

## **Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman*: A Narrative of Trauma, Memory and Resurrection**

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### **Abstract**

*"It took my mother, Khonuo, exactly forty-five years before she could bring herself to talk about the war"*- With these powerful words Easterine Kire introduces her novel, *A Respectable Woman* to her readers. In Nagaland, the decisive Battle of Kohima has been fought and won by the Allies and people in and around Kohima are trying hard to come to terms with the devastation, the loss of home and property and the deaths of their loved ones. Forty years after the event, Khonuo reconstructs this moment, sewing together her memories, bit by bit, for her young daughter. As memory passes from mother to daughter, the narrative slithers seamlessly into the present, a moment in which Nagaland, much transformed, challenges different realities and challenges. Using storytelling traditions so conventional of her region, Kire leads the reader smoothly into a world where history and memory meld to show how a young woman comes to understand the legacy of her parents and her land. Memory plays not only a significant role in depicting the horrors of war and bloodshed but also makes the next generation aware of the tradition and culture of the lost land. Through her fractured memories, Khonuo defines her nationalist identity by questioning and amalgamating the horror of past and the love of modernized Nagaland. This paper seeks to focus on how memory becomes a strong narrative to peep into the psyche of the people and culture of the land which is trying to come out of the ashes of war, loss and death.

**Key Words:** Tradition, War, Bloodshed, Culture.

Trauma is generally understood as a disruptive experience that largely impacts the self and its perception of the external world. Trauma studies explores the impact of trauma in literature and society by understanding its psychological and cultural importance. The literature of the North-East reflects mainly the political turmoil which often intensifies violence, ethnic battles and belligerent conflicts. Almost all the states of the North East have suffered trauma of violence and displacement. For example, one of the longest

military conflict in the world is Naga Insurgency which started in 1950. North Eastern region is ethnically, culturally and linguistically different from the other parts of India but these diversity is not the only reason for the unrest in North-East. After the independence, North East is divided territorially and during the demarcation of state border, cultural specificities were ignored which gives rise to ethnic battle and unrest. Literature of the North East is basically reflecting the traumatic condition of the people and because of that North eastern literature is termed as “literature of terror”, “literature that is too conflict ridden” (Long Kumar 2014). Emphasizing the importance of literature in understanding the traumatic condition of the people after war and violence, Miriam Cooke says, “There is no one history, no one story about a war that has a greater claim to the truth but that history is made up multiple stories, many of them her stories which emanate from and then reconstruct events. Each story is told by someone who experienced war...” (Cooke 1996). Writers like Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao captured the sufferings, pain, violence, terror, insurgency, question on nationalism and the separatist forms movements of the region successfully as they are the part of the trauma too. Mostly in their narratives, we find conflict, recollection, nostalgia and memory.

Easterine Kire like her novel *Mari*, accounts the grim experience of the Kohima war and its effect on the Naga people. In the year 1944 Japanese force invaded India which was under the colonial rule of British. Kohima experienced the worst time during the battle between British Allied forces and the Japanese forces. Though the Japanese were defeated in the battle of Naga Hills by the British forces who were well supported by the Naga people but the wound that was left by the war is hard to be forgotten. Kire does not merely documenting the events of the war but also reviving the forgotten culture, oral tradition, food and identity of the land for the younger generation. Kire’s latest novel ‘A Respectable Women’ is a daughter’s narrative of a shifting landscape through the stories told by her mother. Kevinuo is absorbed by stories of her homeland and when her mother finally starts telling her tales from the past, stories of a war-torn Nagaland. She finds out more about her ancestors and the burden and responsibilities they carried. The Japanese invasion displaced people and damaged property but most importantly, it brought a radical change to the social structure, creating newer problems that sent a peaceful settlement into chaos. Kire sensitively scales the psychological impact of war on a people and precisely reconstructs life in the post-WWII years in Nagaland, following the victory of the Allies in the Battle of Kohima. The narrative, divided into two sections, unravels through the memories of Azuo, who was a child when the Japanese invaded Kohima in 1944, and traces the trajectory of her daughter Kevinuo’s life in a changed Nagaland. The novel is a memoir which narrates the friction between the old Nagaland and the new Nagaland. It brings out the after effect of the Kohima war on the lives of the simple villagers and how the lives of the people started to change like the young men joining the army and becoming alcoholic. As the narrative progresses towards the next generation, we see how the socio political topography of Nagaland has changed.

The opening line of the novel “it took my mother, Khonuo, nearly forty years before she

could bring herself to talk about the war” (3) gives the reader a semblance of the mental agony and trauma that she has experienced. She narrates the past history in a fragmented manner and naturally her stories do not have any beginning, middle and end. It is as if she is lost somewhere in her own memory and tries to understand the present with the fragmented memories. Like many others, her family also had to suffer mas’ evacuation from Kohima village to the villages of Chieswema, Meriema, Rusoma, and Jotsoma. When they returned after the war, they only found their houses were in a dilapidated condition. “nothing was left standing. The place was unrecognizable. There was tin strewn on the ground, and a few burnt planks were all that was left of our house. We cried when we saw the total destruction the war had wrought” (9). Most of the houses were wiped out totally and only the ruins were visible. The process of rebuilding was started slowly by those men who escaped death by trying to make new dwellings with bamboo and planks. For the children the effect of war is not so pungent like that on the adults. Sometimes the sight of grown women wailing over their lost homes and dear ones was fascinating to the children as they didn’t understand the situation.

Kevinuo learns from her mother that education became a priority after the war. Before the war, it was John Angami who started a school with the help from DC Pawsey. After the war DC Pawsey reopened the Mission school. Initially the arrangements were made to start class three and six. She talked about the importance of girl’s education also. The girls who did not join the school would like to stay at home, doing household works. With the help of the missionaries, the old girls learned to bake cake and they would also learn to converse in English. For a war torn land, cake baking became “the new skill that a young woman could lay claim to when she set up her own home” (22). Khonuo says: “In our generation, our parents encouraged us to study, especially since they had themselves been educated in the Mission schools. They knew very well that education offered a better life and wanted us to reap the advantages of western education” (24). The life of Khonuo is like the life of Nagaland as both have suffered a lot during the battle of Kohima and both of them have started to regain the lost glory, identity and life. There were several deaths which made the life of Khonuo miserable. Death of her husband made her life wretched as she could not regain peace afterwards. But with the constant help and motivation from her sister she started working in the school. She was changing so was Nagaland by welcoming the need of education and modernity. “Becoming a working girl was once of the greatest joys of my life. For the first time, I was earning money and making a living for myself. I could buy things for the house and go shopping for clothes and shoes with Lydia” (27).

Soon after the war, Nagaland along with its people was beginning to become normal again. The most significant change that the war brought into was the amalgamation of traditional Nagaland with the modernized Nagaland. For instance, the marriage of Nzuo Zeu, sister of Khonuo was the best combination of a traditional marriage and a church wedding. The marriage was conducted following the rituals of Christianity in a church but the wedding feast was conducted in the traditional manner. Food is always an

important factor in any culture. In Nagaland, the traditional way of expressing care and love by sending food. Even at funeral one can't ask how the bereaved person is feeling instead they make food for the family which is the traditional way of showing sympathy and a way to share in their sorrow. She goes on telling that "...for the person offering food, it is an act of love and they try to persuade you to eat and stay strong so you can experience the whole process of the funeral" (35). She has been the best critic of her time and generation. She warned her daughter not to judge the old generation as old fashioned. Though they wore the old fashioned traditional dress but they were more tolerant and understanding unlike the contemporary age.

Our is a generation that has seen the devastation of war. We are people who know what it's like to lose everything almost overnight, homes, loved ones, and life as we knew it before the war. When death is so imminent, some things in life simply stop being important. Some things become bigger, and small things turn insignificant. That is what war does. Love in all its different aspects comes into play during wartime...it was a strange time: we saw some people doing the meanest things and we saw others doing the most noble of action. (37-38)

Dying of young people in the war is the most tragic event in Nagaland as many young Naga men were enthusiastically join the British army in those days because the pay was good. Unlike Amo, many of his friends died in Burma fighting the Japanese. Even the dead bodies did not reach to the families which made the family even sad as the mourning over the dead body is a custom for further healing and closure. After the war, people were preoccupied with rebuilding their homes and their lives so much that they even forgot to give attention to those bereaved families. War has opened the world for the Nagaland. Before the war, none have seen an aeroplane. During the war, the skies were filled with planes, sometimes dropping rations, sometimes leaflets or sometimes dropping bombs on the areas occupied by the Japanese soldiers. War brought development also. There were no proper roads before the war. It was only Imphal-Dimapur road which was quite narrow and one way. "numerous roads were built after the war: widening village paths, digging new routes and connecting them to the main highway between Imphal and Dinapur (54)." Before the war people of Nagaland could not trust their eyes that such a big world could exist beyond the Naga Hills. The war brought the outside world so much closer to the people of the Nagaland. For example, the use of radio to listen to the news from the outside world changed the perception of the world before them. Kire states in the chapter Mapping Kohima, that "Post war Kohima witnessed huge changes as the society made a huge transition from largely rural and village based agriculture society to a modernized, town based, semi-urban community" (169).

In the year 1947, when British started to leave, the people of Nagaland could not accept it as many of them did not know any Government other than British Government. They grew up in an environment which gave them to lead independent lives and also they had

become used to the “presence of a government that took care of matters that were too big for them, such as the Japanese invasion” (57). Political changes took place in Nagaland when the British divided the land of Nagaland between India and Burma. The then leaders organized protest against this division and refused to join the Indian Union. The educated Naga felt that they should fight for the Naga Sovereignty. The Indian army tried to crush the movement for the Naga Sovereignty. In 1918 came the Naga Club, which told the Simon Commission in 1929: “Leave us alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times.” The Naga National Council (NNC) was formed in 1946 under the mercurial Angami Zapu Phizo, who declared Nagaland as an independent state on August 14, 1947. The NNC conducted a “referendum” in 1951 and claimed that “99%” people supported an “independent” Nagaland, though within the NNC itself there were two opinions. The moderates led by general secretary Theyieu Sakhrie were committed to the larger Naga cause but against an armed struggle, foreseeing its futility against the might of the Indian state. They were for greater autonomy under India to preserve the Naga way of life. The other group, led by Phizo, wanted total independence. The people were biased towards the moderates. In 1956, Phizo decided to launch the “counter-offensive”, as he decided to silence the moderate leadership, accusing it of collaborating with India. He started with poet, writer, and NNC ideologue Sakhrie, his mentor and speechwriter. The insurgency was at a critical stage. The stage was set for military operations focusing only on the hostiles, to create conditions for negotiations with the moderates for autonomy under the Constitution. (*Times of India Blog*, 15 Sept. 2018) But all are in vain as though there was clear instruction to win the heart and respect of the Naga people and made them think to be part of India. In the counter insurgency warfare, violence met with violence forgetting the distinction between the moderators and the hostile groups.

Eventually the Naga National Council; organized an army unit and took up arms against the Indian government because many people were being tortured in the interior areas and whole villages were undergoing ‘grouping’ as part of the Indian government’s strategy to suppress the freedom movement (58)

The atrocities of the army and the traumatic condition of the people due to this insurgency is well narrated by Khonuo. The villagers, especially the old people and the young children were either starved to death or by beating.

We were no longer safe in our own homes. At any time, the army would barge in the door and search our homes. ...it was very dangerous to go out if there was a curfew on. The soldiers shot anybody who ventured out at such times...we heard that women were raped in these villages. So many men joined the Naga army to fight against the Indian government. So many of those men died; it was like a whole generation of men disappeared because they were all killed, one after the other (58).

The common people were the worst sufferer because they were closely surveilled and their family members were closely monitored. Life became even worse than it was during the Japanese war. People gets frightened by the sight of the Indian soldiers. They started to desert their homes again. The fight between the Naga Underground army and the Indian army continued to make the life of the Nagaland worst. The emotion of nationalism and the duty towards motherland, made many young people to enlist their names in the Naga army. It was very difficult to shy away from the struggle. Women were also participated in the war against Indian army because their brothers or fathers were killed while fighting the Indian force. There were cultural and religious reasons behind joining the underground army. The non-Christian believed that if they fail to avenge the death of the family members, they would have failed in their commitment to the dead members. Men were ready to laid down their lives to protect their land and which they thought to be a very noble duty.

In the second section of the book, we move to Kevinuo's story. She grows up in a Nagaland that is impelled by modernity. Every village became modernized by the use of electricity and improved transportation service. Yet, political turbulence continues, bringing with it new challenges for the government, such as alcoholism. The political milieu continued to contribute tension and uncertainty. "The government came down harshly on men who would not surrender and 'join the mainstream,' as they called it. Frustration drove even more men to drink and alcohol abuse soon became a visible social problem" (87). Drinking and beating of wife became everyday story in Nagaland. The drinking houses selling rice-brew did not have any age restriction. Church also failed to give any solution to the drinking problems and moreover people were giving so many reasons to justify their drinking habits which are somewhat right in that time.

They were quick to blame the political situation, the brutality of army occupation, the transition from rural to modern which left some people out in the cold because they did not have enough education or skills, the heavy migration from the rural areas to the townships, and the problems of sharing resources among an ever increasing population. And they were right on all counts. The government lacked a support system for the affected families, whether it was in terms of financial or psychological support" (133)

Even after the Liquor Prohibition Act, the alcoholism did not stop. Prohibition opened the gate for smuggling alcohol at very high price. The profits were so alluring that people were transporting alcohol from Assam and selling in Kohima. Sometimes the smuggled alcohol contained methanol and other substances and a result many died because of the methanol. While war and suffering provide the backdrop for Khonuo's narration, Kevinuo's story is anchored in friendship and love. She struggles to cope with her father's premature death, which causes her mother to withdraw into a shell. But where her mother is absent, her friend Beinuo fills the void. However, this childhood friendship is tested when Beinuo makes a life-changing decision after school to marry, one that was expected of Angami women. On the other hand, Kevinuo is somewhat a rebel like her mother. She does not like the idea of

early marriage and wants to be independent. She fights for the rights of women who are beaten by their husband and become a strong voice for those women. By assuming the role of an unmarried mother of Uvi, Kevinuo deconstructs the old model of respectability. Uvi is a metaphor for a new Nagaland, a future of Nagaland leaving behind all the trauma and violence, embraces the world of hope and resurrection.

Kire with her unique story telling technique gives a true picture of the growth of a land from the war torn, traumatized, dislocated Nagaland to a modernized and westernized Nagaland. It is important to note that she never discarded the value of old tradition of the Nagaland and that's why she has used the oral tradition of storytelling to depict the traumatized world of Nagaland. Knonuo's narration comes from her fractured memory. By recollecting her past, she presented a history of Nagaland and its several beliefs and culture. Whereas her daughter's narration is coming from her present situation where Nagaland is still struggling to accept the aftermath of modernism. Through the narration of mother and daughter, Kire shows us two different worlds of Nagaland and its development as a state.

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