

Threads of Resilience: Narratives of Strength and Survival in *A Respectable Woman* and *Aosenla's Story*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explicate the central issue of tradition versus modernity prevailing in the society of Nagaland through Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* and Temsula Ao's *Aosenla's Story*. The novels delineate the liberal feministic perspectives constructed around the significance of women's individual choices and resilience to achieve gender equality. Both the novels, set against the backdrop of Nagaland, which is a culturally diverse and complex society, examine how the tribal women's lives are influenced by traditional beliefs and practices as they simultaneously struggle with modernity's unavoidable advancement. It discourses the Indigenous Naga women's lives, emphasizing their resilience and the complexities run between tradition and modernity. It also shows the significance of women being pushed into the peripheral layer of society under the name of tradition, culture, and its impact over their disconnection from interpersonal bonds, societal institutions, and personal goals. The novels have also effectively picturized the painful interconnection between the preservation of cultural traditions and embracing modernity, thereby capturing the universal struggle of indigenous communities that is undergoing rapid change. The central characters, Kevinuo and Aosenla, amidst all of their societal struggles, show their ceaseless struggle to pursue their dreams while also embracing their traditional tribal lifestyle despite the oppressive societal structure. In such a predicament, the novelists, Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, become the spokespersons of the second sex through the voices of their protagonists and advocate the indomitable spirit of women through their resilient and empowering attitude beyond their social labels.

Key Words: Identity crisis, Empowerment, Tradition vs Modernity, Dreams

Tradition and modernity, in the indigenous world, are always considered to be opposing forces, yet they coexist with each other in complex ways. Indigenous traditions consist of different customs, beliefs, and practices that have been followed through their generations. The traditions which they follow are deeply rooted in their lives, thereby emphasizing its significance in the community, connection to nature, and sustainable living. Whereas, on the other hand, modernity encompasses technological advancements, globalization, and new ways of thinking which can bring challenges and complement in indigenous ways of living.

This paper aims at bringing to light the complexities confronted by indigenous native Indian women in their subservient world, while struggling between their cultural heritage and modern advancements. Women are generally constrained to live under a set of traditional practices and beliefs within their community. Their life completely revolves around the strong expectations of their societal requirements regarding their gender roles, marriage, and familial institutions. Their cultural systems are extremely ingrained in the social fabric of their life, where they strictly adhere to their norms without any deviation. If any unconventionality occurs within their traditional setup, it is followed by numerous

consequences such as exclusion and many other internal conflicts. The central characters in the novel, *A Respectable Woman* and *Aosenla's Story*, evidently portray the turmoil faced by the Indian women, especially the Indian tribal women, between their self-identity and the contemporary changes.

There are many popular fictional writers in Nagaland, such as Tilottoma Misra, Indira Goswami, Mitra Phukan, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Sumita Ghose, and Mamang Dai, who bring out holistic images of their region and the people. They intend to re-trace their traditional roots through their novels, which becomes one of their significant identity markers of Nagaland identity. The novel, *A Respectable Woman* by Easterine Kire, also reconstructs the past memories to her younger generations with her true spirit. Adding to it, the novel discourses the female struggle for achieving their identity removing many stereotypes.

Easterine Kire is an author, poet, and storyteller from Nagaland, a state in Northeast India. She has made noteworthy contributions to Indian literature, predominantly in bringing the culture, history, and traditions of the Naga people to the world-wide readers. She was born in 1959 in Kohima, in the Angami Naga family of Nagaland. She studied in Shillong and later did her PhD at Savitribai Phule Pune University. Her literary career began with the publication of her first collection of poems, *Kelhoukevira*, in 1982. Her works often echo the rich cultural heritage and riotous history of Nagaland. Kire is known for her deep understanding and portrayal of Naga society, its myths, oral traditions, and contemporary issues. She has published many novels such as *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *Don't Run, My Love* (2017), *Walking 6 the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland* (2019), and *Spirit Nights* in 2022.

A Respectable Woman (2019) is comprised of two parts, in which the concept of war and loss is first covered. It explains the Japanese invasion of Kohima during World War II and the aftermath situation in the state. The novel is narrated by Khonuo, mother of the protagonist Kevinuo, who narrates to us about the early years of Angami Nagas, the bitter memories of war, and the transformation of the victims. She also brings out the devastation of the state from the war, the life of the displaced families, and the people's efforts to rebuild their homes and lives. Followed by this description, the narration shifts towards the contemporary problems of Nagaland in the second part of the novel.

The novel depicts the condition of women in India and the women of Northeast India. The state of women has gradually improved in mainland India, while the voice of women in the Nagalandian society is unheard and still witnesses the struggle for their rights and demands. Although the Nagas do not face problems like child marriage or dowry system, the major issue for women is their treatment as a downtrodden subject in their society. They are excluded in their social order and political sphere. The patriarchal presence in society dismisses the rights of women in their own space and country. It leaves them in a secondary position in the household as well as in the society. There is a conventional way of life that has been set against a woman in Nagaland, which instructs and restricts her conduct from her choice of living. She is oppressed in the name of familial institutions and objects to her freedom to live her own life and wishes. In the novel, *A Respected Woman*, it is evidently visible through the conversations of people including the Kevinuo family, schools, and in many public places, where the women's prominent way of living could be only of having a husband rather than following their dream towards success. Kevinuo, who is completely against this notion of gender inequality and wants women to live with liberty without any constraints. She is also appalled to see her senior girl, who is being ousted from her school for becoming pregnant. She is disregarded from being called as a respected woman and considered to be a rejected subject from her society and religious gatherings. This event clearly depicts the state of the women who are away from any traditional aspects or oppose the culture of their society are cornered into a distinct layer from the center. The novel also portrays the female hardships through the voice of Kevinuo's mother who teaches her daughter about how women are referred to as the

husband's property and are forced to endure and accept domestic violence. They are taught to be in a secondary position and remain as voiceless human beings which again raises questions about women and their self-identity.

Kevinuo, who is indifferent from traditional norms of marriage life, embraces the slice of modernity through her education and represents women's successful progression towards self-identity and gender equality. The stories which she hears from her mother sprouts maturity in her mind, thereby cultivating a liberal attitude within her and also expecting the society around her to be the same. She progresses ahead in her life through education, which later allows to be a working woman at a school in Kohima when it is a nightmare for her other associates. She represents the liberal attitude of a woman who has escaped from the strangles of traditional norms that disrupts her growth, freedom, and desire.

The novel *Aosenla's Story* (2017) by Temsula Ao explores the condition of Naga women inside their family, community and in the trace of modernity. The writer of the novel is an author, ethnographer, and a firsthand experienced tribal writer who brings to light the exact depiction of women's status and the complex terrain of the family and society in Nagaland. Some of her renowned works are *These Hills Called Home* (2006) and *Laburnum For My Head* (2009) which also highlights women and their way of life. Her collection of essays, short stories and poems play a major role in the understanding of the various facets of culture and identity of the Naga people. The protagonist also faces many hardships to reach the threshold of her career due to the neglect of the society towards her gender.

Aosenla's story portrays the patriarchal set up in the modern context and urban locality of Nagaland. The protagonist, Aosenla, has undergone a forceful marriage to an older man by her family in the hope of upliftment of her status. She is a happy and pampered daughter in her family, but the mindset of the parents become different and distant while thinking about marriage and their traditional aspects of the society. She is stopped from her education and oppressed to be imperative in her own family by ruining her wishes and dreams. Even after the marriage, she could not liberate herself as she is rejected for the reason of giving birth to two daughters. "The Naga woman is never a part of the decision-making activities of the village council either. Those important roles are assigned only to the males" (Chowdhury, 282). Her family members humiliate her for the loss of her third child where nobody accompanies her while she is discharged from the hospital. This depicts the social expectations of the Naga-society over the women and their subjugation in their own sphere. Although there is an occurrence of modern development all around the nation, the traditional set up of the community has made the self-identity of women questionable. Aosenla, who also has a typical experience like that of the other women in her society, has never put herself down. She becomes resilient to the situation and at the same time chooses her way of life by embracing modernity. She is restricted from climbing up her professional ladder by her husband and his family members, but all her accusations do not pull her back from her progress in her own world. She cares for herself a lot and adapts to modernity with western outfits, fashionable clothes, and socializing with her friends. Her resilience over her traumas has also changed the mindset of her husband and his family, which according to her is itself a great surprise and success.

The characters Aosenla and Kevinuo from *Aosenla's Story* and *A Respectable Women* are both strong Naga women, yet they face different challenges and societal expectations. Aosenla's own independence is restricted by oppressive traditions in the label of marriage. Despite her hardships, she stays resilient in order to reclaim her wishes and desire on her own terms. In contrast, Kevinuo is a protagonist who fights for the respect, self-worth, and dignity of women in society. She becomes successful by standing against the traditional constraints put forth by her society. Both characters show the complex fight for female empowerment within their respective cultural settings, but Kevinuo's struggles are more subdued and centre on upholding her dignity and respectability in a society that has strict expectations for women, whereas Aosenla fights against overt societal oppression.

Liberal feminism, in the context of tradition and modernity, emphasizes gender equality and women's rights which equally advocates women's inclusion within existing societal frameworks. It often challenges traditional norms that confine women's roles to domestic spheres, encouraging the equal access of women to possess education, employment, and political participation. "Today, the educational status shows that the Angamis have been able to gain access to education" (Pienyu,44). Liberal feminism promotes women to have personal freedom to choose their modern values and cultural traditions in order to pursue their ambitions in both their public and private life.

In the novel *Aosenla's Story* by Temsula Ao, liberal feminism can be observed in Aosenla's struggle for personal autonomy and equality in a patriarchal Naga society. The narrative analyzes gender-based restrictions that limit her opportunities and freedom, highlighting the need for legal and social reforms to ensure women have equal access to education, employment, and other resources. Aosenla's determination to assert her identity and rights amidst societal constraints exemplifies the liberal feminist ideals of individual empowerment and equality, advocating to protect and uplift the status of women. Similarly, in *A Respectable Woman* by Easterine Kire, liberal feminism is reflected in the protagonist's resistance to traditional gender roles and her quest for self-sufficiency. The story explores the dynamics of marriage and family, emphasizing the importance of equal partnerships and respect for women's autonomy. By challenging societal expectations and pursuing education and economic independence, the protagonist's journey aligns with liberal feminist principles, promoting the dismantling of stereotypes and the promotion of gender equality through cultural and social transformation.

The interconnection between tradition and modernity in indigenous communities can lead to a dynamic cultural evolution, where traditional practices are preserved and adapted to fit contemporary contexts. The traditional people must embrace both tradition and modernity, where modern development in this era has become a platform to protect cultural heritages and provide space for indigenous voices in the global discourse. Education is another area where tradition and modernity intersect, thereby incorporating educational systems in Indigenous communities that lead to their empowerment. The global discourse about the community and empowering education keeps the tribal identity intact with the country. However, the interconnection between tradition and modernity cannot be accomplished without any challenges where some people still think modern advancement is a threat to their traditional lifestyles. Particularly Indigenous communities feel an erosion of their cultural practices and land rights due to these external threats, but the relationship between tradition and modernity in the indigenous world helps for their evolution. The key solution for Indigenous communities towards empowerment and identity is to have a balance between traditional values and benefits of modernity for their sustainability and visibility. Thus, the novelists, Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire, have brought about the importance of women rights and self- identity in their modern development world.

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