

Abstract

The Indo-Naga conflict is one of South Asia's longest-running struggles for self-determination. Located in the northeastern corner of India, Nagaland is a region where violence persisted for over five decades, ever since the colonisers departed the region and annexed it to India. It is a highly militarised space with draconian regulations such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act still in effect, enabling army personnel to escape punishment even if atrocities are committed. In such a conflict situation, women become more vulnerable since they are frequently seen as the embodiment of ethnic and cultural identity. Unique to this region, however, would be the way in which Naga women have strategically utilized their traditional gendered positions to resist conventional gender expectations. They demonstrate agency not just in opposition to the authoritative aggression of the State, but also in opposition to the systematic oppression in their own community spaces, where a few discriminatory customary practices that prevent them from accessing the public-political sphere, continue to exist. Thus, a gendered social space has been constructed in which women are prevented from engaging in the realm of decision-making, reducing them to an internal minority in an already marginalised community. A society that is patriarchal in nature and, at the same time, also entangled with the mechanisms of militarism, hinders the autonomy of women. This results in the organization of a counterpublic, which transforms existing gendered identities such as that of the mother or the traditional storyteller. In my work, I study two sites of female agency as distinct examples of women's cultural re-figuration as they oppose the establishment of a gendered space—peace activism and literary narrative. It is also significant to highlight that this thesis intends to analyse the ways in which these women have engaged with their own cultural traditions in order to obtain agency, drawing strength and support for their resistance from their own history by selecting roles that are distinctive to their communities. The thesis also seeks to analyse how their endeavours have enabled them navigate their subjecthood in a setting where patriarchal

and militaristic modes are intrinsically linked. Hence, the purpose of this thesis is to explore the works of Naga women activists and writers as paradigmatic cases of cultural re-figuration of women, demonstrating how women can gain agency in traditionally male-dominated contexts by expanding the bounds of their gendered roles.