

Women In The Naga Society: A Study Through the Narratives of Naga Women Writers

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The women of Nagaland live in an ethically subtle environment on account of their folks' persistent skirmish for self-determination. The women are also prone to face the intricacy of a civilisation that is undertaking the binary of transformation and continuity, with the wrench towards modernism on the one hand and the sturdy dynamics of customary and traditional conventions on the other. The traditions and customs that the people of Nagaland follow have a solid aversion towards the liberation of women, as they have a strong inclination towards patriarchy. However, Naga women have coped to engross themselves efficiently while enclosed in their traditional space, and to a great extent, they have created an impact on their people. From a diplomatic standpoint, they have evolved within their confines to leave an impact on the undercurrents of peacemaking. This article tries to document the complex and textured existence of Naga women through various narratives of the women writers from there.

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The Nagas are a composition of numerous tribes residing in India's North-Eastern portion. They have parallel cultures and ethnicities and form the major indigenous group in the Indian state of Nagaland, as well as a substantial presence, which can be seen in other Northeastern states like Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and a few in Assam. Chiefly, there are sixteen tribes in Nagaland, and they have their creole Nagamese to communicate with each other.

In Naga society, the family is the basic collective body, but it is a mixture of patrilineal as well as patriarchal, and as a result, the lineage is often traced from the side of the father. It throws light on the fact that women do not enjoy the status that men experience. The Naga customary laws protected and endorsed by Article 371A of the Indian Constitution have functioned together for the advantage as well as the disadvantage of Naga society. It has aided in shielding the traditions and culture of Nagaland, but it has also led to discernment in numerous fields, predominantly against women. For instance, women are least likely to be given leadership privileges and are consequently barred from decision-making bodies. This discernment can also be seen in inheritance and property ownership. Properties such as houses, plots, and meadows at all times go into the hands of males no matter if they are rich or poor, and only movable properties are inherited by daughters, or else they cannot be retained in their village and subsequently will belong to others. The reason that they are treated in this manner is that the Nagas believe that, when compared to men women are physically weaker. “Like in many other communities, the Anâls (a Naga tribe) consider women as physically and mentally weaker than men and it is the responsibility of men to protect the weaker gender”(Veronica, 2018, p.30). Even then, when it comes to domestic affairs, complete authority falls into their hands. Men distance themselves away from indulging in domestic affairs as they contemplate it mediocre to do so.

In traditional Naga society, there are numerous dissimilarities between diverse Naga tribes, but there are a few mutual features that include hunting, indulging in combats, and farming for men, whereas spinning, knitting, and pottery were the most vital responsibilities allocated to women. Domestic errands are anticipated to be accomplished by women. Even though the men have an upper hand in the Naga society, the way the communities portray their patriarchal stand is quite poles apart.

For the Konyak women, apart from being bound to household work and the domination of their husbands, they also suffered under numerous restrictions and taboos thus preventing them from enjoying the right to freedom. For Rengma women, on the other hand, except

in inheritance and property ownership, she enjoyed almost equal and liberal status with men. Concerning the status of Ao women, [...] there are certain areas where women do not get recognition but in many respects, the Ao women are considered as equal partners to their menfolk (Ao, 2019, para.4).

Nagas Old Ways New Trends, the famous book about Naga culture and society written by M. Horam, discusses how women are treated in Nagaland and, adds that there is no discrimination taking place based on sex. “In the Nagas’ society there was no dowry system, no sati, no purdah system, no child marriage no bride burning, no female child infanticide.”(Saikia, 2019, para. 12) Moreover, the Zeliangrong Nagas follow the system of ‘Chamanludo’ where the bridegroom has to pay a bride price to the family of the bride. Divorce was sporadic in the Naga community but occasionally this led to many nasty conflicts in the villages. Conventionally, womenfolk were free from threats and physical torments at the time of these inter-village disputes.

During the yesteryears, if the condition of women is looked upon, Naga women’s hard work begins from their childhood. She is anticipated to wake up even before the sun rises to do all the household tasks. Therefore unlike in different parts of India women celebrate the birth of the girl child in the Naga society particularly if it is the first child “The empirical study among the native reveals that in the olden days, the birth of a baby girl was considered as the arrival of source of wealth, prosperity, and wellbeing in the family. However, in reality, women are taken for granted to be mere helpers in the families” (Veronica,2018, p.15). The chief source of livelihood among the tribes of Nagaland is Cultivation. Conservation of livestock such as poultry, swine, cattle, etc. was also an obligatory source of income. Concerning the village’s economy domestic animals play a key part. Therefore women have the additional responsibility of feeding and looking after these animals along with their kitchen duties and family responsibilities “Another feature of being a girl child is that she has to act as a constant helper and a companion to her mother. In so far as a young girl has a mother to love and follow, she has a role model of becoming a ‘little mother’” (Veronica,2018, p.16).

During the pre-independent era, women contributed significantly to the field of agriculture as it added income to the economy of the household. Mothers put their daughters in charge and went to the field. If any war broke out in the absence of the elders the daughters were accountable for taking the young tots and quickly leaving to any place where they could hide and safeguard these younger ones. In the field of agriculture, women showed their excellence in all areas from ploughing, sowing, weeding to reaping and they only rest after the grains are cropped. It was the responsibility of the men to do the process of winnowing by spreading huge rugs on the field and womenfolk collected and bundled the paddy. Together men and women carried the paddy to the family barn which is known by the name Machum and women were liable to pound and husk it for the consumption of the family. If there were more paddies than what they required it was traded using a barter system in the nearby villages. Women had to make sure that there was a sufficient amount of essential vegetables and crops available in their fields for their household consumption. The other duties given to them included collecting firewood and bringing water from the sources which are often in far-off and sheer places. When talking about the traditional Naga society a prominent source of income for them comes from the weaving industry which is also an additional conspicuous financial activity of the Naga women. The art of knitting and dyeing was exclusively done by women. Varieties of traditional handloom attires were weaved by the women folks for the family as well as for sale. These works were done generally during the agricultural off-season. Hence, Naga women can be said to be the sustainers and chiefs of the family.

In Nagaland, the progression of education brought about by the acceptance of Christianity contributed to the progress of women's circumstances. People realised the necessity of education for both sexes. There has been a shift from the outdated notion that women should only be able to read a song sheet and a bible to be considered knowledgeable. Instead, they had access to education even though limited compared to men. TemsulaAo, Naga author and scholar, who has published remarkable poetry works as well as short fiction comments on it by saying that, it "was never considered a *sacrifice* but

the *duty* of girls to do so, even if they happened to be better students. Merit was never the decider, being male was” (Ao, 2014, p.125).

Generally, the ethnographic documents are inscribed by administrators and scholars who are mostly male, and therefore what we see there is from a male point of view. At present, as women are undertaking an expedition by getting out of their comfort zones, and with a refined form of self-awareness, it can be noted that several contemporary accomplished Naga females have commenced considerable research on Naga women’s lives. Even though the patriarchy continues, it is anticipated that by using the powerful tool of writing, a significant effect can eventually be seen which will holistically address the concerns of women. The village still has many young and old women who are still bound in the clutches of the customary norms ignorant of their civil rights and continue to submissively follow the traditions. But in the nineteenth century, with the arrival of the British troops and the missionaries, substantial vicissitudes happened in the general traits of Naga values and traditions. One of the prominent changes that they could bring forth is bringing an end to the Naga headhunting culture.

Because of being precluded from inheriting land, Naga women have taken to education with missionary zeal. Today, Naga women excel in the public and private spheres academically, intellectually, and to a certain extent economically — this is frightening to the Naga male, who continues to expect the woman to be dependent on him. While Naga women are respectful towards Naga culture, tradition, and customary law, they are also generally more open, willing, and able to adapt to new ideas and change and generally to global culture, politically, economically, and socially. The new Naga woman is very different from our subservient grandmothers, which is truly frightening to the Naga male, who has failed to and/or refuses to understand and appreciate how much the world has changed from the days of British colonials and American missionaries. Significantly, some statistics maintain that more than 50 per cent of Nagaland government employees are women (Changkija, 2017).

Women stood equally well to men in each domain of life and didn’t entirely depend on their partner’s incomes. With the

advancement in the areas of learning, there is sudden progress in the number of women becoming waged daughters and spouses. The conventional outlook has loosened giving more opportunities for the education of girls.

Women had chosen to preserve their culture, voice out their grievances, and earn a living through the art of writing. Naga women belonging to diverse sections of the society wrote in different genres like narratives, short stories, folktales, and poems but for that, they adopted a common language that is English. Conventionally, the Naga people used oral narratives instead of this writing method and it was strictly done by men. From this, they have been undergoing an evolution to reach the state that they enjoy now. The relatively new space of writing allowed a kind of gender democratisation, unlike oral transmission, as far as the inscription of their subjectivities is concerned. The writers believe that by writing they could bring a change in the community and thus a bloodless revolution can be brought about “Through their writing, women writers discover a kind of world where they not only find solace and peace but are also discovering a certain kind of identity that makes them feel empowered” (Ao, 2019, p.94).

An alternative world is being built for the Naga women by the writers, thus they are taking a refuge that is livable and welcoming to withstand their alternate life. The women of Nagaland have claimed a space of their own with the help of the powerful tool that is writing. Writing has also aided women to covey the other side of their life which the world is not aware of and at times which they are even not aware of. Therefore it can be said that writing has made these women discover themselves.

Writing is a way of discovering and revealing the ‘you’ that you are yet to encounter. It is a platform where one breaks open the strict closure of the self and finally opens up what is repressed in oneself. It is a space where one becomes, what one wants, who one wants to be. It is about infinite possibilities, which are not pre-determined or present in the given discourse but are constructed in the discourse through the usage of language and thereby invent a new desire that only appears when it is written (Cixous, et al., 1976).

As time flew by, women dared to find an alternative remedy to overcome the long-standing customary dogmas of the Naga. When talking about the professional life of the Naga women, they are now permitted to choose any career of their interest and, on the financial front women now have the right to own assets even though, men still are in control of most of the economic power. This shows how the Naga society still adheres to the traditional practices even if they are modern in stance to the world. As for how the famous Naga writer Temsula Ao portrays, albeit achieving higher education, women's attainments are slurred by commenting that "she did it even though she is a woman" (2014, p. 128). This indicates that they do not have opinions of their own and are allotted an inferior position in society. In the paper titled *Empowering women in the Naga Society: Issues, Challenges and Opportunities*, Joelin Zhimomi and Dr. Nongmaithem Kishorechand have discussed the same elaborately by stating

Women's engagement within the workforce is influenced by societal standards, which as often as possible maintain gender based segregation and uneven opportunity. In many societies, men are energized to seek after careers and monetary freedom, whereas ladies are anticipated to organise caring for others and family obligations. Women's business is hampered by these measures, particularly in callings or segments where men prevail. Besides, inclinations and misguided judgments almost women's inclination and fit for specific occupations lead to word related isolation and wage inequality. Women's get to to formal work openings and authority parts may be limited by social standards that put a premium on men's financial commitment and business. Precise alterations to work advertise directions, working environment methods, and social states of mind on sexual orientation parts are fundamental in arrange to address these built up standards. (Zhimomi, et al., 2024)

To add to this difference, men never considered such educated and working women as marriage material and families rejected their proposals by stating "Men hesitate to court a woman who has too much education. They also do not like to take someone as wife who is not often seen at home" (Kire, 2013, p. 104)

The framework of Naga women's scripts is often grounded on personal experience of suppression and mistreatment established alongside the milieu of patriarchy and accustomed rules. Therefore through writing, women mostly express their innermost feelings in-depth. So it can be said that Naga women's literature is a kind of discourse constructed by them using the ideologies that are deprived to them by society in real life.

In this 21st century, there has been a transformed form of enthusiasm that has helped the women writers belonging to the elite class to be self-aware and to bring that into their writings. The best example of this is the poetry collection titled *Poetry from Nagaland* written by the poetesses from Nagaland and the work throws light upon various problems connected to women. If a discussion is done on the poems from the Naga writers such as Longchari, Ao, Zumvu, or Longkumer what readers can see as a common factor is the sense of oppression that the Naga women undergo. The poem *The Tale of a Woman* written in the year 2005 by Zumvu is about how a father feels disappointed when he comes to know that the child that his wife has given birth to is a girl.

The common themes that can be seen in fiction are slaughter, combats, violence, and the struggles in Nagaland but the issues faced by women are never out of focus. In this manner, they search for individuality of their own and try to attain a voice without self-deception. Easterine Kire is one such writer who has written prolifically on these themes. She is the first novelist to write an English novel from Nagaland and it is *A Naga Village Remembered*.

The life of the Naga people, the political tensions, etc. especially during the time of war is discussed in the 2006 short story collection of Temsula Ao titled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. "Her stories give a fine understanding of ordinary Naga people trying to cope with violence and negotiate power with both the army and Naga nationalists and in the midst of all these how Nagas chose to live in peace by finding spaces for enjoyment in times of terror" (Sarma, 2014, p.336). In addition through some specific incidents in the stories, Ao portrays the valiant role that women played during wartime. As a result of these imaginary yet convincing works

of fiction, Ao can put forth the unfamiliar side of women and by this means she is not just telling a story but also giving a message to the readers.

Another major work of Ao is *The Jungle Major* written in the year 2006 and here she recounts the chaos that the Nagas have tumbled into in the course of the current radical emergency that atrophied Nagaland. In this story, the writer has dared to discuss the quick-witted woman named Khatila who saves her husband from the hands of death. What makes the story different from real life is that here the heroic quality of a woman is discussed contrasting to real life. Another masterpiece that was delivered in the year 2006 from her pens is *The Last Song*. This novel is about the atrocities that the Naga people had to encounter from the Indian armed soldiers. This work is an illustration of the abhorrence that Nagas had for the army men.

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* written in 2013 is about a girl growing up in a matriarchal family. Dielieno was the only girl child of her parents and was a sister to four brothers. Although her parents adored her she had the feeling that she was unsolicited and felt that she was an addendum as her family often gave her the leftover outfits of her elder brothers. Even when she was very young her martinet grandmother Vibano tamed her to evolve to become the 'suitable bride candidate' and a good mother. "I was the youngest in my family of five children, I sometimes felt I was an afterthought, and maybe Father and Mother didn't quite know what to do with me. Also because I was a girl after four boys, they never seemed to be sure whether to buy me girl's clothing or let me wear leftover boys' clothing" (Kire, 2013, p.2).

The meaning of the name Dielieno is errand girl, and through this, the author is trying to signify the role that a girl child is being signified of by society. The title throws light upon the matriarchal hegemony carried out by the grandmother Vibano who stifles the miseries of a girl child in a male-dominated society. Vibano has never addressed her grandchild by her name but 'the girl'. Dielieno being a womanist, as she grew, was in a constant struggle with the grandmother even for her basic right to education, and therefore can be said that

she wanted to break her essence. “My grandmother didn’t like me. I knew this when I was about four and a half” (Kire, 2013, p.1).

Through this novel, Kire portrays the grating truth of the Naga socio-cultural structure that commands the women of Nagaland how and what they should do in life as well as in society. What makes the novel fascinating is that Kire, through her protagonist Dielieno, shows how Nagaland is changing, eventhough women are still forced to follow old societal norms. Dielieno is a mind voice of Kire herself who stands against this ideology and it is a contrast to that of the older generation who feared that they may get outcasted if the girl children were not disciplined as society demanded.

Kire has always tried to portray strong and bold women characters who take a stand for themselves in her works. In her biographical novel *Mari* which was published in the year 2010, the readers could feel what the titular character had gone through during the Kohima Japanese war. Her whole life was misshaped as a result of this mishap. She had to transform herself from a carefree young girl into a responsible young woman who desired to protect her siblings by taking them to an innocuous place where they would be free from misery, death, and hunger.

Mari is not just Mari’s story. It is the story of Kohima and its people. Kohima today is very different from the Kohima of my childhood, and completely unrecognizable from the Kohima of Mari’s childhood. [...] Once upon a time, a war was fought here and it changed lives. (Kire, 2010, p. xiii)

The women in Nagaland have gone through a great sense of evolution from the traditional backdrop and are basking in the glories that were once forbidden for them. The writers played a major role in bringing these women from the four walls of the households to the societal forefront. They use the language of fiction along with the truths of their lives to showcase the reality of Naga women to the world. The writers are not enslaved by the traditions or culture and have the liberty to pour their minds without being afraid of anyone and this clearly shows the autonomy that the women in Nagaland enjoy. Compared to the past women today enjoy the freedom to choose what to listen to and what to avoid. They know where to set the

boundaries and make themselves at times audible and at other times visible so that their lives will be pliable, ingenious, and responsive. Despite the arguments on the discrepancies between men and women being debated over and over on various platforms, it is clear that the women of Nagaland adore their authority in society along with their households.

In conclusion, the significance of women in Nagaland appears as a multifaceted exploration, evident through the lens of Naga women writers. Through a nuanced examination encompassing various factors such as the presence of matriarchal structures as portrayed by Kire in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, distinctive geopolitical and cultural influences as depicted in *Mari*, *Jungle Major* and *These Hills Called Home* a unique female identity emerges within Nagaland. Despite the existence of patriarchal constraints as discussed through the writers' pen, Naga women adeptly navigate and carve out their distinct identities, signifying resilience and agency that is shaping their stories. By delving into literary analysis and sociological representations, we gain deeper insights into the intricate interplay of gender dynamics within Naga culture. Through the voices of Naga women writers, we witness the depth and diversity of their experiences, emphasising the ongoing evolution of gender roles and how women are asserting their empowerment within Nagaland's cultural landscape. As a result, this research undertakes the significance of acknowledging and appreciating the varied contributions of Naga women writers in shaping their communities and paving a path towards gender equality and social progress.

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