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Feminist Perspective in the Works of Easterine Kire: *A Respectable Woman*

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Abstract:

In Indian society a woman has been a victim of humiliation, torture and exploitation. Human experiences have long been associated with masculine experiences, which has led to a biased and incomplete perception of mankind as a whole. Man is concerned about the worries of woman, whether in reality or in his dreams, rather than considering her as an independent individual. This situation remained the same in every sphere of life, whether in political, social or cultural section. The ways that clothing, attitudes, cultural behavior, and family structures have differed from the relevant or similar developments in western culture and on the Indian subcontinent have shaped the feminine perspective. Throughout the history, women have always been viewed as secondary, whether in Eastern or Western cultures. For the centuries they have been rejected the opportunities for growth in the name of religion and socio-cultural practices. Not only women are marginalized in the cultural, social, and business domain, but also in the field of literature. Women began to demand equal rights in all the areas of life such as, political, social, and cultural as their consciousness grew. But, our renowned naga writer Kire has raised women's marginal voice through their own elaborate writing. In this paper, the researcher attempts to analyze *A Respectable Woman* by Easterine Kire from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: Feminism, subjugation, gender, discourse, ideology, marginalized, patriarchal, Easterine Kire, Respectable woman, Naga literature.

Feminism:

Feminism is a wide-ranging social and political movement that focuses on improving the lives of women within society. This movement has inspired numerous writers, thinkers and



critics to develop a unique perspective on literature that seeks to highlight instances where women experiences are represented. Although feminist literary criticism emerged from the 1960s women's movement, its roots can trace back to the 18th century, with some writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Wolf being early contributors. In contemporary times, feminist thinkers can be found globally, including Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar. The primary goal of feminist literary critics is to challenge patriarchal norms that have persisted over time. They explore issues such as marginalization of women, their struggle with identity, their search for personal space, and the celebration of female bodies. Feminist critics also draw on insights from various academic disciplines, including Structuralism, Post- Structuralism, Psychoanalysis and Marxism, leading to innovative approaches in their work. For example, Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of 'Intertextuality', while Elaine Showalter proposed terms like 'gynocriticism' and 'gynotext.'. However, in order to define feminism, Lisa S. Price, in her book, *feminism Frameworks: Building Theory on Violence against Women* (2009), says, "Feminism is a method of analysis, a standpoint, a way of looking at the world from the perspective of women. It questions government policies, popular culture, ways of doing and being and asks how women's lives are affected by these ideological and institutional practices" (p.6).

The modern western feminist movement, which is social movement basically based on equal rights, freedom and various opportunities for women. In the second half of the 1960s, Maggie Humm was a prominent figure of feminist criticism. It is concerned with ways in which literature further the social, political, economic and psychological oppression of women. As Maggie Humm has suggested in her book *Feminism* (1992), "emphasized the different 'materiality' of being a woman and has engendered both moral solidarities created by feminist positions and identities, and new knowledge about the embodiment of women drawing on psychoanalytic, linguistic and social theories about gender construction and difference."

So, three waves of feminism deal with the different perspective of the same feminist issues. 19th and early 20th centuries first wave feminism focused on women's legal rights that is women's suffrage. During this time writers like Mary Wollstonecraft play a vital role because of her book which is *A Vindication of the Rights of women* (1792), highlighted the inequalities of sexes. At the same time renowned activist like Susan B, Anthony Victoria Woodhull contributed in women's suffrage movement.

The second wave feminist movement began in the early 1960's and through the late 1980's, addressed issues such as sense of equality with men and fought for a greater control over their



body and protection from physical abuse. So, there are some major writers like Simon de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* published in 1949, Elaine Showalter's *The Literature of their own*, published in 1977 and Kate Millets *Sexual Politics*, published in 1969. All the three writers established their groundwork and influenced by the second wave movement.

The third wave feminist movement emerged in mid-1990's was much more focused on the women's colour than the second and first waves had been. This movement addresses the issues of race, Nation, ethnicity etc. And we all know that fourth wave feminism, which is started the early 2010's with a focus on sexual harassment, rape and other issues. All these issues which is highlighted on social media and address this concern. The movements like 'Me Too Movement', which was launched in United States in 2006 to give supports for sexual violence.

Naga Literature:

The Nagaland is the small rural state of India, lying in the hills and mountains of the northeast part of country, which is grappling with numerous socio-political issues. In Nagaland, the Naga people are divided into various Nagas ethnic group, each with its own language, culture, identity and way of life. Their languages are unintelligible to each other's, but all are connected with each other. This region has been a lot of social issues, such as religious and political unrest, cultural upheaval and natural resources. Nagaland both in terms of its geography and its unique cultural psyche, stands out from other regions. Yet the regions challenges are brought to light by a variety of authors, both real and imaginary, such as Sanjaoy Hazarika and Sanjib Baruah. While some writers like Tilottama Misra, Indira Goswami, Mitra Phukan, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Sumuta Ghose and Mammang Dai aim to paint a comprehensive picture of the area and its inhabitants, Others frequently turn to the art of storytelling and the narration of traditional folk poems. A notable trait of Naga writers is their use of language, often interwoven with elements of folklore. Basically, Northeast Indian literature has their various themes such as, multiplicity of culture, ethnic community, borders, boundaries, identity, oral tradition, insurgency, terrorism, political factionalism, the sense of alienation, and the indifference, neglect and racism. so, above themes are frequently inhabitants in nature, knowledge and ethics.

Easterine Kire: An Introduction

Dr. Easterine Iralu Kire, a renowned poet, short story writer, and novelist, was born on March 29, 1959, in Kohima, Nagaland, India. She belongs to the Angami Naga community, a state in Northeast India, and her literary works are deeply influenced by her cultural heritage.



Her writings are rich in Naga traditions and customs. In 1982, Kire became the first Naga poet to have her poetry translated into English, with her debut book, *Kelhoukevira*, marking this significant achievement. Her 2003 novel, *A Naga village Remembered*, stands as the first Naga novel in English, further establishing her as a prominent figure in Naga literature. This historical chronicle the impact of British colonial expansion on a small Naga village, Kohonoma, from 1832 to 1880, making it the inaugural Naga novel to be published in English and earning her the Hindu prize. Kire continued to make significant contributions to Naga literature with her novels *Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *Don't Run, My Love* (2017) and *walking the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland* (2019). Kire's novel, *Bitter Wormwood* was shortlisted for the Hindu Lit for life prize in 2013 and received the Free Voice award from Barcelona in the same year. In 2016, Kire's novel, *when the river sleeps*, won The Hindu lit for life prize. Her most recent work, *Spirits Nights*, was published in 2022. Kire's contributions extend beyond novels, as she was the first Naga writer to create books for children and has also penned articles and essays. She pursued her education at Shillong and later completed her PhD from Savitribai Phule Pune University.

Easterine Kire's literary works offer a glimpse into the historical awareness and cultural identity of Nagaland. In her 2003 book, *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, Kire recounts the Battle of Khonoma, a conflict between the British and the Nagas. She vividly portrays the alongside the rich cultural details and the deep-rooted love for nature among the Nagas, particularly the Angamis. Her portrayal of the Angami's culture and their relationship with mother Nature is both beautiful and insightful. In her 2010 novel, *Mari*, Kire shares the personal account of her aunt Mari and her diary entries from a pivotal time. This diary chronicles the battle that concluded the Japanese invasion of India during World War II. It tells the story of a young Naga girl caught in the turmoil of war. Through her writing, Kire sheds light on a forgotten chapter of history, focusing not only on Mari's personal experiences but also on the broader story of Kohima and its inhabitants. *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) tells the tale of two friends reminiscing about their youth and their decade long fight for Naga independence. In this novel the writer portrayed very deeply about violence, racism, extremism and the political scenario. The theme of her novels directly or indirectly touches environmental crisis such as deforestation, contamination, eco-terrorist and ecotourism.

A Terrible Matriarchy (2013) explores the lives of three generations of women, focusing on the strict and discriminatory actions of Grandmother Vibano towards her granddaughter, Delieno. Grandmother represents the patriarchal norms she seeks to enforce on her granddaughter, pushing her towards a submissive, meek and obedient role as a Naga wife.



However, the novel also shows Grandmother's eventual realization of her gender biases, her resistance to her son's greed, and her acceptance of the girl who has treated her as her own mother and caregiver. *Son of Thundercloud* (2016), The plot is short and interesting, which includes themes like myth, magic, supernaturalism, magic, realism and innate Naga wisdom etc. So, it is a wonderful allegory of redeeming the goodness of men, which focus on a sense of Naga consciousness and identity by using reminiscence.

A Respectable Woman: Summary

A Respectable woman (2019) is a mixture of fact and fiction, chronicling the lives of experience of a generation in Nagaland. It tells the tale of conflict and loss, focusing on the Japanese invasion of Kohima during World War II and its profound effects on Nagaland's people, particularly through the lives of two women, showcasing how it altered their lives and the regions landscape. Set in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland, the novel offers a vivid portrayal of the state. The characters in the novel are from the Angami tribe, and it also challenges the traditional belief of Nagas regarding the spirits of fallen soldiers, who are believed to haunt the land and its people. The author skillfully brings to light the courage and resistance shown during this time. The narrative centers around the two women, Khonuo and Kevinuo, and their enduring memories of the war and its aftermath.

The story begins with the World War II era, as seen through Khonuo's personal journey, starting with her birth, education, friendships, family life, societal roles and the unexpected losses she faces. The final part of the novel delves into the challenges Kevinuo encounters in her life. *A Respectable woman* is a coming-of-age story that explores the post war life in Kohima, focusing on the Angami women of two generations and their differing perspectives on the world. It is similar to "Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered" (2003), another memory novel that delves into the clash between the British and Nagas in the 19th century, set against the backdrop of the Japanese invasion of Kohima during World War II and the years that followed. The entire story is narrated by Kevinuo, who shares the tales she has heard from her mother, Khonuo, and her own personal experiences. Through these stories, Kevinuo learns more about her ancestor's resilience and the challenges they faced, including the displacement of people, damage to property, and the profound changes in the social fabric that followed the war.

Following the conflicts, Kire narrates the story of Azuo and her sister's hesitation to enroll in school. Numerous young girl's their age, who close not to attend, were approached by missionaries who devised a strategy to teach them baking and prayer. This strategy included



a brief prayer that aided in learning English. Essentially the missionaries introduced modern practices to various tribal communities. Consequently, these girls were educated on proper behavior, etiquette, and the English language. The narrative also sheds light on the relationship between British officials and the Naga tribes. As the country gained independence, the last missionary family departed from India. Kire writes, “Reverend Supplee was a musician who had written songs on Kohima which were sung by different generations of Nagas in later years. Ruth Supplee, the missionary wife, was frequently sick and would spend days confined to her bed. Many people were sad to see them ago” (Kire, p.23).

Towards the latter part of the novel, Kevinuo delves deeper into the everyday challenges faced by the people of present-day Nagaland. Kire exposes the issues of alcoholism, which poses a significant threat to the youth. She skillfully discusses how the enactment of the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Act 1989 affected Kevinuo’s oldest friend and marked a pivotal moment in her life.

In the concluding sections, Kevinuo emerges as a beacon of inspiration within her family, excelling in her responsibilities and earning the respect of others. She balances her roles as a provider, daughter and sister with equal dedication and love. Additionally, the narrative highlights the presence of strong female figures in Kevinuo’s life, such as her aunt, Azuo Zeu, who encouraged her to think independently.

Women’s marginal Voices:

It was not the easy task to convince patriarchal society to give women the same rights and opportunities as men. For the century women struggled remains the same and fighting for their rights. Feminism is the significant movements against patriarchal Indian society. So, in *Respectable Woman* narrates the battle of Kohima, which took place in 1944 in Nagaland.

The region was deeply affected by significant shifts in social and political landscapes. Through their literary works, feminist scholars like Elaine Showalter, Kate Millet and Virginia Woolf, among others, have brought attention to the issues of women’s rights making women aware of their subordinate’s status in society, where men dominate. These western feminist thinkers have played a role in increasing women’s awareness of their issues. In India, feminist authors and theorists are working towards achieving gender equality, which encompasses advocating for equal pay, representation in politics, and access to education and healthcare. They have also pointed out how the patriarchal nature of Indian society suppresses women, compelling them to adopt a patriarchal mindset. In *A Respectable woman*, Easterine Kire depicts the lives of three women with distinct characteristics. Kevinuo, Khonuo and Beinu are the three women



characters in the novel. Khonuo is the mother of Kevinuo. Beinuo is the friend of Kevinuo. All the three women are educated. Education enters into Naga culture with the intervention of Christianity in Nagaland.

Over time, the status of women in India has slowly improved across the country's mainland, but when we look specifically at women in the northeast, we find them facing significant challenges in asserting their rights and expressing their views. In Nagaland, there are various tribes, each with its unique language. The tribal lifestyle of the Nagas, unlike in other parts of India, does not include issues like the dowry system or child marriage. This absence of such social issues, in contrast to women in mainland India, allows Naga women to enjoy greater freedom and empowerment. However, a closer examination reveals that Naga women are still marginalized within their society. They face marginalization not only in social aspects but also in politics. These issues of marginalization are also evident in the political arena. Easterine Kire, in her novel *A Respectable Woman*, skillfully addresses these issues of women's marginalization. In an interview, Kire discusses how she portrays these themes in her work that "There are many things in Naga society that are liberal and positive; education for children regardless of gender, encouragements of girls taking up professions or studies formerly dominated by boys, a healthy acceptance of non-conventional roles and professions" (Kire, 2019, p.389).

In this novel, Kire embodies a vivid portrayal of Naga society and the ways in which the male dominated system is upheld, including traditional customs and the passing down of property. She illustrates numerous examples from life that readers can easily connect and comprehend. To her astonishment, she discovers that not just men, but women too, play a role in upholding this male centric societal structure, and they view it as the norm from young age. The narrator has been privy to various experiences and conversations that have reinforced her perception of women's subordinate status both within the home and in society. The dialogue and interactions she witnesses in her family, at school, and in public spaces place a high value on marriage, starting a family and adhering to the social and moral expectations of women. The conversation also covers the rules and limitations placed on a woman's behavior in public. Kevinuo was deeply saddened and angered when she observed that a young girl, just eighteen, became pregnant and was expelled from school and excluded from social and religious events, losing her status as a respectable woman. Institutions like society, religion and schools, thus, function as mechanisms to control and oppress women.

Kevinuo's mother once said, "Once she is married, we consider her to be her husband's property" (Kire, 2019, p. 103). It's evident that there's a prevailing mindset among women that



views domestic abuse as a normal part of marriage. Rather than intervening or protecting women from such harm, they tacitly endorse it treating a woman's spouse as her own. This acceptance is rooted in the culture's belief that a woman's identity is bound to her husband. These examples and instances from daily activities justify what Simon de Beauvoir mentioned in her book *The Second Sex*: "Woman is not born but becomes one" (p.301). The initial state of being female is seen as transitory, shaped by societal and cultural norms into a role of subjecthood. Culture imposes the performative aspects on a woman, what Judith Butler explains about "performativity" and it influences one's identity. According to an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a "doing" rather than a "being" (1990, p. 25).

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault states: where there is power, there is resistance" (1990, p.95). Highlights the variety of ways women may respond to oppression. Resistance isn't always manifested through overt defiance. She raised her voice against domestic violence, against women and took a stand against Beinu's husband and threatened him: "You won't get away with this. You murdered her!" (Kire, 2019, p.143). Later in the novel, she shows another example of bravery and non-conformity by adopting Beinu's daughter Uvi. The ending of the novel leaves a sarcastic dialogue from the narrator: "I am 35 years old now, a registered spinster. My chances of becoming a part of a respectable society through marriage are very slim, or are they? My rich, old widower has not shown up yet. We still have a little laugh about that, saying he will finally come hobbling with his walking stick apologizing for the lateness" (p.161).

Moreover, Kevinuo's story shows her resilience and strength in defying the odds. By adopting Beinu's daughter Uvi, she not only expands her own family but also acts as a beacon of hope and inspiration. The novel ends with a poignant reflection from the narrator reflecting on her personal journey and challenges she overcame. Her determination to carve out her own path, regardless of societal expectations, makes her a powerful symbol of resilience and empowerment. Therefore, it is influential to provide women with nurturing support and supervision to become peaceful life and safety future.

Conclusion:

At the beginning of the novel, Kevinuo appears as a submissive, timid, and obedient Angami girl. In subsequent chapters, however, her development into a mature adult is evident. This narrative follows a woman who defies the traditional views of Angami society. She did her graduation, after that she took a job at Kohima school. She wanted to live a single life and



rejected the institution of marriage after observing the circumstances of married ladies around her. Kire aimed to live a single life and is a symbol of marriage. According to Kire, marriage is like a chain that encircles a woman and stifles her freedom, happiness, ideas, and wants. Kire presents the image of an Angami woman who rejects conventional ideas of marriage through the protagonist of the book. This paper is an illustration of how knowledge empowers women and takes away her ambitions, freedom, and happiness. Kire presents the image of an Angami woman who rejects conventional ideas of marriage through the protagonist of the novel. Easterine Kire's renowned book provides an example of how education empowers women, emancipates them, and helps them make strong decisions. Through this novel we can see Kevinuo who is strong woman, she adopts Uvi, Benuo's daughter and decide to bring her up as her own daughter, which is an example that a woman can independently adopt a girl child from outside of marriage. This is an illustration, which encourage other women through the character of Kevinuo, who is wise, mature and self-sufficient. So, the researcher tries to explore all the concept from feminist perspective. In conclusion, the novel suggests that a woman who is considered respectable redefines what it means to be respectable for women, themselves, and their community.

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