

Threads of Transformation: Education as the Catalyst for Female Agency in Select Narratives of Easterine Kire

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Abstract

For Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the progress of a community was measured by the degree of progress which women have achieved, pertaining that, education of women is not only morally imperative but a stimulus to bring an affirmative transformation in a society. A society cannot be civilised keeping its significant other in dark and ignorance. Hence women Education plays a vital role in a basic structure of any society. The present paper tries to analyse the role of education in women resilience in select works of Easterine Kire. It employs qualitative methodology through textual analysis of the select novels to draw a hypothesis to recognise the role of education in evolution of female characters towards empowerment. The present paper attempts to investigate the application of Reader response theory to broaden the perspectives of the narratives.

Keywords: Easterine Kire, Mari, a respectable woman, Women Education, Role of Education

Introduction:

"I am ashamed to talk with my very maids," says she, "for I don't know when they do right or wrong. I had more need go to school, than be married", Defoe, who quoted this statement in his English essay *The Education of Women*, is expected to have believed that education was more important than marriage because it was a much more appropriate institution for women in his day. This quote serves as a reminder of the profound changes that education brings about for women. According to Ambedkar, the status of women in a society is a good indicator of its level of development. The multifaceted development of a society can benefit from the contributions of an educated woman. In light of this, the current study aims to examine the importance of education in the lives of female characters in Easterine Kire's work *Mari*.

Easterine Kire, the first Naga writer, needs no introduction in the arena of North Eastern literature, writing along with Temsula Ao, she has secured a place for herself in literary canon through her poetic writing which brings Naga world to life. The simple yet magnificent writing connects and characterises Nagaland at multiple levels, traversing through its history,

mythology, folklore and contemporary issues with fictional tapestry. Her noted works, *Mari*, has been considered for the present study. The paper tries to analyse significance of education in the evolution of the female characters of above said novel to broaden the perspective of the narratives, to be able to appreciate the narratives without constraining it to its geography, to answer the bigger questions on the impact of multiple socio-religious factors affecting the female education, to evaluate the narratives on the application of reader response theory, to comprehend the evolution of a tribal cultural on the introduction of a new religion and to explore the casteless community and its view on the gender equality.

Though the main theme of the selected novel *Mari* is war of Kohima, which was fought against the Japanese troops, jointly by Indo-British forces during the second world war around 1945 in the naga hills, the present study tries to highlight the author's intention to fabricate the life history of her female protagonists with history of her land. The present paper injects various critical theories to analyse the respective plots to pull a single thread of concept called role of education and tries to analyse the way education led to the emancipation of Naga women after the war to regain its essence for better future. The present study is significant to comprehend the present-day scenario of Nagaland and the attitude of Nagas with respect to women education.

Literature Review

Leisangthem Gitarani Devi, in her research paper titled *Writing Lives, Re-membering History in Easterine Kire's Mari*, in *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, Vol. 44, No. 4, Winter 2021 [34-44] examines the work as historico-biographical fiction, to analyse the fiction parallel with historical facts. Sanathan Mandal and Dr.Smriti Singh, in their article titled, *Reconstructing the Past through Personal Hi(story): War, Memory, and Naga Identity in Easterine Kire's Mari*, explores the concept of "Self and identity" in a war-prone area. Tarulatha Pegu in her research paper *A Feminist Reading of Easterine Kire's Mari*, examines the narrative through feminist lens, the lives of women in a conflict area like Kohima during the World War II. Another Researcher B.Deepa from SPMV, Tirupathi, vocalises the effects of war and violence on women, the weaker section of the society in her article titled, *DEVASTING EFFECTS AND REPERCUSSIONS OF WAR: A STUDY OF EASTERINE KIRE'S NOVELS*. Kabeen Teronpi, compares *Mari* with *Felanee*, and highlights the vulnerability of women during the war, physical and psychological stress experienced by them in the article, *Women and Children in Times of Crisis: Reading Mari and The Story of Felanee*. Thus many research articles mentioned above either talks about the historical aspects of the novel or the effects of war and violence on women, hence, the present study finds its gap among them to investigate the specific tool of Naga women's resilience and response of a non-Naga reader, who is being exposed to a society where the culture is evolved without a gender prejudice, where daughters were treated with equal opportunities.

Methodology

The study aims to deploy the qualitative method to analyse the texts and proposes to apply the Reader Response theory of Louise Rosenblatt, which highlights the reader's active participation in deriving meaning from a text and argues that meaning is not predetermined but rather developed via the reader-text relationship. The study attempts a comparative study with other contemporary Naga and non-naga writers' work and the characterisation of female characters to strengthen the argument.

Education and Female Characters

Mari, set in 1945, amid World War II, is a story reaped from the memory of Kire's Aunt which transcends the reader back to the past where a small hamlet called Kohima became the war zone overnight, it became the threshold of India for Japanese force to invade to have an edge over the allied nations. A romantic story of Mari fabricates with the history of her land.

The Story of *Mari* runs parallel with that of Kohima, as she encounters her first love Vic, endures eternal separation due to war, tries to rebuild herself, fall in love again, subjected to heartbreak again and finally stabilises her life as she completes her education to become a Nurse. *Mari* is story which revolves around the war, the violence, struggle to survive, loosing of loved ones and carving a permeant scar on the minds of people who experienced it, the gravity of war on general mass has been explored by many critics and research scholars, however it is also imperative to point out the significance of education that Kire is been implied in her works. After a two heart breaks *Mari*, turns towards the serious phase of life where she had the responsibility of her two fatherless children and she decides to complete her education to have better lives for her and her daughters. It's important to highlight the support she was given by her parents and the society, between the time period of 1945 and early 1950s, where the main stream cultures still kept their women under the veil.

a respectable woman by the same author is a tale of remembrance of war, the narration unfolds the story of mother-daughter duo accordance with history of war, and its byproducts, death, loss, violence and permanent psychological scar left on the minds of inhabitants, going back and forth like pendulum, weaving past with the present, serving the description of the disaster war had brought with the rebuilding of their little village along with mending their relationships. *Khonuo*, the mother loses herself after losing her husband but regains her strength to stand up for her children, her daughter who decides to remain unmarried, chooses to adopt her friend's child who was subjected to domestic violence. One should observe in both the cases women could stand on their decision or they could take a decision at the first place because they were educated, *Khonuo* was a history teacher and her daughter procured a Bachelor degree in English Literature to become a teacher, their education gifted them the financial freedom that they could live their lives rationally on their terms. Amid the war, the worst scenario that any society could encounter, Naga people didn't negotiate with their education, the rigid less narration flows concentrating on the effects of war, however Naga people discipline for education deserves an applause.

In the course of the novel *Mari*, one may observe the ample opportunities given to a girl, to point out some, the main character *Mari*, was allowed or rather encouraged to be a road contractor, to build roads to facilitate the manoeuvre of war vehicles, where she meets her first love *Vic*, gets engaged and eventually loses him to the war and becomes the single parent to his child in the post war period. She falls in love with another young British soldier *Dickie*, who eventually leaves unwillingly adhering to his official orders, leaving *Mari* and his daughter *Lily* alone, however being engaged to *Vic* was accepted by the family and the Naga society, but *Mari's* relationship with *Dickie* was objected, and the solution was to visit the village council and register the child as a legal offspring to retain her birth right to live and own a property in land of her birth. Considering the cultural construct, outside Naga hills, any girl would have been ridiculed and put to shame, however reader response theory, as it says, it's the reader who finds the meaning, according to his/her culturally inherited way of interpreting a text, it is overwhelming to know a young mother is treated so rationally. The parents, family members and the society embrace her along with her daughters and supports them morally when she considers to continue her studies to get a job to support her family. If not for educated Naga society, the mainland's social construct which supported child

marriage and discouraged widow re marriage would have considered the same character as morally declined and subjected to various name calling and have posed unbearable life situations.

In her short story, *The Night* from the short story collection *These Hills called Home*, Temsula Ao, narrates the story of an unwed young mother who is put to shame by her clan members and the young mother who was denied the support by father of her child determines,

I shall devote my life to bringing up these two children in the best way I can. I shall finish my high school, get a job and educate them. I shall spend every ounce of my energy so that they have a better life than mine..

The above lines signify the positive change that education can bring in the society.

Another prominent writer of our times, Manju Kapur illuminates in her novels, like *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*, that societal barriers that prevent women in India from accessing adequate education, often attributed to entrenched traditions. This educational deficit renders women vulnerable and dependent within their communities. Through her novels, Kapur confronts these pressing issues faced by women, portraying the harsh realities of their experiences. Furthermore, she advocates for the transformative power of education, illustrating how it can imbue women with dignity, empowerment, and agency in their lives.

The hardships of Binodini, a young widow who encounters discrimination and social constraints, are depicted by Tagore in his book *Chokher Bali* (A Grain of Sand). As she shows how education can empower women like Binodini to make prudent choices and stand up for themselves in an age of patriarchy, Tagore accentuates the crucial importance of education for women like Binodini throughout the course of the novel.

In a similar vein, prominent Indian writer Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay tackled the topic of women's education in his works. Chattopadhyay portrays the path of Lalita, a young woman from a modest upbringing who realises the significance of education and aspires to pursue it despite societal constraints, in *Parineeta* (The Espoused). The narrative emphasizes how Lalita's desire for self-realization and her life were transformed by education. In the same path Shashi Deshpande frequently includes themes of education and self-discovery in her works, as she examines the impacts of education on women's identities, relationships, and goals in pieces such as *That Long Silence* and *A Matter of Time*.

In her short story, *The Stomach that Chewed Hunger* by Nachiyal Suganthi, moulds the character of a young girl who is studying to be a nurse, thinks that academic success is the only way to overcome and hunger poverty, in the sense that education in a modern scenario is an essential commodity of survival, though our society comprehends the inclination, always made little trickier for women to access the education with its social and cultural construct, gender disparity and prejudices.

In the same way Savitribai Phule, a well-known social reformer and educator of 19th-century India, had revolutionary views on women's education at the time, believing that education was the way to releasing women from society's restrictive systems. She argued that educated women should actively participate in social and political arenas and that they should raise enlightened children who will favourably impact society. She felt that educated women had a crucial role to play in defining the destiny of our country.

Dr.B.R. Ambedkar too acknowledged the connection between women's economic emancipation and education. He contended that women with higher levels of education were more equipped to support themselves economically participate in the workforce, and raise their socio-economic standing, all of which lessened dependency and vulnerability. He truly believed that educating women will lead to overall development of the society, to prove that Literacy rate of Nagaland boots their view on significance of education in their society, which goes hand in hand with the mainland, according to 2021 census, literacy rate of Male is 82.75%, and female is 76.11% constituting the overall percentage of 79.55, which is projected to surpass the mainland India in the following census. According to All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), Nagaland houses five major Universities, one institute of national Importance, sixty-nine colleges, one paramedical, nine teacher training institutes, ten technical institutes, among which female enrolment constitutes 54.01% of the total enrolment. The numbers signify the cultural setting and conventional attitude of the society towards education compared with other tribal communities, Meena Tribe, concentrated more in North western India has overall literacy rate of 57.24%, while female literacy rate is 33.70%, tribes from Andrapradesh is 48.83%, with female literacy rate of 40.89% likewise many tribes like Siddi, Bodo, Irula, Garasia, Katkari, soliga, Muda tribe, Paniya who have less than 50% of literacy rate, the major concern of these tribes is being lack of education which in turn put the overall development of the community in distress.

Role of New Religion

Christianity makes up 87.93% of the population in Nagaland. In the initial stages, religion and education were inseparable for the Nagas as the language English was introduced to them through prayer songs and hymns. The Christian missionaries, who built the first school in Nagaland, brought English education along with new religion. The impact of missionary schools is evident in Kire's works. Their newfound religion provided them with an elevated sense of self and a methodical perspective on their old faith. The language and the new religion afforded them a more logical perspective that enabled them to see past the gender disparity, which in turn offered women in Nagaland greater prospects.

Conclusion

Mari, is a journey of a young woman in the war zone, it intricates the history with biography, as the author says it's a story of her aunt, who navigated through the Kohima war and severe heartbreaks, it's a story of resilience, and the present study has tried to recognise, women education as the tool of resilience, emancipation and women empowerment which in turn leads to socio-economic and cultural deliverance of the entire community. The role of new religion, introduction of English language, which fosters the scientific thinking have had their share in the modern facet of Naga community to overcome the gender disparity and encourage and present opportunities to their daughter to get educated and pursue the carrier of their choice. It is not an overstatement to say that majority of her novels acknowledge the importance of women education and female wisdom. It a universal truth that educated women can foster a positive enforcement, equality and better future and *Mari* concedes the same.

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