



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## VOICES OF NAGA SOCIETY: SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN EASTERINE KIRE'S "RESPECTABLE WOMAN"

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the multifaceted layers of social commentary embedded within Kire's "A Respectable Woman" and sheds light on how literature can mirror and critique societal norms, values, and complexities. Set against the backdrop of post-World War II Nagaland, the novel presents a powerful portrayal of a society in flux. It delves into the depiction of gender roles while also presenting the menace of alcoholism as presented in the novel. This paper contends that "A Respectable Woman" offers a platform for the voices often silenced or ignored, amplifying the struggles of those oppressed by patriarchal dominance.

**Key Words:** Easterine Kire, gender issues, alcoholism, social commentary.

### INTRODUCTION

Easterine Kire, a distinguished poet and novelist, stands as one of Nagaland's most prominent literary figures. Her contributions extend beyond literature, as she plays a vital role in preserving and disseminating Naga cultural values, both within the region and on a global scale. Through her literary works, she has effectively introduced Nagaland to the world, granting insight into the rich heritage and traditions of the Naga people. Drawing inspiration primarily from the oral traditions of the Nagas, Kire has undertaken the noble task of documenting and safeguarding the wealth of untold stories and indigenous knowledge that faces the threat of fading into obscurity. Furthermore, her novels transcend mere storytelling; they function as potent social commentaries, shedding light on the various challenges that Naga society has grappled with during its journey toward modernity. The youthful Naga society has encountered numerous waves of change, some of which have yielded adverse consequences, leaving lasting scars on the present Naga society. This paper aims to explore Kire's recent novel, "Respectable Woman," as a compelling literary work that not only paints a vivid portrait of Naga society but also delves into the societal issues and complexities that continue to afflict it.

### LITERATURE AS A MIRROR OF THE SOCIETY

Throughout history, literature has served as a powerful medium for individuals to explore and critique the complexities of the societies in which they live. Albrecht (1954) states that; "the idea that literature reflects society is as old as Plato's concept of imitation". From the ancient epics of Homer to contemporary novels and poetry, literature has played a crucial role in offering social commentary. It provides a mirror to reflect upon the human condition, offering insight into the intricacies of culture, politics, and human behavior. Literature serves as a reflection of the society in which it is created. According to Zala (2013),

“Literature is the lighthouse of any culture and to know any culture better we must know its literature as it gives us a true picture of the culture and its development”.

Writers draw inspiration from the world around them, infusing their work with the beliefs, values, and experiences of their time. Great literature often challenges societal norms and prejudices. Authors such as Mark Twain ("The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn") and Harper Lee ("To Kill a Mockingbird") have used their works to confront issues of racism and discrimination, forcing readers to reevaluate their own beliefs and biases. Charles Dickens' novels, such as "Oliver Twist" and "A Tale of Two Cities," vividly depict the harsh conditions faced by the poor and the stark divide between social classes during the Victorian era. Novels like Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" offer nuanced portrayals of the female experience and the constraints imposed by society. Literature serves as a multifaceted lens through which society can be examined, critiqued, and better understood. It has the power to provoke thought, encourage empathy, and drive social change by sparking conversations about the world we inhabit. It reminds us that, while society may evolve, the power of storytelling as a medium for social commentary endures.

In the same light, Easterine Kire, a celebrated poet and novelist hailing from Nagaland, has made significant contributions to literature that serves as profound social commentaries on Naga society. Through her evocative writings, she also acts as a cultural ambassador for the Nagas, portraying their rich heritage and the contemporary challenges they face. This paper delves into Kire's recent novel, "A Respectable Woman," examining the social issues it addresses within the context of Naga society. Through a critical analysis of the novel's narrative elements, characters, and thematic exploration, this paper seeks to explore how Kire uses her work to comment on and critique societal norms, values, and dynamics within the Naga community.

## **HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL**

Easterine Kire's novel "Respectable Woman" is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural context of Naga society. Understanding this context is crucial for appreciating the social commentary within the novel, as it provides the backdrop against which the characters' actions, beliefs, and struggles are portrayed. The historical and cultural context of Naga society serves as the canvas on which Easterine Kire paints her narrative, enabling readers to engage with the social commentary within the novel on a deeper and more meaningful level.

Kire's novel is a tapestry woven from oral tales, reminiscent of those passed down through generations in localities and villages. It transports readers to Kohima before the Second World War, painting a vivid picture of life in Nagaland and the aftermath of the Battle of Kohima. In the wake of the war's conclusion, Nagaland faced a period of political unrest and upheaval. This uncertainty contributed to the novel's portrayal of a society grappling with change and the consequences of wartime experiences.

Naga culture has a rich tradition of oral storytelling and passing down knowledge through generations. This tradition is interwoven into the narrative, emphasizing the importance of memory and heritage in the community. The novel reflects Naga society's traditional gender roles, where women often occupy specific roles within the family and community. Understanding these roles is essential for comprehending the challenges faced by the female characters in the story. The presence of Christianity is significant in the novel. The influence of the Church on Naga society and its stance on issues such as alcoholism and morality play a pivotal role in the narrative.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

Among her notable works, "Respectable Woman" stands as a compelling narrative that both illuminates and interrogates the complex nature of Naga society. In this novel, Kire's narrative prowess transcends storytelling; it becomes a potent tool for dissecting and challenging societal norms and values. "Respectable Woman" emerges not just as a work of fiction but as a vivid and poignant platform for social commentary. Through its characters, settings, and narrative arcs, the novel delves deep into the multifaceted layers of Naga culture, exposing the dynamics of gender roles, power struggles, colonial influence, and the eternal tug-of-war between tradition and change. In doing so, it raises profound questions, challenges established conventions, and invites readers to engage in thoughtful dialogue about the intricacies of society, both within the context of Naga heritage and as a broader reflection of human experience.

Easterine Kire's most recent work, "A Respectable Woman," serves as a unique blend of two narrative elements. It can be described as a hybrid of a fictional memoir, chronicling the experiences and lifetimes of a generation in Nagaland, and a compelling narrative illustrating how external events can profoundly influence the trajectories of individuals' lives. This relatively concise volume, spanning just 182 pages, embarks on its literary journey with Kevinuo as the narrator, who takes readers on a captivating exploration of her mother Khonuo's upbringing in post-Second World War Kohima.

Drawing upon the storytelling traditions ingrained in Nagaland, Easterine Kire skillfully guides the reader into a world where history and memory merge seamlessly. Through this blending of past and present, she skillfully presents a reflection of the socio-cultural issues within the Naga society. According to Keyho (2019), "Besides being a historical novel, *Respectable Woman* ought to be read as a biting social commentary"

## REPRESENTATION OF GENDER ISSUES IN THE NOVEL

First and foremost, the novel adeptly explores the evolving discourse on gender equality within Naga society. Through its central character, Kevinuo, Easterine Kire skillfully raises the issue of how education can be a powerful means of empowering women. Kevinuo, a resilient figure, defies societal expectations and embarks on a journey of education and employment, serving as a compelling testament to the potential for women's empowerment through learning.

Kevinuo's early life is characterized by her role as a dutiful daughter. Bereaved of her father at a young age, she assumes the responsibility of caring for her infant brother. Her upbringing is marked by unwavering devotion to her family, particularly her younger sibling. Excelling in her academic pursuits, she earns a degree in English literature and secures a teaching position at a school in Kohima.

The prospect of marriage becomes the next significant juncture in Kevinuo's life. In Naga society, adhering to the conventional path of marriage at the appropriate age is deemed respectable. However, Kevinuo confronts societal norms head-on, bravely rejecting the institution of marriage altogether. Her choice defies the expectation of conforming to the role of a 'good wife,' challenging established norms. She boldly says; "I am 35 years old now, a registered spinster. My chances at becoming a part of respectable society through marriage are very slim". Furthermore, after her resolute decision to remain unmarried, Kevinuo chooses to adopt Uvi, the daughter of her friend Beinuo. While this act of adoption may not align with cultural norms, Kevinuo proceeds with her decision, highlighting her commitment to forging her own path.

The narrative of Beinuo is closely interwoven with the harrowing issue of domestic violence. In her youth, Beinuo displayed a spirited and vibrant outlook on life, firmly opposing the notion of husbands beating their wives. She boldly declared, "I would beat him right back!" However, as she matured and married a prosperous man, she tragically became a victim of physical abuse. Unlike her resolute stance as a young girl, she grew passive, silently enduring the torment. Her compliance stemmed from societal expectations dictating that a 'good wife' must endure silently, as well as her commitment to her child. Ultimately, Beinuo succumbs to the violence inflicted by her husband. (Keyho, 2019). In the words of Subramanian & Jockim (2022), Beinuo is a second generation educated girl who falls in the trap of cultural patriarchy. She becomes a puppet in the hands of her husband and it costs her life. In the novel *A Respectable woman*, Kire says:

By and by, stories began to surface of wife – beatings. Azuo and Azuo Zeu were discussing the case of young neighbor whose husband had returned from a drinking house and beaten her so badly that her family had taken her away. What should she do then? Azuo asked with real concern. ‘once she is married, we consider her to be her husband’s property. (102)

The above underlines the profound helplessness women often experience within the pervasive shadow of patriarchy. It serves as a poignant reminder of how, despite educational advancements, the weight of patriarchy remains an enduring force, making it daunting for women to emancipate themselves from its grip. In the Naga society, genuine gender disparity originates from the unyielding dominance of patriarchy, further reinforced by deep-rooted customary laws

Easterine Kire's portrayal of marriage within her narrative suggests it to be an institution that confines women, where a woman ultimately sacrifices her freedom, happiness, and desires. In this framework, a woman may unwittingly pledge her own detriment when she takes marriage vows or lives in constant fear of failing to meet the expectations of her husband and in-laws. Marriage, as depicted, is a social contract in which a woman often doesn't experience her life fully but instead fulfills predetermined roles as a wife, mother, or daughter-in-law. Deviating from these roles risks her being labeled as a societal pariah, branded as a "disrespectful woman" deserving of exclusion and ostracism. In stark contrast, the book emphasizes that education is the path to women's liberation and empowerment, serving as their most potent tool to overcome adversity. Marriage, as portrayed, lacks the capacity to bestow such privileges.(Thokchom, 2020)

The novel's title, "A Respectable Woman," resonates with its overarching feminist theme. It skillfully redefines the multifaceted concept of respectability for women, championing women's voices and experiences. It sheds light on silenced histories, ultimately amplifying the voices of women.

## **REPRESENTATION OF THE ISSUE OF ALCOHOLISM**

Amid the closing chapters of World War II, Nagaland enters a pivotal period in its history. In the aftermath of the conflict, a disturbed political wave ravaged the land bringing forth many untold frustrations among menfolk. In response to the turmoil and the need for solace, alcohol becomes a refuge for some, contributing to the emergence of a significant issue within Naga society. The frustration and disillusionment are so prevalent that Naga men turn to drinking as a means of venting their emotions, often taking out their frustrations on their wives and families. This widespread alcohol consumption transforms into a pressing social problem, leading to tensions between two groups: the church women, who advocate sobriety, and the brew women, involved in alcohol production and distribution (Srivastava, 2019). The novel presents the roots of alcoholism, about how it all began and became a grave societal concern.

Kaisii (2018) in this light explains how alcohol in the form of rice-beer was associated with tradition and cultural identity and used purely as food and nourishment for the body. However, he goes on to state that; “In the wake of social change and modernisation, however, drinking has slowly assumed a new meaning, becoming more of a symbol of lifestyle, “modern” and a means of entertainment, from erstwhile as ritual item, food and medicine”. What was once a part of cultural identity has now become a social menace.

Within this complex context, the Church assumes a prominent role, recognizing the urgency of addressing the escalating issue of alcoholism. In an attempt to combat this problem, the Church throws its support behind the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Act. However, the implementation of this legislative measure inadvertently gives rise to an entirely new set of challenges. These challenges include the illicit production and distribution of alcohol, as well as the deeper-rooted problem of domestic violence.

In reference to this multifaceted issue, Keyho (2019) aptly notes that "A Respectable Woman" fulfills the role of social novels by addressing the unspoken concerns that society often hesitates to confront, fearing the unpleasant truths that may emerge. Kire's work sheds light on various aspects of the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Act, including its limited vision, implementation challenges, unintended consequences, and the urgent need for reconsideration regarding the efficacy of this legislation.

In essence, Kire's narrative portrays a society in transition, grappling with the complexities of alcoholism and the unintended consequences of legislative attempts to curb it. The novel underscores the importance of addressing these issues openly and reevaluating the strategies employed to tackle them, providing valuable insights into the broader social and cultural landscape of Nagaland.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has endeavored to explore the role of Naga Literature as a medium for authors to give voice to the often untold narratives of individuals, both from the past and present, whose suffering tends to be forgotten, ignored, or intentionally silenced. Through a comprehensive textual analysis of Easterine Kire's "A Respectable Woman," this paper has presented a thought-provoking discourse on how literature functions as a reflective mirror of society. It vividly illustrates how literature serves as a powerful vehicle for shedding light on the pressing issues afflicting Naga society, effectively amplifying the voices of those who may be hesitant to address these matters openly.

Two particularly sensitive issues, namely alcoholism and gender disparity, have been meticulously explored and woven into the narrative, threading through the life stories of characters such as Kevinuo and Beinuo. By doing so, the novel assumes the role of a critical lens through which Easterine Kire critically examines and critiques various facets of Naga society. In essence, this paper has sought to underscore the profound impact of literature in its capacity to not only capture the zeitgeist but also to give voice to the silenced, fostering a much-needed dialogue on issues that society is acutely aware of yet often chooses to overlook or avoid.

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