

**Discourse on Gender, Language, and Identity in the Select Works of
Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire**

(Thesis submitted to Nagaland University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award
of Ph.D. Degree in English)

By

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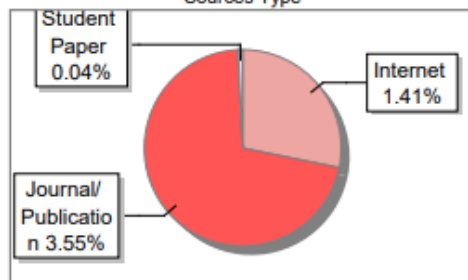
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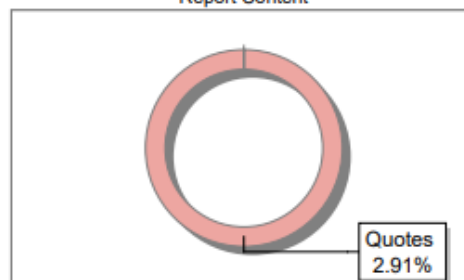
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Abstract

A talk about Gender, Language, and Identity is always an interesting but long topic. Firstly, because each topic by itself is vast and secondly because each of them is so interconnected with one another, that it is difficult to talk about one without bringing the other into the context. The works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire, both internationally recognized writers from the North-East, are predominantly set in a Naga context. They have woven stories from the hills with a tribal essence. From the earlier pagan beliefs to the coming of Christianity in terms of religion, from a patriarchal mode of living to the adaptation of modernism in terms of society, from customary laws to being under colonial rule in terms of politics, from patriotism to questions of freedom and the shift in the economy from the effects of post-colonialism, both have reveled in the flavor of 'Naganness' in their literature. In this thesis the question of Gender, Language, and Identity will therefore be researched keeping in mind the above mode of narration and the context explored in their stories and novels. This research focuses on how gender roles affect language and speech in a Naga context and how these differences affect communication. This study will invite readers to explore and appreciate the cultural heritage of the Nagas, while also prompting reflection on whether tradition serves as an obstacle or a source of benefit. Within the literary framework, focusing on the works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire, drawing upon a diverse array of perspectives from an extensive literature review across various scholarly sources, this research synthesizes subjective and objective analyses to offer detailed interpretations and explore potential implications.

The introductory chapter will establish a foundational understanding of the relationship between Gender, Language, and Identity, paving the way for an in-depth exploration of Northeast Indian literature. By tracing the evolution of gendered language from seminal works to contemporary perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding gender dynamics

within literary discourse. The subsequent chapters will look into the portrayal of gender dynamics within the narratives of Ao and Kire, particularly within the context of Naga literature. Through detailed analyses of specific works, the research will illuminate the complexities of gender constructs, societal norms, and individual identity formation within the Ao and Angami tribes of Northeast Indian society. The research will scrutinize the dichotomies inherent in gendered language to elucidate how societal norms influence linguistic and behavioral choices, shaping individual identity construction. Through a critical examination of everyday language and social practices, the thesis will explore the performative nature of gender, advocating for a diversified understanding within different cultural contexts. Beyond theoretical frameworks, this research will also delve into the enduring significance of oral tradition within Naga society, highlighting its role as a custodian of cultural identity and history. Despite the pressures of modernization and external influences, the Nagas have steadfastly preserved their oral heritage, recognizing its intrinsic value in shaping individual and collective identities. Through storytelling sessions and communal gatherings, the Nagas continue to transmit their rich cultural heritage, ensuring its perpetuation for future generations.

Central to the discussion are the literary contributions of Ao and Kire, whose works serve as pillars within Naga literature. Through evocative storytelling, both authors navigate themes of tradition, modernity, and individual identity, contributing to a deeper understanding of Naga society and culture. This study hopes to contribute to the broader discourse on Gender, Language, and Identity within literary studies, to offer insights into the complexities of individual and collective identity construction within diverse cultural contexts. By interrogating conventional notions and advocating for a more encompassing comprehension, the study seeks to foster dialogue and promote social change toward an egalitarian community.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

This chapter introduces the thesis which deals with a comprehensive analysis of pivotal concepts within gender, language and identity. It introduces an exploration of the literary works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire, illuminating their foundational influences, the catalysts shaping their writing, and the extensive role of oral tradition within their narratives.

Language and gender examines the complex connection between male and female communication patterns. This multidisciplinary research field explores speech and writing across various contexts, emphasizing gender, gender relations, gendered behaviors, and sexuality. Diverse studies investigate the complex interplay, intersections, and tensions between language and gender, transcending disciplinary confines. At its core, this field spans applied linguistics, linguistic anthropology, conversation analysis, cultural studies, feminist media studies, feminist psychology, gender studies, interactional sociolinguistics, linguistics, mediated stylistics, sociolinguistics, and media studies. These disciplines collectively contribute to understanding how language intertwines with gender dynamics, revealing the complex nature of communication within societal and cultural contexts (*Language and Gender*).

Gender studies are often devoted to gender identity and gendered representation as central categories of analysis. This field includes women's studies (concerning women, feminism, gender, and politics), men's studies, and queer studies. Studies on gender and language do analyze all these studies however for this research, queer studies will be excluded as the selected works do not require such readings.

The primary texts for analysis include both fiction and nonfiction works written by Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire." The selected works of Temsula Ao are namely, *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone* (2007), *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags: A Memoir* (2015), and *Aosenla's Story* (2017). The selected works of Easterine Kire are, *Life on Hold* (2011), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), *Don't Run, My Love* (2017), and *A Respectable Woman* (2019).

Key Concepts of Gender Language

The study of gender and language within sociolinguistics and gender studies is commonly traced back to Robin Lakoff's 1975 publication, *Language and Women's Place*, along with her earlier works. Since the 1970s, this field has evolved significantly. Lakoff argued in her article that women exhibit distinct speech patterns compared to men, characterized by the frequent use of mitigators such as "sort of" or "I think" and inessential qualifiers like "really happy" or "so beautiful". According to her, these linguistic features contribute to portraying women's speech as tentative, powerless, and trivial, reinforcing their exclusion from positions of power. This perspective implies that societal norms impose a specific linguistic identity on women, restricting them to predefined roles. Lakoff's article sparked extensive research and debate, with scholars empirically testing her claims, particularly regarding the prevalence of tag questions in women's speech. The subsequent discourse separated into two main approaches: (1) that women and men talk differently and (2) that differences in women's and men's speech are the result of – and support – male dominance. In later years, the two claims were separated and came to be called the *difference* and the *dominance* approaches. Those who focused on differences proposed that women and men speak differently because of their fundamental differences in their relation to their language, perhaps due to different socialization and experiences early on. Deborah Tannen's *You*

Just Don't Understand (1990) has often been taken as a representative of a *difference* framework (Eckert and Ginnet 1).

Tannen argued that girls and boys live in different subcultures analogous to the distinct subcultures associated with those from different classes or ethnic backgrounds. As a result, they grow up with different conventions for verbal interaction and interaction more generally. Analysis associated with a dominance framework generally argued that differences between women's and men's speech arise because of male dominance over women and persist to keep women subordinate to men (Eckert and Ginnet 2).

In 1983, the release of *Language, Gender and Society* by Barry Thorne, Cheris Kramarae, and Nancy Henley marked a pivotal response to the evolving discourse on linguistic gender differences and dominance. Recognizing the increasing separation of the difference and dominance approaches, the authors advocated for a more detailed examination of this dichotomy. They posed critical questions concerning the contextual aspects of language use: who communicates with whom, the purpose of communication, and the setting in which it occurs. The authors emphasized the importance of exploring variations in speech across different contexts, such as home, work, and interactions with different acquaintances, whether intimate or casual.

Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley emphasized the importance of acknowledging substantial variations within each gender group. They urged researchers to consider distinctions among men and among women, exploring when these internal differences outweigh any disparities

between the gender groups. Shifting the focus from seeking commonalities to understanding the nature of diversity among men and women, the authors explored how this diversity contributes to the structure of gender. Their work prompted a shift in perspective, highlighting the complexities of linguistic diversity within gender groups and challenging the understanding of gender as a homogeneous construct.

In the exploration of language and gender, a notable dichotomy emerged, distinguishing between how women and men speak and how they are spoken of. This division found support in the prevailing academic linguistic perspective, which regarded language as a system detached from its users.

Instances of semantic derogation and sexualization in expression related to women, such as the evolution of the term "hussy" from its original meaning of "housewife," were considered linguistic phenomena devoid of societal implications. Harvard University's Linguistic Department even asserted that using male pronouns as generics (e.g., every student must bring his lunchbox to school) was a linguistic fact rather than a reflection of societal norms, dismissing feminist objections as "pronoun envy."

However, early scholars challenged this ahistorical view of language. Ann Bodine (1975) documented deliberate legislation in the nineteenth century influencing the use of masculine generics in English, Sally McConnell-Ginet (1984) explored the dynamic relationship between semantic change and power dynamics in everyday language use, and Paula Treichler (1989) investigated the power dynamics shaping word inclusion in dictionaries, the arbiters of linguistic legitimacy. Collectively, these works underlined the inseparability of language and its usage, highlighting that language is an ongoing construction shaped by practical, real-world applications.

This perspective contested the notion that language operates in isolation from societal influences and emphasized its continual evolution in response to social dynamics (Eckert and Ginet 4).

Social practice encompasses more than individual choices and actions based on reasons; it also includes constraints, both institutional and ideological, that shape but don't entirely dictate those individual behaviors. Emphasizing the significance of everyday social interactions, particularly within face-to-face communities of practice—such as families, workplace groups, sports teams, musical ensembles, classrooms, and playground groups—we acknowledge the diverse factors influencing these interactions. In this framework, language is not the sole social determinant, as it exists alongside other meaningful elements like facial expressions, attire, location, and physical contact. By focusing on these different aspects, this perspective recognizes the complexity of social dynamics, where language operates in conjunction with various non-verbal cues and contextual factors within diverse communal settings.

When we consider practice as fundamental to both language and gender, our inquiries undergo a transformation. Instead of posing questions like "how do women speak?" or "how do men speak?", we explore the linguistic resources individuals employ to portray specific identities as women or men. We investigate the emergence of novel speech patterns and behaviors associated with gender categories or alternative identities. Shifting from the question of "How are women spoken of?" to "What linguistic practices uphold specific gender ideologies and norms?" enables us to examine how new ideas about gender are disseminated and accepted. Understanding how and why individuals modify linguistic and gender practices becomes crucial. This departure from a focus on differences between males and females prompts us to inquire about the types of personae individuals, regardless of gender, can present. The shift broadens our perspective, encouraging a

more distinct exploration of the dynamic interplay between language, gender, and individual identity construction (Eckert and Ginet 5).

The idea of gender is so embedded into the minds that we think it is natural to have a set idea of what gender should be. We know this from the use of sentences like, “you are a girl, do not climb trees”, “you are a man, you should get a job”, “don’t drive like a woman”, and “be like a man, don’t cry”, or buying teddy bears for a girl child and car toys for the boy child. We are so used to this conventionality that we think such beliefs are “normal.” We hear such sentences from childhood till adulthood and sooner or later, eventually these ideas become conventional. These beliefs are then used to justify one’s actions, from the way of dressing to dealing with emotions, to living one’s life. Such is the circle that common adage begins to be accepted as scientific fact. This leads us to an understanding that gender is something that we become or do.

The Oral Tradition

The Nagas are essentially an oral society. Even after more than a century since the white people introduced the written tradition, the oral tradition still holds sway among the Nagas. What has been with them since the earliest of time, perhaps, could not be wiped away in a short period of Westernization/Christianization regardless of its speed and intensity. The oral tradition of the Nagas takes other oral cultures of many parts of the world and constitutes the whole of history, culture, beliefs and relation with nature. In other words, it encompasses the whole life system of the people. Oral tradition, therefore, is broadly a tradition that primarily preserves its knowledge system by passing it down from generation to generation through the different forms of stories, songs, dances, and verbal instructions. Stories or songs/ poems can be in the form of myths, legends

or historical origins of the people, often told with encoded meanings which, at times, require interpretation. Laws, practices, taboos, and philosophy or the way of life of the people are circulated by responsible and wise elders. All these forms of tradition are accepted by the people with utmost reverence as they are the carriers of their history and culture. Addressing the importance and the soundness of a tradition that has endured centuries, Temsula Ao states, “The values and principles embodied in this tradition are based on life and reality and it has therefore been able to withstand the test of time, and, at times even adapt to changing circumstances without compromising the basic truths” (Pou 72-73). How this culture gets passed to the next generation without losing the inherent meaning shows the vitality and viability of the whole system. It is the “values and principles”, as Ao puts it, which enabled the tradition to be ushered down unbroken and complete from generation to generation.

The spirit of the tradition that had been with the Naga ancestors for ages never faded even when the harsh winds of western civilization swept the whole land. Though Christianization compelled the Nagas to embrace Western lifestyles, as the religion was wrapped in the American prototype and this shattered Naga culture, the roots never died. And this we can perceive from the kind of movement that is slowly waking a present generation of Nagas to save the degenerating culture from total disappearance. There is a visible and conscious effort in art, literature, and socio-cultural arenas to revive and restore the tradition that has been kept aside for a long time and because of which many might have been lost but the ones that remain are still worthy of resurrection.

Being of the oral tradition, the Nagas rely heavily on the stories and poems/ songs to trace their history. Perhaps as Amadou Hampâté Bâ puts it, “Every old man that dies is a library that burns” (“Collecting Family Memories”). The old and fading generation transmits everything that has been

preserved through memory to the next generation by storytelling. While the written culture constructs structures and compiled books in libraries, the oral culture subscribes to the human faculty of the memory system to preserve its history. Therefore, knowing that it is important to impart the ways of the tribe, the elders make conscious efforts to convey the history to the succeeding generation. *Morung* institutions were established to facilitate this tradition of learning. Explaining the importance of these institutions, Easterine Kire writes:

These were large houses in which young boys were initiated at the age of fourteen or fifteen for them to receive cultural education and learn the ways of the tribes. Young girls of the same age had a corresponding house. Both houses has a presiding elder or parent, who was responsible for their cultural initiation (Pou 73-74).

In these institutions, young men learn stories of their villages or tribe's exploits and defeats, of men who brought pride to the people, of warfare, and how to be great warriors and to be responsible men of the people. In the same way, women learned the art of various occupations and things that relate to women in society. The *Morung* is also where people learn the songs of various festivities and the stories of old that speak of their history, traditions, customs and practices.

It is common for children from the neighborhood to gather around a fireplace or stone-elevated platform after the evening meal, either inside a house or in a public place, to listen to stories told by the elderly, not just as an entertaining session but to learn. The moment the old grandfather or the grandmother began to tell stories of animals or men or spirits 'silence' is the rule, as if it is a taboo to interrupt. And children being children, they can listen to stories told over and over again, as though they were different ones. The wandering eye is fixed on the narrator and the curious

ears hear nothing but the stories. The old ways of perceiving the world still hold sway in the minds of the present-day generation. This can be visible in the proximity that the age-old oral tradition has with the lived reality (Pou 75).

An Overview of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire's Writing

Of the most remarkable voices in literature from Northeast India, Easterine Kire (born March 1959) and Temsula Ao (1945-2022) have been immensely influential in shaping the distinctive features of what is commonly known as Naga Literature. One of the most quintessential aspects of Naga literature is the fact that most of the pioneering Naga writers took into account the fact that history and culture were passed down through word of mouth from generation to generation prior to the existence of the written forms of their native literature. They also depict their society as being caught in the period of transition between the traditional way of living and the modern ways of life. Naga literature, being of relatively recent origin, can be viewed as a result of the drastic and abrupt shift from oral forms of literature – such as folklores, folk songs, oral history, and the like to its written form. Owing to this fact, some of the most celebrated works of Kire and Ao reflect and reiterate the literary and artistic sensibilities of the Nagas, their values, their social and personal concerns, cultural and societal norms, sense of morality, their worldview and their native aesthetics. Their literary outputs reflect an underlying need to evolve among Nagas a new literary tradition rooted in the pre-existing materials found in their folk tradition and history. Despite these shared characteristics in their writings, both writers approach literature with their own distinct styles with varied artistic visions. While Kire draws largely from her cultural heritage, Ao bases her writings mostly on history and social realities.

Kire and Ao both attempt to recreate the ambience of the traditional Naga way of life. However, while the former resorts to a rather imaginative escapism by blurring the lines between the real and the fantastic, the latter applies a relatively more realistic approach often shaped by her lived experiences and the experiences of the larger Naga community. Given these features, Easterine Kire probes into philosophical and spiritual themes while the writings of Temsula Ao reflect social themes and concerns with subtle political underlining. Though grounded largely in the backdrop of the Naga cultural and historical heritage, the works of these two writers deal with diverse modern issues and themes. Among other recurring themes, the issue of women and gender identity have been most recurring and well highlighted in their works. Other important shared themes of their works include the themes of language, oral tradition, societal roles, and the nature of communal living.

The thesis will be divided into six chapters, out of which the first two chapters will outline the mode, scope, and direction the study will undertake. The following three chapters will provide an in-depth analysis of the selected novels by Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire. The final chapter, conclusion, will sum up the arguments and will report on the findings.

Chapter I: Introduction

This chapter will form the introduction of the thesis and will present detailed interpretations of key concepts in gender, language and identity. This chapter will also give an overview of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire's writings, what forms their background and why, what influenced their writing and how oral tradition plays a major part in these narrations.

Chapter II: Gender in Easterine Kire's Fiction *Bitter Wormwood*, *A Respectable Woman*, and *Life on Hold* in a Naga Society.

The second chapter will provide a Naga backdrop to explain how the society in question creates what is or what makes up ‘Gender’ and probe into the gender related language differences within the context of Naga society. The peaceful and blissful life of Mose, the male protagonist from *Bitter Wormwood* is thrown in disarray as his community is torn apart from unspeakable pandemonium of violence. “It took my mother, Khonuo, exactly forty-five years before she could bring herself to talk about the war” (Kire 3). These startling words introduce the readers to *A Respectable Woman* while the narration blurs the line of history and memory and a young woman Kevinuo comes to understand the legacy of her parents and her land. *Life on Hold* tells the tale of the stubborn Roko who is hard-edged and relentless but at the same time appears tantalizing to his girlfriend Nime just like the idea of nationalism to Nagas. These three fictions by Easterine Kire will take you through the vicissitudes of the life of the characters as the research analyzes the selected novels in the light of the theories discussed in the previous chapter.

Chapter III: Role of Language in Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone* and Easterine Kire’s *Don’t Run My Love* and *When the River Sleeps*

Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire weave the element of magic realism into the narrative of *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, *Don’t Run My Love* and *When the River Sleeps*. In this chapter the research will explore how language fosters or handicaps communication, the stereotyping of gender languages and the miscommunication that arises between male and female and even between the same genders. The characters in the short stories like *The Night*, *A New Chapter* and *The Journey* will show the dynamics of gender language and the following

interchange of language stereotypes. It will explore a different dimension as to how and even circumstances play a role in shaping the characters.

Chapter IV: Notion of Identity in Temsula Ao's *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags: A Memoir and Aosenla's Story*

Chapter four will explore the search for identity in the female voices of the mentioned works of Temsula Ao. Set in a patriarchal setting, the women in the books struggle to find a place of their own as they try to create a niche for themselves in a society who are not so keen to understand them. The research will find out if the air of antagonism is from the patriarchy itself or is it a self-imposed limitation. It will explore the blurring of gender identities and how differently the male community struggles to express and communicate.

Chapter V: Narrative and Style in the works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire

This chapter will expand the horizon for interpretation of the given texts. It will explore how differently the two selected authors portray the male and female characters and how similarly they present their themes. Although both the authors use oral tradition as a tool for narration, Temsula Ao has a crisp tone while Easterine Kire enjoys the nuances and description. The research will elaborately focus on the differences in narrative technique and writing style between the two authors.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

This chapter will sum up the arguments and state if the hypothesis has been verified or rejected in light of the analysis of the select novels. The chapter will illuminate on how the selected authors portray the relationship between male and female characters in the novels and short stories. An endeavor will be made to compare and contrast the use of gender language and identity in the selected works of the authors and lay a groundwork for further research to be carried out in the area.

Overview of the Writings of Tamsula Ao

Tamsula Ao is considered as one of the most recognized literary voices from Northeast India. In her fiction and poetry, she often examines Naga history, oral tradition, and feminist concerns. Her style can be characterized as economical and unadorned. This gives her fiction the qualities and style similar to a documentary in which she examines and discusses social issues affecting the Naga society. She often chooses historical themes and uses history as a reference and the source materials for her fiction. Given this fact, the narrative tone she adopts is retrospective in nature.

Tamsula Ao relies on autobiographical materials in her memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* (2005). She summarizes the struggles of her childhood and adolescence and her journey to becoming a writer. The reflection on her experiences in her memoir, of growing up as an impoverished orphan and her struggles to find herself a place in the world as a well-established writer and her journey to becoming a wife and a dutiful mother, all offer for her an opportunity to reflect on the predicaments and struggles of being a woman with ambitions and goals in a

conventional patriarchal society. The recollection of her mundane as well as the extraordinary experiences through her memoir inadvertently becomes a projection of the universal experience of most Naga women of that given period in time. Thus, through her memoir, Ao brings to light the prevalent social issues while also providing an ample insight into the Naga society and the Naga psyche.

Ao in her memoir adopts a confessional tone in narrating her personal history. It offers to the readers glimpses into her private life. Such details help us in understanding her better as a writer and to examine the inspiration and the reality behind some of the themes, characters and incidents in her literary works. In it she probes into the ideas of identity, gender, marriage and parenthood. Tragedy and socio-economic circumstances play a vital role in shaping her life, her personality and subsequently, her sense of identity. She examines the multi-faceted aspects of her sense of self which is characterized by adoption of different social and personal identities throughout her journey to becoming a self-actualized individual.

Revisiting the past retrospectively to understand the full implications and significance of history becomes a recurring motif in the writings of Temsula Ao. As in her memoir, in her other work *These Hills Called Home*, too, Ao draws largely from history. However, rather than her personal experiences it can be viewed as a manifestation of the collective consciousness of the Nagas during the turbulent years in the Naga hills during the middle decades of the twentieth century. While the incidents in her stories are fictional, the experiences they portray are the representation of the authentic experiences of the Nagas. This is revealed in its preface where she states, “Many of the stories in this collection have their genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that make up the history of the Nagas from the early fifties of the last century, and their demand for

independence from the Indian state” (Ao x). The author thus highlights briefly the primary source from which she had borrowed for her short stories i.e. the mid-twentieth century Naga History. The preface is aptly titled “Lest We Forget” which is significant in explaining the importance she places in recording and retelling the common experiences of the common men and women which would otherwise be forgotten in time. She thus assumes the role of a storyteller whose self-imposed duty towards the community is to pass down the history, wisdom, knowledge and experiences of the past and the present to the future generation. The elders in the Naga community assume such a role.

The recurring themes of the stories from *These Hills Called Home* are the questions of ethnicity and the fractured ethnic identity. Additionally, they also deal with other multiple themes – such as the themes of nationalism, gender roles, violence, societal norms and customs, politics, and corruption, among others - through the perspectives of various individuals from different walks of life. Despite its significance to the stories, the actual political struggles of the Nagas against the Indian state remain as the backdrop. In this light the author states, “... the thrust of the narratives is to probe how the events of that era have re-structured or even ‘revolutionized’ the Naga psyche” (Ao x). Still, the stories have something more to offer as the author herself summarizes as follows:

A few of the stories in this collection try to capture the ambience of the traditional Naga way of life, which even for our own youngsters today, is increasingly becoming irrelevant in the face of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ which is only now catching up with the Naga people. The sudden displacement of the young from a placid existence in rural habitats to a world of conflict and

confusion in urban settlements is also a fallout of recent Naga history and one that has left them disabled in more than one way (Ao x).

In the above statement, Ao calls to attention a social issue of displacement in the midst of rapid change and progress. Such physical displacement also leads to cultural displacement of the Nagas, especially of the younger generation. She therefore makes conscious efforts through her writings to capture the essence of traditional ways that are now waning into obscurity at a rapid pace. The *Pot Maker* is the story that stands out remarkably from other stories in the collection. It succeeds particularly well in capturing the essence of life in Naga villages of the past. In an otherwise realistic setting and premise the supernatural elements are seamlessly interwoven. Magic realism is employed not in an implicit attempt to critique the society but rather to highlight the societal context in which magic and supernatural phenomena were very much a part of the belief system.

The Night, *The Journey*, and *A New Chapter* juxtapose the Naga tradition with modern ways of life. Characters in these stories find themselves in positions where they are compelled to adjust themselves with the changes in their lives. The protagonist of *The Night*, Imnala faces harsh judgements from her conservative society as a result of her pregnancies out of wedlock. Her other concerns are modern ones such as her resolve to complete highschool and her decision to educate her two children on her own. It also exposes the double standards of the society in their treatment towards women. In *The Journey*, the familiar rural setting of the protagonist, Tinula's native village is juxtaposed with the unfamiliar and the unwelcoming atmosphere of her boarding school. Tinula's bewildering experience of being in an unwelcoming environment echoes the similar experiences of the Nagas trying to adjust to the unfamiliar new ways of life. *A New Chapter* best highlights the revolutionary changes that took place in the Naga hills owing to their contact with the outside world and its modernizing influence. The story reveals the tendency of the bewildered

Naga masses that are easily swayed by the whirlwind of rapid changes in the society. Such an attitude is reflected in the manners in which people are sentimentally moved by their ancestral symbol of hornbill used in political campaigns. Its protagonist Bendangnungsang represents the ambitious young Nagas who are quick to adapt to modern changes in the society with a tendency to disregard tradition. He has little regard for traditional values upheld by the elders. He is contrasted with Merenla, a villager who finds herself stuck with the old ways as she is betrayed by her own kinsman, Bendangnungsang. Merenla was “brought up on the tradition that family ties were more sacrosanct than any others” (Ao 143-144), however, unfortunately Bendangnungsang does not share similar views with her. This causes an irreconcilable rift between them. Merenla’s disillusionment is caused by Bendangnungsang’s disregard for the tribal cultural ethos. *The Night* also exemplifies the subordination of women in patriarchal society at grassroots level. Important decisions are made by male elderly members of the society. As Imnala faces trial for her sexual relationship with a married man she becomes a mere spectator at her own trial.

These Hills Called Home succeeds in humanizing the Naga historical events as it expresses the collective history of tragedy, loss, conflicts and violence in human terms. In the author’s hand the authentic Naga voices find expression and their unheard tales acquire the status of folklores and legends that can be passed down to the future generations. The collection also offers compelling insights to non-Naga readers into the Naga history, culture and their ways of life which would help in clearing up their misconception regarding Nagaland. Such insights would help in fighting against the misrepresentation of the Nagas by the outside world. Each of the stories acquires a quality of universality despite them being personal experiences.

Ao herself was very much a part of the social reality that she attempts to portray in her short stories. In *The Journey*, Tinula’s arduous journey through the difficult terrains of Nagaland to get to her

boarding school in Assam is similar to that of many Nagas during those days. Many Nagas in the early to mid-twentieth century had to leave their native villages to gain access to modern education. Similarly, many others undertook the journey to fetch essential commodities such as salt and kerosene from Assam. The author herself had faced similar hardships as depicted in the story. In her memoir *Once Upon a Life* she recounts in detail the challenges she faced in navigating the difficult landscapes of the hills to get to her village from her boarding school in Assam. She states, “My elder brother would come to fetch me from the hostel and we would travel either by bus or train to the last station after which we had to walk to the village” (Ao 129-130). She later adds:

The short visits to the village during the winter vacations opened a completely new area of experience for me. I did not fully grasp it at that time but it now seems that I was moving between two diametrically opposite ways of life; life in the village was so different from the one I lived in the hostel (Ao 133).

In the light of the above given assertion, Ao subtly highlights the contrasts between simple life in the village as opposed to the structured life in a hostel. The latter is the way of life many younger Nagas were bound to adopt inevitably in the rapidly evolving society. For many, it was a bewildering experience. *The Journey* highlights the psyche of a child who finds herself alone in an unfamiliar setting of her boarding school far away from her familiar home environment. The author’s journey and Tinula’s journey both serve to examine the phase of transition of her society from tradition to modernity.

In *Aosenla’s Story*, Tamsula Ao attempts to depict the microcosm of the late twentieth century Naga society from the perspective of a common Naga woman Aosenla. She offers commentary on the social and economic realities of her society and also examines social institutions like marriage

and family. The central themes in the novel are marked with feminist concerns. Aosenla struggles to pursue her personal aspirations and create her own individual identity in the oppressively patriarchal social setting. Societal expectations dictate her to fit into the roles and stereotypes they assign to women. Women are expected to be obedient, meek and submissive especially towards their fathers and husbands. In some traditional families, marriage is seen as a social contract to elevate their social status and also to improve their economic status. Under such a context, women are treated as a social commodity to be exchanged for the interests of the family. Furthermore, women are expected to bear children for her husband to carry on the family name. Such confining roles often clip the wings of women considerably as they limit the range of things a woman can achieve. It is these social problems that Ao tries to address in the novel.

Aosenla wishes to continue her education and become economically independent against the wishes of her family and relatives who want her to marry into a rich family to improve the family's financial position. The author highlights an element of class consciousness among the Nagas as their traditional class system based on the traditional clan hierarchy is threatened to be replaced by a modern one. This modern social hierarchy is based on wealth and economic status. Some members of society are quick to point out the waning importance of clan-based hierarchy based on village history. Nonetheless, some still recognize the importance of pan alliance with a family from the founding clan of the village through marriage. The novel depicts the Naga society in a period of transition between the old traditional ways and the new ways. People are divided in their opinions regarding which of the two should be given more importance. The elders and the village folks naturally favor the triumph of traditional values while town people tend to neglect most of the traditional values.

Like many Naga women of that period in time, Aosenla is caught in the conflict between her personal interest, familial interest and societal expectations. In the end, she compromises her personal interests and learns to come to terms with reality and finds contentment through subversion of her sense of self by the circumstances of life. While it will be erroneous to consider Aosenla as the character completely modeled after the author herself, several parallels can be drawn between the titular character and the author which reveals that she had borrowed largely from her autobiographical sources. In the novel, Ao projects her personal experiences through the voice of its eponymous protagonist to examine the struggles of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

With regard to the question of marriage, some similarities can be observed between the character of Aosenla and Tamsula Ao; they are both dragged into it without their consent. They naturally end up marrying for what is considered the greater benefits of their relatives and not for the sake of love. Their aspirations and goals in life are given less importance by people around them. Aosenla, despite her best initial efforts to fight against them, ends up internalizing patriarchal norms. However, by the end of the novel, she comes to terms with the insurmountable odds presented by the society against her personal aspirations. Unlike Aosenla, Ao succeeds in pursuing her dreams after making several compromises. The struggles of these women reveal the antagonizing influence of oppressive patriarchy in Naga society. It is something that limits the range of things a woman can achieve which can result in psychological conflicts and issues of identity crisis. The possible courses of actions she suggests are either acceptance of unavoidable circumstances or making compromises to achieve one's goals. In both instances, the author highlights how the communal ethics dictate an individual to set aside their personal interest in favor of the interest of the community.

Although deeply moving at times, Temsula Ao refrains from indulging in sentimental engagement with the sensitive subjects and plots in her fiction. Most of her stories are filled with defiant characters engaging in subversive acts against their oppressors. Merenla from *A New Chapter* engages in a ritualistic act of cleansing herself by smashing pumpkins against the ground. She does so in an attempt to move ahead in life and start a new chapter of her life after ridding herself of her association with her kinsman who has abandoned their business deal after instructing her to grow pumpkins. In *The Last Song*, Apenyo a young choir girl breaks into a song as her final act of resistance as the sadistic Indian army captain and his companions rape her and her mother. Similarly, in her novel *Aosenla's Story*, the eponymous protagonist is a defiant woman who defies social expectations. She is a rather outspoken woman who is capable of boldly standing her grounds whenever her character is questioned. For instance, when her husband's family suspects her of having an affair with her friend she threatens them by asserting that she will summon her own family and clansman to settle this particular issue of unjust accusation. In her memoir too Ao herself is shown to be defiant whenever prompted by circumstances. In one of the instances, she lashes out against her hostel superintendent for punishing them twice by refusing to forgive them for their misconduct. She also fights against her bullies by hurling her plate against the wall and by tearing off her skirt followed by shouting, "You all are fit only to be step-mothers" (Ao 78).

Overview of the Writings of Easterine Kire

Easterine Kire is one of the foremost trailblazers of Naga literature in English. Her first volume of poetry *Kelhoukevira* (1982) and her first novel *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) are respectively considered as the first Naga poetry book and the first Naga novel published in English. Kire is a prolific writer who also writes children's stories and poetry apart from fiction. The diversity in the genre she writes on reflects her attempt to diversify readership to different social

demographics. Her initial works cater to the tastes of the present older generation wherein the story lines concentrate on their early childhood, making her works relatable and nostalgic for them. Her middle works like *Mari* (2010) and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) focuses on the freedom fight of the Nagas to gain independence from the Indian government. The novels show how the seeds of the many factions that exist now were sown during the period of insurgency. These themes interest both the youth and present middle aged population as current Nagas struggle from the existence of these multiple political factions. As we read these works, we come to understand why such problems exist and maybe give us a direction of how it can be solved. Kire's later works like *Don't Run My Love* (2017) and *A Respectable Woman* (2019) deals with themes like romance, love, marriage, feminism and the like, which interests the younger demographic. All in all, much of the author's noteworthy fictional narratives display a purposeful yet understated need for the restitution of her rich cultural heritage. Kire through her literary voice subtly advocates for the harmonious coexistence of the traditional and the modern ways. Like Temsula Ao, her writings also share the backdrop of Nagaland, its culture and history.

In an interview with the *Purple Pencil Project*, Kire sheds light on contemporary fictions in Naga literature. She highlights that most of the young fiction writers are concerned more with life and society. As such they tend to highlight social problems that need reformation. She also brings to light some core values that her society upholds. The concept of respect, she states, forms the core of Tenyi culture, she further adds, "respect your elders, respect the disabled, respect the natural world and take care of it, respect the animal world and respect the spiritual world" ("In Conversation with: Easterine Kire). Here she mentions some pre-Christian values upheld by her ancestors that are still worth retaining. Such ideas are echoed in her novels *When the River Sleeps* and *Don't Run My Love*. Kire through her insight attempts to clear up the common misconception

concerning literature from Northeast in general, and Nagaland in particular, that their literature is uniform and laden with themes of political unrest. In contrast to this narrow view on the literature from Northeast India, she asserts:

It is not right to expect only political themes from our writers: that would clip their wings considerably. I usually explain that we, writing from the hills, have the backdrop of the hills of history, culture, religion and politics behind us. They are there in our writing, but they are the background, not the foreground, they are indelible, but we let them play (in Bollywoodese) the side part, not the main part (Kire).

Kire's statement reflects not only the essential aspect of most Naga writings but also of her own fictions. In *When the River Sleeps* and *Don't Run My Love*, she employs as the backdrop the rich Naga culture. This backdrop serves the primary purpose of bringing out the core cultural values, beliefs, philosophy of life and the worldview of her society rather than serving merely as instruments for causing intrigue and fascination in the minds of the readers. Notwithstanding the fact that the elements borrowed from Naga folklore lends to her fictions a quality of fantasy, it can be viewed as a by-product rather than the result of deliberate efforts on part of the author. This contention can be backed by the fact that in *When the River Sleeps* Kire emphasizes more on the philosophy of life that forms the crux of her narrative which drives the plot forward more often than the fantastical elements.

One of the central themes of *When the River Sleeps* is the communion of man with the natural and the spirit world. Vilie the protagonist of the novel sets out on a quest to find a stone which is said to contain immense magical properties that can grant the wishes of its possessor. Beneath the

surface of this adventurous premise lie philosophical ideas that almost supplant plot in terms of importance and emphasis placed by the author. The concrete metaphor of the magical heart-stone serves to represent the abstract and the philosophical idea of the knowledge of the natural and the spiritual world. However, mere acquisition of knowledge would be inadequate in the absence of wisdom that comes with experience. Through the course of the narrative, Vilie grows wiser, both through his own experience as well as through his encounters with various people, especially the elderly members of society such as Kani. In fact, it is Kani who makes Vilie realize the importance of wisdom that should always go hand in hand with one's ambitions. He tells Vilie, "It is not wrong to have wealth but your relationship to your wealth defines everything else" (Kire 95-96). He advises Vilie against narrow pursuit of wealth as chasing it blindly will lead man to lose something he cannot buy with wealth: the knowledge of the spiritual. Kani's advice echoes the philosophical and mystical outlook of the traditional Naga belief system which emphasizes the harmony between men, the natural world, and the spiritual world.

Kani as well as another elderly man that Vilie encounters later in the marketplace are archetypal representatives of the wise old people in society that have valuable lessons to offer to anybody who is willing to listen and heed their advice. They are as wise with matters concerning the world of men and the natural world as they are with matters concerning the spiritual world. Vilie benefits much from his interactions with them and the valuable lessons they teach. The respect and reverence he has for these men also highlights the concept of respect for elders. His attitude towards them also shows that elders are indeed worthy of respect if they have truly earned it by virtue of the wisdom they would pass down on the younger generation. Besides, the village elders also play the role of decision makers in society. For instance, when Vilie is wrongfully convicted of murdering an innocent man, it is the village elders who conduct his trial and see to it that justice

is served. The elders also assume the responsibility to correct the younger ones whenever required. These instances exemplify that respect for elders is grounded on the vital roles they play in the community.

In *When the River Sleeps*, the magical heart-stone is at the center of the plot. Apart from driving the plot forward it serves a more important role as the significant symbol of the Naga oral tradition. Oral tradition is a vital organ of Naga culture. It is through the oral tradition that Nagas in the past have inherited their cultural values, history, folklores, philosophical outlook and the knowledge of their spiritual geography. For Vilie and Kani, the heart-stone represents the physical manifestation of knowledge and wisdom. The keeper of the stone carries an immense responsibility of protecting it from the schemes of evil men who would seek to exploit its power for personal gains. Vilie readily becomes the protector of the heart-stone. Just like the oral tradition is preserved and passed down from the older generation to the new one, the role of safeguarding the heart-stone is later passed down from Vilie to Ate's adoptive son Vibou and her unborn child. The significance of the heart-stone is further expressed through Ate in the final chapter of *When the River Sleeps*:

The wisdom of stone is more spiritual than physical. It helps us discover the spiritual identity that is within us, so we can use it to combat the dark forces that are always trying to control and suppress us. But men who are not initiated don't understand this about the stone, and they try to use it to gain wealth and material things. Vilie was already using the stone on our journey back here. I mean he was using the knowledge he had gotten from his adventure with the stone (Kire 238).

The author Easterine Kire, through Ate, reiterates the central message of the novel in the above given excerpt. Kire seems to be of the view that men ought to be connected with the spiritual world to live a harmonious life with fellow human beings as well as with the natural world. Such connection can be achieved through the medium of oral tradition and our reverence towards it. Vilie is indeed enlightened by his understanding of the worlds he gained through the stone.

Vilie's quest to find the heart-stone is the physical manifestation of a symbolic journey to achieve a reconciliation and harmony between the world of men, the natural world, and the spirit world. Based on this contention, the heart-stone can be viewed as an extended metaphor for an ideal state of balance between the old ways and the new that the author wishes to see in her society. Through several incidents in the novel, the author foregrounds the importance of knowledge that the heart-stone represents. Kani's instructions on the way to the sleeping river play a crucial role in the process of acquiring the stone. Also, he is able to retain the stone through the instruction of another elderly man he encounters at the marketplace. Elderly people like these two play a crucial role in Naga society. In the novel they play the role of storytellers whose duties are not only to pass down history and knowledge but also give valuable words of advice to the younger generations. They are able to fulfill these duties through their oral narration. Kire therefore, succeeds in foregrounding the importance of oral tradition in her society.

The novel also examines the issue of striking an ideal balance between adjusting the traditional ways of life with the modern ways of life. Vilie is accustomed to life in the forest but she still relies on the money he earns by being the official guardian of the tragopan and the mithuns. Initially in the novel, he is also torn between his social need of living within his close-knit community and living alone in the forest. His decision to live a solitary life in the forest causes emotional rifts

between him and his relatives. He tries to resolve all these issues by navigating between the solitary life and occasional visitation to the village.

The author through this particular work of fiction demonstrates that literature grounded in her tribal folktales can have philosophical and moral implications. She places emphasis on actions, both good and bad, and their consequences upon the characters rather than indulging in the elaborate description of the magical phenomenon. The novel is divided into several small chapters in the form of brief episodes dealing with certain issues and phenomenon, both mundane and fantastical. Furthermore; the author does not neglect the mundane yet significant details of the everyday lives of the characters. The ordinary incidents are presented seamlessly with the extraordinary and the magical.

As can be observed in these works, cultural heritage serves not only as an influencing factor but also as a backdrop for the fictions of Easterine Kire. In *When the River Sleeps*, she draws from the myth of the sleeping river and the magical heart stone that can be obtained from the middle of the river. She also employs in her narrative other elements from the Angami Naga folklores such as the were-tigers, widow spirits, and the forest spirits. Similarly, in *Don't Run My Love*, Kire employs elements from her native folklore to similar effect.

Don't Run My Love paints the socio-cultural picture of life in a close-knit traditional Naga village. As in *When the River Sleeps*, Kire extensively uses magic realism to not only highlight the rituals, beliefs and superstitions of the people but also to examine the philosophy of life of the native people. While Kire is generally optimistic about the ethos of a close-knit community, in this novel she also depicts some instances where the demerits of living in such a community are exposed. Most of the elders in *When the River Sleeps* are portrayed in a positive light, but in this particular

novel the elders, though well-meaning, are overbearing to an annoying extent. Their overbearing nature makes Visenuo question the wisdom of living in a close-knit community. Also, there is no question of respecting personal space and privacy in matters of personal affairs. Rumors spread with ease and everybody knows everything about any given member of the village.

The novel also portrays many positive qualities of the traditional Naga society. People are courteous and polite with one another and are always willing to help each other in times of need. For instance, given that Visenuo is a widow, their neighbor Vilhu offers to help them in carrying their harvest back from the field. The narrator comments, “The widows in the village often received help from the others by way of a few days’ free labor” (Kire 24). The villagers are depicted as simple folks who work hard to earn their honest living. They are also hospitable and welcoming even to strangers. For instance, Pfenuo from the Village of Seers readily welcomes Atunuo and Visenuo. As a mother, Visenuo educates Atunuo with the ways of the village. She passes down to her daughter whatever she has learned from her elders: “Well, I only know the things that the village has taught me from childhood, and I try to pass them on to you” (Kire 18). This is an exemplification of the process of how the oral tradition operates in the Naga society.

The characters that Kire depicts are often representatives of the typical people as can be found in such folk narratives. In the Naga folk narratives, characters are often depicted as simple and sometimes one-dimensional. They are often modeled to suit the plot of a given tale. Kire also models her characters based on such a traditional framework but she also succeeds in adding further depth to her characters by presenting them as people rather than mere plot device. However, such depth in characterization is often limited to the primary characters while the others serve the roles of plot devices at large.

Another notable feature of Kire's writing is the relative simplicity of the plot structure. She features plots that are coherent and straightforward. Her narration flows with lyrical ease which adequately compensates for the lack of sophisticated embellishments. In doing so, she captures the essence of oral narration which is usually simplistic in style yet they reflect the deeper and complex philosophies of life. Journeys and adventures form integral parts of both of these tales by Easterine Kire. Though the adventures in the narratives offer a compelling read, Kire misses no opportunity to discuss the ordinary routines of daily life. Even a seemingly mundane activity such as cooking a simple meal is discussed in great detail. Thrilling episodes in the novels are interposed with a more relaxed discussion of other activities. There is neither a sense of urgency in the authorial voice to get to the thrilling parts of the novel nor a conscious effort to prolong them. Instead, even the most intense episodes are kept rather brief. These qualities capture the rhythm of life in rural Nagaland.

Kire portrays a version of Nagaland that is both familiarly realistic and dreamlike at the same time. This duality in her portrayal of Nagaland implicates her implicit efforts to aestheticize the traditional Naga ways of life, the beautiful landscapes of Nagaland and the spiritual geography of its people. Her works demonstrate the acceptance of the coexistence of the natural world and the spiritual world. There is only a very thin veil separating the two. Also, there is an element of ambiguity surrounding the time period during which the incidents in the narratives take place. This places her fictions in a distinct period in time in a familiar setting i.e. Nagaland. Kire often employs allegory and also often alludes to the wisdom and sayings of the elderly folks but she is seldom didactic.

Conclusion

Both Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao have established distinct literary voices in the realm of English-language literature. Their works are widely studied in academic settings in and around Nagaland. Owing to the fact that they have borrowed largely from the cultural heritage and history of Nagaland, oral tradition has been a major inspiration in their literary outputs. This adds an essence of distinct native flavor to their writings. Prior to the introduction of modern education, the Naga literary culture existed exclusively in oral form. Kire and Ao have played significant roles in evolving the Naga oral tradition to its written form. They have thus preserved their history, folklores, ancestral wisdom, cultural practices, customs, rituals and traditional values in written forms. In the process they have also addressed numerous social issues and problems that need to be examined and reformed. The widespread critical acclaims they achieved thus far have been significant in changing 'outsiders' perceptions of the Nagas and Northeast India which has always been perceived as a disturbed region characterized by violence, political unrest and insurgency. The kind of literature they put forth to the world has shown that there is more to the region than what popular media and the mainstream news portray. As writers, Kire and Ao are more than mere informants of their culture and the state. The concerns they echo are universal.

CHAPTER II

Gender in Easterine Kire's Fiction *Bitter Wormwood*, *A Respectable Woman*, and *Life on Hold*, in A Naga Society

Introduction

The second chapter of the thesis aims to establish a contextual understanding of Naga society and its role in shaping the concept of 'Gender.' This exploration explores the specific gender-related language distinctions present within the Naga community. Illustrated through Easterine Kire's literary works, particularly *Bitter Wormwood*, *A Respectable Woman*, and *Life on Hold*, the narrative unfolds the impact of societal upheaval on individual lives.

Embarking on a literary exploration, *Bitter Wormwood* unveils the significant transformation of Mose, the central protagonist, as his idyllic life is abruptly shattered by the ravaging chaos of violence within his community. Amidst this turmoil, the narrative exposes gender norms prevailing in Naga society. Simultaneously, *A Respectable Woman* draws readers into a web of historical reticence as Khonuo, after an astounding forty-five years, finally broaches the subject of war. In this narrative, the relationship between history and memory becomes palpable, as young Kevinuo grapples with untangling the legacy of her parents and their land. *Life on Hold* introduces Roko, a character characterized by tenacity and relentlessness, mirroring the captivating allure of nationalism to the Nagas. Through the lens of Easterine Kire's three works, readers embark on a journey through the unpredictable trajectories of these characters' lives, while the research critically dissects the novels within the framework of theories discussed in the preceding chapter. The narrative combines together personal stories and societal expectations, illuminating the

complexities of identity, tradition, and the enduring reverberations of historical events on both individuals and communities.

1. Gender in *Bitter Wormwood*

Bitter Wormwood portrays the life of a Naga man born in 1937, who witnessed the tumultuous era spanning 1937 to 2007, encapsulating the struggle for Nagaland's freedom from India. Out of all the novels that Kire has written, this is the only novel that merited a separate introduction by the author. This novel is also different from her other works in terms of tone, narration and plot which heightens the specialness of this novel and one might add that- the author had a purpose far beyond its literary value. She briefly highlights the struggle for independence by the Nagas and cites sources confirming her claims. At the end of the introduction she states a disclaimer and hints the purpose of writing this book:

This book is not meant to be read as a history textbook. For the purpose of reading about the history of the Naga struggle, researchers should read comprehensive books on the topic for example, *The Naga Chronicle*, *The Naga Saga*, *Nagaland File*, and *The Naga Resistance*. This book is not about the leaders and heroes of the Naga struggle. It is about the ordinary people whose lives were completely overturned by the freedom struggle. Because the conflict is not more important than the people who are its victims (Kire 6).

In the light of this purpose and the research topic at hand, the focus will be on the ordinary people whose lives, at all stages, were deeply affected particularly in terms of gender, during these

difficult times- regardless of their non-participation, passive participation or forceful participation in the nation's decision making. The narrative unfolds across various life stages, encompassing his experiences as a child, adult, freedom fighter, husband, father, and ultimately, an elderly individual. In the face of a formidable Indian Army, Naga militants employed guerrilla tactics to resist, engaging in covert attacks. The army responded ruthlessly, resorting to torture of Naga Underground militants' family members to extract information. Collaborators, known as rationalists, sided against the Underground for personal gain. The protagonist Mose, navigating these tragic events, found himself caught amid the unrelenting conflict. The narrative documents the protagonist's growth against a backdrop of escalating tragedy, highlighting the persistent nature of the conflict without tangible resolution. The guerrilla warfare, military brutality, and internal divisions within Naga society highlights the complexities of the struggle for freedom, leaving an indelible mark on the protagonist's life.

Representation of Gender in *Bitter Wormwood*

Nagaland, characterized by diverse tribes and subtribes, encapsulates a diverse cultural milieu, playing a pivotal role in shaping the collective identity of the Naga people both as a community and as individuals. The prevailing sentiment among the Nagas is a unified rejection of Nagaland as a state under India, advocating instead for an autonomous nation comprising the various tribes and subtribes that constitute the region. This collective identity is deeply linked to cultural practices and traditions, representing the deep-rooted connection between culture, tradition, and individual and societal identities.

Within the Naga society, gender roles are conventionally assigned, reflecting customary practices that endure despite the backdrop of war and the freedom struggle. Men typically take up arms,

assuming roles as defenders, while women are entrusted with the responsibilities of nurturing homes and families. Although Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* revolves around the life of one man, Mose, it unveils a broader pattern across generations, illustrating how individuals within the Naga community conform to traditional gender roles. The book's narrative, while centered on war and the struggle for freedom, primarily delves into the lives of ordinary people navigating the complexities of their existence during this period. It presents that gender transcends mere biological distinctions, emphasizing its societal construction and the assigned roles that individuals undertake (Eckert and Ginet 1).

Despite Mose losing his father at a tender age and lacking male role models, he assimilates characteristics from his mother while fulfilling his designated male gender role. Joining the Underground, becoming the family's breadwinner, and sacrificing himself heroically to protect a child from factionalists, Mose embodies the multifaceted nature of his role within the community. Mose's wife, Neilhounuo, known as the 'rifle girl' for her adeptness with guns during her time in the underground, consciously leaves behind that part of her life. Instead, she focuses on her new roles as a mother, a wife, and a caregiver to her mother-in-law, who seeks peace (Kire 133). Mose's mother, who assumed the roles of both mother and father after losing her husband, spent significant time in the fields to sustain her family until Mose matured enough to contribute. These characters exemplify a subtle shift towards traditional gender role practices in their later adulthood, foreshadowing the enduring nature of these roles.

It is crucial to note that, in the Naga context, these assigned gender roles are not viewed derogatorily; instead, they form an integral part of the society, reflecting a harmonious coexistence of tradition and individual agency. The characters in *Bitter Wormwood* illuminate the complexities of identity, tradition, societal expectations, and the evolving roles of men and women in the face

of historical challenges. The narrative offers a profound exploration of gender roles in the context of Nagaland's struggle for freedom.

Nagaland operates within a patriarchal framework, characterized by patrilineality and patrilocality, as depicted in the novels. The narrative subtly omits mention of the mothers of female characters, emphasizing the societal norm where women transition from playing central roles in their families to residing with their husbands or in-laws. The study acknowledges the commendable efforts toward ensuring the safety of women in Nagaland. However, it highlights the prevailing gender dynamics, with women primarily responsible for daily domestic tasks and family matters, precluded from political involvement.

The societal structure places men in a position of higher status, allocating their roles predominantly to political and societal affairs rather than domestic responsibilities. This clear division shows gender-based hierarchy, reinforcing the notion that men, with their elevated status, are primarily engaged in political and societal spheres, while women are confined to domestic realms, reflecting the entrenched patriarchal norms within Nagaland.

Bitter Wormwood unfolds in a challenging time and place, portraying the complexity of gender roles as depicted in Nagaland during the struggle for independence. It emphasizes that while joining the Underground is not the sole determinant of gender roles, it is undeniably intertwined with them. Many men sought to contribute to the fight for independence by joining the Underground, but notably, women also participated, showcasing strength and proficiency equal to men in combat, as seen in the case of Mose's wife, Neilhounuo. Despite the acknowledgment of women's capabilities in the Underground, a prevailing sentiment in the book asserts that war is a

role designated for men. This perspective seems rooted in the belief that physically robust individuals, primarily men, are needed to confront the formidable Indian Army.

The narrative sheds light on the sacrifices made by male family members who leave to join the Underground, leaving the women at home to manage household affairs while anxiously awaiting their return. Remarkably, the women in the story shoulder these responsibilities without complaint or protest, understanding the life-threatening nature of the conflict with the Indian Army. This acceptance suggests that, during times of war, women are obligated to navigate the dual roles of managing household duties and addressing various issues while their male counterparts engage in the fight for freedom.

The juxtaposition of men fighting on the frontlines and women managing domestic responsibilities underlines the societal norms prevalent in Nagaland during this tumultuous period. Despite the challenging circumstances, the women in the story embrace their roles without resistance, acknowledging the gravity of the struggle for independence and the risks associated with combating the Indian Army.

Fertility and Expectations in *Bitter Wormwood*

In *Bitter Wormwood*, the narrative delves into the dynamics of fertility and societal expectations through the character Sabunou, Mose's daughter. Married for ten months without displaying any signs of pregnancy, Sabunou becomes the subject of widespread rumors that label her as a barren wife, causing her considerable distress.

In the first year the young couple attracted much interest and attention. Was the wife showing any indications of pregnancy? This was a much discussed topic of conversation. Since Sabunou showed no signs, speculations arose

about her family's fertility. Somebody remembered a detail from the bride's family history about a barren relative and brought it to public memory. Almost triumphantly. Almost as though they were pronouncing a curse of barrenness on the young couple (Kire 156).

The community's concern over Sabunou's apparent inability to conceive sheds light on the significant emphasis placed on a woman's role in bearing children within her marital life. In the context of Nagaland, infertility is not merely a medical concern but carries cultural implications, often viewed as a curse. Sabunou's experience underlines the societal norm where women are expected to commence childbearing shortly after marriage, and any deviation from this expectation becomes a topic of communal discussion.

The narrative suggests a belief that early childbearing is integral to a woman's identity and fulfillment of her societal role. Sabunou's inability to conceive prompts a communal conversation, illustrating the deep-seated cultural expectation that women should fulfill their reproductive duties promptly. The segment of Sabunou explores the pressures and perceptions surrounding a woman's reproductive capabilities. It captures the themes of societal expectations, the stigma associated with infertility, and the portrayal of women's roles in the context of childbirth within the cultural context of *Bitter Wormwood*.

Mose's Life Journey and Gender Roles in Nagaland

Mose, the central character in *Bitter Wormwood*, derives a significant portion of the household income from his shop, diligently cleaning it every month. Despite his efforts, his wife insists on cleaning the shop every fifth day, highlighting a pattern observed in the book where women often decline assistance, perceiving others as busier. While this doesn't generalize all Naga women, it

illustrates an ingrained sense of obligation towards household chores, irrespective of their workload. The narrative delves into Mose's family dynamics as his mother ages and falls ill. Despite Mose's insistence that she cease household work, she, out of joy, defies her physical limitations to cook for her family. This poignant episode underscores the emotional connection between gender roles and personal fulfillment, challenging conventional notions.

Born in 1937, Mose's life unfolds as a multi-faceted journey encompassing education, involvement with the Naga Underground, marriage, parenthood, and eventually, a tragic death at 70 while attempting to protect a child from harm. Analyzing Mose's life becomes a window into understanding the composition of gender, inviting comparisons with other figures in his environment, notably his friend Noutuo. Their parallel trajectories—education, Naga Underground involvement, marriage, and fatherhood—mirror the societal expectations and norms prevalent in their community.

Mose and Noutuo, as the prominent male figures in the book, engage in discussions about the Indian Army, the Naga Underground, and the mistreatment of their local people by rationalists. Their conversations reflect a deep-rooted anger and frustration towards the oppressive forces surrounding them. Despite attempts to channel their concerns through letters to government officials, their endeavors prove futile, underscoring the challenges in effecting change within the existing power dynamics.

Mose's life, intertwined with societal expectations and challenges, becomes a lens through which the book explores the dynamics of power, politics, and gender roles within the Naga context. The parallel narratives of Mose and Noutuo show the broader societal patterns, revealing the

complexities and limitations individuals face when navigating their roles in the face of external pressures.

Navigating Politics: Gender Roles and Aspirations

Bitter Wormwood sheds light on the distinct gender roles assigned to male Naga individuals, particularly in their active engagement in political discussions and societal councils. The prevailing societal norms assign them the role of discussing politics and participating in the councils that shape the community. However, these roles are not just bestowed by society; they emerge as a pragmatic response to the perilous environment where suspicion and violence loom over men associated with the Naga Underground. With factionalists and the Indian Army claiming lives, even those providing support to the Underground face punishment or torture, intensifying the need for political discourse.

While the men disappear into political discussions borne out of necessity and interest, the women, although not actively participating in politics, remain acutely aware of the tumultuous events. Sons and husbands fall victim to violence, and the women, longing for peace and the independence of their land, grapple with the harsh realities of political turmoil. Despite their deep understanding, Nagaland's cultural landscape has consistently marginalized the women's community, evident in the absence of a female Naga MLA since 1963.

The novel sheds light on the persistent gender disparities within the political sphere as well. Despite advancements in women's education and professional status, these strides have not translated into political representation. Numerous women express interest in politics, yet their aspirations often falter due to insufficient support from political parties. The book, echoing a 2013 report on the political status of women in Nagaland (Amer), represents the formidable challenges

faced by female candidates. The narrative reveals that even when women seek political office, the lack of party support makes victory seem nearly inconceivable.

Interestingly, while the book introduces various female characters, few express a desire to actively engage in politics. The reluctance is hinted at by Mose, who suggests that such involvement might be perceived as serving the government, a sentiment echoed by other female characters. Despite their profound knowledge of political events, the women in the book are often hesitant to step into the political arena. Even Neilhounuo, known as the "rifle girl," who joined the cause, ultimately yearns to leave it behind and strive for peace. Their collective wish resonates—a plea for tranquility and the autonomy of their land amidst the turbulence of political affairs.

Navigating Gender Roles Amidst Rebellion

The novel *Bitter Wormwood* provides a fascinating glimpse into the seamless acceptance and adherence to gender roles, revealing an understanding that extends beyond mere biological differences. Mose's attempt to learn cooking from his mother unfolds as a poignant moment challenging traditional gender roles. When Mose wanted to help his mother and asked her to teach him how to cook, she did not say no because he was still a child or because he was a bad cook. All she replied was, "Why? That is not men's work. Your father never cooked" (Kire 44). Her response encapsulates the prevailing cultural norms that often equate gender with biology. Gender is not equal to sex however in most cultures gender role has been largely attributed to biology. Men who are physically stronger than women went to fight and women stayed to look after their homes. The distinction between sex and gender challenges the idea that biology alone determines our identity. While sex is seen as biologically fixed, gender is influenced by culture. This suggests that gender isn't solely determined by our biology and can vary across different societies. Recognizing this

difference allows us to understand gender in diverse ways beyond just our biological sex as Judith Butler mentions in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*:

Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits gender as a multiple interpretation of sex (Butler 9-10).

The character of Neilhounuo, who leaves her “bandit” militant life behind, offers a compelling exploration of individual agency amidst societal expectations. It is even more remarkable how no one dares to talk about it. It is almost like she chose the militant life more out of love for her people because her land was struggling and not because she preferred the “bandit” life. After she returns, she does not remain the same person as she was in the Underground but rather conforms to the role of a wife, daughter-in-law and a mother that society expected of her. Her return to traditional gender roles is not portrayed as a surrender but rather a personal choice that aligns with her evolving identity. The narrative delicately suggests that conformity to gender roles, while influenced by societal expectations, can also be a deeply personal and detailed journey.

Individual differences within the portrayal of gender roles are evident, challenging the notion of a homogenous acceptance. Even the men had no problem with the role society gave them. The men, willingly embracing the roles society has bestowed upon them, join the Underground not out of personal desire, but a sense of obligation to their community's struggle. There was nothing in the novel that showed the menfolk complaining that women should also be joining the Underground.

It is not seen that they were dissatisfied with their roles, when they noticed women fulfilling duties that were physically cumbersome, they willingly went out to help them. A lot of women joined the Underground as well without being asked and carried their responsibilities as a militant. The absence of overt complaints or dissatisfaction ushers a collective understanding and commitment to their assigned roles. Notably, the narrative suggests a community united by a shared cause.

An intriguing observation emerges regarding the acquisition of gender roles, notably influenced by parental upbringing. Mose, having been raised solely by his mother, found himself at a loss in his role as a father to his daughter Sabunuo. Feeling uncertain and clumsy, he attempted to adopt a maternal role. Furthermore, gender roles within the husband-wife dynamic appeared interchangeable and fluid, with Neilhuonuo assuming the authoritative role in raising their child, as Mose chose to take on a maternal role:

Eventually they evolved a routine that worked for them. Mose's pattern of parenting was to be a "mother" to his daughter. He would think back on the way his mother had brought him up. Neilhuonuo naturally became a strict parent. As their daughter grew older, Mose would say, "We have to ask your mother", if a difficult choice came up (Kire 111).

During the rebellion, the dire circumstances faced by the Naga community perhaps overshadowed discussions about gender roles. Survival and resistance against oppression took precedence over questioning established norms. If the situation had been more peaceful then maybe they could afford to have other important topics to discuss besides the rebellion they were immersed in. Other ways of life beyond survival had no room for discussion in the novel. When Mose was young, both the male and female students were affected by it and no one could continue school anymore. Mose

was a bright student and loved studying but he had to discontinue due to the circumstances. Later on, his daughter stopped going for further studies. The school was never an object of interest to her and this was a result of their times when nobody had the capacity to foster such thought or harness dreams of education. The absence of detailed exploration into other career paths or discussions beyond rebellion highlights the overwhelming impact of the conflict on their lives.

Tragedy befalls both genders in the narrative. Mose's mother died from being recklessly shot down on the head by an Indian soldier like many of the Naga people whose lives were lost the same way. However, we do not find any instances where the rationalists and bandits consisting of Naga people killing any women in the community. This highlights the protective nature of the Naga society, where men, acknowledged for their physical strength, are obligated to safeguard the women in their community. *Bitter Wormwood* offers a complex exploration of gender dynamics, between societal expectations and individual choices. The characters navigate their roles with a mix of acceptance, personal agency, and cultural fervor, challenging traditional paradigms.

Navigating Gender through Time: Unveiling Cultural Complexity

In the context of the novel, gender is simplistically categorized into two: male and female. The process of shaping an individual into a man or a woman is portrayed as an ongoing journey. Society plays a pivotal role in the upbringing of a child, imparting the norms and behaviors deemed fitting for their gender. As the characters grow up, society helps them in learning how to be a male or female. Mose, the protagonist, exemplifies an openness to tasks conventionally labeled as "women's work" when it served the purpose of aiding his mother. He had no idea about gender roles. It was only after his mother told him that men and women should do certain things thus conditioning him into an 'acceptable man' according to the prevalent societal expectations.

Initially oblivious to gender roles, Mose's awareness only crystallizes after his mother imparts the societal expectations regarding specific roles for men and women. Instances like these kept happening, where individuals offering assistance receive comments that their contributions are rejected based on gender-specific expectations. This recurring phenomenon reflects the deeply ingrained beliefs regarding tasks earmarked for each gender.

While the novel unfolds post-1937, delving into the origins of gender roles becomes a challenging endeavor, as the community has adhered to age-old notions dictating the distinct responsibilities of men and women. This implies that gender roles were established long before 1937, as it appears that individuals already held the notion that specific tasks were designated for men and women. This perception persisted, influencing individuals from a young age until adulthood, shaping their habits and becoming ingrained in their identity as they aged.

The composition of gender and what makes gender in the novel is largely influenced by the historical and cultural elements embedded within the community. Gender, as depicted in the novel, is intricately intertwined with history and culture embraced by the community. The rich cultural landscape, characterized by festivals and traditions, molds the gender dynamics within the Nagas. The narrative also acknowledges the complexity of the broader societal structure. The novel highlights numerous unexplained cultural habits and traditions. Despite focusing on the ordinary people in Nagaland during that period, the life of one man fails to depict the entirety of Nagaland's dynamics. Mose's individual story serves as a lens through which cultural habits and traditions are glimpsed, leaving many aspects unexplained.

Furthermore, the novel sheds light on how Naga women and other Northeastern women are perceived by other parts of India. The derogatory view of these women as 'easier targets' elicits

strong reactions from the Nagas, sparking anger among various characters. The protective nature of the Nagas towards their women becomes evident, challenging the prejudiced perspectives held by some segments of Indian society. The disheartening realization that people from other regions look down upon Northeastern women fuels a profound sense of indignation within the community, emphasizing the importance of cultural respect and understanding.

Mose, a man nurtured by two women, can be envisioned as a canvas awaiting life's brushstrokes. He, inspired by his mother, sought to emulate her actions to ease her life. While his mother delineated the boundaries of what tasks were deemed suitable for men, Mose, though compliant to her directives, did not internalize the notion that certain household chores were inherently feminine. The narrative unfolds with Mose engaging in various tasks, driven by the desire to assist his mother, irrespective of gender norms.

At the age of 26, societal expectations pressured Mose into marriage, a decision influenced by his mother's insistence. Despite the imposition of traditional gender roles, the reasons behind their existence and societal acceptance remain unexplored. The community adopts these roles without questioning their origins, and characters in the story seem to assimilate them without resistance, reflecting a tacit acceptance. The narrative takes a poignant turn as Mose's daughter faces pressure to conceive shortly after marriage. Rumors circulate about her alleged barrenness, sparking negative chatter about her husband bringing home an infertile spouse. The tale unveils the societal stigma surrounding fertility, yet the underlying reasons or historical context for such gender expectations remain unaddressed.

In this delicate elaboration of societal norms, the novel remains focused on the overarching desire for peace and freedom within the community. The urgency of this pursuit overshadows an in-depth

exploration of gender roles. The characters, grappling with a larger existential crisis, prioritize achieving peace over questioning or challenging established gender norms. Remarkably, the women in the narrative who assume roles traditionally ascribed to men face no discernible resistance. Similarly, men engaging in domestic responsibilities encounter no societal censure. The book subtly confirms a fluidity in gender roles, suggesting a community that adapts to circumstantial demands rather than rigidly adhering to predefined expectations.

The absence of a detailed exploration into the origins and justifications of gender roles suggests that, within the context of the narrative, the community embraces these norms without an explicit understanding of their genesis. The narrative deliberately excludes a comprehensive discussion on the creation and validation of gender roles, positioning them as secondary concerns in the face of more pressing challenges.

Overall, the novel portrays a community where individuals, regardless of gender, navigate their roles based on immediate needs rather than rigid adherence to predefined norms. The overarching pursuit of peace and freedom eclipses an elaborate examination of gender dynamics, reflecting a community's resilience and adaptability amidst a backdrop of societal expectations. *Bitter Wormwood*, aptly titled after a leaf believed to ward off malevolent spirits, encapsulates an era marred by societal turmoil. The leaf serves as a symbolic talisman, embodying a collective yearning for a reprieve from adversity. The title resonates with the hope that ancient beliefs could manifest, offering solace and shielding the land from the repercussions of past rebellions. Despite the aspiration for peace, the narrative reveals the poignant reality that such hopes remain unfulfilled, leaving a lingering bitterness in the aftermath of societal upheaval.

2. Gender in *A Respectable Woman*

A Respectable Woman by Easterine Kire portrays a narrative interplay of power and fragility in life. Kire unfolds the canvas of pre- and post-war existence, offering readers a vivid portrayal of historical events intertwined with the activities of daily life. Through meticulous storytelling, Kire sheds light on facets of existence that might have remained obscure otherwise. One pivotal element shaping the trajectory of Naga lives is the advent of the British and the transformative influence of education. The novel traces the impact of these historical forces that resonates with the contemporary realities we inhabit today. The story, narrated four decades after the war, unfolds through the lens of the protagonist's daughter, embodying a sad connection to the enduring pain and tragedy of the past. Despite the lingering shadows of war, the novel does not merely dwell on loss; it also illuminates the emergence of love amidst adversity, offering a perspective on the complexity of human experience.

A striking thematic undercurrent in the book is the exploration of the fluidity and construction of gender. The narrative probes the timeless question of 'what is and what makes up gender?'—a question that continues to reverberate in contemporary society. The concept that gender is not an inherent trait but a performative act, as articulated by scholars such as West and Zimmerman, Eckert and Ginet, and Butler, finds resonance in the pages of the book. The exploration of gender is not confined to a theoretical discourse but permeates through everyday life. Today, we can see it in our manner of speech, our sense of humor, and even amidst societal conflict happening in and around us. Gender is so deeply imprinted in us, permeating our thoughts, values, and beliefs to the extent that it has evolved into a completely natural aspect of our being.

In this novel, Kire portrays gender as a multifaceted aspect ingrained in our thoughts, values, and beliefs. The narrative serves as a mirror reflecting the naturalization of gender roles and expectations, prompting readers to reflect on the pervasive influence of these constructs in shaping our individual and collective identities. *A Respectable Woman* thus testifies to the enduring impact of historical events and societal norms, inviting readers to unravel the layers of their own understanding of power, fragility, and the performative nature of gender.

Gender Constructs: A Reflection on *A Respectable Woman*

The concept of gender permeates our world in different ways, shaping societal norms and roles that often go unquestioned due to their ubiquity. As Eckert and Ginnet assert, these ideas become so ingrained that they are accepted as truth, “the world swarms with ideas about gender- and these ideas are so commonplace that we take it for granted that they are true” (Eckert and Ginnet 2). *A Respectable Woman*, serves as a compelling exploration of the intricate dynamics surrounding gender roles, both historically and in contemporary society.

If gender is something we create, can it be made differently, or does its creation mean we're stuck with it, limiting our ability to change? Does saying gender is "constructed" mean specific rules define gender differences based on biological sex? How and where does this creation of gender happen? How can we understand something as created when there's no clear creator before its creation? Some views suggest that thinking of gender as a construction implies a kind of inevitability, with bodies just passively taking on cultural gender roles. If culture constructs gender this way, then it seems like gender is as fixed as when we thought biology determined it. In this view, culture, not biology, decides our fate.

In exploring the lives of diverse individuals before and after profound tragedies, Kire meticulously unravels the differences associated with being born as a man or woman in society. The historical context portrayed in the narrative echoes into the present, where societal roles continue to be dictated by traditional gender norms, predominantly based on biological differences. “Men of Kohima village had set up meat stalls and they ran a very good business of selling freshly butchered meat. The village woman sat in the open and sold their wares, fresh and dried herbs, pumpkins, beans, and vegetables in season” (Kire 82).

Even in the present time, today our roles are divided because society has always been elaborating on gender, based on our biological sex. It is a wonder how some norms and values seem to have a long history and it is indeed hard to shake them off. However, it is quite debatable that the biological differences we have as a male and females do, at times determine our roles. The narrative prompts reflection on the endurance of certain norms and values throughout history, making it challenging to break free from deeply ingrained beliefs. For instance, work was given to a man who has to carry bundles of firewood, even though some women can carry out the task at hand, most females cannot carry the same weight a man is capable of carrying. The argument often arises that biological differences such as physical capabilities, play a role in determining societal roles. The assignment of physically demanding tasks to men is justified by the notion of their perceived physical strength. What is commonly argued here is that the term ‘capabilities’, can bring about a debate that most of the time women are considered fragile and weak. However, we cannot simply rule out the fact that nature itself has blessed us that males and females are born with different sets of physical abilities and strengths. While acknowledging natural physical disparities, the societal interpretation of these differences often perpetuates discrimination against women, perpetuating the stereotype of fragility and weakness. Although the problem that gender

brings about is not just about who is stronger, weaker, or capable anymore. The narrative unveils a complexity where societal expectations extend beyond mere physical capabilities. The issue transcends the debate over strength and weaknesses and takes a detailed turn.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* brings up similar questions: If gender is something we create, can it be made differently, or does its creation mean we're stuck with it, limiting our ability to change? Does saying gender is "constructed" mean specific rules define gender differences based on biological sex (Butler 11)? How and where does this creation of gender happen? How can we understand something as created when there's no clear creator before its creation? Some views suggest that thinking of gender as a construction implies a kind of inevitability, with bodies just passively taking on cultural gender roles. If culture constructs gender this way, then it seems like gender is as fixed as when we thought biology determined it:

How and where does the construction of gender take place? What sense can we make of a construction that cannot assume a human constructor prior to that construction? On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny (Butler 11-12).

A Respectable Woman, compels readers to confront the intricacies of gender constructs and question the deeply embedded norms that persist despite societal evolution.

Society's Impact on Identity Formation

Sex determination at birth lays the groundwork for a lifelong process of gendering, shaping how individuals learn to embody and perform their assigned gender roles (Eckert and Ginet 3). The phrase "learns how to be, male or female" underlines the societal construct surrounding gender, highlighting its pervasive influence from an early age. In Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman*, the narrative vividly portrays how these societal expectations solidify, impacting individuals' self-worth and acceptance.

The portrayal of women in the narrative, particularly those who engaged in occupations considered socially unacceptable, reveals a profound internalization of societal judgments. The women who once ran drinking houses, despite being accepted by the church community, struggled with a deep-seated sense of unworthiness. The dichotomy in the reactions of men and women to their pasts exemplifies the ingrained bias surrounding gender. Men easily transitioned into new roles without the burden of self-doubt, while women grappled with feelings of undesirability and inferiority.

The narrative takes a compelling turn as it looks into the influence of educational institutions in shaping gender norms. A striking example is the headmistress lecturing young girls on the consequences of premarital pregnancy, instilling societal expectations about what it means to be a respectable woman. This scene exposes the disconcerting reality that educational spaces, meant to nurture and protect, become platforms for perpetuating rigid gender stereotypes.

After she left, the headmistress marched all the girls from our class to the assembly room and lectured us on the evils of getting pregnant before marriage.

We were quite terrified to hear what would happen to the girls who did that.

They would never find husbands; they would be expelled from church and school; no one would consider them respectable anymore (Kire 96).

What we can notice from the above lines is that the headmistress herself is educating the girls about what a girl should be like, what she should never do because it is forbidden and that crossing certain boundaries can lead to losing respect as a woman. For a school to be imparting such beliefs and ideas on how to be a girl or a woman, instead of it being a safe place to learn and be protected from such social stigmas, unveils a contradiction in societal attitudes. This paradox reveals the lack of comprehensive sex education and the negligence of parents and educational institutions in providing essential information to the youth.

Another element to ponder upon as a controversial topic is how women who get pregnant before marriage are deemed as low and are exiled from society, but at the same time, abortion is an evil act. The portrayal of premarital pregnancy as a societal taboo adds another layer to the complexity of gender dynamics. The controversy surrounding the condemnation of women for premarital pregnancies, without holding men equally accountable, becomes a focal point for examining gender roles. The absence of any mention or criticism of the man involved in the pregnancy reinforces the societal tendency to blame women for such situations. This unequal scrutiny perpetuates a harmful narrative that men are excused from responsibility, while women bear the brunt of societal judgment. The underlying issue here is not merely historical, as the narrative unfolds in the past, but resonates with contemporary society. The reluctance of many homes, families, and schools to incorporate comprehensive sex education perpetuates harmful gender norms, reinforcing stereotypes and biases.

In this novel, we can critically examine the impact of societal expectations on gender identity. The narrative invites reflection on the pervasive influence of societal constructs, urging society to break free from ingrained biases and create an environment that nurtures individuality, acceptance, and a more equitable understanding of gender roles.

Gender as a Perpetual Influence on Identity and Society and vice versa

The pervasive nature of gender in shaping our social interactions and self-perception is a deeply ingrained aspect of human existence (Eckert and Ginert 4). From the moment a baby is born, societal expectations regarding gender influence how individuals are treated and interacted with. As research by Condry and Condry (1976) reveals, even adults watching a crying infant in a film interpret the cry differently based on their belief about the infant's gender (Eckert and Ginert 5). These early imprints contribute to the formation of identity and influence how individuals perceive themselves and others throughout their lives.

At the same time, the impact of societal influence on gender becomes glaringly evident in *A Respectable Woman*. The portrayal of women as property once they are married, as highlighted by Azou Zeu's statement, "Once she is married, we consider her to be her husband's property" (Kire 103), illustrates the deeply entrenched gender norms prevalent in society. This notion reveals a traditional belief system that subjugates women, treating them as possessions rather than autonomous individuals.

Evolving Perspectives on Tradition and Change

A significant moment in the novel involves Azou and Azou Zeu discussing a violent incident where a man beat his wife after returning home drunk. This conversation highlights two crucial aspects. Firstly, it underlines how societal and traditional norms view wives as properties of their

husbands once they are married. Secondly, it introduces a shifting perspective among women, challenging the idea that any individual, including a spouse, has the right to own another. Kire navigates this contrast, exploring the clash between societal norms and emerging notions of autonomy:

‘I hear he’s broken four of her ribs. Her face was so swollen I could not recognise her,’ Azuo added...It is not a good system we have of sending girls back to their husbands who are abusive. ‘Once she is married, we consider her to be her husband’s property.’ ‘And that is so wrong—that kind of thinking. The husband thinks he can do anything that he wants to do with his wife, that he has the right to mistreat her and no one should say anything against it...Kevinuo, if you should ever marry such a man, remember that you are not his property for him to beat you and break your bones. This is not the kind of thing they would teach you in school. But you must learn this lesson from today...If people start beating each other, don’t ever accept that as normal (Kire 103-104).

The clash between traditional beliefs and evolving perspectives on women's autonomy unveils the complex coaction within society. While Azou Zeu's statement reflects deeply ingrained gender norms, the incident of domestic violence sparks contemplation among women about challenging these norms. Kire's narrative, therefore, serves as an exploration of the dynamic tensions between tradition and changing beliefs, emphasizing the need for societal evolution.

This dichotomy presented in the novel resonates with contemporary discussions on gender roles and autonomy. It prompts reflection on how certain traditions perpetuate inequality and

subjugation, while simultaneously revealing the growing awareness and resistance against such norms. Azou Zeu's statement becomes a lens through which readers can critically examine prevailing societal norms and the urgency for transformation in how women are perceived and treated.

The exploration of gender constructs in *A Respectable Woman* reflects the enduring influence of societal expectations on identity formation. From the earliest moments of life, individuals are subjected to notions of gender, shaping their perception of self and others. The novel exposes the stark reality of women being considered property after marriage, but it also introduces a counter-narrative where women contemplate and challenge this traditional belief. Easterine Kire's narrative navigates these societal norms, encouraging readers to question deeply entrenched beliefs and fostering a dialogue on the need for transformative change in gender dynamics. The dichotomy presented in the novel becomes a mirror reflecting the ongoing struggle between tradition and progressive ideals, compelling society to reevaluate and redefine its treatment of women.

Examination of Power Dynamics

In the novel, the pervasive influence of gender norms on power dynamics within relationships is a central theme. The narrative explores the belief that men should be dominant, leading to the subjugation of women. This critical analysis delves into the multifaceted manifestations of gender norms, examining how societal constructs contribute to the perpetuation of unequal power dynamics. A prevalent protocol depicted in the novel is the expectation that men should hold dominion over women within the confines of marriage. Wives are constrained by societal expectations that dictate their silence and submission to their husbands. The finality of a husband's words leaves no room for denial or questioning. Unfortunately, many women find themselves

victims of such oppressive households, often choosing silence due to the fear that challenging their husbands will lead to societal condemnation. The narrative amplifies the struggles of women like Beinuo, who, in a moment of vulnerability, confesses, “I was so afraid that others would condemn me. I didn’t want to be a failure as a wife; It would affect Uvi all her life” (Kire 140). Beinuo’s fear of societal judgment expresses the oppressive nature of gender norms, where speaking out against spousal abuse is equated with failure.

The novel further unravels the menace of masculinity, depicting instances where women live in perpetual fear due to their husbands’ dominance. Meselhou, a character embodying toxic masculinity, instills terror in his wife Beinuo. Threatening to kill her and their baby if she ever left him, Meselhou wields fear as a tool to maintain control. One would ponder upon why people would condemn her for standing up for herself but back in those days this was what was conventional and maybe it is so even in the present in some parts of places we may or may not be aware of. The line “I didn’t doubt that he would”, in the novel shows how certain Beinuo is when Meselhou threatened to kill her and her baby if she ever left him. To be living in fear all her married life, being abused by a man who thought was superior to the wife and her certainty that Meselhou would carry out his threats emphasizes the profound impact of gender norms, reinforcing the notion that the power of masculinity should be feared.

Another instance involving Kevinuo’s threat to report Meselhou to the police sheds light on the absence of remorse in the face of potential legal consequences. Meselhou’s retort, “My family is my property. I’ll do what I like” (Kire 145), reveals an unwavering belief in his entitlement and ownership over his family. The lack of concern for legal repercussions raises questions about the influence of societal conditioning on individuals like Meselhou. Is this behavior a result of ingrained gender norms or a manifestation of his own character?

Kire explores the backstory of Meselhou, highlighting the conditions and circumstances that contributed to his tyrannical behavior. Being the only son and losing his father at a young age may have fostered a sense of dominance and control. The unquestioning obedience of helpers and others around him, coupled with his mother seeking his advice despite his youth, further reinforced his belief that a woman should always follow a man's lead. Ironically, we see that it is a woman who reinforced these ideas and beliefs.

Azou Zeu's observation, "The husband thinks he can do anything he wants with his wife, that he has the right to mistreat her and no one should say anything against it" (Kire 103), encapsulates the wrongful thinking perpetuated by societal norms. The narrative explores how such thinking becomes deeply ingrained, contributing to a cycle of oppression that endures through generations. Azou Zeu's commentary reflects on the cultural implications of such norms, questioning the inherent injustice embedded in the traditional view of marital relationships.

A Respectable Woman serves as a powerful examination of the insidious influence of gender norms on power dynamics within relationships. The novel lays bare the oppressive nature of societal expectations, where women are silenced, subjugated, and live in fear due to ingrained gender norms. The characters, particularly Meselhou, become vessels through which the narrative scrutinizes the impact of childhood conditioning, societal expectations, and toxic masculinity on individuals and their relationships.

Societal Excuses and Male Accountability

Alcohol consumption within the narrative serves as a societal factor influencing gender dynamics. While men engaging in alcohol consumption is deemed common, it also becomes a tool for society to excuse and protect men from criticism. Gossip and rumors surrounding a man's behavior, often

linked to alcohol, are portrayed as mitigating factors. The novel highlights societal tendencies to shield men from accountability by attributing their actions to external influences. This double standard is evident when Beinuo and Kevinuo express frustration at society's tendency to excuse men's actions, attributing them to external factors such as bad company and drinking habits. Beinuo challenges this pattern, asserting, "I think the husband has to take responsibility for beating his wife instead of hiding behind his friends and his alcohol habit" (Kire 105). This confrontation exposes the societal bias that often absolves men of full accountability, reinforcing the gendered power dynamics at play. By unraveling the complexities of power dynamics, Kire prompts readers to reflect on the urgent need for societal transformation, challenging deeply ingrained beliefs that perpetuate inequality and oppression.

The longstanding problem revolves around the differential treatment of individuals based on gender – a pervasive belief that it is acceptable for a man to undertake certain roles or possess particular attributes, while a woman is often deemed unworthy or less capable.

Kire's portrayal of the aftermath of personal struggles, such as overcoming alcoholism, vividly illustrates the gender disparities ingrained in societal perceptions and the lack of male accountability. Former male alcoholics openly share their pasts, seamlessly integrating into various roles within the community, including leading religious services. In contrast, women who once ran drinking houses face a different reception upon entering the church. Despite their efforts to distance themselves from their past, they grapple with a sense of self-worth. The narrative poignantly exposes how societal judgments based on gender history continue to influence an individual's perceived value and worthiness.

The men who had been former alcoholics were quite open about their past and had no inhibitions about giving their testimonies. They took on their duties like ushering or reading the scriptures at services and even joined the men's choir. However, it was not the same for women who used to run drinking houses. Those who gave up their business and came to church were welcomed by the members, but they struggled with their lack of self-worth. They would speak disparagingly about themselves. They would make sure others knew that they had been brew sellers before becoming Christians and they felt unworthy and undeserving to be church members (Kire 93).

The Lifelong Impact of Childhood Conditioning

The profound influence of early upbringing on shaping individual behaviors and societal expectations is another theme in the novel. From infancy, children are molded into specific gender roles, fostering distinct attributes and behaviors. This critical analysis explores how childhood conditioning perpetuates gender disparities, impacting adult identities and societal norms.

From the earliest stages of life, individuals are subjected to societal expectations and norms that dictate how they should behave based on their gender. Boys are taught to embody toughness and strength, while girls are encouraged to embrace delicacy and softness. This conditioning is deeply ingrained, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others as they transition into adulthood. The values instilled during childhood become the foundation upon which adult identities are constructed.

Mothers and fathers play distinct roles in reinforcing gendered behaviors. Mothers, though treating their children differently based on gender, tend to be softer and less stern than fathers. Men are

inclined to engage in distinct play styles, being more rough with boys and gentler with girls. Fathers, as compared to mothers, exhibit differential language patterns when interacting with boys and girls. Additionally, men are more prone to reinforcing gender norms by rewarding children for selecting toys deemed appropriate for their gender (Eckert and Ginnet 6). This observation suggests that men often accentuate gender distinctions to a greater extent than women. The roots of this behavior may be traced back to the stricter upbringing of boys, emphasizing the societal expectation for them to grow into resilient and hardworking individuals, unyielding in their pursuits. This discrepancy in parental influence contributes to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and expectations.

The Idealized Role of Men: Provider and Authority

The novel reflects the societal idealization of men as providers and authorities within the family structure. Azou Zeu articulates this perspective, stating, “A man’s responsibility is first and foremost, to provide food and shelter for his family. Then he should teach his children to be good citizens and try to be an example himself. In turn, his family members should respect and honor him. This is the way it is supposed to be” (Kire 104). The expectation for men to fulfill these roles establishes a framework wherein they may perceive a sense of ownership over their achievements and consequently demand silent obedience in return, reinforcing traditional power dynamics and perpetuating societal norms that prioritize masculinity and authority.

Female Awareness and Societal Silence

Within the novel, the concept of honor for women is explored through the lens of marriage. Women, upon becoming someone's wife, enter a life akin to slavery, conforming to societal expectations of starting a family, bearing children, and adhering strictly to prescribed roles. The

expectation of silent obedience places a burden on women, limiting their autonomy and perpetuating traditional gender norms.

A surprising aspect emerges within the novel as female characters demonstrate an awareness of the treatment they receive and the prescribed performances expected of them. Despite this awareness, they choose not to vocalize their discontent in society. This silent acceptance can be interpreted as a reflection of an established gender hierarchy, wherein women, cognizant of their secondary status, hesitate to challenge the established norms openly.

A Respectable Woman explores how childhood conditioning molds individuals into predefined gender roles, shaping their behaviors and societal expectations. The novel vividly portrays the idealization of men as providers and authorities, burdening women with expectations of silent obedience and adherence to traditional roles. The influence of alcohol on gender dynamics reveals a societal tendency to excuse men's actions, perpetuating a cycle of justification and reinforcing male dominance. Female characters' silent awareness underscores the deeply ingrained gender hierarchy, emphasizing the challenges of challenging established norms. Through a critical examination of these themes, the novel invites readers to reflect on the pervasive impact of childhood conditioning and the urgent need for societal transformation toward more equitable gender dynamics.

Gender Expectations: A Societal Construct We All Share

In our society, gender expectations lie in the very veins of our existence. These expectations are not only perpetuated by individuals but collectively formulated and practiced by society as a whole. The norms and cultures we adhere to have established specific roles for both male and female children, and assigning blame becomes a complex task as we collectively laid the

groundwork for the fruits borne by the trees. This discourse aims to study the pervasive nature of gender expectations and their impact on both men and women.

The societal framework dictates distinct roles for both genders, shaping the trajectory of individuals from a young age. While women are burdened with expectations of obedience, household chores, and childcare, men, too, bear the weight of societal beliefs. The mother's advice to her son, as portrayed in *A Respectable Woman*, exemplifies the prevalent expectations placed on male children. The admonition that "One day Kevinuo will marry and go away from us because she is a girl" (Kire 117), sets the stage for the son's future responsibilities. He is not only encouraged but compelled to acquire a job, earn money, and provide for his future family. This scenario, while seemingly advisory, encapsulates the burdensome nature of societal expectations on males. The quoted dialogue is not unique to a particular household; rather, it is emblematic of a broader societal construct. The expectation that a girl will be married off and devoted to her husband and children, juxtaposed with the notion that a boy's primary purpose is to secure a job, is a pervasive theme across diverse families. This universalization of gender roles underscores the deeply ingrained nature of these expectations in our collective psyche. The educational pursuits of women, as suggested, are contingent upon their willingness to abandon professional aspirations once married. Simultaneously, men are conditioned to view education solely as a means to secure employment, reinforcing the societal paradigm that dictates their respective roles.

The line, "That's how life is," (Kire 117) encapsulates the normalization of these gender expectations. What was once a set of rules has seamlessly integrated into our lifestyle, becoming an integral part of our identity. The acceptance of these roles as a natural order of life suggests a societal conditioning so profound that it is no longer perceived as an issue but embraced as an

inherent truth. The phrase becomes a mantra, perpetuating the cycle of expectations from one generation to the next.

In dissecting the gender expectations laid upon individuals, it becomes evident that the responsibility is collective. Society, as a conglomerate of individuals, has actively contributed to the construction and perpetuation of these expectations. The universality of gender roles, illustrated by the dialogue in *A Respectable Woman*, highlights the need for a collective introspection and a reevaluation of our societal norms.

The Gendered Dynamics of Marriage

The institution of marriage, a seemingly universal concept, is often fraught with gendered expectations and societal pressures. In *A Respectable Woman*, the narrative explores how gender influences individuals' choices and experiences in the context of marriage. This discourse aims to unravel societal expectations regarding marriage, emphasizing the impact on both women and men.

The novel presents a scenario where the marriage of one character, Beinuo, triggers expectations for another, Kevinuo. “With Beinuo married, I was pressured by my father’s relatives to get married too” (Kire, 121). This ripple effect is indicative of a societal phenomenon, where the choices of peers and friends serve as a catalyst for others to follow suit. The pressure to marry is portrayed as a switch in societal thinking, creating a belief that aligns with the idea that once those around you embark on the marital journey, you should too. However, the author challenges the notion that maturity, particularly in women, should automatically translate into a rush towards marriage. The consequence of succumbing to this societal pressure, as illustrated in the novel, can

lead to numerous poor marriages, overshadowing the importance of personal happiness and fulfillment.

As women mature, societal expectations place a disproportionate burden on them to enter matrimony at a certain age. This expectation, deeply rooted in gender roles, ignores the individual's readiness for marriage and the complexities of personal choices. The quote, "Don't put it off too long. You modern girls want to wait and wait but if you wait too long, you'll find no one wants an old maid" (Kire 121), exemplifies the societal pressure on women to conform to a predefined timeline. The concept that a woman becomes undesirable after a certain age is perpetuated not only by society at large but also by older women themselves, reinforcing gendered roles and expectations.

In parallel, men face their own set of expectations linked to societal ideals. The emphasis on securing a stable job and earning a substantial income is portrayed as essential for a successful marriage. The novel highlights the societal perspective that the better the income a man provides, the more desirable he becomes as a potential partner. The quote, "They couldn't understand that I needed to know the person better if I were to commit to marriage, it was not enough to simply find out his earning prospects" (Kire 122), reveals the clash between individual desires for genuine connections and societal pressures to prioritize financial stability.

The novel further illustrates how external voices, particularly those of older family members, contribute to shaping and even deciding the marriage choices of individuals, especially women. Kevinuo's great aunt Nisuo's disappointment at Kevinuo's refusal of marriage proposals exemplifies the societal expectation that someone else, often older and presumably wiser, has a

say in determining suitable matches. This underlines the limitation of personal agency, especially for women, in making decisions about their own lives.

The discussion prompts a reflection on the seemingly unchangeable nature of gender expectations. It suggests that being male or female is not merely a matter of personal identity but is deeply embedded in social obligations that have persisted for generations. While both genders may possess voices, societal norms and expectations have already been established, making it challenging for individuals to defy these ingrained patterns. The way society treats and perceives women and men, along with the resulting experiences and expectations from both themselves and others, diverges significantly from common assumptions (Eckert and Ginnet 8).

The novel shows the pervasive influence of societal expectations on both women and men, shaping their choices and experiences in the realm of matrimony. As we unravel the complexities of gender roles, societal pressures, and individual agency depicted in the novel, it becomes apparent that a reevaluation of these deeply ingrained expectations is necessary for the cultivation of more authentic and fulfilling relationships. The call to action is to challenge these age-old norms, fostering a society where personal choices and happiness take precedence over predetermined gender roles.

Gender Preferences, Their Implications and Societal Expectations

In the contemporary landscape of a supposedly progressive era, the preference for one gender over another continues to persist within families. Despite societal advancements, there remains a discernible bias towards male children, a preference rooted in historical conventions. This preference manifests in various forms, including societal attitudes, media representations, and familial expectations. *A Respectable Woman*, explores this complex issue, shedding light on the

repercussions of gender preferences and the subsequent imposition of expectations on individuals. This discourse aims to delve into the historical context, societal perceptions, and the profound impact of gender biases on both male and female individuals.

The inclination towards preferring male children over females has deep historical roots. While it is crucial to recognize that not every family adheres to this preference, the overarching societal trend cannot be ignored. The desire for a male child is often perpetuated by ingrained beliefs that a son can prolong the family lineage, act as a successor to his father's work, or serve as an heir. Additionally, historical practices, such as the system of dowry prevalent in some societies, may contribute to the perpetuation of this preference. Easterine Kire's portrayal in *A Respectable Woman* captures this sentiment vividly through the character of Meselhou, who expresses disappointment upon learning that his newborn is a girl. Beinuo reveals that her husband, Meselhou, harbors dissatisfaction with the birth of their baby girl, expressing a clear preference for a male child, “He is not happy that the baby is a girl” (Kire 123). Meselhou's discontent is further accentuated by his absence during the post-delivery period. The absence of the father at such a crucial time amplifies the gravity of his disappointment. Kevinuo, upon learning of this news and witnessing Beinuo's husband's reaction, is taken aback by the starkness of the gender-based disappointment. This incident illuminates a pressing issue, positioning it as more than an individual circumstance—it appears to be a manifestation of a historical convention. The societal pressure for a male heir and the disappointment associated with the birth of a girl are depicted as deeply ingrained norms, shedding light on the challenges faced by women and the pervasive impact of historical gender biases.

Television series and movies play a pivotal role in reinforcing societal perceptions, often portraying women who give birth to male children as superior. These media representations

contribute to the perpetuation of gender biases, influencing public opinion and shaping societal norms. This narrative shows how even fictional narratives mirror and reinforce prevalent biases.

While the preference for male children may seem advantageous, it comes with a set of expectations and obligations. From a young age, a male child is subjected to societal norms dictating his behavior and future responsibilities. The pressure to conform to predefined roles can lead to internal struggles and feelings of inadequacy when these expectations are not met. Kire's narrative unfolds the consequences of such expectations, illustrating how the burden of societal demands can lead to frustration, disappointment, and even resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms like excessive drinking:

Some of the boys were so frustrated with their lives that they were drinking heavily...People also said that the general frustration with life was driving men to drink more in the present decade. 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 (Kire 133).

The societal pressure to conform to gender expectations, especially for men, can have profound effects on mental health. Kire's portrayal of frustrated young men turning to heavy drinking as a coping mechanism reflects a broader societal issue. The narrative suggests that the general frustration with life, compounded by the rigid expectations tied to gender, may drive individuals to seek solace in unhealthy behaviors. Considering the myriad challenges faced by these young

men, it becomes apparent that their lives were notably more difficult. These individuals endured a series of transformative shifts, both within the context of historical events and the overarching evolution of life. A significant portion of them grappled with inadequate educational opportunities and a lack of essential skills for securing decent employment. The societal expectations imposed on them dictated the necessity for a reliable income, one substantial enough to sustain their livelihoods. In scrutinizing the various circumstances these men navigated, it becomes undeniable that gender norms and their rigid roles played a pivotal role in leaving them adrift, struggling to piece together their identities and life trajectories.

Eckert and Ginet's assertion that gendered performances are available to everyone introduces the idea that societal expectations are not just limited to one gender (Eckert and Ginet 9). However, there are constraints on who can perform which roles without facing repercussions. This brings attention to the intersection of gender and sex, where societal norms attempt to align behavioral expectations with biological sex assignments. The rigidity of these roles, as highlighted in Kire's novel, contributes to the struggles faced by individuals in reconciling their identities with societal expectations.

In the examination of gender preferences and their implications, it becomes evident that societal biases persist despite advancements in various spheres. The preference for one gender over another, particularly the preference for male children, carries historical baggage and societal expectations that impact individuals throughout their lives. By critically examining these issues, we can aspire to dismantle outdated norms, fostering a society where gender preferences do not dictate the worth or potential of an individual. The call to action is to challenge ingrained biases and work towards a future where individuals are free to express their identities without the constraints of predetermined gender roles.

A Respectable Woman, takes us on a journey that not only traverses the temporal landscape of the late 1960s to the early 1970s but also defies the societal norms and cultural confines that sought to define the roles of men and women. Amidst the vivid portrayal of life during and after the war, one standout character, Kevinuo, emerges as a beacon of resilience, challenging the preconceived ideals embedded in society. She is portrayed as unyielding in the face of societal expectations, becoming a symbol of empowerment for the women in the story. Her persistence, particularly in the face of pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, challenges the stereotype of women as passive recipients of societal dictates. Her pursuit of education and the encouragement she receives to study and aim for higher goals serves as a pragmatic consideration, breaking away from the narrative that restricts women to predetermined roles. Ato, on the other hand, chooses a path less traveled, deciding to take life into his own hands and build his destiny without the conventional pursuit of further education expected of men. His defiance of societal expectations leads to a character development that defies stereotypes, showcasing the multidimensional nature of individual choices. The juxtaposition of Kevinuo and Ato's journeys highlights the diverse paths one can tread, reinforcing the novel's underlying theme of individual agency.

At the heart of this defiance is Azou, Kevinuo's mother, a character whose open mindset serves as a catalyst for the positive development of her children. Azou, who lived through the war, defies the expected trajectory, showcasing that even in the face of adversity, one can embrace a mindset that transcends the limitations imposed by societal expectations. The surprising feature here is the role of a mother in shaping her daughter's destiny, challenging the notion that societal norms are immutable. Azou's influence becomes a transformative power of open-mindedness, a force capable of breaking away from the chains of tradition. The novel unveils a narrative of individuals who, inspired by their own goals and determination, shatter the societal ideals and beliefs that sought to

confine them. Kevinuo and her brother Ato emerge as formidable characters, embodying the spirit of self-determination. Their stories lead us to a resounding conclusion: one can forge their destiny without seeking the approval of a society that might not truly understand the nuances of their lived experiences. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that Kire not only provides a historical account but also champions the triumph of individual agency over prescribed societal norms.

A Respectable Woman is, at its core, a narrative centered around the coming of age of Angami women across two generations. While it does explore into the lives of men and their societal expectations, the focal point remains on the resilience, challenges, and triumphs of the women who navigate a world constrained by predefined realities. The novel serves as a testament to the fluidity of gender roles and the transformative power of individuals who dare to question, challenge, and redefine societal norms. We are left with a profound realization that societal norms, though deep-seeded, are not insurmountable barriers. The characters invite us to question the status quo, encouraging us to forge our destinies with an unwavering spirit of determination and self-belief. *A Respectable Woman* is a timeless reminder that the journey to self-discovery often requires charting unexplored territories.

3. Gender in *Life on Hold*

Life on Hold unveils a stark and authentic portrayal of the tumultuous struggles endured by the Nagas during the insurgency-ridden years. At the core of the story is Nime, the main protagonist, whose journey unfolds against the backdrop of the challenging and perplexing times of violence in Nagaland. Amidst the palpable pain and endurance, Kire weaves a conflicted love story between Nime and Roko, her love interest. Both characters, staunch in their beliefs about Naga nationalism,

grapple with the inevitable changes that sweep through their lives while attempting to preserve the fragile concept of love.

The narrative explores the personal struggles of the characters and also provides a portrayal of the general Naga populace, grappling with the abrupt transformation of their daily lives. The sacrifices made during this period were not exclusive to the Naga nationalists; they extended to the women who, steadfast and rooted in tradition, bore the burdens of societal upheaval. The novel captures the essence of how women, in particular, were expected to conform to predefined roles and norms, standing as pillars of strength in the face of adversity.

The exploration of gender roles in *Life on Hold* aligns with the argument that enduring differences in capabilities and disposition are often attributed to biological variances (Eckert and Ginnet 1). The stereotypical construction of femininity is meticulously dissected, revealing societal expectations that dictate how women should behave and present themselves. The prevailing notion that women who defy traditional expectations by being assertive, resilient, and expressive are considered deviating from the accepted norm underlines the deeply entrenched categorization of gender roles in society.

Kire's narrative not only sheds light on the external struggles faced by the Nagas but also the dynamics of personal relationships and the impact of societal expectations on individual identities. The love story between Nime and Roko serves as a microcosm of the broader societal shifts, illustrating how personal and emotional landscapes are inevitably entwined with the socio-political aspects of a community in turmoil.

Love, Identity, and Gender Expectations Amidst Insurgency

As the characters navigate the complexities of love and identity amidst the chaos of insurgency, *Life on Hold* becomes a compelling exploration of resilience, sacrifice, and the unwavering spirit of the Naga people. Kire's evocative storytelling invites readers to reflect on the intricate interplay between individual aspirations, societal norms, and the unyielding pursuit of love and purpose in the face of adversity. In capturing the multifaceted dimensions of the Nagas' lives during this tumultuous period, the novel beckons us to ponder the enduring consequences of insurgency on personal and collective identities.

The concept of gender as a social construct, as elucidated by Eckert and Ginnet, emphasizes how society collaboratively shapes the differentiation that constitutes the gender order (Eckert and Ginnet 2). While acknowledging the biological differences between men and women, it is essential to recognize that there is no inherent biological reason dictating women to be confined to the kitchen while men assume the role of sole breadwinners. Gender roles, rather than innate characteristics, are social constructs ingrained through societal norms. This assertion finds resonance in the novel's narrative, particularly through the character of Nime, whose evolution reflects the burdens imposed by societal expectations on adult women.

Initially portrayed as unapologetically vocal about her opinions, Nime undergoes a transformative journey as the novel unfolds, revealing how societal pressures gradually weigh her down. This transition is encapsulated in an incident where Nime is confronted with the admonishment”

"You were with those boys, weren't you? Oh Nime, when will you start behaving like a girl?" Nime tugged at the bits of grass in her long hair. Her ribbon had come undone and she knew her clothes were untidy. Mother always spent a long time putting Nime's long hair in a ponytail before she left

for school. She had beautiful hair but she didn't care. It would just get in the way, especially when she was wrestling (Kire 4).

This sentiment, reflective of the societal norm dictating prescribed behaviors for women, serves as a stark reminder of the pervasive nature of gender expectations. The novel encapsulates the unfortunate reality faced by many women who often encounter injunctions to "Sit, act, and walk like a lady." The expectation for women to adhere to prescribed standards of propriety has been so normalized that any deviation is met with scrutiny. In Nime's story, societal pressures lead her to question her associations with male friends and prompt her to conform to conventional gender norms. Her close friendships with Roko and Setu, both boys deeply invested in the art of wrestling, challenge traditional expectations surrounding feminine behavior. The portrayal of Nime's friendships exposes the novel's exploration of gender roles. In a society that often dictates rigid definitions of femininity, Nime's association with male friends engaged in unconventional activities challenges these norms. The wrestling sessions become a symbol of resistance to prescribed gender roles, highlighting the arbitrary nature of societal expectations. As Nime grapples with societal pressure to conform to traditional notions of womanhood, the novel invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of such expectations on women's agency and individuality.

The novel illustrates societal construction of gender roles and the ensuing pressure on women to conform to prescribed norms. Nime's character serves as a representation of the internal conflicts faced by women as they navigate societal expectations. Through Nime's journey, the narrative prompts a critical examination of the pervasive nature of gender norms and advocates for an understanding of individual identity, free from the constraints of arbitrary societal expectations.

Individual Aspirations Amidst Societal Pressures

It's crucial to acknowledge that the inclination for same-sex playgroups among children is not absolute, as they frequently engage in mixed groups (Eckert and Ginet 3). The innocence of children often proves to be a hidden blessing, evident in the cases of Roko and Setu, who remain indifferent to whether Nime, a girl, joins them in wrestling or if her appearance conforms to societal expectations. Nime, too, exhibits a refreshing disregard for conventional gender norms, unconstrained by expectations dictating how girls should behave. The toxic notion that boys must embody toughness while girls are expected to be frail and reserved perpetuates a harmful ideology, subtly influencing us all, consciously or subconsciously, making us unwitting victims of this toxic narrative. Regrettably, societal pressures eventually take their toll on individuals.

An impactful moment in *Life on Hold* encapsulates Nime's determination to break free from traditional gender roles. Expressing her aspiration to grow up, work, and financially support her family, Nime declares, "One day I will grow up and get a job and give you all the money I earn, Nime would tell her mother. It never failed to make Mother laugh" (Kire 12). Nime's unwavering resolve to contribute to her family through employment challenges societal expectations. However, her determination is met with varied responses, highlighting the tension between individual aspirations and societal norms, a struggle that many face as they navigate the complex interplay of personal dreams and societal pressures.

In Naga society at the time the novel was set, entrenched traditional norms prescribe distinct gender roles and responsibilities. The societal pressure on both men and women to conform to traditional gender roles is evident in the advice given to Nime by Zeu, who remarks:

"Be grateful you're a girl, you can always marry some rich guy...It would save our whole family if you were to marry this really rich and generous man who would do anything for you. It would be a bit like a fairy tale." He laughed again at that. Nime had to join in the laughter, "He better be young and handsome. I might consider it then," she said in the same tone as her brother. But marriage was far from her mind. How to get a job and earn some money and help, that was all that she thought of (Kire 33).

This statement reflects the societal expectation for women to seek financial security through marriage, and for a man to be able to provide her that security. Women are traditionally assigned the roles of childbearing and nurturing, while men are expected to be the primary breadwinners. The societal pressure intensifies when men falter in fulfilling their duty of providing for the household, illustrating that they too are subjected to societal expectations. In Nime's family, her father's repeated unsuccessful business ventures invite the frowning upon men by society who fall short in their income-generating roles. This raises pertinent questions about the value assigned to labor that brings in money and the disregard for the invaluable work of child-rearing, which historically has been relegated to women's responsibilities.

The prevailing notion that only jobs generating income are justified reinforces the undervaluation of roles traditionally associated with women, such as child-rearing and household chores. Raising a child is depicted as a full-time job, historically assigned to women alongside their myriad other responsibilities. Yet, the absence of monetary compensation diminishes the recognition and glorification of these vital contributions to the family structure. The idea that a woman's primary role is to foster a proper family through domestic work raises critical questions about societal expectations. Challenging this concept, it becomes evident that women can successfully balance

professional careers with familial responsibilities. Despite the taxing nature of multitasking, women have demonstrated the ability to navigate both professional and domestic spheres. Rather than frowning upon women's participation in the workforce, society should celebrate their multitasking prowess, acknowledging the complexities of dealing with patriarchy, prejudices, and family demands simultaneously.

As highlighted by Eckert and Ginnet, gender roles are not innate but rather societal categorizations that influence our perceptions of masculinity and femininity. The differential treatment experienced by boys and girls molds their behavior and shapes their understanding of societal expectations. While society plays a crucial role in shaping gender concepts, individuals, even with considerable differential treatment, do not conform strictly to dichotomous behavioral patterns. This realization challenges the simplistic notion that individuals are inherently predisposed to specific gendered behaviors and emphasizes the impact of societal influence on shaping gender roles.

The exploration of gender roles in Naga society reveals the interplay between traditional expectations and the evolving roles of women. The undervaluation of non-income-generating roles and the resistance against challenging established gender norms reflect the broader struggles within societies.

Womanhood: Societal Pressures, Transitions, and the Complexities of Gender Socialization

Gender socialization often suggests the notion that men should embody dominance and aggression, while women are conditioned to accept an inferior role. The transition through puberty for girls is marked by an increased awareness of femininity and a heightened consciousness of their appearance, reinforcing the societal pedestal of femininity for women. As Nime turns fourteen,

her tomboy demeanor wanes, signaling her progression toward womanhood and an understanding of the associated burdens:

For Nime, it seemed as though her childhood had been forever transformed...The year she turned fourteen and Roko, fifteen, there was a sudden awkwardness between them. They had lost the easy footing of their early days. Nime blushed now if he looked in her direction. Beinuo, one of her girl friends, saw her blush and said loudly, "You like him!" ...the other girl's words cut into her like a knife's edge. It made her clumsy. She tripped. She dropped things...That night she lay awake, frightened at what she had discovered. She was in love. She loved Roko, not like a brother anymore, but as a boyfriend. It was the most frightening thought. Did he know? When he touched her cheek, could he tell? (Kire 21-23).

The novel analyzes the complexities of gender socialization and the evolving perceptions of femininity. The transformation of Nime into a woman is an exploration of societal pressures, conflicting emotions, and the pursuit of individual aspirations amidst deep-seated gender norms. As Nime grapples with societal expectations and personal desires, the narrative invites reflection on the interplay between individual agency and societal influences in the journey toward womanhood.

Eckert and Ginert's assertion that children actively contribute to their development as social beings is exemplified in the portrayal of Nime's transformation from a girl to a woman. The narrative skillfully navigates the complexities of growing up, emphasizing the formative role of societal influences on individual development. Kire's portrayal of Nime's journey vividly captures the

burdens and confusion associated with transitioning into womanhood. At eighteen, the subject of marriage looms, subtly hinted at by others. Nime, however, aspires to secure a job to alleviate her family's financial struggles. The pressure to conform to societal expectations regarding marriage becomes palpable, as seen in Zeu's advice:

“It needn’t be as bad as you think it will be, he may turn out to be a very nice man, and you could be happy with him. Be reasonable, Nime, what other chance do we have of clearing Father’s debts and saving his mind? If you refuse this offer, chances are that other families won’t come forward. You know that words spread fast, people will be there to say, “Oh the madman’s daughter refused Abeiu, who does she think she is? She’s probably as mad as her father,” they would say. Think about it” (Kire 61).

In the midst of an already existing financial crisis within Nime's family, the situation took a drastic turn when her father was diagnosed with delusional disorder. The family found themselves plummeting further into distress. Faced with the burden of impending financial ruin, Nime was confronted with the prospect of marriage as a potential solution to salvage her family's precarious situation. Nime's aunt, taking it upon herself, identified a prosperous suitor for her, a man thirteen years her senior. Anticipating sympathy from her brother Zeu, Nime was taken aback when he not only endorsed their aunt's proposal but also shared the belief that, as a girl, Nime had the responsibility to rescue their debt-ridden family through marriage. Despite the disappointment of hearing such sentiments from Zeu, Nime recognized that his perspective stemmed from a genuine concern for the family's welfare. While disheartening, Nime acknowledged the inevitability of her impending marriage as a means to contribute to the financial stability of her family, understanding the difficult choices imposed by their circumstances.

The imposition of marriage as a premeditated agenda exerts immense pressure on women, disrupting the natural progression of their careers and burdening them with an overwhelming array of family responsibilities. This societal expectation acts as a hindrance, putting a halt to the pursuit of women's dreams and ambitions. The notion that prioritizes marriage over career choices leaves women with no alternative but to succumb to family and societal pressures, forfeiting their personal and professional aspirations. Our society pushes the belief that a woman's paramount objective should be marriage, and any deviation from this norm is met with societal censure, casting her as a rebellious figure. The pressure extends beyond marriage itself; women are also expected to bear children, preferably sons, perpetuating traditional gender roles.

The societal lens casts judgment upon unmarried women beyond a certain age, with negative assumptions and societal expectations creating a narrative of shame around their single status. This ingrained perspective makes it challenging for women to escape the rigid expectations imposed by societal norms. Marriage becomes not just a choice but a societal requirement deeply etched into our collective consciousness. As individuals, consciously or unconsciously, we internalize these societal norms, shaping our perspectives and life choices.

Gender Roles and Entrepreneurship

Easterine Kire's narrative in *Life on Hold* reflects on the traditional gender roles and entrepreneurship in the society. The character's observation of her father's business dealings, considering it a world frequented only by men, exposes the deeply rooted gender biases. However, Abeiu's mother challenges this norm, appearing even more business-oriented than her son, “She had never discussed business with her father. In her mind, that was a world altogether frequented only by men. But Abeiu’s mother seemed to be preoccupied with accounting. She appeared even

more of a businesswoman than her son” (Kire 63- 64). This contrast highlights the societal conditioning that restricts women's roles while showcasing instances where women break free from these constraints. The passage serves as a reflection on the broader issue of societal expectations and the need for a paradigm shift in our ingrained beliefs about women's roles and priorities.

In the initial phase of her marriage to Abeiu, Nime found herself adapting to her new life in Dimapur. Contrary to her aunt's portrayal, Abeiu's wealth exceeded expectations, with three flourishing business outlets—two in Dimapur and one in Kohima. As a successful businessman, Abeiu embodied the financial success her father had aspired to achieve. However, it was Abeiu's mother who left an indelible impression on Nime. A savvy and astute businesswoman, she not only cultivated and sold vegetables but also encouraged Nime to venture into planting and selling exotic flowers, capitalizing on the demand from high officials' wives.

Throughout Nime's life, her aspirations were stifled by a prevailing narrative that discouraged women from pursuing financial independence. Taunted for daring to think of securing a job, Nime's exposure to the world of business was initially tainted by her father's reputation as a failed businessman. Abeiu's mother, however, shattered these gendered norms. Despite receiving limited formal education, she exhibited sharp business acumen, excelling in arithmetic and mental calculations. Her determination extended to imparting crucial entrepreneurial lessons to Nime.

Abeiu's mother emphasized the significance of entrepreneurship, urging Nime to grasp its potential impact on addressing the unemployment crisis in Nagaland. Dismissing the notion that the absence of government jobs was insurmountable, she conveyed that dedication and hard work could pave the way for a fulfilling livelihood. This perspective challenged Nime's earlier experiences, where

women around her had discouraged the pursuit of economic independence, perpetuating the belief that business endeavors were reserved for men. Abeiu's mother became a beacon of empowerment, guiding Nime towards a realization that transcended societal expectations and advocated for women's active participation in economic pursuits.

Nime's exposure to her new family's dynamics marked a transformative journey. It not only shattered preconceived notions about gendered roles in business but also ignited a newfound understanding of entrepreneurship as a viable pathway to address societal challenges. Abeiu's mother emerged as a catalyst for change, encouraging Nime to break free from the confines of traditional gender expectations and embrace the empowering possibilities of financial independence through entrepreneurship.

Workplaces often reflect deeply rooted gender roles, perpetuating stereotypes in various professions. The entrepreneurial landscape is predominantly associated with men, while women are often linked to leadership in the fashion industry. Stereotypical assumptions extend to specific professions, where nursing is automatically associated with females, and police officers are presumed to be male. This categorization of job titles based on gender roles is a pervasive issue that contributes to gender inequality in organizational settings. Addressing gender diversity is essential to creating inclusive workplaces.

An intriguing aspect of gendered language is observed in professional spheres, evident in phrases like "female doctors," "female lawyers," or a "female CEO." This trend raises questions about when gender became a prerequisite for defining a profession. In English, there are no distinct terms for male or female doctors or lawyers; they are simply doctors or lawyers, irrespective of gender.

The inclusion of gender qualifiers seems unnecessary, emphasizing the need to recognize that a profession remains unchanged regardless of the gender of the practitioner.

Life on Hold exemplifies these societal norms, as reflected in Nime's query about job opportunities in the town. The frequent journeys between Dimapur and Kohima, primarily to visit her ailing father, had taken a toll on Abeiu, Nime's husband. In an unfortunate turn, Abeiu began resenting the financial strain caused by these travels, leading to a blaming attitude towards Nime. Frustrated by this resentment, Nime suggested finding employment to contribute to the household income. However, her proposal was met with an ironic laugh from Abeiu, swiftly followed by a dismissive list of reasons why securing a job was deemed impossible for her, "Ha! Work? As what? Don't you know you have to pay a lakh or two to get a government job? If you worked as a teacher in a private school, they would pay you a mere two thousand. Why do you want to work?" (Kire 65). The disheartening statements emanating from her husband shattered Nime's aspirations of financial independence.

Recognizing that the strain on their relationship was exacerbated by the financial burden of her journeys to Kohima, Nime envisioned utilizing her earnings to fund these trips independently. The proposition aimed to alleviate the financial pressure on Abeiu, eliminating the need for him to provide money for her visits to her father. However, entrenched in a patriarchal household dynamic, predetermined gender roles dictated the husband as the family's head, rendering any defiance against his will unacceptable. Consequently, Nime's aspirations to seek employment were silenced, and the topic ceased to be discussed, compelling her to conform to Abeiu's authoritative rule within the household. This episode sadly shows the constraints imposed by traditional gender roles and power dynamics, where a woman's pursuit of economic independence is curtailed by societal expectations and ingrained patriarchal norms.

The inherent dynamics within a marriage, where a woman must seek her husband's permission for any activity, already carry a weight of condemnation. This burden intensifies when the idea of pursuing a job is not only met with reluctance but is also mocked, further exacerbating the challenges women face. In the contemporary job market, the difficulty of securing employment is akin to convincing family members to permit their daughters or wives to work. This dual struggle reflects the pervasive societal norms that hinder women's economic independence. Her inquiry highlights the challenges individuals, especially women, face when seeking employment, shedding light on the pervasive nature of gender-based expectations and limitations. The narrative serves as a reminder that breaking free from these stereotypes and promoting gender equality should be a priority in every workplace.

Even in the professional realm, women encounter wage disparities, receiving less compensation than their male counterparts for equivalent work. This gender-based wage gap reinforces the notion that, irrespective of their efforts, women are confronted with unequal financial rewards. Achieving financial independence becomes pivotal for women, offering a path to autonomy and the ability to support both themselves and their families. However, the prevailing cultural belief that marrying a wealthy man is the sole solution to financial crises betrays the level of influence of these norms.

The analogy that women are akin to property, transitioning from the father to the husband without personal financial agency, perpetuates a cycle of dependency on men. In scenarios where families face severe financial needs, the husband's refusal to allow his wife to work due to pride places an extra burden on him to provide for the family. This situation is almost satirical in its irony, underlining the paradoxical nature of societal expectations within a patriarchal, misogynistic, and chauvinistic framework.

The dialogue between Nime and Zeu in *Life on Hold* encapsulates this societal paradigm, where Nime acknowledges her perceived weakness as a woman, equating it with the expectation of being more "reasonable." "It's not that, it is the fact that I am a woman, and I am weaker than a man and that makes me more liable to be reasonable" (Kire 70). This conversation epitomizes the prevailing gender norms that position women as inherently subordinate, reinforcing the notion that societal expectations are molded by patriarchal constructs, and women are systematically conditioned to accept a subordinate role.

Navigating Gendered Realities

As the underground factions, or self-styled 'Naga freedom fighters,' splintered into separate parties, chaos ensued in an already tumultuous environment. The fragmentation of these groups led to violence, culminating in a tragic incident where Nime's father, along with his friend and four others, fell victim to a shooting perpetrated by a rival underground gang. The loss of her father prompted Nime to confront profound grief, yet she exhibited emotional composure and reason, a stark contrast to her brother Zeu's more overt emotional response. While societal stereotypes may cast women as more emotional, Nime's vulnerability allowed her to navigate and reconcile with her emotions, highlighting the human capacity for emotional fortitude and introspection in the face of tragedy.

From the early stages of infancy, societal perceptions and interactions with male and female children diverge. Experimental findings show the impact of adults' preconceived notions about a baby's sex on their interpretations and responses. Condry and Condry (1976) conducted a study revealing that adults, when shown a film of a crying infant, tended to perceive the cry as indicative of anger if they believed the infant was a boy, and as plaintive or fearful if they believed it was a

girl (Eckert and Ginet 7). This highlights how ingrained gender stereotypes influence the way people perceive and respond to even the most basic human expressions, such as a baby's cry. Differential treatment based on gender becomes apparent as children grow. Despite male and female infants crying at similar frequencies (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974), societal expectations and norms contribute to the observed divergence in emotional expression as they mature. Boys tend to cry less as they grow older, illustrating the influence of societal conditioning on shaping gender-specific behaviors and emotional responses (Eckert and Ginet 8). This shows the broader impact of societal expectations on shaping individuals' emotional expressions and behaviors based on their gender.

While physical differences between men and women exist, emotional intelligence is an area where women are often regarded as superior, displaying greater emotional competence and empathy. Nime's mature and reasoned response to her father's death serves as evidence of her emotional growth. In that moment, Nime's transformation from the assertive young woman who fearlessly engaged with her male counterparts to a mature and reflective individual becomes apparent.

Parents often instill gendered phrases like "Boys don't cry" or "crying like a girl" during childhood, perpetuating the notion that displaying emotions is a sign of weakness. These phrases, heard repeatedly as we grow, contribute to shaping our beliefs and behaviors in adulthood. While there may be biological differences contributing to men's physical strength, there is no inherent biological reason for men to suppress their tears. Emotional expression is a fundamental aspect of being human, and fostering a society that values emotional openness requires addressing how boys are socialized to associate masculinity with the suppression of emotions. By challenging these beliefs, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and emotionally supportive environment where individuals feel free to express their emotions without judgment.

Nime had experienced the arrival of both a daughter, Vinuo, and a son, Zotuo, with Abeiu displaying a notable preference for their son, “Abeiu was pleased that it was a son. He spent a lot more time in the hospital than he had done at Vinuo’s birth” (Kire 86). While Abeiu's happiness over having a son was evident, Nime harbored concerns about him spoiling Zotuo and favoring him over their daughter. She wished Abeiu would be more discreet about his biased affections to maintain a balanced relationship between their son and daughter. Unfortunately, their daughter began feeling distanced from her father as he consistently displayed more affection towards their son. This disparity extended to academic achievements, where Abeiu praised their son extensively, prompting Nime to invest extra effort in guiding their daughter's studies. Recognizing the need to compensate for the unequal attention, Nime focused on encouraging their daughter, especially in subjects like Math, hoping to secure her father's undivided attention for their daughter's well-rounded development.

The prevalent preference for sons by parents is a widespread phenomenon rooted in various societies. Numerous factors contribute to this inclination, including the expectation that sons will assume financial responsibilities for the family, perpetuate the family lineage, and bring success to the family name. These expectations are heaped upon a newborn, unaware of the impending burdens placed on them. The pressure is such that even the slightest errors may be perceived as significant, potentially disappointing the parents. Conversely, when a daughter is born, the societal response often involves a barrage of passive-aggressive comments. Congratulatory messages may be tinged with remarks such as, 'You can always try again for a boy,' emphasizing the perceived value of having a son. In certain families, the quest for a son may involve enduring the birth of several 'unwanted daughters,' a situation marked by irony. Yet, in a twist of fate, it is often the daughters who assume the role of caring for the parents in their later years. The expectations linked

to gender roles are ingrained early in life, influencing perceptions and behaviors from the earliest stages of childhood.

The proliferation of underground forces had become widespread, impacting even the younger generation. Zutuo's unexpected request for a gun upon returning from school left his parents astonished, "Oh Mother, you don't understand, the ones who don't have guns are sissies and the others laugh at them." (Kire 95). His reasoning, attributing possession of a gun to toughness and societal approval, reflected the influence of a burgeoning gun culture on innocent minds. In response, Zutuo's parents, particularly Abeiu, sought to counter this influence. Abeiu firmly conveyed to Zutuo that individuals like them, who earned an honest living through hard work, had no need for guns. Abeiu held a critical view of the underground forces, considering them as nothing more than thieves who exploited innocent, hardworking individuals under the guise of tax collection. This exchange illustrated the erosion of innocence in young children due to the infiltration of a gun-centric culture, prompting parents like Abeiu to actively resist such influences and instill values of hard work and decency in their children.

Up until the age of two, boys and girls exhibit similar play behaviors. However, a divergence occurs in play preferences and activities between boys' and girls' groups after this age, as they select different toys and engage in distinct activities. The socialization process includes children monitoring each other's play and imposing sanctions on activities considered gender-inappropriate, as noted by Eckert and Ginet (9). Adults play a significant role in reinforcing gender stereotypes, as seen in the differential treatment of boys and girls in rewarding their toy choices. Fathers, in particular, are more likely to reward their sons for selecting gender-appropriate toys than they are for other toys, contributing to the rigidity in boys' toy preferences compared to girls. Boys also tend to be more critical of gender-inappropriate play styles in other boys than they are with girls (Eckert

and Ginet 10). These learned behavioral patterns during childhood have a lasting impact on a person's development into adulthood. The influence of gendered roles and expectations is evident in children who mimic behaviors observed in friends, family, and media. Commercials, especially those advertising Barbie dolls, are tailored to a specific audience – girls. Any deviation from these gendered norms, such as a boy playing with dolls, can lead to mockery, reinforcing societal expectations about appropriate toys for each gender. Similarly, colors have been arbitrarily associated with genders, perpetuating stereotypes like pink for girls and blue for boys.

Parents often employ distinct language patterns based on the gender of their children. Studies show that parents tend to use more diminutives like 'kitty' or 'doggie' when addressing girls, and they use more inner state words such as 'happy' or 'sad' in conversations with girls as well. On the other hand, when speaking to boys, parents employ more direct and emphatic prohibitives like 'don't do that!' or 'no! no! no!' (Gleason et al. 1994; Ely et al. 1995; Bellinger and Gleason 1982) as highlighted by Eckert and Ginet (11).

The impact of these gendered expectations on children is profound and can foster toxic attitudes. Assigning specific behaviors based on gender can stifle a child's self-identity and limit their freedom to express themselves authentically. For example, boys are often conditioned from an early age to embody qualities of strength, toughness, and dominance. Deviating from these expectations, such as crying or embracing the color pink, may lead to derogatory terms like 'sissy.' This pressure to conform to traditional gender norms can be detrimental, suppressing emotional expression and fostering a culture of toxic masculinity. It is crucial to address the harmful consequences of suppressing emotions, especially for men who may feel societal expectations to adhere to a narrow definition of masculinity. Acknowledging and challenging these gendered

performances is essential, as they not only constrain individuals but also perpetuate harmful stereotypes, hindering authentic self-expression and emotional well-being (Eckert and Ginet 12).

In *Life on Hold*, Esterine Kire paints a vivid tableau of the violence that ravaged Nagaland during the late 80s, disrupting the lives of ordinary Naga people. The emergence of insurgency cast a somber shadow, turning the once vibrant sky gray and upending their world. Despite the upheaval, a glimmer of hope persists as they anticipate positive changes and envision a brighter future for their society. Kire explores the background of Naga women, revealing their subjugation to the shadows of their husbands. The narrative centers on Nime's journey, capturing her coming-of-age as a woman burdened by societal expectations. Nime grapples with the weight of her gender, embarking on a quest for self-identity amidst the complex landscape of the Underground forces or Naga nationalists.

The novel delves into the conflicting love between Nime and Roko. While she resists Roko's involvement with the underground forces, his stubborn choice to join creates an irreparable rift. The sacrifices Nime makes for her family and her resilient endurance become important themes, etched vividly in the narrative. *Life on Hold* is a powerful exploration of the impact of violence on ordinary lives, illuminating the struggles of Naga women and the complexities of gender identity. Nime's journey becomes a microcosm of the societal transformations during that tumultuous period, offering readers a poignant glimpse into the endurance and sacrifices of individuals in the face of adversity. Her journey is emblematic of the internal conflict faced by many women, torn between individual aspirations and societal expectations. From a fearless child challenging gender norms, Nime evolves into an adult woman ensnared by societal conventions, a metamorphosis that reflects the complexities of identity and societal pressures. Kire skillfully portrays Nime's thwarted dreams of a different life with Roko, a poignant commentary on the sacrifices women make for

family and financial stability. The stark choice between marrying a virtual stranger and pursuing a career highlights the societal structures that constrain women's choices, echoing the broader struggle faced by many in Nagaland during that turbulent era.

Life on Hold is an emotional roller coaster that begins with vibrant hues, reflecting the vitality of Nime's youth, and culminates in a somber gray, mirroring the challenges and losses endured. Every character in the novel becomes a vessel for symbolism, representing the multifaceted layers of societal transformation. The novel's timeless narrative allows readers to contemplate the bitter and sweet facets of life, drawing parallels between the late 80s and the present, and recognizing the enduring relevance of its themes. Through Nime's journey, Kire invites readers to reflect on the evolving dynamics of identity, love, and societal expectations, leaving an indelible mark on the canvas of literature.

Conclusion

In summation, the profound exploration of Easterine Kire's novels, *Bitter Wormwood*, *A Respectable Woman*, and *Life on Hold*, coupled with the corresponding research findings, yields an unraveling of the challenges faced by the Naga people, particularly women, across historical and insurgent epochs. Each narrative serves as a lens into the collective Naga identity, societal norms, and gender roles, providing insights into the complexities of identity construction, societal expectations, and the impact of violence.

Bitter Wormwood meticulously dissects the gendered landscape within Nagaland's cultural and historical context. Mose's journey becomes a compelling narrative that unravels the societal structures deeply entrenched in a patriarchal framework. The research findings shed light on persistent gender disparities in Nagaland's political sphere, underlining the need for transformative

change. The absence of a comprehensive exploration into the origins of gender roles prompts contemplation on the community's implicit acceptance of norms, prioritizing peace amidst societal challenges.

A Respectable Woman focuses on power, fragility, and historical influence, traversing pre- and post-war periods. The narrative deftly navigates the intricacies of gender fluidity, challenging readers to confront societal norms that shape individual and collective identities. The research findings accentuate the pervasive nature of societal expectations, urging a critical reflection on deeply ingrained beliefs and advocating for transformative change in gender dynamics.

In *Life on Hold*, the exploration of insurgency-ridden years becomes a lens into personal and societal struggles, illuminating the enduring consequences of violence on identity and gender roles. Nime's journey, skillfully portrayed, prompts readers to reflect on the fluidity of identity and the impact of societal expectations on agency. The research findings extend the discussion to workplace gender roles, language patterns, and the imperative need for societal transformation to achieve gender equality.

Collectively, this synthesis of literature and research findings stands as a discourse on the challenges faced by the Naga people. It impels readers to contemplate the pervasive influence of gender constructs, societal norms, and historical events on individual and collective identities. Beyond the literary narratives, this discourse resonates with a broader imperative for societal transformation—a call for inclusivity, understanding, and the dismantling of deeply rooted biases.

CHAPTER III

Role of Language in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* and Easterine Kire's *Don't Run My Love and When the River Sleeps*

Introduction

The term "language" is imbued with a multitude of connotations and possesses the capacity for diverse interpretations, reflecting its complexity and significance in human communication. In its broadest sense, language emerges as a fundamental medium through which individuals engage in the exchange of ideas, emotions, and information. This encompasses a spectrum of modalities, including verbal articulation, written expression, and non-verbal gestures, all bound by the intricate framework of grammar, syntax, and semantics. According to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, language is defined as "a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings" ("language"). This comprehensive definition shows the nuanced nature of language, highlighting its role as a structured system that facilitates the transmission of meaning within a community or society. Within this context, literature emerges as a profound manifestation of linguistic artistry, wherein authors wield words as tools to craft narratives, evoke emotions, and provoke thought. Through the deliberate arrangement of linguistic elements, such as vocabulary, syntax, and imagery, literature serves as a vehicle for the exploration and expression of complex ideas and themes. Whether conveyed through prose, poetry, or drama, literature encapsulates the essence of human experience, offering insights into the intricacies of existence and the depths of the human psyche.

Literature is an enduring power of language, transcending temporal and cultural boundaries to resonate with audiences across generations and geographies helping us to know the impact of language in shaping our understanding of the world and ourselves.

Language and literature are closely interrelated concepts since language in its written form is the primary medium in which literary works exist. The understanding of the differences between the kind of language used in ordinary conversations and literature becomes an important factor in the understanding and appreciation of certain literary works. In works of fiction the author's choice of words and the manner of presenting the speech and thought patterns of characters not only reflect the unique style of the writer but also serve to add to the particular effects he wants to achieve and also convey the themes and concerns of the work effectively and add new dimensions to it. Language therefore; becomes a bridge between the reader and what the author tries to convey. Thus, it often occupies an important area of discourse in the study, interpretation and analysis of literature.

From the humanistic point of view, literature presents us with a form of linguistic composition that is a blend of social communication, individual expression, moral and aesthetic values. Literature, thus, is viewed as a product of the individual's expression of the self and his/her experiences, knowledge, perception and understanding of the world and reality as perceived. Such view posits that literature contains certain quality of universal and timeless truth. Literature, therefore; is a form of artistic expression that not only imitates reality but also enriches mankind through its representation of reality and teaches something of timeless significance to its readers. This view on literature, however, is questioned by the structuralist and poststructuralist theories which view literature as a signifying system which can only be understood in relation to the greater structure of which it is a part of.

Literary language is often suggestive unlike the language used to present factual information in science. This quality provides an opportunity to readers for exploring the possibilities of multiplicity of meanings through interpretations of any given work of literature. Given this fact, poststructuralism questions the claim and possibilities of definitive meaning of any form of human communication and expressions that includes verbal and written communication. Despite this view, when placed within specific cultural and historical context in which they emerged, literary works have much to reveal about the concerned society during a specific period in time. Since literature is an important means of depicting the notion of social reality within a given historical backdrop, the examination of the use of language in any given work may reveal not only the social, political and cultural reality but also the possible implications of communication and the dynamics of relationship expressed through it.

Use of Language in the Select Works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire

Temsula Ao employs a relatively restrained approach of narration in her fictional narratives. While Kire's novels read like lyrical prose celebrating the richness of Naga cultural heritage, Ao's narrative style inadvertently reflects her social concerns and probes into the private lives of the characters whose predicaments are characteristically those of the Nagas of the mid twentieth century. The analysis of some of the short stories of Temsula Ao from her book *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* reveals not only the nuances in the usage of language between the males and the females but also between different social groups found in Nagaland. She also uses some words borrowed from the Ao dialects. Conversations and dialogues between characters are scattered and limited mostly to few lines and the plot are driven forward almost exclusively through narration. This feature of her stories makes her authorial voice rather prominent. The language used by the character also sometimes reflects his/her age, social background and

sometimes ethnicity. The author also relies more often on the subtext; gestures and body languages of the character through which they express their emotions and intentions.

Easterine Kire, in her novels *When the River Sleeps* and *Don't Run my Love*, textualizes elements from the Naga folklore such as myths, tribal wisdom, and spiritual beliefs to retrieve and revitalize the Naga oral literature and ancestral knowledge. She employs magic realism as a means to explicate the cultural significance of the belief in the spirits and the supernatural as was common among the Naga ancestors. In these works, she weaves in supernatural elements with the real which blurs the lines between fantasy and reality. The elderly members of society in these narratives often speak in didactic and authoritative manner and impart wisdom to the younger ones through their wise words of advice. Kire's narrative style in these novels is simple and relatively unadorned yet lyrical. This style mirrors the traditional oral style of narration. She also incorporates several Angami words and terminology into her writings. The settings of her novels are the Naga villages, forests and rural landscapes of Nagaland. These elements imbue her narratives with local color whereby distinct elements of Naga socio-cultural life and various aspects of natural landscape of Nagaland come to life in her detailed and elaborate descriptions. Her narrative style also reflects the influence of oral tradition and the emphasis she places on preserving her cultural heritage. She also highlights the significance of oral tradition to her community in her novels through their themes.

Over the span of recent decades, these two notable writers have emerged as significant figures in the promotion and dissemination of Naga culture beyond the borders of Nagaland. Through their literary endeavors, they have endeavored to acquaint readers from diverse backgrounds with the subtleties of Naga life, offering glimpses into its rich accounts of traditions, beliefs, and aspirations. Their works serve as conduits for the collective voices of the Naga people,

encapsulating their untold narratives, experiences, and aspirations. In their literary creations, these writers reflect not only the cultural ethos of the Naga community but also its contemporary challenges and aspirations. Through their prose and poetry, they offer detailed portrayals of Naga society, shedding light on its values, belief systems, and collective dreams for the future. Their writings portray a profound awareness of their roles as custodians of Naga heritage and as agents of social change, thereby imbuing their work with a sense of purpose and responsibility. Through their literary contributions, these writers not only celebrate the richness of Naga culture but also advocate for its preservation and recognition on a broader stage.

1. Role of Language in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone*

The stories from Temsula Ao's collection of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, have the historical backdrop of the Naga separatist movement during the 1950s. Nagas, after India's independence from British rule, wanted to be left on their own to determine their own political future. Most of her stories from this collection explore the consequences of the political aspirations of the Nagas and the dire consequences of such aspirations upon the lives of the ordinary people. Despite this fact she asserts that her primary aim is neither to present 'historical facts' nor to voice out for justice and express condemnation for the historical events that had happened during the mid twentieth century. This is stated clearly in the preface titled "Lest We Forget":

These stories however, are not about 'historical facts'; nor are they about condemnation, justice or justification of the events which raged through the land like a wildfire half a century ago. On the contrary, what the stories are

trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms (Ao IX-X).

In the light of this assertion, the author, through her narratives echoes the sensitive and authentic voices of the tribal Naga people. The title to her preface also indicates the awareness of her role as a writer to preserve the collective and the individual experiences of her people. As a writer she carries the responsibility to use language to achieve this very aim. She also – in few of her stories such as *The Night* and *The Journey* – tries to capture the essence of the ambience of the traditional Naga way of life. While the actual historical struggle remains a backdrop the author still displays a sense historical consciousness in *A New Chapter*. Given these facts, the aforementioned short stories offer social commentary upon the issues prevailing in Nagaland and serve as rich archives of experiences of the Nagas and their struggles although the author expresses her aim to be contrary.

Temsula Ao, in her short stories such as *The Night*, *A New Chapter*, and *The Journey* not only captures the ambience of traditional Naga life style but also portrays characters whose ways of using language reflects the dynamics of gender language and the stereotypical way of communicating that are attributed to gender, age, race, class, etc. Ao also employs subtext to subtly convey certain unstated and sometimes unspoken ways in which people express themselves. Subtext adds an element of realism and relative complexity to Ao's narratives. Another important feature of her narrative style is her use of rhetorical questions in words uttered by the narrator as well as the characters in her stories. Ao's narratives explore the layered relationship between gender, identity and language. Owing to such concerns, the Author's literary language is marked with realism.

The Night

In Ao's fictions, women often occupy the compromising position of victims caught in the pervasive negotiations between men and the society. This particular element of her narrative can be seen in *The Night* which revolves around a young woman named Imnala and her family as they try to cope with the agonizing consequences of her liaison with a married man. The story brings to question how society's balance of justice always tended to tilt against women in matters of illicit affairs. The narrator probes into the minds of the central characters and how each of them battles with the anguish of Imnala's embarrassing pregnancy out of wedlock for the second time and how each expresses the mental and emotional anguish. Much of what is expressed in the story also operates at the level of subtext whereby certain impressions are conveyed through actions, body language and the manner of speaking.

The story begins in the night before the day the fate of Imnala's unborn illegitimate child would be decided: "...the fate of the unborn child would be determined on that day, depending on the admission or denial of parentage by the man involved " (Ao 46). Since their mere denial could absolve them of their involvement in a liaison, men had the unfair advantage of exercising their power to evade responsibilities for their guilty actions. The author establishes from the beginning of the story the prevailing social conditions and conventional attitude of the Nagas that granted superior status of power to men. Such power originates from their ability to use language in their favor.

When Imnala's first child was born out of wedlock, the father had refused to acknowledge his parentage by refusing to send a name for the child. This had tarnished the young mother's reputation as the refusal implied that he was uninvolved in her pregnancy. Her first lover had then

completely abandoned her and went on to live his life as he wanted while she had to assume the responsibility of raising the child as a single parent. This incident reveals how women often had to bear the consequences of such liaison alone while men go on with their lives as if nothing happened. The society imposed higher moral standard upon women than they did upon men. In case the man involved refuses to acknowledge his fatherhood the child would have to live with the dreaded title “child of the street” which would make him a non-person in the Ao Naga society. Giving of such title is one of the negative ways in which rural folks use language to assign an identity that adversely affects the child’s welfare. The mere denial of the father would affect the child’s status in the society that would impact him negatively for his entire lifetime as he would be compelled against his wish to carry the social identity of a ‘bastard’ a dreaded term.

Betrayal from her former lover naturally makes Imnala apprehensive about the fate of her second illegitimate child. Her father Tekatoba too is worried about the child’s future. When the father of the unborn child, Alemba visits after a long absence for business purpose, the old man simply asks when the work would be over as if he wants to cut off all ties with the man as soon as possible. Stricken with feeling of guilt and rejection, Alemba tries to explain his situation but the old man simply replies, “What is done cannot be undone. I am only thinking about the child” (Ao 51). The young man understands the old man’s implication that he did not want him to betray Imnala in the same way her former lover did. As indicated by his way of speaking, Tekatoba is the kind of person who hinted at things rather than voicing out his thoughts and concerns directly. This is indicated again towards the end of the story. As custom demanded, Imnala is to be escorted by a maternal uncle to a joint meeting with the maternal relatives of Alemba’s wife in the presence of the village council. Imnala’s father then tells the maternal uncle, “Whatever the council decides tonight will be something your niece has brought on herself. I ask nothing of you but that you will bring back

my daughter's body to me when everything is over" (Ao 55). Through this seemingly callous remark, the old man expresses his concerns over his daughter's safety. There had been several instances in the past where under similar circumstances a girl's hair was chopped off and her clothes ripped off in an attempt to publicly shame her. He therefore indirectly requests the uncle to protect the daughter as best as she could. Such manner of communication is that of a stereotypical father who harbors feeling of tender care, love and affection beneath his callous façade. The author through these incidents' hints at the social subtext often involved in verbal communication.

Unlike Tekatoba, his wife (Imnala's mother) is a woman who speaks rather bluntly. For instance, when the old man instructs his wife to tell their daughter to be careful with her words lest they get punished with bigger fine they can afford to pay, the woman retorts with accusation: "You tell her yourself. Isn't she your daughter too? And that rascal [Alemba]. Wasn't he your partner" (Ao 52). Although the woman appears callous and unbothered by the family drama, she is, in reality, filled with inner anguish. She goes on with her daily routine, however on the dreaded day of the meeting she breaks down crying on her way to the field when nobody is watching. She feels utterly helpless and hopeless in the face of enormous sorrow engulfing her family. Despite all these she, prefers expressing her sorrows in private. Her daughter's illicit affair with a married man is considered a matter of great shame in their society. As such she cannot share her sorrows with any other members of her society. The lack of a confidant under such circumstance leads her to suffer in silence, unseen and unheard.

The relationship dynamic within the family and their attachment style also affects the way the members deal with their sorrows and trials and tribulations of life. Imnala's family exhibits a dismissive attachment style in their relationship with each other. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*

defines attachment style as “the characteristic way people relate to others in the context of intimate relationships, which is heavily influenced by self-worth and interpersonal trust...individuals with dismissive attachment are presumed to discount the importance of close relationships and to maintain rigid self-sufficiency” (“attachment style”). None of Innala’s family members seem to appear particularly close to each other at emotional level. They appear rather self-sufficient in their emotional needs. Innala’s parents are emotionally distant and cold. On the one hand her mother has little interest in matters pertaining to her father’s business dealings, she also pretends to downplay the severity of the issue plaguing their family whereas on the other hand her father never displays any positive sign of emotional expressions. In fact, Innala recalls how he had not cried even when his own daughter had died. Tekatoba also depends on her wife to speak to their daughter rather than approaching her directly. The impact of such parenting can be seen in Innala who remains shut in room after the news of her second pregnancy becomes public knowledge. She has nobody to lean on for emotional support. In the absence of much needed emotional support from her parents, she relies on her inner strength for deliverance from her predicaments. Given her status in the patriarchal society as a woman her approach to her problems is different from that of Alemba who can easily speak in his own defence. Thus, after brooding over her helpless situation for some time she finds strength in her positive determination to face her accusers with her head held high and bravely move forward in life. Innala’s approach to her problem highlights how an individual may use language to positively impact and influence one’s state of mind. Her positive attitude is clearly reflected through her thought.

‘Come what may,’ she thought, ‘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'. These thoughts seemed to revitalize the woman who had only a few hours ago, grappled with fear and utter despair in the darkest night of her life (Ao 54).

Rather than relying on each other for emotional support during trying times, each of the members keeps their sorrows to themselves. The relationship dynamics in the family and the distinct personality traits of each are reflected in the nuances in their conversation style i.e. their use of language. Tekatoba's roundabout way of speaking reflects his effort to avoid emotional confrontations with his loved ones. His wife's dismissive and often blunt remarks reveal her efforts to conceal her sense of sorrows for her family and the unpleasant realities of her family life. She had not said a single word to her daughter since the discovery of her pregnancy. Her emotions are left to be expressed in private.

The family finally finds peace only after Alemba, as promised, acknowledges the unborn child as his own in his very own words, "You are mine." Merely for the fact of being a man, Alemba's words have the power to placate the society of their hostile opinion and attitude. On the other hand, Innala is powerless and she has to depend on Alemba (and his words) not only to ensure a better future for the unborn child but also to proof that the child is his. Her words would have no influence upon the society but herself. Owing to this fact she resorts to her inner thoughts for strength and determination to face the consequences of her action which would affect her unborn child. Alemba could easily evade dire consequences and humiliation if he desires to do so. He could easily deny his involvement with Innala and the society would simply take his words for the truth. As a man he has the upper hand in the matter concerning the unborn child as his words are more powerful in front of the society. His assuring words, said in the presence of everyone, becomes a sort of

social ‘insurance’ that would give the child the right to call him ‘father’, which Imnala, as a woman, cannot provide.

Acknowledged paternity is of great importance to any illegitimate child born in the Ao Naga community. Despite Alemba’s declaration, Imnala sensibly remains aware of the difficulties she would face as a single mother of two illegitimate children. In spite of his condemnable act of adultery, Alemba is still a man of his words. He is a foil to Imnala’s former lover who had neglected his responsibility to his illegitimate child and the mother. According to those present at the meeting, Alemba behaved like a ‘true man’ because he had not only acknowledged his paternity but also managed to keep his wife’s party from becoming too abusive towards Imnala. In doing so he restored a part of his lost honour as a man at least as far as the society’s attitude towards him is concerned. The incident at the meeting reveals that a man’s character can be defined by his words as much as by his action. This is especially true in the given context where a man’s mere acknowledgement of his guilt decides his accountability to an action he has committed. However, the same society’s attitude towards women is radically different from their attitude towards men. Their double standard is revealed in their praise of Alemba as “true man” merely for taking accountability and responsibility for his own guilty actions while they place all their blames on Imnala and her family. For instance, some of them even go to the extent to remark about Imnala, “What can you expect from a girl like that? The old man’s greed has landed him with a second bastard grandchild” (Ao 50). While Alemba is equally guilty, she is the only one accused by her society of immorality. American author Deborah Tannen, in her 1990 non-fiction book *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* highlights what men and women seek in conversations:

For most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships...

For most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order (Tannen 77).

According to this assumption, men seek to establish order and status quo through conversations while women seek intimacy and understanding. In Ao's *The Night*, the protagonist's brother hurls verbal abuses at her and shames her for her action while her sisters visit her to enquire about how she is feeling. The unstated motivation behind the brother's hurtful words is to ensure that his sister would stop tainting the family's reputation repeatedly. The author often implies in her fictional narratives that in the Naga society family's reputation is given great importance, as such Imnala's brother naturally becomes agitated by her shameful deeds. Imnala's sisters, unlike her brother, try to share their concerns for her and show that they care for her. The story also demonstrates how the male members take charge not only to maintain their status in the social hierarchy but also try to establish control over unfavourable situations through their social communication and negotiation. Imnala's father, for instance, discreetly and indirectly asks Alemba not to betray his daughter. He also, as a father, requests his brother-in-law to take care of his daughter on his behalf during the meeting. The conversations between Alemba and Tekatoba also often revolve around their business dealings and their professional status as business partners. Tekatoba's conversation with other male members in his social circle is thus aimed at negotiations and maintaining order in their social and interpersonal relationships.

In *The Night*, Ao's examination of language reveals its pivotal role in shaping societal dynamics and individual experiences, particularly concerning women. Through Imnala's plight, the narrative unveils the disparities in power and agency entrenched within patriarchal structures, where men

wield language to assert dominance and preserve societal norms. Imnala's struggle against the stigma of her illicit affair epitomizes the societal imbalance that holds women accountable for their actions while affording men impunity. The language usage within Imnala's family reflect deeper attachment styles and emotional dynamics, illustrating how familial relationships shape communication patterns and coping mechanisms. Moreover, Alemba's acknowledgment of paternity highlights the societal privilege accorded to men's words, contrasting sharply with the societal condemnation faced by Imnala. Ao's portrayal of gendered conversational styles further elucidates how men and women navigate interpersonal relationships and societal expectations through language. *The Night* explores power dynamics inherent in linguistic interactions, shedding light on the enduring struggle for agency and equality within patriarchal societies.

The Journey

Temsula Ao's another short story from this collection, *The Journey*, revolves around a young girl named Tinula who comes to an abrupt and profound understanding of life and friendship after a seemingly petty remark from her friend Winnie. The title refers to both the literal journey she has to undertake in order to get to her boarding school as well as the metaphorical journey from blissful ignorance to bleak realization of the unpleasant realities of life. The story also juxtaposes the traditional simple Naga life with the structured modern life away from their homeland. The abrupt transition between Tinula's familiar home environment in the village to her boarding school parallels the rapid transition in the Naga society from the traditional way of life to the modern ways of life. In the wake of such sudden transition Tinula's disorienting experience mirrors that of the Nagas during the aftermath of the turbulent decade of the mid twentieth century. The author also subtly traces the psychological factors involved in the use of language (verbal as well as non-verbal) through the character of Tinula and other characters in the story. The story sheds light on

how one's use of language can reflect one's state of mind and how one can conceal one's true emotions in certain situations.

The story is remarkable for its minimal use of dialogues. The conversations during the course of the journeys are related to practical concerns pertaining to undertaking a long and precarious journey through the wilderness. In the morning of her journey the girl ruminates over the trip that had brought her back from the plains of Assam to her native village in the Naga Hills. The prospect of another such trip worries her as she remembers the challenges she and her brother had faced. She recalls how her brother had urged her to quicken her steps: "Faster, faster, in the evening tigers roam these jungles" (Ao 115). He had inadvertently exploited her fear to motivate her to walk faster. His practical wisdom of long journey is demonstrated in him urging her not to throw away the leftover food. When Tinula could no longer negotiate the steep road, she started crying. Once again, her brother had reminded her of the dangers lurking in the wilderness after sundown. This unpleasant experience of her previous journey becomes reason for her misgivings about the journey she is to undertake for the second time.

When the duo finally gets to the boarding school at around midnight, the Superintendent is understandably annoyed for being awakened at such hour. With no warm words of welcome and formality she simply tells Temjenba, "You can now go" (Ao 119). Her cold attitude towards the duo is an implicit expression of her annoyance. Before leaving, Temjenba merely nods at his sister without a word. Although Temjenba indeed cares for his little sister as indicated by the sacrifices he made by simply undertaking the long and tiresome journey, there is no expression of the same through comforting words. His love language is that of action and practical concerns for his sister rather than reassuring words of love and concern. Tinula is left alone away from home to fend for herself. The unpleasant journey and the coldness of the winter night operate as suitable objective

correlatives for the loneliness Tinula experiences in her new environment. Tinula is allowed to share the bed with her friend Winnie. She finds it difficult to comprehend the abrupt transition from the familiar setting of her home to her present environment of the boarding school: “The transition from that environment to this one seemed so abrupt and incongruous that Tinula began to giggle herself” (Ao 119). Her confused state of mind and her anguish find expression not in words but in her behaviour. Beneath such strange behaviour lies the emotional subtext of a child trying to cope with the stress of changes in her life. An allusion can also be drawn between Tinula and her brother’s arduous journey and the difficult journey Nagas had to undergo to arrive at an unfamiliar socio-political setting. Thus, this particular instance of the language of subtext serves as a microcosm of the general state of mind of the Nagas during the sixth decade of the twentieth century. As the story progresses, Tinula’s predicaments are further intensified by the sudden revelation of Winnie.

‘You know your boyfriend, Hubert, has a new girlfriend now.’ The announcement was so sudden and so out of context that Tinula was taken completely by surprise. She was just thirteen and to call Hubert a ‘boyfriend’ was, of course, fanciful thinking. They had merely exchanged ‘looks’ at church a few times, but being an outgoing sort of person Tinula had once or twice mentioned his name and said that she found him ‘nice’... the suddenness and the tone in which Winnie said the word hurt her deeply, and in order to camouflage her real emotions, Tinula started to giggle again until tears came to her eyes and the giggles began to sound like muffled sobs (Ao 119).

In the above given excerpt, Ao offers an insight into the psyche of a child and the manner in which she might cope with overwhelming emotions. She probes into how the state of mind influence the use of language. Pathos is subtly interwoven with gentle humor and an understanding of a child's predicament. Just through Winnie's single sentence, Tinula becomes aware of her deliberate attempt to hurt her and therefore resorts to hiding it with giggles. Her coping mechanism to emotional anguish helps conceal her true emotion leaving Winnie confused. This incident makes her aware of the fact that barriers in life are not always physical but also emotional and psychological. This theme of emotional barrier is also portrayed in Tinula's relationship with her brother. At the end Tinula is left with an emotional scar not of unrequited and unexpressed love but of the feeling of betrayal from the person she considered her friend. It brings in her a new understanding of the unpleasant reality of life. This particular moment in her life is the turning point from innocence and ignorance to maturity that comes with knowledge and awareness of life and the cruel ways of the world. Tinula's story is representative of the story of "sudden displacement of the young from a placid existence in rural habitats to a world of conflict and confusion" (Ao X).

Even with sparse dialogue, Tamsula Ao captures the complexities of intergenerational communication, revealing the subtleties of emotional expression. She demonstrates that outward displays of emotion may not always align with an individual's genuine internal sentiments. People like Tinula and her brother represent the simple village dwelling people of Nagaland. Their ordinary lives and their everyday struggles mostly go unnoticed and unmentioned. However, as trivial as they may appear, Tamsula Ao recounts with sensitivity and understanding, the simple lives of these ordinary people. According to her, "sometimes it is the trivial that triggers the process of remembering a great loss" (Ao IX). The seemingly trivial incident in Tinula's life thus may

trigger in the minds of the Nagas the process of remembering the loss of their simple ways of life and culture to complexity of modernity. Her narrative gives voice even to the ordinary struggles of ordinary people whose stories often stay untold.

In *The Journey*, Tamsula Ao masterfully navigates the complexities of communication and emotional expression with minimal dialogue, shedding light on the subtleties of language in conveying inner turmoil and external realities. Through the journey of young Tinula, both literal and metaphorical, Ao illustrates the stark contrast between traditional Naga life and the structured modernity of boarding school. Tinula's disorienting experience mirrors the turbulent transition of Naga society, reflecting the psychological intricacies of language use. Ao highlights the practical concerns and emotional subtexts underlying Tinula's journey. Tinula's brother's actions speak volumes about his care for her, contrasting with his lack of verbal reassurance. Tinula's laughter amidst her turmoil symbolizes her coping mechanism, masking deeper emotions beneath a facade of amusement. Ao also delves into Tinula's emotional turmoil when confronted with betrayal from her friend Winnie, revealing the fragility of childhood innocence. Tinula's journey becomes a metaphor for the broader upheavals faced by the Naga people, navigating the complexities of cultural displacement and loss.

The Journey exemplifies Ao's ability to illuminate the ordinary struggles of ordinary people, offering profound insights into the human experience and the transformative power of language in going through life's challenges. Through Tinula's story, Ao gives voice to the untold narratives of a society in transition, reminding us of the enduring significance of even the seemingly trivial moments in shaping our understanding of loss and persistence.

A New Chapter

A New Chapter, the last story from Ao's collection *These Hills Called Home*, is set in the backdrop of the aftermath of the turbulent years following the Nagas separatist movement. Through its depiction of Nagaland in a state of uneasy calmness following the violent conflicts with the Indian armed forces, Ao hints at how the Nagas have been portrayed as misguided and violent savages by labelling their state as "troubled" area requiring the surveillance of security forces to keep them under control. The story revolves around Bendangnungsang (also called Nungsang), a crafty businessman who navigates through the new social, economic and political landscape of Nagaland during the nineteen sixties to become one of the most influential and richest men in town.

The author explicates the role of language as a means of communication that could manifest not only in the forms of speech and dialects but also in the forms of symbols, cultural elements, ideology and symbolic actions. She also hints at how language can be a marker of one's status, level of education, and ethnicity. Powerful and influential people like Nungsang, his business partner Bhandari, and his old classmate Wati use their skills of negotiation and manipulation to exploit people to further their selfish ambitions while lower working-class people like Merenla, Abdul Sattar and Karim become victims of their exploitation, greed and treachery. In the hands of these powerful people, language becomes a weapon of corruption and oppression while the oppressed classes are silenced into submission. Thus, various manifestations of language and nuances in the use of language by different characters can be delineated from this story.

Language of Negotiation and Manipulation

A New Chapter depicts various instances of how people use language to adapt to new socioeconomic realities. It also demonstrates how the characters try to negotiate and sometimes

even manipulate others to place themselves in a favorable position in this new socioeconomic setting. The Indo-Naga conflict had far reaching consequences on the Nagas. New political structure was to emerge and soon replace the old, and many new army establishments were set up to counter the possibility of further conflicts. These developments not only altered the political, social, economic and cultural structure of the state but also led to the emergence of new classes of businessmen and elite classes in society. Army contractors, the businessmen who undertook the task of providing service of supplying army stations with food items were one of the newly emerging elite classes in Naga society.

It was to procure ‘supplies’ for these army establishments that a new class quickly emerged. They came to be known as army contractors who now entered the space between the opposing factions and were poised to make their fortunes from the spoils of war. They were often persons with ‘connections’ in the right places, both overground and underground. They became the new factor in the hierarchy now evolving in Naga society in the wake of the upheaval (Ao 123).

This new elite class occupied a place in the social hierarchy that required them to negotiate with both the Indian army as well as the underground Naga rebels in order to maintain their status. Nungsang realizes this fact and does everything under his capacity to establish connections with some of the most powerful people in town. His family itself is one of the most influential families in town. He is however considered to be the “oddball” in his family and the least successful of the siblings. His most valuable assets, however, is not his family’s wealth and status but his friendship with Bhandari, a non-native with a remarkable ability to negotiate, manipulate and persuade people to their advantage.

Nungsang's job as a contractor runs at loss as the amount of money he spends is at par with his profit. This changes when Bhandari advises him to replace expensive food items such as meat and fruits like apples and mangoes with locally available cheaper alternatives such as plums at least twice a month. This dishonest practice requires the participation of the Subedar in charge of food items. In this matter, Bhandari assists Nungsang to strike a deal with the N.C.O. The conversation involving the negotiation between Bhandari and the Subedar reveals that they belong to the same community. This factor positively contributes to their agreement. Language is shown as an important indicator of one's ethnicity which can also help one bond with and come to an understanding with others belonging to the same community as demonstrated through Bhandari and the N.C.O.

It is thus evident that most male characters in this story are scrupulously involved in manipulating and negotiating relationships and maintaining status in a hierarchical social setting. As business partners and friends, Bhandari and Nungsang negotiate and make deals with other businessmen. Most of the small business owners occupying the lower level of hierarchy in the business world have no choice but to silently comply with whatever the most powerful men have to say. Nungsang also negotiates with Wati to exempt himself from paying taxes to the underground faction of the Naga Army. Likewise, Wati manipulates the deal to his own advantage. Bhandari also plays the crucial role of persuading the businessmen of town to contribute to the effort of electing Nungsang as the MLA.

Manipulation and display of power dynamics can also be seen in familial setting. Nungsang manipulates his mother by alluding to the constant threat to his life if he fails to comply with the demands of the underground. Even though Nungsang and his classmate Wati – an underground leader – had a mutual understanding that fulfilling the latter's end of the bargain would take time,

he pretends being scared to go out on his usual business trips. His mother then panics and persuades his reluctant father to do find a job for Wati's future son-in-law lest they put their son's life in danger. His father in turn orders his other son to arrange a job appointment for the person concerned. When the father learns of his son's intention to join politics, he does his part as the head of the family by ordering all his children to contribute certain amount of money for Nungsang's election campaign. Each of the members are shown to have certain form of influence over others be it emotional, parental, financial, bureaucratic or political.

Sociolinguistic Features in *A New Chapter*

Sociolinguistics, as defined by *Encyclopedia Britannica*, encompasses the study of language within its social context, probing into the convoluted relationship between language and society. This multifaceted discipline explores how various sociological factors, including ethnicity, education, occupation, peer-group identity, and gender, shape an individual's linguistic repertoire. These factors exert influence over an individual's vocabulary, accent, and grammatical features, reflecting the complex elaboration between language and social roles within a community. Through sociolinguistic analysis, researchers uncover the refined ways in which language both reflects and reinforces social structures, shedding light on the dynamic nature of linguistic diversity and identity formation.

In *A New Chapter* Bhandari exhibits a tendency to habitually speak in Hindi which reveals his level of education and his ethnicity. As English is a medium of instruction in most schools in Nagaland, it is naturally considered to be the language of the learned. As such, Bhandari being unable to speak much English shows that he is not highly educated. It is also noteworthy that Bhandari reverts to Hindi whenever he wants to convey crucial information during conversations

and make impactful statements. For instance, he speaks in Hindi when he cryptically implies that his success as an army contractor was achieved through dishonest means. He tells Nungsang in Hindi: “Yeh jo mera ghar bana he na, meat-on-hoof se nahi, kadu lauki se bana.” (Ao 126). He reveals that he had substituted certain expensive items such as meat with cheap local vegetables like pumpkins, squash and gourd. Such dishonest practices have been the secret of his success as an army contractor. Thus, he metaphorically declares in Hindi that he had built his house not with “meat-on-hoof” but with pumpkins and squash.

Bhandari’s use of Hindi also indicates that he is a non-local as Hindi was a foreign language to most Nagas during those days. Bhandari also speaks in his native language with the N.C.O. at the army station to negotiate an agreement between him and Nungsang. The use of their native tongue fosters communication between the two. He is able to appeal to the feeling of communal belongingness. It is through his assistance that Nungsang secures a deal to substitute the items to be provided to the soldiers. Nungsang is able to negotiate with a non-local individual only with the help of another person outside the Naga community. Thus, language is an important aspect of one’s ethnic identity. The story also highlights the peculiar ways in which rural people use language. For instance, the villagers from Merenla’s village call her “Pumpkin Merenla”. They associate her identity with the most common vegetable grown in abundance in her farm.

Simple village folk have a unique and singular way of using language, therefore calling the widow ‘pumpkin Merenla’ was their way of adding a new dimension to her identity during the period of her association with Nungsang, the contractor. There was no malice or ridicule intended in the sobriquet (Ao 146).

Similarly, the villagers had named a particular type of tomato “Longritoba’s pendu” or “Longritoba’s tomato” after the person named Longritoba who had first introduced that particular type of tomato to their village. Ao displays her gentle sense of humor and her genuine understanding of the rural people of the Naga society through the portrayal of the way in which people choose to use language.

The Language of Cultural Symbols, Cultural Elements and Political Ideology

A New Chapter foregrounds the various ways in which the language of communication can manifest in the use of cultural symbols, cultural elements and political ideology. The narrative showcases the author’s keen historical consciousness through its portrayal of the entry of the Nagas into the mainstream Indian politics. The early political scenes of Nagaland are depicted in details. As a counter measure against the opposition party, Nungsang’s party plans an orderly procession to attract possible voters to their party. The language of symbolism and ideology is foregrounded during the procession in which the symbol of hornbill bird becomes the party symbol. The display of discipline and orderliness during the procession also help influence the people. The procession of the other party had been disorderly, loud, and unorganized. For the common people, the bird becomes a huge influencing factor in swaying their votes in favor of Nungsang. The hornbill bird is of great cultural significance for the Nagas. Nungsang and his party is able to convey their political message more conveniently through symbolic language drawn from cultural symbol. Its impact upon the people was thus significant and immediate.

Apart from the orderliness of human behaviour in the procession, what remained vivid in the minds of the townspeople was the mesmerizing sight of the magnificent birds fluttering from the banners and flags festooned on the

slow-moving vehicles. Even years later, older people recalled that the sight of the legendary birds stirred something elemental in their racial memory and they fancied that the birds had descended from their lofty perches in the deep and dark jungles and had come to participate in the political parade with a clear message for the people...for many voters it was the defining factor in his [Nungsang's] favor rather than any new-fangled political ideology, which they did not understand anyway (Ao 140).

Given the larger historical context of turbulent years of conflicts and political upheavals during the fifties in the Naga Hills, Nagas in general longed for orderliness, discipline and stability. This attitude is echoed in the story through people's preference for the orderly procession of Nungsang's party over the other party which had, during their procession, displayed disorderly behaviour by drinking, beating of drums and shouting of slogans. Nungsang's party, in contrast, exploits people's sentiment by using the Nagas' ancestral symbol – the hornbill -- as their party symbol. They also insist the elders to wear traditional attires and stand as the centre pieces flanked by the younger people in each vehicle in procession. Most of the presumably uneducated masses of people, especially the elders, have little concern over the political ideologies which they hardly understood. Under such circumstance, language of persuasion becomes more effective when communicated in the forms of symbols and display of civilised behaviour. Thus, the author foregrounds the fact that effective language of communication need not necessarily be verbal.

Language of Symbolic Actions in *A New Chapter*

A New Chapter highlights how one can express oneself in distinct ways apart from verbal expressions through symbolic acts. This is shown through the subplot involving Merenla, a distant

cousin of Nungsang who, along with other lower-class people like Karim and Abdul Sattar, represent the lower order in the hierarchy of people involved in business activities. Merenla had cultivated surplus pumpkins in her field in order to sell them to the contractor. Owing to this simple fact, she is given the name “pumpkin Merenla” and thus comes to be associated with pumpkins. Though there is no apparent ill intent behind this sobriquet, it later affects the way she perceives herself.

Despite the innocence of her association with the common vegetable, she comes to hate the identity given to her by the society because the pumpkins become a dreadful reminder of betrayal from her clansman. After being elected as an MLA, Nungsang completely gives up his job as an army contractor. As such, people working under him are adversely affected. However, he remains indifferent towards the suffering of those working under him caused by his selfish action. In case of Merenla, she loses her primary source of income as Nungsang was the one who bought almost all of her stocks of agricultural produce. It was Nungsang who had encouraged her to plant more vegetables. In the absence of buyers for her abundant harvest, however, these vegetables become a burden for her. In order to do away with her frustration, Merenla finally resorts to indulge in a cleansing ritual not only to rid herself of her awful experiences but also to erase her now unwanted identity which was imposed upon her by the people around her.

Wearing a red scarf on her head, Merenla began to shout ‘Vote For’ loudly and with every shout she would hurl a pumpkin to the ground below... There was something essentially childlike in a grown woman taking out her frustration on some common vegetables and yet, those who saw the scene on the bamboo platform came away with a distinct impression that the simple

act of throwing out the pumpkins signified a deep resolve in the mind of this poor widow to reorganize her life (Ao 145).

This symbolic act (an expression of her symbolic language) signifies the start of a new chapter of life for her. Her seemingly ridiculous way of dealing with her frustration leaves a memorable impression upon the villagers who are then truly able to comprehend the severity and intensity of her pathos. They therefore stop calling her ‘pumpkin Merenla’. She manages to convey her frustration, her anguished state of mind and her strong resolve to restructure her life and start anew through her symbolic language of smashing pumpkins and parodying an election campaign by shouting “Vote For”:

...the villagers recognised the message that she conveyed to them through her very vociferous and public rejection of this identity on the day that she had ‘cleansed’ her house and herself of something that had ‘wounded’ her both in the material and psychological sense (Ao 147).

Merenla in many ways represents the old traditional values of the Naga society as opposed to Nungsang who represents and seek to promote the capitalist ideals of modern society. While the former, in the later part of the story, tries to regain her former identity, the latter strives for new identities and is dissatisfied with his initial identities. The conflict of interests between them represents not only the conflict between the old and the new ideals but also the conflict between classes in which the richer class often oppresses and exploits the lower classes. In both cases, they achieve their respective goals through the way they present themselves to the world through the ways in which they communicate with the society. Their language of communication operates at symbolic level which proves very effective in combination with verbal expressions.

A New Chapter explores the multifarious role of language within the socio-political landscape of Nagaland during the aftermath of the turbulent years following the Nagas separatist movement. Through the lens of sociolinguistics, Temsula Ao unveils the ways in which language shapes and reflects social structures, cultural identities, and power dynamics within the community. The narrative examines into the language of negotiation and manipulation employed by characters like Nungsang and Bhandari, highlighting how linguistic strategies are wielded to navigate through the complex web of socioeconomic realities. Additionally, the story elucidates the sociolinguistic features embedded in cultural symbols, political ideology, and symbolic actions, underscoring the profound impact of language beyond verbal expressions. Through the characters of Nungsang, Merenla, and others, Ao vividly portrays the intricate interplay between language, identity, and power. The use of Hindi by Bhandari not only signifies his ethnic background but also serves as a tool for negotiation and manipulation in the socio-political milieu of Nagaland. Similarly, the symbolic language of the hornbill bird during political processions reflects deeper cultural sentiments and influences voter perceptions. Furthermore, Merenla's symbolic act of smashing pumpkins becomes a powerful expression of her struggle for identity and agency in the face of societal oppression and exploitation. Overall, *A New Chapter* masterfully demonstrates how language operates as a dynamic force that shapes social hierarchies, cultural identities, and individual agency within the complexities of Nagaland's post-colonial landscape.

In analyzing Temsula Ao's stories like *The Night*, *The Journey*, and *A New Chapter*, we gain deep insights into how language largely influences societal interactions, personal perspectives, and gender-based power dynamics within Nagaland. Ao's meticulous scrutiny of language unveils its dual role in both mirroring and perpetuating social hierarchies, cultural identities, and struggles for autonomy within patriarchal contexts. Collectively, Ao's works accentuate the enduring

struggle for autonomy and equality within patriarchal societies, while highlighting language's transformative potential in shaping societal dynamics and personal experiences. Through her unique literary voice, Ao amplifies the unheard narratives of the Nagas, offering a reflection on human existence and the enduring influence of language in shaping our perceptions of self and society.

2. Role Of Language in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* and *Don't Run My Love*

When the River Sleeps by Easterine Kire narrates the story of an Angami man, a lone forest-dwelling hunter named Vilie who goes on an epic quest to acquire the magical heart-stone from the middle of the mythical sleeping river. Throughout the narrative, the protagonist encounters not only men and women but also fantastical beings such as were-tigers, river spirits, widow spirits, and the spirits of the dead. The supernatural elements in the narrative are often treated as though they are closely related to commonplace experiences. As he journeys through the forests, hills, mountains, and several villages to reach his destination, Vilie's ability to use language efficiently becomes one of the most important contributing factors to his success. During most of his encounters with sinister beings and spirits, words are proven to be the only effective weapons to fight against them. One of the central themes of the novels is the theme of orality which is brought into focus by emphasizing the importance of words. Words, even those spoken by ordinary men and women, are depicted to have powerful influence even over the spiritual beings and other mythical creatures of the Angami Naga folklore.

The narrative adopts a direct and unadorned style, akin to a fable, wherein the author refrains from excessive elaboration, opting instead for concise storytelling. This approach, reminiscent of oral

tradition, prioritizes simplicity and fluidity, allowing the story to unfold seamlessly. The author's reluctance to dwell on unnecessary details shows her commitment to advancing the plot while evoking the timeless charm of traditional storytelling. This narrative technique not only pays homage to the influence of oral tradition but also imbues the story with a sense of immediacy and accessibility, captivating readers with its straightforward yet compelling delivery.

The Power of words and its Symbolic Significance

One of the most notable elements of this novel is the foregrounding of the influence and power of words over people and how words often assume symbolic significance. Vilie, for instance, is prompted to undertake the journey in search of the magical heart-stone because of his recurring dreams of him acquiring the heart-stone from the sleeping river. This dream is prompted by the story he has heard about the sleeping river from people around him:

He had had the same dream every month for the past two years, ever since he had first heard the story of the sleeping river. He was restless in a way that he had never been before. And it made him come to a decision. The following week he would go on the wretched journey and get the river out of his head. But he didn't really mean it like that. Vilie was fascinated by the tale of the sleeping river. It was more than a story to him. He wanted more than anything to find the mysterious river, and 'catch it' when it went to sleep (Kire 2).

His recurring dream alludes to the collective unconscious of the Nagas; it not only reflects their spiritual belief but also the need to be in close harmony with nature. In the light of this understanding Vilie may be regarded as the archetypal hero who responds to the call of the unconscious to seek for knowledge to gain a spiritual understanding of the natural world. He does

not simply dismiss the story as nonsensical due of its supernatural elements, it is as real to him as much as he considers his recurring dreams to be prophetic. The story also points to the fact that belief in the supernatural was one of the essential features of the Naga oral tradition as was reflected in the tales they talked about the sleeping river.

In the second chapter of the novel, Vilie, in response to the relentless nagging of his aunts on the subject of marriage declares, “The forest is my wife” (Kire 7). He had also responded to her mother with the same statement when she nagged him on the same topic. Although he seems to have said those words on impulse to divert the question of his marriage, he is shown to have deep connection with the life in the forest and with the forest itself. His role as the guardian of the tragopans and the *gwi* naturally requires him to live in the forest but when he succumbs to severe loneliness, he considers leaving the forest life behind. He however dismisses this idea with a feeling of guilt.

“The forest is my wife.” He had said this many times to his relatives back at the village. Now he had the sensation that he was being an unfaithful spouse. He began to think that leaving the forest would be the same as abandoning his wife. Though it was an unsettling thought in his soul, he found he had actually nurtured it for a long time (Kire 9).

The first line assumes symbolic significance as the narrative progresses. The forest is further personified as a caring wife and Vilie’s destiny is further tied to it. Apart from being the guardian of the *gwi* and the tragopan he later assumes the role of the guardian of the Heart stone of the sleeping river. He is driven by his sense of responsibility to protect the stone against evil men who would seek to exploit its magical powers. In doing so, he becomes the guardian of the mystic

knowledge of the spiritual world which the magical stone would impart. Unbeknownst to his own awareness, he reciprocates his role as a symbolic spouse of the forest and nature in general.

After becoming an inadvertent witness to the murder of an elderly man named Pehu by another hunter named Hiesa, who in drunken rage had shot the former dead, Vilie flees from the crime scene. While on the run he feels safe only under the cover of trees in the middle of a forest. This forest not only shelters him and protects him from the sight of his enemies but also provides him with medicinal herbs to treat his wounds and other edible herbs for his broth. The forest thus nurtures, nourishes and protects him in the same manner as a wife of him would have done under similar circumstances. In this sense, the positive roles played by a wife in her husband's life serves as an appropriate comparison for the caring nature of the forest. The caring nature and other positive attributes which are associated with nature are the same qualities expected of an ideal wife in the traditional Naga social context which is revealed through the comparison between the two.

On his return, he felt safe enough to stretch out under his leafy roof. The forest was his wife indeed: providing him with sanctuary when he most needed it; and food when his rations were inadequate. The forest also protected him from the evil in the heart of man. He felt truly wedded to her at the moment.

(Kire 51)

This instance from the novel reflects the reliance of the early Naga people on the resources provided by the forest for survival and sustenance. The same is reflected when Vilie encounters Zeliang women who collect nettle barks to weave clothes. These women lament that the process of making clothes from nettle bark is a dying art as most people wear readily available clothes from the market. The experience depicted in this encounter parallels with how the Nagas face the

threat of the prospect of most of their traditional practices being replaced gradually by the modern ways of life.

Role of Language in Trade and Commerce

The novel also subtly depicts the important role played by language in trade and economic activities. Through the character of Idele, an elderly Zeliang woman encountered by Vilie in the nettle forest, the narrative unveils the shifting linguistic dynamics intertwined with economic activities. She tells Vilie that the younger generation of her community do not speak Angami as there is no practical reason to learn it:

“We are Zeliang and the younger generation do not know how to speak Angami, since there was no need for them to learn it. I speak it because it was necessary in my day. Back then we traded with the Angamis and took their daos, spears and spades, and *keshiini*, in exchange for our brine salt, pigs, dried fish and chilli. They made excellent daos because they knew how to temper steel so much better than us” (Kire 35).

Idele's revelation about the dwindling knowledge of Angami among the younger Zeliang generation highlights the pragmatic nature of language acquisition in the context of trade. In elucidating how the Zeliang people, like many others within the diverse Naga community, once relied on language proficiency for inter-tribal commerce, the novel highlights the historical significance of linguistic versatility in facilitating economic exchange. Kire also indicates the fact that the Naga community consists of diverse group of tribal people with their own distinct cultural identities and distinct languages which are mutually unintelligible to a large extent. Language acquisition was therefore an indispensable need to communicate effectively to carry out trade with

the neighboring communities in the past. However, as the barter system yields to modern economic structures, the necessity for multilingualism diminishes, reflecting broader socio-economic transitions. Through this narrative, the author subtly hints at the metamorphosis of the Naga economic landscape from traditional practices to modern frameworks, highlighting the notable impact of language on trade dynamics and societal evolution.

The novel portrays the critical role of language not only in interpersonal interactions but also in trade and economic activities within the Naga community. Through the encounter between Vilie and Idele, the author illustrates the evolving linguistic landscape influenced by shifting economic dynamics. The narrative illuminates the necessity of language acquisition for effective communication in trade relations among diverse Naga tribes in the past, juxtaposed against the changing economic structures that render certain languages obsolete.

Role of Language as a Resourceful Tool

Vilie, several times in the novel, proves himself to be a resourceful man with an ability to think quickly. His resourcefulness often stems from his ability to use words and communicate effectively to his advantage. For instance, when he encounters a tiger, at first, he fires gunshots to scare it off since he did not want to kill it. However, when it returns for the second time, he realizes that the beast was in fact a were-tiger also called *tekhumavi* in Angami. It was a folk practice of certain men to transform their spirits into tigers. Though a secret art, most villagers generally knew whose spirit counterpart those were-tigers were. Vilie exploits this knowledge to survive from the beast's probable violent assault. He recollects the name of men who had their tiger spirits, calls them out by their names and rebukes them.

Kuovi! Menuolhoulie! Wetsho! Is this the way to treat your clansman? I am Vilie, son of Kedo, your clansman. I am not here to do you harm. Why are you treating me as a stranger? I come in peace. You owe me your hospitality. I am your guest!” He shouted those words out with absolute faith that they were being listened to and heeded. Sure enough the animal retreated for the second time (Kire 26).

It is implied here that even a beast or a spirit being would listen to a man who speaks with conviction and authority. Vilie takes advantage of the fact that he could be the were-tiger’s clansman and demand the respect and hospitality he believes that he rightly deserves. His demand also sheds light on the importance placed by Nagas to offering of hospitality and showing of respect to one’s clansman. Towards the end of the novel, when Vilie is attacked by a murderous man, who had murdered Vilie’s Nepali friend in search of the heart-stone, a were-tiger comes to his aid. Although it is ambiguous, it can be speculated that Vilie is being helped by a were-tiger who happens to be his clansman. Despite this aid, Vilie mysteriously disappears and is presumed dead by the end of the novel.

Vilie is also shown as a skilled speaker during his trial for the murder of Pehu. After running and hiding in the forest for several days from his pursuers, Vilie finally decides to willingly surrender himself to them. He sees this particular course of action as the only reasonable choice after realizing that the leader of the search party was a certain man named Teiso Yhokha, a man he knew as an acquaintance in the past. Although Vilie hopes that Teiso would help him out, neither acknowledges the fact that they were known to each other lest others suspect that the latter is biased in his judgement. When he is presented for the trial, Vilie chooses his words carefully and gives only well calculated replies. The questions that the village elders ask are diplomatic but carefully

framed to allow rooms only for one-line answers at most. He is nonetheless given an opportunity to present his side of the story. Vilie tackles the situation by thanking them first for not murdering him right away instead of claiming his innocence. The politeness of his conduct ensures the possibility of him being listened to.

Vilie's proficiency in utilizing language as a resourceful tool emerges as a recurring motif throughout the novel. From his strategic communication with the were-tiger to his calculated responses during his trial, Vilie demonstrates the power of words to navigate through perilous situations and assert his rights. His ability to command attention and respect through language proves the significance of effective communication in negotiating social dynamics and securing one's survival:

Vilie cleared his throat and began to address them. First he thanked them for not killing him straight away. Choosing his words carefully he told them how he had been travelling toward the border villages when the incident happened. He looked at the faces around him. Some of them looked interested and the others simply looked stern. Vilie suddenly stopped speaking and took off his jacket. He pushed up his shirt sleeve. "If you don't believe me, look that's where the second bullet grazed my arm." The wound was red and showed signs that it had festered and was slowly drying up" (Kire 71).

His interactions with both human and supernatural beings show the cultural values of hospitality, respect, and diplomacy within Naga society. Through his linguistic prowess and strategic use of language, Vilie not only confronts the challenges posed by the physical and metaphysical realms

but also sheds light on the interplay between language, power, and cultural identity in the Naga context.

Generational Differences in the Usage of Language

There is a marked difference in the way in which the elders speak as compared to how the younger generations speak. The younger people of the search party speak in a manner that displays their impulsive and reckless tendencies. For instance, Vilie overhears one of them saying, “What’s the good of a trial? He shot an unarmed man without giving him any chance to defend himself. Why should we show him any mercy” (Kire 65). The speaker is countered by the elderly man Teiso who firmly warns him, “Listen to me! There will be no lynching without a trial. I will not hesitate to shoot anyone who tries to take law into his own hands.” (Kire 65). The elders in the Naga society, especially men, speak with authority and power over the younger ones whenever it was called for, the given incident serves to reflect this very fact.

The male village elders also played the role of judges to deliver justice in the traditional Naga society. These men often spoke with authoritative assertiveness and asked well calculated questions. They are depicted not only as diplomatic and formal but also wise in their dealings. After being questioned, Vilie is given a chance to express himself and defend his case. Taking this opportunity, he shows them the bullet wound on his arm to prove his innocence. The wound proves that the shooter was Hiesa the man who actually murdered Pehu and for whose murder Vilie is being tried. As Vilie had hoped, Teiso comes to his rescue. He explains:

He [Vilie] is speaking the truth, this is a wound made by a bullet from a .22 rifle. I can vouch for that. Heisa uses just such a rifle. Further, I want you to consider that we found this man walking in the direction of the village. A

common fugitive would not walk toward the village where he would surely be captured. He would be far from here if he were running from capture (Kire 71).

Through the character of Teiso, the author shows that one's knowledge and experience on a particular field could be plainly evident in one's speech. Since Teiso is an experienced hunter who is also an expert on guns, the elders are convinced that Vilie is innocent. They also consider the fact that so far as the reports of the neighboring villages are concerned, they have only heard good reports about Vilie. Heisa on the other hand is known to be a quarrelsome man infamous for his excessive drinking habit. Thus, they are willing to accept Vilie's testimony over Hiesa's. In this trial, evidence is valued over unfounded claims and false testimonies, such condition makes justice prevail. Evidence also naturally strengthens Vilie's claim of innocence. Even though Vilie belongs to another village, the wise elders ensure that justice is rightly served. This incident also demonstrates that the character of an individual is also constructed by what others think and speak about him in the society. As such, if others speak good things about an individual, he is automatically assumed to be a good person. On the contrary, however, if people spread malicious rumors about someone, sometimes falsehood are taken for truth. Such is the case with Ate, an innocent woman who is assumed to be a *Kirhupfiimia* (woman that is believed to possess evil powers in Angami folklore) based on rumors and faulty speculations. There seems to exist between Teiso and Vilie a form of unspoken communication and understanding that transcends spoken and verbal communication. Teiso, even without asking a single question to Vilie, seems to understand his plight and the fact that he is innocent. As Vilie leaves the village after his trial he only gives Teiso an almost imperceptible motion with his head as an acknowledgement for his help.

These narratives explore the generational disparities in language usage within the Naga community, illuminating the contrasting communication styles between elders and younger individuals. Through detailed dialogues and interactions, the author vividly portrays the authoritative and wise demeanor of the male village elders, who wield language with a blend of assertiveness and sagacity. In contrast, the impulsive and reckless speech of the younger generation reflects their brashness and lack of restraint. The trial scene exemplifies the decisive role of language in the dispensation of justice, as evidenced by the elders' reliance on evidence-based discourse to ascertain truth and innocence. The unspoken understanding between Teiso and Vilie highlights the subtleties of non-verbal communication, further confirming the multifaceted nature of linguistic expression and interpersonal dynamics. Through its exploration of generational differences in language usage, the novel offers insights into the complexities of tradition, authority, and communication within the cultural milieu of the Naga people.

The Power of Words Over Spirits

In the chapter titled “Forest Etiquette”, Kire explores the power of words over the spirit. Vilie wakes up from his nightmare and finds himself unable to move. He is weighed down by a dark indistinguishable figure sitting on his chest. Finding himself unable to speak or scream out the thoughts in his mind, he flings them towards the mysterious spirit who seems to detect his thoughts. It is then that Vilie recalls the words of the seer: “Let your spirit be the bigger one. They are spirits, they will submit to the authority of the spirit that asserts itself” (Kire 83). With this thought he pushes the “thing” off him with all the strength he could summon and declares, “Mine is the greater spirit! I will never submit to you” (Kire 83). He asserts his authority over the spirit and demands it to leave before he harms it and the spirit that almost seemed undefeatable at first now grows smaller and smaller. He only manages to subdue this malevolent spirit through the strength of his

will asserted through his powerful words and not with brute force as physical force would have had no effect on the spirit being. He likewise overcomes similar challenges against other spirit beings later on in his journey by asserting the strength of his spirit in the same manner.

Vilie manages to get to the sleeping river with the assistance of a wise old man Kani who warns him that his only protection against the attacks of evil spirits during the trip will be his own good heart and his clear conscience. They reach the river about the same time it goes to sleep. The water recedes and becomes still and silence fills the air but when he finally gets to the middle of the river and retrieves the stone, the water starts flowing abruptly. After struggling against the powerful currents for some time he realizes the futility of his attempt and therefore stops trying and instead concentrates on the spirit words he had learned, “Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! *Kepenuopfu* [Creator or God in Tenyidie] fights for me, today is my day! I claim the wealth of the river because mine is the greater spirit. To him who has the greater spirit belongs the stone” (Kire 103). After a short while the waters recede leaving him out of harm’s way. They are then chased by the vengeful widow spirits. The two manage to reach the outer path which marked the border between the sleeping river and the village. Kani then shouts at the widow spirits, “*Kepenuopfu zanu tsie la mha talie!*” (Kire 105) which is translated as “In the name of the creator-deity retreat at once” in the footnote. Kire’s use of Tenyidie words in this instance serves to produce the effects she desired which could have been lost in translation. Kire in this novel uses over twenty Tenyidie words and provides a glossary at the end of the book to explain their meanings.

Kire's narrative vividly illustrates the profound influence wielded by words over spirits, highlighting the potent force of language in confronting supernatural challenges. Through Vilie's encounters with malevolent spirits, the author illuminates the transformative power of assertive

speech, as Vilie asserts his authority over the ethereal beings through the strength of his will and the potency of his words. Vilie's invocation of spiritual affirmations, rooted in the wisdom of his cultural heritage, serves as a potent tool for overcoming adversities and asserting his dominance over the spiritual realm. Kire's strategic use of native Tenyidie words adds authenticity and resonance to the narrative, enabling readers to fully grasp the nuances of spiritual invocation and cultural significance embedded within the text.

It is noteworthy that most of the exchanges between Vilie and other people he encounters are confined to everyday matters related often to works and daily routine of the working-class people. They also communicate in manners reflecting the ways Nagas usually converse with each other. Easterine Kire manages to successfully portray the pattern of speech followed by the Nagas. For instance, it is a customary Naga practice to mention one's father's name while introducing oneself to strangers. Vilie follows this custom while introducing himself to the nettle bark weaver Idele: "... I am known as Vilie, my father was Kedo, the headman of the village" (Kire 36). This custom also throws light on the fact that traditional Nagas follow a patrilineal descent whereby one's ancestry is traced through male line of descent.

The journey undertaken by Vilie is as spiritual as it is literal. It teaches him lessons about perseverance, will power, clear conscience, morality and the importance of being knowledgeable about the spiritual world. In fact, he must first be a worthy man in order to acquire the heart-stone. Kani's wisdom and his words of advice play a significant role not only in helping Vilie reach the sleeping river but also helps him realize the true motive of acquiring the stone. The wise old man thus warns him:

Remember when we are out in the sleeping river, there can be no room for fear. If you harbour fear, you are a dead man. If you came here after committing something terrible, like a murder or sending a man to his death by a false testimony, your spirit will not be able to outwrestle their spirits. Any evil action of yours will weigh on your conscience, and make you vulnerable to their onslaught... So your only protection is your own good heart and your clear conscience (Kire 93).

Vilie's success at acquiring the heart-stone bears testimony to his worthiness with regard to its ownership. He had, indeed, during the course of his journey overcome his fear with courage to stand not only against the sinister supernatural foe but also the schemes of evil men like Hiesa and his brothers. He had asserted his dominance over the evil forest spirit as advised by the cryptic seer. He then overcame his fear of punishment by bravely facing his trial for the accused murder of an innocent man. Villie initially flees from Hiesa and his clansmen but his faith in fellow human prompts him to face the trail rather than hide from his accusers. His innocence and truth triumphs over the false testimonies of Hiesa. He was essentially a simple man with a good heart, a man without greed, selfishness and evil intentions. These qualities of him shine even as he continues his journey after acquiring the heart-stone. The stone thus has no corrupting influence on Villie even with its enormous power.

Though the heart-stone has the power to provide him with immense wealth, power and influence over other people, he has no interest in any of these. He rather wants the heart-stone for the spiritual knowledge it would offer him. In a way his role is to act as a guardian for the stone to protect it from evil men seeking to acquire it for selfish ambitions. Vilie's conversations with Kani also

bring out other significant theme of the novel i.e. the power of knowledge. In fact, his advice to Vilie reveals the true power of the heart-stone and thus it serves as the crux of the narrative:

What joy will wealth afford you when you do not know the secret of living with peace and faith in your fellow men? It is not wrong to have wealth but your relationship to your wealth defines everything else. If you are grasping at wealth, you are going to lose something that wealth cannot buy for you. You will lose knowledge of the spiritual... That is true power; that is the only power to aspire because it gives you power over both the world of the senses and the world of the spirit (Kire 95-96).

Kani's advice helps Vilie view his experiences from a new perspective in the new light. He has indeed come a long way from the simple man who has left his home to search for the stone whose significance he was unaware of. Kani helps him understand that knowledge is something wealth cannot buy. This new understanding motivates him to find the sleeping river for the spiritual knowledge its mythical heart-stone would offer him.

The novel's depiction of nature and portrayal of man's relationship to it offers a possibility for an interpretation from the eco-critical perspective. The novel revolves around a man who lives in close proximity to nature. He also plays the role of the guardian of the gwi or the mithuns and the official protector of the tragopan upon the request of his clan and the forest department. Nature provides basic means of sustenance to the local people. He also prefers living in the forest over living in his village. Nature is also endowed with feminine qualities and is even referred to as wife. Nature occupies a space between the spiritual world and the world of men. Vilie's encounters with the spirit beings happen only in the forest. In this sense, nature is a gateway between the worlds of

the spirit and the world of men. The sleeping river has qualities of a sentient being with the mind of its own. The heart-stone that Vilie seeks to obtain can be seen as a metaphor for the knowledge and power that nature will offer to those who are worthy of it. The magical heart-stone is the medium through which Vilie could literally communicate with the natural and the spiritual world that lies beyond the understanding of common men. Vilie seeks it for knowledge, thus his intention is not to exploit it for his greed and selfish ambition, this is the most important reason why he is able to fetch it from the river in the first place. Vilie's success at acquiring the magical stone signifies his success at gaining access to an understanding of the language of nature.

3. Use of Language in *Don't Run My Love*

Don't Run My Love revolve around the lives of two women, Atunuo and her widowed mother Visenuo, who live a simple life in an Angami village of Kija. Though their daily routine is regulated by ceaseless agricultural labors, they lead a peaceful life in a close-knit community. Although overbearing at times, the elders are wise and caring. Their relatively peaceful and structured life is shattered by their encounter with a handsome and charming young man named Kevi. Atunuo falls in love with Kevi but the affection between the two takes a menacing turn when she rejects his marriage proposal and inadvertently discovers the secret that Kevi is a *tekhumevi* or a were-tiger. The central conflict in the novel is prompted by Kevi's indirect manner of speaking. Kevi and Atunuo harbor romantic attraction for each other but neither of them expresses it outright. Her mother Visenuo realizes this and hints at Kevi that he should plan on getting married and implies that Kevi should be more upfront about his feelings for her daughter:

‘Kevi, as you can see, Atuonuo is a young woman now and she is considered to be of marriageable age by the older people of the village. She cannot be seen in the company of any young man. It would hurt her reputation, you see... ‘But what if... what if I decided I wanted to marry her?’ Kevi asked with another of his smiles. When he smiled like that, it was hard to tell if he was truly sincere or if it was all just a jest to him (Kire 62-63).

Kevi’s manner of talking in the above excerpt implies that he is afraid of committing to a relationship. He makes attempt to divert the question and avoid confrontations that might compel him to take definitive actions. This tendency angers Atuonuo who blatantly declares that she will never marry him when he finally extends his marriage proposal. This rejection in turn angers Kevi who then runs away without making much attempt to make the situation right. This causes a rift between the two. Atuonuo’s attempt to make things right by apologizing only worsens the situation. Later that evening she goes to the field hoping to meet Kevi in order to apologize. She lies to her mother that she would accompany her cousin to go to the forest for collecting herbs. When she gets into their hut, Kevi who is already in there hurts her inadvertently. There is, however an element of ambiguity surrounding Kevi’s true motives for most part of the narrative. It is unclear whether Kevi hurt her deliberately whilst consumed by rage and jealousy or that he had no control over his own mind whenever he transforms into a were-tiger. It is, however, clear that miscommunication, misunderstanding, and secrecy gradually leads to the failure of their relationship.

Kevi communicates mostly through his actions, specifically through the custom of leaving gifts. Thus he conveys his intention of marrying Atuonuo by constantly leaving gifts for her at the door of the hut in their field. This repeated gesture of him is naturally interpreted by the mother as the

gesture of a suitor who wants to marry her daughter. Atuonuo, unlike her mother, is oblivious to such custom. Through situations like this, the author hints at the crucial role played by elderly people in passing down tradition and norms by word of mouth to the younger generation. This is one of the fundamental aspects of the oral tradition highlighted in the novel.

Atuonuo is utterly annoyed by the way her mother and Kevi treat her like a child. While the mother becomes increasingly maternal towards Kevi, he in turn directs his questions towards the mother even when the question concerns the daughter. For instance, he asks the mother, “Does Atuonuo have a sweetheart back in the village” (Kire 38). As such Atuonuo feels like a child left out in the conversation between two adults. She thus reacts rashly towards Kevi. Atuonuo later feels guilty for having reacted in that manner and makes attempt to make amends. This effort however goes awry and leads to a series of events that drive the plot of the novel towards its turning point. Thus, one of the central themes of this novel is the consequence of the failure of communication and how it may negatively impact relationships. Kevi possesses an irresistible charm, he is remarkably good looking, enigmatic and mysterious. However, his tragic flaw lies in his manner of conversing which reveals only a part of his whole intentions. Atuonou finds this tendency in him insufferable and therefore impulsively rejects his marriage proposal as a way of punishing him. She however regrets this later and her guilt leads her to lie to her mother. The way the central characters communicate in this novel thus impacts their lives significantly. The novel also shows that communication is not always verbal but sometimes one’s intentions are expressed through customs and gestures.

Kivi's existence as a were-tiger is depicted as possessing a unique and mystical connection with the natural world. Known as *tekhumevimia*, or were-tigers, these beings straddle the boundaries between humanity and the realm of spirits, embodying a duality that grants them access to both

domains. As elucidated in the narrative, they inhabit a liminal space, with one foot firmly planted in the world of men and the other in the ethereal realm of spirits, “they have a foot each in both the world” (Kire 92). This extraordinary connection empowers them with the ability to commune not only with their fellow humans but also with the language of animals and spirits, forging a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all living beings. Through this portrayal, the author seamlessly integrates elements of magic realism into the story, enriching the narrative with layers of mystery and enchantment.

The author often employs dialogue as an important device for characterization. Dialogues not only offer an insight into the characters’ motivation and their state of mind but also reflect their personality as a whole, their beliefs as well as the values they uphold. For instance, Visenuo tells Atuonuo that her husband’s aunt Abau had warned her that tragedy will befall on any person who opposes cultural practices when the couple had refused to host feast of merit to showcase their wealth and status. Such threat reveals not only the conservative mindset of Abau but also her superstitious beliefs. Abau’s younger sister Khonuo is shown to be more reasonable than her sister. She tells her elder sister that Visenuo was probably right to get annoyed because people in their close-knit community have a tendency to make so much of nothing. They often fail to consider the fact that there is a very thin line between being genuinely concerned and being intrusive to the private affairs of other.

The rumors spreading in the village also reflect the general attitude and the tendency of the close-knit community to find out about the matters of private lives. This is shown when Kevi helps Visenuo and her mother bring their harvest back to Kija village. The curious villagers start speculating the identity of the handsome stranger (Kevi) and the nature of his relationship with the women.

The young mothers and men...who had witnessed the three of them entering the village went back to their homes and discussed this event with their family members. No one had a clue who the young man was. By late evening, the whole village was abuzz with news of the handsome stranger who was helping the widow and her daughter. Two of Visenuo's paternal relatives made it their business to visit them and get acquainted with the stranger (Kire 41).

Such rumor carries with it the prospects of not only tainting the family's reputation but also the societal image of Atuonuo as a maiden. It worries Visenuo because in their conservative society no suitor would approach a woman seen in the company of another man in public. Atuonuo's paternal great-aunts Abau and Khonuo consider it their duty to uphold the conservative ideals of the community. These two women represent the overbearing elders generally found in the close-knit rural Naga community. For them their family's reputation is of great importance, they therefore attach utmost importance to preserving it. Being the elderly member of the once influential family, Abau considers it her business to know the happenings in the lives of her children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces and their children. Their motivations, attitudes, and the conservative values they uphold are reflected in their arguments with Visenuo who makes little attempt to veil her irritation upon learning the reason behind their sudden visit. Visenuo takes offence at Abau's assumption that Kevi was set upon marrying one of the two women. She therefore retorts that the young man who had just made their acquaintance few days ago was trying to marry neither herself nor her daughter. Such overbearing nature of her relatives makes Visenuo question the wisdom of living in a close-knit community where everybody knows everything about everyone within their community. In such societal setting, words spread quickly through rumors

and speculations and truth is often subject to distortion. However, despite Visenuo's understandable misgivings about her community there also appears to be certain merits of living in such community. Widows, for instance, are often offered help in the form of few days of free labor.

The title of the novel *Don't Run My Love* has many possible implications. Firstly, it alludes to Kevi's tendency to remain elusive and constantly out of reach for Atuonuo. It also hints at Atuonuo's desire to know Kevi's true nature and his true intentions. Kevi running away after Atuonuo's rejection can be viewed as a symbolic manifestation of his tendency to run away from commitment as well as his impulse to avoid confrontation with his emotions. Secondly, the title alludes to Atuonuo and her mother literally running away from Kevi in mortal fear of Kevi's wrath after the discovery of his true nature. In both of these cases there is a failure of communication between the two which creates misunderstanding and frustration ultimately creating conflicts and tension. The title of the book thus foreshadows the crucial plot elements of the novel.

One of the most remarkable features of Kire's writing is the lyrical simplicity of her prose which still manages to capture the essence of the beauty of her native landscape and nature of Nagaland. The simplicity also parallels the simple ways of living of the traditional Nagas. Conversations between characters – even the brief exchanges – offer a glimpse into the simple lives of the Nagas living in rural regions.

Another feature of Kire's literary language is the use of dialogues rather than flashbacks to recount significant details of the past of the secondary characters. Such stories also offer a glimpse into the lives of the ordinary people and their past experiences which have shaped them. Their stories highlight that even the secondary characters can be multidimensional and complex in their own

rights. These characters also treat the supernatural elements in their lives as though they were ordinary incidents. In *Don't Run My Love*, Pfenuo the woman who hosts the mother-daughter duo at the Village of Seers narrates the story of how she arrived and eventually settled at the Village of Seers. She had been sent by her grandmother to find an antidote for her uncle who had been poisoned. Once she got there, however, she decided to make it her home because back in her ancestral village she was a mere orphan who was treated as a servant. Pfenuo's tale brings out additional details not only about herself but also about the Village of Seers, specifically the fact that virgins find the way to the village of seers easily. Her tale also highlights the validity of a declaration made in the presence of others. She had come looking for the cure not because of her intentions to save her uncle but because her grandmother had promised to give her the biggest field she owned. She believed her words because "she had said it in the hearing of the whole family" (Kire 98). Although the overarching plot of the novel obviously concerns Atuonuo and her mother whose experiences serve as the bigger story within the framework of this narrative, Pfenuo's tale can be treated as a complete story within this bigger story which adds depth to the narrative as a whole. The subplot thus provides an opportunity for these women to share their unique experiences with each other that help them connect with each other, understand each other better and in turn offer sympathy and extend a helping hand as needed.

We also find similar plot element in chapter thirty-one of *When the River Sleeps*. Ate a woman at the village of Kirhupfiimia (certain females who are believed to possess evil powers) saves Vilie from her evil sister Zote and shelters him at her house. Ate then narrates the story of how she and her sister came to their present village. Back in their ancestral village many years ago, Zote had been very upset with a woman who would spit in their direction every time they met her on the village path. One day Zote was so upset that she pointed at the woman's pregnant womb. In that

instant the baby died inside her and the woman screamed out and fell to the ground. They were exiled from the village the following morning and were warned that they would be killed should they ever set foot on the village again. She also mentions the tragic account of her aunt who blinded a man that tried to rape her by merely pointing at his eyes. She too was exiled and was never seen again. These incidents prove that despite being considered evil, the *Kirhupfiimia* were essentially misunderstood women who were wronged and mistreated by the society. More than often, the victims of their evil powers were the ones at fault. However, the villagers made no attempt to hear what the women had to say in their defense. Even those who wanted to speak in their favor were scared to speak out. In being denied the opportunity to present their side of the story, *Kirhupfiimia* were denied justice. These instances highlight how oppression often results from suppression of one's ability and right to use language to voice out and demand for justice. Such injustice leads Zote to seek vengeance upon her own village through the power of the heart-stone.

People like Pfenuo and Zote are shaped by the circumstances of their lives as much as they shape their own lives through their personal choices. The former chooses freedom over wealth while the latter becomes vengeful and bitter. Pfenuo leaves behind her old life altogether while Zote lives in the past unable to forgive those who wronged her. Their respective choices affect their ultimate fates; Pfenuo lives a contented life in the Village of Seers while Zote faces the wrath of the ancestral spirits in whose hands she meets her untimely death. The author through these two women in her novels demonstrates how we can shape our own destiny through the choices we make. She highlights that unpleasant experiences can either mould us for the better or for worse. In all of the cases discussed above, the lack of proper communication creates misunderstanding resulting in tragedy.

The detailed analysis of these two novels – *When the River Sleeps* and *Don't Run My Love* – by Easterine Kire brings to light certain features of the literary language and distinct style of the author. The author not only offers glimpses into the Naga social life, food habit, economic activities, the daily activities and the lives of ordinary village dwellers but also describes in detail the rural and natural landscapes of the region and the spiritual geography of the Angami Nagas. As reflected in the tone of her narrative voice, Kire's primary intention is not to offer a social commentary on the prevailing issues found in her society but to celebrate the richness of the Naga cultural heritage and the simple lives of ordinary men and women. In doing so, she fights the negative stereotype that literature from Northeast India only deals with violence, bloodshed, injustice and political conflicts. She presents a picturesque description of Nagaland that feels familiar yet almost primordial and presents a world that seems to exist away from modern civilization and its complex ways of life. In both of these novels the theme of orality, among others, which is expressed through exploration of the knowledge of the spiritual world, folk wisdom and belief in myths and the supernatural serve to foreground the importance of oral literature to the Naga society as a whole. In Kire's fictions, magic realism becomes a tool to explicate the cultural significance of the belief in the supernatural for the Naga ancestors. Her use of lyrical prose style adequately brings out the native aesthetics that capture the essence of the Naga folk literature.

Conclusion:

Writers in English from the time of Chaucer – as with some of his predecessors – have tried to promote the use of native language as a means of not only promoting their own language to be the popular medium of communication but also as a means of preserving it. Through European colonisation of the hitherto unexplored areas of the world in the early modern period many European languages were promoted vigorously through cultural imperialism and through the

spread of education through their language as the medium of language in educational institutions. Over the passage of time however, many of the colonised nations gained independence. Throughout the process of decolonisation, native languages have been employed as a primary weapon to fight against colonial powers. Some writers however started adopting English, the language of the colonisers, either to fight against cultural imperialism and to create awareness of the importance of one's cultural heritage and the importance of preserving it. Such has been the case even with some important writers from Nagaland such as Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao. Since the Naga community consists of various tribal groups with their own language, English has been used as the literary language understood by all. Their literary outputs have given shape to the literary, historical and cultural voices of the Nagas.

Both Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire used fiction as a medium to portray the socio-cultural life of the Nagas and also relate their oral history and cultural heritage. Their works display a high degree of social and cultural awareness which are often depicted through characters that serve as outlets for the authentic voices of the Nagas. They have also depicted the nuances of language usage between individuals, especially between opposite genders and across different social demographics and how the use of language affects communication and relationship dynamics between them while also revealing the social constructs that exist within the society.

CHAPTER IV

The notion of Identity in Temsula Ao's *Aosenla's Story* and *Once*

Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags: A Memoir

Introduction

This chapter will undertake an examination of the quest for identity within the female perspectives portrayed in the literary works of Temsula Ao. Against the backdrop of a patriarchal milieu, the female characters depicted in Ao's works grapple with the formidable challenge of carving out a distinct space for themselves within a societal framework that evinces a palpable resistance to their aspirations. This scholarly inquiry aims to ascertain whether the pervasive sense of antagonism encountered by these female protagonists emanates primarily from the firmly established patriarchal structures or stems from internalized constraints. This research thesis will explore the phenomenon of gender identity dissolution and delineate the unique struggles encountered by the male populace in their endeavors to articulate and convey their experiences within the narrative discourse.

In psychology, the term 'identity' is a broad construct encapsulating an individual's distinctive amalgamation of traits, which collectively shape their understanding of themselves. Despite the inherent adaptability and fluidity of identities, they maintain a certain stability grounded in a persistent sense of selfhood. From a sociological standpoint, identity intertwines with role behavior, delineating the array of social roles an individual undertakes, such as those of motherhood, studenthood, or familial responsibilities. Judith butler in *Gender Trouble* also adds

that the stability of "identity," especially regarding "gender identity," challenges the idea that talks about identity should come before those about gender identity, showing how societal gender norms affect how we see ourselves over time:

It would be wrong to think that the discussion of "identity" ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that "persons" only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility. Sociological discussions have conventionally sought to understand the notion of the person in terms of an agency that claims ontological priority to the various roles and functions through which it assumes social visibility and meaning. Within philosophical discourse itself, the notion of "the person" has received analytic elaboration on the assumption that whatever social context the person is "in" remains somehow externally related to the definitional structure of personhood, be that consciousness, the capacity for language, or moral deliberation (Butler 22).

Temsula Ao's meticulous exploration of identity and its formative processes is discernible in her literary contributions, notably in her novel *Aosenla's Story* (2017) and her memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* (2013). Through these works, Ao probes into the complexities between individual traits, societal roles, and the intricate construction of one's sense of self, illuminating the inherent refined entanglement in the human experience of identity formation.

Since its inception and especially during the second wave of the Feminist Movement in the 1960s to the contemporary era, feminist discourse has continuously studied the complexities of identity,

particularly the imperative of articulating feminist concerns to affirm the woman's place in a patriarchal milieu. This thematic exploration permeates various literary genres, encompassing fiction, semi-fiction, and critical theory. Despite diverse cultural and social contexts, these literary endeavors often resonate with shared experiences emblematic of womanhood worldwide. In this continuum of feminist dialogue, Tamsula Ao emerges as a noteworthy figure, not solely as a champion of women's rights but also as an advocate for the preservation of cultural heritage and ethnic identity within the Nagas of Northeast India. Ao's works embody a synthesis of feminist activism and cultural consciousness, serving as a testament to the intersectionality of feminist discourse with broader socio-cultural concerns. Through her writings, Ao not only amplifies the voices of women but also highlights the significance of honoring and safeguarding cultural roots amidst the flux of modernity.

Ao's depiction of the search for identity in these two books is distinctly recognizable as that of women struggling not only to find a sense of self-worth but also a sense of the self and a place in this world for themselves. She attempts to delineate the factors that go into shaping one's sense of identity and self-worth when pushed to the extremes of the harsh reality that neither allows for any favorable autonomy nor any conducive circumstances to decide one's fate and shape the ideal self. The quest for identity in both of these books ends with the implication that the self is the sum of all experiences and is the product of the socio-cultural environment that one is a part of. Through such a suggestion, she hints at the importance of cultural roots and society as powerful players in shaping an individual's identity without condoning the inevitable social evils. In her literary works, Tamsula Ao engages with Simone de Beauvoir's seminal assertion from *The Second Sex* (1949), "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," echoing the profound impact of experiences and societal constructs on individual identity. This sentiment reverberates particularly in Ao's portrayal

of the protagonist Aosenla in *Aosenla's Story* and her autobiographical narrative *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*. Through her literary endeavors, Ao illuminates the various pathways through which individuals maneuver and negotiate their identities within patriarchal societies.

1. Notion of Identity in *Aosenla's Story*

In *Aosenla's Story*, Ao navigates the trajectory of a protagonist who transcends societal constraints and personal adversities to assert her identity and agency within a stifling social environment. Through Aosenla's journey, Ao elucidates the transformative power of resilience and self-realization amidst oppressive familial and societal expectations. Through the lens of feminist theory, this researches into the various manifestations of patriarchy as portrayed in Ao's narrative. The analysis focuses on Aosenla's journey, documenting her resistance against societal norms and her relentless pursuit of self-realization amidst stifling gender roles and societal expectations. Drawing upon the characters of Aosenla, her family members, and the broader Naga community, this research explores the complexities of female identity formation within the confines of patriarchal structures. Additionally, it examines the intergenerational dynamics of female agency and constraint, shedding light on the evolving nature of gender roles within the context of familial and societal pressures.

Patriarchal Oppression and Female Identity in *Aosenla's Story*

The pervading antagonistic force working against the realization of the ideal self throughout the narrative of *Aosenla's Story* is the oppressive force of patriarchy that influenced almost every aspect of the life of the Naga society in the 1960s in particular and the considerable portion of the twentieth century at large. The feminist theory argues that women are taught to internalize the

conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority. In line with this supposition, the psychological subjugation of women by patriarchy is well demonstrated by the opinion of Aosenla's paternal grandmother, "A woman, no matter how educated or rich or well-placed, needs the protection of a man all her life. A man may be blind or lame or ugly, but he is superior because he is a man and we women are helpless" (Ao 18). This statement reflects her willing acceptance of male dominance as a natural norm in their society. Unlike Aosenla, this elderly woman stands in favor of men at the expense of women. Rather than oppose it, she willingly upholds and even promotes and propagates such prejudices towards women.

Aosenla, at the beginning of the novel, reflects on the events leading to her almost forced marriage and the years of unhappy married life with her domineering husband Bendangmeren and her equally oppressive in-laws. Her family expects her to accept the marriage proposal from a prominent family not for love's sake but for the sake of improving the status of their family which belonged to the founding clan of the village. While on one hand "The family had made it amply clear to her that their welfare and future rested on their alliance [marriage]" (Ao 26), society, on the other hand, opined that "money and family position had become more important than lineage and prominence in village history" (Ao 16) and given this fact, her family should promptly grab this opportunity to marry her off. Lineage was of great significance in Naga society. Alliance with the prominent clan of the village was often forged through marriage. Aosenla falls victim to the practical consideration of her family that seeks to grab the opportunity of allying with the wealthy family. Her initial defiance and resentment towards marriage thus wane in the face of the enormity of these pressures and she is subdued. So, with an understanding of the pressure that tradition can exert on an individual, especially in a traditional family like hers, she surrenders to her family's expectations. Their total disregard for her desire to pursue higher studies and her other ambitions

reveals how women's wishes were often considered to be of little significance in comparison to her expected social role of surrendering herself to the will of the family. Her family to a great extent fails to understand her longings and aspirations.

In being denied even the basic right of having a say in her marriage, Aosenla is essentially denied the ability to decide her fate and to chart her destiny. Now her identity becomes inextricably tied to her status as a married woman and the imposed selves necessitated by her circumstances. She is expected to be a wife, a mother, and a dutiful daughter-in-law. The nagging perpetual question of who she is grows over her years of unhappy married life adding to her inner turmoil: "All along she has sensed that her life was no longer her own; that she did not own herself" (Ao 164). The role of a wife is almost forced upon her. As she was not given any opportunity to say no to the decisions that would greatly affect her life she feels as if she does not own her own life. Her role as a daughter thus is a passive one with her family in total control of her.

She constantly struggles to break the chains of conventions and expectations that bind and limit her ability to be truly herself. Throughout the narrative, her primary objectives thus become a fight to claim her rightful place in her family and society, realize her potential and find her true identity. Within the framework of this narrative, Ao explores the themes of the biases perpetuated by patriarchy and the burden of expectations that women are compelled to carry. The themes of female gender roles and their associated identity are further explored through other characters like Aosenla's mother, her paternal grandmother, her mother-in-law and her daughters.

The older generation of women in this novel are depicted as having limited choices in their social roles and matters about marriage, subsequently married life, familial matters, and, in general, the things they want to do in life. Left with no choice, Aosenla, just like her mother, relents to the

expectations laid down on her, thus becoming a caring wife, a dutiful mother, an obedient daughter-in-law, and a society lady. Throughout the ordeal, however, unlike her mother, who submits to her husband's wishes without much protest, her grandmother, who perpetuates internalized patriarchy as social norms, and her mother-in-law, who draws strength from her husband's powerful position, Aosenla remains a rebel within with a voice of her own and a strong conviction. In contrast to these women, Chubala and Narola, the younger generation of females, have relatively greater liberty in deciding what they want to do in life. For instance, the daughters are allowed to pursue higher studies without any objection from their father. Chubala also gets to marry the man of her choice. The fact that they are daughters and not much-needed sons does not stop Bendang from loving them as much as he could. Bendang never expresses resentment towards Aosenla for not bearing him a son. Nevertheless, the author, through the character of Akala, Bendang's illegitimate daughter, contends that one's circumstance of birth plays a significant role in shaping an individual's identity; it also decides the extent of control a woman can have over her own life. Bendang had blatantly refused to acknowledge Akala as his daughter. Had she been born to the woman he married, he might have possibly loved her as his daughter.

The journey of Aosenla serves as an evocative depiction of the relentless struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society, where familial expectations and societal pressures eclipse individual desires and aspirations. Denied even the basic right to choose her path, Aosenla finds herself bound by the dictates of tradition and familial duty, forced into a life that is not of her own making. Despite the overwhelming odds stacked against her, Aosenla remains a beacon of resilience and defiance, challenging the status quo and asserting her right to self-determination. Through the depiction of intergenerational dynamics and the evolving roles of women within the Naga community, Ao sheds light on the enduring legacy of patriarchy and the transformative power of

female agency. As Aosenla's daughters navigate a world marked by greater freedoms and opportunities, Ao stresses the importance of challenging inherited biases and redefining societal norms to pave the way for a more equitable future.

Gender Identity and Societal Pressures in *Aosenla's Story*

The opening chapter of the novel depicts the prevailing notion of a woman's role in her family in late twentieth-century Naga society. Aosenla, in the gathering dusk of the evening, reflects on her own life, and the wedding invitation card of the son of a wealthy business tycoon she received earlier that day prompts her to reflect on the possible implications and probable outcomes of the impending marriage:

Then she recalled a bit of gossip she had heard a few weeks ago: the bride-to-be was the daughter of a minor functionary in the Deputy Commissioner's office, and she was a teacher in one of the lower primary schools in town. She also remembered what the town gossip had said to her sister-in-law, 'The boy's parents are saying that she will not be allowed to keep her job once they are married.' Recalling these bits of gossip, and also the disparity in the social standing of the families, it became apparent to her, as it would to anybody else, that this marriage was indeed one of convenience (Ao 3).

Her recollections trigger memories of the events leading to her marriage many years ago, which was also one of convenience. Daughters, like the bride-to-be and Aosenla, were often expected to sacrifice their aspirations for the common benefit of the family. Marriage to a prominent and influential family was seen as an opportunity to improve the social standing of the bride's family. A marriage of this sort was aimed at mutual benefits for both the bride's and the groom's families.

Furthermore, the parents viewed such marriage as a means of providing a secure future for their daughter. As such, women often had no say in their marriage and thus had little opportunity at their disposal to shape their ideal selves within the confines of married life. The given excerpt also highlights the prevailing societal attitude towards marriage and the unfair obligations imposed upon married women. The bride-to-be is expected to leave her job to become a full-time housewife. The economic independence of women was given no importance; their roles as wives rather obliged them to be dependent on their husbands financially. Likewise, the husbands were to accept their responsibility to provide for their own families.

Aosenla had a promising academic career to look forward to; she dreamed of a post-graduate degree and a decent job after that. She would then look after her aging parents and make them proud. On one hand, Aosenla wanted to look after her parents through her accomplishments, whereas, on the other hand, her family, with their limited perspectives, saw her marriage as the only way to improve their social status. The marriage proposal thus signaled the death of her dreams and the imposition of a new role and a new set of identities.

Aosenla's mother finds herself torn between her sympathy for her daughter and her sense of duty and loyalty to her husband. She views her husband's motivation as reasonable but is tormented by the sorrows and protestations of her daughter. Despite her motherly concerns, she has to "align herself with her husband because she was brought up to believe that it was the bounden duty of a wife to support her husband, especially in a situation like this" (Ao 6). This attitude is instilled in her by her upbringing. Her conflict in roles highlights the controlling influence of internalized patriarchy over women, which acts as a limiting force against women to assert their desires and voice out their concerns, whereby women themselves inadvertently perpetuate the antagonism of

patriarchy. Aosenla's mother prioritizes her role as a wife over her role as a mother by siding with her husband rather than her daughter. In society's view, she could be seen as a dutiful wife who complies with her husband's motivations while supporting him accordingly. She recognizes the practicality of her husband's action but supports him mostly out of her sense of obligation as a wife. While the former faces a dilemma over her obligations, the latter keeps his peace, suggesting that men value the practicality of decisions over the consideration of the emotional outcomes of their undertakings.

Their relatives blame the daughter for being selfish and the parents for being too lenient with their children, especially the daughter, implying their opinion that daughters need stricter parental control than sons. Unable to convince their headstrong daughter, the mother resorts to pleas while the father resorts to the furious assertion of authority, "I have accepted their offer, and the marriage must take place as planned" (Ao 8). It is the father who accepts the proposal, not the mother or the daughter, whose marriage is concerned. This instance demonstrates how men often struggle to communicate effectively in consideration of the emotional needs of women. Their decisions are considered absolute and final. Their almost absolute dominance is revealed in this episode. The pressures societal opinions exert on conservative families in close-knit communities are also brought to the forefront through this incident. Under such circumstances, as unpleasant as they are, Aosenla is eventually compelled to surrender to the collective familial and societal pressures. Now her role shifts from being a daughter to being a wife, a daughter-in-law, and a mother herself.

Over time, Aosenla's inner turmoil grows as do her unhappiness and loneliness owing to her tragedies: first the double tragedy of losing her only male child and the inability to bear any more children, then the devastating knowledge of her husband's illegitimate daughter that could shatter

not only their marriage but also tarnish the reputation of his affluent family. Her tragedies, however, only serve to strengthen her: “The shy, timid girl before the third pregnancy seemed to have emerged out of her cocoon... and was turning out to be quite a personality in her own right” (Ao 73). She then starts taking an active part in social activities, attending parties and other events, grooming herself, and even acquiring a new status among her friends. On account of these new changes, she earns a level of respect that did not seem even remotely possible at first. Besides, the knowledge of her husband’s past affair gives her an upper hand in their relationship, as she now finds herself in a position where she can easily manipulate or even blackmail him into submission.

The opening chapter of the novel is examined as a microcosm of the prevailing notions surrounding a woman’s role within the familial and societal framework. Drawing upon Aosenla’s introspective reflections and the socio-cultural context of the time, this research elucidates the tensions between individual aspirations and familial obligations, as exemplified by Aosenla’s internal conflict over her impending marriage. It analyzes familial dynamics and societal pressures in shaping Aosenla’s trajectory, from the dreams of academic and personal fulfillment to the eventual surrender to the dictates of tradition and duty. By interrogating the complexities of gender roles and societal expectations, Ao’s narrative invites readers to reflect critically on the enduring legacy of patriarchy and the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

Aosenla's Journey to Self-Acceptance and Empowerment

Another significant turning point in her life occurs towards the beginning of the novel when her in-laws gang up against her to question her fidelity to her husband on account of a mere rumor of her cheating on him with another man. Instead of being cowered into submission, however, Aosenla counters them with a warning that she too will call on her family and relatives to settle

the matter of their unfair and unfounded suspicion. By challenging their claims, she inadvertently proves to her husband and his relatives that she is not a woman to be trifled with. In this incident, the fact that she is a member of the prominent clan in the village causes fear in her in-laws. This particular episode in her life also serves to show that the concept of identity is multifaceted, flexible, and dynamic. Though she is compelled to be a wife to somebody, she is first a daughter to her parents, a sister to her siblings, and a cousin or niece to her relatives. These identities are essential aspects of her true self that can never be taken from her.

Through experience and trials of life, Aosenla acquires a new conviction that the process of gaining control over her own life must begin at home and within its confines. Within the bounds of her limiting circumstances, she learns to accept her new reality and begins to view her life more practically and objectively. She recognizes the compromises that such an undertaking entails. For instance, her prospect of a divorce with her husband after the revelation of his illegitimate child is utterly overshadowed by the need of her daughters Chubala and Narola, so she decides to hold on to their loveless marriage for their sake. Her obligation as a mother triumphs over her other considerations. Moreover, it is in motherhood that she discovers a new self. After losing her third child at birth, she feels the loss and grief acutely. The absence of any visible indication of grief in her husband intensifies her sorrows. To cope with her pain, she turns all her attention to her live children. This offers her a positive distraction from her pain and feelings of emotional isolation. It also gives her a fresh sense of responsibility and an escape from her emotional isolation. She then finds motherly affection to be fulfilling and strong. This new identity saves her from utter loneliness and despair.

Aosenla's ultimate triumph over her predicaments results ironically from her acceptance of practical reality and her new identities, both self-imposed and those imposed by others. Towards the end, Aosenla finally realizes that one can still be true to oneself despite the uncontrollable circumstances and social forces that shape an individual's identity. She is ultimately released from the burden of the question of identity and her conflict over identity once she accepts this fact:

She is that essential Aosenla to herself and she will always remain true to herself. But she also begins to understand that no one entirely owns one's self because that self has to exist within a given circumstance, and the moment she accepts this, she seems to have entered another space in her life. She is released (Ao 196-97).

Throughout the novel, Aosenla is burdened by the feeling that her life is beyond her control, and she, therefore, struggles to be her true self, but she eventually recognizes the fact that it is futile to claim total ownership of oneself. One can only adjust, adapt, and grow within the circumstances in which he or she is placed. It is this realization, combined with her motherly love, understanding, basic humanity, and compassion, that turns her into a well-balanced, assertive woman. In this manner, Aosenla's conflict of identity is resolved.

Aosenla's journey epitomizes the process of operating through societal expectations and personal struggles to achieve self-acceptance and empowerment. The crucial moments in her life, such as the confrontation with her in-laws and the challenges of motherhood, illuminate the heterogeneous nature of identity and the complexities of asserting one's true self within the constraints of cultural norms and familial obligations. Through endurance and introspection, Aosenla transcends the limitations imposed upon her, embracing the various facets of her identity while confronting the

realities of her circumstances. Her unwavering commitment to her role as a mother, despite the hardships she faces, shows the transformative power of love and familial responsibility in shaping one's sense of self. Ultimately, Aosenla's realization that true ownership of oneself is contingent upon acceptance of one's circumstances marks a profound shift in her perspective. Embracing the notion that identity is fluid and adaptable, she finds liberation from the burden of conflicting expectations and societal pressures. As she embraces her essential self, Aosenla emerges as a symbol of strength and adaptability, inspiring readers to embrace their own identities with courage and authenticity.

The Complexity of Identity and Society's Influence

The theme of the issue of identity in the novel is also explored through other characters, such as Bendang's illegitimate daughter and her daughter, and Doctor Kilang, the family physician. The illegitimate daughter is simply named Akala which is the Ao Naga pet name for a baby girl -- any baby girl. In their society such children are associated with the stigma of a name tag which is even worse than the term "bastard"; they are called "children of the streets" meaning "real father not known" in Ao. Such negative stigma has deteriorating effects on the psychological well-being of a person as demonstrated by Akala who succumbs to depression and also goes on to bear a daughter out of wedlock just like her mother. People like Akala and her daughter, in their association with their identity, have no place in society and are unwanted by their relatives as they would tarnish the image and reputation of the concerned family. Society, thus plays a vital role, in certain instances, to create the identity of an individual.

Once Doctor Kilang gets involved with Aosenla and her secret plan to induct Akala's infant daughter into his orphanage called Home, he too becomes entangled in the web of her domestic

drama. As the latter tries to preserve the outward normalcy of her family life by keeping the knowledge of her husband's past a secret, the former, who is a well-respected family man and a reputed doctor, becomes apprehensive of the possibility of his involvement in this scandalous affair becoming public knowledge. He also becomes increasingly cautious to ensure that his relationship with Aosenla remains professional. With Aosenla he has to set a clear boundary between a doctor-client relationship and friendship. On the professional front, his role as a doctor overrides his role as a friend. He too, like Aosenla, navigates through different roles and identities imposed upon him by the realities of life. Kilang, as a father and a husband has a special concern for his family and his reputation, on the other hand, the ethics of his profession compels him to accept the inevitability of things and do what is best for the baby at the crucial moment. He understands that without his interference and professional care the baby would die.

With Doctor Kilang, Aosenla develops a strong bond of friendship and, in him, finds an opportunity to be heard and understood. His friendship plays a vital role in her life, as he becomes her only confidant with whom she shares most of her sorrows. At times, he also acts as a mediator between Aosenla and Bendang. His amiable nature and compassion go a long way in helping Aosenla go through some of her bleakest days. His contribution to society is also notable. As a doctor, he helps the sick, and by being the proprietor of an orphanage, he helps the children who might have been left homeless. Through multiple identities, he assumes, Doctor Kilang thus becomes a valuable person in town. His relationship with other people as friends or confidants, his identity as a family man, and his professional identity as a doctor are all essential facets of his personality. Therefore, the notion of the multifaceted aspects of personality can also be explored through this character.

The exploration of identity in the novel extends beyond the protagonist, Aosenla, to encompass a diverse array of characters, each grappling with their own struggles and societal expectations. Through Bendang's illegitimate daughter, Akala, we witness the devastating effects of societal stigma on individual well-being, highlighting the harsh realities faced by those who do not conform to traditional norms. Society's role in shaping individual identity is highlighted as Akala and her daughter are marginalized and ostracized, emphasizing the power dynamics at play in defining one's place within the community. Furthermore, Doctor Kilang's involvement in Aosenla's domestic drama offers insights into the complexities of identity and professional ethics. As he navigates his roles as a family man, doctor, and friend, he confronts moral dilemmas and societal expectations, ultimately embodying the multifaceted nature of identity. Kilang's compassionate nature and contributions to society show the interconnectedness of personal and professional identities, highlighting the importance of understanding and empathy in going through life's challenges.

The Symbolism of the House: Identity and Transformation in *Aosenla's Story*

The theme of identity in *Aosenla's story* is further explored through the symbol of the house. The bigger house in which her in-laws live adjacent to her smaller house, for Aosenla, symbolizes “authority and invincibility.”

Her gaze shifted towards the big house, the house that had symbolized authority and domination over her life ever since she had entered it as a daughter-in-law. She wondered how an inanimate object like a house could wield so much power. Was it the structure, which tended to dwarf the smaller one that she could at least call her own? Or was it the aura of the people who

lived in that house, who seemed so sure of themselves, and at every given opportunity tried to remind her of her origins and her place in life (Ao 1-2).

Her idea about the big house mirrors her attitude towards its inhabitants, whom she refers to as “the gods,” particularly her mother-in-law. Just as the bigger house with its imposing structure overshadows her smaller house, the inhabitants of the bigger house—her in-laws—dominate over her, making her feel insignificant and small. Her proud mother-in-law at the beginning of the novel appears to be a formidable woman who even seems to go against her husband. For instance, as the gardener restores the garden, he tries to inform her what the Obou (grandfather), the patriarch, said, but she simply shouts back, “Never mind what the old man said; do as I tell you” (Ao 2). Her formidable aura, however, vanishes abruptly after her husband’s sudden death. She becomes a mere shadow of her former self. Aosenla then assumes the responsibilities of looking not only after both houses but also looking after the old matriarch, who seems to have reverted into the age-induced second stage of infancy. The shifting of roles from being the wife of an influential husband to being a widow, therefore, acts as a significant turning point in the old matriarch’s life.

The deterioration of the imposing house over time and its subsequent renovation show the impermanence of status and identity. After the house is renovated, every physical aspect of it is changed; it is only the foundation, the inner essence, that remains untouched. Aosenla understands that her husband has all along treated her as a mere possession, but what disturbs her most is the nagging fear that she has allowed herself to be “made over,” just like the old house. As such, it occurs to her that she is like the old house, and “whatever has happened outwardly to it, the old house stands on its original site as though guarding an inner essence.” (Ao 196). Over several years, she has been subject to changes in her outlook on life, and she has also grown as a person.

Being no longer the naïve woman that she was earlier, she fears that she is no longer herself owing to these changes in her personality. However, she realizes that her inner essence and her true self have always remained the same throughout her life. This realization brings her comfort.

The symbolism of the house in *Aosenla's story* serves as a powerful representation of identity and transformation. Through the juxtaposition of her smaller house with her in-laws' imposing residence, Aosenla grapples with feelings of insignificance and dominance. The shifting dynamics within the larger household, particularly after her husband's death, present the fragility of societal roles and the transformative nature of life events. The deterioration and subsequent renovation of the house symbolize the impermanence of outward appearances and the enduring essence of identity. Ultimately, Aosenla's realization that her true self remains unchanged despite external changes offers her solace and a sense of inner strength.

Patriarchy and Identity: The Role of Male Figures and the Evolution of Self

Bendang's father represents the traditional notion of patriarchy in Naga society. He has almost absolute control over family matters, as reflected in the way he finalizes the decision of where his son should go for his medical treatment and who should accompany him. It also appears that he even manages to keep Bendang, a married man, under his control. His sudden death and the sense of disorientation and helplessness that the old matriarch and Bendang feel in the absence of his towering presence hint at the sense of loss that a sudden loss of traditional value might present to a conservative society that relies on it. The old woman depended on him for her strength. Her husband's death thus strips her of an aspect of her identity as the wife of a powerful man. Bendang, too, depended on his father's adept ability to maneuver the family to place them among the elite class of families in town. He feels helpless after his death, as he depends on his father's skills for

handling the crises in his life. For instance, his father had saved him from the crisis of becoming a laughing stock among his peers and from having to acknowledge the paternity of his illegitimate daughter. The possible imposition of a negative identity by society on him is thus avoided. Aosenla, unlike these two, relies on her inner strength to overcome her life crisis. Having nobody to turn to, she initially depended on her convictions for support and strength. She later turns to her friend and confidant, Doctor Kilang, in times of crisis, but she never relies on him entirely, and theirs is a collaborative effort operating following her plans (as during the adoption of the infant).

The idea of identity is further explored through other male characters like Bendang and Aosenla's brothers. Bendang, for a significant portion of the novel, maintains a somewhat aloof and callous attitude towards Aosenla and her emotional need for love and attention. He is a representation of the male ego perpetuated by patriarchy. For instance, during his recovery from a car accident, he strives to appear strong and manly before her and decides to overcome any visible signs of weakness and "be fit to play the role of head of the family" (Ao 142). The traditional aspect of patriarchy comes to the forefront when his father has a final say in who should accompany him for further treatment outside the state to Indore. Though frustrated, he has no choice but to submit to his father's will, as is customary in their social demands. In many ways, he too is a product of the social environment, just as Aosenla is. He often fails to communicate and express his emotions with his wife. For instance, he leaves a birthday gift for his wife with her maid instead of handing it directly to her. His behavior causes an emotional distance between him and his wife. However, his secret recognition of Aosenla's inner strength and his love for their daughters eventually give him a redeeming quality of understanding and give him the courage to reciprocate Aosenla's love for him. He finally learns to express his affection for Aosenla.

The portrayal of patriarchy and its impact on identity reveals some intricate dynamics within Naga society. Bendang's father epitomizes the traditional patriarchal figure, wielding significant control over family affairs and shaping the identities of those around him. His sudden absence leaves a void, highlighting the dependence of the old matriarch and Bendang on his authority. Their sense of disorientation shows the profound influence of traditional values in a conservative society. Male characters like Bendang and Aosenla's brothers serve as reflections of the patriarchal constructs perpetuated in Naga society. Bendang's struggle to reconcile his role as the head of the family with his emotions presents the complexities of male identity within traditional frameworks. Unlike Bendang and his father, Aosenla navigates her life crises with inner strength and resilience. Despite initially relying on her convictions, she later finds support in her friend, Doctor Kilang, showcasing the importance of collaboration in overcoming challenges.

Communication Struggles and Gender Dynamics

Throughout most of the novel, the conflicts between Aosenla and Bendang are mostly due to their inability to communicate effectively and their inability to express affection healthily. In addition to this, Aosenla's secret pride stops her from expressing outright her need for love and emotional support. After she successfully stands her ground against the unjust accusation of her husband's family regarding her fidelity, Bendang's father berates him, after which his behavior towards her changes slightly for the better. During this short interval, she deludes herself into believing that her husband has finally learned to love her:

Deluding herself that she was succeeding in her efforts to gain his love and attention and being gullible and vulnerable in her inherent romanticism, she once more lapsed into the role of dutiful wife and mother. She began to think

that she was, at last, winning the battle of ‘reforming’ her husband and readily forgave him the many insults and indignities he had inflicted on her. He displayed more ardor in his lovemaking and this seemed to release a dormant spring of physicality in her (Ao 44- 45).

She falsely assumes that her husband would love her if she readily surrendered her body to him in bed. However, to her utter disappointment, she later learns that he was merely exercising his dominance over her body as her husband while treating her as a mere possession and a goal to be accomplished. Her newly awakened sexuality enlarges her vulnerability. Furthermore, her next pregnancy leaves her feeling defeated. She then comes to the distressing realization that, in a desperate attempt to keep him under her spell, she had used her sexuality, but she tries convincing herself that whatever she had done was truly out of genuine love. Mulling over these thoughts, she suddenly remembers her childhood encounter with an older man who nearly raped her. She had tried to erase this very incident from her mind and pretend as if it never happened. However, her recent sexual encounters with her husband reinforce the same kind of self-loathing she experienced in her childhood. It is at this juncture that she wishes to be devoid of sexual impulses and get rid of the “femaleness” of her body. With every subsequent pregnancy, she felt betrayed by her husband, as he would neglect her emotional needs as a wife. She suffers from the secret guilt of having used her body to win her husband’s love, while her husband slinks back into his former self. It can be seen here that Aosenla’s identity as a woman is closely associated with her body.

Bendang, on several occasions, also tries to assert his dominant status as a man every time an opportunity for such is presented. After the car accident and his complete recovery, instead of discarding his walking sticks, he orders for them to be displayed in a teakwood showcase in direct

view of the bed. This can be seen as his absurd attempt to display a reminder of the fact that he had survived a terrible car accident. His physical disability had eroded his self-esteem to a great degree. During the period of his recovery, he decides to sleep in a separate room so that nobody will see him in his pathetic condition. He does not want to feel dependent on anyone, especially his wife. This attitude demonstrates the fragility of his ego. Aosenla relishes the freedom of having a room to herself without it being shared by her husband. Within the confines of this private space, she could be at ease with herself, but with the recovery of her husband, even this seemingly private space is invaded. She treats his entry into the room with unwelcome silence, but Bendang remains unfazed: “Aosenla understood that he wanted to demonstrate that the decision to come back [to their bedroom] was entirely his prerogative whether he was welcomed or not” (Ao 160). Their relationship dynamic demonstrates their tendency to resort to passive-aggression instead of outright confrontation. On one hand, Aosenla, through her behavior, tries to show that she cares very little for him, while on the other hand, Bendang tries to defeat his wife’s defiant behavior by directly or indirectly asserting his dominance.

As cold and uncompassionate as he generally tends to appear, Bendang occasionally exhibits and even shows his compassionate side to his wife. For instance, when his father decides that he is to be accompanied by a male nurse during his medical treatment in Indore as opposed to taking Aosenla as planned, he blames himself for letting down his wife by not reasoning with his father. He is also inwardly hurt and concerned after the miscarriage of their third child, which gravely affects Aosenla. As a way of showing his affection, he plans on going on a vacation to Darjeeling with her. Though reserved with his wife, he tends not to hold back from showering his love and affection on his daughters.

It can be seen that Bendang is a man who is a victim of his secret obsession with his identity as a man. He fails to recognize this shortcoming in himself until later in the novel, when he finally learns to understand his wife and shows her affection. His upbringing in a strictly patriarchal family might have instilled in him the need to display his superiority over his wife as a man. His character is in sharp contrast to the character of Doctor Kilang and his readiness to express sympathy and kind words when they are called for.

By the end of the novel, Bendang emerges as a liberated modern man, while ironically, Aosenla almost repeats her parent's mistake. At this point in her life, she displays hints of internalized social norms perpetuated by her parents. When Chubala writes to them about her boyfriend and their plans to get married soon, she gets offended for not being consulted first. In their daughter's case, there is a subversion of the situation that Aosenla faced before her marriage. Aosenla had not been consulted about her marriage, whereas for her daughter, it is the other way around: it is the parents who are not consulted first. Bendang is unbothered, as he simply says, "If Chubala has chosen him, I will accept him as my son-in-law. You know, Asen, times have changed, and we must accept the fact that our children are not like us and will never be so" (Ao 199). Instead of asserting his will as a father, he sides with his daughter. It is Aosenla who instead feels the need to assert her will over her daughter, who is bothered by the fact that they know nothing about their future son-in-law. Bendang seems to understand the importance of love in marriage and the consequences of its absence.

This sudden transformation in her husband comes as a shock to Aosenla. As a young woman, Aosenla herself wished her parents were more understanding of her, but as a parent herself, she almost fails to understand her daughter. For Bendang, being a father brings about a positive

transformation in his behavior and outlook toward life. He is a simple man incapable of deep introspection, but he gradually gets to understand his complicated wife and how he is almost always at the mercy of her whims, despite his best efforts to tame her. He no longer feels the urge to control her, and towards his daughter, he is even more liberal. In the end, Aosenla rejoices at the prospect of their new beginning with the marriage of Chubala. The missing essential ingredient in their marriage had been love all along, but their daughter's marriage would be founded on love. Moreover, she comes to consider her daughter's happiness as fair compensation for her deprivation. The new understanding of her husband's love for their daughter and the contentment she finds in motherhood clears her lifelong doubts and earlier insecurities. A fine balance thus emerges within their relationship.

The dichotomy between the male and female psyches in the novel is shown through the male characters and their attitudes as opposed to those of their female counterparts. Men, as shown in this novel, value the practicality of decisions, while women often passively comply with the men, often disregarding their emotional needs. Men are shown to be conventionally dominant and less expressive, while women are shown to be emotional and needy at times. For instance, Aosenla's brothers display a blatant disregard for her concerns regarding her marriage. Rather than understanding her predicaments, they scoff at her refusal to marry with an insensitive remark, "Why are you being so silly? Sooner or later, you have to get married, so why not now?" (Ao 12). This incident leads her to discover how differently men think about things than women do.

In *Aosenla's Story*, Aosenla and Bendang grapple with their inability to express affection and communicate effectively, leading to misunderstandings and emotional turmoil. Aosenla's secret pride and Bendang's obsession with his masculine identity exacerbate their relationship challenges, contributing to a cycle of unmet emotional needs and dissatisfaction. Aosenla's journey is marked

by moments of self-delusion and vulnerability as she seeks validation and love from Bendang. The association of her identity as a woman with her body reflects the societal pressures and expectations placed upon her. Conversely, Bendang's attempts to assert dominance and maintain control over his life reveal his struggle with his own insecurities and societal conditioning. However, amidst these struggles, moments of compassion and growth emerge. Bendang's gradual transformation from a rigid patriarch to a more understanding and liberal father reflects a shift in societal norms and personal introspection. His newfound empathy towards Aosenla and their daughter signals a departure from traditional gender roles and a step towards mutual understanding and respect within their relationship.

Ultimately, the dichotomy between the male and female psyches portrayed in the novel belies the complexities of gender dynamics and societal expectations. Through Aosenla's and Bendang's experiences, the novel invites readers to reflect on the importance of healthy communication, empathy, and the evolution of gender roles in shaping meaningful relationships. As the characters navigate their journeys, a delicate balance is struck, highlighting the transformative power of love, understanding, and self-awareness in overcoming communication struggles and transcending traditional gender norms. Overall, the novel *Aosenla's Story* chronicles the long process of subversion of the notion of self by circumstances, which ironically leads to self-discovery and contentment. It is only after having realized this truth that Aosenla finally feels at ease with herself and the people close to her.

To a certain degree, the character of Aosenla can be seen to have been drawn from the author herself and her personal experiences. This is reflected in her memoir, *Once Upon a Life*. Just like the author herself, Aosenla is dragged into marriage without her consent; both of these women

belong to a founding clan of the village, and they both harbor a desire to improve their standing in life and their status through academic pursuit. They bravely face the hurdles thrown in their way to emerge triumphant in their fight for the achievement of their potential. Besides, both Aosenla and Temsula Ao try everything in their power to provide for their children what they were deprived of in their formative years. Although Temsula Ao never gets to reconcile with her husband and Aosenla never gets to follow her academic dream, they both succeed in attaining their ideal self-image. In both cases, there is an acceptance of the circumstances beyond individual control without the relinquishment of the true self. Theirs are testimonies of the resilience of the human spirit, which demonstrate that no matter how improbable it may seem at first, there is always a way to overcome antagonistic forces and societal limitations through patience, conviction, and a sense of self-respect. *Aosenla's Story* can be considered, in some ways, the portrayal of an alternative version of the life that Ao herself could have led.

2. Notion of Identity in *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags: A Memoir*

In this memoir, Ao chronicles the ordinary and transformative episodes of her own life, exemplifying the relationship between personal experiences and societal dynamics in shaping her identity as a woman. By intertwining personal narratives with broader socio-cultural reflections, Ao contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender identity and agency, affirming the notion that womanhood is a dynamic construct shaped by lived experiences and social contexts.

Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags is divided into three parts. The first part recounts the memories of the author's parents, their deaths, the early childhood experiences of the siblings, and their years as orphans. The second part focuses on her schooling years and the experiences of

her adolescent years. The third and final part of the book focuses on the years following her marriage, the challenges of parenthood, her career, her evolution as a writer, and her accomplishments. In all these parts, one can observe the author's constant desire to create a niche for herself in the world and her search for her true self amid the challenges of life. By the end of the book, we get a clear picture of who the author is as a person through the things she narrates in her book. She also comments on various social realities, the challenges faced by women, and the contrasts between the assigned roles of men and women.

Once Upon a Life is a retrospective memoir. Here, Tamsula Ao movingly recounts the most significant incidents of her life spanning over seven decades, starting from early childhood and leading up to her becoming a remarkable personality and one of the finest writers of India. It is the narrative of a woman who overcomes seemingly insurmountable odds through sheer determination and self-respect, with instinct and will to survive as her only weapons of self-defense. It is also an attempt to reiterate her identity as a caring mother who tried everything in her power to make up for her deprived childhood by providing her children with every essential thing she lacked growing up. The memoir is essentially her story, but it is also the story of every significant person in her life as she remembers them. In the preface, she explains:

The narratives in this book cover some of the most significant incidents in the different phases of my life, a life that went on to overcome the travails of a most difficult childhood, early marriage and the subsequent responsibilities of a single parent raising four children and coping with the demands of a full-time job. The memories of that life presented here are the most insistent ones

which depict the journey of an individual in search of the self-worth once lost to time and circumstances (Ao VII).

It is an effort to reconstruct and represent her past with authenticity and intensity based on the impressions retained by memory. The author tries not only to reconstruct her identity but also that of her family (especially her parents) based on her recollection and stories relayed to her by others and, in some instances, through material objects associated with them. For instance, her parents' physical appearance is reconstructed with the help of old photographs. In this memoir, the author effectively depicts the process of her journey to self-actualization. She also portrays the importance of an individual's cultural roots and ethnic identity, two of the essential facets of identity within the Naga community. The memoir further includes various other people, apart from her own family, who have influenced her life in different ways, both big and small. The various roles and identities she had to assume in her personal and professional lives are also depicted in this book.

Perhaps the single most inspiring figure in Ao's life is her father, the man who not only inspired respect in his fellow villagers after his death but also valued honor and upheld the importance of one's lineage and heritage during his lifetime. According to the author, her father was "a man who was never shaken from his belief in himself" (Ao 29). He was a man who never compromised on his principles despite the difficult circumstances beyond his control. The displacement of the family had long begun before the four younger children were born. This sense of displacement triggered by her migrant family continues throughout her adult life. Her father was expelled from the village by his rival clan, which sought to distort their village history to establish their superiority in the village hierarchy. They achieved this by spreading false rumors about his involvement with Gandhi's freedom movement against British colonial rule. He then settled in

Jorhat, the only other place he was familiar with. This incident in her father's life reveals the importance placed by Naga society on lineage, hierarchy, and status within the village.

Ao's father took pride in his "sense of self" and acquired his moral strength from a powerful conviction that nothing on earth could deprive him of "his history, heritage, and rightful place in society." She recounts how her father, during their early childhood, had often taken the siblings to their native village. She states, "Father insisted on taking the children to the village whenever possible (father did so that we who were born and brought in the plains would not forget our roots)" (Ao 9). She recollects this effort of her father with admiration for her as an adult, and now she realizes how important his undertakings were. Her father's effort has helped her and her siblings form the all-important bond that has given them a strong sense of belonging to their ancestral village, Changki. In Jorhat, away from their ancestral village, the concept of cultural roots and ancestry had become a matter of greater significance for the estranged family. She asserts, "Political power may prevail for a time; what money can buy is relative; they all pass. But the truth about lineage and heritage, on the other hand, is unassailable and therefore incorruptible by unscrupulous men and their machinations" (Ao 35). Even after his death, the memory of her father's life becomes an admired lore among the villagers, while the schemes of his enemies to distort his image remain unsuccessful. She reflects, "The respect he [her father] inspired in his fellow villagers and relatives alike is still a part of our village lore" (Ao 35). In many ways, thus, her father acted as a role model for her and shaped her outlook on the realities of life.

The death of her parents in quick succession begins for her and her siblings the process of physical and psychological displacement. The siblings are not only orphaned but are also stranded physically in an alien place among strangers, while mentally, she longs for a place she could

associate with as her home. Ever since she left her childhood home to join a boarding school, she has been left with no permanent space to call home. She constantly moves from one place to another—from Jorhat to Shillong and then to Dimapur, besides her occasional visits to her village and her sojourn in foreign countries—until later in her adult life. She reflects, “Living in someone else’s house was the equivalent of being ‘homeless’ in the traditional sense, and all my conscious life I had fought against this status” (Ao 207). Her quest to build a home of her own ends when she finally purchases a house in Shillong, Meghalaya. However, her desire to be close to her people compels her to settle in Dimapur, Nagaland.

Rising from her impoverished childhood, Temsula Ao goes on to become a teacher, an MLA’s wife, a professor, a Director of the Northeast Zone Cultural Centre (NEZCC), and a distinguished writer, winning accolades like the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Nagaland Governor’s Award for Distinction in Literature in 2009. All these milestones in her life are proof of the realization of her potential to a significant degree. On her journey to self-actualization, Ao had to assume several identities—that of a daughter, a sister, an orphan, a student, a mother, a teacher, an academician, a professor, and then a writer.

Ao’s first social role is that of the daughter of two affectionate parents. It closely corresponds to her happier memories. Her happy childhood, however, is cut short by the deaths of her parents—first her father and then her mother. She recounts her callous early childhood ignorance, which made her prone to insensitivity towards her mother after her father’s death, and thus, in retrospection of such ignorant behavior, strives to be better as a mother.

Mother tried to give us the best she could but with the seeming cruelty of
children born out of ignorance about the realities of the adult world, we could

not accept the changes in our lifestyle, especially me. The first instance was my birthday which I expected to be as before when father was alive. There would be a new frock, new shoes and lots of goodies to share with friends. But all that mother could afford on that day were some cookies she made with our initials on them. As an adult and a mother, I now know how much it hurt her when I refused to eat them (Ao 16).

The family, which had hitherto lived a comfortable life under the father, was reduced to a state of near poverty after his death. Ao's mother, a barely literate woman, in the absence of her husband, the sole breadwinner of the family, tried her best to provide for all the essential needs of her family. To an extent, she does manage to look after her children as a single mother. The author recalls how they never had to go hungry, even though they could no longer afford the luxuries of their earlier days. However, owing to her ignorance, Ao, as a child, utterly fails to recognize the daily struggles her mother has to go through merely to keep the family together. She rather seems insensitive towards her. As a mother herself and as an adult, she recalls her callousness with an immense sense of guilt and regret.

She also recounts the death of her mother on Easter Sunday and how she and her brother performed a song that evening in their local church along with other Sunday School students. She recalls no feeling of grief or sadness, and the memories of the rest of the day, apart from the recollection of the song performance, seem to be blocked from her consciousness. Therefore, Easter Sundays, irrespective of whether or not the dates coincide with the date of her mother's death, acquire for her a negative symbolism as a day of great personal loss. The enormity of her loss hits her not instantly but gradually as the fact of her mother's absence starts affecting her. The author, by

contrasting the blissful ignorance of her childhood with the bleak awareness of adulthood, highlights through these instances the important role played by childhood experiences in shaping one's attitude, opinions, and outlook towards life.

The lack of much-needed emotional support during this crisis deeply affects the widow. Despite her inner turmoil and struggles, she, as a mother, strives to appear strong and brave for the sake of her family. She does manage to appear so for some time before the enormity of the loss sinks in gradually. She then becomes listless, loses weight, and loses interest in her social activities and in life in general. In the absence of her husband's financial support, she struggles to fulfill her role as a mother effectively. In many ways, her limitations as a widow and a single mother of six can be seen not as arising from her weakness but from the reality she is subject to. Her husband's death in the first place had resulted from a seemingly improbable cause—tooth extraction. He bled to death after having his tooth extracted due to a severe ache. The sheer improbability of this incident might have intensified the feeling of loss for the family. In the absence of emotional support, her mental and physical health naturally declined, leading to her early death. The early deaths of both parents deprive the children not only of parental love and care but also leave a deep emotional scar on their psyche.

Ao's mother, despite her shortcomings, is shown to be an honorable woman who upholds the community's moral code of conduct. Her husband's death had been publicly celebrated by his rivals, who, despite his exile, felt threatened by his mere presence in the village. In doing so, they blatantly violated the time-honored community's code of respect for the dead. This naturally comes as a severe blow to the grieving mother. She, however, keeps her sorrows mostly to herself. At this juncture, the supreme irony of life comes into play. The leader of her husband's rival group

gets admitted to a hospital in Jorhat on account of a serious medical condition affecting his intestines. Far from their village, the sons of the sick man turn to the widowed mother for help, and her positive response is met with furious opposition from her sons, who warn her to stay away from them. However, she not only visits him but even coerces her son Temjen to take food for him to the hospital twice. When the sick man dies shortly thereafter, she helps the bereaved family arrange a decent funeral. Her noble act of extending a simple humanitarian gesture within her capacity proves her true worth as a good mother who also encourages her children to follow in her footsteps to repay evil deeds with good. The untimely deaths of both parents and the subsequent deprivation of parental care and affection have negative impacts on the orphaned children. She reflects:

Though we all have children of our own and have tried to give them as much love and care as we know how, I cannot honestly say how far we have succeeded in our roles as parents. If the ‘giving’ has left ‘wanting’ I can only say that not receiving the same when we needed it most must have created an emotional vacuum in us which may have left its debilitating stamp on our psyches (Ao 53-54).

The notion of a family for these dislocated orphans becomes a reality only after they have families of their own. They are eventually forced apart by the harsh realities of life. The younger siblings are sent to their native village to be looked after by their relatives; Ao gets sent to a boarding school, while the oldest brothers are left to look after themselves. Each of the children manages to create a niche for themselves in life. However, childhood trauma of loss and deprivation haunts them throughout their adult lives. She thus questions their parenting skills and the extent to which

they are successful at being parents themselves, without many palpable memories of their short time with their parents.

Reflecting on the disintegration of her family after their parents's deaths, the author reflects, "We were not a 'family' anymore, only a bunch of orphans left in the old house to fend for ourselves as best as we could" (Ao 36). The force that kept the children together as a family was the presence of their parents. In their absence, their identities are reduced to those of orphans. For some time, the older brothers are compelled to look after their younger siblings as crude substitutes for their parents. As incompetent as they are, their unavoidable circumstances force them into the roles of guardians and caretakers of whatever is left of the family. The sympathetic neighbors fulfill their moral obligations by looking after the children shortly after their parents' deaths. In their new family dynamic, gender roles come into play. For instance, though young, the responsibility to cook was held to be that of the sister, while the responsibility to provide basic needs for the family rested on the older brothers. The relationship between Ao and her brothers can be seen as a microcosm of the larger society to which they belonged.

The dichotomy between male and female attitudes, behaviors, and roles is also illustrated through Ao's relationship with her younger brother and his friends. In her adult life, the same is reflected in the attitudes of her in-laws and her relatives. Her younger brother became one of her closest childhood companions, with whom she would often engage in activities traditionally associated with young boys:

There were days when I could not be with the older girls and I would try to accompany my younger brother's friends on their fishing trips or tree-climbing jaunts. They would discourage me by saying that girls cannot do

these things. But I followed them regardless and sometimes out of extreme annoyance they would throw pebbles at me shouting, ‘Go away, we don’t want girls, they bring bad luck (Ao 39).

The attitude of her brother’s friends towards her and girls, in general, reflects the conventional societal attitude towards girls during those days. Within this social construct, girls were expected to be proficient in household chores and other activities (such as cooking and housekeeping), which were considered feminine, whereas they were seen as less competent than boys in outdoor activities. The author, however, shows that such a conventional notion is not necessarily valid by default. For instance, in addition to being a bad cook who often burns food, her early experiences as a housewife reveal her ineptness in housekeeping. In contrast, her husband’s bodyguard, a Nepali man, proves himself to be an efficient caregiver and a better housekeeper than her during her absence. The limitation on her part is partly due to the absence of a mother figure who would have guided her and partly due to a society that is not so keen on understanding females. Ao shows that upbringing plays a crucial role in the efficiency of social roles one performs as an adult and that gender has very little to do with what one can or cannot do based on conventionally assigned gender-based roles. The author, unlike her mother, is much more efficient in providing for her family financially. She is as efficient as her husband in this regard. For instance, after her divorce, she managed to not only buy her own house but also raise her children by herself as a single mother. Perhaps her experiences in childhood led her to develop a strong need for independence and the ability to look out for herself and her family.

The most momentous period in the author’s life, as depicted in the memoir, is her years at Ridgeway Girls’ High School in Golaghat, Assam. It marked for her a new beginning filled with

memorable experiences and valuable life lessons. The new environment of this boarding school presents her with a new set of roles, challenges, and experiences that play a vital role in her later life and the person she ultimately becomes. She discovers that the hostellers live a dual existence; they are students during class hours and menial laborers, cooks, and housekeepers in the hostel. Their roles in the hostel are crucial for its smooth functioning. Ao gradually adapts to these roles. The strict discipline the hostel imposed instilled in her the valuable skill of time management that was inducted into her very character, becoming an essential asset in her later life. The quality of education she received during her six years in boarding school was of a high standard, which laid a strong foundation for her academic career. The rules of the hostel and school were harsh and cruel at times. Nevertheless, they were applied equally to all, irrespective of their family status and economic background. The justice of rules thus acted as a leveler among students, as no other identity could be superimposed on the single identity of all, i.e., that of a student. As such, it mattered very little that she was a poor orphan while some students were from well-off families. Whatever she lacked as an orphan was adequately compensated by the things she learned in school and at the hostel. Her experiences and the things she learns along the way get incorporated into her character.

The theme of identity in the memoir is also explored through several individuals the author encounters in her life. She comes across different kinds of people during her schooling years, which not only opens her to new experiences but also provides an opportunity to understand the unique struggles everybody has to go through in life, imparting her valuable life lessons. She befriends a girl with a deformed right hand, whose company everybody shuns. They soon became close friends. Through their special friendship, she realizes their mutual dread of alienation, their similar experiences, and the different types of deprivation that connect them to forge a special

bond. The author had been jibed at her looks and called Hiuen Tsang an insult because of the Mongolian features of her face and her hair, which was cut short with a fringe falling over her forehead.

The unfair attitude toward females in society is further revealed by the advice of one of her teachers during hygiene class: “The boys can always get up and go away, but the girl has to bear the consequences and damnation for such an act [premarital sex]” (Ao 102). Though in this context the teacher warns against indulging in premarital sex, it reveals the double standards imposed by society on women, where men seemingly escape the consequences of their actions while women often face the consequences alone. During this class, the students also learn about human anatomy and the human reproductive process, specifically that of females, whose ability to create a new life was called a “miracle” by their teacher. After bearing children of her own, the author realizes the implication of her remark.

During these years, Ao is seen to be driven by her strong conviction that the only way to move forward in life, especially as a woman, is through education. Moreover, education widens her perspective, allowing her to see beyond the narrow confines of societal norms and conventions. She, therefore, strives to excel in her studies. Against this prospect lies the antagonistic air of patriarchy, which presents challenges for women trying to pursue their academic dreams. A victim of such oppressive forces is an older woman, a child widow, who enrolls in her class. This young woman is bright and does exceptionally well in her studies; however, there has been much opposition from her in-laws and her community against her joining the school. The author thus reflects, “I begin to see how it must have been for her in a society that condemns widows, child or adult. And what must it have been like to defy social sanctions to continue with studies that were

considered pointless for girls in most families, let alone a child widow” (Ao 73). The author herself faces similar challenges later in life when she, as a married woman, defies social sanctions and considers pursuing higher studies, leaving behind her husband and her children. During her first year of marriage, she pleads with her husband to allow her to join an evening college for unemployed young people. After initial reluctance, he agrees; however, his family berates her and her husband for making such a decision without their permission.

Then he [her father-in-law] asked who gave permission for me to join college.

I said to my husband. Then he began to berate me for not getting his permission too. This upset me and I made the mistake of replying that I thought my husband’s permission was enough. That set everyone off: about the shame I brought to the family because their daughter-in-law was going out at night with all kinds of people (Ao 174- 175).

The family dynamic depicted here clearly demonstrates the dominant role played by the patriarch of the family in traditional Naga households. Despite being a married man, her husband, like a young child, is left helpless to support his wife against humiliating suspicion of assumed marital misconduct and the unjust standards set for women by society. Owing to the collective pressures from her in-laws, she gives up her pursuit of higher studies for some time. Though she is more than capable of academic excellence, as she later proves, the obstacles presented by her society limit her ability to realize her full potential. Her role as a wife overtakes her role as a student. She resolves to be a better wife, but her determination to continue her academic career remains strong. This incident awakens in her the resolve to fight against blatant attempts at unjust subjugation. Since further studies at this juncture had to be set aside, she occupied herself with books. It is

during this period that she finally awakens to her feminine identity, as she slowly becomes aware of herself as a ‘woman’. She starts applying makeup and wearing new clothes, which are ironic as she gets to experiment with her femininity like a teen only as an adult. She had never had an opportunity earlier to focus on such an aspect of her identity under the strict constraint of time and her preoccupation with studies and routines that kept her constantly busy.

She reflects on the challenges of growing up within the confines of conventional notions of marriage. As a wife, she is expected to observe several taboos regarding how a married woman should behave: “Be reserved with boys, never shout or laugh loudly in the presence of elders, to not answer back to your husband even if you think he is wrong, etc.” (Ao 176). She tries her best at personal development within these confines, yet here too, her in-laws fail to understand her intellectual needs. Her interaction with the friends of her brother-in-law and the intellectual stimuli she receives through discussions based on similar interests in books, movies, and music keep her in touch with her inner self. This tendency, however, is viewed as pretension. She, therefore, adapts by developing a dual personality: that of a meek and submissive housewife and that of a curious woman thirsting for more knowledge through books and interactions with like-minded individuals. This dichotomy, she reflects, prompts her to set out on her own to pursue her career, eventually causing a rift between her and her husband. For such a rift, she blames the incompatibility of their personalities. Their differences, in the later years, ultimately result in the breakdown of their marriage and the disintegration of their family.

Ao gets to assume her desired identity as a teacher in a local kindergarten school, which offers some break from the monotony of housekeeping and looking after her children at home. This reveals her inner desire to grow beyond the confines and parameters of what her marriage has

afforded her. She constantly believed that there was more to her life than being a lowly-paid kindergarten teacher and a mere housewife. As an MLA's wife, she enjoyed her teaching job as it provided her with an opportunity to maintain a separate identity from her public persona related to the political maneuverings of her husband.

She eventually gets to continue her scholastic dreams after years. This requires her to stay in Guwahati, away from her home and family, for two years. She recalls with gratitude the service rendered by a certain Nepali man named Bir Bahadur Gurung, who virtually adopted her family, taking responsibility to look after the children and the house in her absence. This simple man had come to them as her husband's first bodyguard after the latter was elected as an MLA for the first time. He devotedly looked after the family for over a decade before leaving home for Nepal. This man from another country and another culture teaches her the true meaning of devotion and the fact that "as long as you have love in your heart, everyone is your family, everyone is your friend" (Ao 189). She also remains grateful to her husband, who has supported her endeavors. As a practical man, she believes that her husband realized that their income had to be supplemented by her efforts.

The notion of identity depicted in *Once Upon a Life* can also be analyzed from the perspective of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the concept proposed by American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908–1971) in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" in the journal *Psychological Review*. This theory posits that 'human needs exist in a hierarchy, ranging from physiological needs at the bottom to safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and finally, self-actualization needs at the top' (Baron et. al., 403- 404). According to this concept, an individual has to first fulfill the needs in the lower order of the proposed hierarchy to move up to the higher order of needs. Once

all or most of these needs are fulfilled, an individual can attain self-actualization. A self-actualized individual is someone who has achieved their true potential to a maximum degree. They are in touch with their personalities. In other words, they have a firm idea of their identity and have a better understanding of their weaknesses, strengths, and other qualities that make them who they are. They are also more appreciative of life in general.

Temsula Ao's memoir depicts how, despite obstacles and personal limitations, the author goes on to fulfill most of the needs presented in the list of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (although not necessarily in the presented order). After being orphaned, the siblings' basic physiological needs (such as food, clothing, etc.) remain mostly unfulfilled. The generosity of many kind souls in their lives brings about a partial fulfillment of these needs. During her later childhood and adolescence, her social needs are fulfilled through friendships with new people and a sense of belongingness with the selected few people around her. Her safety needs (physical and financial) are fulfilled later: first through her marriage, then through her new job as a teacher, and later through her distinguished career as a writer, winning several accolades. Most of her esteem needs, such as self-respect and confidence, have perhaps been fulfilled early on in her life, unlike her other needs. She remarks, '...our parents did not leave us any material legacy; but what we inherited from them is this priceless sense of belief in our intrinsic worth' (Ao 35).

One of the most significant accomplishments in the author's career was building the Heritage Museum at Shangnyu village in Mon District, Nagaland, during her tenure as the Director of NEZCC. This required visiting the Angh, the traditional ruler or chief of the Konyak Naga village. The Naga society is traditionally patriarchal, and this fact is depicted in her encounter with the Angh. Before entering the Angh's house, a doubt arises in her mind as she questions herself, "What

if, seeing me, a woman, he refused to talk to us? Would he accept the fact that a woman could be the director, the boss over men” (Ao 212). Such apprehension might appear farfetched in hindsight, but in the context of the Naga societal setup of the nineties, it is only natural that she harbored such doubt. She also informs us that Angh could take as many concubines as he wanted, which reveals the subservient status of women in the social hierarchy. The deteriorating condition of his house reveals the gradual erosion of his power, and the Angh himself represents a dying tradition of feudalism among the Konyaks. Temsula Ao thus speculates:

Through my interaction with the late Angh, I had the privilege of learning a lot of interesting things about this ancient institution among the Konyak Nagas whose power was slowly beginning to be eroded by the introduction of democratic systems like the village councils which dissolved his erstwhile subjects. He gave us the land because, I am sure, that he too had sensed that his days were over and that a new order would soon replace the old (Ao 217).

On account of the collective pressures from his subjects and the NEZCC team, the Angh, according to the author, must have witnessed his absolute sway waning right before his eyes. The title of an Angh, an inherited identity, endows an individual with immense power and absolute control over decision-making in the village. This shows how certain identities are socially sanctioned and accepted by all, as in the case of an Angh. However, the inexorable tide of history has leveled many great emperors of the past, and in the same manner, the outdated Angh of Shangnyu village faced the eventual decline of his power and influence. In constructing a secure place for priceless cultural artifacts, she plays a role in the inevitable process of the transition of society from a traditional one to a modern one.

The influence of her father can be observed in the character of Ao and her ways of dealing with people. The fact that she is an orphan does not stop her from speaking up against cruelty and injustice. For instance, in the hostel, she stands up against her bullies by ripping off her skirt, which makes them fearful of the consequences of their behavior if the hostel authorities see her in a torn skirt. This makes them apologize to her. She also displays courage in speaking up against the hostel matron for her unjust punishment. Though sometimes prone to rash impulsivity, her actions reveal that her strength comes from her belief that truth and justice would prevail if one dared to stand firm instead of succumbing to injustice and cruelty. Her father had similarly displayed courage in leaving his native village in broad daylight, as opposed to the suggestions from the well-wishers that he ought to leave stealthily at night. He also spoke out against his employer's misconduct in smoking in an area where it was strictly prohibited. The fact that he was his subordinate did not stop him from speaking out against his boss. Her father proves that one's self-worth can be determined by one's moral strength and strength of character.

All the essential indicators of a self-actualized individual are apparent in *Once Upon a Life*. The author, in retrospection, clearly expresses her sense of wonder through the events of her life and the world that have shaped her. She shows a deep sense of appreciation for what she calls her 'ordinary life. In the final section of the book, she says, 'In this retrospective mood, I say this with a sense of awe and even pride that the rewards and joys of this ordinary life have far outweighed the hardships and heartaches. She further adds, '...it is the simple things in life like love, care, and a kind word that can make life worth living and adds an extra dimension to ordinariness' (Ao 230-231).

In many significant ways, Temsula Ao is a woman way ahead of her time. This is highlighted in her strong sense of individuality and her conscious as well as inadvertent defiance of conventional norms imposed upon women. She, for the most part, prioritized her goals and aspirations. Her early marriage plunged her into unknown territory and assigned her a role for which she found herself ill-prepared. She tried making compromises, but eventually, her aspirations overrode her other roles to the point where compromise became impossible. The marriage itself was never of her own accord, as it was arranged by her relatives and her husband's family. She was deemed a suitable bride on account of her descent from the founding clan of their village. Her inherited identity thus placed her in the roles of a wife and then a mother. A conventional woman in her situation might have yielded to societal pressures. However, the marriage never subdued her interest in higher studies. A married woman continuing her studies in the twenty-first century might be considered normal, but during the latter decades of the twentieth century, especially in the context of Naga society, such a thing was mostly unheard of and seldom encouraged in such a conservative society. Despite this fact, she continued her higher studies. Furthermore, she continuously strove for financial independence by acquiring for herself a higher-paying job. She hardly depended on her husband financially. Like her father, she carried on through life with a strong sense of self-worth and a firm conviction that, as long as she had done no wrong, she needed not fear unjust accusations. Besides, she managed to stand her ground during crises. Through hard work and sheer determination, she ultimately succeeded in creating a niche for herself in a society not so keen on understanding women.

The author had endured a lot of obstacles and hardships throughout her life. The struggles of her life were made much more bearable by the sympathy and generosity extended by many people she came across in her life. By facing the challenges bravely, she emerges triumphant as an

independent, self-sufficient woman. The process involved making several sacrifices and making compromises with the different roles she was subject to. Sometimes her role as a mother seemed more important than her desire to pursue her career; at other times, she had to choose the independence of decision-making over discussing it first with her husband. Thus, the conflict of roles was one of her biggest challenges.

The final section of the memoir focuses on the author's evolution as a writer, perhaps her most significant identity that came to define her as a person. She describes the earliest works she submitted as assignments as a schoolgirl and later during her professional course. She then goes on to mention the publication of her several collections of poetry and prose. She believes that the relevance of a literary work to life is its most important ingredient. Poetry had been the main domain of her interest in literature. She only turned to prose when it became increasingly challenging for her to come up with decent poems. She recounts how she often struggled with self-doubt and questioned her capability as a writer. She gives a piece of valuable advice for aspiring writers: "The sooner one accepts one's limitations as a writer, the better will be the going" (Ao 228). She considers herself a "peripheral writer" as compared to other accomplished great writers, but she speculates that there must be many unsung writers whose works can equally delight and inform like those of great writers. Being a writer has not only been an important facet of her identity, but it has also given her a sense of purpose in life.

The roles an individual fulfills through different phases of life constitute an important aspect of his or her personality. Such roles can be either self-assigned or imposed by society. Temsula Ao's journey to self-actualization is paved with different roles and responsibilities. Of her numerous roles in society, perhaps the most significant are her roles as a mother and as a woman. The phrase

“bloody rags” in the title of her memoir refers to the rag used by women to absorb the menstrual discharge during female puberty. She hints at the physical maturity as a woman that she experienced as an adolescent. The taboo surrounding menstruation poses a unique challenge for women. Although menstruation is experienced by all women, she felt the need to hide her “secret self” and felt embarrassed at the prospect of her physical reality being publicly exposed. She recounts an incident where, during a basketball match, the string used to tie the rag came undone, nearly causing her “bloody rag” to fall off in public. Some other girls understood her problem and helped her out. There was a mutual understanding of their unique predicaments among women. They appear to be tied together by their shared identities as women. The “bloody rag” thus becomes a symbol of femininity and the shared experience among women. A significant question regarding the notion of identity is presented early on in the book. The author recounts her childhood experience of seeing her mother stark naked for the first time.

I found it difficult to reconcile the naked woman in the bathroom with the sedately dressed one in public. From an early age girls are taught about the ‘shame’ of nudity and are always cautioned to be ‘careful’. Then why did mother not feel any ‘shame’ in letting me see her like this? I shall never know but recalling this incident, a question often comes to my mind; does nudity reveal or hide one’s true identity (Ao 20).

Her mother had asked her to bring a towel to the bathroom while she was bathing. As a naive little girl, she failed to understand why her mother exposed her naked body to her with no apparent indication of shame. It was a shocking experience for her. Given that the author herself failed to understand the full implications of the incident, we can only assume that perhaps her mother felt

no shame as they both shared the same feminine physical features. In this sense, her mother inadvertently exposed the other side of her true identity as a woman. Her mother is as much a woman in her clothes as she is naked but without her clothes on, her feminine features are left fully exposed which draws her daughter's attention to them leaving a strong impression on her young mind.

The author contends early on in the book that a person's sense of identity is inherently tied to their context of birth and heritage. In narrating the historical account of her father's life in exile, she states, "To every life lived on this earth, there is an inner context, the context of a person's birth and heritage. He is both a product of and subject to this truth" (Ao 31). She takes the example of her father, who lived true to his intrinsic context despite his life in exile. According to her, it was because her father had always lived close to his roots that he became a formidable moral force to be reckoned with even in his state of exile. Her life, too, is lived with a sense of being exiled, with no place that can be called her home. This feeling of dislocation was felt more intensely during her visits to foreign countries. During the last part of her tenure at NEHU, she got several opportunities to travel abroad as a member of the delegations of the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. Even though she enjoyed traveling to new places, she learned that, at heart, she was always yearning for a home. The sense of not belonging to a place hit her. She states, "So each time I came back home, beginning with my trip to the USA, I returned a bit wiser, a bit more humbled, and above all, with a lot more acceptance of who I am, where I am, and what I have" (Ao 222-223). Her travels taught her as much about life as her other experiences.

Conclusion

Through these two books, *Aosenla's Story* and *Once Upon a Life*, Temsula Ao reveals the multifaceted aspects of the concept of identity. Owing to its complexity, identity acquires multiple dimensions: personal, societal, ethnic, territorial, economic, and occupational. This makes it possible for these works to be analyzed from feminist, psychological, and sociological perspectives. The evidence from the text suggests how one's notion of self-identity is shaped and how it can evolve and change over time as necessitated by circumstances. Identity can either be self-imposed or socially appointed by tradition and convention. Under these pretexts, Ao questions the socially assigned subordinate status of the woman (through rhetorical questions) by turning her focus to the unequal standards set by society. Ao further demonstrates that one can either embrace the imposed identities or oppose them by creating their own set of identities based on one's inner self. In the process of realizing the ideal self, the unavoidable circumstances and realities of life often play a very crucial and unavoidable role.

The selected works of Temsula Ao *Aosenla's Story* and *Once Upon a Life* can be considered social commentaries documenting the difficulties posed to the prospect of self-actualization for women in a patriarchal society. There is ample evidence to suggest that it is possible to attain one's potential even when one faces the prospect of a seemingly bleak and uncertain future. While the novel suggests the stoic acceptance of reality as an essential step to overcome obstacles in a certain given situation, the memoir presents an alternative. It shows how one can adapt and make sacrifices to attain the ideal sense of self. In either case, the author approaches her subject with realism befitting the reality she deals with.

CHAPTER V

Narrative and Style in the works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire

Introduction

In the realm of fictional literature, the construction of narrative techniques assumes paramount importance, as it is through these devices that authors navigate the labyrinth of storytelling. A narrative device serves as the conduit through which the author orchestrates the tale, putting together a plot and setting with precision. The selection and deployment of these literary techniques are contingent upon a multitude of factors, including the author's artistic intent, literary influences, and idiosyncratic style. The discernment of an author's narrative style is pivotal in unravelling the thematic underpinnings of a literary work. Such comprehension not only elucidates the central tenets of the narrative but also engenders a plethora of interpretative possibilities, facilitating rich perspectives. Consequently, a clear grasp of narrative devices serves as a gateway to the world of literary interpretation, inviting readers to engage with the many possibilities a text can take form.

The literary oeuvres of Naga authors Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire manifest a discernible narrative ethos deeply rooted in the oral traditions of the Naga people. Evident within their respective works is a deliberate choice towards a prose style characterized by its simplicity and directness, mirroring the linguistic patterns inherent in traditional Naga storytelling. Central to their narrative strategies is the fluid recollection and reimagining of historical events through the lens of oral tradition, thereby imbuing their writings with a sense of cultural continuity and communal memory. Despite this shared thematic framework, Ao and Kire distinguish themselves

through their individual artistic sensibilities and approaches to narrative construction. Through the deployment of literary techniques, each author crafts a unique aesthetic signature that resonates throughout their works, elucidating their distinctive authorial voices within the broader context of Naga literature. Thus, while both writers draw from the wellspring of Naga oral tradition, their divergent creative expressions serve to enrich the literary landscape, offering readers a varied exploration of Naga identity and heritage.

Ao's narrative methodology evinces a deep historical consciousness, epitomizing her endeavor to transmute historical verity into fictionalized renditions firmly rooted in reality. Through this approach, she interweaves historical events into her narratives, harnessing fiction as a potent vehicle to interrogate and critique the prevailing socio-cultural milieu of Nagaland. Conversely, Kire's literary works are characterized by a deliberate incorporation of her cultural lineage into the realm of fiction, drawing extensively from the rich collection of Angami Naga folklore and mythology. Noteworthy among her later works, such as *When the River Sleeps* and *Don't Run My Love*, is a thematic inclination towards the exaltation of Naga cultural heritage, extolling the uncommon beauty of her native land and the manifold riches embedded within its cultural matrix. Despite variances in their narrative approaches, both authors pivot their storytelling endeavors around the axis of Naga ethnic identity. Their fictional enterprises serve not only to amplify the voices of Naga women but also to articulate the collective ethos of the Naga community at large, thereby offering multifaceted representations of Naga identity within the broader literary discourse.

Analysis of the narrative methodologies, literary forms, and artistic techniques employed by authors constitutes an integral aspect of scholarly discourse surrounding their literary outputs. This

holds particularly true for writers whose creative endeavors transcend mere expressions of personal vision and aesthetic sensibilities, as their works often serve broader cultural and societal purposes. Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire emerge as significant contributors to the nascent landscape of Naga literature, their writings serving to expand its horizons and enrich its thematic representations. Situated within the context of a developing literary tradition, their works undertake a conscious endeavor to reclaim the historical and cultural legacies of the Naga people, thereby contextualizing their narratives within the broader framework of Nagaland's cultural, historical, and societal atmosphere. Through their literary expressions, Ao and Kire facilitate a dynamic dialogue between tradition and modernity, bridging temporal and cultural divides. Their literary pursuits serve as channel for the transmission and reinterpretation of Naga heritage, facilitating an understanding of the relationship between the past and the present within the evolving scenario of Naga identity.

The works of these two prominent writers also share some commonalities with postcolonial writings. Kire and Ao, albeit subtly in most regards, explicate the themes of identity crisis, recovery of cultural identity and a search for a sense of place in post-colonial historical settings. As far as the history of Naga nationalism is concerned, Nagaland has been twice colonised: first by the British colonial power and then by the Indian government that tried to bring the Naga region under its political administration. Furthermore, cultural imperialism took root with the arrival of American missionaries who brought with them their new religion (Christianity) and the new education system. Although such historical factors brought about positive changes and progress to the Naga society, they also brought about the gradual degradation of the Naga cultural heritage. The two Naga writers, being products of such time, demonstrate a sense of historical and cultural consciousness in their writings and therefore attempt to incorporate them into their writings through

the use of local names, native settings, symbols and motifs unique to the Nagas. Their narrative styles thus become a medium through which their concerns as writers are highlighted.

1. Portrayal of the Ao and the Angami Communities

Both Ao and Kire demonstrate a proclivity for incorporating indigenous nomenclature into their narrative frameworks. Temsula Ao, for instance, employs names indigenous to the Ao community, including Aosenla, Bendanglemba, and Kilang. Similarly, Easterine Kire adopts Angami names such as Atuonuo, Visenuo, Villie, and Kivi within her literary compositions. This stylistic choice imbues their narratives with a deep sense of cultural authenticity, anchoring the stories within the distinct cultural and communal contexts of their respective tribes. By utilizing local names for their characters, both authors foster a sense of narrative cohesion deeply rooted in the specificity of their own tribal identities. This deliberate incorporation of indigenous nomenclature serves to portray the intimate connection between the characters and their cultural context, enriching the storytelling experience by imbuing it with a sense of cultural immediacy and authenticity. Their narratives emerge as vivid portrayal of their respective communities, offering readers a detailed exploration of the interaction between individual identity and communal belonging within the broader framework of Naga society.

Kire's narrative style, particularly discernible in her later works, elucidates an exploration of gender dynamics within the context of her traditional and somewhat idealized societal milieu. An exemplary instance of this thematic exploration is found in *Don't Run My Love*, where male

members of the village community willingly extend their assistance to widows, recognizing the physical demands of certain tasks as better suited for men. Through her lyrical prose, Kire accentuates a harmonious interdependence between genders, extolling the communal ethos inherent in rural village life. Contrastingly, Kire's earlier works such as *Bitter Wormwood* and *A Respectable Woman* present more pragmatic portrayals of Angami Naga society. The former delves into historical fiction, foregrounding the Nagas' quest for independence, while the latter offers an ironic critique of societal expectations surrounding the notion of a "respectable woman." Across her literary trajectory, Kire's narrative style evolves gradually, transitioning towards a more lyrical and relaxed tonality while preserving the authentic simplicity of her storytelling voice. This evolution underscores her adeptness in capturing the essence of Naga societal dynamics, thereby enriching the thematic discourse surrounding gender roles and communal dynamics within her narrative corpus.

In the literary works of Temsula Ao, a discernible thematic thread emerges, foregrounding a pronounced divergence between gender roles and the ensuing conflicts engendered thereby. This thematic exploration finds expression in works such as *Aosenla's Story*, wherein the titular protagonist grapples with the tension between her individual aspirations and societal expectations concerning the idealized female archetype. Similarly, in *The Night*, the character Imnala faces disproportionate repercussions for her involvement in an extramarital liaison, highlighting the unequal treatment of genders within the societal framework depicted by Ao. She skillfully elucidates the idiosyncratic social dynamics prevalent within her narrative context, as evidenced by her portrayal of the penchant for assigning unsolicited epithets among rural villagers. In *A New Chapter*, for instance, the character Merenla is bestowed the sobriquet "Pumpkin Merenla" due to her prolific cultivation of pumpkins—a narrative device employed by Ao to illuminate the amusing

intricacies of her community's social fabric. Through such depictions, she not only offers insights into the complexities of gender dynamics but also unveils the amusing peculiarities embedded within her community, thereby enriching the scholarly discourse surrounding Naga literature and societal norms.

2. Narrative Style in the Works of Temsula Ao

The narrative style evident across the diverse literary pursuits of Temsula Ao, encompassing poetry, short stories, and novels, serves as a vehicle through which she endeavors to reinterpret the historical trajectory of the Naga community, centering on the lived experiences of ordinary individuals. Within this narrative framework, Ao adeptly navigates the intricate socio-cultural landscape of Nagaland, shedding light on the swift and profound societal transformations and the attendant array of social issues confronting the Naga populace. Moreover, her narratives are imbued with psychological and cultural undercurrents, adding layers of complexity and depth to her explorations of Naga identity and collective consciousness. Through her literary craftsmanship, Ao not only engages in a nuanced examination of the socio-historical context but also offers profound insights into the psychological and cultural dimensions that shape the Naga community's collective consciousness.

Ao's Narrative Style in *These Hills Called Home*

In her collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home* Temsula Ao attempts to recount the collective experiences of her people through the stories that foreground the psychological implications of the turbulent years of conflicts and confrontations with the Government of India.

The preface to this collection serves as a guide to how these stories are to be approached. She persuades against interpreting the stories as politically motivated narratives aimed at condemnation of heinous actions through historical facts:

These stories however, are not about ‘historical facts’; nor are they about condemnation, justice or justification of the events which raged through the land like a wildfire half a century ago. On the contrary, what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms (Ao IX-X).

The author clearly delineates literature from the conventions of institutionalised history by placing the human experience rather than the historical facts in the foreground. She assumes the role of a storyteller like her forebears who passed down tribal wisdom, stories, aspirations, and experiences of the people through the oral tradition. She acknowledges the important role played by memories in such an undertaking. As an inheritor of history and the waning cultural heritage, she endeavors to reconstruct the Naga identity fractured by their traumatic past and the influence of rapid changes brought about by modernization fostered by their interaction with the outside world and cultures which are fundamentally foreign to them. However, despite her personal concerns for the Naga community as expressed in the preface, the unsentimental and relatively detached narrative tone she adopts make her stories rather objective, impersonal and universal in themes.

The Role of a Third-Person Narrator in the Works of Temsula Ao

These Hills Called Home is written entirely in the third person limited point of view whereby the personal experiences, motives and aspirations of the characters are revealed and explicated through the voice of a detached narrator. The use of a third-person perspective in the narratives offers an

opportunity to probe into the psyche of multiple characters. The stories are written in past tense which gives a sense of retrospective reflection on the past to uncover a new perspective to look at them. The readers are thus placed in a position to indirectly experience the stories as the characters do. The plots of some of the stories serve not only to offer social commentary on the Naga society but also probe into the themes of identity, gender, class, cultural norms and the general outlook of the community. Some of these themes are explored in stories like *The Night*, *The Journey*, and *A New Chapter*. *Aosenla's Story* is another work by the author which is narrated in the third person. The narrative closely follows the process of self-discovery and the formulation of the identity of its protagonist. The narrative point of view allows for a deep commentary on the character while also allowing room for commenting on the private lives and thoughts of other characters apart from the central character.

Narrative Technique in *The Night*

The Night offers ample insight into the status of women in a traditional and conservative Naga village community. Unlike other stories in the collection which have the Naga history as the backdrop, this story deals with the experience of a family dealing with the consequences of their daughter's illicit affair with a married man. It deals with the theme of the status of women in the society, the issues of identity faced by fatherless children, and the conservative attitude of the villagers. The story criticizes the double standards of society in their implementation of justice. Innala is summoned for a trial at the village customary court for breaking the societal code of conduct regarding marriage and sexual relationships. She is at the mercy of the male members of her society both for her safety and for the verdict of the trial. Her personal justifications for the defense of her own case would be irrelevant as she is compelled to rely on the father of her unborn

child to decide its fate. Social conventions place her in a position where she alone would be responsible for her pregnancy out of wedlock if the father denies the allegations of his involvement. She alone can never justify her own stance. This is revealed in her mother's advice to her: "Remember, in our society a woman must have the protection of a man even if he happens to be blind or lame. A woman alone will always be in danger" (Ao 53). These are some of the main concerns and preoccupations of the protagonist throughout the novel. Despite reflecting on the social reality, the narrative is primarily concerned with the psychological consequences of Imnala's misconduct upon herself and her family.

In *The Night*, readers are introduced right away to the inner turmoil of its protagonist. The challenges that she faces at present are the consequences of her past actions. Her past could potentially affect not only her social image but also that of her children. The story then proceeds to reveal the incidents of the past. The author seamlessly incorporates the past with the present in the narrative whereby she shifts from the past to the present and back to the present. The use of a third-person narrator also proves to be effective in presenting a more nuanced, and multiple perspectives on the same social issues. The limitations of a possibly biased female view on social problems are balanced out through the perspectives of male characters in the story. Imnala's father, for instance, is almost as helpless as his daughter. He has to rely on Imnala's maternal uncle to defend her case and to protect her as "custom decreed that only maternal uncles or cousins on her [Imnala's] mother's side could escort a girl to the meeting" (Ao 52). Although Imnala's father, on the surface, appears to be callous, his concerns and care for her daughter is highlighted through the subtext of his request to a maternal uncle of Imnala. This is explicated through the following excerpt:

‘Whatever the council decides tonight will be something your niece has brought on herself. I ask nothing of you but that you will bring back my daughter’s body to me when everything is over.’ Behind these harsh and seemingly callous words lay the fervent but indirectly appeal of the father, which actually meant, ‘Please protect my daughter as best as you can. See that they do not abuse her physically’ (Ao 55).

The father’s callousness could indicate his displeasure with his daughter’s actions and the fact that he does not condone such behaviour. However, he is still a caring father who requests his relative to protect her dignity and honor regardless of her behaviour.

The narrative technique employed in the story effectively conveys the complexities of the protagonist's situation and the broader social dynamics at play within the Naga village community. The author seamlessly weaves together past and present events, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of the protagonist's inner turmoil and the consequences of her actions. By shifting between past and present, the narrative creates a sense of immediacy and urgency, drawing readers into the protagonist's world and inviting them to empathize with her struggles. The use of multiple perspectives, including those of both female and male characters, adds depth to the narrative, allowing for a more holistic exploration of the social issues under examination. Through the juxtaposition of different viewpoints, the author highlights the complexities of gender dynamics and societal expectations within the Naga community, challenging readers to critically reflect on prevailing norms and values. The incorporation of dialogue and internal monologue enhances the psychological depth of the characters, providing insights into their motivations, fears, and desires. This narrative technique enables readers to

empathize with the characters on a deeper level, fostering a greater emotional connection to the story and its themes.

Narrative Technique in *The Journey*

The Journey offers an empathetic understanding of a child's psyche and her sense of disorientation after she undergoes the literal and metaphorical journey of life. Subtext serves as an important tool in the story to suggest the wider implication of unspoken and indirect ways of communicating that the characters resort to. The title of the story itself can be seen as the overarching subtext that alludes to the movement of the Naga society from a traditional way of life to a modern way of life at an unprecedented pace.

The protagonist Tinula undertakes a strenuous journey from her native villages to her boarding school in the neighboring state of Assam. The significance of her journey can be examined through its multiple implications. On the one hand, the literal journey that she undertakes entails a shift in the physical space that she finds herself in, while on the other hand, it also leads to a profound understanding of the harsh reality of life. The people she encounters on her journey are generally caring, friendly and kind, she experiences a sense of communal understanding of the difficulties of fellow humans. In sharp contrast to these people are the ones she finds at the boarding school. The Superintendent of the school is cold and unconcerned about Tinula and her brother. Likewise, Tinula's friend Winnie succeeds in deliberately hurting her sentiments by revealing to her that Tinula's supposed "boyfriend" now has a new girlfriend. The sudden revelation of her friend leads her to a profound understanding of life that, "the barriers in life are not only the physical ones." Thus, after her journey, she physically finds herself in a new and unfamiliar place while she also enters a new psychological space with a new realization.

The setting of this story plays a significant role in highlighting the dichotomy between the simple unstructured ways of life in the village with the institutionalized setting of the boarding school. Such dichotomy presents a barrier of understanding between the people inhabiting these contrasting physical spaces. The process of transition between these two settings is referred to in the title of the story. The journey is symbolic as it introduces Tinula to the painful realization of the harsh realities of life.

The Journey employs a range of narrative techniques to effectively convey the protagonist's psychological and emotional journey, offering readers an empathetic understanding of a child's psyche amidst societal transition. One notable technique is the use of subtext, which subtly suggests deeper meanings and wider implications through unspoken and indirect forms of communication among characters. This serves to enrich the narrative by inviting readers to interpret underlying themes and societal dynamics beyond the surface level. The title itself acts as a potent subtext, symbolizing the broader movement of Naga society from traditional to modern ways of life, setting the thematic tone for the story. Through Tinula's literal and metaphorical journey from her native village to a boarding school, the narrative explores themes of displacement, adaptation, and personal growth. The contrast between the caring individuals encountered during her journey and the coldness she experiences at the boarding school highlights the dichotomy between traditional and institutionalized settings, highlighting the societal transition depicted in the story. The narrative technique effectively utilizes setting to present this contrast, emphasizing the simplicity and unstructured nature of village life juxtaposed with the regimented environment of the boarding school. This juxtaposition serves as a barrier of understanding between characters inhabiting these contrasting physical spaces, reflecting the broader societal shifts occurring within Naga culture.

Narrative Technique in *A New Chapter*

A New Chapter the final story in *These Hills Called Home* examines the social and political changes in the state of Nagaland during the second half of the twentieth century. The story explicates the conflict between the traditional values of the Nagas and the new changes in the society brought about by the new economic and political system. The conflict between tradition and modernity is highlighted by the characters of Bendangnungsang and Merenla. The former represents the new generation of ambitious Nagas while the latter represents the older generation of Nagas with a traditional outlook towards life. The story also highlights the change in the political aspiration of the people, the changing aspiration of the people and the intermingling of tradition and modernity.

The author, in this story, uses a sub-plot to probe into different strata of the Naga society. The primary plot revolves around Bendangnungsang and his acquisition of riches and the rise of his political power and influence. The sub-plot on the other hand revolves around the ramifications of his rise to power that negatively affects the life of Merenla and other poorer people of society. The differences between the attitudes of these two characters help in delineating the differences of the attitudes of the Nagas across different demographics and social classes.

City dwelling people like Bendangnungsang and his business partners are shown to be individualistic, calculated, ruthless, materialistic and ambitious. For instance, influential and rich businessmen like Bendangnungsang and Bhandari makes decision on behalf of small traders in town for their personal benefits. Small traders and business owners like Abdul Sattar and Karim are exploited by the rich and the powerful. In contrast, the village dwelling widow Merenla and other villagers are simple-minded, sympathetic and communal. When Merenla faces huge financial

loss in her business dealing with her kinsman Bendangnungsang, she feels betrayed and hurt as she was raised to believe that family ties were of immense importance. However, her kinsman clearly demonstrates through his selfish actions that he has no concern for such traditional values.

The political campaign of Bendangnungsang's party highlights the manipulation involved in the corruption of traditional values for personal gains. The party uses the Naga ancestral symbol of the hornbill to convince the townsfolk to vote for their party. Most of the people in the masses are easily persuaded merely by the sight of the majestic bird. The masses represent the large section of the common Naga people of that time who were driven blindly by their ideological assumptions, romanticism and nationalistic attitudes.

In *A New Chapter*, the author employs a multifaceted narrative technique to explore the social and political changes unfolding in Nagaland during the latter half of the twentieth century. Central to the narrative is the examination of the conflict between traditional Naga values and the emergent forces of modernity, epitomized by the contrasting characters of Bendangnungsang and Merenla. Through these characters, the narrative effectively delineates the shifting dynamics within Naga society across different demographics and social strata.

One notable aspect of the narrative technique is the use of a sub-plot to probe into the various layers of Naga society. While the primary plot revolves around Bendangnungsang's ascent to wealth and political power, the subplot delves into the repercussions of his actions on the lives of individuals like Merenla, representing the poorer segments of society. This juxtaposition allows for a detailed exploration of the divergent attitudes and values prevalent across different social classes, illuminating the broader societal tensions between tradition and modernity. The characterization of Bendangnungsang and Merenla serves to highlight the contrasting attitudes and

behaviors associated with city-dwelling elites and rural villagers. Bendangnungsang and his associates are depicted as individualistic, calculating, and materialistic, driven by personal ambition and profit. In contrast, Merenla and her fellow villagers are portrayed as simple-minded, communal, and guided by traditional values such as familial loyalty and solidarity. The narrative technique effectively integrates political symbolism to highlight the manipulation of traditional values for personal gain. The use of the Naga ancestral symbol of the hornbill by Bendangnungsang's political party exemplifies the exploitation of cultural heritage for political ends, revealing the ideological manipulation and blind allegiance prevalent among the masses.

In her anthology of short stories, *These Hills Called Home*, Temsula Ao demonstrates a masterful command of various literary techniques, employing them with precision and subtlety to delve into the layers of Naga society. Through the judicious use of symbolism, subtext, metaphor, and subplot, Ao skillfully unravels themes that resonate deeply within the cultural and social fabric of the Naga community. These themes encompass the complexities of identity formation, gender roles, class dynamics, and the landscape of political affairs. Symbolism, in particular, serves as a potent tool through which Ao imbues her narratives with layers of meaning, allowing readers to decipher deeper truths embedded within the text. Subtle dash of societal norms and values are conveyed through symbolic representations, inviting readers to contemplate the underlying significance of seemingly mundane details.

Ao's use of subtext enriches the narrative texture, infusing her stories with layers of implicit meaning that transcend the surface plot. Through understated dialogue and character interactions, she subtly conveys the underlying tensions and conflicts simmering beneath the surface of social interactions, illuminating the complexities of human relationships and societal dynamics.

Metaphor is another hallmark of Ao's narrative technique, enabling her to draw insightful parallels between disparate elements, shedding light on the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate aspects of Naga society. Through the use of metaphorical language, Ao invites readers to explore the deeper resonances of her narratives, uncovering hidden truths and universal themes that transcend the specificity of the Naga experience.

Ao uses subplots into her stories, allowing for the exploration of diverse perspectives and experiences within the broader context of Naga society. By interweaving multiple narrative threads, she creates a rich and multi-dimensional portrayal of life in the Naga hills, offering readers a panoramic view of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the social fabric. Through the narrative perspective of a detached narrator, she maintains a sense of objectivity in her exploration of these social issues, presenting them with a degree of impartiality that allows readers to engage critically with the themes at hand. Despite the subjective nature of her personal motivations for crafting these narratives, Ao's deft narrative technique enables her to present the complexities of Naga society with insight and empathy, inviting us on a journey of discovery and introspection.

Narrative in *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*

In her memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* Temsula Ao employs the first person point of view to narrate the experiences of her life, her personal struggles of being a woman, of growing up as an impoverished orphan and her dreams and aspirations. Although she admits in the preface that she has made no attempt to achieve the accuracy of a biography, the memoir clearly captures the core essence of her personal history and her most significant memories. The memoir is essentially one of her most personal works. The sensitive tone of her narrative voice prompts the readers to sympathize with her. The memoir is chronologically divided into three parts which

are further divided into smaller parts each of which is titled appropriately. Such divisions and subdivisions facilitate the easier understanding of the significance of each experience.

The first part of the memoir deals with Ao's early childhood and her life as an orphan in Jorhat, Assam. She also recounts her early schooling days and the struggles she and her siblings faced after of losing her parents in quick succession. Her childhood deprivation and the trauma that ensues become the subject of reflection in her later life. Her childhood trauma has a great impact on her parenting style and her attitude towards life and people. The second part of the memoir details her years in high school and the realization of her coming-of-age and gradually assuming the identity of a woman. However, it is only in the final section that she explicates the full realization of her feminine identity: "...I was slowly becoming aware of myself as a 'woman'; no longer a starry-eyed teenager; though ironically, I was experimenting with maturity not as a giggly teenager but as a married woman still in her teens" (Ao 176).

The final section of the memoir deals with her experience as a woman conflicted between her social roles as a married woman and the independent spirit that drives her to pursue her ambitions of being an academician and a writer. She also reflects on her role as a mother and her conscious efforts to become a good mother to her children. Her motherly concerns are clearly highlighted in the manner in which she endeavors to be a good mother with the best of her efforts. She also liberates herself from the conventional norms of how a woman should behave. This section also deals with the process of her evolution as a writer.

The narrative also reflects on her parents. She tries to reconstruct the history of her parents based on her memory and on the account of their personal history narrated by her relatives. Her reflections on her parents reveal how their admirable qualities have inspired her to carry on in life

and be a better parent herself. Such narration adds vitality and extra dimension to her memoir. Her retrospection leads her to arrive at a better understanding of her parents and the society at large. She realizes that her mother, after her father's death had always tried her best to keep the family together despite her limitations. Through her mother's struggles, she points out the difficulties of being as single parent, especially as a widow. The financial dependence of a wife on her husband was a common problem faced by the Naga women of the twentieth century. Such dependence left a woman helpless in the absence of the husband who provided for the family. This is clearly shown through the difficulties and financial limitations faced by the author's family after her father's death. The impact of the events of her childhood is apparent in the author's later life. She works hard to become a well learned woman with the financial capacity to look after her personal need and that of her own children.

The reconstruction of the father's personal history is another vital element of the memoir. Temsula Ao later realizes the significance of her father's effort to get her and her siblings attached to their native village and its people even though they lived far away from it. Even in his physical absence, Ao's father had a significant impact on her life. How her parents deal with the struggles of life teaches her important lessons about the resilience of the human spirit and the need to uphold the valuable cultural values of the Nagas. The memories of her parents serve as the means through which she tries to compensate for their physical absence from the world. Thus, providing an insight into her parents' lives and their personal struggles through her narration helps her in evaluating the positive roles played by ideal parents in the lives of their children. Memories, in this case, serve as the only available means to achieve this.

As in her other works, Temsula Ao highlights the purpose and her intentions of writing the memoir. It serves as a cathartic outlet for the painful memories and the trauma of the past. More importantly, it is a deliberate attempt to tell her story before it is lost to time. She thus ends her preface with this remark: “And above all, I have written this book because I had to tell my story before time claimed it all” (Ao xiii).

Temsula Ao employs a range of narrative techniques in her memoir, *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*, to provide a deeply personal account of her experiences, struggles, and aspirations. Through the use of the first-person point of view, Ao invites readers into her inner world, sharing intimate reflections on her journey. The memoir which is meticulously structured and chronologically divided provides an organizational framework that facilitates a coherent exploration of Ao's life experiences, allowing readers to grasp the significance of each episode in her journey. Furthermore, the sensitive tone of Ao's narrative voice prompts readers to empathize with her struggles and triumphs, fostering a deeper connection with her story.

Throughout the memoir, Ao reflects on the impact of her childhood trauma on her identity formation, parenting style, and attitude towards life. Her introspective narrative sheds light on the complexities of growing up as an orphan, navigating societal expectations, and grappling with personal aspirations. In particular, Ao's exploration of her evolving feminine identity, from a starry-eyed teenager to a married woman balancing societal roles with personal ambitions, offers insights into the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies. Central to Ao's narrative is the reconstruction of her parents' personal histories, based on her memory and accounts from relatives. Through these reflections, Ao gains a deeper understanding of her parents' struggles and

sacrifices, which serve as guiding lights in her own journey. The memoir thus serves as a means of honoring her parents' legacies and preserving their memories for future generations.

Ao's memoir serves as a cathartic outlet for processing painful memories and trauma from the past. By sharing her story, Ao confronts the ghosts of her past and seeks closure, while also ensuring that her experiences are not lost to time. In doing so, she adds her voice to the collective narrative of resilience and perseverance, inspiring readers to find strength in their own struggles. Overall, *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* is a testament to the power of storytelling as a means of self-discovery, healing, and remembrance. Through her narrative techniques, Ao offers readers an intimate glimpse into her life's journey, inviting them to reflect on their own experiences and find solace in shared humanity.

Narrative in *Aosenla's Story*

In *Aosenla's Story* Temsula Ao narrates the story of the eponymous protagonist and how she tackles the obstacles presented by the conventional and patriarchal Naga society. The major themes explored in the narrative are the issues of identity and gender. The author employs the limited point of view in which “the narrator tells the story in the third person, but stays inside the confines of what is perceived, thought, remembered, and felt by a single character (or at most by very few characters) within the story” (Abrams et al., 303).

Although the plot of the novel flows in a chronological sequence for the most part, the novel follows a framework that resembles a loose circular narrative. It begins with a brief exposition on the settings of the narrative from the perspective of the protagonist Aosenla. The opening of the novel also highlights the state of mind of its protagonist who appears to be discontent and dissatisfied with her life. The wedding invitation card that she had received earlier triggers the

memories of the past events that had led to her now unhappy marriage. This reflection serves as the foundation upon which the plot is set to motion. The narrative then progresses to detail the events of her past. The cyclical structure of the novel helps in emphasizing the significance of the events of the story, their ramifications and their wider implications. It also frames the central question of whether or not Aosenla will eventually overcome her obstacles and her inner and interpersonal conflicts and come to terms with her life and choices.

It is a narrative rooted essentially in the feminist perspective on the theme of identity. The story thus, is structured in a manner that allows for a gradual awareness of the character's sense of identity and her place in society. The plot thus aims to uncover the multifaceted aspects of Aosenla's identity gradually in a systematic manner. This unfolding of her various identities – of that of a daughter, a sister, a daughter-in-law, a mother and a teacher – throughout the narrative eventually leads Aosenla to realize the true essence of her sense of self. This ultimate realization comes with the subversion of her personal and societal expectations. After achieving this sense of realization, she is finally liberated from her conflict of identity.

Although the central focus of consciousness is on Aosenla, the author also uses a subplot to probe into the impact of her actions on another significant character, Doctor Kilang. Kilang is an important person in Aosenla's life who helps her and her family in times of difficulty. His good nature, goodwill, and his compassion helps her overcome many of her challenges. On one hand, he serves the role of a family doctor while on the other hand, he is a friend and a confidant to Aosenla. Besides, he is also a family man and an exemplary figure in society. Thus, he is as multidimensional and complex as Aosenla. His experiences parallel the experiences of Aosenla but from the perspective of a man.

The narrative technique employed by Temsula Ao in *Aosenla's Story* demonstrates the exploration of identity and gender dynamics within the patriarchal Naga society. Through the use of a limited point of view, Ao immerses readers in the internal world of the protagonist, Aosenla, allowing them to perceive the story through her thoughts, memories, and emotions. This narrative choice offers a deep insight into Aosenla's struggles and highlights the societal pressures and expectations she faces. The novel's structure, resembling a loose circular narrative, adds depth to the exploration of its themes. Beginning with an exposition that sets the stage for Aosenla's discontent, the narrative then goes back into her past, gradually unfolding the events that have shaped her identity and choices. This cyclical structure not only emphasizes the significance of these events but also frames the central question of whether Aosenla will overcome her obstacles and find reconciliation with herself and her circumstances.

At its core, *Aosenla's Story* is rooted in a feminist perspective, aiming to uncover the complexities of Aosenla's identity and her place in society. As the plot unfolds, readers witness Aosenla's gradual realization of her various identities – as a daughter, sister, daughter-in-law, mother, and teacher – ultimately leading to a profound understanding of her sense of self. This realization, marked by the subversion of personal and societal expectations, liberates Aosenla from her inner conflicts and paves the way for her personal growth. Additionally, Ao incorporates a subplot involving Doctor Kilang, a significant character whose experiences parallel those of Aosenla. Through Kilang's perspective, we gain insight into the impact of Aosenla's actions on others, further enriching the narrative with multidimensional characters and perspectives. Kilang's role as a friend, confidant, and societal figure adds depth to the exploration of gender dynamics and interpersonal relationships within the story.

Through an analysis of Temsula Ao's chosen literary corpus, it becomes apparent that she crafts her narratives with a deliberate and meticulous attention to detail, employing a succinct and precise tone of narration. Her utilization of subplots serves as a strategic device to illuminate thematic elements from diverse perspectives, thereby enriching the depth and complexity of her storytelling. Despite the inherent personal concerns embedded within her narratives, Ao's adept manipulation of narrative tone imbues her literary works with a sense of objectivity and universality, transcending individual experiences to resonate with a broader audience. This judicious balance between personal introspection and narrative impartiality underscores Ao's mastery of the craft, enabling her to traverse complex thematic terrain while maintaining a compelling and accessible narrative voice.

3. Narrative and Style in the Works of Easterine Kire

As evident in *Don't Run My Love* and *When the River Sleeps* the author Easterine Kire employs fictional narratives to continue and to enrich the oral tradition of her Naga ancestors in written form. In her novels, she blurs the line between the real and the fantastical and makes no deliberate attempt to distinguish between the two. They coexist in the same manner as she believes that tradition should harmoniously coexist with the changes brought about by cultural assimilation and modernization in the context of a globalized society. She seems to suggest that the fantastical is almost synonymous with tradition and that the ignorance about the same is the lack of awareness of the value of tradition and its capacity to enrich one's life.

The Role of Magic Realism in *Don't Run My Love* and *When the River Sleeps*

The term "magic realism" encompasses the characteristics of prose fiction wherein the author interweaves elements of sharply delineated realism, depicting ordinary events and details,

alongside fantastical and dreamlike elements, as well as motifs derived from myth and fairytales (Abrams et al., 258). Within such narrative constructs, the author presents supernatural occurrences and fantastical events juxtaposed with mundane realities, without any explicit demarcation between the two. Characters within these novels commonly encounter supernatural phenomena as an integral aspect of their lived reality, treating such occurrences with an acceptance akin to that of commonplace events. Consequently, reactions to extraordinary incidents that defy conventional logic and reality are devoid of incredulity, reflecting a seamless integration of the fantastical into everyday life. In other words, they do not react with disbelief when they encounter an extraordinary incident that defies logic and reality.

Within her literary framework, Kire situates her fictional narratives within a context where the realms of magic seamlessly intertwine with the fabric of reality. Employing the genre of magic realism, she adeptly elucidates the rich tapestry of Naga oral tradition and cultural ethos. Drawing from the wellspring of Naga folklore, Kire incorporates elements imbued with the spiritual beliefs and supernatural entities pervasive within Naga culture. Central to her narratives are the thematic underpinnings that show the intrinsic cultural values of symbiotic relationships between humanity and the natural world, as well as the communal bonds fostering harmony among individuals. Through her exploration of magic realism, Kire imbues her fiction with profound philosophical inquiries, probing into existential quandaries and metaphysical contemplations. Kire elevates the ostensibly simplistic customs and traditional convictions of the Nagas to a broader realm of significance, imbuing them with deeper layers of meaning and universal resonance.

Kire's utilization of magic realism diverges from the conventional paradigms established by renowned authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, Salman Rushdie, and John

Fowles. In contrast to the prevalent conventions within the genre, Kire's literary works of magic realism eschew the inclination towards fictionalizing historical events or espousing political ideologies. Instead, her narratives distinctly prioritize the exploration and illumination of cultural motifs and philosophical tenets prevalent within Naga myths and folklore. Drawing inspiration from her cultural heritage, Kire imbues her storytelling with a richness derived from the cultural tapestry of the Nagas, thereby infusing her narratives with layers of cultural significance and profound philosophical insights.

Myths in *Don't Run My Love* and *When the River Sleeps*

Spirit narratives constitute a fundamental aspect of the Angami Naga folklore, serving as repositories of cultural memory within the societal framework. Within the narrative of *Don't Run My Love*, the mythological concept of *tekhumevimia*, or the were-tiger, assumes a pivotal role. According to tradition, were-tigers are purportedly individuals, typically males affiliated with specific clans, endowed with the capacity to metamorphose into tigers. Rooted in the belief system, the spirit of the tiger confers upon these individuals' supernatural abilities, including shape-shifting capabilities and precognitive foresight. Pfenuo, a resident hailing from the village known for its seers, articulates observations regarding the formidable powers vested within a *tekhumevimia*:

They [the were-tigers] have immense power. Oh, I don't just mean physical powers. I know there are many villages where their owners are consulted for their supernatural powers. We say they can *themou*, you know, predict the future. And you know how people like to hear about their own futures. The people who consult them are warriors, young men and also young women, rarely the elderly (Kire 92).

Pfenuo further elucidates that the symbiotic relationship between man and tiger is emblematic of a profound interconnectedness, wherein the physical embodiment represents the human form while the spiritual essence embodies the tiger. This observation contributes significant insights into the intricate fabric of traditional belief systems prevalent among the Angami Nagas. Moreover, her remarks subtly underscore the deep-rooted familiarity of elderly community members with the spiritual realm, obviating the necessity for direct consultation with a were-tiger to access such esoteric knowledge. The accrued wisdom among the elderly populace consequently renders them discerning and sagacious. Thus, Pfenuo advocates for Atuonuo and her mother to seek counsel from the venerable seer of the village in order to address their perilous predicament.

The Village of Seers emerges as a salient mythical motif within the novel, embodying rich symbolism and mystique. This enigmatic locale is depicted as possessing a mystifying quality, purportedly capable of shifting its geographical coordinates, thus confounding attempts at its precise localization. Within the narrative context, the village assumes a profound symbolic significance, serving as a beacon of hope for the maternal protagonists. Their very survival hinges precariously upon the timely discovery and arrival at this elusive sanctuary. Central to their quest is the indispensable guidance provided by the venerable village seer, whose sage counsel enables them to devise a strategic response to the imminent peril they face. The arduous journey embarked upon by the maternal duo is laden with metaphorical import, parallel to the broader struggles of the Nagas in navigating and affirming their cultural identity amidst the complexities of contemporary times. Through their unwavering resolve and tenacity, they embody the indomitable spirit of a community grappling with existential challenges, thus encapsulating the enduring ethos of perseverance and cultural endurance.

The Narrative Structure of *Don't Run My Love*

Don't Run My Love narrates the story of a widow Visenuo and her daughter Atunuo whose normal lives are affected by their encounter with a beautiful young man named Kevi. The story is narrated from a third person point of view and follows a chronological sequence. The prose is simple yet lyrical and relaxed. Kire attempts to capture the ambience and the rhythm of life in a traditional Naga village. The narrative lays equal emphasis on the plot and the setting and Kire seems to relish the description of simple routine activities of everyday life in the village.

The exposition is blended with the action in the opening of the story. Until the second half of the novel, the story progresses slowly which allows for plenty of time to follow the characters through their mundane everyday tasks. The novels also offer glimpses into the life in the village. The second half of the novel then progresses at a faster pace. Visenuo and her daughter find themselves in a dangerous position after Atunuo rejects Kevi's marriage proposal. Kevi is revealed to be a were-tiger or a man who can transform himself into a tiger. This discovery of the dual nature of Kevi drives the narrative towards its climax.

The novel follows its readers through the fields, the village, and the forests into the world of the spirits. Running away from Kevi, the mother-daughter duo looks for the village of the seers. It is a village inhabited by seers that is believed to shift its location. Their quest almost resembles a spiritual journey of pilgrims looking for refuge from the menace and confusion of the world. They seek solution for their problems and answers to the questions of the supernatural and the spirit world.

The were-tiger is the central motif and a significant symbol in the novel. It symbolizes the duality of the nature of man who can be beast-like if he fails to control his darker inclination towards evil

desire to harm and kill. Kevi at the beginning of the novel is caring and kind. He helps Atuonuo and her mother in their work and gradually develops a romantic attraction for her. Her rejection however brings out his anger and his evil side. He now seeks to harm Atuonuo as revenge for breaking his heart. He is unable to forgive her which eventually leads to his tragic death.

Don't Run My Love employs various narrative techniques to effectively convey its storyline and themes. Firstly, the third-person point of view allows for a comprehensive exploration of the characters and their experiences, providing insight into their thoughts and motivations. This perspective also lends a sense of objectivity to the narrative, enabling readers to engage with the story from a detached yet immersive vantage point. The narrative unfolds in a chronological sequence, presenting events in a logical order that facilitates understanding and coherence. This structured approach to storytelling allows for the gradual development of plot and character arcs, as well as the exploration of thematic elements throughout the novel.

The prose style employed by Kire is characterized by its simplicity, yet it possesses a lyrical and relaxed quality that imbues the narrative with a certain charm and authenticity. Through vivid descriptions and evocative language, Kire skillfully captures the ambience and rhythm of life in a traditional Naga village. The novel's pacing is carefully calibrated to create tension and suspense, particularly in the second half of the story where the plot accelerates towards its climax. The gradual buildup of tension serves to heighten the stakes and intensify the conflict, keeping readers engaged and invested in the outcome of the characters' struggles.

Central to the narrative is the motif of the were-tiger, which serves as a potent symbol of the duality of human nature and the consequences of unchecked desires. Kevi's transformation from a benevolent figure to a vengeful antagonist highlights the novel's thematic exploration of morality,

agency, and the consequences of one's actions. The quest for the village of the seers adds an element of mystique and intrigue to the narrative, imbuing the story with a sense of adventure and spiritual discovery. This journey serves as a metaphorical odyssey for the protagonists, as they navigate the physical and metaphysical realms in search of solace and resolution. *Don't Run My Love* employs a range of narrative techniques to craft a compelling and thematically rich tale that explores the complexities of human nature, cultural identity, and the supernatural.

The Role of Flashback in *Don't Run My Love*

The novel presents a flashback in the form of a story narrated by a secondary character Pfenuo. She narrates the events of the past which had led her to the Village of Seers where she decided to settle in for good. Pfenuo's fascinating story serves as a complete story in itself. This back-story adds an extra dimension to the overall narrative. Pfenuo's story offers a subtle commentary on the status of orphans and women in society. She had been sent to find an antidote for her uncle who had been poisoned by the husband of a woman with whom he had an illicit affair. As she was an orphan, her relatives treated her like a mere servant. As a result of the ill-treatment of her grandmother and her relatives, she is motivated to find the antidote not by the need to save her uncle but by the promise of her grandmother to give her the biggest field if she returns with the cure. Given that she was treated as a dispensable member of the family, she chooses to stay in the Village of Seers. The story makes Pfenuo a character as complex and human as other primary characters. She evades the stereotype of a secondary character who merely serves the purpose of conveniently helping the protagonist at a crucial moment of crisis.

The utilization of flashbacks in the novel serves as a pivotal narrative device that not only enriches the overall storyline but also contributes to a deeper understanding of the characters and themes.

Pfenuo's recounting of her past experiences adds a layer of complexity to her character, transforming her from a secondary figure into an individual with her own motivations and struggles. Through Pfenuo's flashback, we gain insight into the societal dynamics and injustices faced by marginalized individuals, particularly orphans and women, within the Naga community. Pfenuo's status as an orphan and her subsequent mistreatment by her relatives highlight broader issues of social inequality and discrimination prevalent in society. Her quest for the antidote, driven not by familial obligation but by the promise of reward, underscores the harsh reality of her circumstances and her perseverance.

Pfenuo's decision to settle in the Village of Seers serves as a commentary on the themes of belonging and agency. By choosing to forge her own path and establish a new life in a place of her own choosing, Pfenuo asserts her autonomy and independence, challenging traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Overall, the flashback featuring Pfenuo's story adds depth to the novel, elevating her character beyond the confines of a mere supporting role. Through her experiences and actions, Pfenuo emerges as a fully realized individual whose journey resonates with universal themes of identity, resilience, and empowerment.

The Philosophical Implication of Myths in *When the River Sleeps*

When the River Sleeps represents a narrative imbued with profound philosophical undertones. Positioned within the plot is the odyssey of Vilie, a solitary hunter dwelling amidst the forest, who embarks on a perilous expedition to obtain the revered magical heart stone. Through this narrative, the author explores the Angami Naga myths, amplifying their significance within the literary realm. Central to the storyline is the symbolic motif of the heart stone, which serves as a focal

point driving the momentum of the narrative, catalyzing Vilie's transformative journey and imbuing the plot with thematic depth.

The heart stone serves as a tangible embodiment of spiritual wisdom within the narrative framework. Vilie's pursuit of this mystical artifact is not driven by materialistic aspirations, but rather by a quest for enlightenment in the realm of spirits. Throughout his journey, he traverses the diverse landscapes of Nagaland, navigating encounters with both mortal adversaries and supernatural entities. These challenges serve as catalysts for Vilie's personal growth, imparting invaluable insights into the symbiotic relationship between humanity, the natural world, and spiritual forces. Consequently, the heart-stone emerges as a conduit for articulating the philosophical underpinnings of the Naga traditional belief system, encapsulating the interconnectedness of existential elements within their cultural cosmology.

In addition to the exploration of the heart-stone motif, the novel scrutinizes into the mythological archetype of the were-tiger, presenting this spiritual entity as possessing a degree of rationality and agency. Within the narrative, these enigmatic beings embody the profound mysteries inherent in the spiritual realm, serving as a medium between the ethereal domain and the terrestrial plane. As a means between these realms, were-tigers symbolize the dual nature of human existence, straddling the boundary between the corporeal and the metaphysical. Rooted in Nagas' traditional beliefs regarding the presence of the soul within individuals, the portrayal of these mystical beings underscores the intricate interplay between the spiritual and material dimensions of human consciousness. Thus, their depiction within the narrative serves to elucidate the existential complexities and spiritual dimensions intrinsic to Naga cosmology.

The Setting of *When the River Sleeps*

Within the narrative landscape of the novel, the temporal setting unfolds with a layering of historical epochs, presenting an intriguing juxtaposition between the seemingly timeless and untamed terrain of Nagaland and the inconspicuous integration of modern societal structures. This deliberate blending of the primordial essence of Nagaland's landscape with the subtle infiltration of contemporary institutions, such as governmental bodies, educational facilities, and local councils, imbues the narrative with a sense of temporal ambiguity. Through this narrative technique, the author crafts an anachronistic atmosphere, wherein the coexistence of divergent historical epochs converges within the temporal framework of the narrative, fostering a rich and multi-layered exploration of time and societal evolution.

A significant portion of the narrative unfolds within the depths of the forest, with the author devoting particular attention to elucidating the profound significance of this natural setting. Within the narrative, the forest assumes a persona akin to that of a devoted spouse, symbolizing both sustenance and refuge for the protagonist Vilie. Vilie's affinity for a solitary existence amidst the forest's embrace is palpable, as he finds solace and fulfilment in its untamed expanse. However, moments of solitude occasionally evoke pangs of guilt within Vilie, reminiscent of the remorse one might feel for betraying the trust of a faithful companion. This metaphorical comparison between the forest and a spouse resonates deeply within the narrative, as the forest not only provides Vilie with the means of sustenance but also serves as a protective haven, shielding him from adversaries and offering nourishment and medicinal resources in times of need. The forest assumes the role of a steadfast and nurturing partner, embodying the qualities of reliability and resilience akin to those found in a devoted spouse.

The portrayal of the forest as a nurturing and supportive wife resonates with the ecofeminist themes underlying the author's narrative. Vilie finds fulfilment and sustenance within the forest's embrace, relying on its abundant resources for his daily needs. Similarly, the nettle bark weavers depicted in the narrative draw upon the forest's bounty to craft essential clothing materials. Moreover, the forest serves as a habitat for revered cultural symbols of the Nagas, such as the *gwi* (Mithun) and the tragopan, further highlighting its significance within the cultural and ecological landscape. The forest serves as a nexus for encounters with spiritual entities and supernatural phenomena, including malevolent spirits and were-tigers. This wooded terrain thus becomes a liminal space where the boundaries between the realms of spirits, humanity, and fauna blur and intersect. Such a portrayal of the forest reinforces its significance as a locus of spiritual convergence, elucidating the spiritual geographies inherent to the region.

The Narrative Structure of *When the River Sleeps*

The novel progresses in a linear fashion, adhering to a structured chronological sequence encompassing an introduction, development, and resolution. Comprising forty-one chapters, the narrative unfolds through episodic vignettes, each chapter encapsulating a distinct incident or pivotal moment. Furthermore, the inclusion of titled chapters serves to elucidate the thematic essence of each segment, thereby providing readers with insight into the forthcoming events and thematic undertones.

When the River Sleeps as a Quest Narrative

The novel embarks on a profound odyssey of epic proportions, tracing the arduous journey of the protagonist through the treacherous wilderness, perilous landscapes, and remote villages in pursuit of a mystical artefact of profound significance. Beyond the mere acquisition of the enchanted

stone, the hero's mission extends to safeguarding it from the machinations of nefarious individuals intent on harnessing its formidable power for personal gain and malevolent purposes. Vilie's unwavering conviction in his preordained destiny as the guardian of the stone is fortified by recurring visions that imbue him with a profound sense of purpose. Recognizing the imperative of acquiring requisite knowledge to navigate the perils inherent in his quest, he diligently seeks counsel from venerable mentors such as Kani and other sagacious figures, who impart invaluable insights into the mystical realm of spirits and the enigmatic nature of the stone.

The ramifications of the misappropriation of the stone are elucidated through the malevolent deeds of Ate's malevolent sibling, Zote. Leveraging the power of the stone as a tool of retribution, Zote unleashes havoc upon the villagers who unjustly expelled her from their midst. In a stark demonstration of its potential for malevolence, the stone becomes an instrument of affliction, precipitating pestilence, disease, and widespread devastation throughout the village. Zote's nefarious actions accentuate the imperative of safeguarding the stone against exploitation by malevolent forces.

The novel manifests as a quintessential quest narrative, delineating the protagonist's profound odyssey through perilous terrains and remote locales in pursuit of a mystical artifact of profound import. Beyond the mere acquisition of the enchanted stone, the hero's quest extends to the imperative task of shielding it from the clutches of malevolent entities harboring intentions of exploitation and nefarious deeds.

The Use of Tenyidie Words in the Works of Easterine Kire

In we find several instances of the author using words from her mother tongue Tenyide. Such usage places the reader nearer to the language and culture from which she has borrowed for her

fictional narrative. In *Don't Run My Love*, Tenyidie words can be understood through the context in which they are spoken. They are explained indirectly by the speaker who uses them. In *When the River Sleeps*, the author provides a glossary in which Tenyidie words are explained. The author's occasional use of Tenyidie words and phrases reflect her effort to contextualize the story within the cultural context in which they unfold.

In both *When the River Sleeps* and *Don't Run My Love* the author adeptly integrates elements of her mother tongue, Tenyidie, into the narrative, thereby immersing us in the linguistic and cultural milieu from which she draws inspiration for her fictional array. In *Don't Run My Love*, the contextual usage of Tenyidie words allows readers to discern their meanings indirectly, as elucidated by the speakers within the narrative. Conversely, *When the River Sleeps* provides a comprehensive glossary, elucidating the meanings of Tenyidie words and phrases. Such strategic incorporation of Tenyidie vocabulary reflects the author's endeavor to authentically contextualize the narrative within the cultural environment from which it unfolds, fostering a deeper appreciation of the linguistic and cultural detailing inherent in the storytelling. Following are the recurrent Tenyidie words used in Kire's works:

1. *Tenyime/ Tenyidie*- Language spoken by the Angami- Naga People
2. *Tekhumevimea*- Were-tiger
3. *Liedepfu*- the ritual initiator of the harvest
4. *Kichuki*- Male dormitory
5. *Thehou*- Communal house
6. *Thehou nuo*- Child of the *thehou*
7. *Kevakete* – A harvest ritual
8. *Japan nha* – Japan weed

Conclusion

The literary contributions of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire have been instrumental in shaping the trajectory of Naga literature, marking a pivotal shift from oral tradition to written expression. Both authors adeptly tailor their narrative styles to align with the thematic and aesthetic contours of their artistic visions. Central to their narrative approach is a deliberate foregrounding of ethnic symbols, a narrative ethos steeped in the rich tapestry of Naga oral tradition, and an intricate interweaving of symbols drawn from Naga mythology, tradition, and folklore. In exploring the narrative and stylistic techniques of the two writers, it becomes evident that both authors employ a rich array of literary devices to convey profound insights into Naga society and culture. Through their narratives, they explore themes such as identity, gender, tradition, and modernity, drawing on the oral traditions and folklore of the Naga people to enrich their storytelling. Ao and Kire's narrative styles exhibit a keen attention to detail, with vivid descriptions and lyrical prose capturing the essence of life in Nagaland. Additionally, their use of symbolism, subtext, and metaphor adds depth to their narratives, inviting readers to dive deeper into the layers of meaning embedded within their works.

The juxtaposition of traditional elements with modern contexts accentuates the complexities of Naga society and the challenges of cultural preservation in the face of globalization. Both authors skillfully blend the past and the present, creating narratives that resonate with readers on both a cultural and universal level. Through their works, they offer valuable insights into the human condition, encouraging readers to reflect on the subtleties of identity, tradition, and change. Thus, the narrative and stylistic techniques employed by Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire serve as

powerful vehicles for storytelling, enabling them to convey timeless truths while celebrating the unique cultural heritage of the Naga people.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

Within the framework of this study's thematic focus, informed by an extensive review of pertinent literature encompassing books, journals, and related publications, a comprehensive synthesis has been achieved. By scrutinizing diverse perspectives and engaging in both subjective and objective analyses of literary dynamics, the ensuing discussions have yielded an array of interpretations and potential implications. This chapter culminates in the examination of the relationship between language, gender, and identity, encapsulating the culmination of the research endeavor.

Chapter I provided a comprehensive introduction to the relationship between gender, language, and identity, setting the stage for an exploration of these themes within the literary works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire. By looking into foundational concepts and multidisciplinary approaches within gender studies and language analysis, a groundwork has been laid for a deeper understanding of how these authors navigate and depict gender dynamics within their narratives. The examination of their selected works illuminated the complexities of gendered representation and identity construction within the context of Northeast Indian literature. This chapter traversed through key concepts of gendered language, tracing its roots from seminal works like Robin Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* to more contemporary perspectives such as those advocated by Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley. By researching foundational concepts and employing multidisciplinary approaches within gender studies and language analysis, a framework has been established for understanding how these authors portray gender dynamics within their narratives. The dichotomies inherent have also been researched to understand how women and

men speak and how they are spoken of, which shed light on the dynamics between language, gender, and societal norms. By recognizing the embeddedness of gender ideologies in everyday language and social practices, an understanding has arrived that gender is not innate but rather constructed and performed through linguistic and behavioral choices. This realization challenges us to deconstruct conventional notions of gender and embrace a more inclusive and deeper understanding of individual identity construction within diverse cultural contexts. As we move forward, it is imperative to continue interrogating and redefining these constructs to foster a more equitable and inclusive society.

The enduring vitality of the oral tradition among the Nagas stands as a testament to its profound significance in preserving the cultural identity and history of the community. Despite the waves of Westernization and Christianization that swept through the land, the Nagas have steadfastly held onto their oral heritage, recognizing its role as the custodian of their values, principles, and way of life. This tradition transcends mere storytelling; it serves as a repository of collective wisdom, guiding the younger generation in understanding their roots and shaping their identities. The conscious efforts to revive and restore this tradition show its enduring relevance in the face of modernity. Through storytelling sessions, morungs, and communal gatherings, the Nagas continue to pass down their rich heritage, ensuring that the flame of their oral tradition burns bright, illuminating their path into the future.

The literary contributions of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire stand as pillars in the landscape of Northeast Indian literature, particularly within the realm of Naga literature. Through their works, they weave together Naga cultural heritage with the modern challenges of societal transition and individual identity. Their writings not only serve as a bridge between the oral traditions of the past and the written forms of the present but also as windows into the evolving ethos of Naga society.

While Kire's imaginative narratives delve into philosophical realms and spiritual introspection, Ao's grounded realism reflects the social cohesion and political undercurrents of Naga life. Despite their distinct styles and artistic visions, both authors share a common commitment to exploring themes of gender identity, societal roles, language, and the enduring significance of oral tradition. Through their literature, they invite readers to embark on a journey that traverses the landscapes of tradition and modernity, offering profound insights into the complexities of Naga culture and the universal human experience.

Temsula Ao comes forth as an eminent literary figure in Northeast India, particularly within the realm of Naga literature. Through her evocative writings, she elaborately traverses Naga history, oral tradition, and feminist concerns. Ao's style, characterized by its economy and stark realism, mirrors a documentary approach, offering insightful commentary on the social issues permeating Naga society. Her memoir, *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*, serves as a reflection on her personal journey, revealing the struggles and triumphs of a woman striving for self-realization in a patriarchal milieu. By interweaving autobiographical elements with broader societal themes, Ao provides a detailed exploration of identity, gender, and societal norms.

In her short story collection, *These Hills Called Home*, Ao delves into the collective consciousness of the Naga people, offering a glimpse into their tumultuous history and evolving cultural landscape. Through diverse narratives, she tackles themes of ethnicity, nationalism, gender roles, and societal change, all set against the backdrop of political upheaval and social transformation. Ao's stories resonate with authenticity, capturing the essence of Naga life while offering universal insights into human experiences. In *Aosenla's Story*, Ao confronts the intricacies of gender dynamics and societal expectations, depicting the struggles of a Naga woman caught between tradition and modernity. Through the titular character, Ao explores themes of marriage, familial

obligations, and personal agency, shedding light on the complexities of social pressures faced by women in Naga society. Temsula Ao's writings serve as a testament to the resilience and richness of Naga culture, offering profound insights into the complexities of identity, tradition, and societal change. Through her evocative storytelling and detailed characterizations, Ao emerges as a voice of authenticity and empathy, illuminating the shared struggles and aspirations of her people.

Easterine Kire is a pioneering figure in Naga literature, particularly through her extensive contributions to English-language writing. Her works, spanning poetry, fiction, and children's stories, serve as a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the Naga people while advocating for the harmonious integration of traditional values with modernity. Kire's narratives, such as *When the River Sleeps* and *Don't Run My Love*, offer profound insights into Naga society, exploring themes of community, spirituality, and the struggle for balance between old and new ways of life. Through her writing, Kire challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about Northeastern literature, emphasizing the diversity and depth of literary expression beyond mere political themes. Instead, she foregrounds the importance of oral tradition and cultural heritage as integral components of Naga identity, employing elements from Naga folklore to enrich her storytelling. Her characters, while rooted in traditional frameworks, exhibit depth and complexity, reflecting human experience within the context of Naga society.

Kire's narrative style, characterized by simplicity and lyrical ease, captures the rhythm of life in rural Nagaland, seamlessly blending thrilling adventures with mundane daily routines. Her portrayal of Nagaland as both familiarly realistic and dreamlike shows her aestheticization of Naga culture and landscapes, highlighting the spiritual connection between the natural and supernatural realms. Easterine Kire's writings not only serve as a celebration of Naga identity and culture but also as a bridge between tradition and modernity, offering readers an understanding of Naga

society while affirming the enduring relevance of cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world. Through her literary endeavors, Kire continues to leave an indelible mark on Naga literature, inspiring future generations of writers to explore and celebrate their heritage with pride and authenticity.

Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao have emerged as prominent figures in the realm of English literature, particularly within academic circles in and around Nagaland. Their literary contributions are deeply rooted in the cultural heritage and historical context of Nagaland, drawing extensively from the rich oral tradition that has long characterized Naga literary culture. This reliance on oral tradition imbues their works with a distinct native flavor, enriching their narratives with the essence of Naga identity. Prior to the advent of modern education, Naga literary expression was primarily oral in nature. Kire and Ao have played pivotal roles in the transition of Naga storytelling from oral tradition to the written word. In doing so, they have not only preserved the history, folklore, ancestral wisdom, and cultural practices of the Naga people but have also addressed a myriad of social issues and challenges that require examination and reform.

The widespread critical acclaim garnered by Kire and Ao has been instrumental in altering the external perception of the Nagas and the Northeast region of India. Often stereotyped as a region plagued by violence, political unrest, and insurgency, their literature offers a nuanced portrayal that transcends such simplistic narratives. Through their writings, Kire and Ao have demonstrated that the region possesses a rich cultural and intellectual depth that extends far beyond its portrayal in mainstream media. As writers, Kire and Ao transcend the role of mere cultural informants, engaging with universal themes and concerns that resonate with readers beyond the confines of their geographical and cultural context. Their literary endeavors serve as powerful vehicles for

cultural preservation, social critique, and cross-cultural understanding, contributing significantly to the broader discourse on literature and identity.

Chapter II has provided a robust examination of the complexities of gendered representation within the unique context of Northeast Indian literature through the works of Easterine Kire: *Bitter Wormwood*, *A Respectable Woman*, and *Life on Hold*.

The exploration of gender dynamics within the narrative of *Bitter Wormwood* offers a high amount of societal norms, expectations, and individual agency amidst the backdrop of Naga culture and historical context. The depiction of Mose's life journey and the parallel trajectories of other male figures in the narrative shed light on the complex correlation between gender roles, societal expectations, and personal agency, offering insights into the broader societal patterns prevalent in Nagaland. The portrayal of fertility and societal expectations through characters like Sabunou highlights the profound significance placed on women's reproductive roles within the community, showing the cultural implications of infertility and the pressures associated with fulfilling traditional gender roles. The exploration of politics and gender roles reveals the distinct roles assigned to men and women within the political sphere, as well as the formidable challenges faced by female candidates in seeking political representation, echoing real-world dynamics observed in Nagaland. Furthermore, the narrative navigates gender roles amidst rebellion, showcasing a community united by a shared cause while highlighting individual agency and cultural fervor in challenging traditional paradigms. Finally, the unfolding of gender through time unveils the intricate composition of gender within the novel, shaped by historical and cultural elements embedded within the community, and underscored by a collective resilience and adaptability amidst societal expectations. Overall, *Bitter Wormwood* serves as an exploration of gender

dynamics within the Naga context, offering an understanding of the complexities and nuances of gender roles, societal expectations, and individual agency within a community grappling with historical turmoil and cultural identity.

The exploration of gender dynamics in Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* offers insights into the interplay between societal expectations, individual agency, and evolving perspectives within Naga society. Through meticulous storytelling and vivid character portrayals, Kire illuminates the multifaceted nature of gender constructs, inviting readers to critically examine the enduring influence of historical norms on contemporary identity formation. The novel delves into gender roles, revealing how societal expectations shape individuals' self-worth and acceptance. From the portrayal of women struggling with societal judgments to the examination of traditional beliefs regarding women's autonomy, Kire navigates the complex landscape of gender dynamics in depth. *A Respectable Woman* serves as a mirror reflecting the enduring impact of historical events and societal norms on the construction of gender. The narrative prompts readers to question deeply ingrained beliefs and fosters dialogue on the need for transformative change in gender dynamics. By presenting a dichotomy between tradition and progressive ideals, the novel compels society to reevaluate and redefine its treatment of women, advocating for a more equitable and inclusive understanding of gender roles. The novel stands as a testament to the resilience and agency of individuals within Naga society, while also serving as a call to action for societal evolution towards greater gender equality and empowerment.

A Respectable Woman also explores power dynamics within relationships, shedding light on the pervasive influence of gender norms on individual agency and societal structures. Through meticulous storytelling and vivid character portrayals, Kire exposes the oppressive nature of societal expectations, particularly regarding the dominance of men and the subjugation of women

within marital relationships. The novel critically examines the belief in male dominance and the subsequent silencing of women, revealing how societal norms perpetuate unequal power dynamics. Characters like Beinuo and Kevinuo exemplify the struggle of women who face societal condemnation for challenging spousal abuse, highlighting the pervasive fear and oppression in gender norms. Kire also checks into the societal excuses and lack of male accountability surrounding alcohol consumption, exposing the double standards that shield men from full responsibility for their actions. Additionally, the novel explores the lifelong impact of childhood conditioning on shaping individual behaviors and societal expectations. Through portrayals of parental influence and gendered upbringing, Kire highlights the roots of gender disparities and the perpetuation of traditional roles and expectations.

A Respectable Woman serves as a powerful commentary on the insidious nature of gender norms and the urgent need for societal evolution towards greater equality and empowerment. Through its exploration of power dynamics, societal excuses, and childhood conditioning, the novel compels readers to confront deeply ingrained beliefs and advocate for transformative change in gender dynamics. Through meticulous storytelling and detailed character portrayals, Kire unveils the gender hierarchy embedded within societal structures, particularly evident within the context of marriage. Central to the narrative is the exploration of honor and obligation for women upon entering marriage, where societal expectations dictate silent obedience and adherence to prescribed roles. Despite a silent awareness of their treatment, female characters hesitate to challenge these norms openly, revealing the profound influence of childhood conditioning and societal silence. The novel sheds light on the pervasive nature of gender expectations collectively crafted by society, assigning distinct roles for both genders from a young age. The universalization of these

roles, exemplified by the dialogue within the text, shows the normalization of gendered expectations, perpetuating a cycle of societal conditioning from one generation to the next.

Within the realm of marriage, the narrative exposes the gendered pressures faced by both women and men, challenging the notion of matrimony as a universally desirable pursuit. Women are burdened with expectations of timely marriage, while men face pressure to secure financial stability, highlighting the clash between individual desires and societal ideals.

Furthermore, the novel deals into the limitations of personal agency, particularly for women, in making decisions about their own lives, as external voices often shape and even decide marriage choices. *A Respectable Woman* serves as a scholarly discourse on the pervasive influence of societal expectations on gender dynamics, prompting a critical examination of norms and advocating for transformative change. As scholars engage with the complexities of gender roles, societal pressures, and individual agency depicted in the text, the call to action emerges to challenge age-old norms and prioritize personal choices and happiness over predetermined gender roles in the pursuit for societal reevaluation to cultivate more authentic and fulfilling relationships. In the exploration of gender preferences, their implications, and the resulting societal expectations, the novel invites critical reflection on the historical context, societal perceptions, and profound impact of gender biases on individuals. Through meticulous storytelling and detailed character portrayals, Kire unveils the persistent preference for male children deeply rooted in historical conventions, manifesting in various forms such as societal attitudes, media representations, and familial expectations. The narrative vividly illustrates how this preference for male children, exemplified through Meselhou's disappointment at the birth of his daughter, perpetuates beliefs about the importance of male heirs in continuing family lineage and inheriting paternal responsibilities. Such historical practices, compounded by societal pressures, contribute to the

perpetuation of gender biases and the imposition of rigid expectations on individuals from a young age. Kire's exploration of societal expectations on both male and female individuals highlights the profound impact of gender preferences on personal identity and life trajectories. The pressure to conform to predefined roles can lead to internal struggles, feelings of inadequacy, and resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms, highlighting the detrimental effects of societal demands on mental health.

A Respectable Woman also serves as a timeless reminder of the fluidity of gender roles and the possibility of forging one's destiny beyond the constraints of societal expectations. The narrative invites readers to question the status quo, encouraging a reevaluation of ingrained biases and the cultivation of a society where gender preferences do not dictate the worth or potential of an individual. Through critical examination and introspection, we aspire to foster a future where individuals are free to express their identities authentically, charting their paths with unwavering determination and self-belief. Through the lens of characters like Kevinuo and Ato, who defy traditional gender roles and societal expectations, the narrative champions the triumph of individual agency over prescribed norms. Their resilience and determination serve as a testament to the transformative power of open-mindedness and self-belief in challenging and redefining societal norms.

Through the exploration of gender roles and societal expectations within Easterine Kire's *Life on Hold*, a scholarly discourse emerges, illuminating the complex interplay between individual aspirations, societal norms, and the enduring impact of insurgency-ridden times on personal and collective identities. Kire's evocative storytelling not only unveils the stark realities endured by the Nagas during tumultuous years but also delves into the dynamics of personal relationships and the

profound influence of societal expectations on individual agency and identity. The narrative adeptly dissects the societal construction of gender roles, revealing the pervasive nature of gender biases and the pressures imposed on women to conform to predefined norms. Through the character of Nime, readers are confronted with the internal conflicts faced by women as they navigate societal expectations, challenging traditional notions of femininity and advocating for individual autonomy. The novel exposes the differential treatment experienced by boys and girls, highlighting the arbitrary nature of societal expectations in shaping gender roles. By interrogating the undervaluation of non-income-generating roles traditionally associated with women, the narrative prompts critical reflection on the complexities of gender dynamics.

Ultimately, *Life on Hold* serves as a poignant reminder of the resilience and unwavering spirit of the Naga people amidst adversity. By unraveling the intricacies of love, identity, and gender expectations amidst insurgency, the novel invites readers to contemplate the enduring consequences of societal pressures on personal and collective identities. Kire's narrative beckons us to reimagine societal norms and foster a future where individual aspirations are celebrated, free from the constraints of arbitrary gender roles. The portrayal of Nime's journey from adolescence to womanhood vividly illustrates the burdens and confusion associated with transitioning into adulthood amidst deeply ingrained gender norms. The pressure to conform to societal expectations regarding marriage and family roles is palpable, highlighting the pervasive nature of gender socialization in shaping individual identities. Furthermore, the narrative sheds light on the intersecting dynamics of power, privilege, and patriarchal control within familial and societal structures, underscoring the challenges women face in asserting their autonomy and pursuing their aspirations. The narrative confronts the entrenched gender biases and stereotypes that perpetuate inequality and restrict women's opportunities for economic independence. Nime's aspirations to

secure employment are met with skepticism and dismissal, reflecting the broader societal norms that prioritize marriage and domesticity over women's professional ambitions. The portrayal of Abeiu's mother as a savvy businesswoman challenges these norms, offering a glimpse of empowerment and possibility beyond traditional gender roles. Overall, *Life on Hold* serves as a poignant exploration of the complexities of gender socialization and the enduring struggle for women's agency and empowerment in the face of societal pressures. By interrogating the constraints imposed by patriarchal norms and advocating for gender equality and inclusivity, the narrative calls for a reimagining of societal expectations and a commitment to creating more equitable and supportive environments for women to thrive.

Bitter Wormwood meticulously dissects the gendered landscape within Nagaland's cultural and historical context, unraveling the societal structures deeply entrenched in a patriarchal framework. *A Respectable Woman* navigates power dynamics and historical influence, challenging readers to confront societal norms that shape individual and collective identities. *Life on Hold* delves into the personal and societal struggles amidst insurgency-ridden years, illuminating the enduring consequences of violence on identity and gender roles. In conclusion, the synthesis of Easterine Kire's novels—*Bitter Wormwood*, *A Respectable Woman*, and *Life on Hold*—alongside the corresponding research findings, offers insight into the intricate challenges faced by the Naga people, particularly women, across historical and insurgent epochs. Through these narratives, readers are provided with a lens into the collective Naga identity, societal norms, and gender roles, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity construction, societal expectations, and the enduring impact of violence.

Collectively, this synthesis stands as a discourse on the challenges faced by the Naga people, urging readers to contemplate the pervasive influence of gender constructs, societal norms, and

historical events on individual and collective identities. Beyond the literary narratives, it resonates with a broader imperative for societal transformation—a call for inclusivity, understanding, and the dismantling of deeply rooted biases. As readers engage with these profound findings, they are invited to contribute to a more equitable and compassionate world, where empowerment and resilience define our identity.

In summation, this chapter has provided a robust examination of the relationship between gender, language, and identity, offering a comprehensive foundation for further exploration of these themes within the literary works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire. Through a meticulous exploration of foundational concepts and the application of multidisciplinary approaches within gender studies and language analysis, a framework for comprehending how these authors navigate and depict gender dynamics within their narratives has been established. Moving forward, the analysis of their selected works holds the promise of illuminating the complexities of gendered representation and identity construction within the unique context of Northeast Indian literature. This chapter has traversed through pivotal concepts of gendered language, tracing its evolution from seminal works such as Robin Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* to more contemporary perspectives advocated by scholars like Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley. This exploration has shed light on the inherent dichotomies in understanding how women and men speak and are spoken of, thereby elucidating the dynamic relationship between language, gender, and societal norms. By acknowledging the pervasive influence of gender ideologies in everyday language and social practices, we have underscored the constructed and performed nature of gender, urging a departure from conventional notions and advocating for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of individual identity construction within diverse cultural contexts.

Additionally, the enduring vitality of the oral tradition among the Nagas has been presented as a testament to its profound significance in preserving the cultural identity and history of the community. Despite the onslaught of Westernization and Christianization, the Nagas have valiantly upheld their oral heritage, recognizing its role as a guardian of their values, principles, and way of life. This tradition, serves not only as a repository of collective wisdom but also as a guiding beacon for the younger generation in comprehending their roots and shaping their identities. The deliberate endeavors to revive and perpetuate this tradition reveals its enduring relevance in the face of modernity, emphasizing the priceless cultural wealth it embodies.

Chapter III firstly explores language and literature to set a base for an understanding of human communication, individual expression, and societal dynamics. Authors harness the power of language to craft narratives that reflect the complexities of human existence, offering insights into the universal truths and timeless significance of human experiences and literature serves as a bridge between individuals and the socio-cultural realities of their time, providing a lens through which to examine the dynamics of relationships, societal norms, and historical contexts. The works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire exemplify the transformative potential of literature in depicting the socio-cultural life of the Nagas and preserving their oral history and cultural heritage. Through their narratives, they not only shed light on the language usage and its impact on communication and relationship dynamics but also reveal the social constructs that shape Naga society. Their exploration of language serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of literature in illuminating the complexities of human experience and fostering a deeper understanding of cultural identity and societal evolution. Thus, the study of language and literature not only enriches our

comprehension of the world but also provides invaluable insights into the human condition and the interplay of language, culture, and society.

The analysis of language usage in the select works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire provides a profound insight into the complexities of Naga society, culture, and heritage. Ao's restrained narrative style, characterized by subtle details in language and reliance on narration rather than dialogue, offers a glimpse into the private lives and societal concerns of the Nagas, particularly during the mid-twentieth century. Through her use of subtext, gestures, and character dynamics, Ao skillfully navigates the intricacies of gender, social background, and ethnicity, thereby enriching her narratives with authenticity and depth. On the other hand, Kire's lyrical prose and incorporation of Naga folklore, myths, and spiritual beliefs in her novels highlights the rich cultural heritage and oral tradition of the Nagas. By blending elements of magic realism with the real, Kire creates a narrative landscape that blurs the lines between fantasy and reality, offering readers a deeper understanding of Naga cultural identity and beliefs. Her meticulous attention to detail in describing Naga villages, forests, and rural landscapes imbues her narratives with local color and vivid imagery, thereby bringing to life the socio-cultural milieu of Nagaland.

As significant figures in the promotion and dissemination of Naga culture, Ao and Kire's literary contributions serve as invaluable repositories of Naga traditions, beliefs, and aspirations. Through their prose and poetry, they celebrate the richness of Naga culture while advocating for its preservation and recognition on a broader stage. Their works not only offer readers from diverse backgrounds an insight into Naga life but also reflect their roles as custodians of Naga heritage and agents of social change. Thus, the analysis of language in their works illuminates the profound impact of literature in preserving cultural identity and fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

Temsula Ao's short story *The Night*, from her collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone*, explores of the role of language in shaping societal dynamics and individual experiences, particularly concerning gender and power dynamics within the Naga community. Through Imnala's narrative, Ao masterfully unveils the complexities of patriarchal structures, where language becomes a tool for asserting dominance, preserving societal norms, and perpetuating inequalities. The story's portrayal of Imnala's struggle against the stigma of her illicit affair exposes the societal imbalance that holds women disproportionately accountable for their actions while granting men impunity. Through character interactions and dialogue, Ao deftly illustrates how language is employed to negotiate relationships, maintain social hierarchies, and convey emotional nuances within familial dynamics. The contrast between Alemba's (the baby's father) societal privilege, as evidenced by his ability to absolve himself of responsibility through mere acknowledgment of paternity, and Imnala's societal condemnation reveals the enduring struggle for agency and equality faced by women within patriarchal societies.

The Night examines language, power, and gender within the context of Naga society, shedding light on the pervasive influence of linguistic interactions in shaping individual experiences and societal structures. Through her meticulous exploration of language dynamics, Temsula Ao invites readers to reflect critically on the complex dynamics of power and agency inherent in linguistic exchanges, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural landscape of Nagaland.

Temsula Ao's short story *The Journey*, from her collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone*, explores the complexities of communication, emotional expression, and cultural transition within the context of Naga society. Through the character of Tinula, Ao masterfully navigates the depth of language, both verbal and non-verbal, to reveal the psychological intricacies

underlying individual experiences and societal upheavals. The story artfully juxtaposes the traditional simplicity of Naga village life with the structured modernity of a boarding school, mirroring the broader transition of Naga society during the mid-twentieth century. Tinula's literal and metaphorical journey becomes a poignant metaphor for the displacement and loss experienced by the Naga people amidst societal upheavals. Ao skillfully captures the practical concerns and emotional subtexts underlying Tinula's journey, highlighting the fragility of childhood innocence and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Through sparse dialogue and rich characterization, Ao illuminates the ordinary struggles of ordinary people, offering profound insights into the human condition and the transformative power of language in navigating life's challenges. *The Journey* exemplifies Ao's ability to give voice to the untold narratives of a society in transition, reminding us of the enduring significance of even the seemingly trivial moments in shaping our understanding of loss, resilience, and cultural identity. Through Tinula's story, Ao invites readers to contemplate the complexities of communication, emotional expression, and cultural adaptation, ultimately underscoring the universal themes of human experience that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

Temsula Ao's story *A New Chapter* from her collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone*, explores the multifaceted role of language within the socio-political landscape of post-colonial Nagaland. Through the lens of sociolinguistics, Ao unveils the intricate ways in which language shapes and reflects social structures, cultural identities, and power dynamics within the community. The narrative delves into the language of negotiation and manipulation employed by characters like Nungsang and Bhandari, illustrating how linguistic strategies are wielded to navigate the complex web of socioeconomic realities. Additionally, Ao elucidates the sociolinguistic features embedded in cultural symbols, political ideology, and symbolic actions,

highlighting the profound impact of language beyond verbal expressions. Through characters such as Nungsang and Merenla, Ao vividly portrays the intricate interplay between language, identity, and power. The use of Hindi by Bhandari not only signifies his ethnic background but also serves as a tool for negotiation and manipulation in the socio-political milieu of Nagaland. Similarly, the symbolic language of the hornbill bird during political processions reflects deeper cultural sentiments and influences voter perceptions. Merenla's symbolic act of smashing pumpkins becomes a powerful expression of her struggle for identity and agency in the face of societal oppression and exploitation. Overall, *A New Chapter* masterfully demonstrates how language operates as a dynamic force that shapes social hierarchies, cultural identities, and individual agency within the complexities of Nagaland's post-colonial landscape.

In analyzing Ao's stories, *The Night*, *The Journey*, and *A New Chapter*, we gain deep insights into how language intricately influences societal interactions, personal perspectives, and gender-based power dynamics within Nagaland. Ao's meticulous scrutiny of language unveils its dual role in both mirroring and perpetuating social hierarchies, cultural identities, and struggles for autonomy within patriarchal contexts. Collectively, Ao's works accentuate the enduring struggle for autonomy and equality within patriarchal societies, while highlighting language's transformative potential in shaping societal dynamics and personal experiences. Through her unique literary voice, Ao amplifies the unheard narratives of the Nagas, offering a reflection on human existence and the enduring influence of language in shaping our perceptions of self and society.

Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* offers a rich exploration of the multifaceted role of language within the context of Naga culture and folklore. Through the protagonist Vilie's journey, the narrative delves into the transformative power of words, from their ability to navigate interpersonal interactions and negotiate trade relations to their potency in confronting supernatural

challenges and asserting cultural identity. Kire adeptly weaves together themes of orality, generational differences in language usage, and the spiritual significance of language, showcasing the pivotal role of communication in shaping individual and collective experiences. Vilie's quest for the mystical heart-stone not only serves as a metaphor for the pursuit of spiritual knowledge but also highlights the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world, wherein language emerges as a bridge between the realms of the mundane and the mystical. Through its portrayal of linguistic dynamics and their socio-cultural implications, Kire's narrative invites readers to contemplate the enduring power of words in shaping perceptions, forging connections, and navigating the complexities of existence.

Easterine Kire's exploration of language and communication in *Don't Run My Love* offers a reflection on the complexities of human relationships within the backdrop of Naga culture. Through the dynamics between characters like Atuonuo, Kevi, and Visenuo, Kire highlights the consequences of miscommunication, secrecy, and societal expectations. The novel not only delves into the nuances of verbal and non-verbal communication but also reveals the significance of oral traditions in passing down cultural norms and values. Kire's lyrical prose beautifully captures the essence of Naga landscape and culture, inviting readers into a world where the supernatural and the mundane coexist seamlessly. Ultimately, *Don't Run My Love* stand as a testament to the richness of Naga heritage and the timeless themes of love, loss, and resilience that transcend cultural boundaries.

In conclusion, Chapter 3 explores the significance of language and literature in understanding human communication, individual expression, and societal dynamics. It highlights language as a multifaceted medium for conveying ideas, emotions, and cultural nuances within a community. The works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire exemplify the transformative potential of literature

in depicting the socio-cultural life of the Nagas and preserving their oral history and cultural heritage. Through their literary contributions, Ao and Kire celebrate Naga culture while advocating for its preservation and recognition on a broader stage. Their works serve as repositories of Naga traditions, beliefs, and aspirations, inviting readers to understand Naga life and reflecting their roles as custodians of Naga heritage and agents of social change. The analysis of language in their works illuminates the impact of literature in preserving cultural identity and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

The historical trajectory of English literature from the era of Chaucer to the present day highlights the multifaceted role of language in shaping cultural identity and resisting colonial hegemony. While early English writers sought to promote their vernacular language as a means of communication and preservation, the colonial era witnessed the imposition of European languages as tools of cultural dominance. However, the process of decolonization brought about a resurgence of indigenous languages as instruments of resistance. Interestingly, some writers, including Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao from Nagaland, have adopted English to subvert cultural imperialism and highlight the importance of preserving one's heritage. This dynamic demonstrates the complex interplay between language, power, and identity. Moreover, the emergence of English as a unifying literary language in diverse communities, such as the Naga tribes, highlights its role as a medium for cultural exchange and cohesion. Ultimately, through their literary contributions, Kire, Ao, and others have not only shaped the literary landscape but also contributed significantly to the preservation and celebration of their cultural heritage.

Chapter IV has looked into the exploration of identity from female perspectives within the literary oeuvre of Temsula Ao. Situated within a patriarchal milieu, Ao's female characters navigate the

challenges of asserting their identities amidst societal constraints. Ao's meticulous exploration of identity in works such as *Aosenla's Story* and *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* illuminates the intricate processes involved in the formation of selfhood amidst societal expectations and cultural influences. Through her narratives, Ao probes into the complexities of identity formation, highlighting the interplay between personal experiences, societal norms, and cultural heritage.

This chapter situates Ao's literary contributions within the broader discourse of feminist theory and activism. Across diverse cultural and social contexts, feminist discourse has engaged with the imperative of affirming women's place in patriarchal societies and advocating for their autonomy and empowerment. Ao emerges as a significant figure within this continuum, intertwining feminist concerns with the preservation of cultural heritage and ethnic identity among the Nagas of Northeast India. Through her writings, Ao amplifies the voices of women while advocating for the recognition and safeguarding of cultural roots amidst the pressures of modernity.

Ao's depiction of the search for identity within her works shows complex relationship between individual agency, societal expectations, and cultural influences. By engaging with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Ao highlights the profound impact of experiences and societal constructs on individual identity formation. Through her literary endeavors, Ao offers insights into the myriad ways in which individuals navigate and negotiate their identities within patriarchal societies, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics and the quest for selfhood. The exploration of identity within Temsula Ao's novel *Aosenla's Story* offers understanding of the complexities inherent in the formation and negotiation of selfhood within a patriarchal society. Through the lens of feminist theory, this research has examined the various manifestations of patriarchy as depicted in Ao's

narrative, particularly focusing on the protagonist Aosenla's journey of self-realization amidst oppressive familial and societal expectations.

The pervasive influence of patriarchal oppression is evident throughout Aosenla's narrative, as she grapples with societal norms and familial pressures that seek to confine her within traditional gender roles. The analysis has elucidated how Aosenla's initial defiance against societal expectations gradually wanes in the face of overwhelming familial and societal pressures, leading to her submission to the dictates of tradition and duty. Within this context, the research has highlighted the psychological subjugation of women by patriarchy, as exemplified by Aosenla's internal conflict and her eventual acceptance of her predetermined roles as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. The examination of intergenerational dynamics within the novel has revealed the evolving nature of gender roles and societal expectations within the Naga community. Through the depiction of characters such as Aosenla's mother, grandmother, and daughters, the research has explored the tensions between individual aspirations and familial obligations, shedding light on the enduring legacy of patriarchy and the struggle for gender equality.

The analysis has extended beyond Aosenla's narrative to encompass a diverse array of characters, each grappling with their own struggles and societal expectations. Through Bendang's illegitimate daughter, Akala, and the character of Doctor Kilang, the research has elucidated the devastating effects of societal stigma on individual well-being and the complexities of identity and professional ethics within the community. In essence, the complexity of identity within *Aosenla's Story* serves as a microcosm of broader societal dynamics, highlighting the interconnectedness of personal experiences, societal expectations, and cultural norms. Through Aosenla's journey of self-acceptance and empowerment, the novel offers insights into the transformative power of resilience, compassion, and self-realization in challenging patriarchal structures and redefining societal

norms. Ultimately, Ao's narrative serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the enduring quest for selfhood within the complexities of human experience.

Through the symbolism of the house, Aosenla's transformation from a submissive daughter-in-law to an empowered individual is vividly depicted, highlighting the impermanence of societal roles and the enduring essence of identity. The portrayal of patriarchy, particularly through Bendang's father, exemplifies the traditional power dynamics within Naga society and their impact on individual identities. Aosenla and Bendang's struggles with communication and emotional expression highlights the challenges inherent in navigating gender roles and societal expectations. However, amidst these challenges, moments of growth and understanding emerge, leading to a gradual shift towards mutual respect and empathy within their relationship. Through Aosenla's journey, readers are invited to reflect on the transformative power of love, self-awareness, and resilience in overcoming societal limitations and embracing one's true self. Ultimately, Aosenla's Story serves as a testament to the human spirit's capacity to triumph over adversity and find contentment amidst life's trials, echoing the author's own journey of self-discovery and empowerment.

In the pages of *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*, Temsula Ao masterfully navigates the terrain of personal narrative and societal reflection, offering readers a multi-view of identity, agency, and the human spirit. Through her memoir, Ao not only unveils the multifaceted layers of her own journey but also checks into broader socio-cultural dynamics, particularly regarding gender roles and familial relationships. As she chronicles the ordinary and transformative episodes of her life, Ao elucidates the complexities between personal experiences and societal forces in shaping individual identity, especially within the context of womanhood. Her narrative shows the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, illuminating the

enduring quest for self-actualization and belonging amidst life's myriad challenges. By interweaving personal anecdotes with profound reflections, Ao enriches the ongoing discourse on identity, leaving an indelible mark on readers' hearts and minds. Through her memoir, she affirms the intrinsic value of every individual's journey, underscoring the profound truth that the quest for self-worth and authenticity transcends time, circumstance, and societal expectations. In essence, *Once Upon a Life* stands as a timeless testament to the enduring power of storytelling and the transformative potential of embracing one's true self.

Temsula Ao's works, *Aosenla's Story* and *Once Upon a Life*, offer profound insights into the intricate nature of identity, illuminating its various dimensions and the dynamic interplay between personal agency and societal expectations. Through rich narrative exploration, Ao delves into the complexities of self-identity, highlighting the roles of gender, tradition, and circumstance in shaping individuals' perceptions of themselves. Her portrayal of the struggles and triumphs of women in patriarchal societies serves as a compelling social commentary, highlighting the resilience and potential for self-actualization even in the face of adversity. Whether through stoic acceptance or proactive adaptation, Ao's characters navigate the nuances of identity with realism and depth, offering readers valuable perspectives on the human experience. Ultimately, Ao's works stand as poignant reflections on the quest for self-discovery and fulfillment in a world fraught with challenges and opportunities.

In conclusion, this chapter situates Ao's female characters within a patriarchal milieu, where they confront challenges in asserting their identities amidst societal constraints. The research aimed to discern whether these obstacles primarily stem from external patriarchal structures or are influenced by internalized constraints. Additionally, the chapter aimed to delineate the struggles encountered by male characters in conveying their experiences within the narrative discourse,

providing a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics within Ao's works. Drawing from psychological and sociological frameworks, the chapter highlights the multifaceted nature of identity, encompassing individual traits, social roles, and the fluid interplay between them. Ao's meticulous exploration of identity illuminates the intricate processes involved in selfhood formation amidst societal expectations and cultural influences.

Through her narratives, Ao probes into the complexities of identity formation, emphasizing the interplay between personal experiences, societal norms, and cultural heritage. Furthermore, the chapter situates Ao's literary contributions within the broader discourse of feminist theory and activism, emphasizing the imperative of affirming women's place in patriarchal societies and advocating for their autonomy and empowerment. Ao emerges as a significant figure within this continuum, intertwining feminist concerns with the preservation of cultural heritage and ethnic identity among the Nagas of Northeast India. Through her writings, Ao amplifies the voices of women while advocating for the recognition and safeguarding of cultural roots amidst the pressures of modernity. In essence, the research findings showcase the complexity of identity within Ao's works, highlighting the interplay between individual agency, societal expectations, and cultural influences. Through in-depth exploration, Ao offers insights into the myriad ways in which individuals navigate and negotiate their identities within patriarchal societies, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics and the quest for selfhood.

Chapter V analyzed the narrative techniques employed by Naga authors Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire in their respective literary works. Through meticulous examination, the chapter elucidates how the authors utilize narrative construction, stylistic choices, and thematic exploration to convey profound insights into Naga society, culture, and identity. The chapter highlights the

narrative ethos shared by Ao and Kire, deeply rooted in the oral traditions of the Naga people, while also acknowledging their individual artistic sensibilities and approaches. Ao's narratives are characterized by a historical consciousness, critiquing socio-cultural norms, while Kire celebrates Naga cultural heritage through the incorporation of folklore and mythology. Despite variances in narrative approaches, both authors pivot their storytelling around Naga ethnic identity, amplifying the voices of Naga women and articulating the collective ethos of the Naga community. Furthermore, the chapter examines the narrative methodologies, literary forms, and artistic techniques employed by Ao and Kire, positioning them as significant contributors to the landscape of Naga literature. Their works contextualize Naga narratives within the broader framework of Nagaland's cultural, historical, and societal atmosphere, facilitating a dynamic dialogue between tradition and modernity. Moreover, their narratives resonate with themes of identity crisis and the recovery of cultural identity in post-colonial settings, reflecting a sense of historical and cultural consciousness unique to the Naga experience.

Both writers relied extensively on the oral traditions of the Naga people. By choosing to write in a simple and straightforward manner, Ao and Kire reflect the natural flow of language found in traditional Naga storytelling. This deliberate choice connects their works with Naga culture, preserving its essence and collective memory. While both authors explore similar themes, they carve out their own identities through their unique artistic visions and storytelling techniques. Ao and Kire employ various literary tools to shape their narratives, creating distinct flavors in their writing that echo throughout their works. This individualistic approach not only highlights their personal styles but also enriches the broader landscape of Naga literature, offering readers a diverse array of voices and perspectives to engage with.

In Ao's storytelling, one can discern history delicately imbued into her narratives, each theme meticulously placed to illuminate the complexities of Nagaland's past. Through her prose, she not only chronicles historical events but also offers incisive commentary on the prevailing socio-cultural norms, challenging the status quo with profound insight and unwavering conviction. Conversely, in Kire's literary realm, the air is suffused with the mystical fragrance of Naga folklore and mythology, each tale more vibrant than the other, of ancient wisdom and timeless beauty. With exquisite craftsmanship, she transports readers to the heart of her native land, where the spirits of ancestors dance amidst the whispering leaves, and the echoes of legends reverberate through the mist-covered hills.

Despite the divergent paths they traverse in their narrative journeys, both Ao and Kire converge upon a common destination—the celebration of Naga cultural heritage and the elevation of Naga voices. Through their storytelling prowess, they offer a kaleidoscopic view of Naga ethnic identity, amplifying the often-muted voices of Naga women and articulating the collective ethos of their community with eloquence and grace. In the broader literary discourse, their narratives serve as beacons, illuminating the path toward understanding, empathy, and appreciation for the richness of Naga culture and heritage.

Analysis of the narrative methodologies, literary forms, and artistic techniques employed by authors constitutes an integral aspect of scholarly discourse surrounding their literary outputs. Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire emerge as significant contributors to the landscape of Naga literature, expanding its horizons and enriching thematic representations. Their writings contextualize Naga narratives within the broader framework of Nagaland's cultural, historical, and societal atmosphere, facilitating a dynamic dialogue between tradition and modernity. Their works resonate with themes of identity crisis and recovery of cultural identity in post-colonial settings,

reflecting a sense of historical and cultural consciousness unique to the Naga experience. Through their narrative styles, Ao and Kire highlight their concerns as writers, using local names, native settings, and symbols to underscore the importance of preserving Naga heritage amidst evolving cultural landscapes.

The literary endeavors of Ao and Kire offer insights into Naga society, culture, and identity, with a particular focus on the Ao and Angami communities, respectively. Through their deliberate incorporation of indigenous nomenclature, both authors infuse their narratives with a deep sense of cultural authenticity, anchoring the stories within the distinct cultural contexts of their tribes. This stylistic choice not only fosters a sense of narrative cohesion but also portrays the intimate connection between the characters and their cultural milieu, enriching the storytelling experience with a sense of cultural immediacy and authenticity.

The narrative styles employed by Ao and Kire serve as effective vehicles for exploring various thematic concerns within Naga society. Ao's narratives often explore the dynamics of gender roles and societal expectations, illuminating the tensions and conflicts engendered thereby. Through the character interactions and dialogue, she adeptly courses through the idiosyncratic social dynamics prevalent within her narrative context, offering insights into the amusing peculiarities embedded within Naga community life. On the other hand, Kire's narrative style evolves gradually across her literary trajectory, transitioning towards a more lyrical tonality while preserving the authentic simplicity of her storytelling voice. Her works explore themes of gender dynamics, communal ethos, and the celebration of Naga cultural heritage, offering multifaceted representations of Naga identity within the broader literary discourse.

The narrative methodologies employed by Ao and Kire facilitate a dynamic dialogue between tradition and modernity, bridging temporal and cultural divides within the evolving scenario of Naga identity. Through their literary expressions, both authors serve as custodians of Naga heritage, transmitting and reinterpreting the cultural legacies of their communities for contemporary audiences. Situated within the broader context of post-colonial literature, their works offer a reflection on the historical and cultural consciousness of the Naga people, highlighting the enduring resilience and richness of Naga heritage amidst the challenges of modernization and globalization. The literary legacies trailblazed by Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire stand as vibrant threads in Naga literature, each word a brushstroke painting the vivid portrait of Naga cultural identity. Their written offerings transcend mere storytelling; they are a kaleidoscope of insight, inviting readers to embark on immersive journeys through the heartlands of Naga society and culture. With masterful strokes of narrative finesse, Ao and Kire unfurl the layers of Naga identity, inviting readers to traverse the labyrinthine pathways of tradition, history, and contemporary life. Their literary creations serve as portals, transporting readers to the soul-stirring landscapes of Naga ethos, where the whispers of ancestors mingle with the rustle of bamboo leaves. In their narratives, one finds not merely stories, but windows into the rich tapestry of Naga heritage—a heritage that pulses with resilience, diversity, and enduring beauty.

Temsula Ao's anthology *These Hills Called Home* is proof of her mastery of narrative technique and her profound understanding of the complexities of Naga society. Through her skillful use of symbolism, subtext, metaphor, and subplot, Ao works through questions of identity, gender, class, and politics within the Naga community, offering readers a varied exploration of life in the Naga hills. The use of symbolism imbues Ao's narratives with layers of meaning, inviting readers to delve beneath the surface and contemplate the deeper truths embedded within the text. Subtle

nuances of societal norms and values are conveyed through symbolic representations, enriching the narrative texture and inviting readers to contemplate the underlying significance of seemingly mundane details. Ao's adept use of subtext adds depth and complexity to her stories, subtly conveying underlying tensions and conflicts simmering beneath the surface of social interactions. Through understated dialogue and character interactions, she illuminates the complexities of human relationships and societal dynamics, inviting readers to engage critically with the themes at hand.

Metaphor serves as another powerful tool in Ao's narrative arsenal, allowing her to draw insightful parallels between disparate elements and shed light on the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate aspects of Naga society. Through metaphorical language, Ao invites readers to explore the deeper resonances of her narratives, uncovering hidden truths and universal themes that transcend the specificity of the Naga experience. Furthermore, Ao's use of subplots allows for the exploration of diverse perspectives and experiences within the broader context of Naga society. By interweaving multiple narrative threads, she creates a rich and multi-dimensional portrayal of life in the Naga hills, offering readers a panoramic view of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the social fabric. Overall, Temsula Ao's narrative technique facilitates a profound exploration of Naga society, culture, and identity, inviting readers on a journey of discovery and introspection. Through her evocative storytelling, Ao sheds light on the rich tapestry of life in the Naga hills, offering a deeply empathetic understanding of the challenges and triumphs of the Naga people.

Temsula Ao's memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* stands as a deeply personal and introspective exploration of her life's journey, struggles, and aspirations. Through the masterful use of narrative techniques, Ao invites readers into her inner world, sharing intimate

reflections on her experiences with sensitivity and honesty. The memoir's structure, meticulously divided into three chronological parts, provides a coherent framework for exploring Ao's life story, allowing readers to grasp the significance of each episode in her journey. Ao's use of the first-person point of view lends a sense of immediacy and intimacy to her narrative, fostering a deeper connection between the reader and her story. Throughout the memoir, Ao reflects on the impact of her childhood trauma on her identity formation, parenting style, and attitude toward life. Her exploration of her evolving feminine identity offers insights into the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies, resonating with readers on a deeply personal level. Central to Ao's narrative is the reconstruction of her parents' personal histories, which serves as a means of honoring their legacies and preserving their memories for future generations. Through these reflections, Ao gains a deeper understanding of her parents' struggles and sacrifices, which continue to inspire her in her own journey. Ultimately, *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* serves as a cathartic outlet for Ao to process painful memories and trauma from the past. By sharing her story, she confronts the ghosts of her past and seeks closure, while also ensuring that her experiences are not lost to time. In doing so, she adds her voice to the collective narrative of resilience and perseverance, inspiring readers to find strength in their struggles. Through her narrative techniques, Ao offers readers an intimate glimpse into her life's journey, inviting them to reflect on their own experiences and find solace in shared humanity. Her memoir stands as a testament to the power of storytelling as a means of self-discovery, healing, and remembrance.

Temsula Ao's narrative in *Aosenla's Story* deals with similar themes from her selected works; of identity and gender within the patriarchal Naga society. Through the limited point of view, Ao provides readers with a deep insight into Aosenla's struggles, societal pressures, and emotional turmoil, inviting them to perceive the story through her thoughts, memories, and emotions. The

narrative structure, resembling a loose circular narrative, adds depth to the exploration of its themes, framing the central question of Aosenla's reconciliation with herself and her circumstances. Rooted in a feminist perspective, *Aosenla's Story* gradually uncovers the complexities of Aosenla's identity and her journey toward self-realization. As readers witness Aosenla's evolving understanding of her various roles within society, they are confronted with the profound impact of personal and societal expectations on her sense of self. Additionally, Ao incorporates a subplot involving Doctor Kilang, whose experiences parallel those of Aosenla, offering further insight into the complexities of gender dynamics and interpersonal relationships. Her narrative in *Aosenla's Story* exemplifies her mastery of the craft, as she navigates complex thematic terrain with a compelling and accessible narrative voice. Through her exploration of identity, gender, and societal expectations, Ao offers readers a profound and thought-provoking reflection on the human condition, inviting them to contemplate the universal struggles and triumphs inherent in the quest for self-discovery and fulfillment. Through an analysis of Ao's narrative technique, it becomes evident that she crafts her stories with meticulous attention to detail, employing a succinct and precise tone of narration. The strategic use of subplots serves to illuminate thematic elements from diverse perspectives, enriching the depth and complexity of her storytelling. Despite the inherently personal nature of her narratives, Ao maintains a sense of objectivity and universality, allowing her works to resonate with a broader audience.

Easterine Kire's works, including *Don't Run My Love* and *When the River Sleeps*, exemplify her adept utilization of fictional narratives to perpetuate and enrich the oral tradition of her Naga ancestors in written form. In the enchanting realms of her novels, Kire weaves a delicate dance between the tangible and the fantastical, beckoning readers into a world where reality and imagination intertwine with grace. With lyrical prose, she champions the symbiotic relationship

between tradition and evolution, urging for a balance that honors the sanctity of heritage while embracing the currents of change brought forth by cultural assimilation and modernization. Within Naga folklore, Kire discovers treasures of wisdom and wonder, affirming their profound relevance in the contemporary landscape. Through her narratives, she unveils the transformative power of these age-old tales, demonstrating how they illuminate the paths of individuals and communities alike, enriching lives with their timeless truths and enchanting allure. In Kire's vision, the fantastical is not merely a flight of fancy but a cornerstone of tradition and cultural identity. She implores us to recognize the intrinsic value of preserving these cherished narratives amidst the tide of globalization, reminding us that in safeguarding our heritage, we safeguard the very essence of who we are.

At the heart of Easterine Kire's storytelling artistry lies a captivating fusion of the ordinary and the extraordinary, where the ethereal dances hand in hand with the everyday. Through her use of magic realism, she intertwines mystical phenomena and fantastical occurrences with mundane existence, seamlessly blurring the boundaries between the seen and the unseen. This narrative alchemy serves as a testament to the profound interconnectedness inherent in Naga culture, where the natural and the spiritual realms coalesce in a harmonious embrace. Drawing from the wellspring of Naga folklore and spiritual traditions, Kire conjures narratives that resonate with the echoes of ancient wisdom and the whispers of ancestral spirits. Within the enchanting realms of magic realism, Kire embarks on profound philosophical odysseys, into the depths of existential ponderings and metaphysical musings. Through her fiction, she invites readers to contemplate the mysteries of existence while shedding light on the rich Naga cultural ethos, where tradition and transcendence converge in a symphony of enchantment and enlightenment.

Kire's utilization of mythical motifs, such as the were-tiger and the heart stone, serves as a means of elucidating complex thematic elements and cultural values prevalent within Naga society. These symbols embody the duality of human nature, the interconnectedness of humanity with the natural world, and the enduring resilience of cultural identity amidst adversity. Through her narratives, Kire elevates ostensibly simplistic customs and traditional convictions to a broader realm of significance, imbuing them with deeper layers of meaning and universal resonance. The examination of Easterine Kire's use of Tenyidie words illustrated her efforts to contextualize her narratives within the cultural milieu of the Naga people, enriching the storytelling experience for readers. Kire's narrative structure and stylistic choices contribute to the immersive and evocative nature of her storytelling. Employing vivid descriptions and lyrical prose, she captures the ambiance and rhythm of life in a traditional Naga village, inviting readers into a world imbued with mystique and intrigue. Additionally, the incorporation of flashback sequences adds depth to the characters and themes, offering insights into their motivations and struggles while contextualizing their actions within the broader narrative framework. Easterine Kire's narrative and stylistic approach in her works exemplify a masterful fusion of tradition and modernity, fantasy and reality. Through her storytelling, she preserves and celebrates the cultural heritage of the Nagas while engaging with universal themes of human experience and existential inquiry. Kire's literary contributions serve as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling as a means of cultural preservation, self-expression, and collective identity formation.

In conclusion, Chapter 5 underlines the literary prowess of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire in crafting narratives that offer profound insights into Naga society, culture, and identity. Through their narrative techniques, both authors contribute to the preservation and celebration of Naga cultural heritage while engaging with universal themes that resonate with readers across cultural

and geographical boundaries. The Stylistic techniques employed by Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire enrich Naga literature and contribute to the broader landscape of global literature. Through their works, they illuminate Naga society and culture, fostering a deeper appreciation for the rich diversity of human experience. As such, their literary legacies inspire reflection, foster empathy, and bridge cultural divides through the power of storytelling.

The selected works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire paint a vivid picture of the Naga society as it were during the times their respective works were written. However, it cannot be denied that the two have their perspectives heavily influenced by their respective tribes. The myriad tribes in Nagaland having independently evolved from each other have their own beliefs, history, customs and practices that influences the values and psyche of the different tribes in their own unique ways. Another challenge encountered in this research discourse was the limitation of existing theories in adequately encompassing the diverse facets of Naga society. Attempting to apply these theories often resulted in an overly narrow focus that failed to capture the richness and complexity of the myriad customs, beliefs, and values present among the diverse tribes of Nagaland. Due to the distinctive circumstances, experiences, and history of the Nagas, studying gender roles, identity, and values through existing established theories becomes challenging, if not impossible. Despite this, the works under examination remain highly pertinent to Naga society as a whole. This is because the wave of modernization, which swiftly engulfed all the various tribes simultaneously, underlines their relevance and significance. The diverse tribes of Nagaland collectively share a common experience of modernization and Christianization, which have significantly impacted their traditionally untouched tribal societies.

The topics of Gender, Language and Identity, even if dealt individually encompasses a wide field of study. Therefore the current research thesis can be read as an foundational discourse to these

three monumental subjects, thus leaving room for more in-depth research on these topics. A future researcher can also take the approach of post-colonial theorems by referring to postcolonial scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha who have explored the effects of colonialism on indigenous cultures and identities, including gender dynamics and language use within tribal societies. A researcher in the future working on the subject may also study about how much westernization and western styled education influenced the authors' sense of values, writing style and other nuances since it is inevitable that similar education system, with all students reading the same books influences them in having similar perspectives and sense of values.

Additionally, one can seek out literature from other authors, preferably representing different tribes, to conduct a comparative analysis of various aspects of Naga society. Regrettably, at present, there is a lack of Naga writers of the same caliber such as Temsula Ao or Easterine Kire. However, the surge in writers population in the present years gives us a glimmer of hope that, there will be more writers who will continue exploring similar themes with varied perspectives to foster and expand the scope of their research.

Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire's literary contributions are pivotal in the evolution of Naga literature, marking a shift from oral tradition to written form. Although, it is important to note that while their works address significant Naga issues, they do not fully capture the current state of affairs, as positive strides have been made, particularly in promoting gender equality. Nonetheless, through meticulous narrative craftsmanship, there is no doubt that both authors convey profound insights into Naga society and culture. One can safely say that in the field of Naga literature, none surpasses their unrivaled contribution. Ao and Kire's narrative styles are marked by keen attention to detail, vivid descriptions, and lyrical prose that vividly capture the essence of life in Nagaland, deliberately foregrounding ethnic symbols and a narrative ethos deeply rooted in Naga oral

tradition. By drawing upon Naga mythology, tradition, and folklore, both authors infuse their works with layers of meaning and cultural resonance. Through their works, Ao and Kire encourage readers to reflect on the subtleties of identity, tradition, and change, inviting them to engage with the complexities of the human condition. With grace and artistry, they beautifully intertwine age-old traditions and contemporary settings, fashioning narratives that enchant readers, transcending cultural boundaries and resonating on a universal scale.

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