



# Naga Women And Violence:A Sociological Study Of Easterine Kire's A Respectable Woman

**Awnisha Verma**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Gindo Devi Mahila Mahavidyalya.Budaun

## Abstract

A lot has been discussed about the experiences of women who happen to be part of mainstream Indian literature, but the voice is unheard and the experiences are marginalized for women who belong to the northeastern part of India as the land of 'eight sisters' is detached from the mainland due to its geographical isolation, riots, communal conflict, and exoticized multiple ethnicities. A writer like Easterine Kire, who hails from Nagaland, seems to understand the repercussions of this silence. Therefore, her works endeavor to articulate the real experiences of Naga women to the world. One such novel is a respectable woman, it exhibits life after the war which happened between Japanese and Britishers and how people, with the help of alcohol, are trying to negotiate the existing reality and the novel unfolds the issue of domestic violence happening against women. The paper is an attempt to understand the root cause of women's suffering by focusing on Beinou's character and uncovering the social and cultural factors that developed the tendency in males to perpetrate violence against women.

**Keywords:** Hegemonic Masculinity, Emphasised Femininity, Naga women, Naga culture, violence.

Easterine Kire, a highly regarded novelist and poet from the Naga community, has established herself as a prominent figure in the realm of modern Indian literature. By writing about the real-life encounters, circumstances, and intricate aspects of Naga society and culture, namely within the socio-cultural and political environment of Nagaland, special mention is given to the experiences of Naga women, who are doubly marginalized due to their peripheral location and gender. She has broken the prevailing silence that has historically enveloped Naga society and provided a platform for the underrepresented voices originating from the northeastern area of India. Kire's novels, including *A Respectable Woman*, draw inspiration from the memories of women who lived through the war (between the Japanese and Britishers) and explore the aftermath of conflict, shedding light on the altered reality of Naga society. The fact that novels derive their material from real people's experiences makes the story highly authentic. At the end of the novel, Kire writes, "The present decade possibly offers the last opportunity to record the life of Kohima in the post-war Kohima using their memories was a challenging task, but it was not impossible. The novel successfully articulates the trauma people have witnessed in the horrific reality of war. Avienou, a young girl in the novel, says, "It took my mother, Khonou, exactly forty-five years before she could bring herself to talk about the war" (Kire, 3). Alcohol offers some relief and a method to cope with new realities for returning soldiers and those coping with the consequences of war. The Church, a significant force in the community, supports the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Act, joining the fight against alcohol. Amidst all this upheaval, the novel unfolds the issue of violence a woman is the victim of. The research article intends to highlight the suffering of marginalized women living in geographically isolated region by unfolding the root causes of various forms of violence embedded in the text by focusing on the literary representation of the character Beinuo, and the paper will take up the task of investigating the underlying reasons and cultural factors that

contribute to the propensity of males to perpetrate acts of violence against women. Raewyn Connell, a renowned Australian Sociologist and Professor propounded the concepts of 'Hegemonic Masculinity' and 'Emphasised Femininity' would help provide the backbone to the proposed arguments in this paper. By focusing on Beinou's experience, the writer is writing about the community's experience. Therefore, It's a story of not individual Naga 'Woman' but 'Women'.

Much has been said about the political and social conflict happening in Nagaland. For the first time, readers can have an insider's perspective through Kire's a respectable Woman where they got the chance to see the disrupted domestic sphere in which women have no agency to speak for themselves, no power to make decisions, are subordinate beings, passive victims of violence, and wife-beating is natural to men. The novel depicts the character of Beinou, who is a young married woman. She is highly docile and meek, and she very easily adheres to the norms of patriarchal society. The character of Beinou, to be a good wife and a respectable woman in society, never raised her voice against domestic violence, and she feels she must passively accept the violence inflicted upon her by her husband. Finally, she was beaten to death. The paper intends to question why Beinou resisted the violent and toxic marital relationship. Why is Beinou's body treated as an object on which violence can be done easily? Beinou was afraid to break the existing gender order. She was following what Connell named 'Emphasised femininity, which is the "pattern of femininity that is given most cultural and ideological support" (Connell, 187). She further talks about the requisite feature of Emphasised femininity: "compliance with this subordination and being oriented to accommodating to the interests and desires of men." (Connell,187)

Her dear friend, Avienou, who emerges in the novel as a strong naga woman who is capable of making choices on her own, asks, "Why didn't you leave, Beinou? why? You know women can leave abusive marriages." In response to this question, she helplessly replied, "I couldn't. I was so afraid that others would condemn me." (Kire,140). The statement by Beinou firmly asserts the influence of society the society she is part of and the internalization of patriarchy in a woman. She is more interested in what people will say than in saving her life from the deadly marriage she is caught in. She feels that raising her voice against abusive marriage is never an option; it is their duty to accept the suffering silently in order to be a part of society, which has assigned certain roles to women, and those roles involve passively obeying the command of their husbands, no matter how violent that person is. The role of society is salient, and understanding society seems important to decode the mentality of Beinou. Whenever the question of Naga society comes, the role of Naga Customary Law is inevitable, and in today's time, the Naga Customary Law is also followed, and people are highly connected with their Naga Customary Law, which comes under Article 371(A) of the Indian Constitution. The words of Dolly Kikon on Naga Customary Law establish the fact that it is harmful to the women of Nagaland. She states, "If Naga customary law is seen as the foundation of justice, the exclusion of women from these powerful decision-making bodies negates the entire notion that these are pillars of justice(MorungExpress)." The Egalitarian society of Nagaland has not given the gift of equality to its women; they are seen as secondary or subordinate to the males. In the words of Beauvoir the "other," men are "absolute"; they are complete, but women need them to be accomplished beings. Such perceptions in society created a sense of inferiority in women. Hence, they become handicapped while making decisions. This ancient Naga Customary Law is still prevalent in Nagaland and is delaying the growth of liberated women. The survival of women in such a patriarchal society creates several situations that cultivate in women the idea of being subservient to their male counterparts. A strict patriarchal society imposes strict gender roles and expectations. They are expected to behave in a manner that society wants them to; they are not supposed to follow the right path, which demands individual courage; instead, they are forced to follow the terrible laws of society, which can end their lives in tragic ways. Society focuses on the performative nature of gender roles. Violence against women seems as natural as air. Bell Hooks, one of the prominent theorists in gender studies, has shed light on the thinking behind patriarchal violence. "Patriarchal violence in the home is based on the belief that it is acceptable for a more powerful individual to control others through various forms of coercive force." (Hooks, 61) These words of Hooks indicate inequality, which is often seen in marital relationships where women are generally considered less powerful than their partners, giving a license to male partners to conduct violence against them. And the passive acceptance and internalization of this practice of violence by women made them passive victims of the heinous crime that happened inside the four walls. The decision of Beinou to be a silent victim comes from the normalization of violence and the inequality society has done for women. "The husband thinks he can do anything he wants with his wife" (Kire, 103) The nurturing of such ideas in the male psyche is cultivated by society. It is a society that legitimizes the injustice happening against women.

For any women, motherhood is the most celebrated precious gift, which is cherished by them to the utmost and provides them with unimaginable strength and courage. Patricia Collins, in her chapter named 'The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Mother-Daughter Relationship' defines "Motherhood, whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother, can be invoked by black women as a symbol of power (Maternal Theory: Essential Reading, p. 281). This definition is specifically related to black women; it seems applicable to all the mothers on the planet Earth. As a mother, women feel empowered, but in the case of Beinou, her motherhood is being used as an instrument to stop her from raising her voice against injustice. "I will kill your baby in front of you" (Kire, 140). A threat she received from her husband, who is also the father of that baby, whom he is planning to kill if her wife and the mother of that baby try to react against the violence happening to her. In the case of Beinou, motherhood emerged as a weapon to control women in the domestic sphere. The propensity to obey is so great that she passively accepts the death threat of her child without questioning the intention of her husband.

The earlier part of the paper was from the women's perspective it focused on Beinou's situation and tried to locate her position in society. The second half of the paper will try to understand the male's perspective by focusing on the character of Meselhou. Why do they commit violence against women, especially in the conjugal space? What is the motivation behind such a mindset? To understand the motif of the character, the concept of "Hegemonic Masculinity," given by R. W. Connell, will provide insightful support. The ordinary people of Nagaland are suffering from the detrimental repercussions of the war between Japanese soldiers and British soldiers, which involved ordinary people in fighting, and the aftermath of the war brought undesirable social changes. People witnessed the major issue of unemployment, which leads to frustration. To bear that frustration, the men took help from alcohol, and that became an integral part of their lives. All these factors, combined, paved the path for wife-beating cases in Nagaland. "Frustration drove even more men to drink, and alcohol abuse soon became a visible social problem." (Kire, 87). So, the society was struggling for survival, and as mentioned above, the social structure of Nagaland has a hierarchy in which women hold a lower position than men, the males of Nagaland are considered the bread earners of the home, and women are supposed to take care of household work. But after the war, the social structure went upside down as women also tried earning money. "Their children went to school, and their mothers paid their fees with the money they earned selling brew." (Kire, 101) This factor has multiplied the tension between the conjugal spaces of men and women. All this is challenging the 'Hegemonic Masculinity' that is the base of society. 'Hegemonic Masculinity' is the ideal definition of men, "which is always constructed about various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women" (Connell, 394), and they hold the dominant position in society and have the privilege of living their lives freely, unlike women and homosexual men, who do not fit into the category of ideal men. The definition of Connell showcases the binary that exists in society. The definition of 'Hegemonic Masculinity' can be understood about subordinate beings such as women and homosexual men who do not fit into the category of ideal men. The definition of ideal men consists of men who earn money and have control over women and children. Connell writes, "Physical or economic violence backs up a dominant cultural pattern (for example, beating up 'perverts'), or ideologies justify the holders of physical power (law and order) The connection between the hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal violence are close (Connell, 184). Somehow, in Hegemonic Masculinity, the subordination of other beings takes place, not complete negation; their supremacy lies especially in subordination Of women. The practice of hegemonic masculinity "institutionalizes men's dominance over women" (Connell, 399). It could be said that such practices in society legitimize subordination, which leads to violence as the other person is seen as the subject of oppression, and it gives license to the men to project their frustration of failure on the women. In the novel, the literary representation of the Meselhou, Beinou's husband, belongs to the culture that practices 'Hegemonic Masculinity'. It seems that the perception of Meselhou is highly affected by the cultural practice where men have cultivated a sense of superiority over women, which has given birth to patriarchal Patriarchal Violence. A sense of dominance is the basis of a relationship, according to Meselhou. "He didn't want a wife who was more intelligent than him. Whose wife had to be submissive and do his bidding? She would be beaten until she submitted." (Kire, 147 In the character of Meselhou, the false idea of masculinity is seen, and the seeds are cultivated by the family itself, which is the smaller unit of society. "He's always had his way, and it's possible that his parents spoiled him thoroughly as a child." (Kire, 147) On the one hand, women are taught to be obedient and silent, while men, from their childhood, have the agency to do what they are willing to do. Men naturally started looking at women as subordinate beings and objects to be controlled. In the character of Meselhou, the privileged position that men enjoy in society has created a sense of dominance and power. Meselhou's character depicts the kind of man who exercised the practice of 'Hegemonic Masculinity' in an altered manner, characterized by aggression, dominance, and domestic violence. Meselhou and Beinou lost their baby boy out of sickness,

and the pain was unbearable for both. Meselhou, to bear the sad reality, blamed Beinou for the death of the child and beaten her so much that she was on the verge of death. Meselhou is saddened by the death of the baby boy. The fact that the baby was a male child aroused his fatherly love for children. As mentioned above, he threatens Beinou by telling her that he will kill Uvi because she is a girl. "He blamed me for losing Uvi's brother and gave me the beating of my life. Then he pushed me down the step. I know I won't survive this." (Kire,139). Beinou's body was an object for him to project his anger on, as he considered her inferior to him. The character of Meselhou is representative of a large number of men who are part of Naga society. In general, the novel also serves the setting where the male figures are kept on a higher pedestal than the women and those who are supposed to be the breadwinners for the family are struggling to earn money. Going back home without money challenges the ideal definition of men and creates a sense of frustration as it can bring the dominant position of men in danger and that failure is projected on the wife. "The same men would go home and beat their wives if they berated them for not bringing home money(Kire, 134).

### Conclusion:

The novel successfully tried to bring to the forefront the real position and condition of Naga women living in the Naga society. A lot of discussion and debate is available when it comes to the political tension and communal violence happening in serene land, but when it comes to the women, it's hard to find out about their reality as, for the first time, the experiences of women are being recorded in the form of written literature. Earlier, it was all oral tradition, and the geographical distance never made their voice heard in mainstream literature. A respectable woman not only portrays the deplorable condition of women but also challenges the general notion of empowered Naga women. The Egalitarian Naga society (which does not have any caste or class division) failed to provide equal opportunity to women and positions that men enjoy in their society; the gift of equality is still a far cry for them. It would be apt to quote the statement of Naga scholar Eyinbeni Humstoe, where she is highlighting the complications in the social structure of Naga society. She states, "The Nagas have not been able to do away with cultural forces where it concerns the emancipation of women from cultural chains, which are embodied in customary laws." It is the patriarchal society that is ceasing the women's path of liberation and gender equality. The predetermined role assigned to women in society, which is highly conservative and harmful to women, has affected men in the most toxic way. Unconsciously, they have generated a false sense of superiority, which is providing them with the courage to inflict violence on women. There is an urgent need to redefine the role and position of Naga women in society, and a more inclusive approach is needed while categorizing the literature. The long silence and lots of unheard experiences coming from the northeastern part of India need more attention and serious reading.

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