

**The Rise of the Subaltern Counterpublics: A  
Critique of Naga Women's Literary Narratives  
and Peace Politics**

**Thesis submitted to Jadavpur University  
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THE RISE OF THE SUBALTERN COUNTER PUBLICS:

A CRITIQUE OF NAGA WOMEN'S LITERARY NARRATIVES AND PEACE POLITICS

submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of -----

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And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nagaland is one of the eight states that constitute the conglomeration generically called the 'northeast' India. In a sense, this notion of the northeast is more of a cultural construct rather than a geographical location; one that reflects its peripheral existence in the imagination of the centre, the 'mainland' India. The notion has historically emerged in the national as well as global imagination as a cultural category which homogenises the indigenous societies that inhabit these states, thus obliterating their individual historical and cultural identities. The process continues till date as the region is still subjected to multiple imaginations that reinstate its marginal existence. As Preeti Gill observes in "Engaging with the Northeast", the term 'northeast' (which according to her became part of the Indian vocabulary around the year 1971) is not only "meaningless" but also "inappropriate" since it represents an external perspective rather than a local one—an observation exemplified by the fact that none of the indigenous languages of the region contains a word that conveys a similar idea of clustering together multiple extremely diverse states, each of which is unique in its cultural, ethnic or geographical characteristics (3). Homogenised under the umbrella term of 'northeast', exist eight states which have been ethnically disparate and culturally different for centuries. Prior to the arrival of the British, this region was divided into territories ruled by several dynasties and sovereign village systems in which various tribes enjoyed a sense of autonomy. Several kings from dynasties like the Ahom, Koch, Ningthouja, Manikya and others ruled over the areas that are part of present-day Assam, Manipur, and Tripura. However, in the easternmost parts of the hilly region (later to be deemed the Naga Hills), tribes like the Ao, Angami, Konyak, Lotha and others, established sovereign villages, where they lived a separate, independent existence for centuries. As Khala points out in *The Armed Forces Special Powers Act and Its Impact*, during the colonial period, however, this region, particularly the Naga Hills, was increasingly portrayed as a troubled area inhabited by violent tribes; especially since the British made several expeditions to this region between 1832 and 1846, but made little progress due to fierce resistance from several of the tribes (20).

Exasperated by the hostility of the tribes inhabiting these hills, the British decided to abstain from interfering, and even when they had to create the Naga Hills District in 1866 for administrative convenience, eastern and northern Nagaland was left

outside the British purview as “unadministrative area” or “excluded area” (Khala 23; Venuh vi). Thus, it was during the colonial times that a fundamental change occurred in the perceived image of this region and its inhabitants. Since the colonial imagination could not grasp the indigenous knowledge-systems, they viewed it as a primitive, antagonistic existence pitted against their Modern western discourses. Due to lack of perspective, they saw it as a dark cultural space that propagated primitivism (which was inherently savage in nature for the British) challenging their idea of Modernity. It is this creation of a dichotomous paradigm that perpetuated the alienation of the region even after the colonialists left. As Vizovono Elizabeth notes, the colonials stereotyped the Nagas as “ignorant” and “savages”, an image that was then reinforced by the media of postcolonial nation of India who largely associated the region and its communities with violent and conflict-ridden images (50).

The British attempted to contain the hostility they faced from the inhabitants by largely excluding the region from rest of India. By the time the postcolonial nation of India acquired the colonisers’ legacy of forcibly annexing the region, segregation between this region and the rest of India was already pronounced. The image of the segregated other that the British had established, had thus given birth to a conflict situation that was to continue for decades. Their representation of these tribes as aggressive and hostile portrayed them as an obstacle in the process of integration. Since the region was kept largely isolated, the nation-making discourse in pre- or post-independence India did not leave much of an influence here—at least not in a positive sense—as will be seen when the political history of the region is studied in this thesis. That the colonial perspective is retained in the current Indian national perception is quite apparent from the fact that these Hills are still often viewed as a backward region as well as a source of threat against the national drive of integration. The exoticisation of the region has continued as well, since the other identity with which it has captured the national imagination is that of a vibrant tourist destination that offers a token view of the indigenous lifestyle to the ‘mainlanders’ as well as the foreign tourists. The brutal aggression perpetrated by the State during the long-drawn conflict situation and the enforcement of draconian laws have only exacerbated the already tensed atmosphere of hostility. The Nagas declared independence one day before the State of India did—on 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1947. The declaration of this independence was announced after the submission of six memorandums to the British Government which was leaving the

nation, and ten memorandums to the Indian Government which was to rule the nation henceforth. In all of these memorandums the Nagas proclaimed their right to sovereignty based on political as well as historical framework. Their claim to sovereignty was based upon the fact that the Naga Hills had been inhabited from 150 AD by the Naga tribes, and they had independently existed in that region for thousands of years afterwards (Kire, “The Conflict in Nagaland”). As discussed before, even during the colonial period, although the British did set up a few administrative posts in the Naga Hills, large parts of the area could not be brought under control as they faced a vehemently hostile opposition from the tribes (Tajenyuba Ao 50). However, as the British prepared to leave their South Asian Empire, they still decided to cede the Naga Hills to India, creating an atmosphere of hostility between the newly formed Indian government and the Naga people demanding for sovereignty, which continued for decades to come. The estimation of the fatalities caused by this struggle varies widely since there is an obvious lack of documentation with some scholars putting the number of Naga casualties at even 200 thousand (Phillips 1; Kire, “The Conflict in Nagaland”). It is hard to calculate the precise figures since even the data accessible on the South Asian Terrorism Portal’s website only go back to 1990. Villages after villages were burnt and destroyed in the name of the punitive action of ‘grouping’, giving the state funded Repressive Apparatus direct access to even the personal spaces of the unarmed citizens. By 1956 the Government of India had declared the Naga Hills as “disturbed area”, under the “Naga Hills Disturbed Area” Ordinance, and imposed the “Assam Maintenance Law” which sanctioned arrests without warrants, imposition of collective fines and proscribing of public speeches and meetings. It is also during this time that the Assam Rifles battalion is replaced by the India Armed Forces to be stationed in the region. In 1958 the “Armed Forces Special Powers Act” is passed sanctioning search and arrest without warrants and shooting even to the causing of death, with complete protection of military and paramilitary forces from legal charges— a decision that left a devastating effect on the Naga society for generations to come (U. Chakravarti 6; Khala 82).

The term ‘Naga’ is used to denote more than forty hill tribes who reside in the region spread between the Brahmaputra in India and the Chindwin River in Myanmar. The term was not in circulation before the British rule as it was not in use until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was introduced and commonly used by British bureaucrats and

anthropologists to refer to a collective of tribes that shared some traditional and cultural traits (for example, the megalithic burial custom, the feast of merit, the practice of headhunting and the communal dormitory) (Venuh v; Thomas 1). Even the British were aware of the fact that the term was quite foreign to the tribes themselves, as is evident from the account of John Butler, a British political officer, who wrote in 1875— “be this as it may, the term is quite foreign to the people themselves; they have no generic term applicable to whole race, but use specific names for each particular group of villages” (Butler 294). Mar Atsongchanger also notes that the term was “unrecognized” by the people of these tribes themselves (3). Prior to colonisation, the Naga village enjoyed a sovereign existence. It was also the most significant component of the tribal polity in the Naga society; as N. Venuh observes, it was the “epitome of their thought, a universe in miniature” (v). Because of this, it was unacceptable for them to tolerate being dominated by another community or tribe in any way. The inhabitants of the villages were protected from assaults by hostile forces by walls and pickets constructed on the highest points of the surrounding mountains (Khala 18).

As Temsula Ao notes in “Benevolent Subordination” this sovereign Naga village was also the “origin” of the traditional structure of power in the Naga society (101). The traditional thought process and culture of the ancient village polity continues to exert a significant influence on the ideologies held by the Naga communities till today. The Nagas led the life of warriors, and it was of the utmost importance for them to defend their territories from attacks by regional rivals. As a result, their everyday lives were filled with the dangers of conflict as well as that posed by the wilderness that encompassed their community. In each of these activities, the physical strength of the men of the village was a critical factor in the protection and prosperity of their community. The Naga man thus came to be seen as the “protector” of his tribe and its women from hostile clans as well as wild animals (Ao 103). Thus, in a way, men because of their perceived physical prowess obtained a higher status in the community than their counterparts; and, this notion of male superiority, then facilitated women’s exclusion from all seats of governance and decision-making spaces. As Temsula Ao argues, their exclusion could have been seen as acceptable to the women as well, given that the decision-making bodies exclusively discussed defense and hunting-related issues, which did not concern women since they did not participate in these activities. Ao notes that as a result of this exclusion— “what



obtained in the pristine rural environment of Naga society was a state of consensual role-playing where women accepted their subordination to men due to very practical reasons” (104). Naga culture thus continued to rely on male prerogatives for generations. However, Naga scholars such as Lucy Zehol and Anungla Aier have attributed women’s exclusion from the decision-making sphere to the gendered system of descent in the Naga communities. They note, that among Naga communities, male clan members are seen as progenitors and hence, the custodians of the traditions of the clan, whereas women are considered only temporary members of their birth-family (and by extension, the clan); and as a result, men are deemed more suitable than women to represent the clan in a decision-making capacity (Aier 306; Zehol37). Therefore, determining the extent of women’s consent in their social “role-playing”, as Temsula Ao had put it, is difficult to determine—given how gender identity was constructed in ancient Naga society. This is further complicated by the absence of written documentation, and the inaccessibility to women of what little there was. The concept of equal collaboration between men and women in decision-making spaces, which accompanied the establishment of a new democratic form of government following statehood in 1963, thus ran counter to traditional Naga polity.

The decades-long violent conflict situation and the State’s repressive approach to the crisis have added a new dimension to this issue. An effort to demand even strategic reservations for equal participation of women in decision-making public-political sphere (especially if influenced by the policies/ justice system of the State of India) could now be interpreted as an anti-tradition agenda, viewed with skepticism and even a sense of betrayal, as demonstrated by the 2017 violent protests. It was the government’s decision to finally introduce the 33% quota for women in the Urban Local Body elections, which had prompted these protests. Among Naga communities, this dispute over women’s electoral reservations has raged for a significant amount of time. Several apex tribal organizations challenged the elections as they raised concerns that by adopting the reservation, the government did not adhere to the guidelines set out in Article 371A of the Indian Constitution, which provides specific protections for the state of Nagaland. Article 371A was added to the Constitution by the Thirteenth Amendment Act, 1962, after the Naga Peoples’ Convention and the Indian government reached an agreement in 1960 (promising the Nagas their own state). Article 371A ensures there are legal provisions to protect the resources as well as the customary laws

and practises of the Naga tribes by providing constitutional safeguards. Along with Meghalaya and Mizoram, Nagaland is one of the states in this region where the 73rd amendment (under which a total of 33% of seats in local self-government institutions have been reserved for female candidates) was not implemented over the entire area to offer greater authority to the traditional local institutions of self-government, such as the village councils. Subsequently, the 1993 constitutional amendment that mandated reserving one-third of village council leadership positions for women was also not imposed in this area. Hence, the demand for the 33% reservation is often perceived as somewhat of an anti-Article 371A (and, by extension, anti-Naga) standpoint because it contradicts the fabric of Naga system. Anungla Aier (who is the former Director of Women's Studies centre in Nagaland University and Principal and Professor of Anthropology, Kohima Science College) thinks that the explanation provided for such vehement exhibition of violent protests, opposing Naga women's admission into positions of power is premised upon the "oral tradition and narrative" of the Naga tribes which predominantly restricted access to these positions to men (308). Limanochet Jamir, a legal studies scholar from Nagaland who has conducted extensive research on the Naga customary laws and practices, believes that it is not necessarily the traditions or the customary laws that make the situation more challenging for women, but rather how those laws are interpreted by the custodians of the customary laws (in this case, the village councils) who are tasked with interpreting and implementing the laws. Discussing the shortcomings of village councils in dealing with Naga customary laws and practices, he explains in an interview:

When it comes to the custodians of the customary laws, there is no concrete concept of separation of powers. Justice must not be only done but seen to be done. But when it comes to the custodians—the village councils—they have Legislature, Executive, Judiciary all in that one body. So when you have that, there's likelihood of misuse or abuse of the law. That checks and balances have to be there which don't seem to be there... Moreover, the structure of these village councils, custodians of customary laws, are made in such a way that women are not there. If you talk about the gender perspective, women cannot be there in the first place, the structure is made in such a way. (L. Jamir)

As he points out, the structure of the councils, which adhere to the tribes' traditional justice system from ancient times, simply do not provide a space for women to be accommodated, as induction of women into decision-making spheres was not a norm in Naga tribes' customs from the pre-colonial times.

Through apex organisations such as the Naga Mothers' Association, Naga women have been fighting a legal battle for the implementation of reservations for women for quite some time. However, the Naga Mothers' Association was forced to withdraw their support for the petition as protests over the mandate turned violent in 2017 (Saikia, "As Nagaland Prepares"). This has left the future of the issue in limbo despite the Supreme Court granting the committee's Special Leave Petition in April 2016. According to Dolly Kikon, the conflicts about women's political involvement in Naga society reveal the underlying paradoxes in Naga society regarding gender equality and labour ethics (Kikon, "The Myth"). Echoing the views held by Temsula Ao and Anungla Aier, Kikon also thinks that the traditional norm that only Naga men can access the decision-making sphere has made it so that any demand for women's participation in the public-political sphere in the traditional Naga institutions is seen as a direct threat to Naga cultural norms and values (ibid.). Naga women's participation in decision-making and consequently the public-political sphere has thus remained quite low. Since the formation of the first legislative assembly in February 1964 till 2021, no women have been elected to the House. In 1977, Rano Shaiza became the first and only Naga woman till date to be elected as a Member of the *Lok Sabha* of the Indian Parliament.

This was a topic that came up multiple times in my conversation with Dr. Toshimenla Jamir (Professor and head of the Department of Sociology in the Nagaland University), who has written and edited numerous volumes on women and politics in Nagaland. She is of the opinion that the binary of gendered spaces was still present in the pre-colonial communitarian Naga warrior community, despite the fact that the concept of a clearly divided public and private realm did not exist in that society; "When you look into the history of Naga society, Nagas were basically warriors... I believe that it all has genesis in those aspects", she mentions in the interview (T. Jamir). As Shimray also points out, war was not only a political practice for the Nagas, it was deeply connected with social, cultural and religious belief of the tribes (47). As a result,

men were almost always on the warfront or busy preparing battle strategies, occupying the public sphere of decision-making places, while women were left to care for the private sphere of the domestic space, including caring for the village's children. The resulting division of worked perfectly for the pre-colonial rural setting. Hence, this pattern was followed by the warrior tribes of this region for decades after its establishment leading it to become the norm that came to be synonymous with Naga traditional life. This is why, according to Dr. Jamir, while the concept of private and public spheres in its present sense was not existent theoretically, it was always there in practice in traditional Naga culture. The exclusion of women from the public-political realm and decision-making spaces, thus, had its origins in this spatial division that penetrated the old Naga village's power structures according to her— "because men will always be on the warfront. I mean, they had to be very vigilant. They were always either raiding other villages, or defending their villages. So, women were in the home, like looking after the domestic arena, taking care of the children. I think that's why even though the notion of private-public wasn't there theoretically, but I think it was always there.... it kind of had its roots in this (set-up)" (T. Jamir).

As Temsula Ao writes, to some extent, women in ancient Naga society supported this "cult of 'heroism'" that was attributed to the men of their community— whether by weaving warrior shawls to reward battle exploits of their men or by singing songs that mocked those men who did not want to engage in warfare (103). She refers to it as an act of "benevolent subordination" that ancient Naga women performed upon themselves (106). However, as noted previously, the consensual nature of the acceptance of this "benevolent" subordination remains debatable. As Temsula Ao herself observes, for centuries, the social roles of a Naga woman have been strictly determined by a tradition that asserts it is "only men who can be decision-makers" in public as well as private matters of significance (101). She also notes that this attitude persisted even after the arrival of the colonials and the missionaries, when formal education was introduced, as male children were always given the first chance to attend school and the girl children were permitted to attend only to make them capable enough to read "the Bible and the song sheet" (ibid.). Thus, the prioritisation of male prerogatives became ingrained in several systems of the Naga society, that governed the structure of the decision-making spaces, like the public-political sphere. This engendering of space, according to Toshimenla Jamir, is perpetuated in the present

democratic system as well, since men are still considered the “public face” of the family. She believes that understanding the private and public divide in Nagaland requires an understanding of how men are still perceived in the public as the main representative of a family (and, by extension, the clan)—“Here men are the public face of the family. So, in any public meeting, if general public meeting is called, you will not see any woman going to the meetings”. Dr. Toshimenla Jamir tells me during the interview (T. Jamir). This perpetuation is probably also a result of the protracted conflict situation, as the extensive militarization of the space in an already patriarchal culture significantly inhibits women’s options to enter the public sphere or even access to the public spaces, as will be discussed in the first and second chapters of this thesis. Thus, an amalgamation of different methods working towards engendering the public sphere has continued to exclude Naga women from decision-making spaces.

Dr. Jamir’s book *Women and Politics in Nagaland: Challenges and Imperatives* (published in 2012) is probably one of the first to take a comprehensive look at the issue of women and their representation in the political space in Nagaland. The work explores in great details the social context of Naga communities as well as the structure of their polity in order to provide a better understanding of the space women occupy in the political sphere of Nagaland. Analysing empirical data and social structures, she examines not only the obstacles women face in the political realm but also their position in relation to contemporary political issues. Moamenla Amer’s *Women’s Political status and Engagement: A Study of Nagaland* (also published in 2012) deals with similar issues as she contextualises the discussion over the political representation of Naga women in the backdrop of the convoluted and multi-layered social and political space of Nagaland. In her book as well as her published papers (for instance, “Political Awareness and its Implications on Participatory Behaviour: A Study of Naga Women Voters in Nagaland”, published in 2009; and “Political Status of Women in Nagaland” published in 2013) the obstacles to Naga women’s political engagement and involvement are examined in details, including those posed by the institutions and the nature of the political system itself. In 2017, Dr. Toshimenla Jamir co-edited another volume titled *Human rights in Nagaland: Emerging Paradigms* that focuses on the condition of women’s rights vis-à-vis human rights in a militarised space such as Nagaland. Not only does the collection feature essential essays on the political milieu of Nagaland (like “The Politics of Political Participation and the Human Rights of Naga

Women: Discussing Gender, Culture and CEDAW” by Inotoli Zhimomi and “Customary Law and the Question of Gender Rights in Nagaland” by Dr. Toshimenla Jamir herself) and the effects of AFSPA on the Naga people (for example Kaka D Iralu’s “An Analysis of the Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958 from its historical background of Nagaland in the 1950s” and “Face of Armed Forces (Special Powers Act) AFSPA” by Khatoli Khala), but it also includes poignant pieces such as “Mental Health Problem of the Nagas Affected by the Conflict” by P. Ngully, which discusses the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other mental health issues resulting from a protracted conflict. Books such as *Women and Gender: Emerging Voices from North-East India* edited by Temjensosang, Athungo Ovung and A. Lanunungsang Ao, also feature a number of important essays written by academics such as Dr. Toshimenla Jamir and Moamnela Amer, amongst others. The book provides thorough essays on distinct Naga tribes, such as the Aos, Angamis, Lothas, and Maos, enabling researchers to comprehend the nuances of the customary laws and the structural challenges encountered by women in a particular tribe. As Limanochet Jamir explained to me in an interview, it would be incorrect to homogenise the customary laws and practices of Nagaland and the structural polity of several tribes into a single, all-encompassing idea (L. Jamir). Although the customary laws do follow a similar pattern, it is crucial for a researcher to understand the social and political structure of the tribes in order to contextualise the discussion over women’s political rights and participation in the public sphere. Books such as *Women and Gender: Emerging Voices from North-East India* enable researchers to see through the specificities of different tribes’ polity structures and thus contextualise the issues more effectively. The edited volume *Gender Implications of Tribal Customary Law* (published in 2017) edited by Melville Pereira, R. P. Athparia, Sunumi Changmi and Jyotikona Chetia, also contains some extremely important pieces that situate the challenges encountered by Naga women within the framework of their respective tribes—for example, Limatula Longkumer’s “Ao Women and Village Politics: Gender Implications of Tribal Customary Laws” focuses on the customary laws pertaining to women of the Ao tribe whereas Thoshusie Katiry’s “Customary Laws and Traditional Practices of the Pochury Tribe of Nagaland” provides information about the customary laws of the Pochuri tribe; LucyZehol’s “What do the Gender Ideologies in Khasi and Naga Societies Reveal?” critically analyses the social structure of the Zeliangrong Nagas while Toli Achumi’s “Women and Family in Naga Society” focuses on the gendered structure of the customary laws and practices

in both Ao and Sumi Naga communities. Along with my experience during fieldwork, when I had the opportunity to meet and connect with Naga women from various tribes, these publications provided a more comprehensive and contextualized understanding of the challenges Naga women confront and the resistance they put up. When it comes to literature, two books offer a more nuanced, critical view on the work produced by women from Nagaland—*Literary Cultures of India's Northeast: Naga Writings in English* by K B Veio Pou and *Insider Perspectives: Critical Essays on Literature from Nagaland* by Vizovono Elizabeth and Sentinaro Tsuren. I was also fortunate to meet and interview Elizabeth, which helped me gain an analytic perspective on Naga women's writings, especially given her academic and teaching background. In the framework of Naga experiences and worldview, both of these publications contextualise the writing of prominent Naga women authors, whose works this thesis also seeks to explore. The books are also critical in their offering of an insider's perspective, which was vital for my reading of the texts because it allowed for a dialogue between my interpretation of the works as a reader from outside the region and the perspective of an indigenous reader. However, even though all of these works provide a detailed perspective on the context and specifics of the political and social experiences of a Naga woman, the purpose of this thesis was to explore how Naga women, lacking direct entry points to decision-making spaces in the public sphere, are reclaiming their voices by attempting to establish alternative public spheres, or "subaltern counterpublics," as Nancy Fraser terms them. This framework of counterpublics becomes a crucial lens for a space such as Nagaland, especially the space occupied by Naga women, because this is not only a patriarchal society, but also a militarized space in which multiple patriarchal hierarchies are at work, as will be described in the first and second chapters of this thesis. Regarding the studies conducted on this region or the neighbouring states, this frame of counterpublic was employed by Minu Basnet (in 2019) in a paper titled "Disrobed and dissenting bodies of the Meira Paibi: Postcolonial counterpublic activism," published in *Communication and the Public*, where she uses the theoretical framework of counterpublic to analyse the activism of Meira Paibis in Nagaland's neighbouring state of Manipur, that has experienced a similar protracted conflict. Basnet notes here that the postcolonial counterpublic status of the Meria Paibis hinges on 3 levels—“(1) marginalization of the entire region by the Indian democracy; (2) the brutality and human rights violations which receive very little coverage by mainstream media; and (3) sexual violence by the

army, a state institution” (204). As will be seen through an analysis of gendered space in Chapter 2, all of these elements also stand true for Naga women and the social space that they inhabit. As Basnet argues, taken together, these factors pose a serious challenge to the “claims of inclusiveness” presented by Indian democracy to the people of this region (ibid.). This thesis, however, will examine the emergence of counterpublics and the re-construction of the identities of Naga women, with particular emphasis on two sites of female agency—peace activism and literary narratives. It is also important to note that this thesis seeks to study how, in order to gain agency, these women have chosen tradition-specific roles, thereby engaging with their own community’s culture (which has been subjected to double colonisation) and deriving strength and validation for their resistance from their own history and culture. The thesis also attempts to analyse how their efforts have helped them negotiate their independent subjecthood even in a space where modes of patriarchy are intertwined with militarization, making them face multiple obstacles while attempting to enter the formal public-political decision-making sphere. The peace activists, such as the Naga Mothers’ Association, are doing this by broadening the tradition-specific roles in order to become instrumental in the public-political debate, thus employing the discourse of the very tradition that their society attempts to employ against them. The Naga women authors, on the other hand, accomplish so through the traditional role of storytellers, by incorporating personal and collective memories into public literary discourse, thereby making the personal political and the private public. This thesis will explore how Naga women have used these tradition-specific roles, as well as the tradition of storytelling and memory writing, to construct women’s counterpublics in order to resist the traditional lack of access to decision-making spaces in the public-political sphere.

To provide a better and more detailed understanding of the issues, the secondary materials used in this study are mainly focused on the works of Naga scholars and academics. The majority of these books and papers were obtained during my travels to cities in Nagaland as well as libraries and archives in Guwahati, Shillong, and Delhi, including Guwahati's Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI) archives who have digitised historically important works, (such as the Annual Reports of the Women’s American Baptist Foreign Mission Society) for a better comprehension of the history of the tribes (especially the women) during a time when Western education and script were being introduced to them; a time, as previously mentioned,



that was extremely crucial in Naga history for multiple reasons. As previously said, the name Naga encompasses several tribes—therefore, it was absolutely essential for the author of this thesis, who does not hail from the region, to engage with the works of scholars who have written about their own tribes from their own subject-position. However, the most enriching sources have likely been, the interactions I have had with the scholars and activists from Nagaland, or from neighbouring states who have conducted research on Naga literature and society, some of which have been incorporated into the thesis in the form of interviews. During my fieldwork in 2018 (conducted in Kohima, Dimapur, Mokokchung and Lumami) and afterwards, I conducted these interviews in person, over email, or through online communication platforms. A total of ten unstructured personal interviews were conducted with individuals from the academic, religious, publishing, legal, and political spheres. The impact of the conflict, gendered social structures, customary laws and practices, and women's rights to participate in decision-making spheres were the central issues that were covered throughout these interviews. These conversations have not only been enlightening, but they have also broadened my understanding of the agency and varied experiences of Naga women, without which this work would have been disingenuous and hollow.

The first chapter of the thesis deals with the theoretical and contextual background of the work and hence goes on to discuss the terms like public and counterpublic in details. The idea of the “subaltern counterpublics” was developed by Nancy Fraser in reaction to Habermas' theorization of the bourgeois public sphere that had originated in eighteenth-century Europe. Any discussion on the public or the public sphere requires an examination of the Habermasian public sphere, which he described in his landmark work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in 1962. Habermas' concept of the public sphere is ground-breaking in that it gives a critical investigation into a space where citizens may come together and critique the State and its policies, as a collective, moving beyond individual interests. However, as several feminists, including Joan B. Landes, Johana Meehan, Markman Ellis, Mary P. Ryan, and, most notably, Nancy Fraser, have pointed out, Habermas' concept of the public sphere suffers from a gender blindness that limits its emancipatory scopes. This section of the thesis also includes a consideration of this constraint. The second part of Chapter 1, therefore, attempts to analyse Fraser's pioneering concept of the subaltern

counterpublics, which is better suited to a stratified society ridden with significant inequalities. The Naga society, which is not just patriarchal (as well as patrimonial) in nature, but has also experienced violence and repressive State measures for more than half a century, is more suited to Fraser's stratified society, in which numerous groups (in the case of Nagaland, including the State itself) compete for dominance and certain groups are driven to the fringes. For a post-colonial indigenous community such as the Naga's, the concept of the counterpublic, thus, has greater significance than the Habermasian public sphere, which does not really discuss communities outside of Europe in the eighteenth century in depth. Fraser deliberates that in a stratified society, one overarching public sphere would run the risk of homogenising and thereby silencing the voices of those who are not permitted to represent themselves in the public. She believes that in such societies, the formation of multiple publics will allow marginalised groups to build a space where they may communicate their "needs, ideas, and strategies" (Fraser 66). Fraser defines the subaltern counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (67). Despite the fact that participatory parity is never fully realised in stratified societies, the multiplicity of counterpublics might at least offer marginalised communities with a space to discuss and therefore approach the concept of parity. This theoretical discussion would set the framework for the subsequent chapters which will trace the evolution of the narrative of resistance amongst the women of Naga society. Despite the fact that this thesis deals with a theoretical framework developed in the western school of discourses, as the first chapter will study in details, the counterpublic framework becomes pertinent for a stratified society like Nagaland's due to its socio-political context, where the State and multiple publics are vying for power and hegemony, as opposed to Habermas' concept of the liberal public sphere. In "Under Western Eyes", Mohanty discusses the need of focusing on the "strategic location" in relation to the context of any analysis (336). As she notes, a lack of this context of analysis can not only result in the homogeneity of women's experiences, but also in the production of a "monolithic" notion of patriarchy or "male dominance" as that "stable, ahistorical something" that oppresses and exploits "most if not all women" in these societies (335). This context of analysis, according to her, might range from anything like "kinship structures" to the "organization of labor" (337). Therefore, in the second chapter my attempt will be to explore, how patriarchy

rather than being a coherent and monolithic concept, actually functions as a process (through forms like kinship structures as well as conventional organization of labour and division of space) that continually reinvents and manifests itself in different forms in conjunction with other systems of oppression, in the context of the communities of this region. As Philipp Schorch and Arapata Hakiwai point out, the great majority of Western academic knowledge generation and theory production is justifiably criticized for its exclusive Western orientation; however, they also believe “collaboration” to be the “methodological key” to overcoming this difficulty and unlocking greater understanding (192). They write “(b)y collaboration we mean dialogue”— dialogue that does not entail only a “gestural accommodation” of the “subaltern” for its “eventual assimilation within the dominant whole” but rather alludes to an “interpretive engagement” that leads to shaping the “‘Third Space’ of knowledge production by creating a dialogue” (191-92). Hence, the second chapter of the thesis will analyse how the Indo-Naga conflict and the State’s violent and oppressive measures along with certain customary practices have established a restrictive gendered space, in an attempt to understand the positioning of women in a complex landscape of gender, community and other identities.

The gendered space, according to Maryna Bazylevych, is “the culturally and materially embedded repertoire of the appropriate gender roles that create frames (porous, not rigid) within which women construct and negotiate their identities” (2). The chapter will explore how through multiple layers of violence—physical as well as systemic—this restrictive space has been created for Naga women that prevent their entry into the decision-making public-political sphere. It is crucial to examine the creation of this gendered space since it is this restrictive space that the Naga women have utilised to create their own counterpublics. The chapter examines the drastic consequences of oppressive legislations such as the AFSPA on Naga society as a whole, and particularly on its women, making it even more challenging for Naga women to access the public sphere. Several scholars have emphasised the detrimental effect that laws like the AFSPA have had on the Naga community, particularly on Naga women (Khala 69; Banerjee 58; U. Chakravarti 11). Their works have highlighted how, in conflict situations, women’s bodies are frequently reduced to symbols of the cultural identity of the communities, rendering them especially vulnerable as primary targets. Moreover, the impunity that the AFSPA confers upon the state’s repressive apparatus

not only denies the victim any chance of proper justice or reparation but also creates a culture of unabated impunity that suffuses the communitarian spaces as well as private spheres, further curtailing inclusion of women into the public sphere. Some feminists from the region, like Dolly Kikon, believe that the prolonged conflict and the resulting culture of impunity have created a social space that has enabled that pervasive perpetuation of gender discriminatory practises under the “guise” of a few customary laws, which have affected both the private and public lives of women here (“Women and War” 5). The Naga customary laws are especially noteworthy since they are seen as norms established and traditionally authorized by the tribes’ forefathers, bearing with them the ethos of entire communities. These regulations are therefore enforced by communal institutions and regarded as sacred and sacrosanct for all the Naga tribes. While it must be remembered that these customary rules are essential to the preservation of indigenous Naga tradition, many scholars in the region consider that some of these laws are discriminatory towards women and need to be reinterpreted as they hinder women’s access to the decision-making spaces in the public sphere. Although societal norms such as dowry, honour killing, and child marriage do not exist in Naga society, some customary laws here do propagate a discriminatory attitude towards women of the community contributing to a subalternised existence for them. In this context, Vizovono Elizabeth tells me in an interview:

The situation/experience of patriarchy is different for different groups of people. Just like the experiences of black women and indigenous women are different from those of white middle class women. So in some parts of India, it is measured by dowry deaths and female infanticide, in some others, it is through silencing of female voices and prevention from political participation. Is it better to die or to live and be forever subjugated in life? One is not necessarily better than the other (Elizabeth).

Naga women have been especially affected by two customary law issues, according to scholars and activists from this region: the ability to inherit ancestral property and the right to freely engage in decision-making spaces in the public sphere (N. Das 25). The chapter refers to the works of multiple Naga scholars to elucidate the issues— for the Ao tribe (L. Longkumer 217), the Tangkhul tribe (Khongreiwo 87), the Mao tribe

(Athishu 110), the Sumi tribe (Achumi207), the Lotha tribe (Ovung 138) and the Angami tribe (Christina 69).

As Toshimenla Jamir points out there are distinct forms of land ownership among the Naga tribes, including individually-owned land, ancestral land, clan and/or village land, and she further notes that the practice of “purchase and selling of land...came about with the commodification of economy only, and that is very recent” as it only started after the British arrived (T. Jamir). Therefore, ancestral land was significant in ancient Naga society, and the customary laws of the Naga tribes prohibited daughters from inheriting ancestral or family land because they were expected to marry into another village, which posed a threat to the ancestral land's integrity for the community. In addition, as Dr. Jamir notes, due to “monetization of the economy,” “concept of privatisation,” and “commodification of land,” women in rural regions are losing access to the common land to which they were formerly entitled. She explains:

Now, when it comes to the gender aspect, what we see is that particularly in the rural areas, women, even though they don't have ownership of land, (because all the land will be in the name of her husband or father if she's not married, so it's all in the hands of the members), but whatever it was, she had access to this common property resources...but when you have this division of land, it becomes private property. So, the common property resources are shrinking within them... that means that the common property resources, no longer is there in the proportion or in the magnitude that they had earlier. So now, women have less access to this common property resources, which definitely impacts upon (their) livelihood (T. Jamir)

As a result, Dr. Jamir observes, the unforeseen situation of the emergence of the “landless Nagas” is taking place in the Naga society, particularly hurting women and in extension the single-woman-headed families, already severely impacted by the violent conflict situation and the State's punitive measures (ibid.). As Rekha Rose Dukru, one of the five women candidates who contested in the 2018 assembly elections in Nagaland, points out, because of lack of inheritance rights to the land women cannot even do something as trivial as taking a loan from a bank (Dukru). Thus, lack of access

to land rights, particularly in militarised spaces, impacts women even when it comes to participation in the economic sphere of the present society. The denial of right to political participation is the second major point of contestation for the Naga women. As previously discussed, the performative distinction based on gender roles in ancient Naga societies relegated women to the private sphere. When the men of the village went to war, the women were expected to care for the home and contribute to the family's and the village's economic well-being through farming and livestock breeding. Thus, although women's participation in the economic sphere was prevalent in traditional Naga societies, this did not extend into a chance to enter decision-making spaces. Toshimenla Jamir argues that the historical absence of "political socialisation" of young girls is likely indicative of why Naga women play a marginal role in the political sphere even in contemporary Naga society ("Engendering Politics" 50). The second chapter thus examines the emergence of a restrictive gendered social space for women, the rigidity of which has only increased over the past few decades due to the violent conflict.

The third chapter of the thesis explores how, to contest this rigid gendered space, Naga women have used roles that were dictated by societal traditions to create a space for deliberation (which we call counterpublics). Women in patriarchal societies must often negotiate and navigate their way through traditional gender roles in order to assert their distinctive identity. In order to challenge the control that has been exerted over their status as subjects, they must acquire a strategic position that is valued by their communities. The Naga women have made use of two such strategic positions as this chapter explores—the traditional peacemaker (*Pukrelia/ Demi*) and that of motherhood. The chapter provides a detailed examination of how both positions, which are crucially significant in tribal society, assist women in carving a space for themselves where they can express their agency outside private sphere to which they had previously been relegated. The peace-building process in this society has become a viable realm in which women can increase their potential for agency and assume a more prominent role in formal public-political sphere. In pre-colonial Naga society, women were given direct authority to mediate conflicts between warring villages, and they frequently served as negotiators, as this chapter will demonstrate. The chapter will examine the works of Naga scholars from various tribes to demonstrate how, in all of these tribes, women who married outside their village or clan could play this socially approved role

as the peacemaker— be it the Ao tribe (Imchen 94), the Angami tribe (Paphino 18), the Zeliangrong tribe (Zeliang 27), the Tangkhul tribe (Shimray 38) or the Chakhesang tribe (Lohe 53).

In ancient Naga culture headhunting and warfare were more than just symbolic acts of pride. There was a high level of social significance attached to these rituals and practices. And since war was an integral part of their lives, the traditional communities viewed peacemaking as an essential component of their survival as well. The chapter studies how despite the fact that the exercise of warfare was strictly gendered in nature and women had no place on the battlefield, her participation as an agent of peace was completely recognized and authorized by the traditional society. To assert themselves in a patriarchal society, women often find that doing so requires them to steer their identities working within the framework of traditional gender roles. Because of the elevated status accorded to mothers in traditional societies, such as the tribal communities in Nagaland, motherhood can be another such useful strategic position to provide women with a context for their daily micropolitics. This chapter, hence, also examines how groups such as the Naga Mothers' Association have successfully transitioned from their traditional roles as mothers to those of social and political agents, utilising the space and experiences of the private sphere to aid them in their newfound roles as peacemakers in the public sphere. The chapter thus addresses how strategic use of the tradition specific subject positions have enabled these women to gain access point to the masculinized discourse of conflict from which they were previously excluded, and thus create a space for their own counterpublic. This chapter seeks to explore, through a close reading of these strategic roles, how the peace building process here has become a site where women can aspire to increase their potential for agency.

If peace activists have utilised the traditional roles of the *Pukrelia*, *Demi*, and that of motherhood to create a counterpublic of their own, it would appear that the Naga women authors have attempted to do so by utilising the traditional role of storytellers. In the traditional oral societies of the Nagas, women were the designated storytellers. While discussing her historical fiction, author Easterine Kire explains the role of women as storytellers in traditional Naga societies in an interview with me: “In the traditional Naga community, women were storytellers. This is a factor overlooked by

scholars. It was not something extraordinary that a woman passed on stories of the tribe to her children and grandchildren” (Kire). And this is where literary narratives come into play, as they may provide an alternative rhetorical space for articulating the histories of those whose voices have not found a place in the grand narrative of Statist history. The final three chapters of the thesis will study how this space is created, particularly through a reading of the fictional narratives of two of the most prominent and prolific Naga writers, both of whom are women—Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire, as they employ storytelling methods to weave a narrative that attempts to excavate as well as comprehend the history of a people; and in the manner in which they articulate the fractured subjecthood of a Naga woman against the backdrop of conflict. The primary query of this section of the thesis would be to explore how the two authors have employed this approach to articulate and integrate the subjectivity of Naga women within a cultural framework where multiple forms of oppressions are at play, and in the process, how their works create a counterpublic of their own, a discursive space where the lived experiences of those marginalised by the narratives of State comes to life. The fourth chapter of the thesis addresses the background and context of Naga women’s writing in English. The chapter begins with an analysis of how the arrival of colonialists and missionaries irreversibly altered Naga oral society. Since the oral tradition of the Naga Hills tribes was severely disrupted when script was introduced by missionaries, discussing this historical context becomes relevant even when discussing the literary discourse coming out of this region today. This chapter also explores the efforts of these two Naga women authors to bridge the gap between the written and oral traditions of the Naga people (which was created by Western forms of education and the spread of script and print) that they achieve by integrating orality as well as the undocumented history of the people into their work. This chapter also argues how literature can become a site of resistance for women in a patriarchal society with a social space that is not only stratified but also heavily militarised. The chapter then discusses the roles of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire, the two most prominent creative writers from Nagaland, as organic and counterpublic intellectuals, how they have used the space of literary discourse to challenge and counter the prevailing hegemonic narratives in society including those of the State and the colonisers.

For this thesis, I have chosen to focus on the fictional narratives of Ao and Kire, specifically on those texts that offer an interaction of history with memory and



imagination, thereby allowing empirical facts and history to coexist with imagination and memory in a shared narrative space. For this reason, the thesis concentrates on texts that rely not only on the lived experiences and memories of the authors, but also on those of the others, especially those subjects whose voices have been excluded from the grand narrative of statist history. Thus, these texts constitute a counter-narrative that highlights the position of the Naga woman, written from the perspective of Naga women and by providing a discursive space for this counter-narrative, they contribute to the formation a counterpublic of their own. The fifth chapter of the thesis focusses on the works of Temsula Ao to show how they accomplish this through the creation of a narrative that reimagines and rewrites the identity of Naga women from the point of view of a Naga woman. The author recasts the identity of Naga women, particularly through the use of private memories— both personal and collective. The objective of this chapter is to analyse how Ao is able to wrest the narrative away from the dominant frames and return it to its rightful subjects. Chapter 6 on the other hand, will analyse Easteirne Kire's works, in particular those novels of Kire that capture pivotal moments in Naga history that drastically shaped the Naga social space. This chapter will examine how Kire employs historical fiction to create a shared space where empirical history may coexist with the lived experiences and memories of people who witnessed those events and lived through them. Similar to Ao, personal and collective memory occupy a significant space in Kire's writing as well. And thus she recasts the historical narrative of the Naga society in her novels from the perspective of a Naga woman organic intellectual— a standpoint that is rare to locate especially in a social space where the State aims to control the subjects through coercive measures. And she, Like Ao, does it by adopting the traditional role of the storyteller, thus establishing an organic connection with her culture which has been subject to repeated instances of cultural colonialism. In the interview with me, she explains her subject-position as a writer chronicling the history of her people within the Naga society in the following lines:

When I document the history of my people, I am doing what my forebears have been doing for many years. The only difference is that it was the men who were the carriers of village history while the women could be considered the carriers of stories. I used the narratives of oral narrators to document our history in books that are categorised as historical fiction (Kire).

It is worth noting here, that while men play a more dominant position in other aspects of Naga culture, the majority of authors (especially those engaging in creative writing) are women. This has been noted by several scholars and academics from the region as a step forward for the Naga women to create an empowered space of her own in the society (Pou 48; I. Longkumer 5). Kire, however, thinks it was only a “matter of timing”, a “natural progression” in continuation of the traditional storytelling practices of Naga women, she explains to me:

Women writers will always write differently from men simply because they have very different sensibilities. The fact that women writers took the lead in creative writing in Nagaland should not be treated as a strange phenomenon. It was simply a matter of timing, and it was a natural progression that the storytelling activities of women in an earlier age progressed to the writing of creative fiction by women in the ages that followed. (Kire)

Vizovono Elizabeth, on the other hand, believes that the long-drawn conflict scenario and its devastating repercussions on the Naga community also played a role (even if a tacit one) in the emergence of women writers in the Naga society, she explains:

There was a point of time when all able-bodied men were either killed, maimed, or had gone wayward. Households were headed by widows who suddenly became responsible for the care and survival of their children and families. So women took on the role of literally continuing their stories through storytelling. But now that they were literate, they could do it in the form of writing too. This was at the initial stages of the development of creative writing by Nagas. (Elizabeth)

Thus, in literary narratives women are afforded the opportunity to rewrite their own identities. This thesis will seek to explore the ways in which women are afforded the opportunity to craft their own identities in literary narratives, thereby opening up a discursive space of counter-narratives (or as Nancy Fraser calls it, counterdiscourses) that directly confront and critique the dominant discourses of the State and contemporary society. This space is akin to what Fraser describes as the “parallel discursive arenas” in which members of subjugated social groups can generate and

distribute “counterdiscourses”, enabling them to formulate alternative interpretations of their “identities, interests, and need”—a space that she names “counterpublics” (67). Critics of Habermas’s theory have suggested that the literary public he extols in his work is tilted against women’s perspectives because it overlooks the lived experiences of contemporary women, and therefore fails to reach the universality Habermas asserts for it (Ellis 28). This “lived experience” of a Naga, and specifically a Naga woman, which was largely overlooked by the dominant hegemonic narratives of society, can be traced in the works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire. Both Ao and Kire’s writings rely significantly on their own personal experiences and memories and those of others. Consequently, as these chapters will demonstrate, their work reflects the need to document the political history of their society from the perspective of those who have actually lived through it, thereby making it possible to comprehend the collective experience of the people (and especially women) who experienced it, as opposed to relying solely on the dominant discourses of the State or the masculinist public-political sphere.

In a society where systems of gender-based discrimination are connected with the political reality of militarization and prolonged violent conflict, there emerges the need to devise approaches that are radically distinct from the conventional feminist resistance to define selfhood. Since women’s voices have traditionally been excluded from decision-making spaces, alternative arenas such as peace movements and literary narratives have evolved to play a much larger role in defining resistance and identity here. This is a region that has witnessed the use of a variety of unique and alternative methods of resistance adopted by women to carve out a space for themselves—methods that are meticulously distinct from the conventional masculinist political narrative prevalent in the society. In this thesis, I will attempt to explore some of these alternative methods that the women of this region have adopted for reclaiming their own voices and asserting their agency.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Public Sphere and the Subaltern Counterpublics: Theoretical and Contextual Discussion

#### 1.i Introduction

In January of 2017, a violent protest spread through Nagaland like wildfire. The protests cost two lives and led the then-chief minister, T. R. Zeliang, to quit. The protests were held in response to the Urban Local Body elections which introduced the 33% reservation for women, a point of contention for many years in Naga communities. Multiple organisations objected to the elections, claiming that they violated Nagaland's special provisions under Article 371A of the Indian Constitution—a reason why many Nagas regard the demand of the Naga women for a 33% reservation as essentially an anti-Naga stance. A similar incident had occurred in the Naga town of Mokokchung prior to the Mokokchung Town Municipal elections of 2008. The protest was mainly put up by *Ao Senden*, the chief tribal organization of the Ao tribe, deterring women from even filing their nomination papers. While talking about the motivations that drive these protests, Anungla Aier notes:

The justification given for such strong protest against the entry of women to occupy seats of power in the society are based on the oral tradition and narrative of the community in which traditionally women were never accredited with such positions because access to such a position was reserved for men as only men were involved with headhunting and warfare that protected the villages from enemies (308).

For years, Naga women have been pursuing a legal struggle to adopt reservations for women through women's groups such as the Naga Mothers' Association. The Joint Action Committee for Women's Reservation was created in 2011 by some of the leaders of the organisation and they soon moved to the Supreme Court of India for implementing the reservation. The Supreme Court finally granted the committee's Special Leave Petition in April of 2016, and directed the state government to hold elections with one third of the seats designated for women, and the government acquiesced. But as protests over the mandate became violent in 2017, the Naga Mothers' Association removed their name from the petition, thus plunging the future

of the issue into uncertainty. Dolly Kikon notes in “The Myth of the Empowered Naga Woman”, that the debates surrounding the political participation of Naga women expose the inherent contradictions that exist in Naga society about gender equality and work ethics:

For example, Naga women and their labour are glorified as intrinsic qualities of Naga society as long as they are traders, officers, waiters, or choose to pursue any career that generates an income for the family. Their work ethics represent Naga values and culture. Naga women can toil and labour, yet they are denied the authority and power to become decision makers as equal members in the traditional assemblies and customary courts. In this context, any assertion to participate as decision makers in the traditional institutions is immediately seen as an opposition to Naga culture. (Kikon)

Journalist and feminist activist Linda Chhakchhuak also hold similar views, as she concurs:

Leadership by women has always been a fact in northeast India – our folk tales have a lot of reference to it. It is the women who hold the tips for good agriculture in a village, they are consulted in every important decision within the family but their leadership outside the family has not happened yet. It is because men want to keep women out of tribal institutions to be able to control the social and political space. (qtd. in Pisharoty)

Hence, it will not be wrong to claim that, Naga women’s economic contributions have not resulted in a matching position of power in decision-making or public-political spheres. This thesis will look at how Naga women have attempted to create “counterpublics” of their own in the absence of a direct entry point to the public-political space, which has helped them negotiate their independent subjecthood even in a stridently patriarchal setup that has attempted to prevent them from entering the formal public-political decision-making sphere time and again.

The first chapter of the thesis deals with the theoretical and contextual background of the thesis. The idea of the “counterpublic” was developed by Nancy Fraser in reaction to Habermas’ conception of the bourgeois public sphere, which

originated in eighteenth-century Europe. Any discussion on the public or the public sphere requires an examination of the Habermasian public sphere, which he described in his landmark work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in 1962. Habermas' concept of the public sphere is ground-breaking in that it gives a critical investigation into a space where citizens may come together and critique the Modern State and its policies, as a collective moving beyond individual interests. However, as several feminists, including Joan B. Landes, Johana Meehan, Mary P. Ryan, and, most notably, Nancy Fraser, have pointed out, Habermas' concept of the public sphere suffers from a gender blindness that limits its emancipatory scopes, particularly for marginalised communities such as women. Hence, the next section of the chapter will analyse Fraser's pioneering concept of the subaltern counterpublic, which is better suited to a stratified society ridden with significant inequalities. The Naga society, which is not only a patriarchal society but has also experienced a severe and oppressive conflict situation for more than five decades, is better suited to what Fraser describes as a stratified society, in which multiple groups compete for power and in the process several communities are pushed to the margins. This is why, for a post-colonial tribal society like Nagaland, the concept of the counterpublic gains more significance than the Habermasian public sphere, which does not address societies outside of eighteenth-century Europe in detail.

### **1.ii The Habermasian Public Sphere and its Limits**

As a political idea, the concept of the public sphere and its hallmark of free and fair participatory trait has travelled far and wide since its primary inception in Ancient Greece. The idea can be traced back to Aristotle, who had theorised about the notion of the public sphere through the idea of *polis* in his *Politics*. Aristotle had defined the *polis* as a place of political association (*koinōnia politikē*). The *polis*, thus, also stands in stark contrast with the *oikos*, the sphere that constitutes of the family and the household (which primarily included women and slaves). The *polis*, as a place for political association, was thought to be formed with the objective of attaining a common (and thus public) goal, as opposed to the *oikos* or the household. In the very first chapter of Book 1 of *Politics*, Aristotle claims—

It is therefore evident that, while all partnerships aim at some good, the partnership that is the most supreme of all and includes all the others does

so most of all, and aims at the most supreme of all goods; and this is the partnership entitled the state, the political association (3)

Aristotle describes the *polis* as a political community of equals (or “free citizens”) that aims at the “good life” (9). For him the good life, thus, is only probable through participation in the *polis*; while the *oikos* is described as a form of human “partnership” that is established “in the course of nature” to satisfy “everyday purposes” whose members are “meal-tubfellows” or meal-sharers (7). Thus the constitutive elements of the two spheres stand essentially separated from each other. Whereas the *oikos* is composed of individuals, the *polis* is composed of citizens that are described as “pure and simple” and “defined by nothing else so much as by the right to participate in judicial functions and in office” (175). The *polis*, in Aristotle’s theory, transcends the *oikos* since it works towards an end that cannot be achieved by the *oikos* (the family and the household) as well the individual citizen—which is the “common interest” (*koinos sympheros*) of the people (Aristotle 201; Zhu 238). This idea of the common interest connotes the public nature of the *polis*, since, although the citizens as separate individuals may hold different ideas, their individual ideas are compelled to converge into collective or public interest. As Rui Zhu points out in his article “Distinguishing the Public from the Private: Aristotle’s Solution to Plato’s Paradox”—whereas a private man’s virtue resides in his “reason” or “wisdom”, a “good citizen” will have to be “noble (*kalos*)” and “free-spirited (*eleutherous*)” as “liberality, nobility, and magnanimity” are primarily social ideals that can only be nurtured in “public domains” (238). Thus the *polis* becomes the fundamental space for the considerations and actions that are beneficial to public interest, even if it stands in direct conflict with individual or private interests. Although Aristotle’s political theory helps separate the private sphere from the public, it should be remembered that the main objective of his theory was to uphold the public and not defend the privacy of the individual. For Aristotle public individuals are fundamentally rational persons who enjoy the ability to access both private life as well as the life of the *polis*. By contrast, then, the private persons are those who cannot be deemed to be completely rational beings and hence they can merely partake in the limited goodness of their private spaces. Theirs is the life of inferior association in comparison with the superior political association of the *polis*, since the latter is more inclusive in nature. Hence, according to the Aristotelian structure, the ethics or morality of the public sphere cannot be judged by the principles

of the private moral conduct. What lies implied within this paradigm created by Aristotle is the fact that the *polis* is only accessible to those individuals who are able to hold dual statuses as private as well as public persons. It is categorically denied to those individuals who possess only a singular private status in the Greek society; Aristotle had thus fundamentally bifurcated the public (which is also the political) and the private (by contrast, apolitical) spheres (Elshtain 327; Habermas 3). The discourses about the public and the private spheres as well as the concept of political personhood have, since Aristotle's *Politics*, been largely structured around his formation of typologies.<sup>1</sup> The Greek conception of the sphere division made it apparent that the idea of freedom was something that could only be achieved in the public, and not in the private; although the freedom of the autonomous citizen essentially depended on his private autonomy as the complete master of the *oikos*. As Craig Calhoun claims in his essay "Civil Society and the Public Sphere", the classical republican school of thought particularly emphasised on the "moral obligation" of citizens to deliver public service as well as guidance, and on the significance of the "public matters" or "*res publica*" which essentially brought the citizens together (Calhoun 328).

Jürgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, takes his cue from this Greek division of the *polis/ oikos* to theorise about the rise of the public sphere in the seventeenth century Europe. Although the public life (or *bios politicos*) dominated the market place (or *agora*), according to Habermas, that did not necessarily denote that it transpired only in this particular locale. Rather, he thinks "The public sphere was constituted in discussion (*lexis*)" (Habermas 3). He further elaborates that the Greek public sphere could also assume "forms of consultation" or even "common action" such as waging a war or athletic games (*ibid.*). However, Habermas also reminds his readers that the status of a citizen in the *polis* was strictly based on his status as the "unlimited" master of the *oikos* (*ibid.*). Thus, the citizen's involvement in the public life was completely dependent upon their private autonomy as the *master* of their household or the private sphere. The citizens could be set free from productive labour but only because of the "patrimonial slave economy" that made sure that women and the slaves were retained under the master's control, inside the private sphere of the *oikos*, to enable the master to successfully partake in the public sphere (*ibid.*). However, since the *polis* did provide a space for "honourable distinction" Habermas concludes that the citizens were indeed able to interact as "equals with equals" (Habermas 4).



Thus the Greek public sphere could turn into a realm of “freedom and permanence” albeit at the expense of the women and the slaves (*ibid.*). However, as Craig Calhoun points out in his Introduction to *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, although the bourgeoisie public sphere that Habermas critiques, shares multiple characteristics with the Greek idea of the *polis*, it also “reverses a key element” (Calhoun 7). The bourgeois public sphere is defined as a public constituted of private subjects participating on discussion of issues that have an impact on the state authority. Hence, individuals in this concept are acknowledged to be shaped predominantly in the realm of the private (which comprises of the family), in contrast to the Greek thought. Furthermore, in Habermas’ concept the private sphere is recognised as a space for freedom which is to be safeguarded by the *public* individual against the authority of the state. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas focuses upon the bourgeois political thought of the seventeenth through mid-twentieth centuries to find an institutional location for practical reason in public affairs for the claims of democracy. In his critical inquiry of the public sphere Habermas develops the idea of the “intersubjective communicative processes and their emancipatory potential” in the lack of a historical subject, to contend the rise of cultural industry and transcend capitalism (Calhoun 5). Habermas thinks that a historical understanding of the public sphere is important to achieve a methodical conception of the contemporary society. The bourgeois public sphere that Habermas explores was a historically specific phenomenon that was created out of the relations between capitalism and the state authority in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The theories related to the public sphere in its present sense had developed in conjunction with the modern state as well as the modern capitalist economy. The modern state brought with itself new forms of dominant administrative apparatus whereas the capitalist economy ushered in a correspondingly authoritative ability to inflate wealth. However, as a result, they also carried with them different forms of discriminations and exploitation. In such a context the public sphere symbolised the prospect of creating a space that can subject these newfound forces to a greater amount of collective guidance aimed at collective good. Right in the beginning of the work Habermas provides his readers with a clear conception of crucial terms for the discussion of the public sphere, such as “public”, “public authority” and “public opinion”. He defines public sphere in the first chapter of the text as a “specific domain” of “public opinion that happens to be opposed to the authorities” (Habermas 2). He also makes it clear that the bourgeois public sphere is a

category that is “typical of an epoch”, and that it “It cannot be abstracted from the unique developmental history of that “civil society” (bürgerliche Gesellschaft) originating in the European High Middle Ages (Habermas xvii).

The formation of the public sphere in its modern sense began to take shape somewhere around the sixteenth century, according to Habermas, along with the rise of the early form of trade capitalism. Before that, during the Middle Ages, publicness was seen as a kind of a “status attribute” (Habermas 7). This was the time of the “representative publicity”, according to Habermas, when “lordship” was represented “not for but “before” the people” where the lord “displayed himself, presented himself as an embodiment of some sort of ‘higher’ power (Habermas 7-8). Habermas explains this “staging” of public representation in following words:

The staging of the publicity involved in representation was wedded to personal attributes such as insignia (badges and arms), dress (clothing and coiffure), demeanor (form of greeting and poise) and rhetoric (form of address and formal discourse in general) in a word, to a strict code of “noble” conduct. The latter crystallized during the High Middle Ages into the system of courtly virtues, a Christianized form of the Aristotelian cardinal virtues. (8)

Joan B. Landes comments in this context:

Habermas calls attention to the features of visibility, display, and embodiment.... The “re-presentative” public sphere was not a sphere of political communication, nor did it require any permanent location. Rather, it was marked by the staged performance of authority, displayed before an audience, and embodied in the royal subject (93-94).

However, this court society of the Middle Ages slowly gave way to a new kind of sociability characterized by the seventeenth century salons. It will be wrong to assume that Habermas refers to this public sphere of the seventeenth century as the bourgeois public sphere only because of the class composition of the members; rather it was the society that was bourgeois and since the bourgeois society produced this form

of public sphere it is named as such (Calhoun 7). As a result of long-distance trade radical transformations were brought in the ways of communication that later transpired to the structures of power relation. This was instrumental in bringing down the older feudal forms of power structure that was based on the courtly culture. Although this transaction evolved according to norms that were controlled by political authority, an extensive network of horizontal economic interdependence arose, which “in principle,” could not be sustained anymore by the vertical connections of reliance that characterised the structure of the estate system (Habermas 15). The trade cities (like Antwerp, which by 1531 had become the world’s permanent trade fair) had turned themselves into centres for traffic in commodities, but more importantly, information; since it was the merchants who had systematised the earliest forms of mail routes for the purpose of their business. Such cities of the early modern era created spaces that brought strangers together through networks of finance, culture and markets. Markets, which were erstwhile seen as merely physical spaces for direct interaction, now signified a space for large scale system of exchange for commodities as well as information. However, since the merchants were content with a structure which restricted information only to insiders of the trade, the public nature of it was still lacking— this “publicness” which according to Habermas was the “decisive element” for the transformation of the social milieu, “occurred only at the end of seventeenth century” (Habermas 16). It was during this time, which Habermas refers to as the “mercantilist phase” that the idea of the modern state came to take its shape along with the national as well as territorial economies. Since the sixteenth century the mercantile companies began organizing an extended capital base. Hence, unlike their predecessors, the early capitalists, they wanted the chance for widening the scope of their markets, especially in uncharted locales. However, to open up new market spaces they required political securities and guarantees. Habermas writes, “within this process was constituted what has since been called the “nation”” (17), which is how we know the modern state as, along with all its bureaucracies and officialdoms. This procedure of constituting the nation resulted in the initiation of a response that boosted the mercantile policy. Since private loans by the royals were not adequate anymore to fulfil the mercantile requirements, a system of taxation is implemented in order to meet the demand. And thus the modern state shaped itself as an institution based on taxation where bureaucracy of the treasury became the very centre of its government and administration. Thus began a process of separation between the personal capital of the

monarchs or the feudal lords and the holdings and belongings of the state as a separated institution. This separation calls forth a paradigmatic shift in the administrative power relations especially since local administrations were brought under the state's control<sup>ii</sup>. This shift in power relations was instrumental in creating a space for the modern public sphere. According to Habermas with the displacement of estate-based institutions, occurred a diminution in the type of publicity involved in representation, which paved the way for the emergence of this other sphere—“the public sphere in the modern sense of the term: the sphere of public authority.” (Habermas 18).

Public authority is gradually established into a substantial and tangible object with the rise of institutions like the press, since there is a continuous correspondence required between the state activity and those trafficking in commodities. The word ‘public’ in this sense became synonymous with ‘state-related’; ‘public’ now referred to the “functioning of an apparatus with regulated spheres of jurisdiction and endowed with a monopoly over the legitimate use of coercion” (18). Thus the feudal lords’ authority over their subjects is now converted into the state’s authority to “police”. And the “private people”, as the recipient of this public authority, consolidated the “public” (ibid.). Thus, it was the private people who created the public *against* the public authority of the state. Habermas here talks about the emergence of a collective of individuals that—though they may never come into contact with the vast majority of the group’s other members—all self-identify under a shared community identity. This concept of “horizontal comradeship” was also presented as a frame for understanding nationalism in Benedict Anderson’s 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Anderson 7). The notion is best captured in Anderson’s words—“all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined (15). As Anderson points out the community is “imagined” since the citizens of even the smallest of the countries will likely never meet the vast majority of their fellow citizens, let alone get to know them, and still the idea of their “communion” will continue to exist in their minds (ibid.). Therefore, as Fraser notes in “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere”, with much the same “vernacular literary forms” that gives way to Anderson’s “imagined community of the nation”, Habermas established the framework of his public sphere (12). However, it must be noted in this context that in contrast to Anderson’s conception, which focuses on nation and nationalism, Habermas’ concept denotes the creation of a sphere where

the State and its policies can be critiqued by individuals as a collective, pursuing common good for general populace (Fraser 3).

According to Habermas the shift in the mercantile enterprise had left a vital impact on the relationship between the state authority and its subjects; especially as a result of the mercantile policies which were formally concerned with maintaining the stability of trade (Habermas 18). Hence the administrative action gradually adapted to the capitalist mode of production. The privileges that were approved to the occupation-based corporations earlier, (which was something that characterised the feudal estate regime), were now superseded by grants that were aimed at bringing transformation of the extant manufacture into full scale capitalist production. As Calhoun points out, this new “sociability” along with the “rational-critical” discourses which arose from spaces like the coffee-houses or salons, were dependent on the emergence of “national and territorial power states” on the foundation of the “early capitalist commercial economy” (7). According to Calhoun it was this process that prompted the development of the notion of a society that was distinct from the “ruler” or the “state” and also, a private sphere separated from the public sphere (ibid.). Within this transformation of the political as well as social order that was taking place during the mercantilist phase of early capitalism, the print media in the form of the press cultivated a “unique explosive power”, according to Habermas (20). Long distance trade required a traffic in news as traffic in commodity grew. The newsletter that carried the information about prices and demand for the traders also started carrying various other kinds of news. This process in return helped in transforming the print media to a necessary source for substantial *public* information. These changes proved to have revolutionary effects in that age of mercantilism. The state also started making use of this medium to disseminate instructions or directives and soon the press was systematically used to cater to the interest of the state authority. The addressees of these announcements of the state authority was the common people or the *public* in the “proper sense” – Habermas refers to an order issued in 1727 by the Prussian cabinet, whereby it is made clear that this institution was envisioned “to be useful for the public” as well as to “facilitate communication” (Habermas 22). Through this medium, the state authorities began addressing their declaration to all its subjects, at least in principle. However, in this way they mostly reached the “educated classes” only and not the “common man” (23). With the integration of the apparatus of the “modern state”, a new section of “bourgeois”

people also came to exist who took up the primary position within the “public” (ibid.). At its core were the officials of the state’s administrators (especially the jurists) along with other officers, doctors, clerics, professors and scholars. These were the people who occupied the top of the hierarchy in the system reaching down to the commoners or the “people” through the schoolteachers and scribes (ibid.). This new class of the bourgeois citizens was from the inception a reading public. They were also the “real carrier” of the public according to Habermas (ibid.). Even though these were the people that was to inform the public of the “useful truths” propagated by the state, before long, they began to deliberate upon their own thoughts and judgements, which was mostly directed in contradiction of the state authorities (25). Habermas drew into focus a public sphere of educated individuals who simultaneously altered the sociopolitical structure of eighteenth-century Europe, by participating in rising discursive institutions of print and socialized interactions (Goodman 1). This participation was anchored in a sense of collective imagination, which assisted these individuals in forming a community despite not knowing one another personally. In his essay “Imagining in the Public Sphere” Robert Asen uses the idea of “collective imagining” as a socio-political process that helps integrate a political imagined community through discursive engagement (349). According to Asen, it is not separate and individual perceptions and beliefs that culminate into the emergence of collective imagination. Instead, collective imagination develops through the discursive interaction between multiple interlocutors located in a diverse range of situations that vary in “scope”, “formality” and “structure” (349). Hence the role of discourses and their exchange becomes crucial in this process since they not only function as conduits for the dissemination of ideas and information, but also as a significant “constitutive force” (ibid.). As Asen emphasises, people may begin the process of social interaction with preconceived ideas, but they may also form ideas (or even rearrange them) only after engaging in discussions with other members of the community. This makes the concept of interaction of discourses significant. Hence, he observes that collective imagining, instead of characterizing the connection between objects and perception, alludes to the ideas that develop through intersubjective relationships, representing a “public process”— “interlocutors engage in processes of imagining about people they regard as similar to and different from themselves, and the processes and products of the collective imagination are accessible to others” (Asen 350). Thus, the process of collective imagining through various sorts of “voluntary

associations” creates a sense of community even in the absence of face-to-face connection (Goodman 2).

The public sphere, however, could only be ideated in its full sense if the state could be established as an “impersonal locus” of authority (Calhoun 8). Hence, the modern concept of the public sphere was contingent upon the prospect of juxtaposing the state with the society as completely separate entities; this is how in Habermas’ idea of the public sphere the private sphere of the society could finally assume a *public* significance (thus breaking down the *polis/ oikos* hierarchical binary in the field of public discourse). Habermas writes—

Civil society came into existence as the corollary of a depersonalized state authority. Activities and dependencies hitherto relegated to the framework of the household economy emerged from this confinement into the public sphere (19).

Because of the separation of state and society it was finally possible to acknowledge the concept of society from the point of view of the connections and associations created for sustaining life. Habermas notes how the educated elite commenced viewing itself as constituting the public and thus altered the abstract concept of the “publicum” as a counterpart to the public authority into a substantial set of practices— “The publicum developed into the public, the subjectum into the [reasoning] subject, the receiver of regulations from above into the ruling authorities’ adversary” (26). The members of the educated elite started to view themselves not just as the object of the action of the state authority, but as the adversary of the same. This bourgeois public sphere established a practice of rational and critical discussions, based on the concept of a common interest that is so sufficiently fundamental and basic in nature that the discourse about it cannot be distorted or misrepresented by individual interest, at least in principle. Habermas explains—

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange

and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason. (27)

The idea of the public sphere however, does have its own set of constraints. As Joan B. Landes points out in her essay “The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration”—

From the outset, a tension arose between the formal criteria of abstract moral reason and the goals of substantive rationality. Ambivalences in the principle of privacy derived from the system of private property and from a family caught up in the requirements of the market. In addition, conflicts arose in the identity of the privatized individuals who occupied the public sphere, insofar as their status derived either from a position as property owners rather than from their basic humanity. (96)

Landes comments that like an exclusive “club”, there were “strong requirements” for an individual to take admission into “this club” as to any other, as the issue of property remained the prerequisite for inclusion in the bourgeois public sphere, even though it did not become a subject of discussion (97). Thus, the notion of class and its paraphernalia (Landes especially mentions— “property”, “literacy”, “income” as well as “cultural background”) turned out to form substantial obstacles to fully participate in the Habermasian public sphere (97). More importantly, Landes believes that, since the public sphere and the criteria for publicity assumed a differentiation between public and private concerns, it was not well equipped to address the political dimension of private interactions in a public manner— “the structural division between the public sphere, on the one hand, and the market and the family, on the other, meant that a whole range of concerns came to be labeled as private and treated as improper subjects for public debate” (98). Landes thus comes to the conclusion that this bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century was for the most part a “restricted male preserve” (ibid.).

Johanna Meehan echoes similar views about the Habermasian public sphere when she claims that his account of the public sphere is afflicted by a “gender blindness” that seems to veil the disparities between the social and political standing of



men and women— “while Habermas’s model of classical capitalism clarifies the inter-institutional relations among various spheres of public and private life, in failing to thematize gender issues his model fails to realize its full explanatory power” Meehan remarks (7). She points out, when Habermas connects the economic and family spheres, he overlooks the fact that gender influences this relationship just as much as money does. She mentions that for the capitalist, the role of the worker is inherently a masculine one reflected in the identification of the male as breadwinner in the historic workers’ struggle for a “family wage” (ibid.). At the same time capitalism has provided women the position of consumer, as well as one with the responsibilities of childcare and other unpaid duties involved in the recurrence of everyday activities that connects economy and the family spheres. Meehan claims that since Habermas’ interpretation disregards the “gendering” of these “role assignments”, he fails to acknowledge and examine gender as an “exchange medium” (7). As a result his account also fails to acknowledge how the role of the “citizen”, as a participant in the formation of public opinion, is inherently structured as masculine since, “consent and public speech, prerequisite for the exercise of citizenship, are historically the prerogatives of men and have often been viewed as at odds with femininity” (7). Thus, the gender-blindness of his analysis obscures the undertones of gendered identities not only in the realm of citizenship but also in the public realms of waged work or public administration. Meehan contends that, because the bounds of this public sphere only included “disembodied subjects of discursive reason”, the private sphere of emotions and the relations nurtured into it, was effectively excluded, resulting in a “de facto exclusion” of women (9). Thus, Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, tends to facilitate some interests over the other, even if not on purpose, thereby resulting into exclusion of individuals based on their status in society. Furthermore, by overlooking the nuances of the gender-based power dynamic in the interpersonal relationships of the private realm, it also effectually warrants that the male-subjects would remain the foremost occupants of the public sphere. As Meehan remarks, “Habermas is wrong to see the exclusion of women from the bourgeois public sphere as simply the failure of the bourgeoisie to realize its own normative ideals”, since this exclusion was “constitutive of the institutionalization of that sphere” (9). However, she also points out “while Habermas’s discussion of gender is limited, his discourse theory is one of the most persuasive current reflections on politics and moral and social norms, and thus of great interest to feminists theorists despite its failure to specifically theorize gender” (1). As

multiple feminists have concurred, Habermas' study provides a framework for evaluating the nature of life under modern capitalism, as well as its capacities— both liberatory and domineering. As a result, Habermas' concept becomes effective for fundamentally rethinking subjecthood by emphasising the inter-subjective development of selfhood (Fraser 57; Meehan 10). In spite of its shortcomings, the concept of the public sphere remains beneficial for the feminists, because it helps to draw a distinction between various spheres of society (as discussed in the next section of the chapter) and allows one to better comprehend a variety of concerns, which is particularly useful in evaluating socially constructed gender divisions especially in the public realm.

### **1.iii Subaltern Counterpublics**

One of the most significant achievements of this idea of the public sphere has been the way the concept has helped evade misperceptions which have afflicted progressive social movements and the political discourses accompanying them. As Nancy Fraser points out in her essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”, when it comes to feminism, the concept has especially helped the feminists understand the significance of the idea of the public sphere in a more fixed and accurate way than before. Fraser, in her essay explains how Habermas' theorisation of the public sphere helped feminist discourses circumvent the confusion regarding the very expression— the public sphere. Feminist dialogues tended to collate three systematically distinct categories with their usage of the term: the state, the arena of official economy and the spaces of public discourse (hence, everything that is outside the domestic sphere of family). This act of conflating of three categories is not simply a theoretical problem, but it is also an issue that has grave political consequences. Fraser writes:

Now, it should not be thought that the conflation of these three things is a “merely theoretical” issue. On the contrary, it has practical political consequences, for example, when agitational campaigns against misogynist cultural representations are confounded with programmes for state censorship, or when struggles to deprivatize housework and child care are equated with their commodification. In both these cases, the result is to

occlude the question whether to subject gender issues to the logic of the market or the administrative state is to promote the liberation of women.(57)

Habermas' idea of the public sphere can be helpful in overcoming such conceptual difficulties since it presents the public sphere as a site that is conceptually distinct from the state as well as that of market relations. He presents the public sphere as an arena of discursive relations which is in essence critical of the state. It is also essentially distinct from the economic sphere of market relations since it is a "theatre for debating and deliberating" and not purchasing and vending (57). Fraser thinks that the idea is also significant for its potential to offer a space to discuss alternative models of democracy. However, she also considers the particular form in which Habermas expounds his idea to be non-satisfactory, especially, to produce a category capable of conceiving the confines of existing democracy. It has to be remembered in this context that the idea of the public sphere that Habermas had explored in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is that of a liberal bourgeois public sphere. That model of public sphere is probably no longer feasible under the altered conditions of twentieth or twenty-first century "welfare state mass democracy" (Fraser 58). This mode of the public sphere was postulated in the time of a social order when the state was categorically distinct from the market economy (which was in its initial stages of privatisation as well). Hence a clear separation of the state and society was possible. It did not last with the emergence of welfare state mass democracy where the ideas of state and society became entwined. Especially with the advent of mass-mediated display staged by the state public opinion started getting manipulated and as a result public deliberation in the sense of rational-critical scrutiny of the state became virtually extinct. Whereas it is true that openness is one of the fundamental preconditions of the public sphere, the reality is that numerous systems of exclusion are vehemently present in actually existing publics. The bracketing of inequality of status also came to its cessation as the non-bourgeois sections of the people started gaining entry into the public sphere:

Then, "the social question" came to the fore; society was polarized by class struggle; and the public fragmented into a mass of competing interest groups. Street demonstrations and back room, brokered compromises among private interests replaced reasoned public debate about the common good. (Fraser 59)

Although Habermas includes an ample amount of critique of the transformation and consequent degeneration of the liberal mode of public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* he stops short of developing a new post-bourgeois model of the same. At the same time, he also does not clearly problematize some doubtful assumptions that afflict the bourgeois model of the public sphere—for example its exclusive nature. Education and property ownership were the most significant criteria to enter this bourgeois model of public sphere. It also considered only the “older, elite public” as constitutive of the whole relevant citizenry; Calhoun mentions— “These qualifications defined a “man”, that is, the fully capable and autonomous person competent to enter into the rational- critical discourse about the general interest” (Calhoun 16). Since the rational critical discussion was to be accessible to all and was aimed towards a common good, issues that could be recognised as private interests were to be disallowed; and as the participants were to deliberate as compeers, inequalities of status were largely bracketed. Deliberating upon the exclusive nature of the public sphere Fraser refers to the work of Joan Landes, for whom the chief axis of exclusion is gender. With the example of the emerging republican public sphere in France, Landes shows how it replaced the salon culture (which was more “woman friendly”), by stigmatizing it as “effeminate and aristocratic” (Fraser 59). Since the bourgeois mode of public sphere intended to be more rational in nature, it grew as a space that was-- in opposition to the erstwhile salon culture-- more “virtuous” and even more importantly, “manly” (ibid.). Thereupon, masculine gender identity was built into the very conception of this model of public sphere. Fraser refers to the etymological connection between the words “public” and “pubic” in this context as she claims that this association showed that even in the ancient times, “possession of a penis was a requirement for speaking in public” (60). However, the exclusive nature of the Habermasian public sphere has not been its only shortcoming, even more so was Habermas’ lack of attention to other competing public spheres that were non-bourgeois and non-liberal in their approach. Mary P. Ryan, in her work, “Gender and Public Access: Women’s Politics in Nineteenth Century America”, presents a historiography of the nineteenth century North American women (from different classes and ethnicities) constructing entry points to the public political sphere, although they were mostly excluded from the scope of the official public sphere. The women who came from the aristocratic bourgeois background, built a counter civil society of only women participants, although these associations mostly imitated the masculine societies that

were built by the men in their families and lives. For women coming from less privileged backgrounds the access route to the public was created through participation in the protest activities of the working class, although it was still a male dominated space. And for some other women access to public life came through involvement in street protests and parades. Then were the women's rights advocates who publicly contested the issue of the gendered exclusion of women from the public. Citing this revisionist historiography, Fraser observes—

In fact, the historiography of Ryan and others demonstrates that the bourgeois public was never *the* public. On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics. Thus, there were competing publics from the start, not just from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Habermas implies. (61)

These studies of historiography also make it apparent that even in the absence of a formal political assimilation, there have always been diverse ways to access a variety of public arenas and spaces. Following Fraser, then it can be said that, the plurality of public sphere is not a modern phenomenon as Habermas had opined. Fraser categorically opposes Habermas' claim that the propagation of a diverse range of competing publics is necessarily a hindrance in the way of democracy, to be read as a sign of fragmentation of the liberal public sphere.

Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* emphasised upon the singularity of the public sphere. However, Fraser in her essay goes on to oppose this perspective of Habermas as she explains the efficacy of multiple publics in two kinds of society that may exist in the modern era—egalitarian multi-cultural societies and stratified societies. She defines egalitarian societies as one that are “classless societies without gender or racial division of labour” (Fraser 58). These are societies that possess a basic framework which does not produce “unequal social groups in structural relations of domination and subordination” (ibid.). Even in such spaces the existence of a single comprehensive public sphere seems counterproductive. To explain this idea Fraser raises the issue of the relation between public discourse and social

identities and asserts that public spheres are not only spaces for formation of discursive opinion (which is what Habermas had claimed) but also are spaces where the formation and “enactment” of social identities take place (Fraser 68). Since this is the space where participants are supposed to express their opinions and if they do so in while they are able to speak “in their own voice”, then they are also concurrently “constructing and expressing” their “cultural identity through idiom and style” (Fraser 69). Thus the public sphere can never be a space of “zero degree culture”; rather, they exist in culturally specific institutions (Fraser cites the journals and the urban spaces) that use “culturally specific rhetorical lenses” that sift and even rework the expressions that they structure (ibid.). Therefore, the existence of an overarching singular public sphere is not ideal even in an egalitarian multicultural society. It would filter expressions and opinions through its singular homogenous lens and since this lens cannot be sincerely culturally unbiased, it would basically champion the expressive norms of one cultural group over another, which would result in the obliteration of the multicultural nature of the society. While to preserve the multicultural aspect of itself, an egalitarian society would have to support the multiplicity of publics, the situation is decidedly different in stratified society.

Fraser defines stratified societies as societies whose “basic institutional framework generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination” (66). In such a society complete equality of involvement in public discussion is not even realistically probable. There is a presumed disparity when it comes to participation in public discourses between dominant and subordinate groups in such state of affairs. Nagaland, where the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) is still implemented by the State, which has also been a conflict zone for more than five decades, and where, the society, much like most of India and the rest of the world, is still patriarchal in nature, leans more towards the definition of a stratified society as expounded by Fraser (since not all the groups, especially women, have had the chance to enjoy a full parity of participation in the public life, because of the systemic violence of the state as well as patriarchal attitude propagated in the region like the rest of the country). Fraser deliberates, that in such a stratified society the plurality of publics is required for participatory parity even more than the egalitarian society. A single overarching public sphere in a stratified society would end up homogenising and thus suppressing the voice of those who are not allowed to represent

themselves in the public life. These multiple publics will provide the members of the marginalised groups to create a space of their own where they can voice and deliberate amongst themselves about their “needs, ideas and strategies” (Fraser 66). Her argument is also backed by the revisionist historiography of the public sphere by feminists like Mary P. Ryan which vividly records that member of subordinate and marginalised communities like “women, workers, people of colour, and gays and lesbians” have over and over again found it to be to their advantage to organise alternative publics (67). In this context Fraser establishes her idea of the “subaltern counterpublics”—

I propose to call these *subaltern counterpublics* in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. (67)

Fraser finds her primary example in the late twentieth century feminist subaltern counterpublics created in the United States of America. The spaces that this counterpublic was organised in was both academic (for example journals, conferences, bookstores, research meetings and lecture series) and non-academic in nature (film or video circulation network, festivals and local places of gathering). Fraser mentions how this counterpublic used language by engendering new terms to grasp the realities of women’s condition in the society—

In this public sphere feminist women have invented new terms for describing social reality, including “sexism,” “the double shift,” “sexual harassment” and “marital, date, and acquaintance rape.” Armed with such language, we have recast our needs and identities, thereby reducing, although not eliminating, the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres. (67)

The counterpublics serve twofold purposes in stratified societies. First, they function as spaces for “withdrawal” and “regroupment”; and second, they also create the space and impetus for conducting activism directed towards the public at large. As Fraser writes – “It is precisely in the dialectics between these two functions that their

emancipatory potential resides” (68). Although participatory parity is never completely realized in stratified societies, the plurality of counterpublics can at least provide the marginalised communities with a space to deliberate and thus approximate the notion of parity. However, Fraser does not fail to mention that in a stratified society these variety of public spheres are staged in the backdrop of a structured setting that is inherently advantageous to some and disadvantageous to other groups. Hence, in a stratified society, the discursive relation between these multiple publics is one of contestation as well as deliberation. Fraser also accepts the fact that subaltern counterpublics are not always egalitarian in nature and can practice their own methods of informal eliminations, especially in a stratified society. However even in a stratified society the counterpublics can raise issues of marginalisation and oppression that were hitherto unseen and thus expand the discursive practices. Hence the defence of the plurality of public is not merely a celebration of postmodern multiplicity for Fraser; rather this concept of plurality sanctions a space where internal differences can be debated and discussed. Since such inter-public contestations are found often in a stratified society, the concept of the boundary of the public sphere becomes important. In the Habermasian idea of the public sphere the discussion was to be held between private persons about public matters. Much like the Aristotelian idea of the public sphere, the issues of the private sphere were to be excluded from the public discussions since it did not entail the idea of common good. However what counts as matter of common concern should be decided through discursive contestations by the participants of the public sphere only. Here Fraser brings in the idea of the boundary between the public and the private (a debate that has continued since the time of Aristotle defining the public sphere through his description of the *polis* in his *Politics*) by presenting a discussion upon the subject of domestic violence, which was viewed as a “private matter” for long and hence not a “legitimate topic of public discourse” (Fraser 71). It took a subaltern counterpublic of the feminists to establish the view that domestic violence did not only pertain to the personal space shared by a couple, but is actually an extensive systemic attribute of patriarchal societies and thus is a matter of common concern. Fraser goes on to comment that the terms like “private” and “public” should be treated with a nuanced perspective since they are not merely “straightforward designations of social spheres” (73). Rather, in political discourse, they are used as rhetorical labels set up to undermine the interests and wellbeing of one group while protecting the interest of others. As Habermas discussed in *Structural Transformation*



the concept of public and publicity may mean something that is accessible to all, usually related to state, of concern to all and finally something that relates to a common good or collective interest. The idea of privacy connoted an inherent opposition in nature to all the above-mentioned qualities. But more importantly there are two more sense of privacy that Fraser points out— “pertaining to private property in a market economy” and “pertaining to intimate domestic or personal life, including sexual life” (Fraser 71).

#### **1.iv Nagaland and the Counterpublics**

In a conflict-ridden stratified society, like that of the Naga communities, this rhetoric of publicity and privacy may function to restrict the boundaries of the public spheres to delegitimise the interests of the subordinate groups like that of the women. The rhetoric of domestic privacy does so by personalising issues through casting them as familial (and thus domestic) matters as opposed to public-political matters. The rhetoric of economic privacy, on the other hand delegitimises the claims of the subordinate groups by casting them as “impersonal market imperatives” or ““private” ownership prerogatives” or as “technical problems” for managers, thus posing them in contradistinction to the public-political matters (Fraser 73). Therefore, merely rescinding formal restrictions for subordinate groups like women cannot be held as a successful prerequisite to ensure inclusion. The conceptions of economic privacy and domestic privacy can act as means through which gender and class detriments can continue to operate subtextually, even if formal restrictions are annulled. Subaltern counterpublics also possess the ability to confront the apparent neutral stance of the mainstream and traditional publics and thus disclose that hegemonic public culture reflects intricate power relations.

Habermas’s idea of the universal bourgeois public sphere is founded upon the code of active citizenship. For him the coffee houses of England and the salons in France exemplified the public sphere as they provided the groundwork for democratic participation in Europe during the eighteenth century. One of the core ideas that shape the Habermasian public sphere is the development of the concept of public opinion as opposed to mere opinion. Whereas opinion in its rudimentary sense was nothing short of arbitrary observations of isolated individuals taken in collective and shared a “polemically devalued association with pure prejudice”, public opinion was seen as the reflective consideration of the educated bourgeois (Habermas 92). Habermas’s idea of

the public sphere is, thus, an arena which essentially belongs to the individuals who can delve into rational-critical mode of discussion (hence those with access to education that propagates the ideas of European modernity, which is mostly the bourgeois middle class). This is also an arena where social inequalities are deliberately to be bracketed so that the discussion is always focussed on common good instead of private interest. However, in an unequal and plural society (like that of India and Nagaland) where segregation and perpetuation of class, caste and gender-based hierarchy have created a mass of submissive and passive citizenry, it is almost impossible to formulate such a structure of an overarching singular public sphere that is also egalitarian and liberal in nature. In such a society (which Fraser called “stratified” society) there is a strong need for mobilization by several interest groups so that the marginalized communities can access the public-political space or the decision-making sphere. This is why Fraser’s concept of subaltern counterpublics becomes pertinent for the Indian as well as the Naga society.

Habermas thought that public opinion was significant since it was attained through reasoned debate. For an informed rational critical discussion, it is imperative that the citizens have access to information, which calls for transparency in government dealings as well as absence of censorship of the state on the dissemination of that information. Active communication, thus, becomes an important prerequisite for publicness. The idea of public opinion was to be perceived as not just an aggregate of opinions of the individual citizens. It was rather to be conceived as a sincere societal product which comes out as a result of active communication. Towards the end of *The Structural Transformation* Habermas goes on to scrutinise the nineteenth and twentieth century publics through the terms of the loss of this very rational critical aptitude that had resulted from the rise of the public relations management which successfully integrated the public into the realm of administered society. This precondition of active participation has been hindered in conflict zones (like Nagaland) because of the state’s unwillingness to provide its citizens with transparent access to information. Also, the longstanding violence along with the rise of the public relations managements that Habermas mentions towards the end of his text, has imposed a state of inaction on the citizens, thus hindering any prospect of active participation into the public sphere. Since it is not only the lack of access to transparent information, but also passive citizens that make the potency of the public sphere limited, the creation of the Habermasian mode

of an overarching singular public sphere is almost impossible in a society like the Naga's (Calhoun 319). However, it is not only the production of an inactive citizenry that hinders participation in the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas writes about. Capacity of holding a rational critical argument is also an important prerequisite for participation. But this condition in effect eliminates certain groups of people, since dependence upon refined reasoning in public deliberations essentially privileges one section of the people over the others (Young 38). Thus, it was both the creation of a depoliticised passive citizenry as well as the systemic exclusion of certain groups on the basis of standards set by the virtues of modernity, which made it impossible for a Habermasian public sphere to form in the post-colonial society of India and at the same time, Nagaland. Hence the formation of "weak publics" (Sahoo 80), which also happened to be heavily exclusionary in nature, probably became the reason why India's civil society was largely confined to a certain section of the society. Several Indian political theorists have argued that the Indian civil society has always been confined to a small section of the modern elites who have had access to not only education in its contemporary form under western modernity, but also have enjoyed access to the literary and political life of the communities as well, a status that is not accessible to many groups of citizens including most women, barring their caste and class (Chatterjee 61; Kaviraj 311). These educated elites have also had the opportunity to stand as the political proxy of the masses against the colonial British state. The political status that they have fabricated as key contenders to the British in the anti-colonial struggle of India, has also helped them gain access to an unchallenged legitimacy to authority and power even in the current post-colonial situation. The exclusion of a vast majority of the population as well as their long-term reliance on welfare created a mass of passive citizenry which was unsuited with the idea of a strong public sphere (Bhargava 48).

In most societies around the globe, gender has been unequivocally accepted to be one of the key points of exclusion when it comes to participation in the public-political sphere. It remains true for all Indian communities, including the Nagas (as was also the case with the seventeenth century bourgeois public sphere, as shown by Nancy Fraser). Ethno-historian and journalist Ranju Dodum perfectly captures the convoluted situation when it comes to women's rights in Nagaland in the following lines—

Home to 16 recognized tribes, the role of women in Nagaland's political history can be difficult to understand viewing it from an outsider's perspective. As in several tribal and indigenous communities in the Northeast, women in Naga society have a lot of freedom and are not systematically suppressed by men (or at least it's not evident at first glance). However, freedom does not necessarily translate into rights.... That is just how it has been for ages (Dodum)

In any patriarchal society women are categorically relegated to the private sphere of family, thus sharply separated from the public sphere. Like most of the societies around the world, even in the egalitarian tribal communities of Nagaland, women have often been denied the chance of equality and agency in the public sphere. As mentioned by Fraser, Habermas' idea of the public sphere becomes useful in the context of the Naga society since it helps us differentiate between the economic sphere and the arenas of public discourse, two areas that are often conflated in the expression "the public sphere" (Fraser 37). When it comes to state wise workforce participation rate, Naga women present the second highest percentage of participation in workforce in the entire nation with a 44.74% average, according to the 2011 census, coming only second to Himachal Pradesh (44.82%); whereas the workforce participation rate for females at all India level stands at only 25.51%<sup>iii</sup>. Even with such high participation rate in the workforce, involvement of Naga women in the decision making sphere, and thus the public-political sphere has remained significantly low. In Nagaland, no woman has ever been elected to the House, from the time when the first legislative assembly was constituted in February of 1964. The only time a woman was elected into office was when Rano Shaiza had become a Lok Sabha MP in the year 1977. Since the state's creation in 1963 till 2017 (which is when the riots took place) only 30 women had participated in the state elections and none of them managed to win. However, the state legislative assembly elections of 2018 had witnessed for the first-time successful nomination of 5 women candidates for the 60-seat assembly. Although none of them won, it stood as a symbol of the change that will probably be ushered in by the grit of the Naga women who have struggled for years to take back their agency. This change is also fuelled by prolonged activism of Naga women for shaping their own identity, wrung away from the discourse of the Indian state or their communities. In the lack of proper entry points to the heavily masculinised public political sphere, the women here

chose to create subaltern counterpublics of their own which helped them regain their agency. In the following chapters there would be discussions focussed upon two of the key fields that these women have chosen as spaces for creation of counterpublics, to help them achieve agency—the arena of peace activism and that of writing.

However, before going into a detailed discussion of the counterpublics created by the women in Nagaland, it is important to take a look at the formation and nature of the mainstream public sphere in the Naga communities. The Naga public sphere has had quite a strong presence in the region since the pre-independence days of the state of India. Every social order designs its political life in divergent ways, primarily based on its practices and principles. However, there are not many societies that have undergone social transformation at such swift pace as the Naga society has over the past few decades. The Naga public sphere had formed and grown in a distinctively separate manner from the mainstream public sphere of India. The reason behind this was that the very origin of the Naga public sphere was based upon the demand for a distinctive Naga identity, which could not be overshadowed by the state of India in any shape or form. An understanding of Naga public sphere must also take into regard the commanding presence of the village as well as tribal councils; it must also be studied in the framework of the prolonged Indo-Naga conflict and the violent and volatile backdrop it has created for modern democracy to be unfolded in Nagaland.

The emergence of the public sphere in the Naga community can be traced back to the colonial age. It was the colonial era which bore witness to the broadening of the Naga public sphere with the advent of the significant Naga civil societies, such as the Naga Club (est.1918) and the Naga National Council (est.1945). Thus a critical public sphere came into existence for the Naga people, where they could unite to discuss their political future, which stood in separation with the state much like the Habermasian idea of the public sphere. However, it is important to note that the development of this public sphere was shaped by the political experiences of the Nagas in relation to the British colonisers and later, the state of India. The Naga public sphere was heavily impacted by the Indo-Naga conflict situation that dominated the area for more than five decades. Therefore, unlike the Habermasian public sphere the Naga public sphere could not have operated in a space that is largely free from any kind of constraints imposed by the State. However, even with that limitation bearing upon them the organisations

that have resulted out of the Naga public sphere, have been quite successful in their attempt to communicate the political objectives of the Nagas through a framework of indigenous experiences as well as collective human rights. Democracy in its modern sense reached Nagaland only in the 1960s, after the attainment of statehood in 1963 and the organisation of the first elections in 1964. As Charles Chasie points out, democracy in Nagaland has always been something akin to the site of conflict. He thinks that the incongruent nature of the tribes, as well as the unresolved Naga political issue in relation to the state of India, and the simultaneous presence of “insurgency” operating through the entire period” are responsible for this “complex, difficult and painful” experience of democracy (247). The presence of inter-factional encounters amongst the underground forces only intensified the conflict situation in Nagaland permeating all spheres of society and life. The Naga public sphere, thus, became significant not only in terms of political importance but also for the reason of nurturing peace. In Nagaland, this associational space of plurality is organized mainly along the lines of tribal and religious bodies (especially the church committees), as well as students’ and women’s organizations. The creation of the public sphere in Nagaland has its own cultural as well as historical backdrop. Hence it is important to study the Naga public sphere and the counterpublics as phenomena situated and framed in the historical context of the Naga communities. The Naga public sphere was formed in the conditions of political uncertainty and conflict as this public sphere functioned apropos the armed conflict situation between the state and the Nagas. The Naga public sphere is also essentially moulded by the ethos and value system of the tribal belonging, thus separated from the Habermasian idea of the bourgeois public sphere as well. Therefore, unlike the liberal view of the public sphere as presented in the *Structural Transformation*, the projections of the public sphere in Nagaland are a ‘closed’ space instead of being presented as an inclusive or open space (Tunyi 199).

Since the emergence of the Naga public sphere had taken place only during the colonial times, the idea of a civil society can also be viewed as a fairly contemporary development in the Naga communities. The most prominent civil societies from this region include the Naga Club, the Naga National Council (both were established during colonial times), Naga People’s Movement for Human Rights (established during the 1970s) and the Naga Hoho, formed during the early 1990s. All of these civil societies (the details about the rise of these organisations will be discussed in the next

chapter) were born as a result of the continuing conflict situation between the state and the Naga communities. Before the emergence of these civil societies, the Naga public sphere was mainly dominated by the church, with its religious leaders functioning as the intermediating force between the two hostile sides during the conflict situation. The Indian state has often tagged these civil societies, “indigenous institutions like the Hoho, student bodies and human rights organisations” as, “mouthpieces” of the armed rebel groups (Kikon 47); at times they have also been referred to as “proxies” of the underground groups (Manchanda and Bose 51).

Although the Naga public sphere, as we see it today, was formed primarily during the colonial period, a version of it existed even in the pre-colonial Naga society. Riko Khutso discusses this idea in his essay “Shifting Democratic Experiences of Nagas” where he refers to the “teakhe mepou”, an assembly held annually, in which associated villages took part to discuss upon customary regulations and espouse new resolutions when and as needed (145). Some would argue that the constant confrontations between different tribes and villages made it difficult for the integrations of the Naga public sphere during the pre-colonial era (Tunyi 203). However, Khutso mentions that although the village is historically perceived as the locus of Naga polities, it did not rule out the indigenous communication network that existed between the village societies (Khutso 145). To illustrate this idea, he alludes to the political system of the “Kuzha Netho Ketsii”. This political system largely revolved around three Kulza cognate villages—Leshemi, Lasumi and Zapami. During the pre-colonial times the head of each of the family (known locally as “kriidie”), would hold an annual assembly in the oldest of the three villages, Leshemi (ibid.). This annual assembly would take place in the month of December, which was considered to be the first month in the local calendar, for the purpose of teakhemepou. In these meetings, matters related to finance, rituals, matters of war and customary laws would be deliberated upon through common consensus. The new resolutions adopted by these deliberations would then be followed by the cognate villages for the rest of the year. In this way the teakhe mapou, seems to follow the structure that Habermas proposes for his notion of a productive and liberal public sphere. The fact that the participants could challenge and if needed even change customary regulations indicate that the idea of customary laws were not a monolithic and static entity that was beyond the scope of review and reinvention. Khutso argues that this feature of the teakhe mepou exhibits the pragmatic democratic ethos of the

Naga indigenous polity even in the pre-colonial era (146). Although the teakhe mapou resembles the Habermasian public sphere in its decision-making procedures, when it came to participation to the teakhemepou manifests dissimilarities. For an individual to be accepted as a “representative” in this assembly, they would have to “secure measures of social status and standing” (Khutso 146). One would usually have to do this by their show of power and wealth, usually through a lavish feast for the entire community. Beside social status, bravery and merit were other important factors for one to become a participant in the teakhe mepou. However, representation was never fixed on hereditary lines in this society. The political and social hierarchy in this society centred around the village elders who usually had the authority to preside over public discussion and whose decisions were given utmost importance in the village republic (Wouters 9). However, even in this liberal and egalitarian structure gender biased regulations still prevailed and women were excluded from teakhe mepou, just like they were from any other decision making sphere— “It must be noted here that a major critique of Nagas’ indigenous ideas and practices of democracy is the blatant exclusion of women from the political domain. This is a fair critique” writes Khutso (147).

The Naga public sphere that developed during the colonial age had a more distinctive characteristic because of the conflict situation as already mentioned. The World Wars also shaped the rise of the Naga public sphere since in return for their allegiance and service in the war, most Nagas expected to receive some “political favour” from the British as they prepared to leave; however, their anticipations did not result into any fruition since the British annexed the land with the state of India as they departed the subcontinent much to the dismay of the Naga tribes (Khutso 150). These developments magnified the nationalist ambitions of the Naga people. As Zhoto Tunyi points out—

A distinguishing feature about the historical emergence and contemporary manifestation of most, though not all, Naga civil societies is that they regularly position themselves in opposition to the state, its institutions, procedures, and laws. (205)

Over time these organisations, formed out of the Naga public sphere, have continued to resist any unwarranted imposition made by the Indian state through various methods, in their attempt to protect Naga ethos, values and interests. The



following part of the chapter includes a short discussion of these organisations which manifest the nature of the Naga public sphere. The Naga Club was the first of these civil society organisations to be formed. It was established in 1918 and the collective mainly consisted of senior Naga leaders which included government employees, interpreters, chieftain of the clans and men who returned from France as part of the Naga Labour Corps (Sema 249; Khutso 149). The chief objective of the Naga club was general welfare of the community and promote the concept of fraternity amongst the tribes for the purpose of unification. However, the club took up a more political character with time, was able to establish itself as a space for the discussion of Naga political affairs including the factor of Naga identity, as the state of India was about to achieve independence from the British:

Nevertheless, later development of the club clearly testified that this organization was formed with a foresight to maintain distinctive Naga identity. Its formation thus provided the needed social and political foundation to the Naga tribes and was symbolic of the emerging or rather incipient sense of solidarity among the Nagas. (Sema 250)

The pan Naga identity that the club possessed also helped the in the action of integration of the Naga identity amongst the tribes. This becomes apparent from the text of the memorandum that they submitted to the Simon Commission, which is widely conceived as the first expression of the political aspirations of the Naga people. The memorandum begins as:

We the undersigned Nagas of the Naga Club at Kohima, who are the only persons at present who can voice for our people have heard with great regret that our Naga Hills is included with in the Reformed Scheme of India without our knowledge, but as administration of our Hills is continued to be in the hands of the British Officers and we did not consider it necessary to raise any protest in the past. (“Naga Memorandum to Simon Commission”1)

The fact that the club refers to themselves as representatives of *all* Naga tribes instead of a particular one throws light upon their ideology of unity and fraternity. It should be noted that when these diverse tribes came together for the first time, it was in

an environment in which the Nagas' circumstances were fast changing. Not only were the tribes struggling with the ramifications of colonialism and missionary advent, which was already fast altering their sociocultural scene (as will be discussed later in the thesis), but the World Wars also had a significant impact on the region. The Nagas were not only drafted as soldiers to fight for the British in Europe during World War I, but they were also directly pulled into the war when the historically significant Kohima war took place during World War II. As already mentioned, the Naga soldiers who returned from Europe were a prominent part of the Naga Club. It can be assumed that their experience of the historic war in Europe had somewhere sowed the seeds of Naga consciousness and nationalism. However, the public sphere of Nagaland was moulded not only by the experience of the Nagas who fought in Europe, but also by the experience of those Nagas who witnessed the dramatic shift brought about by the Second World War during the Japanese Invasion of 1944. John Thomas addresses this in the context of the formation of the Naga National Council, when diverse tribes banded together to define their national space at a time when they not only experienced a rapid change in the very space they inhabited, but also witnessed a sudden influx of outsiders in the shape of soldiers and fleeing refugees. As Thomas notes—

This experience of occupation and control turned further severe with the coming of the Second World War and the related famine in the 1930s and 1940s, and it rudely brought home the realisation of their susceptibility to circumstances that were thrust upon them...whether it was the helpless Indian refugees from Burma, or the recalcitrant Japanese, Indian, African, American and British soldiers and army staff, or the colonial authorities, everyone seemed to march into their homes and impose upon them without any reasonable justification. This was the context in which Nagas increasingly felt the need to reconstitute their identity, demarcate their national space and defend it from further incursions (2).

And this is what prompted the disparate tribes to unite, transcending their tribal identification barriers. This is the milieu in which the Naga public sphere had started to emerge.

Even though the Naga Club was originally established to assist the British administration to comprehend the social challenges the Naga tribes faced for better

governance, increasingly over time the organization was able to transform itself to a significant platform to deliberate upon the idea of an integrated Naga identity. However, the exclusive nature of membership for the club may be able to make the claim of the pan Naga identity of the organization convoluted to some extent (Khusto 150; Solo “Story of Naga Club and Simon Commission Petition”). Khusto opines that it was only with the establishment of the Naga Hills Tribal District Council (hereon mentioned as “NHTDC”) in 1945 that a Naga public sphere arose which was “more representative” in nature (Khusto 151). The council was originally sanctioned by Charles Pawsey who was the District Commissioner at that time. The NHTDC contained representatives from several of the Naga tribes since it was initially formed to look over the matters of reparation for the damages suffered by the Nagas because of the Battle of Kohima during World War II and to unify the Naga tribes for their general welfare (Sema 267). Since the organization inducted representatives from a number of Naga tribes this platform became more inclusive as well as a wider democratic space than its predecessor. On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1946, the NHTDC officially changed their name to the Naga National Council (NNC). The foundation of the Naga National Council was not merely the commencement of another Naga organisation. Rather, the formation of NNC enunciated a carefully considered articulation of the Naga identity and the political aspirations attached with it. This is evident by the induction of the word ‘national’ within the very name of the council. As Khusto mentions— “(i)t was this articulation of Naga ‘nationalism’ that aggressively expanded the socio-political public sphere locally” (152). On June 19<sup>th</sup> of the same year the NNC held its general meeting at Wokha, where the following resolutions were passed that clearly captured the political aspirations of the organisation which pushed towards the idea of local sovereignty and self-governance for the Nagas:

1. This Naga National Council stands for the solidarity of all the Naga Tribes, including those in the unadministered areas.
2. This Council strongly protests against the grouping of Assam with Bengal.
3. The Naga Hills should be constitutionally included in an Autonomous Assam in a Free India, with local autonomy and due safeguards for

the interests of the Nagas. The Naga Tribes should have a separate electorate. (Sema 268)

The system of representation in case of NNC went beyond the tribal identity, as was the case with NHDTC. The networks for NNC inducted villages and clans into their system. Thus, much like Habermas' public sphere, the NNC was able to provide an open space for critical public discourse on the common socio-political concerns of their community. The letter and memoranda helped them create a critical public sphere also, a lot like the liberal public sphere that Habermas talked about where written documents like letters and journals played a big role. The "Yehzabo" which is the constitution of the NNC is probably the most important document to have come out of this series of events, marking the emergence of political modernity for the Nagas. Khutso explains— "The written Yehzabo fostered a new tryst of conformity by recognizing the NNC as the overarching socio-political and cultural imperative. This written document bound Naga villages and identities into one" (153). For the Nagas whose ancient culture was heavily based upon oral narratives, this written form of document in the form the "Yehzabo" symbolised an expression of modern public discourse in all its formality. Khutso reads the adoption of the "Yehzabo" as an expression of socio-political selfhood, but one that worked with the "gradual process" of inter-village networking (153). This form of inter-village networking system opened up the possibilities for a wider communication, thus making the space more liberal and freer in nature<sup>iv</sup>. The NNC asserted Naga independence on 14th August, 1947. But the newly independent state of India refused to acknowledge this political ambition of the Nagas, and as a result a political power struggle began. Under the headship of Zapu Phizo the council prepared a referendum in 1951 to augment legitimacy to their claim to independence. It is thought that 99% of the Nagas who were consulted for this referendum did vote in favour of Naga independence (Steyn 85; Wouters 4). Khusto points out that this referendum had epitomised the summit of "Naga vernacular democratic space, as forged by the NNC" (154). Thus an organization which was initially formed for general welfare and unification of the Naga tribes, had transformed itself into a significant platform for the articulation of Naga political aspirations in the backdrop of the Indo-Naga conflict. However, as Tunyi mentions, with time the NNC altered itself into the potential government of the Nagas; and from thereon, after the eruption of violent conflict during the 1950s, the council was enforced to go

underground, where they began engaging in guerrilla warfare to fight for Naga independence—“(a)s such, the NNC shifted from a civil society to a government to an underground outfit” (Tunyi 204).

Except for these larger organisations, which cut across tribal or clan identities, the late-colonial period also stood witness to the advent of tribe-based Naga apex bodies. The Lotha community established their tribal council in 1923; five years later in 1928 the Ao tribal council was formed. The chief objective of these tribal apex bodies is to represent the interest of the respective communities in the broader administrative and political space. However, with time the nature of these organisations also changed. These tribal bodies are now frequently seen competing over several issues related to governance and resources like the distribution of development funds or government service (Tunyi 204). These councils have also politically aligned themselves with different factions in relation to the Indo-Naga conflict. In this context Wouters observes—

The structure of Naga society was already such that there was a pre-existent power struggle among the tribes, but it was during the new democratic arena that the political significance of tribal belonging augmented: most constituencies were delimited and divided tribe-wise, as were development allocations, government jobs, and other state projects, in the process pitching one tribe against the other in the struggle over access and ownership of state resources. (Wouters 19)

The emergence of the Naga public sphere can be traced back to the colonial age as it provided the Nagas with a chance to widen the arena of public discourse with formation of vital civil societies as the Naga Club or the Naga National Council. It is not to be overlooked that this rise of a critical public sphere was definitely shaped by the political experiences of the Naga tribes in relation to the British colonisers and then the state of India. It was this public sphere that gave the Nagas a platform for articulating their political identity. In his essay on the rise of the civil societies in Nagaland, Zhoto Tunyi describes a crucial attribute of the Naga public sphere and the civil societies that rose out of it. The “historical emergence” as well as “contemporary manifestation” of the Naga public sphere clearly manifest that this space is almost always posited in direct opposition to the State and its institutions and procedures (205).

This peculiar feature of the Naga public sphere is a direct result of the decades long conflict situation that has made the existence of a completely unrestricted space for public discourse particularly difficult. The emergence of the Naga public sphere took place in the midst of political ambiguity caused by the prolonged conflict situation. This obviously left a profound influence on the principal engagement of the Naga public sphere. The chief objective of the public sphere in this region is not only to criticise the state when needed (as was the case with the bourgeois public sphere of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe) but also to expedite the crucial peace-process as well as to protect the Naga identity and ethos at all cost.

Naga indigenous polity, especially in the form of the village republic, has been glorified for its egalitarian and liberal nature. Reisang Vashum, in his book *Nagas' Rights to Self Determination: An Anthropological-historical Perspective*, describes the decision making process of some tribes (especially the Ao and the Angami tribes) to show the “republican” nature of the Naga society –

The Angami tribe had a nominal head of the village known as *Kemevo*. Its functions were both religious and administrative. In religious matters he could issue formal order. On the other hand, he had no power to issue formal order in secular matter; the decision of the public of any public meeting (which could be called by any influential person of the village) was final and binding. The Angamis considered their village fellows as equals. (Vashum 59)

However as Verrier Elwin had pointed out, the Naga society presented “a varied pattern of near-dictatorship and extreme democracy” depending on the tribe in question (Elwin 6). As already discussed in the chapter, a general political norm, for the Nagas was that the opinions and instructions of the male elders in village or tribe, overrode those of the rest, which included women. Wouters mentions in this context that “reconstructed thus, this traditional Naga ‘debating society’ or ‘purest democracy’ may now connote a patriarchal autocracy of the old, male, wealthy, and meritorious” even though it is still “treasured” by the people (Wouters 9). It cannot be denied that even with their egalitarian values Naga village polities were decidedly “gendered” in their political form (Wouters 6). Although Elwin had noted that women in the Naga tribes

“work on equal terms with the men in the fields and make their influence felt in the tribal councils” (104), women scholars and activists from the region have repeatedly drawn attention to the discrimination meted out to women in the political or decision making sphere; and some of them, like author Temsula Ao, find its roots in their ancient indigenous “tradition” that claimed “it is only men who can be decision makers in important matters both in public and private affairs” (Ao “Benevolent Subordination”, 101). It is this discrimination that has over time crept into the post-statehood democratic domain, which has resulted in Nagaland becoming the only state in India that has never elected a woman to its assembly till date (although they did have a woman representative elected as an MP, Rano Shazia). This attitude has also permeated in the organizations that have formed the Naga public sphere, as discussed in this chapter. In the following chapters, it will be studied, how the formation of this gendered space is created by the triad of state, community practices and the prolonged conflict situation, and how women are resisting the phenomenon of being shaped by this restrictive space. Women become particularly vulnerable in such a conflict situation, since they are held up as symbolic bearers of ethnic identity. Specific to this region, however, is the way that Naga women have strategically used their tradition-specific gendered roles to subvert prescribed gender norms; they exhibit agency, not only against the authoritative violence of the state but also towards the systemic violence of their own communities that continue to propagate a few discriminatory customary laws, restraining them from entering the public political sphere.

A patriarchal society, intertwined with the modes of militarization, precludes the self-determination of women; this leads to the mobilization of a counterpublic, questioning and transforming available gendered categories such as that of the mother. In the following chapters I will study how women from the Naga communities motivated this gendered role of motherhood, which essentially attempts to relegate them to the private sphere, to create their own counterpublic. This is the reason that Fraser’s idea of the counterpublics becomes significant when applied to the Naga context. In this thesis two sites of female agency will be studied that resist the formation of this gendered space and create an alternative public sphere of their own, to gain entry into a heavily masculinized decision-making sphere-- that of peace activism and that of writing (with an emphasis on the idea of memory-writing). A whole new dimension is added to the significance of memory-writing in the context of the violent conflict

situation existing in Nagaland since India's independence. Practices of remembrance, in such conflict-zones and militarised spaces, may provide an insight on how pasts are imagined and constructed in popular consciousness, thus helping in the process of writing and re-writing of history. Whereas the women peace activists of Nagaland have contributed to the creation of the female counterpublic by widening of sex specific roles (thus bringing out the private into the public), the women authors have done the same by *writing* Memory (of their own and the others) —thus, making the personal political and the private, public.



## CHAPTER 2

### The Creation of the Gendered Space in Naga Communities

#### 2.i Introduction

In the previous chapter, the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of the public and counterpublics were studied, especially in the context of the Naga society. The chapter also explored how the concept of counterpublics is better adapted to marginalised populations in stratified societies with varying power-relations, hierarchies and levels of oppression. This chapter will delve into the specifics of the ‘gendered space’ in which the Naga women struggle to construct their own counterpublics. The notion of the gendered space, which will be discussed in this chapter in the context of Nagaland, is based on Maryna Bazylevych’s description— “Gendered space is the culturally and materially embedded repertoire of the appropriate gender roles that create frames (porous, not rigid) within which women construct and negotiate their identities” (2). This chapter will outline the manner in which State, community practices and the conflict-situation have established this gendered space in the Naga society that attempt to govern and dictate the identity of Naga women. It is crucial to investigate the formation of the gendered space because it serves as a script for the State as well as the people to recast their public positions. This chapter will explore how through multiple layers of violence—including physical as well as systemic violence—a space has been created for Naga women that aim at restricting their entry into the decision-making public-political sphere. It becomes necessary to analyse the emergence of this gendered space as Naga women have used this very space to construct their own counterpublics (as will be studied in the next chapters).

The first section of the chapter discusses Nagaland’s political history from the colonial times to the Indo-Naga conflict, since, gaining an understanding of the culture of impunity, which heavily contributes to the oppression of women and the creation of the gender space here, is difficult without this historical context. The second part of the chapter will look at the debilitating effects of draconian legislation like the AFSPA on Naga society as a whole, notably on its women. The third section of the chapter contains a discussion on the critiques of the customary laws by the scholars from Naga society, who believe that, while the laws are extremely important to the Naga tribes, some of these laws (particularly those pertaining to inheritance rights and the right to enter the

decision-making sphere) further contribute to the formation of a restrictive space for Naga women. The fourth section, on the other hand, explores the framing of the gendered space through Naga proverbs and myths. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the theoretical postulation on the establishment of the gendered space and how it limits Naga women's ability to participate in decision-making and the public-political sphere.

## **2.ii Short Overview of Naga Political History**

Historically the Nagas remained isolated for a long period of time from other communities and societies in proximity with them. As far as the central Indian subcontinent is concerned, neither Hindu nor Muslim emperors have been able to set foot in Nagaland. Ethnically and historically, therefore, the tribes of the Naga highlands had largely remained separated from the other societies and communities of what was to become the nation of India after August 15th, 1947. Even six hundred years of proximity with the Ahom civilisation, that had entirely taken over its neighbouring province Assam, did not affect the Naga culture to a great extent (Khala, *The AFSPA and Its Impact* 17). The Ahoms did attempt to invade the region and were probably the first non-indigenous people to come in contact with the tribes here. However, their advent was quite fiercely resisted by the Nagas. Although the Ahoms were successful in winning several of these confrontations, they betrayed no intention of expanding their administrative control over the defeated tribes of the Naga Hills. Instead, they were content in collecting a form of tax from these tribes as a token of their loyalty. Hence, the Naga tribes were allowed complete autonomy as the Ahoms refrained from intervening into their clan or village related issues. With the decline of the Ahom dynasty towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Naga tribes ceased to pay their taxes to them and asserted full independence (Kabi 69; Barpujari 44). In a way, the harsh and rocky backdrop of the Naga Hills protected the Nagas from thorough subjection to the Ahom kingdom and the Assamese, thus shielding it from assimilation into the Sanskritised Hindu society in any shape or form (Barpujari 28). Until the advent of the British colonisers during the nineteenth century, no invaders could successfully enter and occupy this region.

The Nagas' encounter with the British began with the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 which for the first time brought in the concept of demarcation of

territorial boundaries for the Naga tribes. The British Invasion of Nagaland can roughly be divided into 3 phases— the first period of British exploration that began a little after the signing of the treaty; the second phase, which could be seen as the colonisers' fierce attempt to exert their control over this region through show of force and the final and third phase where the British mostly exhibited a non- interference policy towards the Nagas (Khala 20). The first phase takes place from 1832 to 1838; this was the time that the British explorers were setting their foot in this region for the first time. In January of 1832 a British Captain, by the name of Francis Jenkins had to face fierce Naga raids during one such expedition, while marching with a troop of around 1500 men, through the Naga territories, travelling from Manipur to Assam. To prevent such attacks the British carried out several expeditions 1832 onwards, which caused substantial damages for both parties (Kabi 70).

The second phase of the British invasion takes place between the years 1839 to 1846. Khala categorises this phase as the “period of control that involved an external show of force” (20). Several expeditions were made into the Naga territory during these years, including an attempt to make an outpost within the hills during 1847 to 1850. However, aside from increased Naga hostility, there were not many substantial results (Ao 19). The years between 1851 to 1865 can be called the period of neutrality, when the British, bewildered by the relentless aggression of the Naga communities, took up the policy of non- interference. As a result, the British troops were also largely withdrawn from the area. However, this action resulted in the Nagas conducting more than twenty raids in Assam valley only in the year 1851. Consequently, the Commissioner of Assam was compelled to report to the Lieutenant Governor in 1862, that – “(t)he non-interference policy is excellent in theory, but the government will probably be inclined to think that it must be abandoned” (Mackenzie qtd. in Ao 116). Incited by the ravages caused by the tribes, the British created the Naga Hills district for administrative expediency in 1866. However, the traditional Naga village authority continued to perform with the same degree of autonomy that they enjoyed before and the eastern and northern part of the region continued to exist outside the purview of the British, known in administrative parlance as “unadministrative areas” or “excluded areas” (Khala 23). Thus, even through the days of colonialism (which coincided with the time of conception for Indian Nationalism) the Naga Hills were kept largely isolated by the British. This act of isolation is probably one of the reasons why the Nagas never really

saw themselves as part of India in any way. To curb the violence between the tribes across the Naga hills and the British subjects of Assam, the British Government passed the Inner Line Regulation<sup>v</sup> in 1873 (Hazarika 14).

However, some scholars believe that the Inner Line Regulation was merely a ploy by the British to drive a wedge between the plains people and the tribes inhabiting the hills. For example, Banerjee and Dey think that this regulation was simply a scheme through which the administrative zones of the hill tribes and that of the plain landers were disjointed since “the civilized faced problems with cohabiting with the wild”; and that in no way the regulation rendered any kind of sovereignty to the people of the hills (Banerjee and Dey 6). They believe that the Act of 1935 that categorised the hill areas of Assam into excluded and partially excluded areas was not created to safeguard territorial sovereignty but rather to keep the hill tribes separated from the British subjects of the plain land, since the British could not control the aggression that they met with in this region. At the same time this exclusion of the hill region also meant that the tribes here continued to be shut out to any constitutional trials that the British exercised in the other parts of the colonised country. The British, thus, conveniently used the narrative of a wayward and unmanageable populace to create a “process of demonization” of these tribes (Banerjee and Dey 7). This methodical act of demonization ostensibly contributed in a profound manner to the otherisation, which the Naga tribes faced even in post-independence India. This could also be deemed as a manifestation of the divide and rule policy that the British colonisers had often employed in this part of the world causing situations of protracted violence in South Asia. Hence, it would not be wrong to assume that to some extent, this exclusionary attitude of the British did contribute to the post-independence Indo-Naga conflict. As Banerjee and Dey point out:

Most of these developing countries suffered greatly in the colonial period. The colonial masters often followed a divide-and-rule policy. One group of people was treated better than others. In the post-colonial period these bitter rivalries between religious groups, tribes, clans and ethnicities continued. Often post-colonial governments inherited this mantle of recurrent conflict between different groups of people and became a player in this whole process. The ruling elite, having learnt from the colonial masters, persisted in siding with one group against the other. (4)

This attitude of otherisation proved to be decisive in determining the Indian state's attitude towards the region after independence. Hence, it is not unusual that the historiography of post-independence India from the "other side" (in this context, the Naga tribes) looks quite different as it is strewn with accounts of "treacherous" ways of "accession" by the "Indian state" (Banerjee and Dey 7).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Naga critical public sphere, where the Nagas could unite to discuss their political future, had come to exist during the colonial period with the formation of the Naga Club and later the Naga National Council. These organisations, which functioned similarly to the public sphere, in the sense in which Habermas defined the term, provided a forum for the Nagas to articulate their political objectives through the prism of indigenous experiences. Prior to discussing the emergence of the women's counterpublic sphere in Nagaland, as this work intends to do, it is necessary that the history and operations of some of these organizations be considered. A discussion about the formation of some of these organizations was included in Chapter 1. In this chapter a discussion on the historical operation of these organisations (especially Naga Club and the Naga National Council) is included in the framework of the political history of the Naga communities. As discussed in Chapter 1, the formation of the Naga Club in 1918 paved the path to a political consolidation of the Naga voices in order to emphasise upon the thoughts and opinions of the tribes of the Naga hills. In 1929 the Naga Club submits a memorandum to the British Simon Commission demanding the right to self-determination, opposing the idea of annexation into the nation of India, since the Nagas did not identify with the cultures of the Indian civilizations: be it politically, historically or in relation to religion (Iralu 5). In 1935, reflecting upon this memorandum as well as acting upon the recommendation based on the Simon Commission, the British came out with the "Government of India Act" of 1935 which categorised the Naga Hills District as "excluded" or "partially excluded" area, where no Federal legislature of Assam was to apply (Khala 21)

In 1946 the Naga National Council (henceforth referred to as the NNC) is formed under the deputy commissioner of the Naga Hills, Charles Pawsey. The NNC was established as a complete political organisation so it was expected that they would be at the forefront to conducted negotiations with the British to protect Naga self-

determination (S. K. Das 265). The NNC was integrated as the emerging voice of the Naga people under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo from the late 1940s. They submitted a report to the Bordoloi Advisory sub-committee asking for an “interim government” for the period of 10 years and a referendum after that to decide their future. But the dialogue between the NNC and the committee did not transpire successfully. NNC sent a political memorandum to Lord Mountbatten in February 1947, suggesting that India might act as guardian power for a period of ten years after which Naga to break the impasse the NNC then entered into a dialogue with the Governor of Assam, Akbar Hydari in May, 1947. This dialogue between the Governor and the NNC leaders led to the signing of the Hydari Nine-Point Agreement.

The agreement provided legislative, judicial and executive powers and protection of lands and resources of the Nagas. However, there was a disagreement on the 9<sup>th</sup> clause. The 9<sup>th</sup> point of understanding was “at the end of 10 years the NNC will be asked whether they require the above agreement to be extended for a further period or a new agreement regarding the future of the Naga people arrived at” which, in a way, validated the Naga the right to self-determination (Haskar and Luithui 151). There was vehement opposition from one section of NNC. To this minority the 9<sup>th</sup> point signified the end of Naga right to self- determination at the end of agreement period. Seeing that the majority of members had been persuaded, Pawsey put the issue to vote. The agreement was approved by only a small majority. One also has to have in mind the fact that the Naga system of decision making is not based on representative discussions but by a general agreement.

On the other hand, once the British finally withdrew from India in August 1947, Nagaland was annexed into the Indian union within the new nation structure without the consensus of most of the Nagas. Notwithstanding this dictum, the Naga National Council declared Naga independence on 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1947, one day prior to the India’s declaration of independence. The Naga National Council also conducted a plebiscite in May 1951 to assert Naga autonomy. The final result is said to be unanimous with 99% of voters in favour of Naga independence, but this outcome was largely neglected by the Nehru Government (Kire 6; Banerjee and Dey 8). When in 1952 a Naga delegation met Nehru in the aftermath of the plebiscite, Nehru claimed “even if heaven falls or India went to pieces, Nagas would not be granted independence” (qtd. in Nag 50). Later

in the parliament, he stated that he regarded it to be “fantastic” that a “little corner between China, Burma and India” wanted to be considered an independent state (ibid.). Nehru was adamantly opposed to discussing any requests for independence with the Nagas, and one explanation for this stance could be the geopolitical location of the Naga Hills, which was wedged between newly constituted states of India and Burma, as well as an influential nation like China.

Consequently, dissatisfaction began to brew amongst Nagas against the Indian state and its government. In 1952 the Naga leaders decided to boycott the 1st general election held in the region. By 1956, the Government of India pronounced the Naga Hills as “Disturbed Area”, under the “Naga Hills Disturbed Area” Ordinance, following the footsteps of their colonial predecessors. Unfortunately, the founding leaders of the newly formed nation’s assembly continued to use the same rhetoric as their colonising masters to negotiate with the people that they thought to be deviant. This attitude was instrumental in determining the approach of the state towards the people of this region. This otherisation helped prepare the ground for laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act and the Assam Maintenance Law. The state imposed the Assam Maintenance Law in 1955 which sanctioned arrests without any warrants, imposition of collective fines and proscribing of public speeches and meetings. It is also during this time that the Assam Rifles battalion was replaced by the India armed forces. In 1958 the Armed Forces Special Powers Act is passed further sanctioning search and arrest without warrants and shooting even to the “extent of causing death”, with complete protection of military and paramilitary forces from legal charges (Khala 82). The peace negotiations, which started with the Naga-Akbar Hydari Agreement in 1947 continued simultaneously on bureaucratic and political levels. In 1960 the Sixteen Point Agreement is signed between the Naga People’s Convention and the Government of India, following which the state of Nagaland is officially formed in 1963. One significant factor contributing towards granting Nagaland’s statehood could be the 1962 India-China border crisis, which required the Indian government to pacify the border areas, and this was a way to reconcile with the Nagas staying within the constitution’s framework (Inoue 25). However, this strategy of reconciliation through granting statehood, which had brought peace in Mizoram, failed to do the same for Nagaland. What the strategy did succeed in, was dividing the national movement.

However, establishing a Naga state did not end the violence since the memorandum never really incorporated the opinions of the Naga tribes.

Numerous agreements and accords have been negotiated since then, like the Shillong accord of 1975 and the more recent Nagaland Peace accord of August 2015, between the NSCIN (IM) and the Government of India. Although these accords have been able to yield a situation of ceasefire between the army and the rebels, they have also given rise to the problem of factionalism, resulting into bloodied discord amongst several groups of the underground movement. As Rita Manchanda writes, these peace accords (she especially refers to the Sixteen Point Agreement of 1960) “laid the template for the grand strategy of power sharing and devolution of power to territorially focused, ethnically or linguistically delimited autonomies” but they could not effectively harness a framework for a successful negotiation for peace (Manchanda24).

### **2.iii The Armed Forces Special Powers Act and its Violent Effects**

The situation of violence had especially intensified in Nagaland because of the simultaneous presence of three different kinds of conflicts—that between the state and the non-state actors (especially the NSCIN-IM and NSCIN-K), the factional killings inside the rebel groups and the conflict between the tribes based on ethnic identity (for example, the Kuki-Naga clashes that took place during the 1990s). In the 1990s, there was one security force member per ten civilians through this region (Chenoy 170). In this context of perpetration of violence in these parts of the country, Patricia Mukhim points out how women and their bodies are often reduced to “cultural identity” of the community, and thus may become the primary target of violence in a conflict situation (Mukhim “Women and Insurgency”). Women become particularly vulnerable in such circumstances, if they are held up as symbolic bearers of cultural and ethnic identity. Khala writes, for women in Nagaland, “honour, victory, triumph and revenge are played out on their bodies” (69). Thus, like in any other long drawn-out conflict situation, the women in Nagaland too, have had to bear evidence to a multifaceted as well as a gendered form of violence—be it emotional, physical or social. As observed in the *Global Reports of Women’s Human Rights* made under the Human Rights Watch Women’s Rights Project, in a conflict situation rape is used as a weapon of war and a tool of political repression and more often than not violence against women, perpetrated by the combatants is “frequently tolerated by commanding officers in the course of



armed conflict and by abusive security officials in the context of political repression” (16). According to the findings of the United Nations’ “Preliminary report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences”, rape also remains “the least condemned war crime; throughout history” (64).

In a conflict situation, perpetration of sexual violence is never an isolated and private sexual act, neither is it unrelated to the framework of structural violence created by the State agents. Rather, sexual violence in a conflict-ridden zone, ever so often takes place in conjunction with other politically driven acts of violence as it is essentially about power and domination. Like other human rights abuses, sexual violence on women serves a strategic political purpose, especially when women are perceived as bearers of cultural symbolism, which is the case in any conflict-ridden society that is also patriarchal in nature. It thus turns to a tool for the oppressor against an agentive individual as well as their community honour. As Paula Banerjee writes:

The AFSPA is often used as an excuse to rape and brutalise women who appear in any way agentive. Sometimes it is used to dishonour entire communities with the result that the men from the community try to retrieve their masculinity by subordinating their women (Banerjee 58).

Thus the presence of harsh punitive measures like the AFSPA perpetuates women’s abuse in public as well as private spaces. In this region, the security forces often engage in sexual violence during crackdowns, when they conduct cordon and search operations. These are the times when the men of the villages are held away from their homes in the name of identification. As was the case in Yankeli Village on 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1971, as recounted by the survivors to the WISCOMP team that visited them for a pilot survey; the findings of this survey are documented in the WISCOMP publication *The Armed Forces Special Powers Act and its Impact on Violence against Women in Nagaland*. In this particular incident multiple women and children were assaulted, hit with stones and raped as all the men were cordoned off away from the village; some of the rape survivors were minors at the time of the incident (37).

The WISCOMP study documents their statements as well as the accounts of several other survivors of such and other instances of violence perpetrated by the forces

around several districts of Nagaland—Wokha, Zunheboto, Mokokchung and Kohima (Khala 37- 45). In the light of these accounts Khala mentions:

The AFSPA has had wide-ranging effects on the life of the people under it. Apart from the effect on the life and security of the general public, the abuse of women and children, and the violations of human rights, it has also adversely affected economic (Mokokchung incident) and religious (Yankeli incident) aspects, harmed health (Mokokchung incident) and the growth of children (Akuluto incident), and impacted on civil administration (Kohima incident) (36).

As Amit Ranjan explains, not only in Nagaland, but in all the places “where AFSPA is enforced, rape, security and patriarchy are intertwined” (445). He points out, “After AFSPA was clamped down in 1991 in the Kashmir Valley, the molestation of women during army crackdowns were seen as ‘normal’ acts. While the army did not expect them to leave their houses during crackdowns, Kashmiri women, fearing harassment, preferred to do so as they do not want to be alone inside when security forces raided their homes (446). Details of multiple cases of sexual assault and rape have come out from the valley from 1990 onwards (when the act was imposed in Kashmir), including the 1991 incident of Kunan Poshpora, which the Press Council of India’s ‘Crisis and Credibility’ report, set up under journalist B. G. Verghese claimed to have been “concocted” (Ranjan 446). In Manipur, on the night of 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2004, a thirty-two-year-old woman, Thangjam Manorama was arrested from her house by personnel of 17 Assam Rifles. Next morning her bruised, violated body was found dumped on the Keirao-Wangkhem Road near her village in Manipur. Her body had numerous scratch marks, a deep gash on her right thigh and seven bullet marks on the back, including one that pierced her genitals. Five days later, in an unprecedented move twelve women scripted history, when they stripped themselves to protest against this atrocious crime committed by the men of the chief repressive state apparatus in front of the massive gates of Kangla fort where 9 sector Assam rifles and 17 Assam rifles are housed. This dramatic and aggressive gesture symbolized a sense of extreme hopelessness and desperation, and more than anything else a latent anger. As Uma Chakravarti points out, the impunity that the AFSPA grants the army, does not only deny any chance of “judicial redress” to the victim but also creates a culture of

“unchallenged impunity” that equally permeates into the spaces of “family and community” (11). Amit Ranjan shows how this affects the women of Kashmir Valley as well: as a result of the prevailing situation in the Valley, women face many sorts of restrictions on their attire or movements and they are being denied many of their natural and civil–political rights. The age of marriage has dropped down to 14–15 years, which, before 1991, was 21–22 years. Once a girl has been raped, it becomes impossible for her to marry, so parents are eager to marry off their daughters at a younger age. (447)

This is how, in a conflict zone social hierarchies are produced and reproduced continually; and hence during such times women are oppressed and victimised not only by the power structures from outside (here, the State) but also by power structures from inside, that is their own communities (Banerjee and Dey 14). In a militarised social system, thus, structural violence affects not only public but also private and intimate spaces. The curve of violence outspreads from a militarised social system and goes on to encompass the fundamental units on which its edifice is positioned—that is of home and the community. Hence the culture of violence and impunity in a place like Nagaland must be studied in the framework of structural violence of the militarised society. The Indo-Naga conflict is recognised as the one of the longest running insurrections in this part of the continent. Although since the 1997 ceasefire agreement the intensity of violence has gone down to some extent, the processes of militarisation and structural violence have still been perpetuated during this period. Dolly Kikon, in *Life and Dignity* traces the source of this violence in the culture of impunity that is generated in militarised societies:

By culture of impunity I am referring to the established practice of absolving perpetrators and granting them legal impunity under extra-constitutional regulations like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958). As the guilty stood outside the purview of law, it ushered a culture of impunity among Naga society at large that legitimized everyday violence including domestic and sexual assault. (24)

This is how a draconian law imposed by the state can create an inimical atmosphere for women even while not perpetrating direct violence. It generates an environment of impunity where gendered violence becomes almost commonplace in its

every occurrence. It is almost like a “change of guard” that occurred in Nagaland between the armed forces and the “civilian men on the streets” (Kikon 73). Hence any study on the violence against women in a conflict zone like Nagaland has to be positioned within the context and history of the state granting impunity to perpetrators under such acts. The women then are compelled to fight not just the armed violence but also a society that negates their agency by perpetuating the structure of violence in every space, public or private. The protracted Indo-Naga conflict has led to two types of justice framework in the region. The first framework of justice concerns the state and its forces, where most of their abuse remained unaddressed, while the second one is comprised of the community networks and the family unit (Kikon 22).

The demarcation between the two frameworks often get blurred, as both state and non- state agents often follow similar ideas of justice and impunity; a fact which, if overlooked, creates a political as well as methodological challenge for the study of violence against women as it eradicates the “everyday sites of struggle” within the Naga society (Kikon23). It is of utmost importance to acknowledge the rights of minority communities in order to protect their civil liberties and ethos against the predation of the state, especially in a conflict situation. However, at the same time, it also important to remember that these minority groups are rarely homogeneous and they often contain other minorities inside their own collective (more often than not comprising of women and children). Kikon mentions the dangers of reading the “Naga voice” as a homogenous identity as it is then put in a position of privilege over other experiences of violence, like the experiences of the domestic workers or migrants in different cities of Nagaland (23).

#### **2.iv The Armed Forces Special Powers Act and the Culture of Impunity**

Since in a conflict situation the asymmetries in power reach a more critical standing, the position of this section of “internal minority” becomes more complicated, as they are pushed to a state where they have not one, but two groups to contend with, both of whom have acquired more power in relation to them (Green 257). The internal minorities take up the most vulnerable position during the times of violence since their suffering is two-pronged. First, they suffer from being members of minority groups that must defend themselves from the majoritarian and often oppressive state; secondly, they also end up facing inequality and discrimination from other members of their own

community. This is what makes them a twice marginalised subject within their own ethnic groups, struggling for their political or socio-economic rights. The women in Nagaland have faced a similar state of affairs since they have been largely excluded from the process of nation formation, and at the same time are defined by the same categories of discourses from which she is left out—be it that of the state's or the rebels' (Bhattacharjee 128).

The long history of militarization has ushered in a culture of impunity that in way has legitimised everyday violence and abuse upon women. In this context, Kikon brings in the example of how Naga customary courts deal with incidents of sexual abuse. The jury is almost always comprised of male council elders, and through the proceedings it is the metaphor of “spoiling” the victim's life, that remains predominant (24). The judgement usually varies from paying some kind of fine (monitory or through farm animals) or a “settlement” where the rapist is instructed to marry the abused woman (ibid.). The discourse that dominates the entire set-up of justice in such a case is the woman's honour that is ascribed to her by her community and the society at large. The state machinery has also failed women here as they have been unsuccessful in winning the Naga people's trust when it comes to delivering justice. The patriarchal arc found in the judgement of the customary courts is present here as well. The Nagas still view the legal system as “weak” and a structure that has not yet been able to gain the common people's conviction (“Will the Death Penalty Deter Incidents of Rape and Sexual Violence?”). On the other hand, in the rare instances when the victim or their family has actually reported the atrocity to the police, they have been “reluctant” to deal with the matter especially if the case is reported against any member of the armed underground groups (Kikon 30). To add to the woe there is also a massive logistical issue that is also faced by the offices, hindering the process of justice for the victims. The scenario becomes even more complicated in a place like Nagaland, because here the socio-political worlds of all the parties associated in these incidents (including the state and the underground groups) become intersected in some form or the other. Citing the case of a woman who faced sexual abuse from her father (who was also a cadre of an armed group) for three years, Kikon throws light upon how social relations are transformed in an intricate and complex fashion in a militarised society. It is to be noted here that the formal complaint of the abuse was lodged by the woman's aunt, who happened to be part of a rival armed group to the one that the woman's father belonged

to. Documenting and studying testimonies of such survivors of sexual abuse is imperative to create a dialogue on justice system and individual rights in a militarised society. The woman in question was being sexually abused by the father since she was a child. Even after she braved the odds and informed her family about the incident, they chose not to make a formal complaint. Rather, it was decided that the woman will be sent to her grandmother's village.

This act of merely removing the victim from the space where the incident occurred, instead of reporting or punishing the abuser, shows a patriarchal society's inability to hold the male perpetrator accountable (Kikon 43). Thus the culture of impunity that the armed forces seemed to have created is perceived to become part of the culture even for the most integral part of the Naga society, the family unit. It was the woman's maternal aunt who finally reported the father to the police, but not before the incident was repeated time and again with the survivor. As this maternal aunt was part of the rival group of the father's organisation, the case brought together multiple social worlds entangled in a complex socio-political situation. This convoluted milieu comprised of the rebel groups, the family unit and community and finally the state machinery, as the police became "apprehensive" to get into an "internal" matter of two rival underground groups (Kikon 44). Hence, on one hand the state manufactured this hostile space for women by perpetuating the culture of impunity, and on the other also failed to aid them against injustice even through their agents of the repressive apparatus when it came to the issue of community or family unit. It is almost as if, in a militarised society a nexus is created between the family, the state machinery and the underground groups generating a hostile social space for women shaped by the asymmetries in the society at large. Explaining the way this case reveals the fragility of justice system within the structures of militarised societies, Kikon states:

In Nagaland the legal institutions, quasi-legal units like the insurgent justice system and the political system that includes the tribal customary courts and state machineries all co-exist within their respective constituencies. The boundaries of jurisdiction between these organisations are often hazy and complicated. (44)

Thus women, when held up as symbolic bearers of cultural and ethnic identity in a militarised society, are by all means thrust into a more vulnerable position. It has to be remembered that in a conflict situation the structure of violence is reinstated in new forms of manifestation. The stalling of the peace negotiations by the government of India has prolonged the conflict situation and at the same time it has also helped create these new forms of power structures-- “authorities and tribal elites”—allowing the “political terror and nightmare” to spread further into the Naga society (Kikon 77). And thus, the notion of cultural violence created by the state gradually permeates through the entire structure of society.

Kikon locates two particular institutions that have come up as the principal sites of violence in the Naga society, at the backdrop of this culture of impunity — the family unit and the Naga armed groups (28). The struggle for these women, thus, are on many fronts. They are simultaneously fighting armed violence as well as a society that perpetuates their degradation. Their situation is such that they are victimised not only by the power structures from outside but also those from inside. As Inotoli Zhimomi concurs—

As with many other women around the world, Naga women’s experience in the quest for self-determination are a product both of external forces, such as the violent regime imposed by the AFSPA, and of the internal political dynamic between competing groups of the Naga Nationalist movement which often results in brutal armed conflict (91).

## **2.v Customary Laws and Practices: Inheritance Rights and Decision-Making**

The protracted Indo-Naga political conflict has brought about radical changes in the Naga society. As with other long drawn conflict situations, the process of militarisation has politicised the sense of identity for communities here in such a way that an elemental distortion of social and political structure was bound to take place. The violence perpetrated in the public space by a powerful enemy like the state itself, only reinforces the inherent patriarchal structure of a community by rationalising the oppressive control over women. Dolly Kikon writes in her article “Women and War” that the protracted violent environment has resulted heavily in the perpetuation of patriarchy “in the guise of” Naga customary laws, affecting both domestic as well as public life of the Naga woman (5).

Customary laws set up a seminal part of the cultural life in any society, but more specifically in the case of tribal societies. This is especially true for the tribal communities since they pursue traditional practices of their ancestors, thus preserving a way of life that is severely threatened by the modernisation processes in any country. Hence, it is of no surprise, that these customary laws are often viewed as the very basis or constitutive element for distinctive identity in a tribal community. Since these laws are unwritten in most tribes and varies in nature from tribe to tribe, it is difficult to formulate a generic definition of the customary laws. They represent a conventional and long-standing system of rules and regulations that had evolved from the natural needs or requirements of their ancestors and their way of life (Seymour and Bekker 11). The Naga customary laws are not written in form but have existed as practice over eons. Even the British had to recognise the existence of these unwritten customary laws when they took the Naga tribes under their administration, through the Scheduled District Act of 1874 (Christina 66). It is important to preserve the customary laws for the Nagas because they are essentially like the articulations of what the community decides on, collectively as well as individually, based on local and traditional way of living.

The Nagas believe that their customary laws are “ancient, certain, reasonable and universal” and guide them in their “social, religious and ethical behaviour” (L. Longkumer 216). These laws are comprised of customs and traditions that have guided the people here for centuries in regulation of the social system and govern themselves, before the advent of the modern legal system. Till date these laws have remained the very locus of the legal system in this region since, even now, civil as well as criminal cases such as theft, accident or homicide are judged by a customary court in the village (Achumi 207). Because local disputes are handled by people of the village, especially the elderly, the process of justice becomes swifter, cheaper and overall less complicated. The process is also democratic in nature since it involves a method of discussion where everybody from the locality can participate and all parties can present their opinions in front of their peers (Selvaraj 100).

Moreover, the courts use indigenous languages for their proceedings, and since they are handled by local people as authority, they also possess a familiarity with the concerned cases that a formal court would lack (Rodrigues 73). Thus, in these areas the machineries of the customary laws successfully resist the dominance of the laws of the



state. Consequently, they also make it more difficult for the “dominant groups” (which, in this context would indicate the nation-state of India and its attempt at homogenisation of polity) to impose and “parade” their rules and laws as “neutral, universal or superior” and render it impossible to treat the ideologies and practices of the tribal communities as “deviant” or “inferior” to “dominant norms” (Rodrigues 74). Hence, preserving these customary laws becomes imperative for the sake of culture and identity of the tribal communities here. To safeguard their indigenous identity from the hegemonic impositions of ‘mainland’ India and its authorities, the tribal communities here have sought Constitutional guarantees to protect these customary laws that encapsulate their world view.

The Naga customary laws are constitutionalised and protected by the Article 371A of the Indian Constitution; they are also recognized by the Rules of Administration of Justice and Police Act, 1937 and the Village Council Act 1978 (Christina 66; L. Longkumer 217; Achumi 206). This article provides special provisions for Nagaland in matters of customary laws as well as autonomy of state. Such protective measures are obligatory to safeguard the social practices of the tribal communities that came under heavy threat with the formation (and imposition) of the idea of the nation-state. Shaunna Rodrigues argues—

Considerations of historical injustice would require that these forms of self-government be protected. Therefore, the State cannot intervene and dismiss the culture of these communities by implementing uniform laws across the citizenry. Equality would demand that the State recognizes the differences in the ways of life of tribal groups because culture is an irreducible and a constitutive aspect of the political and social life of these groups. Protecting cultural groups and customary laws as their way of life would promote equal treatment for people belonging to different cultural communities. (73)

The customary laws hold their particular importance because they are seen as rules that are sanctioned by the ancestors of the tribe, their chieftains and leaders. Hence these laws are enforced by community institutions and are held to be almost sacrosanct in nature. Not only do these laws control the codes of conduct for the people of the tribe, they also set up economic practices since they are locally organized and derived from natural resources of the particular space that the tribe inhabits. While these

customary laws are critical to the preservation of ancient Naga culture and worldview, a large number of women, activists and scholars in the region believe that a some of these laws suffer from a gender blindness which prohibits women from participating in the decision-making process in public-political sphere. Although the Naga society is free of religion-based customs that have promulgated issues such as dowry, polygyny, honour killing and child marriage in other parts of India, several customary laws here do propagate a discriminatory attitude towards women of the community, as will be addressed in the next section of this chapter. While addressing the community versus individual debate in the context of the UCC and personal laws, Nivedita Menon discusses how the rights of women as “individual citizens” and the rights of their communities (she mostly focuses on religious communities in her essay) as “collective units” of democracy often conflict in marginalised populations (243). This contradiction arises from the fact that the rights claimed by communities in relation to the state, such as self-determination and access to resources, are frequently denied to “their” women (246). As a result, they end up following the same practice of exclusion that the nation used to discriminate against the marginalized communities. Therefore, while it is necessary to safeguard the cultural rights of the marginalized communities, unquestioning acceptance of such might lead to the formation of what Bhattacharya dubbed “internal minorities,” as observed in several communities in the North East. This complicates the concept of Minority Rights since it leads to the understanding that the empowerment of a minority group does not always equate to the empowerment of every member of that community. An inevitable conflict between individual and collective rights leads to the construction of a subalternized group within an already subaltern society, resulting in the emergence of “voiceless, historiless, unorganised” internal minorities (Bhattacharjee 128). The problem, according to Menon, lies in the way in which these “rituals” in their cultural practices are intertwined in the concept of the “self” that has been constituted essentially as “male”— “the self that is recognised by different cultural groups... the self that is endowed with ‘selfhood’ is male” (250). Although Menon is commenting upon religious minority here, feminists in the region have discussed how the same mind-set is pervasive in numerous communities across North East India. However, a reform imposed from without (such as the imposition of UCC) can never be acceptable to the indigenous groups of the Northeast, who rely on constitutional practises (for example Article 371A and 371G) to protect their already eroding traditional way of life (Menon 257; Dahiya 10). It would

be unethical to impose reforms from the outside because it would severely harm the cultural identity of the ancient Naga tribes, as these customary laws also safeguard their world view and communitarian spirit of life. Hence, as Menon also points out, the reform has to come from inside the communities without an imposition from the Centre. In the next lines, she lays out the plan of action—“external protection of the democratic rights of communities vis-à-vis a larger society, as well as internal restrictions on them to ensure the rights of sections of their own population” (257). In this regard, she mentions the work of the Bombay-based Nikahnama Group and the Women’s Research Action Group, as well as the Joint Women’s Program (JWP). What these organisations are attempting to accomplish is to focus on reform within the framework of existing community laws (or personal laws in these cases) in order to guarantee greater liberties for women of these marginalised communities (253). As we will see in the following chapter of this thesis, Naga women’s groups (like the Naga Mothers’ Association and Watsu Mungdang) are attempting to achieve the same effect in their region, albeit using different approaches and methods. The customary practices of the Nagas are comparable to those of a number of tribes residing in neighbouring states. Lal Dena, while discussing the condition of women in Mizoram, refers to “hyper-masculine” biases that drive women into conventional domestic duties, thus preventing them from entering the public realm (117). Esther Syiem and Patricia Mukhim found that this bias exists even in the Khasi community, where, like in Nagaland, women are not usually permitted to engage in decision-making at home or in public. (Syiem 112; Mukhim, “Gender and Development” 51). N. Vijayalakshmi Brara, observing the prevalence of this prejudice among Manipur’s communities, observes, “Our Niyams are very subtly laid,” often swept under the rug and cloaked in “ceremonialities,” so impossible to identify and consequently difficult to criticise (87). In the tribes of India’s northeastern states, including Nagaland, these customary laws can be broadly divided into two categories—the ones including the family and kinship values, and the laws regulating tenure rights over land and other such natural resources (N. Das10). Both categories are somewhere interlocked in the context of the tribal communities since issues of kinship are also intractably related to issues of rights over land or natural resources. Hence, it can be surmised that the customary laws still hold a widespread effect on the tribal population of Nagaland. It cannot be denied that preserving these customary laws are important not only because of their intimate relation with the historicity of the tribal identity but also because of their indigenous origin, swift justice system, absence of

capital punishment and widespread acceptance amongst the tribal society (Ray 40). However, at the same time, many activists and scholars from the region have questioned the traits of male hegemony found in these customary laws governing property rights, marriage and political privileges. Since all of the Naga tribes follow a patrilineal ideology the kinship norms and the customary laws that they follow are also heavily embedded into that same social structure. As Nepuni Augustine points out, not only in Nagaland, but in most parts of northeast India, the “major family systems” are “patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal” (5). Lucy Zehol also mentions that gendered practices are “deeply rooted” in the “Naga patrilineal societies” and that the structure of the gender identity in the Naga society draws its inspiration from traditions that “immortalize and revere male ancestors as progenitors” while pushing the female ancestors to oblivion (35).

Thus unequal gender relations work through the society, including the customary laws, to keep women subordinated. Although the Naga community consists of multiple tribes and each of these tribes have their own set of customary laws, all of them manifest a strong patriarchal ethos. Athungo Ovung, while discussing the practices in the context of Lotha Nagas echoes the same sentiments in the following lines—

Among the Naga tribes, there are significant variations in culture and social organization and even between the sections of the same tribe, which makes more complicated to define gender to one understanding. However, some degree of patriarchy is universal everywhere. (140)

Kekhrieseno Christina argues that even in the instance of the Angami Naga society (which Verrier Elwin had praised highly for manifesting democratic traits), the social organization is essentially “patriarchal and patrilineal” (67). The same thoughts are reflected in Temjensosang’s writing where he describes the Ao Nagas as a “strictly patrilineal people” (157).

Consequently, the issue of women’s rights have come up as a key fault line of internal contestation in the Naga society. The two major issues of customary laws, that the scholars and activists surmise to have affected the Naga women the most, are—the rights to inherit ancestral property and the rights to free participation in political as well

as decision making sphere (N. Das 25). It is true that in tribal societies, including the ones in Nagaland, the coercive structure of patriarchal control is not as rigid as it is in the rest of the country. Issues like dowry system or child marriage is absent from these communities, problems that plague the rest of India heavily. However, as Asok Kumar Ray explains :

Although the coercive structures of sexual control like female chastity/ unchastity, purity/ pollution, child marriage, *purdah* and female seclusion, prohibition of divorce and widow remarriage were absent among the tribes, there was an overarch of male 'control' over women and consequent gender inequality in North-Eastern societies. This penetrated into the collective consciousness of the tribal communities. (50)

Whereas this stands true that most Naga tribes (including the Angamis and the Aos) confer a higher status on women than caste societies of the rest of the country do, it does not mean that they enjoy the same amount of equality as their male counterpart. Linda Chhakchhuak points out the same while discussing how a positive Gender Development Indicator (GDI) like health, education or women's participation in economic sphere, does not always indicate a gender just society :

But the positive GDI have not served to open door for increased women's participation in governance at any level including in the family affairs. Without the concomitant acceptance of women as equal partners in governance and decision making institutions, or having an equal voice in families, it only goes to prove that these qualities are allowed to the extent that in the context of the days socio-economic scenario, it enhances the customary property value of women as an extra earner contributing to the properties of the family in which again, the women customarily have no say or part. (18)

Therefore, a holistic approach towards a gender just society should take account of three vital categories of empowerment for women—social, economic and political (Mukhim 10). In this context, social empowerment may refer to convenience of access to fundamental services provided by the state. Whereas, economic empowerment

signifies provision of training and scope for employment to generate income and political empowerment stands for a conscious removal of the obstacles (both internal and external) that hinders full participation of women in public-political sphere. Although it is true that the Naga women do not have to face tribulations like female foeticide or dowry deaths, it does not simply reveal a lack of gender discrimination in the society. The internal contestation based on women's rights that are emerging from the region cannot be equated with the situation in the rest of India, since the structure of the traditional society here is different than the caste based societies of the rest of the country. However, as Vishü Rita Krocha, owner of one the most prolific publishing houses in Nagaland, Penthrill, tells me in an interview :

One of the things that the Naga society is quick to say when it comes to gender issues in Nagaland is that Naga women are always treated at par with men in the state. This is true to a certain extent but maybe, even unconsciously, many of us have simply adapted to an environment or system that has been followed over the years by our forefathers (Krocha)

Since patriarchy moulds structural as well as institutional correspondence of dominance between men and women, gender role stereotypes still heavily influence the Naga society, and it becomes especially prominent when it comes to political and inheritance rights (Amer "Participation of Women" 42; L. Longkumer 217). As discussed before, in Naga tribal societies, the laws of inheritance are intricately related to the system of kinship-- as kinship provides the consolidating codes for societal identity as well as resource dissemination. Since after marriage women have to change their clan, inheritance of ancestral property, especially land, becomes a conflicted issue. The traditionalists are weary of introducing the norm of sharing clan property amongst daughters since it may lead to fragmentation of the clan-land which in turn will shake the very basis of their ethos and identity. Hence, although women have a high level of involvement in the agricultural production they are mostly denied ownership rights. Not only do they carry out major agricultural activities on the field, they are also in control of processing and storage of the harvest.

This stands especially true for *Jhum*<sup>vi</sup> cultivation which requires heavy manual labour. Thus, even though women are indispensable for upholding economic

permanence of their societies, they lack any opportunity to control or own productive resources, making them economically dependent on their families (Zehol 38). Toli Achumi considers that in the Ao Naga society daughters are restricted to being “subordinate members” of the family since the daughters can never become “co-owners with the sons” or inherit family and especially the ancestral property as dictated by the customary laws (208). Temjensong also mentions that in the Ao society, during the *jhum* cultivation process, the nature of work shared between men and women remains same but men are entitled to higher wages (165). Achumi further points out that women in the Ao Naga society are generally burdened with more work than men and yet are denied equality when it comes to ownership rights—

Though there is a division of work or labour, it is interesting to note how women are made to shoulder extra burden. For example, in the Ao Naga community, when the husband and wife go to or return from the field, if there is only one load the wife will carry it, and the husband will lead the way. If there is more than one load, the husband may help. (209)

K. Athishu writes the same about Mao Naga women, who contribute more into the agricultural labour force than their male counterpart, as among the participants in agricultural activities 60% are women (114). Not only do they work longer hours, they also take more of an active part in transporting and selling the product, as can be seen in the women dominated Mao market in Kohima (Athishu 117). In Naga communities there are two types of property—movable and immovable. Immovable property refers to arable land which is the most valued form of property here because of its economic, social and symbolic implications. There exists separate categories of land ownership in the Naga tribes—individually owned (personally acquired), family owned (ancestral) and clan and/ or village owned land (also known as common land). The customary laws dictate that the daughters of the family are largely denied of inheriting ancestral or family land—be it in the Ao tribe (L. Longkumer 217), the Tangkhul tribe (Khongreiwo 87), the Mao tribe (Athishu 110), the Sumi tribe (Achumi 207), the Lotha tribe (N. Das 64) or the Angami tribe (Christina 69).

However, in some of the tribes, like the Angami Nagas, women can inherit her father’s personally acquired property, including land although she is denied of the

ancestral land. Christina mentions, that in some cases if the father does not have a son, the daughter can possess the rights to the ancestral house but only to live there with her family till her death (Christina 70). In these cases, a symbolic transfer is performed where a small piece of land and household articles are given to the immediate male kin of the father (ibid.). An unmarried daughter has the rights to use the ancestral land for cultivation and acquire personal wealth through farming (ibid.). In some tribes, including the Angamis, agricultural land is used as a marriage gift to the daughters from her parents (Banerjee 3; Christina 70). But this land is part of the acquired land by the parents and not part of the ancestral land owned by the daughter's family. Interestingly, amongst some Angami Nagas, like the Zounuo-Keyhonuo group of Viswema village, there is a custom where the mother can give her daughters paddy fields (termed *Pozephu*) that were in her possession, thus creating a transfer through the female line but such customs are few and far between (N. Das 64). Also, movable property can be bequeathed to the daughter, including cattle and money, with absolute right (Kehie 197).

In Angami society a widow enjoys the rights to stay on, as well as use, her husband's land for self-sustenance but she does not have the rights to inherit this property since it belongs to her male children (Kehie 196). If she has no children who will inherit the land after her, she loses the rights to control the property of her husband (Christina 71). In Ao society too a widowed woman cannot inherit her husband's property whether land or otherwise; but she can use them to sustain herself if she does not remarry (Temjensong 157). Same traditions are followed in the Pochury tribe that live in the Phek district of Nagaland (Katiry 225). In the Sumi Naga community, the widow is entitled to only a third of her husband's property, even the movable property of husband does not completely belong to her (Achumi 207). Much like the Angamis, the Ao women too are denied inheritance rights, but has full rights on the movable property gifted to her during her marriage ceremony (Temjensong 157). The Lothas follow strict patrilineal ideology as well. Hence daughters are denied any inheritance right to the family land and if a family does not have a son the ancestral land is transferred to the closest male kin (N. Das 64). Among the Mao Nagas too women are denied the right to inherit the ancestral property, called *lophri* (Athishu 110). The property that is jointly bought by the parents, called *arhu-hru* can be shared between sons and daughters, but even then, sons usually get the major share so that land does



not go out of the hold of clan (ibid.). Since the daughter changes her clan after marriage, families fear giving them away ancestral land would ultimately lead to fragmentation of the same. This clan-land conflation, which is a result of the kinship system that guides the ethos of Naga communities. Asok Kumar Ray argues that it is this clan-land conflation procedure that has moulded the “clan-based organizations” in both the fields of “infrastructure” as well as the “superstructure”—which in turn have created the “regulatory norms, customs, ideology and the political systems” that work towards the exclusion of women (Ray 50).

Thus, Naga women’s right to landed property, the most prized asset in the Naga society, is evidently limited. To add to the woes, the privatisation of common land of the clan or the village is further shrinking the space of self-sustenance for women in Naga society. Although the ownership of the common land is restricted to men, all women of the village/ clan enjoy the right to use it (Christina 69). This is especially helpful for single women and women headed households without any inherited land, since they can use the common land to cultivate or forage for produce, making them economically self-sufficient. However, as Patricia Mukhim points out, the neo-liberalisation strategies of the government that look towards privatisation of common land, end up making women’s situation worse by narrowing their access to the common land – “Notably the majority of women in the region are marginalised agriculturalists or *jhum* cultivators without rights of ownership of the lands they tilt for livelihood” (16). Sometimes parts of the common land are also turned to individually owned land by the powerful men of the village/ clan so that it becomes easier for them to obtain singular *patta* against such land (N. Das 23). This is a case where the customary laws clearly give into the state laws, thus subverting the very idea of protecting the traditions for which these laws were supposed to exist. The exposure to urbanisation has also thus affected women, especially those without access to any form of arable land.

In these events poverty becomes gender-specific, since such rampant neo-liberalisation of the tribal land makes single women and the women headed families suffer the most from systemic injustice. This is how the rigid gender based distinction found in the Naga society results in the dependent position of women through different forms of economic subjugation. Landed property does not only provide direct or indirect means of sustenance and economic independence (thus also helping in the right

to loans and credits), access to ancestral land also has some symbolic significances in the Naga society. As Toshimenla Jamir explains in “Engendering Politics” ancestral land possesses more value than purchased land as it has historically signified civil as well as political prowess (58). Thus, discrimination in command over land has not only created insistent economic disparity but has also effectually lowered the social as well political status of women with customary denial of inheritance rights (*ibid.*). Therefore, inequality in inheritance rights directly affects a woman’s scope of participation in the public-political sphere, not only because of financial restraint but also because it creates a social structure that impedes a woman’s chances to enter the public-political sphere.

The denial of right to political participation is the second major point of contestation for the Naga women. Customs and tradition deeply impact a society’s perceptions and beliefs, which in turn shape the community’s attitude. Since the Nagas were predominantly a hunter society in the pre-colonial days, the entry of women into decision making sphere was restricted. During the ancient days, in the traditional decision-making spaces, there would mostly be discussions about warfare, defence or hunting. Since usually women did not directly participate in warfare or hunting, this restriction did not necessarily indicate a sense of hierarchy, mostly because of practical considerations. Within this established institution women were to perform two roles—that of the hard-working toiler on the field and the nurturer of the private sphere. The basic principle working in this division of labour was that the role of a man was that of a “provider” and the role of a woman was that of a “home maker” (Christina 67). This performative differentiation in roles relegated Naga women essentially to the private sphere of household. Women were to stay back and take care of home and contribute to the economic betterment of the household through farming and rearing cattle, when the men of the village went for war. Thus, participation in the economic sphere was present in the traditional society, but that never transpired to a prospect to enter the decision-making sphere. During the pre-Christianity days head-hunting was an integral part of Naga culture. Beside carrying religious and social significance head-hunting was also practised for the prestige of the village. The social as well as political structure of the Naga society was organised around this tradition. Consequently, it heavily impacted the gendered division of labour. Women could not participate in this tradition and hence were entirely excluded from any form of direct participation in the political decision-making sphere. A binary was thus created where women were consigned to

the private sphere of domesticity, while the decision-making sphere became a prerogative of the men (Achumi 207; T. Jamir 48).

Over centuries, these rituals and practices that were structured around this gendered division of labour, gradually coalesced into conventional customary practices that are considered to be sacrosanct and irrefutable in nature. The consequence of keeping women out of the formal decision making sphere has resulted in the continuation of the political exclusion of Naga women even in contemporary times. As Dolly Kikon points out in her essay “Framing Naga Customary Practices through the Lens of Gender Justice”, when it comes to obtaining the rights to enter the political sphere or becoming members of the traditional councils, the objection comes from a section of Naga women as well (Kikon 54). Temsula Ao calls this condition a syndrome of “benevolent subordination”, she explains :

Truth be told, even today many women are not free from such a bias when they concede to male superiority out of deference to ‘custom’. Thus, Naga women, no matter how well educated or highly placed in society, suffer from remnants of this psychological ‘trauma’ of subordination, which in their grandmother’s times might have seemed perfectly logical but which now appears to be a paradox within the ‘modern educated’ self. (Ao 105)

## **2.vi Traditional Practices: Rituals, Lore, Proverbs and Gender Discrimination**

Many scholars (like Toli Achumi, Toshimenla Jamir and Limatula Longkumer) have traced the foundation of this discriminatory binary creation in the integral ‘Morung’ system of Naga society. During the pre-colonial days the institution of bachelor’s dormitory was called ‘Morung’. The Morung was a centre for training in warfare and hunting, but more importantly it was a centre for dissemination of knowledge that was transmitted through generations (Achumi 208). Each of the Naga tribes had their own form of Morung, the Aos called it ‘Ariju’, in Angami society it was known as ‘Kichuki’, whereas amongst the Konyak Nagas it was known as ‘Ban’ (Ao 49). The bachelor’s dormitory played a key role in the community polity. Toshimenla Jamir points out that in the Ao society, the Morung (or Ariju) was not a mere dormitory, rather it was the locus of all policy and decision-making process in the community—be it warfare, developmental policies for the village or other political strategies (50). On the contrary

the women's dormitory, called 'Tsüki' in the Ao society, was restricted to being simply a "socio-cultural" institution where women were being trained to continue with "domestic drudgeries" that they would have to face after marriage (ibid.). Hence it can be surmised that the traditional institutions permeated the concept of the gendered division of public/ private sphere into the society while moulding the young boys and girls in the pre-colonial days. This historical lack of "political socialisation" of the young girls in these traditional institutions, is probably indicative of the reason why Naga women occupy a peripheral role in the political sphere even in modern Naga society (ibid.). Thus, the socialization process trained women to be subservient from the a very young age.

Lucy Zehol also points out that Naga women are still not allowed to participate in the deliberations of the traditional village councils or "dorbar" even with a pronounced presence in the economic sphere (38). Dolly Kikon writes about the presence of these exclusionary customary practices even in the contemporary private sphere of family, where women are barred from entering a meeting about buying pigs for a feast, although it is a woman who is paying for it (58). Women cannot be members of the apex decision making organisation in a village —the village council, only male members of a clan enjoy that right; they also cannot be members of the apex tribal body the 'Hoho', no women representative are to be found in the apex Naga tribal body, the Naga Hoho (Ao 50; Temjensosang 159). With this amount of exclusion at different levels of decision-making process, women can never find equality when it comes to policy making for a holistic development of the society. The reification of tradition and customary laws through the region's self-governing councils have turned women into "internal minorities" in their own communities, absent not only from the established tribal structures of authority but also from the modern organization of state politics (Bhattacharjee 133). Rodrigues argues that sometimes the provision of accommodation for the customary laws in the constitution can aggravate discriminations inside the cultural groups, because of the existence of the vulnerable groups *inside* the already marginalised cultural group (Rodrigues 76). She cites the example of India in this context. Although the Indian constitution provides the right of 33% of reservation in local body elections for women, this rule is not extended to states with special provisions for customary laws without the permission from state government and local bodies (ibid.). The 33% reservation bill has been a major issue of conflict between

women activists and tribal bodies. In Nagaland, the legislative assembly passed the resolution to implement the 33% reservation for women; following this, in 2008, just before the municipal elections of Mokokchung town, the apex tribal body of Aos, the Ao Senden sat in a meeting with ward chairpersons, the Deputy Commissioner of Mokokchung, the Gaonburas (village council heads), local MLAs and the representatives from WatsuMungdang (Ao women's association based in Mokokchung town) to discuss the matter of reservation in the upcoming election. Although in the meeting it was decided to allot 5 out of 16 wards, the AoSenden later opposed this decision and on 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2008 it was declared that the reservation is not appropriate for Mokokchung, as it was not in line with Ao culture (L. Longkumer 220). However this did not the WatsuMungdang who continued to fight for the reservation through appealing to the Chief Minister's office as well as to the conscience of the general public ("Watsu asks CM to Implement 33% Quota"). In retaliation the AoSenden sent a resolution to the Nagaland Legislative Assembly, that stated:

Even though 33 percent bill is implemented in other states of India, the Ao community would stick to the Indian Constitution Article 371 (A) (i) and Village Council Act of 1978. Any political management in the Ao community will be based on Ao Customary Laws (L. Longkumer 221).

As protests erupted against the reservation, citing disloyalty to tradition, women were not allowed to even file their nomination papers and later the whole election got cancelled (Aier 308).

The women in support of reservation even went to the Guwahati High Court in June, 2011 and received a decision in their favour, based on which the Nagaland Government declared Municipal and Town elections all over Nagaland in 2012, with the 33% reservation implemented (L. Longkumer 221). However, following a meeting held between representatives of Naga civil society and the government, the Minister of Urban Development was sent to tour all 11 districts interviewing "exclusively" men, about their opinion of women's reservation in politics and it was decided that "none of the districts is willing to include women in municipal elections"(ibid.). The government appealed to the high court to reconsider, and this time the High Court Special Bench declared that 33% reservation for women should not be implemented in Nagaland.

Limatula Longkumer rues— “This is how the Ao Naga women lost the battle with the Government of Nagaland on the Reservation Bill” (221).

Anungla Aier thinks that such intense aversion to the idea of women’s entry to the public-political sphere, are based on the oral tradition and narrative of the conventional Naga society where positions of power were only ascribed to men as they took part in warfare and protected the village, the core of the Naga society (308). In her essay “Folklore, Folk Ideas and Gender among the Nagas”, Aier makes a study of Naga origin stories to show how, in the collective Naga psyche, male ancestors are viewed as “progenitors” in the true sense, while female ancestors are mostly portrayed essentially as caregivers, bound to the household duties and even as “weak and sickly” (Aier 303- 06). It is of no surprise then, that these character are also often “pushed to the background” or even “forgotten” in these stories (Aier 306).

Toli Achumi presents the same impression through her reading of the Ao folklore of Kongrola, the mythical rich and powerful woman who enslaved men (209). The story ends with the men turning to apes and Kongrola is decidedly depicted in a negative light. She writes:

The story of Kongrola is often quoted by men in the Ao Naga society when referring to women’s leadership roles in church and society. A liberated, independent and able woman is always described as someone boastful and domineering who controls men and society, and hence give no freedom to others (Achumi 210).

Rammathot Khongreiwo observes similar tendencies in his reading of the myths and lore in relation to the Naga megaliths. Not only in Nagaland, but also in the other states of northeast India (for example, Meghalaya) megaliths are a common sight. The megaliths are, in a way, a public manifestation of the socio-political system of the community as they denote the idea of social-memories. Hence, if the socio-political system of a community was patriarchal, it reflected in the megalithic tradition as well. For the Nagas this becomes apparent from the fact that usually the megaliths erected for men are almost always taller and bigger than the ones raised for women, a wife’s menhir had to necessarily be smaller than the husband’s (Khongreiwo 84). In this

context, he mentions the story of Harkhonla—an exemplary woman who saved her village from fierce enemies belonging to the neighbouring settlement (Khongreiwo 86). Still, when she wanted to raise a ‘maranlung’ (megaliths associated with the Feast of Merit), the men of the village turned averse to help her carry the stone and tried to befool her by demanding more sacrificial animals to move it, suddenly made heavy by evil spirits (Khongreiwo 85). However, ingenious as Harkhonla was, she realised their scheme and refused to add more buffalo to the “pulling” ceremony (ibid.). Thus, the stone was left inside the woods, where the men had carried it up to, at that point in time (ibid.). A similar conclusion is found in the tale of ‘Umilung’ (translates to ‘the widow’s stone’) of Marem village, where too, male villagers conspired to swindle a rich widow who wanted to raise a ‘maranlung’ and as a result she was forced to erect it away from the settlement (Khongreiwo 84).

These stories show that even the roles of dynamic women were constrained deep within the framework of rights and entitlements, centred upon gendered customs, indicating the reach of patriarchal discrimination in traditional Naga culture. Khongreiwo explains—

The denial of the right to memorializing themselves by means of erecting megalithic monuments, which were done partly to immortalize one’s own memory after his death, is tantamount to denial of history in the same way women in the early literate societies were conspicuous by their absence in history and history-writing (90).

These anecdotes also reflect upon the social status of women in the traditional society, as well as the prejudice they had to face for their aspiring undertakings. In the traditional Naga society, the mere touch of a woman or her things before going to war, was considered a taboo (Zehol38; Athishu 111).

These cultural expressions are significant indicators of how gender relations are produced and developed in a society. In all patriarchal communities, there are such lore, proverbs and sayings, which regularly proclaim the idea that women are passive and weak, hence inferior and subservient to men. Dolly Kikon mentions one such popular saying in Naga society—“No matter how terrible the deed, it is a duty to support the husband” (Kikon “Life and Dignity” 75). Proverbs like these, exhibit how language, as

an instrument of expression, can reflect the interest of a particular social group and denounce others. This is how language is used for construction of the female identity through use of folk saying and proverbs. In effect, language through proverbs and sayings like these, structured the societal relation between men and women, already positing women as a subservient subject. Kikon uses yet another example to show how folk sayings can perpetuate the culture of patriarchy. In her tribe, the Lotha Nagas, there is a saying “*epoichoepoi*” which translates to “a man is a man” (Kikon 75). Since such proverbs easily pass into everyday conversation, they leave a substantial impact on the minds of young girls as well as boys and commence the process of gender-stereotyping from an impressionable age.

This is also, how long before the boys formally adopt the patriarchal character of the provider and decision maker in the public sphere, they already learn as well as practise how to be a ‘man’ in family-homes, in the private sphere. Kikon further points out that positing women’s rights and Naga culture as opposing ideologies (as has been done for the 33% reservation debate), use traditional culture as a “cloak” to disregard discriminations, including violence against women (20). Thus, thinly veiled misogyny work through the structure of language, culture and customs to deny women all sense of subjectivity—especially in the socio-economic and public-political or decision making domain. Not only women could not become a member of the village council, she also could not perform the role of the priest in the traditional society. This tenet of the Naga society stands in stark difference to the Meiteis of Manipur, where the “*maibi*”, or traditional priestess, plays a prominent role in the religious celebration of *Lai-Haraoba*, as it is through her that the goddess blesses the entire region. (Brara, “Performance” 279). However, as Limatula Longkumer points out that a woman could not become a priest in the pre-Christian Ao Naga society, even if she was the oldest person in the village (217). As a result, she was prohibited from performing sacred rites or religious sacrifices (*ibid.*). Longkumer further mentions that in this society a woman was not entitled to get “honour, title and fame”, notwithstanding her good performance and contribution towards village life—“She can be honoured only with her husband in songs that are sung at the Feast of Merit given by her and her husband” (*ibid.*). Rammathot Khongreiwo discusses one such lore from the *Khezhakeno* village—mostly inhabited by the Chakesang Naga tribe—which sheds light on the treatment of women by traditional religion in the pre-Christian Naga society. He refers



to the legendary character of Chi-o Mawopi, the wife of Dikha *Mawo* ('Mawo' refers to a village priest). She was known for her intellectual acumen and was in fact able to take up the charge of Mawo, when the next priest in the line, was still a minor (who was probably her son) (Khongreiwo 86). Although she was respected for her performance as a priestess, she was not entitled to some significant privileges that were considered to be the prerogative of the man in the role of the priest. For example she was not allowed to pronounce the "sadesa" (i.e. important orders declared by the Mawo from the sacred stone platform "chinisabe", concerning the observance of sacred days in the village) (ibid.). The reason for this differentiation was that, women were prohibited from stepping on to the chinisabe, considered to be a sacred space by the community.

This outlook has continued in some tribes till date. Amongst the Poumai Naga tribe, it is still a taboo for a woman to even enter the precinct of "neishafii", the sacred four stone platform from where the chiefs deliver important declarations related to sacred days and rites (Khongreiwo 86). In Ao Naga society too, women were deprived of the privilege to perform religious rites and access to the community's consecrated altar (Jamir and Lanunungsang 219). Khongreiwo opines that these instances of discrimination in the religious sphere indicate that "all sacrosanct objects and spaces were gendered" in the pre-Christian Naga society (86). With the advent of Christianity the ancient religious ways gave into the new religion but the gendered configuration of the structure persisted. As Temsula Ao points out in "Benevolent Subordination":

Also, when the new religion was accepted, the pattern remained the same. The Pastor was a male, so were the members of the Deacon Boards. A separate day was set aside as Women's Worship Day but any decision they might adopt would invariably require the approval of the Deacon Board (102).

Christianity arrived in this region during the nineteenth century with the entry of Baptist, Catholic and Presbyterian missionaries—with the Baptist church holding the most power in the Naga Hills (Swamveli and Tellis 131). Ao points out that even though all of the Naga Baptist churches contain women's groups, their leaders are never appointed as Pastors; the most that they can achieve is the role of "Associate" Pastor,

thus indicating her subservient role to the Pastor of the church (Ao 102). This is how the power structure inside the church has propagated the notion of male privilege in seats of authority, just like it was in the traditional society of pre-Christian days. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee also writes about the gender bias that women of this entire region, face at the level of a religious institute like the church:

It is learnt that the Church Unions do not assign higher post to women, who qualify the Bachelor of Divinity and Master of Divinity (BD & MD). It is a clear case of gender discrimination in the Church, when qualified women on Divinity, have to work as clerks in the Church office and the higher posts are enjoyed only by men (134)

Temjensosang points out about this discrimination faced by women in arenas of religious role as well, since Ao Naga women are still only allowed to work in the office of the Pastor, no matter how qualified they are in the discourse of theology (165). Therefore, it will not be wrong to surmise that the culture of gendered subservience was perpetuated even as the traditional society gave way to Christianity in Naga communities. Just like the traditional customary laws, the sphere of religion too, has contributed into marginalization of women from decision making spaces.

In recent years, however, the position for Naga women in terms of religion has changed. In our conversation, Kakheli Inato Jimomi (who currently serves as the Secretary of Women Ministry at the Western Sümi Baptist Akukuhou (Churches) Kukhakulu (Association), and has been a pastor for several years) discusses how women are increasingly being inducted into decision-making spaces (like the deacon board) in the churches of the Sümi community—“Because earlier women were not allowed to work alongside the men, now women are allowed in the decision making body women are allowed to work with the man as a pastor” she observes (Jimomi). Not only that, but women are also being granted license to perform marriage, baptism, and burial ceremonies— “in our Sumi community there are more than maybe around 30 women (who) have been given a license... especially last year, 19 of them were given license... just at once. That’s a huge thing” she added (Jimomi). Given the religious organisations’ previous apathy about putting women in positions of responsibility, this is a significant step ahead. As the Secretary of WSBK, Jimomi herself acts as the

administrative head of 170 churches, and her duty includes coordinating with the women pastors and executive members of these churches. However, as Jimomi acknowledges, because Naga society is patriarchal, the belief that women should be restricted at home is still prevalent among both men and women, an attitude that is no doubt aggravated by the culture of impunity prevalent in any community that has witnessed violence for several decades, as noted earlier in this chapter.

### **2.vii The Gendered Space: Formation and Repercussions**

As previously discussed in the preceding chapter, the public and private spheres no longer exist as neatly delimited places in a stratified, conflict-ridden, post-colonial ethnic society. They share a porous boundary, as seen by the high visibility of women in one public space (the economic sphere)<sup>vii</sup> and almost none in another (the decision-making space). However, as it can be surmised through the discussion in this chapter, in no way does the visibility or mobility of women in the economic sphere indicate a more *empowered* existence in its complete sense. As Rodrigues states, Naga women have become a vulnerable group inside an already marginalized group (76). Hence, it can be conceived that Naga women, through these processes perpetuated by the state as well as the communities, have turned into subjects that are twice marginalised. They are excluded, and consequently rendered voiceless, by the discourses of state as well as that of their own communities.

The tripartite structure of State, community-practices and religion have thus created a rigid gendered social space for women, which has only escalated in its rigidity in the past decades because of the ongoing conflict-situation. The gendered social space can be defined as the traditionally and materially imbedded repertoire of appropriate gender roles that generate permeable, non-rigid frames within which women form and navigate their identities (Bazylevych 2). No more can it be dealt as a simple matter of placement of men and women into public and private spheres since there are multifold linkages that connect the two spheres, as discussed in this chapter. In this chapter I have attempted to delineate the ways through which the state along with the communities have constructed this gendered social space. It is important to study the formation of the gendered space since act as the script used by the state as well as individuals to reinvent their public positions (Bazylevych 3). However, this social space is not just a passive locus of societal associations<sup>viii</sup>; rather, because this site is also a nexus of

numerous agencies, it provides a platform for active subversion of the hegemonic norm. As seen from the discussion in this chapter, this gendered social space is essentially linked to hegemony and power essentially restricting women from making entry points to the public-political sphere. However, it is important to remember that this social space also contains tenets of subversive knowledge as this space is also an intersection of different agencies—“it points up the antagonism between a knowledge which serves power and a form of knowing which refuses to acknowledge power” (Lefebvre 10). Thus, the concept of the social space becomes multifaceted, as it includes diverse voices from various groups and individuals who do not always operate with a singular perspective or purpose. Maryna Bazylevych describes the gendered social space as the “intersection” of action and knowledge that is at the same time political, ideological, and rooted in the present mode of production (4). She views the gendered space as more than just the physical separation of men and women into public and private worlds as the two domains are connected through a number of links; Bazylevych notes—

As Private is often nested in public, and multiple linkages connect the two domains. Instead, I see it as an intersection of knowledge and action in the gender realm that is political, ideological, and embedded in the existing mode of production. In other words, it is the culturally and materially embedded repertoire of the appropriate gender roles that create a space within which women construct and negotiate their identity (Bazylevych 4).

Naga women too have used this very gendered social space to articulate their identity and resistance. Subsequently, it was important to study the formation of this gendered space structured by the discourses of the state and the communities, which women here are confronting on a daily basis. The gendered space that they inhabit, shrink their potential entry to the decision making sphere although their visibility is prominent in the economic public sphere. Being denied the right to enter the public-political sphere and facing vehement opposition from their own communities while attempting to do so, the women here are compelled to look for possible entry points in the heavily masculinised public-political sphere. In the next chapter of the thesis we will look at, how this gendered social space is resisted and a space for deliberation is created, (which we call counterpublics, following Nancy Fraser) to carry out negotiated equality within their communities by Naga women, through the arena of activism, especially in the form of peace-activism.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Narratives of Peace: Naga Women in Politics of Peace and Empowerment**

#### **3.i Introduction**

The Naga self-determination movement is regarded as one of the oldest struggles in Southeast Asia. This protracted political conflict has pushed the Naga society in a state of indetermination for decades. As a result of this long-drawn-out militarized situation, the socio-political dialogues in this region are largely concentrated on the issues related to militarization concerns between the Naga community as a whole and the State of India. Concerns relating specifically to women's rights have consequently, in a sense, been deferred. As observed in the previous chapter, the violence perpetrated through the conflict situation on women of this region is multi-layered in nature—psychological, physical as well as social. The specific concerns pertaining to women are moulded not only by their particular social roles but also by the dominant traditional perception of gender roles in their society. Since the Naga society is also patriarchal in nature, the violence and discrimination faced by women here are intersected by multiple aspects, including cultural and structural disparities that are meted out to women in a patriarchal set up. As discussed in the last chapter, the women's struggle here is not only against the armed violence that creates hostile spaces for them, but also a societal set up that engages in prejudiced practices especially regarding the rights to inheritance and the rights to enter the decision-making sphere. Thus, adopting a single praxis line of thought will not be sufficient to comprehend the myriad ways in which multiple patriarchal structures intersect to create a hostile gendered space for women here; neither will it be adequate to comprehend the methods of resistance that women practice in this region. It is, hence, important to study how subjugation patterns intersect in the experience of violence for women, given that a monolithic conception of patriarchy generates an equally homogenised and reductionist concept of women's subordination as well as their agency and practices of resistance. The preceding chapter explored, how patriarchy, as opposed to being a coherent and monolithic concept, is actually a process that continually reinvents and manifests itself in different forms and societal frameworks, as different forms of violence intersect for women in this region. The chapter also studied how, in this process, a gendered space is created by the State as well as by some traditional practices of their own communities, to hinder the Naga women's prospect of entering into the public sphere of decision-making process. This

chapter will analyse how Naga women are making use of roles that are backed by their traditions to resist the gendered space and establish a counterpublic through their socio-political activities as peacebuilders.

### **3.ii Naga Women and ‘Dual Political Aspirations’**

H. Asangla Phom, the Associate Director of Nagaland Development Outreach, thinks that women in Nagaland are stuck between the violence of the armed conflict and the systemic discrimination, left to “tolerate abuse to save face” (qtd. in Zhimomi 99). Phom expresses her increasing concern about the “cultural impunity” in Naga society (as also noted by Dolly Kikon, as discussed in the previous chapter) since in a militarized space women are doubly disenfranchised by discrimination mechanisms that operate “within the communities” (ibid.) Women in Naga communities must therefore pursue “dual political aspirations” when it comes to the objective of their struggle: “national peace” as well as “women’s equality” (Zhimomi 100). The violence in this region has thus extended from the conflict to the post-conflict situation. This perpetuation of violence can be perceived as an extension of the gendered form of oppression that is rooted in the social subservience of women, faced by them as an everyday occurrence. Women are thus caught between the violence perpetrated by both state and non-state actors, both of whom exhibit vehement patriarchal tenets. The sanctity of traditional practices is inscribed on women’s bodies, especially when two patriarchal powers engage in a conflict. Yet, women are excluded from the discourses that those very powers create around her—be it that of state, the rebels or the ethnic community that she belongs to. As discussed in the previous chapter, women are reduced to symbolic bearers of cultural traditions during the times of conflict, making them a direct target for opposing patriarchal forces to attack the social fabric of the opposing community. However, when it comes to the process of the nation formation (and the public-political sphere related to the nation-making process) women are almost always deliberately excluded by both the State as well as the rebels (Banerjee and Dey 16; Goswami 121).

Moreover, the conflict creates a new dispossessed class of women (in the form of widows without access to land, or victims of sexual violence disenfranchised by community) whose social position, even in the post-conflict society, is irredeemably marked by their experience of the violence during the conflict. Women’s presence in

the public becomes more hindered than before with their mobility severely restricted. Even something as basic and crucial a task as farming becomes difficult to carry on since they cannot work for long hours anymore and have to always move in groups fearing imminent assault (Gill, “Women in the Time of Conflict” 220). The conflict situation has also left an adverse impact on women’s access to healthcare, be it physical or psychological. Because of the ongoing violence, health care services have been severely interrupted in many places, putting women’s health at great risk. Additionally, the deep emotional trauma, created as a result of the violence inflicted on and around them, has led to cases of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and fear psychosis amongst the common people; Gill quotes Daisy Mezlor, Secretary of Social Welfare Advisory Board, Kohima, in this context:

Our society is going through a transition period which is much too fast for us. We are running before we can walk. Hence there is much chaos. In the whole process women are caught in the web. Atrocities against women are growing and we wonder why. We live under extreme tension and pressure every day. If we hear a bang we crawl under the table. In the evenings if any member of the family is still out, we are sick with worry and tension. In a way we all need professional help. We live in constant fear. There is a kind of fear psychosis in every one of us. All of us are victims in one way or another. I feel the need to talk with somebody before I go mad. (221)

This atmosphere of fear mongering can largely be attributed to the militarization of the Naga society, where, one soldier is placed for every ten Naga people (Manchanda, “Naga Women Making a Difference” 6). Along with the issue of militarization, the incidents of factional killing among the rebels have also accelerated the tension amongst the people of this area. There is severe lack of trust among the people of the community, since every individual is seen as a potential participant of an underground group, or an informer for them (Gill 221). The Chakesang women of Chizami village open up about this tense and hostile climate that affects their community severely—“(t)hey can trust no one—not even the people they know well.... Neighbours and friends are viewed with suspicion and mistrust” (qtd. in Gill 221). This is how a conflict situation can disrupt an entire community’s way of life, affecting every individual within the collective. Since the Nagas are essentially a communitarian society (as seen in their high respect for kinship values), one can only imagine how this

atmosphere of suspicion and distrust can rip open the very fabric of the Naga society. The conflict situation has not only negatively impacted the physical and psychological well-being of Naga women, it has also left an adverse effect on their economic means. Their loss of mobility, disruption of surrounding spaces and locales and the systemic violence upon their indigenous knowledge-systems, skills and the environment have become contributory factors to the violation of economic means for women (Gill 222). Thus, the violence ensuing from the conflict situation has left short-term as well as long-term adverse bearings on women of this region. In these ways situational factors in a conflict zone later manifest as structural constraints, further narrowing the scope for women's entrance and presence in the public sphere. To articulate their identity from their twice marginalised subject position, the women here are compelled to create a self-reflexive space within the very cultural system that attempts to obliterate her individuality. Seeing women only as passive sufferers in conflict situations, re-establishes the gender binaries perpetrated by patriarchy and denies women their agency through an emphasis on victimhood (Dutta xviii; Manchanda, "Women's Contribution Towards Peace Building" 212). Whereas in reality, in such situations women are often seen as the ones grappling with the responsibility of managing the survival of the entire family, as the male head of the house is missing or killed in the conflict.

Women can adopt various roles during conflict situation, including that of the aggressor and the survivor. Moreover, 'women' can never be viewed as a homogenous category, even in a conflict situation. In a conflict zone too, different women are positioned in different ways—they can and sometimes do "abet xenophobic, intolerant and violent politics" and yet, women can also not only actively advocate against the violence and human rights violation, but promote an inclusive form of politics otherwise absent from a conflict zone (Manchanda "Building Peace: What Difference do Women Make" 120). The latter is the narrative that Naga peace making women disseminate through their strategies of overcoming factional and ethnic divides. To avoid this simplification and homogenisation of women as sufferers, there is a need of using the idea of gender as an analytic category armed with critical awareness about the numerous roles and standpoints of women, at play during the conflict and post conflict situations. However, in a patriarchal set up women always remain unequal to men, in all of these capacities. Rita Manchanda points out that the media images of conflict



fetishizes the concept of the suffering woman by capturing her as a lost, bereaving individual wailing at the loss of a loved one, or as a “refugee” mother with little children at her side “fleeing the conflict” as a helpless figure of complete destitution— “the archetypal victims of wars waged by men” (109). Then at times, there is a counter narrative floated around by the media, the “glamorised” narrative of women as the aggressor, the militant “women with guns” (ibid.). However, beyond these jaded portrayals lies another stance of the women in the conflict zones, that is probably “less dramatic form of agency” and hence scarcely framed by the media— “of women reaching across violent conflict divides and creating the space for a dialogue”, the peace makers (ibid.). These are women who defy the popularised narrative of the passive sufferers in a conflict ridden society as they actively work towards the production of a non-violent space for initiation of dialogue between all stakeholders of the process.

This space of negotiation has proved to be of extreme significance in the Naga society, where state and non-state actors can come together to begin a channel of communication with the probability of conviction and reconciliation. Not only do these women create this vital space for dialogue, they also take to streets to actively protest all form of human rights violation in their society, especially relating to women, be it perpetrated by the state or their community—these are the women “sweeping up after the waste and destruction” in the conflict as well as post-conflict times (Manchanda 110). The preceding chapter set out to investigate the ways in which the state and the Naga communities work together to create a gendered space that makes it harder for women to participate in the public sphere especially the formal sphere of decision making. This chapter will examine how Naga women are adopting active roles as peacebuilders in order to establish significant entrance points for the formation of a counterpublic through their socio-political engagements.

### **3.iii Women as Peacebuilders in Naga Traditions**

To think that women are at the head of the peace programme because of their acute forms of suffering is not without its fault, since it harps on the victimhood of women. It has to be remembered, hence, that women do not only play the part of passive sufferers in a conflict situation. They are also the ones who are thrust with the responsibility of their family’s survival at the absence of the men of the community—by safeguarding them from the violence as well as providing them with daily sustenance through

economic or agrarian means. Instead of letting their loss (often of family members who simply disappear) wear them down, these women draw strength from their relational ties. Manchanda mentions—

(B)ecause of their experience in times of conflict and their increased responsibilities in the home and community, women are fundamental stakeholders in the peace process and bring new perspectives to the peace table. As mothers, wives, and sisters of combatants, as victims and survivors, and as individuals with powerful community networks, women are essential to rebuilding society and providing a lasting peace. (12)

Therefore it can be said, that women here are given the responsibility of safeguarding not only their families but their entire communities during times of strife. The women from India's Northeast have traditionally performed a significant part in the peace process of the region, whether it is the Meira Paibis of Manipur, the Ka Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei of Meghalaya, or the All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation and Missing Women's Front from Assam. In several occasions, the Indian government has employed these organisations and their leaders in the peace process in order to negotiate with the underground groups. The involvement of People's Consultative Group (PCG) in mediating between the Indian government and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), with Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami at the helm, is probably one of the most highlighted cases in point (Bhattacharjee 235; S. K. Das "Conflict and Peace in Northeast India" 47).

This is a role that Naga women know all too well because in multiple Naga communities women have been entrusted with the role of peace keepers since pre-colonial times. The previous chapter examined how some of the Naga customary laws (especially those related to inheritance rights and the rights to enter the decision-making sphere) create obstacles for women to articulate their individual identity. In this chapter it will be studied, how Naga women have taken help of the some of the other Naga tribal traditions and customary laws to create their own counterpublic. It also attempts to explore the emancipating prospective of Naga women's peace-work as well as its effects upon the complex forms of correspondence between the concepts of ethnicity, nation-formation and gender, at the backdrop of the conflict situation in Nagaland. By making use of the very same traditional narrative which the patriarchal culture often

employs to denigrate them, women here have ensured that the narratives of peace emerging from their methods, presents itself as a mode of destruction of the patriarchal frameworks, intertwined within the formulaic construction of gender.

In the traditional tribal society of pre-colonial days, Naga women were formally authorized as peace-makers and mediators when two opposing villages were engaged in a war. In almost all of the tribes, the women who married outside their village or clan could play this socially sanctioned role of the mediator and the pacifier — be it the Ao tribe (Imchen 94), the Angami tribe (Paphino 18), the Zeliangrong tribe (Zeliang 27), the Tangkhul tribe (Shimray 38) or the Chakhesang tribe (Lohe 53). The peace activism practiced by the women's groups of this region, thus, finds its origins in the historical tradition of the Naga communities. Shimreingam L. Shimray writes about the Tangkhul Nagas in this context—

As the violence was a reality, making of peace with warring group or person was also the immediate concern of the traditional Tangkhul society. They had adopted different methods of peace making and peace building among which the role taken by women was considered the most important one. (36)

This is true for all Naga communities who were often forced to engage in warfare with a neighboring village or another clan. The custom of headhunting was also widespread as it was not only a political practice, but one that had social, religious and cultural bearings as well. The social and political significance of headhunting was so great that until a man would practise it, he would not be considered eligible for marriage; or be given the ceremonial shawl *Haora* which represented the Naga concept of “manhood” (Shimray 35). Thus, warfare or headhunting were more of social practices than mere show of violence and bravery for the pre-colonial Naga society. Therefore, the process of peace building was also looked at as a necessary tool for the traditional society. In the traditional culture of the Naga tribes, the position of a woman as a peacemaker thus, also occupied a significant niche.

In the traditional Naga society, a woman who had married into another clan, held the power to intervene in a war situation between the two clans and stop the violence with immediate effect. Although the socio-political practice of warfare was rigorously gendered in nature and a woman had no place on the battlefield, her presence

as an agent of peace was fully sanctioned by the traditional society. For example, in the Angami tribe it was a taboo for a tribesman to kill their maternal uncles (termed *ami*) even if their clans are engaged in warfare (Paphino 19). In the traditional society Angami women could intercede into any kind of fights to save her brothers and her clan only by the ritualistic placing of her shawl on them and the opposite clansmen will not be able to harm them anymore, since it was a taboo to forcefully remove the shawl (Paphino 18). Similar traditions are to be found amongst the Chakhesang Nagas as well. In this tribe too, a married woman was entrusted with the responsibility of reconciliation amongst her two sides of family, or two villages with which she shared ties with, when they engaged in warfare (Lohe 52). In the Ao Naga tribe also, one finds examples of the same role being played by women, assigned with the task of mediating between two clans, *khels* or villages (Imchen 94). In the Zeliangrong tribe too it was a taboo to attack the maternal uncles (*herapau*) and the wife's brothers (*pemakme*)—this practice helped maintain peace by restraining inter-village or inter-clan conflicts (Zeliang 28). Many anecdotes are found in the rich oral culture of Nagaland that portray the legitimacy of this practice.

Zeliang mentions one such story where an inter-clan couple from Beneru village refused to take part in a clan war, citing the fact that the husband would have to attack the wife's brothers, violating the norm of the tribe (28). They decided neither to participate in the battle nor forego their rights to his clan and declared it to both parties; impressed by their determination for peace the two clans also relinquished their will to fight, and the matter was amicably settled by the village elders without any bloodshed (*ibid.*). Stories like this demonstrate, how Naga women were successful in brokering peace in the traditional society albeit they had no space on the battlefield or the decision-making sphere in relation to it, as seen in the last chapter. In the Zeliangrong tribe women had the authority to physically go to the battlefield to stop the fight. These women were known as *hekeume* and examples of their agency are found even in recent history of Nagaland (Zeliang 28). During the mid-1960s the upper and lower 'khel' of Ndunglwa village in Peren district, got caught into frequent clashes which even the village elders failed to control (Zeliang 29). In such a situation it was the village women who had to take it upon themselves to save their village and its inhabitants. These women went to the fields where the clashes would take place, and physically pushed the two parties apart with the bamboo poles they carried with themselves (*ibid.*). Thus,

these Naga women played the key role in restraining the violence of the situation which was completely out of control till their involvement.

Incidents like these depict the authority Naga women still hold from this socially sanctioned role that the traditional society created for them. In Zeliangrong tribe there is a word found for the declaration of armistice by the mediator. This declaration is termed *hie* and although men and women can essay the role of the mediator, what is unique about women's authority as a mediator is that a woman's *hie* cannot be violated at any cost (Zeliang 29). Even in the practice of headhunting women played the crucial part of acting as a bridge between two families and villages. In Zeliangrong tribe, only a woman (termed *demi*) had the right to take the head of the slain to the bereaving family, as a norm it was a taboo to harm the *demi* in any way (Manchanda "Naga Women Making a Difference" 4).

In the Tangkhul Naga tribe the traditional women peace makers were known as *pukrelia*. In this tribe a woman who is married to another clan is called *yorla* and she holds an important position in many community rituals (like *laira*, the seed sowing festival, or ceremonies related to marriage and death) because of her connections with two clans or villages (Shimray 38). However, a special power is conferred upon the *yorla* when there is a war between the two clans or villages that are related to her through genealogical and marital ties. During the time of war, the status of the *yorla* changes to that of *pukrelia*, a woman with the decisive authority to stop the violence and bring back peace. Valley Rose, who is the editor of 'Aja', a Tangkhul daily, describes the ritualistic power of the *pukrelia* in the following lines--"the *pukrelia* would intervene between two fighting groups, stretch her arms and shout: 'Stop! Stop fighting! You on my brothers' side and you on my husband's side, stop fighting and let peace prevail for my sake" (qtd. in Manchanda 4). The *pukrelia* would physically enter the arena of war with a Y-shaped stick in her hand and perform the role of a mediator with the power vested into her by the traditional society (Zhimomi 91).

This performance helped her create a space for herself as a woman in the heavily masculinised sphere of warfare that she was otherwise strictly excluded from by the same traditional society<sup>ix</sup>. This ceremonial conferring of the role of the official peace maker by her "neutral" status and recognition of her "dual citizenship" by the society

(Shimray 39). She draws the strength of her position from her relational bonds with both clans/ villages. No one could harm the *pukrelia* because of her venerated status backed by the society and her connection with both parties. If someone did try to harm her, the case will be taken to *Chingsang Long* (council formed by multiple adjoining villages) and together these villages will turn against the accused party and even go to the extent of ostracising the perpetrator (Shimray 40; Manchanda 14). Shimray cites a historical example of the *pukrelia* tradition, in his article “Methods and Values of Peacebuilding in North East India” from the middle part of the 19th century. This is an account of a *pukrelia* named Vakhalpa, who had saved her husband’s village Kampha, from the attackers that hailed from her original village, Talui, albeit it meaning that they had to break their vow to destroy that village (41). Such was the power of the woman as the peace maker, that even as significant an issue as clan-prestige became secondary, while pitted against her declaration. This is how in the traditional society, the Naga women had used a culturally sanctioned role to exert significant power over the masculinized sphere of political violence and warfare. In a different account of this *pukrelia* tradition, a wise woman was said to be powerful enough to stop a war just by shaking or whipping open her *mekhala* (Manchanda 14). By means of this performance a woman could exercise a way of public shaming of the perpetrators of the violence. This form of authority, thus, endowed her with a power over the public space that she otherwise lacked, albeit it being drawn heavily from the role she played in the private sphere of her home. In this context Elungkiebe Zeliang cites a traditional account of how a woman had stopped a war between the villages of Poilwa and Remdi by this ritualistic performance of shaking her *mekhala*—

Tradition has it that once Poilwa and Remdi (Maram Khullen) villagers were arch-enemies and they waged many wars. Finally, in one such war, a popular warrior of Remdi named Ruikuipi was killed by Poilwa warriors. On hearing the sad news of the death of her son, Ruikuipi’s mother took out her mapungli (menstrual blood stained *mekhala*) and shook it declaring a *hie*, ‘if Remdi villagers ever wage war with Poilwa villagers, let the village be like my dirty mekhala’. Ever since her *hie*, the two villages never waged war again (Zeliang 30).

As can be observed from this account, the Naga woman could make this performance a part of her projection of *public* anger, thus transgressing the stereotyped

gender norms of being eternally confined into the private sphere of family and household. By turning the very female body that is relegated to privacy and commoditized by patriarchy, to a site of public anger the women could assert their right to their own bodies. They accomplish this by bringing the female body and the taboos associated with the discourse about it into the public sphere, thereby dissolving the rigid boundary between the private and the public (in a way reminding us of the Kangla protest staged by the Meira Paibis, one of the most potent images of resistance against state fascism). In “Rethinking the Public Sphere” Nancy Fraser cites the etymological association between the words “public” and “pubic” as evidence that “possession of a penis” was a prerequisite for speaking in public even in the ancient times, which showed that in the very basic conceptualization of the public sphere, “masculine gender constructions” were heavily embedded (59-60). By bringing the woman’s (private) body into the public, then, these women are in a sense also challenging the phallogocentric structure of the public sphere that Fraser and other feminists have criticised, as discussed in Chapter 1. Thus, Naga women have historically held the power to intervene in a conflict situation and this traditionally sanctioned role has empowered Naga women to defend their people by using manoeuvres of informal negotiations or organizing means of reconciliation. With the help of these practices some Naga women have successfully shaped the formal sphere of peace process even during the days of Indo-Naga conflict and thus taken back their agency that was otherwise seized from them. Continuing with this traditional practice there have been multiple women’s organizations in modern Naga society, who have taken central roles in the formal sphere of the peace-making process between the state of India and the rebels. Few examples of these organizations are—the Angami Women’s Organization, the Chakhesang Mothers’ Association, Watsu Mongdang, the Naga Women’s Union and most importantly the Naga Mothers’ Association. These groups have effectively established themselves as successful negotiators not only between the state of India and the rebels, but also the several factions of the rebel groups, who engage in violent conflict very often as well.

Their roles have been instrumental even in the context of the ethnic violence that has afflicted this region for decades. In the northeastern states of India, women’s groups have been at the forefront of struggle against state militarization on quite a few occasions. However, the Naga women’s mobilization is different in the sense that that

it has demonstrated the scope of peace activism to be strategically instrumental to women's rights. The conflict situation, in a way, has compelled the women of Nagaland to get organized, which in turn has helped consolidate their efforts to reform women's standing in their communities (Ghosh 1754). It is women who continue to hold their families as well as communities together during the time conflict. The Naga oral traditions claim that it was women, who in times of war, prepared the food for the fighters and even supplied it to the battlefield (Lohe 55). This tradition continued during the days of army operations when the army would lay siege upon entire villages in their quest to detain the members of the underground groups. Kheshili Lohe, a sexagenarian woman from Tehephu village in Phek district of Nagaland, recounts her experience of these sieges and how women acted as protectors and preservers of the people of the village during such times of crisis—

Mrs Kheshili further narrates that she remembers that three times Indian army invaded and burnt the whole village and all of them escaped and stayed in the paddy field's hut for weeks together. She said that in times of danger of all things, what they remember most, was the rice for the family, so women rushed to the *khee* (big basket where farmers store grain) in spite of danger. (Lohe 54)

They did all of it while carrying their own children as well as the *mukho* (a type of a basket where they carried rice) at the back, moving carefully through thick forests, usually through the night to avoid being spotted by the army (Lohe 55). Women also often worked as messengers to warn their people against an imminent attack. They would sometimes do so through singing folk-tunes, sometimes they would carry letters from one village to the other, inserting them inside the straps of their carrying baskets (*mukho kuphu*), in the guise of going to the field or bringing water (Lohe 56). Thus even during the times of conflict, women here contributed in multifaceted ways to keep the community together and protected from the violence surrounding them. This is how Naga women have evolved as a valuable reservoir of social capital with high prospective for conquering the threats of social disintegration. These experiences have effectively been brought into the field of peace process by women's organizations of this region, especially with groups like the Naga Mothers' Association. The women's groups here have mainly worked through diverse issue-based peace movements,



collaborating with different interest groups as well as negotiate with both the army and the underground organizations.

The peace building process in this region has been transformed into a prospective site for women to strengthen their potential for agency and at the same time adopt a bigger role in governance and formal political sphere. It is essential to equally involve women in the peace making process for successful conflict resolution. And in the states of northeast India, including Nagaland, women's groups have been progressively more vocal in civil society attempts to participate in conflict resolution as well as the peace making process. Writing about the restructuring of gender relations during conflict and post conflict situations, Áshild Kolås argues :

Assuming that conflict entails a disturbance of established norms, researchers have also argues that conflict may have unintended positive effects on the status and role of women within their societies by affecting the gendered division of labour, and allowing women to perform jobs previously held by men. (42)

In this way, possibilities of new opportunities may arise during the conflict and post conflict situations for women. Through a reshaping of relations during peace building, women here, have also restructured gender roles in their society. The women's groups in Nagaland, by means of their peace building work, have contributed towards the formation of a more equal post-conflict gender order. Conflict resolution can thus be viewed as an opportune occasion, where women can make substantial contributions towards a long-lasting, unprejudiced and inclusive form of peace that they can benefit from as well.

At the structural level Naga women's groups are characterized by their inspiring show of resilience and potential. As studied in the previous chapter, they have been the ones bearing most of the brunt of the conflict situation for decades. The heavy militarization of their society and space, has put them in a precarious situation where human rights atrocities were taking place in various forms. And still, when threatened with military coercion and aggression, it was women who formed a formidable vanguard to save their communities. However, what makes these women stand apart is

their capability to organize against the inequalities and discriminations dealt out to them by all sides— be it the exploitations and abuses perpetrated by the armed forces, or their own communities. All strong Naga women’s organizations, like the ones mentioned before, have emerged as substantial platforms for women to exert their agency. As Tungshang Ningreichon mentions in her article “For a Strong Naga Nation: Deconstruct Patriarchy”—“(t)hese women organizations have a national character as they have the mandate of the people and they represent the voice of women. Most of them were borne out of the conflict and they are an integral part of nation building” (Ningreichon).

A distinctive feature of these Naga women’s organizations, is that they are comprised of several tribes, and hence cannot be called monolithic organizations. For example, the NWUM permits every Naga woman above the age of fifteen to be its member, hence the organization has its division in all Naga rural communities so that the question of access does not hinder a woman’s participation into the group (Sangkham and Thekho 125). All of their units in the Naga villages, preserve their specificity but at the same time work as a federation network (Ningreichon). They collaborate with each other in their approach to different social and gender specific problems. Most of these groups, including the Naga Mothers’ Association and the Naga Women’s Union, operate extensively in ways that impact the larger society, through their social form of activism against issues such as drug addiction or alcohol abuse amongst the youth. Their effective contribution through a number of societal welfare activities, has strengthened their position as activists in the Naga society.

Organizations like the Naga Mothers’ Association, or the Naga Women’s Union, have also been able to establish themselves as major critics of the violence perpetrated in their society, even at the national front. Serious endeavours have been undertaken by these women to get opposite sides together and work towards negotiations for sustainable peace. As Khrienguzono Paphino point out while discussing Angami Naga women’s role in peace building processes, Naga women have traditionally shown their solidarity towards each other, as part of their communitarian life—by the way of “identifying the needs of another woman” and participating in community work together (17). This was done by extending a helping hand to all women in their difficult daily chores, such as agricultural tasks, like harvesting crops

or tilling land, or collecting water or firewood from the forest, works that were typically assigned to women to take care of their household. And this help was extended by women to all of their co-workers from every family of the village, without any hierarchical constraints (Paphino 17). In this way, they were able to create an egalitarian society where women lived in harmony with each other, in a form of sisterhood.

Rosemary Dzúvichú, one of the chief advisors to the NMA, finds such examples present even in the post conflict Naga society. While delivering a speech at a peace congregation in Kohima in the year 2007, Dzúvichú remarks that these women, having survived in a conflict zone with its array of effects on not only themselves but also their families and relationships, have been skilled from a quite a tender age in dealing with conflict situations within the framework of the family and the society that encompasses their lives (Vamuzo 12). She also argues that by doing so, Naga women have acquired the skills and knowledge to create a potent network of sisterhood that encourages a greater understanding of empathy and thus, peace (ibid.).

This idea of empathy and sisterhood has helped women build bridges among different tribes as well. A good example of this form of peace building can be found in the manner the Angami Women's Organization had intervened into Angami- Sumi tribal clash using the idea of solidarity and empathy. As the violence was intensifying, the Angami Women's Organization decided to take the initiative for peace and intervened seeking forgiveness from the Sumi tribe on behalf of their whole community, one of their leaders expressed--"no man has the right to take another man's life, the deceased man lying in front is like a son to every mother though he differs in tribe, he is like my son and it pains the mother most to see her son laying dead before her, forgive us, and may God have mercy and forgive" (Paphino 20). This is how they used a tradition specific gendered role to overcome tribal differences, created by the masculine decision making sphere, the political- public sphere. Much like the Naga Women's Union, the Angami Women's Organization too holds units in different villages to include women from all spheres and along with peace building work they also "hold leadership, run administration, to share and exercise their power" as part of exerting agency in the region (Paphino 20).

The women peace-makers in this region deal with three kinds of violence in their course of work—the conflict between the armed forces and the underground forces, the factional violence amongst the underground rebels and the ethnic violence resulting from territorial dispute. Women, have taken a prominent position in the struggles for peace and justice in this region through different means of actions and strategies—by acting as shields to save their communities, through negotiations with the armed forces and taking up the role of mediators during the ethnic clashes (Manchanda, “Building Peace: What Differences Do Women Make?” 113). In the above-mentioned example, it was observed how Angami women had successfully quieted down a violent situation between two tribes, going beyond ethnic identity. There are multiple examples of women acting as shields and barriers to save their communities from brutalities of the forces as well. As Manchanda notes in “Women’s Agency in Peacebuilding”, throughout the histories of peace movements in South Asia, whether in Nagaland, Nepal, Kashmir, or Sri Lanka, there is a common thread of women spontaneously coming forward to shield their community to save their ““sons” from being taken” (Manchanda 4741)

The Shirui siege of 2009 is probable one of the best examples of this strategy. The 17<sup>th</sup> Assam rifles had besieged the village of Shirui in the Ukhrul district, covering around a NSCN (IM) camp, which the group claimed to a designated camp, hence refusing to budge (Zimik 120). As the armed forces urged the rebels to surrender, they too responded with threats of violent retaliation, and caught between two belligerent parties, the life of common villagers was endangered. In such circumstances when the forces were about to engage in warfare with the rebels, the women of the village took it upon themselves to save their community from the forthcoming bloodshed, by holding a vigil around the camp to avoid a showdown. More than 2000 women from Shirui as well as neighbouring villages came together to make a human barrier between the two hostile groups praying and singing hymns to appeal to both sides for peace (Banerjee and Dey 18). They maintained the vigil round the clock and even forsook their household duties “their homes and children”, thought to be the most significant responsibility of a traditional Naga woman (Zimik 120) This feat reveals how Naga women, through their traditional peace building scopes, can find a way to step beyond the private domain of the family and partake in (and positively influence) the masculinised sphere of military operations. As a result of their effort, the siege finally

concluded on 9<sup>th</sup> February, 2009 without the brutality that was feared. There are several such events to be found in the area that demonstrate the agency women can exercise through the various methods they adopt for conflict prevention and the peace-building process. Whereas this event took place in the early 2000s, another such incident is mentioned by Dolly Kikon in her monograph “Life and Dignity”, from the 1950s in which her grandmother had participated. This encounter had taken place in the Tsungiki village of Wokha district in Nagaland. Kikon refers to this period as the “darkest” in the Indo-Naga conflict, and even then women were the ones who resisted the armed forces by keeping vigil night after night (Kikon 73). They used songs as a way of voicing their rage and despair but did not leave the vigil lest their community is brutalised (Kikon 74). This is how values of empathy and sisterhood have been employed time and again by the Naga women to active take up the role of the protector of their communities.

All these examples also illustrate how the Naga women have never confined themselves to the role of disempowered bystanders caught between two forces of patriarchy. Studying women’s efforts in peace politics becomes imperative, since by analysing Indian peace building situations (especially in conflict zones like the north-eastern part of this country), one can gather valuable insights into women’s engagement in the peace-making process in settings without global interventions. This will further offer opportunities to reflect upon the socio-political frameworks governing the “liberal peacebuilding paradigm” of multilateral organizations and, in particular, the utilization of women’s agency as a central indicator of democratic state-building process (Kolás 43). To acquire a deeper understanding of the tribulations, political agency and objectives of these women peacemakers here, it is imperative to analyse the goals and strategies of these women’s organizations, responding to conflict. While doing so it has to be remembered that the complex dynamics of gender are deeply entwined with other power structures and their forces at work, like the tribal fraternities, armed groups, village boards, and the networks and systems of clans and families. Yet with these day-to-day negotiations of power, it is in the arena of politics of peace that women here have been able to negotiate a space for agency and reform.

Naga women, who traditionally had no place in the decision-making sphere were now emerging as key players in the sphere of peace politics through the work they

put in for years at the state as well as village level. And thus, they were also challenging their gender-based exclusion from the public sphere whether it be traditional and tribal or the modern one. Since the 1997 ceasefire agreement twenty-four years have passed. As Manchanda and Bose point out twenty-four years of ceasefire prompted the development of an emerging “new middle class” of educated and professional individuals—both men and women (52). This social group that was small but still influential is broadening the public sphere of the Nagas and reshaping its values, social or political. In the midst of the social upheaval, a new generation of skilled and informed, professional indigenous women have arisen (many with connections to women’s movements, national or overseas), in the quest of women’s equal rights as citizens. Thus, this middle space which evolved out the ceasefire, has opened up new scopes for gender relations in the Naga society, giving women opportunities that they lacked earlier. In order to achieve a better understanding of the political agency of Naga women peacemakers, it is essential to explore the objectives and strategies of some of these organizations. However, before going into a discussion on the action of these women’s peace groups, it is important to take a look at how the scholars and activists from this region as well as those who have studied the Indo-Naga peace process, have defined the very notion of peace.

It is imperative to take into account indigenous cultural methods and frameworks surrounding the idea of peace, to gain an understanding of how peace building is developed in the Naga society. Hence it is necessary to carry out a systematic analysis of the perceptions and practices of peace in this society. In the traditional Naga tribal societies, one could find the simultaneous presence of four kinds of wars (“declared war”, “war of challenge”, “war of hostage” and “secret war”), and two kinds of peace process – positive and negative peace (Shimray 36). In case of a dispute it was essential to work out the matter soon as it was possible, not only to keep things stable and peaceful within the community, but also in view of the external threats that posed a constant danger to any village. Also, when there was a possibility of attack a force had to keep prepared to safeguard the lives of villagers and preserve internal peace. The concept of “negative peace”, thus, comes from the idea that peace can only prevail when there is an absence of violence (*ibid.*).

However, the traditional tribal concept of peace also included another kind of peace building process, which Shimray refers to as “positive peace”—for which every conceivable step was taken for the “wellbeing of every citizen” in their daily lives, and not only during the times of war (ibid.). The concept of positive peace was also inclusive of the idea that to maintain holistic peace it is important to keep a cordial relation with the neighbouring villages as well. Thus, peace was more of a communitarian effort than just a matter of transitory conflict resolution. The welfare of the villagers was a responsibility of the leaders who took care of law and order and administrative work as part of the process. *Morungs*, the activity centre for the male youth of the village, also worked as “peace education centres” where young men were taught these egalitarian values through the use of folk tales, songs and history— “to a great extent morungs helped villagers regard themselves as members of a bigger family” (Shimray 37).

The core philosophy of the tribal world-view as well as the basic motivation of the people, was to keep the community at peace and in harmony. Their administrative and law and order systems were thus directed towards the idea of positive peace. Even religious events were tied to this idea of peaceful coexistence, through the organization of community feasts and festivals (ibid.). Peace was hence understood as a continuous process in the traditional society, not just an isolated event that would be terminated after a certain point of time. This idea of seeing peace as a continuous process has also been stressed upon by contemporary scholars studying the Indo-Naga peace process. Triveni Goswami talks about “sustainable peace” in this context, which does not only indicate a mere absence of violence but also the development of an atmosphere that promotes constructive peace making through continuous communitarian efforts (Goswami 130).

Anuradha Dutta believes that the concept of positive peace is particularly relevant for the states of India’s northeast, including Nagaland, where systemic violence has persisted over generations. For her, the idea of positive peace does not only connote the elimination of conflict but also a constructive and innovative method of creating well integrated communities (xiv). She defines positive peace as a method that includes “social justice, gender equity, active co-existence, economic equality and ecological security”, and this method of peace building is especially necessary for a place like

Nagaland where “cultural and structural” violence has continued for decades (xxvi). Hence peace making initiatives should also engage in social change working towards positive social as well as cultural goals, to sustain the condition of peace. It should be seen as a process of formation of an “ethical community” founded on the ideals of all its members— “including women, men, children and the environment” (Dutta xix).

This calls for economic as well as social developments without any discrimination made on the basis of ethnicity, religion or gender. As discussed before, Shimray had pointed out how in the traditional Naga society keeping an amicable relationship with other villages and clans was part of the positive peace building process. Tangkhul Naga journalist and politician Valley Rose, opines that a similar attitude should be adopted in the contemporary context of peace building, especially in the backdrop of ethnic violence— “So, if we really want to be peacemakers, if we really want to be a peaceful lot, I think it must begin with you and me. Let us stop talking against ‘the other person’, let him/ her express his/ her view. Let us listen and accept” (Rose 191). Rose, hence, appeals for a view that is empathetic as well as socially aware, and at the same time goes beyond the ethno-national binary created by the masculine powers in the public- political sphere.

Peace building is thus recognised as a process that requires systematic transformation, not a discrete event that is complete in itself. Therefore, if peace needs to be perceived as a concept that goes beyond mere elimination of armed violence, it needs to be founded upon a politics of inclusivity and equality. Neidonuo Angami, one of the founders of the Naga Mothers’ Association describes the process of peace building as a constant endeavour— “Peace is always in the making. It is not an event. There is no success in peace making. It is always in the making” (qtd. in Manchanda 109). Rita Manchanda also argues that building peace is a “plural process” that need to be cultivated “not only at the top, but at multiple levels with various stakeholders” (Manchanda 116). This idea of political inclusivity has reflected strongly in the activity of the Naga women’s peace building organizations. The peace building mechanisms of these women’s organizations emphasise the idea of an inclusive approach that transcends factional divisions.



In his study of the Indo-Naga peace process, *Conflict and Peace in India's Northeast*, Samir Kumar Das classifies the civil society of northeast India into four basic categories. The first category is termed the “civic representatives” referring to those organisations that appear to serve an ethnic minority and therefore participate in conflicts concerning the community; Das uses the example of Naga Hoho or Tatar Hoho to illustrate this group (42). Then there are “popular initiatives” – “unorganized” or “loosely organized” initiatives which have emerged as a power separate from the rebels as well as the state (50). As an example, from Nagaland, Das cites the unorganized voluntary protests that rose from the common people, led by Ao Senso Telongjem (the Ao traditional council) against the rebel group’s attack on Dr Maong Wati, a prominent Naga philanthropist, in September of 2004 (51). They demanded the state to take more responsibility for the law-and-order condition of their society, asking for immediate arrest of the assailants. The third— whom Das calls the “peace groups”—are organisations which have been specifically formed to plan for peace dialogues between two or more warring sides, to create specifics of truce and thus, facilitate the process of peace accords (46). He cites the example of the Peace Mission (PM), PCG and Naga People’s Convention in the context. He does not include groups like the Naga Mothers’ Association or Naga Women’s Union into this category, since he thinks, although the main challenge for the peace groups is to be viewed as independent by both the conflicting sides, these groups should also not become so autonomous as to become “unacceptable” for the conflicting parties (4). He also argues, while members of these groups were renowned representatives in civil society, they seldom got united in a true sense and hence lacked any “organic links” with the community (ibid.). Das uses the example of PM and PCG in this context. Groups that were created “expressly for the purpose reducing the distance between warring parties” (3). Das thinks that because of this nature of their creation they are not able to “survive” the “failed peace attempts” as the end of peace talks also results in their disintegration. Explaining the shortcoming of these organizations, Das comments—

Civil society organizations like the PM or the PCG might have played an effective role in the official process had they been able to develop some kind of synergy with the unofficial peace processes. PM was considered too autonomous to be acceptable to the conflicting parties, and the PCG failed to envisage the many constituencies and concerns within society (4)

Whereas groups like NMA and NWU or even the Meria Paibis succeed in this context as they “work mainly as large conglomerates of the locally based bodies representing the interests of respective villages, localities, and neighborhoods” (ibid.). Their “living within the immediate society” helps them create a more intimate and immediate bond with their community whereas civil society groups such as PM or PCG that work at macro-level may be seen as “too autonomous for the conflicting parties” to be accepted as a mediator (ibid.).

The final category is that of the “bridge builders”, these are organisations that actively contribute to creating bridges at the local level so that multiple communities can live together (S. K. Das 48). They perform a key function in resisting widespread hostilities among multiple communities. Like the civic representatives, these groups too share an intrinsic organic relation with an ethnic community. But at the same time unlike the civic representatives, they operate in a manner that includes transcending ethno-national boundaries in order to maintain peaceful coexistence and avoid an unbridled ethnic war. Their strategies of creating peace exhibit the intent of an inclusive politics that surpasses fractional divides—as the Naga women exclaim “We have no factions” (Manchanda 117). The best example of such solidarity which cuts across ethnic boundaries was shown by the Naga Women’s Union during the Naga Kuki clashes that took place in the 1990s. When lawlessness and fanaticism got unleashed in the form of ethnic cleansing, the Naga Women’s Union got together with the Kuki Women’s Union, going beyond their ethnic identity and played a crucial part as mediators to put an end to the violence and bloodshed (Chinnu 59). Thus, through solidarity, these women practice the politics of inclusion with success and at the same time challenge the male-dominated political sphere of ethno-nationalism and the violence related to it. It has to be noted in this context that women, who are viewed as symbolic bearers of community identity and culture, and who are victimised for this stereotypical subjectification during a time of conflict, are paradoxically the ones who can transcend community barriers and create new horizons of solidarity.

This position of Naga women (Sukalpa Bhattacharya calls it “radical” as well as “non-conformist”, citing its departure from the formal stance taken by male dominated organizations), appeals to all the parties engaged in the conflict, giving the women an effective form of authority (Bhattacharya 137). This is reflected in the

recognition these women have garnered from the formal sphere of peace politics albeit women having no voice in traditional policymaking system. Gina Shangkham, a founding member of the Naga Women's Union, was appointed the General Secretary for the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights, one of the most important organizations working for the Nagas. The Naga People's Movement for Human Rights is the first democratic rights organisation of the Nagas, mostly through whose efforts, did the citizens in other areas of the nation learn of the systemic suppression of basic rights happening in this region (Haksar 2201). Along with Shangkham, Grace Satsang, another noted member of the Naga Women's Union and Khesheli Chishi from Naga Mothers' Association were both part of the Forum for Naga Reconciliation, a platform of seminal importance that enjoys the support of 39 Naga frontal organizations including the extremely influential religious institutions, the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) as well as the Council of Naga Baptist Churches (CNBC) (Manchanda and Bose 55).

In the states situated at the northeastern part of India, one can find a rich legacy of women's organizations, at the frontline of protests against state militarization, practising conflict resolution and protecting civil liberties. However, the Naga women's journey stands apart remarkably as it illustrates the nature and shortcomings of the politics of peace process by promoting and strengthening the rights of women. The politics of the Naga Women's Union (henceforth referred to as NWU) and the Naga Mothers' Association (henceforth referred to as NMA) serve as a case in point. The NWU is a mass-based women's organisation which has worked for decades towards the social and political rights of women in this region. The NWU was established in October of 1994, when a number of Naga women, including Grace Satsang, Valley Rose and Gina Shangkham decided to form a common organisation to discuss and demand for the rights of Naga women (Shangkham 8). They had felt that the Naga women having separate tribal organisations at different levels, should be integrated within one union so they could have a better understanding of the issues of systemic violence faced by Naga women in diverse tribes and villages (Satsang 192). Their strategy of highlighting the interconnection of diverse contexts of oppression is particularly important when discussing identity politics related concepts. Some critics of identity politics argue that its flaw is not that it fails to transcend diversity but that it typically flattens intragroup differences. Considering that many women's experiences

of violence are influenced by other dimensions of their identities, such as race, caste and class, the elision of difference in identity politics is problematic in the context of violence against women. Crenshaw notes in this context:

In the context of violence against women this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups, another problem of identity politics that bears on efforts to politicize violence against women (1244)

Therefore, it becomes essential to politicise the experiences of women by recognising the sites where several systems of oppression connect with varied manifestations of violence against women. But more importantly, for NWU this was important to represent everyone equally on a common forum with the call for equal rights. The NWU comprises of 16 tribes and Hoho units and uses their platform for every Naga woman to voice her issues (Shangkham 9). The NWU draws its strength from these smaller village level organisations and thus the grassroots level tribal women's groups can also influence the activities of the apex bodies in the Naga society.

As NWU founder Gina Shangkham and P. A. Theko mention in their article "Naga Women in Peace Process", in NWU, women from each tribal organisation might share their views and thoughts which they had in turn, obtained from their grassroots village units (125). In the official website of the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs the motto of the NWU is summed up in the following lines:

Naga Women's Union stands for the rights and dignity of women, for the cause of Nagas in general and to strive towards strengthening the Naga unity and also provides a common platform for gender equality, advocating for peace, human rights and capacity building through trainings, workshops, advocacy, networking and lobbying. ("Naga Women's Union")

Thus, the NWU have also committed to campaign for democratic governance and women's rights alongside peace building—following the idea of positive peace, as

discussed earlier in the chapter. At the same time, they did not refrain from criticising the underground rebel groups as well as the discriminatory customary practices of their communities. Consequently, they have successfully produced a space for themselves to challenge the very framework of the gender bias surrounding them, through their work on gender relations. These women also did not shy away from calling out men from the community when needed, as one of the founders of NWU, Grace Satsang asserts—“The Naga women are very vocal about the Naga men... especially when they go for murder and rape” (193). Therefore, it can be surmised that they are quite actively critical about their own communities when it comes to violence against women, along with the armed forces. And much like the ethnic solidarity that underline the activities of NWU or NMA, a hand of solidarity has also been extended towards the non-Naga women of the region. Satsang comments – “when such cases happen to the non-Nagas, we try to see that justice is delivered to the victims especially to minorities living in our own area” (ibid.).

They vigorously promote ideas and demands related to women’s rights from their platform, which clearly expresses the views of the representatives of the organization. The resolutions from NWU’s General Assembly, proclaimed the rights of women to inheritance, marriage and divorce, and most importantly, representation in elected bodies and public institutions, including the United Naga Council’s Naga Apex body from the 1990s (Manchanda and Kakran 71). Their resolution also argued that there was nothing in the Naga customary laws that prevented the women from entering the public political sphere, and hence they demanded the inclusion of women in local village councils as well the United Naga Council. Structurally the NUW operate more formally than NMA, as an organization with their own constitution and explicitly stated framework and guidelines. They also consistently conduct more conventions and publish studies and reports regularly as well (S. K. Das 48). Together with the NMA, the NWU has also been able to emerge as one of the most prominent pan-Naga social organizations, making an extensive impact on the Naga public sphere. Following the *pukrelia* tradition they have come up as important actors in the social and political world of the peace process.

In the traditional society it was the *pukrelia*’s responsibility to travel up and down between two villages to mediate between them when warlike conditions arose. During the time of head hunting the men of the village were at constant risk of an attack

from the enemy village, particularly if there was a dispute going on between the villages (Paphino 19). In that sense, they were not really free to roam around from one village to the other. However, for a woman especially if she was considered to be the *pukrelia*, this travel from village to village was much easier. She had the right to transcend any village boundary as she willed, as she was venerated as a mediator- figure who spreads positive news and constructs new connections between villages and communities (Paphino 19; Shimray 43).

In contemporary times, groups like the NWU have taken up that role as they travel for miles, sometimes by foot, to meet different factions to hold dialogues with them and diminish the violence and bloodshed. Much like the NMA, the most crucial task of the NWU is to keep the channels of dialogue open between the opposing factions and to expand the reach of the ceasefire to include the factions left out of the process. As Grace Satsang asserts— “we (the Naga Women’s Union members) go and meet the underground members, members belonging to not any one particular faction but all factions” (Satsang 194). Not only do they work with the factions of the Naga underground groups (namely the NSCN), they hold dialogues with rebels from the Meitei community as well. Satsang recounts a telephonic conversation she had had with one such Meitei rebel leader, who praised the Naga women for coming down to hold a dialog and criticised the Meitei women for not doing the same. Instead of supporting his anti-Meitei views Satsang criticised the leader for not being able to create the space the Meitei women would need for such a communication to take place—

I told him, “Why not? Maybe you have not given them the space, the space where we can come over to meet our leaders; maybe you have not created the space for your Meitei women. If that be the case, create that space. I think and I am sure they will come.” (Satsang 195)

Here Satsang is talking about that *space* where a woman can freely voice her opinions and views about the socio-political situation without being held back as a passive subject inside the private sphere of her home. For the production of this space, which is nestled in the public political sphere, the prejudiced social systems and customs have to be annulled.

These women are thus attempting to carve out a space for themselves in the decision-making sphere that was otherwise inaccessible for them. If peace politics has to be an inclusive process, as discussed before, then inclusion of women in the public political sphere or the decision making sphere is a necessity. And thus, through their peace building efforts groups like the NWU, have effectively fashioned their own counterpublic where they can criticise the government, the rebels as well as the patriarchal constructs in their communities, and actually be heard. Since the politics of peace that groups like NWU pursues are essentially based on contributing to building connections and keeping channels for communication open between the warring sides, their peace politics is inherently inclusive.

At the same time, by criticising the social issues around them they also aim for a holistic growth of their community instead of only focussing on conflict resolution. Therefore, their method of peace building essentially aligns with the idea of positive peace that was practised in the traditional Naga societies during the pre-colonial days. Shimreingam L. Shimray thinks that the attempts put up by the Naga society (be it religious, military or that of the civil society) have largely failed to garner any desired results, except for temporary reduction of violence. He opines that this has happened because they have failed to integrate the cultural and traditional mind-set of the Naga people—all Naga people, including Naga women (33). He also thinks that the discriminatory behaviour meted out to Naga women has created a “divided culture”, and to overcome this situation it is mandatory to accommodate the opinions and voices of women (Shimray 43). As observed through the analyses of the roles of *pukrelia* or *demi*, considering women as peacemakers is not an alien idea to the traditional tribal society. Shimray urges the contemporary Naga society to revisit those ideas and strengthen the position of women, a concept that should not be seen as a threat to the traditions of Naga society, but rather a return to them<sup>x</sup> (ibid.).

Both NMA and NWU have emerged, from village-based grassroots associations to apex organisations in the context of Naga polity. The two groups have worked in collaboration for long. Following the announcement of the ceasefire in 1997, NWU, along with representatives from the NMA, reached out to the NSCN(IM) and NSCN(K), the rival factions, to appeal to them and provide a safe pace for dialogue (S. K. Das 48). In 1999, four members from these two organisations had together trekked across the

Myanmar borders to hold informal negotiations between the senior leaders of the rival factions and was commended as reliable interlocutors by both the factions (Manchanda and Kakran 73). However the main difference between these sister organizations, is that the NWU's policies were never couched in 'motherhood politics' that the NMA has conspicuously practiced from beginning. The following section of the chapter will address how this method of motherhood politics has helped and hindered the NMA's socio-political aspirations and the process of forming the counterpublic, in contemporary Nagaland.

### **3.iv Maternal Frame and the Naga Mothers' Association**

The NMA was founded on January 14, 1984, in the city of Kohima as a voluntary group, with the aim of eliminating all sorts of social problems that have been plaguing the Naga communities. Their membership is open to all Naga women transcending tribal boundaries in the Naga society. The main objective of the NMA is "combating all social evils confronting the society at that time in various forms, to provide a common platform for women's issues and interests and to uphold the dignity of motherhood" (qtd. In S. K. Das 47). Neidonuo Angami, popularly known as the "mother of peace" in Nagaland, served as the General Secretary of the organization from 1984 to 1994 (Patra and Manna 928). Their primary goal was to act as a medium of communication to eliminate injustice and oppression that infested their society.

Simultaneously, they also worked towards facilitating significant involvement of women in the public-political realm to preserve a peaceful coexistence. They do not have any set structure of policies and regulations like the NWU. In practice the NMA still work through indigenous women's organizations that work at the grassroots level. Although they began as a group primarily concerned with social issues like drugs and alcohol abuse, they eventually redefined themselves as one of the primary stakeholders in the peace process through decades of social activism, much like other women's groups of the region, including the Meira Paibis of Manipur. In this process the NMA has also acquired the ability to transform the power they exerted on a local level, into formal authority in the otherwise masculine domain of Naga public-political sphere. The transition is also reflected in their work culture as well as line of thinking. It is made especially clear by the opposing response of the organization towards two Naga women professionals belonging to two separate generations at a gap of two decades:



The journalist Monalisa Changkija, back from University in the 1980s, declined to join NMA, alienated from its activities and functioning style. Two decades later, Professor Rosemary Dzuvichu is a consultant with NMA, and steering the campaign of an expanding generation of educated, professional tribal women challenging women's exclusion in decision making and customary law arbitration practices that reinforce violence against women in a social context of deep militarisation and impunity. (Manchanda and Kakran 66)

The transition came to them in 1994, when the NMA morphed into a collective that was inclined to get involved into peace building practices transcending their identity as a social activist group. The same year, they also launched an enquiry into the brutal assassination of several Naga citizens and sent a memorandum to the National Human Rights commission in connection to the incident. They have also vehemently opposed the imposition of AFSPA in Nagaland like other organizations like the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPHMR) or the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR). Drawing inspiration from their social activism they subscribe to the idea of positive peace in their mode of politics. They believe that until the roots of these societal issues are sufficiently handled (which in a conflict zone is quite perceptibly the systemic violence unleashed upon the subject), cases of drugs or alcohol abuse are likely to intensify.

Three consecutively elected presidents of the NMA— Sano Vamuzo, Neidonuo Angami and Khesilie Chisi—have traced the roots of the social issues in the political problem of conflict and violence, plaguing the Naga society (S. K. Das 48). In a way, it was the rising the factional violence of the 1980s and 1990s that forced groups like the NMA, who had erstwhile only engaged in social activism, into the arena of peace politics. This transformation of the NMA from their social welfare oriented actions to peace activism was a significant developmental phase, which strategically pushed them into the turf of activism for women's civil and legal rights as well. Drawing strength from the traditionally endorsed role of the peacemaker, the group gradually established themselves as a major stakeholder in the peace politics and thus took a direct entry to

the public political sphere of decision making activities, a realm not previously accessible to them.

In this way, much like the NWU, the NMA also used the traditionally and socially sanctioned role of the peacemaker to enter a realm that tradition itself had barred them from. Their method is especially effective as they made also made use of another socially sanctioned role, that of the mother. This is a role that does not pose a challenge to the conventional system of their society, and hence can be easily accepted by the society in general. When the fratricidal violence spiralled out of control during the 1990s the NMA had to take up the stance of the traditional *pukrelia* and call for peace through their action to stop the incessant bloodshed. In those days unclaimed bodies of young men would often be found in the morning, strewn across the markets and roads. The NMA took initiative to honour the dead, and perform the last rites of these unknown young men by wrapping the bodies with traditional shawls, a conventional Naga ritual of honouring the departed. (Vamuzo 17). The NMA emblem is fraught with symbolic significance. It is a depiction of a human eye which is shedding tears of blood. It carries with it a four-word message as well— ‘shed no more blood’. In the symbolic crying eye of Naga motherhood one may find a gaze of resistance. It is a gaze that stares back at the masculinized space of conflict which willfully keeps women out of it. Thus through the emblem itself they put up a critique of the volatile space which seems to have lost its direction in the maze of violence (Ghosh 1754).

Manchanda and Kakran find a contemporary analogy of the *pukrelia* tradition in the “apocryphal story” of Neidonuo Angami, who was then the president of NMA, interceding between two warring factions in the Phek district of Nagaland and asserting “Listen to your mother before you kill your brother” (70). They were trying to reach out to the factions through the role of the mother thus creating an immediate bond with them. Motherhood has become the one of most significant metaphor of women’s politics in this region today, especially because the revered status a mother enjoys in a traditional society as found in the Naga tribes. The use of the motherhood trope is not new to colonial and post-colonial politics of South Asian countries including India. During the British rule the figure of the “Mother Goddess” had emerged as a synecdochic symbol of the “motherland”; in effect, as a ground for the nationalist anti-colonial politics (Bagchi 51). However, the use of the motherhood trope has taken a

new significance in the post- colonial, conflict ridden societies. In these societies Women have frequently used the framework of motherhood to express their anger, anguish as well as demands out in the public space. A surge can be noted in the metaphoric importance that the idea of motherhood in the context of women's movement has gained in the recent years with examples from around the world that came into being since the later decades of the 1900s. Be it the Co-Madres in El Salvador, Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina or the Mother's Front of Sri Lanka, that came into existence in the 1970-80s, when violence had wreaked havoc in their part of the world these groups consisting of mothers played a major role in fostering the peace agenda in the region<sup>xi</sup>.

Motherhood has often been used as a space for protest. During the civil war in Sri Lanka, as the state let loose extreme forms of brutality upon its peoples, hundreds of young individuals in the nationalist youth organisation vanished or were executed. These events forced women to organize and form the Mothers' Front, a grassroots group with more than 25,000 women joining as members. As Maithreyi Krishnaraj writes, using the "emotive vocabulary of motherhood" these women challenged the State as they demanded an environment where they "can raise our sons to manhood, have our husbands with us and lead normal lives" (Krishnaraj 24). A similar method was also adopted by the mothers of Manipur, Meira Paibis when they decided to protest the sexual assault and brutal murder of Thangjam Manorama, in 2004. These mothers have successfully utilized the traditional concept of motherhood to challenge the violence perpetrated by the state. They show that although the patriarchal state and society dictate the mother to raise their children in a nurturing ambience that very state goes against that dictum when it perpetrates violence and creates an unstable and hostile environment.

However, the NMA has not only used motherhood as a site of protest, they have also used it to actively participate in the peace politics and emerged as important stakeholders in the official peace process. Maternal obligations are often used as an excuse to remove a woman from participatory position in the public sphere, and in extension the decision making sphere. Consequently, although the idea of motherhood has been glorified in the nation building processes, it has only been done without any actual form of empowerment. However, the NMA made use of the very private sphere

that a mother is relegated into, in order to take an entry point into the politics of peace. They placed their engagement into the public sphere as an expansion of their conventional roles relegated to the private sphere—through, what Manchanda and Karan termed the “kitchen politics” (71). They would invite the leaders of the underground groups to their own homes, their kitchen “the heart” of a Naga household for a warm meal and speak to them as mothers to an “errant son”— “Who are you fighting for? Not for the 50- 70 of you, but for us, not for your today but for our tomorrow” (ibid.). And this shows the potential of the site of motherhood which, although intricately confined to the private domain, also contains “openings” that break down the barrier between the public and the private (Bagchi xxiv).

This is the reason Jashodhara Bagchi locates the concept of motherhood into the cusp of the private and public sphere—“In this cusp, of course, falls motherhood, constructed as an extremely private experience that is made surreptitiously to seem public without an overt acknowledgement of its deep signification in the public domain” (Bagchi xxv). Therefore, it can be surmised that the mere reality of motherhood does not make women disempowered. It is the social construction around the concept of motherhood which makes them susceptible to vulnerability as the gendering process of motherhood is enmeshed into the multidimensional means of patriarchy (Krishnaraj 22). In the process of emancipating the concept of motherhood from these gendering processes, the NMA has used their platform not only for protest or peace politics but also for demanding women’s political rights in the Naga society. However, this has been a long drawn process. During the early years of the ceasefire process, from 1997 to 2003, the NMA had mostly held back from commenting upon any political agenda, which could also be read as a strategic position to gain trust from all parties. But, since the ceasefire, the younger generation of Naga women have walked away from the conformist stance of the original founders. Moving away from the politics of the earlier presidents such as Sanu Vamuzo (whose stance was mostly that of a mother protesting against peddlars who had “wasted” their children), the NMA has emerged as an organization, run by accomplished women who are recasting Naga women’s agency as a more assertive “rights-based” politics (Manchanda and Kakran79).

In a highly patriarchal society, women have to steer and negotiate their ways through the prescribed gender roles to assert their identity. What they need is a strategic

position that will simultaneously be approved by the patriarchal communities and help them undermine that very patriarchal oppression of their subjecthood. Motherhood can be one such useful strategic position, as it endows women with a context for their everyday micropolitics—especially because of the hallowed status the notion of “motherhood” enjoys in traditional societies like the tribal ones in Nagaland. Banerjee and Dey find in this image of “motherhood” a chance to challenge the “masculinist discourse of nationhood” (16). The NMA’s success lies in the fact that it was able to keep the channels of communication open between warring factions by using the space for “mother’s negotiation,” as Manchanda and Kakran termed it: “They would appeal to the armed factions by inviting them to their kitchens to discuss prospects of peace over a home-cooked meal” (71).

Their position as mothers was thus turned into a public role, with the aid of the private space. Groups such as the NMA have effectively translated their traditional roles as mothers into roles as social and political agents. This strategic use of the sexed subject position has helped them to garner an entry point to the masculinized discourse of conflict. Samir Kumar Das, in his essay “Ethnicity and Democracy Meet When Mothers Protest,” talks about this surge in the metaphoric importance that the idea of motherhood has gained in the context of women’s movements in recent years, citing examples from movements around the world from the last decades of the 20th century onward (which have already been cited in this chapter). Das calls this mode of activism that centers on the metaphor of motherhood “the maternal frame” (57). However, Banerjee and Dey point out that the image of motherhood can also become a problematic one, as this stance is sometimes traced back to the apparently innate qualities of women as mothers “where ‘motherhood’ is seen as a performative; a product” (16). The strategy of “motherhood politics” might then be seen as a hindrance for women in their attempts to assert their right to be a part of the formal decision-making sphere. That inference may not be wholly incorrect, especially in light of the 2017 riots against the government’s decision to implement a provision that reserves 33% of spots in the Urban Local Body election for women. However, as discussed earlier in the chapter the NMA has long begun using their platform as a site to demand women’s rights hence, it would be wrong to conjecture that by playing a tradition-specific role, women remain bound by the gender-biased rules that perpetuate patriarchy.

One must also remember that in the context of a patriarchal tribal society that still practices a few customary laws that are discriminatory toward women, motherhood is one of the few modes of women's politics available in the region—one of the few modes through which women often articulate and organize their democratic resistance. As Das comments, “their invocation of motherhood as a metaphor should not be seen as a continuation and reproduction of their traditional role but more as a political strategy” (62). This politicization of a tradition-specific role helps them attain an entry point into the world of political struggle, in which they can organize and assert themselves. In a society where democracy has been rigorously undermined and patriarchy has confined women to their tradition approved gender stereotypes, this politicization of motherhood gives them a chance to venture into previously unfamiliar territories. Das quotes Sara Ruddick in this context, who says “in the name of womanly duties that they have assumed and that their communities expect of them, they resist” (70). Malathi de Alwis, too, points out how these women unveil the inherent contradiction between the states’ “rhetoric” and “practices” by revealing the states’ policies as “denying women opportunities for mothering,” and they do this by taking this stance of motherhood, which is essentially a “state defined role” (qtd. in Banerjee and Dey 16).

In the context of this politicization of motherhood, Das distinguishes between “pure motherhood” and “universal motherhood.” He describes pure motherhood as a paradigm that “deliberately avoids any kind of political commitment” and “insists only on some form of emotional communion with their children ‘long absent’, ‘disappeared’. . . irrespective of the political cause they have been fighting for” (58). In this scenario, the children’s particular political movements and struggles lose importance in the face of the mother’s biological and emotional attachment to her child. Although Das infers that “in political terms such actions are of little value” (59), it cannot be denied that through their personal movements, propelled by their *personal* grief, the paradigm of pure motherhood is at times able to question the very legitimacy of these armed movements—as it did in June 2002, when the families of 210 United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) militants submitted a petition to the Assam Human Rights Commission accusing the militant organization’s commander in chief of coercing their children into unlawful activities. In opposition to this suffering of “pure” mother, who

is bereft of political anchorage, stands the paradigm of universal motherhood. The difference between “pure motherhood” and the politics of the “Maternal Frame” may be perceived through the notion that “pure motherhood” is characterized by the pain and anxiety of losing one’s children. In this paradigm, mothers are continually bound by the sense of longing for their children.

The suffering mother is therefore largely isolated from the public, walled inside the bubble of her own grief. Thus, Pure Motherhood is without any political mooring; as Das writes, mothers under this paradigm are perpetually waiting for the “moment of reunion” (59). The NMA has turned the concept of pure motherhood (which bears patriarchal implications with it) on its head by disentangling the site of motherhood from any specified mother–child relation, and thus decontextualizing it. Through this strategy, they liberate the notion of motherhood from an exclusively emotional context that is apolitical in nature. The NMA’s concern for all victims, regardless of their ethnicity, indicates the transcendence of ethnic boundaries. The organization’s work with the Kuki Mothers’ Association during the Kuki–Naga clashes of 1992 demonstrates its commitment to forming solidarity with women from other ethnicities and going beyond the discourse of ethnic politics, which was created inside the narrative of the male-dominated public-political sphere.

Thus, this particular concept of motherhood is also freed from the specific context of a biological mother–child relation. As Das mentions, the metaphor of motherhood in circulation in Nagaland “seems to have consciously stayed away from the paradigm of ‘pure motherhood’” (59). The NMA women have successfully accomplished this by attaching the idea of “mother” to the justness of the cause that their children are fighting for instead of to specific children and by organizing themselves around the cause. In doing so, these women are able to reconstitute themselves as equal and democratic subjects. It is their commitment to the cause of resistance, rather than their personal bonds, which simultaneously makes their use of the site of motherhood political and—critically—connects ideas of democracy to both ethnic identity politics and gender politics. In this way, they are able to rise above their isolated grief and transition from being “individual mothers” to becoming “social mothers.” Sukalpa Bhatattacharjee in “State, Insurgency and (Wo)man’s Human Rights,” notes that “it is a delicate mixture of the impersonal communitarian entity with the

personal female ‘self’, almost a two dimensional matrix” (135). But because the NMA mothers are also dissenters, the concept of motherhood is further problematized.

These are mothers who have politicized their motherhood and gained valid entry into the male-dominated sphere of conflict from which women are otherwise forbidden. The universal or social mother is not only an isolated sufferer; freed from the specific context of the biological mother–child relation, she becomes an agent of political resistance. Her ability to merge heterogeneous sites helps her rise above petty ethnic differences. As Das observes, the social or universal motherhood is very “unlike the traditional motherhood that remains confined to the four walls of the particular family, clan, or community” (64). The universal mother is able to rise above clan identity and make a space where an open dialogue is possible with mothers from outside her own community, thus bridging the gap that the ethnicity-based politics of the insurgents has only seemed to widen.

It is their ability to rise as social mothers that has enabled groups such as the NMA to carryout successful negotiations between the warring factions of different tribes within the Naga community, as well as between the Naga and Kuki communities during the 1990s. Their success lies in the fact that they have been able to keep channels of dialogue open among warring factions. The metaphor of motherhood in circulation in this region today is thus based on the theme of solidarity. Motherhood has become the most significant metaphor in women’s politics in Nagaland today, especially due to the revered status a mother enjoys in traditional societies in India. By politicizing this trope, Naga women make sure that, at some level, their struggle also enlists community and family support, so as to not completely alienate the women’s movement from community movements. At times, community movements can even aid the women’s struggle, especially when both parties work against the State and the State-produced patriarchy.

This peace-making role is also indoctrinated through Naga customary laws as seen through the analysis of the role of *pukrelia* or *demi*. Thus, groups such as the NMA have held up traditional roles of women, grounded in the very customary laws of their communities, to strengthen their position. Bhattacharjee notes that the symbolic authority of motherhood is more operative than both the authority of the traditional



society and that of State power, especially because “both resist any subversion of the symbolic authority of the mother because neither can manipulate it” (137). Thus, the woman emerged from the disempowered, solitary mother figure, a sex-specific object, and becomes a figure of maternal authority. Das sheds some light on this politicization of the formulaic “woman language” when he writes, “the language these women speak is the stereotypical ‘woman’s language’—the language of love, loyalty, care and affection—but this they speak with a public anger in a public place in ways they never meant to do” (71). In this process, the mothers become political entities. At the lack of proper entry points this method of voicing their anger and demands help them create their own counterpublic that cannot be disregarded by the state or the community anymore. In their action and strategies, these women have amalgamated demands for rights with principles of care. Although the NMA has pronouncedly used the site of motherhood for the creation of their counterpublic, they allow all Naga women to be part of the association, whether married or not.

At the same time their politics does not only entail peace for the region but also women’s rights, especially their right to enter the public political decision-making sphere. For years now, the NMA has been engaged in a legal fight for the implementation of the 33% reservations for women in local body elections for women. A number of the organization’s leaders came together and formed the Joint Action Committee for Women’s Reservation in 2011 for this purpose. A special leave petition lodged by the committee, questioning the constitutionality of the 2012 Nagaland Assembly resolution (that had absolved the state from implementing the reservation), was approved by the Supreme Court of India, in 2016. The court declared for elections to be held with 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the seats reserved for women as mandated in the 74<sup>th</sup> amendment, and the government had to agree. However, when the incumbent government tried to hold the elections with the provision for the reservation in 2017, riots broke out all over Nagaland as the tribal bodies put up violent protests against the government’s decision. As a result, the government was compelled to revoke the decision. Under immense pressure from the society, the NMA members were also forced to withdraw their names from the petition as the agitations turned brutal. Nevertheless, even such fierce opposition has not deterred the Naga women. As NMA’s current president Abeiu Meru argues:

On April 20 (2017), there was a consultation on Article 371(A) by former parliamentarians of Nagaland and legal experts.... And they also unanimously said that it [reservations] had nothing to do with Article 371(A). I think some people who are opposing us understand this, but they just do not want to accept. We are not asking [for] something that other women in the country are not getting. We just want our constitutional rights. (qtd. in Saikia “As Nagaland Prepares”)

The NMA has continued with its peace work simultaneously, undaunted by the violence they had to face from their community. In January 2018 an NMA team consisting of its President Abeiu Meru and Advisor Dr. Rosemary Dzuwichu made a journey to Taiga, Myanmar to meet the leaders of the Khaplang faction of the NSCN. This faction of the NSCN had abrogated its 14-year-old ceasefire with the Government of India in March of 2015. This journey of the NMA members involved eleven days of travelling through the rugged terrains, with the only possible forms of transport being boats and bikes. They embarked upon this extremely arduous mission, as the traditional *pukrelia* would in times of war, to call for the end of factional hostilities between the NSCN (K) and NSCN (IM). Again on November 12, 2019 the member of NMA travelled to Manipur, Imphal for a similar mission as they tried to intervene between the Naga-Meitei conflicts. They met the Meira Paibis to address the impasse the Naga-Meitei hostilities had hit, establishing a tense environment between the neighbouring states. Through these undertakings the NMA has regained their ground for peace politics which helped them create their counterpublic in the first place.

Shimreingam L. Shimray thinks that the traditional way of peace making was more successful since it developed organically imbued with the ethics of the tribes (47). He thinks there is a need to give women back the same empowered position, but this time with a holistic scope and not only in the times of war, since a discriminatory “divided culture” cannot restore peace (Shimray 43). A community that is prejudiced in nature remains fragmented even though the situation of conflict is over. Neidunuo Angami, the ex-president of the NMA remains hopeful about an integrated community in future that acknowledges women in the decision making sphere—“There was a time when women were not even allowed to participate in the public sphere, but I believe

things are slowly changing for the better... We will surely take part in politics and other decision bodies too... It is a matter of time" (Saikia "The Mothersof Nagaland").

One of the main tasks of women peace campaigners in every part of the world has been to continue to encourage their governments to make room for voices of peace. If women's voices are refused representation, a conditional and short-lived ceasefire could be possible, but not peace. Paula Banerjee mentions in the WISCOMP Discussion Paper, "Across the Experiences— Naga Women in Sri Lanka":

Women's voices are an important component of democratic peace politics. If their voices are drowned then equity and justice suffer. Peace politics then becomes merely a politics for conflict resolution. Peace becomes a prisoner to the discourse of power (24).

Hence, it is imperative that women's voices are included in the narratives that come out of this region to restore and perpetuate the idea of positive peace. And this is where the importance of literary narratives lie, as literary texts may provide an alternative rhetorical site for articulating the histories of those, whose voices have not found a place in the grand narrative of statist history. The following section of the thesis will explore how this space is created by some Naga women writers as they deploy storytelling methods to weave a narrative, attempting to excavate as well as comprehend the history of a people; and in the way how they articulate the fractured subject-hood of a Naga woman in the backdrop of a conflict situation.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Writing Memory, Practising Resistance: Literary Narratives and the Voices of Dissidence**

#### **4.i Introduction**

In the previous chapter, it was studied how Naga women have made use of tradition specific roles (namely that of the traditional peacemaker and motherhood) to widen their scope of creating a counterpublic of their own, in the absence of an entry point to the public-political sphere. The final three chapters of the dissertation will explore the realm of literary narratives and the manner in which women authors of Nagaland have utilised this discourse to establish a women's counterpublic. The primary query of this part of the thesis, would be to find out how they have employed this approach to articulate and integrate the subjectivity of Naga women within a cultural framework that has somewhere endeavoured to eradicate her individuality.

The chapter will begin with a study of how the arrival of colonialists and especially the missionaries irrevocably altered Naga society. Since it was missionaries who introduced script to this region, interrupting the ancient oral tradition of the Naga Hills tribes, a discussion of this historical context becomes relevant even when discussing present literary discourse coming out of this region. The chapter then addresses how tradition is reimagined here, in a symbiotic relationship with the present to generate a "new literature" infused with "indigenous flavour," thereby granting their creation a distinct character as they attempt to infuse writing with features of traditional oral culture (Ao "Writing Orality", 109). The chapter also includes a discussion on how literature can become a location of resistance for women in a patriarchal society that is highly stratified. The chapter then goes on to discuss the roles of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire—the two most prominent creative writers from Nagaland—as organic and counterpublic intellectuals, and how they have used literary discourse to establish a viable alternative to the hegemony that women face in a society where numerous forms of patriarchal oppression are in play.

#### **4.II Missionary-Education, Script, and the "Cultural Neglect" in Nagas**

As discussed in the second chapter of the thesis, throughout the colonial period, the British administrators viewed the majority of the region surrounding the Naga Hills as

“unadministrative” and populated by hostile tribes (Khala 23; Venuh vi). Thus, by largely separating the region from the rest of British India, the colonisers tried to suppress the animosity they encountered from the tribes that lived in this area. Hence, in the colonisers’ narrative, this violent portrayal of indigenous tribes cast them as an impediment to the process of integration. As discussed in the first and second chapters of this thesis, the Naga Hills villages functioned as separate sovereignties, similar to an autonomous nation state, with limited communication with communities beyond their settlements. This secluded existence had continued till the British incursions of the nineteenth century. These expeditions had mostly failed (as discussed in Chapter 2), resulting in the British administrators leaving the area outside their purview as Naga Hills Excluded Area.

However the arrival of the British paved the path of the advent of the Christian missionaries, in particular the American Baptists. It was the Charter Act of 1813 which had opened the possibilities up for the missionaries to come to India. The first missionary couple to succeed in establishing a missionary church in the Naga Hills, were Edward Winter Clark, an American missionary of Dutch origin, and his wife Mary Meade Clark. They founded the first church of the Naga Hills at Molung Kimong, an area dominated by the Ao tribe, on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1872 (Pou 63). As J. P. Mills reports in his book *The Ao Nagas*, when the door was opened for the missionaries, following the Charter Act, there had to be some provisions made to solve the dissension and “overlapping” among the different sects competing for areas for their mission work, in then undivided Assam:

An arrangement, designed to prevent overlapping, has long been in existence by which definite Missions fields in Assam have been assigned to the Anglican and various Protestant Churches. The Naga Hills District falls to the share of the American Baptists (Mills 411).

By mid-nineteenth century the American Baptists had started to work with different tribes of the Naga Hills. Although, the engagement of the American Baptists were initiated in 1839 through Miles Bronson, one of the first American Baptist missionaries who worked in this region, this effort was unsuccessful and there was no conversion in effect (C. Jamir 1). It was about thirty years later that Clark could finally organize the Christian community in Naga Hills. After the Clarks, other missionaries

also started working with different tribes in the Naga Hills. The next missionary couple to be appointed to work with the tribes of the Naga Hills, were C. D. King and his wife, who worked with the Angami tribe and established the Kohima Baptist Church in 1883. The response to the missionaries was a mixed one at the beginning. In some communities the converts were ostracized by the others, forcing them to form new villages; and in others there was a curiosity that worked in favour of the missionaries. The Angami Mission was launched at Kohima in 1881 by C.D. King, however they did not have a single Angami member for at least the first four years (“History of NBCC”). Nevertheless, the missionaries pushed forward despite the obstacles they faced and eventually, it was with the establishment of schools that they could finally draw not only the convert but also the others, to their objective. Education and Christianity, thus went hand in hand in the Naga Hills, disseminating a form of knowledge that was essentially Eurocentric and backed by colonialism. Vizovono Elizabeth, writes in this context:

Little importance was given to improvement of communication and natural resources. The task of educating the tribesmen was left to the American missionaries whose main aim was to spread the Christian religion. British colonialism thus, imposed the Eurocentric concept of progress and modernism on the natives and caused a rupture between the past and the present (Elizabeth 17)

Veio Pou also mentions that, though the missionaries, for whom education was a key priority, did believe that they were assisting the Nagas in “modernising”; they were only pushing them to renounce their own culture in effect— “it was a case of “mistaken modernity”” Pou comments (70).

It is also important to keep in mind that these tribes already had a system of education at place even before the colonisers reached, as discussed in Chapter 3. In the Morung different forms of traditional knowledge and wisdom were shared under the supervision of the village-elder. The Morung functioned as a centre for community education and tribal traditions. However, the western form of education that the missionaries dispersed did not take into account the traditional forms of knowledge, creating a schism between the past and the present that deeply influence the literature coming out of Nagaland even today. It shifted Naga beliefs from indigenous to western

concepts of philosophy and theology— “church hymns replaced folk songs. English nursery rhymes replaced traditional teachings and sayings” (Elizabeth 18). Thus, the introduction of the western notion of formal education slowly began corroding the traditional way of life. And in this process, missionary activities incidentally ended up aiding imperialist policies of colonial efforts, even if they did not work directly as a colonial agency in this area. Consequently, the cultural roots of the Naga tribes were gradually getting eroded by the Eurocentric modernism imposed upon them by the colonials as well as the missionaries, through the last part of the nineteenth century. As Abraham Lotha mentions, though the chief purpose of the missionaries was to spread the Gospel, “in practice, conversion to Christianity also meant conversion to modernity and western morality, particularly American Protestant Puritanism” (qtd. in Pou 66). Richard M Eaton asserts that the main reason behind such a drastic change was the prohibitionist trait of the American Baptists:

Most foreign missionaries in the Naga Hills were Prohibitionist American Baptists who understood religion in strongly moral terms and consequently saw conversion as a conscious moral turnabout, of which markers like Western dress or abstinence from alcohol were outward signs. To be sure, some missionaries seem to have realized that Naga religion could not simply be isolated and excised out of the matrix of Naga culture in which it was embedded. But most paid little attention to that aspect (255).

As upholders of Prohibitionism, the missionaries would have implemented some moral codes which the converts had to abide by strictly. In a sense, the missionaries, thus, were alienating the new converts from their own culture and history bit by bit. This becomes evident when one reads Mary Mead Clark’s account of the olden Naga cultures and the attitude of the missionaries towards aspect of those ancient cultures. In her book, *A Corner in India* (published in 1907, by the American Baptist Publication Society) she describes the ancient traditions of the tribes here as “demon worship”— “the religion of the hill tribes in animism, or demon worship” (Clark 3). Age old Naga indigenous traditions of “Sunday breaking, rice beer drinking”— are described by her as “social vices” (Clark 138). And thus, in the Christian Eurocentric narrative created by the missionaries, Naga indigenous folktales turn into “doubtful stories”, folksongs “objectionable”, and traditional Morung systems are described as mere congregation of promiscuity—

Instead of congregating promiscuously at different houses to sleep at night, singing objectionable songs, telling doubtful stories, and engaging in lewd conversation, these young reformers separated themselves and built a dormitory for their own accommodation in which purity and holiness should reign. Here at morning and evening time the voice of prayer and songs of praise are heard. (Clark 139)

Prior to the arrival of the Baptists, the tribes here, practised distinct forms of traditional philosophies and principles according to the customs of their tribes. Even though these practices varied from tribe to tribe, a number of traditional rites and rituals shared common aspects, as discussed in Chapter 3. A profound respect for nature and faith in an animistic spirituality were common to all the Naga tribes in some capacity. There was no conflict between the natural and the spiritual world in their conventional worldview. All of their cultural festivals are grounded in this philosophy of animism as well. Hence, this ‘civilising’ mission of the Baptists, and their Eurocentric modernist form of knowledge system, left severe repercussions on their cultural practices. As Easterine Kire said in Gopinath Memorial Lecture, 2016, under the colonial reign, “the villages that were found rebellious were burned and their populations scattered into other villages for specific periods of time. Burning of houses and scattering of village populations destroyed the settings of oral narratives effectively” (qtd. in Elizabeth 17). In these ways, the ancient way of life was methodically disintegrated by the westerners—be it the colonisers or the missionaries. As a result, most of the elements that constituted the Nagas’ rich oral heritage have also been lost in the process.

As John Thomas points out it was in this backdrop of change “with the arrival of colonial administration and missionaries during the 1<sup>st</sup> half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Nagas began to be drawn into a world beyond their villages”. Thomas describes the rapid advent of the western form of civilization in the following words :

They increasingly witnessed their land being occupied by more elaborate state structures, their villages and immediate surroundings undergoing vast changes, their existing ceremonial and cultural practices being either fossilised or ridiculed, and the integrity of their traditions and community life broken (Thomas 2).



With the outbreak of World War II and the ensuing famine in the 1930s and 1940s, this sense of occupation became even more devastating; as Thomas writes—“it rudely brought home the realization of their susceptibility to circumstances that were thrust upon them by forces and actors beyond their immediate life-world” (*ibid.*). However, it is also worth noting that the Naga public sphere has begun to take shape in this setting. As Thomas points out “This was the context in which Nagas increasingly felt the need to reconstitute their identity, demarcate their national space and defend it from further incursions” (*ibid.*). As a result, probably for the first time, the diverse tribes of the Naga Hills banded together and claimed their own sovereign nation, leading to the formation of the Naga National Council, who led the movement from the front, as discussed in Chapter 2 (*ibid.*). In this context, it is also important to bear in mind that the Naga women’s literary counterpublic, which will be explored in these last three chapters of the thesis, is also influenced by the arrival of colonialism, particularly missionaries, as they are the ones who introduced the roman script and print culture to this area, disrupting the ancient practice of orality.

It was E. W. Clark who had set up the first printing press in this region in 1884 (Elizabeth 17). The Roman script was also first employed in this area by the missionaries to transcribe local languages and soon Christian literature and journals were being published in native languages instead of English. By constructing printing presses and publishing works on grammar as well as Christian literature in the regional languages, the Christian missionaries took the lead in bringing in a print culture in this area. However, Tilottama Misra considers this move to be somewhat detrimental to the polyglot nature of the region as a whole. She mentions, in the “Introduction” to the *Oxford Anthology of Writings from Northeast India*, since as an outcome of this encounter, there was a “standardisation” of the Assamese language which resulted in the subjugation of other indigenous languages (it is to be noted here that this was still the undivided Assam) (Misra xiv). While this is not entirely true for the Naga tribes (for example Mary Mead Clark’s *Ao Naga Grammar with Illustrative Phrases and Vocabulary* or R. B. MacCabe’s *Outline Grammar of the Angami Naga Language: A vocabulary and illustrative sentences* dealt with the indigenous languages of the specific tribes, Ao and Angami), the Assamese language in its different forms did become the lingua franca of this particular region as well. In Nagaland, the Naga variation of the Assamese language, locally termed ‘Nagamese’, is still in use as a

common language in day-to-day life. Hence, the nineteenth century may be considered to be a decisive period of time for Naga culture and literature, as print and written culture were being ushered in for the very first time among the communities of this region. After the introduction of print culture by the missionaries, collecting and printing the folklore of different communities became an important task for the western ethnographers and explorers, like J. P. Mills or Verrier Elwin.

Although these are valuable editions to the body of literature available on the colonial Naga societies, these were essentially written for governing convenience, addressing a western audience. Misra calls these works “part of the colonial ethnographic agenda” written mostly for “mapping the region” for effective administrative control over the region (Misra xvii). This was a significant shift from the earlier oral traditions that the tribes of this area practiced. This shift from an oral to a written culture, along with the radical change that Christianity brought to their worldview, pushed the tribes towards a “cultural neglect”, continuing well after the colonisers left (Pou 26). It also created a rupture between the past and the present, generating a sense of disconnection. Like most of the communities in this region, the Naga tribes too possessed a vibrant oral culture. This heritage is what separated the cultural milieu of these “face-to-face communities” from the abstract character of modern social connections (Misra xvii). The missionaries’ introduction of print culture severely disrupted this tradition of orality. Temsula Ao writes in *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition*, that the oral tradition of the Naga tribes, is “not a mere form of ‘storytelling’ as opposed to a written recorded version”, rather it is “in many ways the source of the people’s literature, social customs, religion and history” (185). She defines it as a reservoir for the traditional knowledge-systems: “it has evolved into a comprehensive and integrated network of indigenous knowledge-system, incorporating art with reality, history with imagination and the ideal with the practical” (ibid.). This stands true for all the Naga tribes, all of whom have the culture oral tradition in common. Because of the absence of script— and hence archived written records— the significance of the oral tradition in these tribes are multiplied. It was the very *history* of the people that was preserved through folklores, songs and anecdotes. For the Nagas, therefore, the oral tradition serves as a vital link between the ancient and modern, their past and present. In the concluding section of her book, Ao talks about how oral tradition filled up the lacunae of written history for the Naga tribes:

In the absence of any written history the numerous myths, legends, tales and names as well as other aspects of the tradition have been the only link between the historic past and present... 'history' which is of direct relevance to the people lies within the ambit of the oral tradition. And the storytellers, singers and raconteurs have been the custodians and transmitters of this 'history' from generation to generation (186).

The oral tradition, which reflects the worldview of a whole community, is also the reservoir of their cultural values, information and knowledge. However, for at least half a century following the arrival of Christianity, oral traditions and culture were suppressed. As Kire mentions in her Gopinath Mohanty Memorial Lecture, the history of Naga literature is interposed with "the silencing of oral narratives at critical periods in their history" (qtd. in Elizabeth 17). She refers to it as "the first silencing of our narratives" (ibid.). This act of "silencing" resulted in the act of *forgetting* on the part of the Naga communities. Pou describes this process of forgetting poignantly when he writes:

But with the arrival of the 'white' people, their destiny was changed; their own stories and songs weren't colourful and musical to their ears anymore.... The 'white' people told them that they have been living in the 'dark' and so in order to come to the 'light', they have to abandon their old ways of life and put on the 'new' clothes. That was when the Nagas turned their back on their own songs and stories to learn new ones from the foreigners. That was how they began to 'forget'. (Pou 59)

Hence, it is not surprising that acute feeling of cultural loss is a recurring element found in the literature arising from this region. The incursion of a foreign culture that claimed sole ownership of modernity had placed the indigenous peoples at a perilous crossroad, compelling them to face an inevitable break with their own past.

#### **4.iii Writing Orality**

The tradition of oral culture is not just a way of commemoration of a community's past for the Nagas. It encompasses the intricacies of the cultural norms as well as the worldview of a community as it is passed down through generations. Thus the value system of entire communities and the tenets of their sociocultural life is enshrined in

the oral tradition, making it a repository of their history. It essentially preserves a community's knowledge system by handing it down through generations using oral narratives— various kinds of folklore, folksongs, and anecdotes. These stories, in the form of myths, are often loaded with hidden meanings that carry the philosophy of an entire community. Hence, the relevance of oral tradition rests in the idea that it retains the culture and history of entire communities. Therefore, the authors' sense of affinity with the generations before them is strengthened by the storytelling tradition which these authors have attempted to preserve through their craft. Pou notes in this context:

In a way, the various writings that are surfacing from the region also symbolize a quest in reclaiming the hidden past. Exploring them is also a way of rediscovering the self...Re-telling them is, in a way, re-living them. For the societies which are primarily in oral tradition, the stories and the songs are also the histories of the people (Pou 32).

However, it is not a simple undertaking to represent adequately in writing, what was previously exclusively done orally, like capturing the lyrical flow of the oral storyteller. Especially since, in contrast to writing, it is a method of conceiving, transmitting, and conserving culture and tradition through word of mouth (Momaday 167). Thus, in a sense, oral tradition has the ability to defy spatial and temporal constraints, because in it lies the very essence of human experience that is captured over hundreds of years.

While discussing the relation between the oral tradition and the written literature coming out of Nagaland, Temsula Ao observes in her essay "Writing Orality", that for the Naga communities, the oral tradition presents a catalytic framework for authors, by which they are able to examine from a different perspective, the complex socio-political dynamics that pervade this region— this trait also is what also distinguishes the literature coming out of this region, which she calls the "new literature":

By doing this the 'pastness' of the tradition is reinterpreted in a symbiosis with the present -in contemporary terms- to create an altogether new 'literature' rich with indigenous flavour. In this literature, folklore does not remain merely 'folklore' as relics of a distant past but becomes the signifier of a new sensibility. Writing orality in this sense transforms the oral

tradition through recollection, inclusion, inversion and reinterpretation. Not only that, writing orality also provides a new artistic and theoretical framework for exploration of ancient oral literatures, which had hitherto been consigned to the realm of the ‘primitive’ and the ‘un-civilized’ by anthropologists and historians alike. (109)

This “new” literature demonstrates a synthesis of aspects of oral tradition with modern understandings of the self and the society. This amalgamative framework allows the writers to break out from Western Eurocentric paradigms and develop entirely new forms of literature—a literature that is firmly rooted in ancient perceptions but also infused with a perspective born out of ongoing circumstances. Moreover, since these authors are writing about their own communities as well as their own selves, their writings are grounded in reality and thus sustained by a solid foundation with strong ties to the land.

These forms of “new literature” can serve multiple purpose for their communities. These works of literature often engage with basic concerns of identity and existence that their communities face, disenfranchised in their own land. And thus they also possess the potential to be used as a weapon against the oppressors. Literature functions as a networked social space that may contain tools for authoritarian oppression as well as its resistance; and thus it reflects larger struggles related to the ideas of sovereign identity politics (Au 1). According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere was primarily established in the “world of letters”, which then geared toward politics (Habermas 30; Calhoun 10; van Elk 7). Habermas notes that it was with the birth of novels that a relationship between author and reader (or the “public”) was articulated (Habermas 50). This articulation was marked by close, reciprocal relationships between “privatised individuals” who were concerned in ideas like humanity, self-awareness, and empathy (ibid.). Habermas comments “the reality as illusion that the new genre created received its proper name in English, “fiction”: it shed the character of the *merely* fictitious” (ibid). In addition, as these individuals came together to form a public, they also shared their critical and *public* reflections on what they had read, thereby making a contribution to the process of “enlightenment” that they collectively worked to further (Habermas 51). The fact that only two years passed between the appearance of *Pamela* on the literary landscape and the founding of the

first public library provides Habermas with evidence for his theory. Thus, Habermas opines— “they formed the public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters” (51). However as discussed in Chapter 1, in reality, a varied and conflicted public could not be adequately represented by this bourgeois public sphere, not even in Europe. When it came to accessibility to its institutions and discourse, the European public sphere was mostly constrained, especially through the lenses of gender, class and race (Dalleo 3). The monolithic construction of the public sphere that Habermas proposed was based on excluding the poor, the slaves, and women as non-property owners (Dalleo 4). Hence, it will not be wrong to conclude that Habermas’ conception of the public sphere fails to address the transnational nature of power that characterises a colonial or post-colonial space (such as the region we are discussing here) in which power has been confined to a small number of elite individuals (Dalleo 2). In the case of Nagaland, this small group of elites consists of mostly non-regional individuals; during the colonial period, it was the British, and subsequently, it was mainland politicians. In such postcolonial societies, the public sphere must be conceptualised as a “plurality of spheres” instead of a monolithic singular space, as discussed in the first chapter of the thesis (Dalleo 4). It becomes particularly pertinent for the Naga society, which faces double colonisation. As Anson Au points out, the literary public sphere in such postcolonial societies is inherently engaged in the “instrumentality of politics” that foreshadows persistent conflicts between the civil society and an authoritarian state. Consequently, it acquires new connotations in such conflict-ridden postcolonial societies (Au 2). In such societies, literature is one of the rare social domains left for expression of resistance against the hegemony of the authoritative society. Herein lies the literary public sphere's utility in a stratified conflict-ridden society. A study by Markman Ellis on Europe’s seventeenth-century literary public sphere notes that the notion of universality that Habermas grants the bourgeois public sphere was essentially “conceptual” because of the omission of women’s “lived experience” (Ellis 28). This stands especially true for the women authors from this region whose works will be studied in the next two chapters—Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire—who have drawn heavily upon their own personal experiences and those of others in their writings. As a result, they see the need of documenting their society’s political narrative through the eyes of those who have really lived there. It is thus possible to observe the collective experience of the women as well as men of Nagaland, through their works. As Pou notes—

The literary experiences of these writers have generated great interest among the readers because they disclose another panorama of the Naga life, the less talked about everyday lives. And therein also lies the power of literature which history may not be able to write about: the simple and ordinary individual experiences of the episodic past. (Pou 56-57)

The texts of Ao and Kire that will be explored in the next chapters provide a curious interplay of history, memory and imagination. Thus, these texts open up the scope for a shared and dynamic narrative space where fiction can coexist with history. As we will see, Ao accomplishes this through creating a narrative that reconstructs the identity of Naga women, particularly through the use of private memories (personal as well as collective). And thus she wrenches the narrative away from the dominating patriarchal frames in play within the culture. Kire, on the other hand, uses historical fiction to establish this shared space, as she recasts the Naga historical narrative in her fiction (where personal and collective memory once again occupy a significant space) from the perspective of a Naga woman organic intellectual—a standpoint that is not only rare but almost impossible to locate. Therefore, it would be incorrect to interpret the writing produced in Nagaland as expressing simply the violence of the conflict and presume that for the authors of this region their society's turbulent political narrative has obscured other issues, such as gender justice.

The narratives of Ao and Kire's works reflect events that they have dealt with on an individual level; hence, the portrayal of powerful female characters in their works can be interpreted as a mirror of the authors' own lived experiences as a woman in the Naga society. It is also interesting to note here, that most authors coming out from Nagaland are women, which stands in stark contrast to other areas of Naga society where men hold more prominent roles. Many scholars from the region looked at this incident as something unique and empowering for the Naga women at the same time. Pou mentions in this context— "when it comes to literature, though, women preceding men can also be looked upon as 'carved out spaces' to engage in subject matters where women were previously kept out from political spaces" (48). I Watitula Longkumer has also pointed out how Naga women have left behind their male counterpart, at least when it comes to creative writing—

In terms of literary production, Naga women have seamlessly exceeded their counterparts.... Quantitatively also, there is a consistent increase in the number of Naga women writers, scholars and critics. There are a few noteworthy contributions to Naga society, customs and traditions by the earlier generation of male writers. However, in terms of creative writing (fiction and poetry) there is still an evident gap. In the recent past, we have seen a gradual contribution by young male Naga writers such as Sentilong Ozukum and Wedekhro Naro. However, compared to the literary contributions of Naga women writers, it is quite right to state that women writers have surpassed their male counterparts (5).

In an interview Vizovono Elizabeth explains to me that it not so that Naga men did not produce written works; but their works were more political in nature than creative—“Naga women are definitely at the forefront when it comes to creative writing, but men were writing much earlier if you look into all kinds of writing. Most of the early writings by Nagas were by men and political in nature (Elizabeth). She further clarifies, “Men were preoccupied with the political events and immediate practical concerns. One reason why women emerged as more vocal in creative output could be that they were lamenting their loss in the way they knew how, through song and poetry (this has always existed in oral form), channeling their creative energies into something that could give them hope, something tangible” (Elizabeth). The devastation of the conflict and years of brutal oppression compelled them to express in literature what they witnessed. Since the men of the families had been killed, or had gone missing, during the long-drawn conflict situation, it became responsibility of the women to not only take care of the families left behind, but also preserve the memories of the departed, and they chose the Naga traditional form of storytelling to do so—“So women took on the role of literally continuing their stories through storytelling. But now that they were literate, they could do it in the form of writing too. This was at the initial stages of the development of creative writing by Nagas”— Elizabeth comments (Elizabeth). It is important to remember in this context that in Naga communities, women have long played the role of storytellers or “poet-singers”, and in some cultural celebrations, they perform an integral part to complete the ceremony (Pou 56). Thus, as also seen in Chapter 3, here we find another way that the Naga women have utilised their tradition-specific role and customary function to strengthen their position and



represent their people. In this context it should be noted that in addition to their creative production, Naga women are also doing commendable work in providing publication platforms to upcoming writers from this region. There are a number of local publishing businesses that are primarily run by women and are extremely successful. This takes on a new dimension when we consider the fact that writers from the states of ‘northeast’ have repeatedly reported feeling overlooked by publishing houses of ‘mainland’ India. Therefore, the Naga women’s contribution to the literary public sphere is not limited to writing but also includes active participation in the publishing industry.

Temsula Ao thinks that the feature which distinguishes the work of the authors from these communities, is the complex “inter-play of imaginative dialogue” with components from their “collective past” (Ao 111). Because they rely extensively on oral sources that are part of their communities’ traditions, these works of literature gain seminal significance for the people of these communities. However, they also acquire a ubiquitous relevance for readers everywhere since they deal with basic human concerns, as found in moralistic stories in oral traditions all over the world. Further, this “new literature” possesses the capability to act like a vital link between the present and the past, thus conferring a new significance to orality, since through the action of writing, orality can enter a “phase of evolution” via the act of “re-telling” (ibid.). The oral tradition of the region not only offers an imaginative spur to these authors, but it also assists them in enunciating as well as documenting the history and knowledge of their communities. At the same time, the oral tradition also establishes new theoretical frameworks for looking at tribal histories and assisting in their reinterpretation and reconstruction; as an example of this occurrence, Ao cites the instance of village polity— “the most important contribution of orality towards such studies is in the sphere of political insights to traditional village polities, which is providing room for synthesis of modern political concepts within the traditional framework” (109). Orality’s entry into the domain of written literature helps the extension of the prevailing literary canon, which is perhaps the phenomenon’s one of the most important contributions to literature altogether; hence Ao mentions—

Thus oral tradition not only offers avenues for new creativity but also ensures for itself a kind of permanence in a different form and medium. Also, in a certain way writing orality is a process of self-deconstruction of a people in search of meanings for their existence by relieving relevant

metaphors from the ‘imaginative experience’ of orality to deal with present realities” (111).

Thus, for these authors, writing becomes more of an interpretive and evolving process of discovering pertinent tropes in oral sources, to help them comprehend and survive their present struggles. As a result, the authors have delved into their own cultural roots in the quest for their individuality. But, most of the authors from this region, including the two authors that are discussed in this chapter, have used English as their medium of writing. As Elizabeth points out, it is not a matter of choice for the Naga authors, since “English is the only language in which a Naga knows how to read and write” (Elizabeth). Talking about the far-reaching effects of western forms of education in the Naga society, she further explains:

“...education was introduced in English, so every literate Naga is learning to read and write in English. There is no Naga alphabet. Nor is the mother tongue taught along with English, except at the very basic level. The tribal languages are still being codified and developed in a systematic manner. So it is not a matter of choosing English over their Naga language. English is the first language of literacy for an educated Naga. It is the medium of instruction in schools and it is the official language for all administrative and communication purposes. This points to how the Naga way of life was altered by the introduction of Eurocentric mode of education. (Elizabeth)

Elizabeth also points out the fact that there is no common Naga language that can be understood to all the Naga tribes (except for Nagamese, which is more of a lingua franca as already discussed in this chapter). This further complicates a writer’s position, as readers from other Naga tribes will be unable to comprehend their work if they write in their own tribe’s language— “since there is so much linguistic diversity even among the Naga tribes, a writer belonging to one tribe can only be understood by readers belonging to the same tribe. Other Naga tribes would be left out of the readership simply because the language is not discernable to them” she comments (Elizabeth). Thus, writing in English not only facilitates connections with readers beyond their region, but it also makes the authors’ works accessible to all Naga tribes. Temsula Ao thinks that by combining insights from their oral traditions into a language that is “not their own”, the Naga writers also bring a sense of “universality” to this new

literature (108). It is to be remembered here, that most of these authors have completed their school education in missionary institutions. Hence, it is of no surprise that in their writing, one finds a blend of western modernity with their ancient culture. Pou also notes that, it is this very amalgamation of western modernity and the traditional culture of Naga tribes, that creates a “new definition” of the Naga identity through their literature (Pou 53). Therefore, while extending the existing literary canon, these works end up doing so in particular for the body of literature described as “Indian writing in English”, as these works have become part of the syllabi in undergraduate as well as postgraduate courses in universities and colleges all over India. Thus, by fusing the past and the present, these writers attempt to establish an idea of continuance, thereby spawning new literary concerns. And they have successfully done so by adopting a colonial language and transforming it into their own. Through written words, authors can also build new affinities with other communities and individuals, going beyond the sense of seclusion present in oral culture. At the same time, they also allow the writers to embrace the difference in their own culture, as part of their culture’s distinctiveness, rather than seeing them as indicators of inadequacy. By using English as their medium of writing, writers like Ao and Kire have established a literary public sphere that is accessible not only to Naga people, but to all English-reading people, thus fostering a solidarity that transcends their communities. I Watitula Longkumer observes, in this context, that both Ao and Kire have emerged as powerful literary voices who have successfully created a niche for themselves in the literary space by connecting with a global audience, representing the experiences of their communities that was otherwise lost in history (2).

In order to reconstruct their past, the Nagas, who have a strong oral heritage, rely heavily on memory and stories. Here, the older generations passed on all that had been kept in memory to the younger generation by recounting stories. Thus, the Naga authors inculcating orality into their writing, become a part of a storytelling tradition, which strengthens their affiliation with the generation before them. Pou thinks that in recreating a link with the ancient oral tradition, the authors here, manifest a desire to return to their pristine and peaceful past, lost in the violence and instability--

In a way, the various writing that are surfacing from the region also symbolize a quest in reclaiming the hidden past. Exploring them is also a

way of re-discovering the self.... Re-telling them is, in a way, re-living them. For the societies that are primarily in oral tradition, the stories and the songs are also the histories of the people.” (32)

This attempt to recover their lost origins can be viewed as an act of defiance against the perception that the communities of this region do not have a noteworthy legacy, since there is a dearth of archived ‘written’ form of history. Pou asserts in this context that traditions are more than mere constructs in these societies, they are not just views and beliefs that are “wildly thought of one fine day”, rather, they are connected to the “real past”; while they may be “constructions and reconstructions”, they do have to be logically associated with “ideological value” like the concept of formation of the Naga identity (44). Hence, the act of return to the past through literature can also serve as an identification marker for the Naga authors. Literature, thus, can be an active form of reviving traditions even if the authors are writing in English, as their writings “have reflections on history of people”, thus organically reflecting a true sense of the “Naga worldview” (Pou 45).

#### **4.iv Literary Narratives as a Site of Resistance**

Writing, thus becomes a work of excavation of a lost history, as these authors try to look into their past “like looking at something shrouded in mystery” (Pou 60). The oral culture accedes to the human faculty of the memory system to conserve its histories. Thus, practices of remembrance and memory have gained a place of seminal importance in the culture and literature of the Nagas. The encounter with the missionaries had created a fissure between the Nagas and their past. Because there was profound interconnection of culture, religion, and society for the ancient Naga communities, their links to culture and history were also discarded when they abandoned their religious system, under the influence of the missionaries. To unearth the cultural identity of a people it is important to delve into their past. However, as the culture the Nagas now possess is not completely their own and is somewhat of a borrowed culture, this task of unearthing their past becomes even more difficult and complex. This search for understanding the past is important for finding the Naga identity as well as the Naga history. This is why, Pou asserts, it is of utmost importance to make this attempt of recovering their history--

(T)here is a need to make an attempt to recover the past legacy that was once thrown away as ‘heathen’, ‘pagan’ and ‘taboo’, because with them was also buried the songs and the stories that told them of who they were! Only then can there be a true sense of finding a legitimate identity (70)”.

It is in this context that the task of an author practising memory-writing gains relevance. The experience of a sense of loss of roots and a wish to unearth the same pervade the writings of the authors from this region.

While several years of ceasefire had undeniably reduced the unrest in the region, it could not eradicate the memories of the trauma that the people here had gone through for most of the post-independence period of India, as the strife for their own independence continued. In this process of conflict many were dispossessed of their land, as well as their lives. The agony that they were put through is a memory that has shaped the lives of generations amongst the Naga Tribes. As Misra mentions, the literature which was composed in this region during the years right after print and script were introduced, had the identifiable imprint of the images and words of the Bible; however, the shift only occurred when the conflict broke out between the underground army and the Indian forces (xxv). This was the war that entirely changed the cultural tenets of the Naga tribes, ushering in even more undesirable transformation in their way of life. The violence that the region witnessed during the years of conflict, effectually silenced the Naga narrative and attempted to shatter the traditional ties. The boundary between colonial and postcolonial oppression has thus dissolved here, as if it were a historical continuity.

Temsula Ao points out in the Preface of her celebrated collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home*, “the sudden displacement of the young from a placid existence in the 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 ways than one” (Ao x). The Naga authors writing after India’s independence, hence, have travelled far away from the realm of the naïve religious fervour that had influenced the earlier works. A large portion of the new literature arising out of Naga Hills since then, has emerged as a reaction to the violence witnessed by the communities. Consequently, it reflects the radical ideas of political reform but also a sense of disappointment and

dejection that reverberates through a conflict zone, riddled with violence for decades. Still, it will be wrong to conjecture that the new literature developing out of Nagaland is all about violence and bloodshed. The historical storytelling practice, which is shared by all the tribes here, has been ingeniously incorporated into modern literary forms to give this region's literature a specific character. In such a situation writing becomes an act of resistance as well as an expression of a desire to reconnect to the oral cultural roots that they have lost. Pou calls this an attempt to "a conscious reliving and re-creating the past and tradition, picking up from where it was left unattended" (71).

Because of the isolation effected by the British as well as the post-independence conflict situation that continued for decades, not much of the region's past has been strictly documented. To add to that, the hostilities with the Indian state also meant that the state makes it categorically difficult to access materials related to the subject being studied. In such a conflict ridden zone then, there is a pressing need for an alternative methodology to unearth histories that have not been documented in a proper manner. Memory narratives can prove to be an important alternative in such contexts. These narratives may also provide an insight on how pasts are imagined in popular consciousness. These narratives are helpful as they bear a twofold significance. First, they provide us with the perspectives regarding how common people perceive particular events and thus, resist appropriation by both state and the non-state actors. Secondly, in this process we get access to multiple accounts of the same events seen as accepted truths, which in result challenge the dominant interpretation of the statist discourse (Kanth 32).

Olabode Ibrionke, in his article "Monumental Time in Caribbean Literature", accurately points out the dominance of the archive in the process of writing history, which more often than not ends up overlooking the "historical knowledges that were subjugated" (151). The genesis of modern historiography seems to dwell in the very authority of "the document" as being the indisputable proof of human activity. In this process the document is sublimated from being mere recorded history to a primary icon of the modern society, thereby investing a sense of "totalizing authority" into the archives (151). In such a context there rises a dire need of an alternative discourse which is not solely settled upon the authority of the archives to capture those fragments of historical knowledges that are subjugated by the dominance of the document. The

artistic imagination has a pertinent role to play in the attempts to encounter the past in its otherness, citing the fact that not all pasts have really been documented because of the politics of archiving. There are whole civilisations, like that of Nagaland's, who do not own the kind of archive of written documents as possessed by the western civilisation. In such contexts the artistic imagination may emerge as an indispensable appendage to historical narrative—especially when the objective is to render voices to those who are pushed to the periphery, away from the centralised production of knowledge. While commenting upon the relation between history and literature, Kuisma Korhonen points out, in his introduction to his book *Tropes for the Past*, that the conventional linear form of historical narratives may not be most suitable while dealing with the extremely convoluted web of various connection and individual perspectives that shape the historical events. Since, through a study of literature, several forms of hypertextuality may open up, relating our present to the past, literature retains the power to surface as “serious research on world making, language and their multifaceted relationship” (Korhonen 19).

The literature produced in the Naga Hills may be viewed, as a response to the encounters the Naga communities had to face—be it with the mainland India or the West. And each of those encounters have given rise to various types of appropriation but simultaneously, different forms of resistance. The history of the Naga tribes had been driven to the periphery as it did not correspond to the rules of the European notion of modernity that is imposed upon the forms of writing history in the contemporary age. Hence, the authors here had to excavate their past through their work, in order to depict their present as a phase in the continual journey from the history to the future. The writers here, had to persistently incorporate aspects from their own forgotten oral heritage to construct their *own* contemporary literature that would oppose the colonial aim of denying history (or even literature) to their colonized subjects. The works of the authors discussed in this chapter are based on the reality they have lived in and continue to live in. Consequently, their works reveal a collective memory. The memory of the recent volatile past continues to haunt them even as they interact with concerns of today. Therefore, it should come as no surprise to learn that there is a subtext of violence reflected in the writings that emerge from this location. As a result, violence and remembrance are intertwined with the everyday lives of the Nagas in the works of these authors. These are authors who have grappled with the trauma of everyday acts of

violence that leave a profound imprint on creative minds. Following the words of Misra then, it can be said that both of the authors discussed in the last two chapters of the thesis—Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire—are also “the children of violence” (xxix).

Pou compares these writers with the “storytellers” of the ancient Naga society, as through their works (which Pou calls a “manifestation of Naganess”) they not only express their own experiences, but also of the common people of this region— thus playing the role of “social commentators” (49). Misra also finds an “assertion of a political awareness” in the writing of the authors from these communities, as they attempt to “ease the boundaries” between “subaltern traditions” and “Great Traditions” (xviii). They have put up their own narrative of their experiences, as opposed to the narratives put up by the colonialists or the State. Esther Syiem points out that in a conflict-ridden society the authors often take up the role of “literary witnesses”, she claims:

Though there can be no exaggerated claims for literature changing lives or initiating peace, yet the act of writing or the spoken word itself, whether during peace or war, is a defiant gesture that subverts the complacent realities of “power and money”, “insensitivity and terror” (35).

Literature, in such a context, makes use of “words” as “currency”, Syiem assert, as it circulates to pierce dominant power structures— “the more they “circulate the greater their value” as they challenge and subvert; and are effectively dangerous to the political or social dominant” (ibid.). Poets Robin Singh Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih echo similar sentiments when they claim that the writers from this region are forced to master the “art of witness” through their writing, as “living with the menace of the gun” they cannot merely indulge in literary exercises that look away from the daily experience of violence faced by them and their communities (ix). This is how these authors rise up to perform the role of the Organic Intellectual for their own communities.

As studied in Chapter 3, to find an identity beyond the formulaic descriptions the Naga women have chosen the methods of peace movements as an alternative to mainstream politics and have used them as their entry points to the public political sphere that they have been hitherto excluded from. Thus, they have created a subaltern



counterpublic of their own where they can resist patriarchy perpetrated not only by the State but also by their own communities. But another crucial and parallel site that can be, and has been proven effective many times, in this search for identity, is literary narratives. In literary narratives the woman gets a chance to *write* her identity. Cixous writes in “The Laugh of the Medusa”—“Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (Cixous 875).

This is especially true for a culture where the woman has been kept invisible in the dominant discourses of power and politics. They ‘must’ write themselves to defy their status as objects of descriptions and re-invent their selfhood in the process. If the identity of the woman of the northeast has to be retrieved from the colonial and traditional descriptive categories then it has to be recast through self-representation via a mode of narrative which can contest the myths produced in domains of narratives created by masculine ideologies. In the next chapters have selected to study the novels written by two most prominent and prolific women authors from Nagaland—Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire<sup>xiii</sup>; especially the ones which tries to look at the communities’ history from the point of view of Naga women as they excavate the lost bits of history through the ploy of memory writing. This chapter will predominantly look at works that deal with the search for identity and history, but from the perspective of Naga women in particular.

These novels articulate a form of resistance against formulaic portrayals of marginalised communities and individuals *inside* an already marginalised community, who are further marginalised because of their gender (especially, with the formation of the gendered space, as discussed in Chapter 2). Writing from the point of view of a marginalised entity in an already marginalised community, as well as writing *about* such subjects, these authors illustrate the twice repressed subject-position of women in such a situation. Additionally, they help unearth history from an indigenous standpoint, which is typically overlooked by the Statist grand narrative of history. As Misra points out, using their personal and private experiences, these authors have attempted to reach from “the level of personal to that of the universal” (Misra xxxii). Using literature as a tool, they have sought to obliterate the binary between public and private by bringing out private experiences to a larger public. Thus, these authors have created their own

subaltern counterpublic by performing the role of not just the organic intellectual but also the public intellectual. Even outside of their creative works, these authors have been outspoken about their ideas on gender equality, as evidenced by their non-fiction as well as talks given at various events in Nagaland and across the world. As I. Watitula Longkumer notes, these authors “share an understanding” of the scarcity of prospects for Naga women in “social, political, and economic” contexts, and particularly in decision-making spaces, because they have themselves lived through that experience of prejudice (5). As Temsula Ao writes, it is crucial for Naga women to realise that they have been denied from their “birthright” as Naga citizens (107). Both the authors’ creative works strive to oppose this denial and exclusion, as a mirror of the struggle they encountered in their private lives and in the public sphere. Thus, the works of Ao and Kire, end up articulating the collective lived experience of Naga women who are doubly marginalised and seeking to carve out a space for themselves in the political and public spheres. In the framework of Naga society, Ao and Kire can be hence be viewed as the Gramscian Organic intellectual. As seen from the discussion in Chapter 2, the tripartite structure of State, community practices and religion have created constrictive space for women, resulting into further difficulties for women to get into decision-making spaces in the public-political sphere. The conflict situation has especially worsened the condition by introducing a volatile, insecure atmosphere where this patriarchy influenced cultural hegemony has been reinvented in new, subtler and yet more rigid forms. To resist this gender biased system there is a need for a counter hegemonic method of upsetting the consensus to contest this ‘common sense’ view of the society. Since culture is directly involved in the formation of a dominant discourse and the way it is circulated for centuries, there is a need to strike at the very root of this cultural hegemony to obliterate the oppression of the subjugated lot at the hand of the domineering class. As discussed earlier, many of these oppressive rules are also internalized by the women themselves at some level, which makes their subalternization easier. The state, along with some gender biased customs, has perpetuated this notion of biological difference to the political/ public sphere; thus creating a web of cultural hegemony where the woman has not only lost her voice but also her *consciousness*<sup>xiii</sup>. Like the subaltern studies historians in their new mode of historiography propose a recuperation of a subaltern consciousness that “remains vitally important for South Asian history and society and yet receives little attention in available historiographies” (Srivastava and Bhattacharya 10) – a recuperation of the subaltern consciousness of the Naga woman is also required

to search for their voice, obliterated by the State enforced grand narrative of History as well as by the prevalent cultural hegemony. Following Gramsci it can be inferred that, compulsory for this recuperation of a mass consciousness is a social movement which will require the initiative and organizing skill of the Gramscian organic intellectual to transform both the passivity and the intransigence of these subordinated groups of women—whose subjugation is both unwilling and even willing at times—into political discontent. Gramsci defines the organic intellectual in the following words:

Every social group coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields (134).

Although Gramsci in orthodox Marxist manner posits the idea of the organic intellectual within the field of economic production, following Steve Jones it can be said that “we need not apply this observation exclusively in class terms” (84). He gives the examples of the significance of the idea of the organic intellectual in the development of a “politicized black identity” in America theorized and represented by the black intellectuals (*ibid.*). Pheng Cheah too sees in postcolonial intellectuals such as Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugiwa Thiong’o, Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral a shadow of the Gramscian organic intellectual. He views the concept of the organic intellectual as an important “analytical category” to understand the “political vocation of revolutionary thinkers and writers from the colonial and postcolonial peripheries since the period of decolonization to the present” (Cheah137). For Gramsci, the role of the organic intellectual was especially important because he did not believe that a social movement can be wrought out by a handful of revolutionary elites working as a proxy of another class. Cheah in his discussion about the term “organic” points out the two related meanings the word can have; along with the fact that this intellectual stratum is autochthonous, as it is “generated by the social group from within itself”, the term organic also point to the fact that it is only these intellectuals who are able to “give to the social group its proper organic form, or more precisely, to complete this form” (Cheah139). To Gramsci, mass consciousness and participation were important factors for a social movement and it is for this reason that the role of the intellectual becomes

crucial—because Gramsci saw intellectuals as individuals who had the ability to mobilize and organize others. Gramsci writes “All men are intellectuals...but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals” (Gramsci 140). He believes that although every individual possesses intellect and uses it from time to time, all of them are not intellectuals by social function. In Ao and Kire, not only do we observe a curious amalgamation of the roles of the organic intellectual and the traditional intellectual (as they are also part of the academia), but also that of the public intellectual, given that they are also scholars with established professional standing, seeking explanations for *public* actions from places of power, even when those explanations require critique of authoritative power (Thapar 5; Das “How to Become a Good Public Intellectual”). While discussing the idea of the public intellectual Odile Heynders suggests that it is a term that entails the “translation and mediation” of knowledge to the “audience(s) to which the intellectual feels committed” (Heynders 9). This is why the idea is significant in the context of Naga women's subaltern counter public, in which these women have decided to speak publicly not only about their private memories and experiences but also collective lived experiences of Naga women. Odile Heynders defines the public intellectual as someone who holds “independent and critical view on political, social and ethical issues in the public sphere” and “intervenes in the public debate” from a “committed” position— “he has critical knowledge and ideas, stimulates discussion and offers alternative scenarios in regard to topics of political, social and ethical nature, thus addressing non-specialist audiences on matters of general concern” (3). She further clarifies the aim of the public intellectual is, “to enhance critical discussion within a public sphere with a specific public or counter-public”, which, she opines, is a “political aim” (22). This is how the public intellectual can contribute to the creation of subaltern counterpublics, generating alternative entry points to the public political sphere, as has been the case for these Naga women as well. Heynders also mentions that, as public intellectuals they have to address the “public”, or “fragmented counter-publics”, while at the same time they “consciously” continue to remain a part of the audience themselves (4). The public intellectual is thus positioned “*within* the audience”, as they oversee initiatives for criticism, involvement, visibility and the introduction of new ideas (*ibid.*). This is consistent with the Naga women writers’ positions and methods. As Nagas, they have experienced the same trauma that their fellow citizens have faced through the conflict-ridden decades. Additionally, their subject position as a woman in a patriarchal set up has also made them face an added dimension of oppression, as

studied in the previous chapter. Thus, their subject position empowers them with a unique view that helps them effectively perform the role of the public intellectual. As women writers from marginalised communities, they have successfully positioned themselves in a context where, “conflicting cultural, social and political issues can be observed”, which according to Heynders is yet another trait of the public intellectual (24). Heynders thinks that literature continues to be the driving force behind public intellectual endeavours as literature is a “lively and complex negotiation of text, author, reader and society” (20). She further defines literature as “a broad and dynamic constellation of texts and responses and of flexible and exchangeable roles, performances and scenarios” (20). Thus, the writers attain the potential to establish themselves as a public intellectuals and influence several power dynamics in their society, especially because, “the literary work is opened up” by the authors as they “depict and rethink social and political issues in their texts” (16). As a result, they intertwine “aesthetic culture” with “politicised culture” (ibid.).

Heynders also makes a difference between a traditional intellectual and the public intellectual— “the public intellectual addresses an audience beyond intellectual peers, whereas the intellectual mainly interacts with other intellectuals” (4). By becoming a voice for fellow oppressed citizens and sharing communal memory, these authors too, have represented and addressed an audience made up of common Nagas. As we will see through the next chapters, the work of authors like Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire intermingle “facts and ideas, representation and imagination, history and the present”, which, according to Heynders is yet another trait of the work of an author, who performs the role of the public intellectual (24). As public intellectuals, these authors have successfully dissolved the absolute dichotomy between the private/public-political spheres by cultivating a public identity tied to a certain social discourse while maintaining a connection to their personal experiences. However, the authors discussed in this thesis can also be referred to as “counterpublic intellectuals”. This is a term I borrow from Professor Frank Farmer, who uses it in the context of developing counterpublics through composition studies and rhetoric. He defines a counterpublic intellectual as someone who performs intellectual activity, but not from the “elevated realms” of the “traditional public intellectual” (“Counterpublics, Public Intellectuals, and Exodusters”). Rather, their intellectual contributions can be found in “identity concerns”, “local deliberations” and “activist initiatives” (ibid.). As authors (and as

professors or scholars), these women do occupy the said “elevated” realm of the traditional public intellectuals. However, one may observe a unique confluence of different strategic roles in them, as they are also members of the very group, they seek to render a voice— the Naga women – expressing their private memories and experiences (both individual and collective, as is evident from Temsula Ao’s considerations of collective memory of violence in the preface to *These Hills Called Home*), which have been largely disregarded by the public-political arena. If Kire accomplishes this through her historical fiction, in which she recasts Naga history from the perspective of any and all common Naga men and women, Ao accomplishes this by reconstructing the very identity of the Naga women through their private memories and experiences omitted from the grand narrative of statist history. Thus they create a new class of intellectuals who both construct and engage in what Sukalpa Bhattacharjee refers to in “State, Insurgency and (Wo)man’s Human Rights”, as a viable alternative to the “mal-logic of statist hegemony and ethnic insurgency” (132). This is a class of new intellectuals that represents the voices of a section of the population whose subjectivity has been marginalised by numerous factors through the process of othering them from the public-political sphere, as addressed in this thesis. This class of new intellectuals actively participate in practical life and involve themselves with the masses to resist the oppression and present a counter hegemony, a method of upsetting the consensus, of countering the ‘common sense’ view of society that would give it meaning, help it to bind together and function. While talking about the rise of the intellectual-leader in post-independence India, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan writes in “Questioning Intellectuals”: “Historically it was the educated, urban, Hindu upper-caste (and invariable male) leader who emerged from his involvement in the anti-colonial and nationalist struggles as the “voice” of the people” (166). This rings true for India’s northeast as well. In the entire region it was mostly the male leaders who led the movements—be it that against the colonialism, or the Indian government and thus became the *voice* of the people. When it comes to the indigenous rebel leaders, Sukalpa Bhattacharjee observes that their ideologies were such that offered “no perspective for changing the entire bourgeoisie structure of the Capitalist State, but seeks to replace one for the other, which will obviously lead to the same consequence of deprivation and violation of Human Rights” (129). Thus, when they counter the hegemony of the Indian state the leaders end up aiming at acquisition of political power from the hand of the Indian government. But the basic “logic of Capital” is not contested by them

(ibid.). Hence they end up being a part of this game of power, which “in its patriarchal essence is neither philosophically liberating nor is politically revolutionary” (ibid.). They create mass movements to counter the hegemony of the State of India but themselves cannot overcome the logic of the violent power game of hegemony. It is for this reason that Bhattacharjee believes that “insurgency becomes a self-defeating drive that destroys itself, and its internal minorities especially the ‘woman’” (ibid.). To constitute and assert her cultural rights in such a situation, a movement would be required led by individuals who reject the hegemonic logic of both the state and the surrounding patriarchy. As already discussed in the thesis, multiple feminists from the region have pointed out that since the Naga women were categorically pushed into the private sphere of household duties by the traditional society, they have not been able to articulate their interests separately and distinctively. This is precisely why the need to develop their *own* intellectuals from within their stratum to give the group a sense of meaning and form. Unlike the male leaders already present in the public-political sphere, this new class of intellectuals (that we are calling counterpublic intellectuals here) would not only see them as followers but would engage in what Gramsci calls their ‘feeling-passion’ as well; because, only then they would be able to recuperate the lost consciousness of such a subalternised group. Julia Kristeva, in her work “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident”, distinguishes three types of dissident-intellectuals in today’s world. The first is the rebel attacking political power who transforms “the dialectic of law and desire into a war waged between *Power and Resentment*”, second, the psychoanalyst who “converts ‘the dialectic of law and desire into a war waged between *death and discourse*” and the third is the writer in whose texts “law does not exist outside language” and desire is ‘stripped down to its basic structure: rhythm, the conjunction of body and music’ (295). Thus, the writer plays with the limits of normative identity in her texts within a language that allows the presence of a “pluralized” law that permits a “polyvalent, polylogical sense of play” (Kristeva 295). As the next chapters will seek to demonstrate, this is what both Ao and Kire do in their texts, as they transcend the constraints of normative identity imposed on Naga women by the patriarchal frame of the society, exacerbated by the tyrannies of the conflict situation. They strive to extricate the narrative from the different modes of patriarchy at play in the regions, in order to reconstruct their own identity and recast their own history. And this is how, through a novel form of dissidence, they bring the previously unacknowledged private memories and lived experiences of the Naga women to the

public through their writing, especially since their works have become part of the curriculum at universities not only in Nagaland, but throughout India. This form of dissidence, however, is categorically different from the masculinist power tactics of the male-dominated public-political sphere, since it does not seek to confront one form of oppression while overlooking another. Their politics of literary creation also differs from the masculinist politics of power in that it is a political enterprise that is likewise concerned with identity and self-affirmation, but not through violence and conflict. Thus, their identity as a public (or rather, counterpublic) intellectual also becomes a function, to project a form of agency that is inclusive and holistic in nature.

Sukalpa Bhattacharjee traces the idea of female assertion to subjectivity in the region since pre-colonial days. She distinguishes three visible phases- the “pre-critical” when the woman was a “non-entity”, she had “no memory, no decision and finally no language of her own”; the “critical” when with the arrival of modernity her “sex-specific role was assigned to her and she realized her gendered position and the discriminating language of patriarchy” and third is the “post-critical” when there is a “cognitive shift to the sexed subject as she is effectively using the language of patriarchy to contest it” (Bhattacharjee 138). The process and success of this “contest” is what I intend to explore in the following chapters which would attempt to capture the moments of resistance dispersed in the literary narratives of fiction, created by Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire. Since they are the two most prominent writers from the region and Naga women have always played a central role in their work, I will analyze their writing to determine how they have broken the rigid barrier between the private and the public-political through their writing, while simultaneously reconstructing the identity of the Naga woman and recasting their history.



## CHAPTER 5

### **Reconstructing Identity through Writing Memory: A Study of Temsula Ao's Works of Fiction**

#### **5.i Introduction**

The last chapter discussed the context and setting of Naga women's writing in English. The chapter examined how the arrival of missionaries and western forms of education increased the use of English, which became the primary language of writing for Nagaland's authors. The chapter also discussed how the development of western education and the introduction of roman script and print caused a rupture between the present Naga society and their oral past, and how Naga women authors have attempted to fill that void by incorporating orality and undocumented Naga people's history into their works. As Cixous had noted, "Woman must put herself into the text— as into the world and into history— by her own movement" (Cixous 875). This becomes even more significant in a society where the role of women has been largely neglected in the dominant discourses of power and politics. In order to defy their position as objects of description produced in narrative domains formed by masculine ideologies, women must write themselves and reimagine their identities. While discussing the possible explanations for why women in Nagaland have taken a precedence over their male counterparts at least when it comes to creative writing, Vizovono Elizabeth tells me:

Another factor could be the lack of a public platform to voice their concerns in a traditionally patriarchal society. In cultural spaces, women are still designated to be subordinate and remain silent. Nagas being a people of oral tradition, literature/writing is not a traditional or culturally Naga space. So I think it has provided a platform for women where they do not feel so hindered by customary laws and restrictions. (Elizabeth)

The final two chapters of the thesis will study the works of fiction by two major authors from the region, Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire, focusing on those that discuss the various forms of violence women have encountered in the Naga society and the ones that depict female protagonists who are able to articulate their identity and resistance within this framework.

This chapter will explore the works of fiction of Tamsila Ao who is widely regarded as a pioneer in the field of English literature produced in this region. Several of Ao's works have been included in university curricula around the country. This chapter studies how through her works of fiction—her two short story collections (*These Hills called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*), her novel (*Aosenla's Story*) and her memoir (*Once upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*)—Ao attempts to use literary narrative as a platform to reconstruct the very identity of the Naga woman and to exercise the concept of self-assertion, in a manner distinct from the dominant narratives of masculinist politics of power prevalent in the public-political sphere of the region.

### **5.ii Literary Narratives, Memory and History: A critique of selected short stories from *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head***

Kristeva concludes her essay “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident” on the following note, proclaiming the power of dissidence asserted through language—“through the efforts of thought in language... one can attempt to bring about multiple sublations of the unnameable, the unrepresentable, the void. This is the real cutting edge of dissidence” (Kristeva 300). The idea of finding the voice of those, who Kristeva called the abject figures, via language of narration is an idea that has been reiterated many times when it comes to feminist or subaltern studies. As Sukalpa Bhattacharjee points out in her essay “Narrative as An/Other History”, since more than a decade, critical scholarship has been engaged in asserting “an/other” history via narratives by questioning the presumed disparities between “literary” and “historical” narratives (27). Literary texts can provide an alternative rhetorical site for articulating the histories of those whose voices did not find a space in the grand narrative of History. Bhattacharjee discusses the method of employing literary narratives or storytelling methods to familiarise oneself with histories that were not fully documented. She writes, “it is through fiction, memoirs, testimonies, individual and collective memories that one could weave together the fragments of the moment” (20). She traces these moments in an “interlocution” between the text and the context (ibid.). Through this interlocution, then, a space for dialogue may open up, between multiple histories and identities. This capability of accommodating differences is what sets literary narratives apart from the discourse of History. This dialogue in turn may lead to the discovery of a myriad of “breaks” and “interruptions” within what has thus far appeared to be a “coherent story”

through the narrative of history (21). Narratives not only let one exert her own voice, it also gives a chance to learn from the margins. And this is what the counterpublic intellectual is supposed to do as well, instead of re-presenting the marginalized subject in the author's own semantics; only then can her task as an Organic Intellectual, willing to integrate an awakening of consciousness amongst the fractured subjects, can be completed. The dominating narrative of history has merely documented factual or empirical information, leaving out the aspect of human anguish. As a result, the victims often end up as donors of only "empirical experiences" in the realm of history (23). It is only in the literary narratives that the victims may shed their objectified empirical status to become individuals with stories that create the history of a people. Bhattacharjee observes, "this is how narratives emerge as alter/native spaces of enquiry, privileging the representations of everyday life, thereby interrogating the authorial voice of History" (22). For her, literary narratives gain an edge over history as a space of articulation and recollection, especially because it restores history to the "real authors", to the ones that it truly belongs; but who have been recast into the "other of dominant history" (30). Literary narratives open up a space where one can engage with not only the stories but also the memories of the 'others'. Because the character of such narratives is determined by traces of lived experiences, it puts forth a sense of shared memory. Tilottoma Misra believes that literary narratives are more suited to articulate the voice of the people and record them, than historical discourses, especially in a violence ridden conflict zone— specifically because of the "uncertain nature" of the literary discourses that allows memory to be present with all its "possibilities" forming the primary foundation of all of the "truth it may represent" ("Women Writing in Times of Violence", 249). She notes that in History there is a "delayed representation" of memory of traumatic experiences, allowing memory to "pick and choose" what it "desires to remember", particularly if the trauma is experienced first-hand by the subject (ibid.). But because—as Bhattacharjee had mentioned—literary representations allow the complex play between the "real and the imaginary" and the "symbolic and the experiential", this indeterminate nature of memory does not mar the narration (21). Memory plays a crucial role in helping an individual to recollect those slices from the past which are peculiarly traumatic.

Temsula Ao in her prologue to *These Hills Called Home* (2006) writes, "memories are often sifted through as invisible sieve and selections are made...either

to be preserved or discarded” (Ao, ix). The counterpublic intellectual, however, who aspires to bring marginalia into the mainstream, into the public, must uncover the unheard voices not just through her own experiences, but also through the memories of others. Ao questions her reader, “what do you do when it comes to someone else’s memory and when that memory is of pain and pain alone?” (*ibid.*) This is where it gets problematic—revisiting someone else’s memory is not only an arduous task, it is also impossible to discern the factuality of it. But literary narratives do not get their sustenance because of their verisimilitude with the historical factuality; rather, this interplay between knowability and unknowability is essentially what opens the way for a dialogue-based discourse. Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, is a collection of such memories. Right in the inception of the collection she clarifies, “these stories however, are not about historical facts...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 x). In her stories, this “human term” that loses its *humaneness* as the recorded empirical data in archived history is brought to the fore. The nameless victims of conflict, who lose their individuality in the archival accounts, are brought to life through memory, the act of remembering. This motif of remembrance surfaces in the final few lines of her story “The Last Song,” which is from her debut collection of short stories:

Thus on a cold December night in a remote village, an old storyteller gathers the young of the land around the leaping flames of a hearth and squats on the bare earth among them to pass on the story of that Black Sunday when a young and beautiful singer sang her last song even as one more Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined child. (33)

An eighteen-year-old girl with the name Apenyo, was this “young and beautiful” singer that Ao hauntingly mentions in these lines. The story is about this young girl her mother, Libeni; and the story is also about the hideous horror of gender-based crimes performed by the State forces in the region. However, the story is much more than just a sad portrayal of the lives of two women. Ao’s women are all resilient, undaunted and valiant. I prefer to read the story as a narrative of resilience rather than as one of abject suffering. Apenyo, the protagonist, is one of the greatest singers her little village has ever known. Libeni, like most other mothers in Ao’s works, is an indomitable woman who raises her daughter alone after her husband died when Apenyo

was just nine months old. As a mother Libeni was certain that she could provide a suitable upbringing for Apenyo without the help of a father figure. Therefore, as relatives urged her to remarry so that she and her daughter would have a man to “protect” them she steadfastly refuses (24). Libeni exhibits the motherly fortitude displayed by several characters written by Ao. The story’s climax occurs on a beautiful, chilly Winter morning when the entire community has assembled on the church grounds to celebrate the dedication of the newly constructed church. Apenyo, who had a beautiful voice, was the main singer of the choir about to perform for the ceremony. Their village was frequently trapped between the warring parties, the State and the underground army, and was persecuted by both. Even prior to this particular day, the villagers were harassed to pay “taxes” to underground “governments” (26). The “transaction” had also gotten over without a problem due to the fact that they were already anticipating such an occurrence, especially a few days before Christmas (ibid.). This day was selected to punish them for their “‘crime’ of paying taxes to the underground force,” since the military had apparently learned about the “transaction” and construed it as a sign of “support” for the rebels (ibid.).

When the celebration reaches its climax and Apeyno is ready to begin her solo, the soldiers cordon off the whole church area and demand the *gaonburas* or village council leaders to come out with the pastor. Apenyo, however, remained unfazed by this display of might and began singing her solo as if prompted by an “unseen presence” to defy the “might of the guns with her voice” (Ao 28). What ensued next was a terrible display of brutish power that demonstrated how such power can strip a person of all humanity. The pastor and council elders were bound, the villagers who attempted to run were either shot at or beaten brutally by the troops, and the captain of the army, whom Ao described as a “young Captain,” pulled Apenyo by the hair out to the old church building (ibid.). Inside this revered religious site, a dreadful orgy of unbridled violence began. The army men sought to “teach” the villagers the consequences of “‘supporting’ the rebel cause” by committing a savage gang rape on the young girl and, when the mother arrived to defend her, on her as well (Ao 26). Even then, however, the brutality continued; To eliminate the witnesses to this horrible act, the “captain” ordered the building, with the villagers inside, to be set on fire, but not before shooting mercilessly at them: “The cries of the wounded and the dying inside the church proved that even the house of God could not provide them security” (Ao 29).

However, as previously stated, this is not simply a tale about the suffering of the innocents; it is also about their resilience. During this gruesome display of power, the captain may have been able to suppress Apenyo's voice, but even after she was reduced to a few burnt bones, strangely he could still hear her voice echoing across the valley. The determination of young Apenyo becomes evident in the following sentences. From the following lines the grit and resilience of the young Apenyo shines through—"he thought that he could still hear the tune the young girl was humming as he was ramming himself into her virgin body, while all throughout, the girl's unseeing eyes were fixed on his face" (Ao 29). Suklapa Bhattacharjee, in her essay "State, Insurgency and (Wo)man's Human Rights" mentioned, "Under various institutions of modernity and the conflict between the 'Minority' (an awareness which is quite recent in the North-East) and the State, the 'woman' becomes an ethnic object under male 'gaze',--gendered and fetishized" (132). In an act of rape this process of objectification is complete, under the male 'gaze' of the rapist the victim's body turns to a site of violence where he may assert unchecked authority. Apenyo impedes the process of total objectification even throughout this traumatic encounter by simply staring back at her rapist. She gazes *back* at her rapist while she is being raped. In this one act, she does what the dreaded underground leaders failed to do: she challenges the authority of the hegemonic power that adheres to the principles of oppression and tyranny. By using parts of that very body that was being mutilated by the man in the uniform, she manages to unnerve him. In the sight of her open eye gazing sternly back at her assaulter lies her ultimate act of defiance. An act of defiance that has such a profound effect on the perpetrator of violence that he will be haunted by the image for the rest of his life; towards the conclusion of the story, the readers learn that the captain who unleashed unbridled violence over a whole community wound up in a maximum-security psychiatric facility. Whether or not Apenyo's subtle act of defiance has any tangible significance is a question to be pondered, for in the end she was unable to extricate herself from the murky hands of perverted power-play, yet I sense in her the shadow of Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi Mejhen. Despite being subjected to cruel brutality, Apenyo, like Dopdi, was able to oppose the authority of the powerful and thwart the process of total objectification, even during an act as horrific as rape. As discussed in Chapter 2 in a conflict situation, women's bodies are frequently transformed into symbols of cultural and ethnic identity for the community, making them especially vulnerable since they may become the primary targets of violence (Khala 69; Banerjee58). This hostile

environment further restricts women's access to the public sphere and confines them to the private sphere of household. In a way, through the figure of Apenyo, Ao challenges the assumption of women's passive existence in conflict ridden societies, despite being the subject of horrific violence. By transforming her character into an agent of resistance, Ao as a counterpublic intellectual is able to cultivate the image of a Naga woman with the capability to oppose all forms of oppression, regardless of their severity.

The women in Ao's story are remarkable figures, full of determination and fortitude. As indicated by the discussion in the second chapter of the thesis, the space that has been established in Naga society—particularly as a result of the protracted conflict—actively prohibits women from entering decision-making spaces in the public-political sphere. In stories such as “The Jungle Major” from *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* or “A Simple Question” from *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), Ao celebrates the Naga women's intellectual prowess, presence of mind, and decision-making capabilities and demonstrates how they use these qualities at the right time to save not only themselves and their families, but also their clans, communities and villages. In “A Simple Question,” the reader is introduced to Imdongla, the “barely literate” wife of a *gaonburah* (82). Imdongla, like other Naga woman, was prevented by tradition from addressing village council meetings, which were usually conducted at her house since her husband, Tekaba, was the *gaonburah*. Ao demonstrates this through an incident in which her husband told her to “keep quiet, woman. You know nothing” when Imdongla “forcefully butted in” to offer her suggestions (Ao 85). As Ao specifies, like “The Last Song” this story too is set in the time the region was engulfed with fear perpetrated by both “the underground forces as well as government soldiers” (Ao 83). This little village of Imdongla, like Apenyo's, was entangled in a web of violence in which it was usual to witness individuals beaten by underground leaders for not paying their 'taxes' properly. In this story Ao describes one such incident in which Imdongla's intelligence and compassion prevented her husband and another villager from being brutally assaulted by the leadership of the underground force. As Ao narrates, this was a particularly difficult period for village leaders like Tekaba, who were held liable by both the government and the underground if any member of their community joined or aided the opposite party. In once such occasion when a leader from the underground forces was about to beat up an innocent

man along with her husband for failing to pay 'tax' to them, it was Imdongla's ingenuity that saved both men. Ao mentions, when addressing the 'tax' system of the underground, how the once-admired rebels who fought for Naga nationality gradually lost the confidence of the common Nagas— "as the years went by, the demands grew, and reluctance or protest was met with severe beatings, not only of the person involved but of the gaonburahs and the elders as well" (82). Thus, Ao captures how the movement for Naga nationalism has gradually lost its course, as it too has succumbed to the narrative of violence perpetuated by the culture of impunity, as detailed in Chapter 2. This concept of the average Naga's disenchantment with the underground forces is captured effectively by Kire in a number of her works, particularly *Bitter Wormwood*, which will be discussed in the following chapter. As counterpublic intellectuals, both Ao and Kire's writings offer a critique of violence in its multiple layers of manifestations as it exists in the region.

Imdongla was aware of the atrocities that the underground armies were capable of inflicting on the villagers, so she took it upon herself to remedy the issue. It was precisely the mental fortitude and acumen of Imdongla, the "barely literate" woman, that saved the lives of two Naga men including her husband, who, as an accessory to tradition, refused her a place in the decision-making spaces. Imdongla, upon realising that the villager was unable to pay the "tax" of rice to the underground leader, promptly concocts a tale to save him all the while maintaining her composure even at the face of imminent danger. She begins to reprimand the villager as if he were unable to give 'tax' because she had taken rice from him and left him without any:

“Hey Toshi, why don't you tell this man that I could not return this rice to you this morning as promised? Remember you lent it to my son for the age-set feast? Here it is. So saying she set the basket on the ground and turned to the collector, 'You can see brother, this is more than what he has to give, please take the lot and go, otherwise you will be caught in the rain.'” (Ao 83)

In this manner, Ao demonstrates how resourceful Naga women can be and how they may play a crucial role in the domain of negotiations, as we have regularly observed groups such as the Naga Mothers' Association do, as described in Chapter 3.



Imdongla, like the majority of Ao's women, was able to maintain composure and behave judiciously in situations of impending peril. However, the culminating episode of the story takes place in the army camp when her husband was dragged from their house on the false excuse of "supporting the jungle men" (Ao 86). As soon as she learns that her husband has been taken in, the feisty woman marches resolutely over to the camp and makes her way through all of the protecting sentries. She shouts at the bewildered captain as she sits confidently among the armed men in front of her husband's improvised cage: "What do you want from us?" (Ao 87) He is at a loss for a response to such a basic yet profound issue, which has him baffled: "For the first time in his tenure in the hills this apparently simple village woman had made him see the impossible situation faced by the villagers." (Ao 87) This "barely" literate woman accomplishes in a few words what the previous village council leaders, with all of their political acumen, were unable to do for many years. She is able to reframe the authority's perspective on its own actions when she is able to convey the double-bind situation that they live in, via a simple and straightforward question. By successfully asserting her voice, she not only frees her husband but more importantly is able to regain her lost subjecthood in the process.

A similar exaltation of women's wisdom can also be found in "The Jungle Major", the first story of *These Hills Called Home*. It narrates the story of the beautiful Khatila, who uses her intelligence to defend her husband Punaba and the rest of the community from an army onslaught only with the help of sheer wit. This story also shows how the boundaries between public and private sphere although quite rigid when it comes to gendering of the space, loses its rigidity when it is about the clan and the family. In "State, Insurgency and (Wo)man's Human Rights", Bhattacharjee observes, how in communities like that of the protagonists of the story in the "private space of the (ethnic) community...gross violation of women's human rights" may take place (127). In a clan based society such as that of the protagonist, the boundaries between the private space of the community and the private space of the family quite often becomes vague. The clan asserts its right to intrude the circle of an individual's private sphere and influence its decision, even if they are absolutely personal ones. Especially during times of conflict, and much more so when it comes to the clan's daughters, who are viewed as objects of honour for the clan and thereby lose their distinct subjecthood. Ao depicts this incursion wonderfully in the opening lines of the story, where the

marriage between a woman from a major clan and a man from the minor one leads to the clansmen of the daughter's side declare that by sanctioning this "mismatched" marriage the father was "lowering the prestige of their clan" (Ao 1). Later in the story, this intrusion into their family life continues when the couple's infertility is again "the subject of many lewd comments and absurd speculations" ranging from Khatila's infertility and Punaba's impotence to a absurd speculations such as "she did not allow her husband to touch her" (Ao 2). 'However, "The Jungle Major" is not a story about the confluence of the two worlds, but rather one that honours the intellectual capacities of women whose voices are otherwise muted by clan based oppression. Khatila, who was thus criticized harshly by her own clansmen for marrying someone they deemed unsuitable, ends up being the one who rescues them from terrible tortures such as 'grouping' thanks to her foresight and intelligence. When Punaba, who is now an established underground commander, visits his wife on one occasion, the army learns through grapevine and launches a raid on their village. On a prior occasion, the officers had also told Khatila that she would be punished in a "very special way" if she misled them (Ao 4). So when the informer working for the underground thumped their door at the wee hours of night reporting about the approaching army, Khatila found herself in a fix: "how could she save her husband, herself and the entire village from the approaching soldiers?" (Ao 5) But within few crucial and tensed minutes she devised a plan keeping her head calm even in this moment of crisis. She used her beauty to save her husband. She remembered how her clansmen had "gasped in wonder" at the fact that a woman as beautiful as her can get married to a man who was anything but appealing to the eyes, and quickly turned her husband into a tired old servant by smearing ash on his face and limbs and started shouting at him like a ruthless owner of a hapless slave (Ao 1). Even before the officers could knock on her door, they could hear her angry screams, "You no good loafer...there is no water in the house even to wash my face. Run to the well immediately or you will rue the day you were born." (Ao 6) They were shocked. Whereas they had expected, "to see a cowering woman, crazy with fear for her husband and herself, he was confronted by a dishevelled but defiant person who displayed no agitation and seemed to be utterly oblivious to any danger" (Ao 6). This small act of deception saved her husband, who fled the scene under the appearance of a troubled servant right before the officers' scrutinising eyes. The officers could not have imagined in their wildest imaginings that an ordinary country woman could create a strategy that was so simple and yet so

ingenious: “The young and inexperienced army officer did not realize that the beautiful but simple village woman had thus foiled a meticulously planned ‘operation’ of the mighty Indian army” and that too with such ease (Ao 7). That night, not only did Khatila save her husband's life, but she also saved the entire village, as it is well known in this region that if a village had offered refuge to a rebel, they would have been severely punished by the State. Patriarchy disregards women's decision-making capacity and considers a barely literate village woman fit solely for everyday housework. The protagonist employs patriarchy’s own strategy against it. She knew that the officer would not expect a simple village housewife to be able to outwit him, much less in a matter of minutes when danger was literally at the door. In Ao's works, the influence of a conflict scenario on people’s life always takes precedence over the conflict's intricacies. By emphasising the effects of violence on the general people and their resistance to the culture of impunity, Ao, as an organic intellectual, contributes to the narrative of peace building in a manner analogous to that of the activists described in Chapter 3, but in a unique way. This might also be viewed as Ao's contribution to the counterpublic that Naga women establish, as a forum for them to express their identities in contrast to the violent political-public sphere, where their opinions are typically disregarded by both parties to the conflict, as discussed in Chapter 2.

If these stories of Ao honour the rationality and intelligence of ordinary country women, the following stories celebrate their stoic fortitude. The common factor in these two stories, “The Night” and “A New Chapter” (both from *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*) is not only the stoic female characters they portray but also the fact that they draw their strength from a very tradition-specific role: that of motherhood. As Bhattachajee notes, to establish her selfhood in a conflict situation inside a patriarchal system, a woman must culturally refigure and redefine her rights by “widening of their sex specific roles” (129). As described in the preceding chapter in the context of the various mothers’ groups functioning in the region, motherhood has come up as one of the platforms that derive meaning from this particular point. In this chapter, however, an attempt will be made to identify these moments of power in literary narratives. In “The Night,” the reader encounters Imnala, an unwed mother who is pregnant with a child out of wedlock. Her first suitor, with whom she has a four-year-old daughter, abandoned her for the “important business” of joining the underground army to fight against the government and army of India, and afterwards married a fellow

cadet (44). Although this left her distraught, she rebuilds her life with her daughter in her parents' home. However, no sooner had she begun to put her life back together than she became involved in another illicit romance, this time with a married man. And now her fate hung in the hands of the village council who would decide what could be done about the situation. "The Night" narrates the account of the day when the protagonist and her family, filled with dread, spent hours contemplating the outcome of the council meeting that night, which would determine her and her child's fate. In a patriarchal society the fate of a child born out of wedlock depends completely on the man who has fathered the child, as Ao points out: "the fate of the unborn child would be determined on that day depending on the admission or denial of parentage of the man involved" (46). Imnala fears that if her second child was a girl like her first, she would face the same fate as her sister—growing up without a father-figure. However, the case would be worse for a boy child, because if it is a boy "and if the father cast doubts on his parentage" he would have to live with the "accused title" of being a "child of the street" (ibid.). This terrified Imnala, because "in Ao society, for a boy to be thus branded was to become a non-person" (ibid.). The very existence of the child, then, depended on the decision of the man. Although Imnala throughout the story is mostly seen wrestling with the fear of the unborn becoming an outcast even before their birth, near the end of the story the reader notices a profound transformation. Looking at her sick daughter she draws courage, her enduring abilities as a single mother bestows the courage upon her to be determined to "face her accusers with head held high", she decides:

Come what may...I shall devote my life to bringing up these two children the best way I can. I shall finish my high school, get a job and educate them'.... 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. (54)

Like Imnala, in the story "A New Chapter" we find yet another character who finds her strength to assert her selfhood through the courage she draws from her motherhood. "A New Chapter" can be interpreted as a story in which one cousin exploits the other to continue his corrupt ways of earning money and then betrays her in the end upon achieving success; however, I interpret it as a story that depicts the simultaneous decline of one cousin and uplifting of another within the same time frame.

The narrative focuses on Nungsang, a military contractor, and his cousin Merenla, a widow with two children. Upon the advice of a friend, when Nungsang's business of selling food materials to the army started failing, he bribes the authority, the "Subedar Major," to take "substitutes for the genuine articles" (143). Like his friend, he begins to deliver pumpkins in place of meat-on-hoofs, dried fish in place of fresh fish, and plums and pears in place of mangoes and apples, which were abundant in this region. Because he required a large supply of pumpkins, he persuaded his widowed cousin to begin farming pumpkins on her modest plot of land. Things were going well until he became even more greedy and power-hungry and decided to leave his business to seek a career as a politician. The unfortunate woman was now left with a pumpkin-filled yard and the forlorn hope that her cousin will not abandon her in her hour of need. It takes her a few days to comprehend that her brother has not only broken the vow he was obligated to keep as a merchant, but also the familial bonds that are more "sacrosanct than any other" in a Naga community (144). Her home was suddenly filled with harvested pumpkins, whose odour both enraged and disgusted her: "a crippling lethargy seemed to overwhelm her and she lay there for days staring at nothing" (145). Nevertheless, like Imnala, she regained hope when she realised that she would have to carry on regardless of the circumstances in order to provide for her two sons. However, before she could move forward, she needed to purge herself of the past. The next episode, despite being somewhat humorous, demonstrates how frustrated the disillusioned woman must be—Merenla began yelling "Vote For" while tossing a pumpkin to the ground while wearing a red scarf on her head (145). In a sense, she was conducting penance for assisting an undeserving and corrupt person. In the Naga community, several cleansing rituals are performed to cleanse the body of an ill individual, as they believe that disease is a manifestation of a spirit possessing the body. Reading Merenla's frenzied performance within the context of Naga culture, it appears that she, too, was engaging in a similar cleaning ritual to free herself of a terrible past. As soon as she finished discarding her pumpkins, she felt instantly much better. Thus, the deed assisted her in overcoming the melancholy and mental agony in which she had been immersed until now. When her children gazed at her, they could see a sign of relief on her face, as if "their mother got a fresh lease of life" (Ao 146).

The motif of motherhood appears repeatedly throughout Ao's works. In her story "Three Women" (from the collection *Laburnum for My Head*), Ao celebrates the

concept of motherhood that transcends patriarchal conventions. In this story, the three female protagonists encounter varied experiences of motherhood that both complicate and empower their status as subjects in a patriarchal society. The story is about Martha, her mother Medemla and Medemla's mother Lipoktula. The three women experience motherhood in ways that go beyond the patriarchal norm. It is revealed in the first section of the narrative, which focuses on Martha's perspective, that although she was raised by a Naga mother Martha is not a Naga by ethnicity. Martha describes herself as a girl with thick curly hair, "dark complexion" and "strange features", for which she endured severe bullying throughout her childhood (63). One day a classmate shockingly reveals to her "Don't you know that you do not belong to our village and that Medemla is not your real mother?" (64). Martha was adopted by Medemla when her mother (who was from the "Tea-tribe") died while giving birth to her in the government-run dispensary where Medemla worked as a nurse. This is revealed in the second section of the story, which focuses on Medemla's narrative. Martha's father had vehemently refused to take his child home because she was a girl. Medemla, who was a young unwed girl at the time, could not help but feel an empathetic connection with the vulnerable infant whose family had abandoned her because of her sex— "It was as if some unseen hand was forging a bond between my lonely self and this abandoned child" Medemla confesses (69). Hence, Medemla made the decision to adopt the girl despite being aware of the potential repercussions of adopting a child as a single woman in a patriarchal society, especially one whose "genetic and cultural discrepancy" was all too apparent (62). She did so despite words of caution from her Nursing Superintendent and the prospect of opposition from her own family. Like other women characters written by Ao, Medemla too possesses a character full of courage and resilience. From her part of the story, we learn that she is determined to live her life on her own terms without paying much heed to the society's perception of her. After her long-time fiancé Imsutemjen abruptly and without explanation refused to marry her, she resolved to remain single and live an independent life on her own terms, a decision that shocked not just society but even her parents. But nothing could sway Medemla's determination, she explains, "When it became apparent to everyone, my parents, included that I was determined to remain single, they simply left me alone" (67). Her resolute character and her tenacity shine through once more as she successfully convinces her parents to embrace her adopted child as a member of their family despite their initial opposition. Therefore, when Martha confronts her about her identity,

Medemla only asks her, “So now, don’t you think that I am your mother though in a different way?” (72). Thus, in lieu of a clear response, she guides Martha to the realisation that, while appearing “different” from her mother, Martha “feel(s) no different” in her heart (ibid.). Thus, we see how Ao uses the metaphor of motherhood as a role that enables women to transcend clan and community barriers and accept the *other* as her own, notwithstanding even the community’s disapproval. In Chapter 3 it was explored how the role of motherhood has allowed Naga women build a political space for themselves that is distinct from the violence filled sphere of politics of conflict, a sphere that is primarily controlled by men from both sides.

While the *male* political sphere of the State and underground forces generate divisions along the lines of tribes and ethnicities, this collective identity can be viewed as a political strategy on the side of women to resist this ethnicity-based politics of the male-dominated political sphere. During the Naga-Kuki confrontations of the 1990s, where brutality was unleashed in the name of ethnic cleansing, the Kuki Mothers’ Association and the Naga Mothers’ Association provided the clearest example of such solidarity that transcends ethnic division. Moving beyond their ethnic identities, these women’s organizations played a significant role in halting the sectarian massacres and providing refuge for the victims (Chinnu 59). Thus, through solidarity, they are able to successfully resist the male-dominated political sphere and the violence associated with it. In the 1990s, the Naga Mothers’ Association were able to conduct successful negotiations between the warring factions of different Naga tribes and between the Naga and Kuki communities due to their capacity to rise as social mothers. Thus, the metaphor of motherhood in circulation in this region today is centred on the notion of solidarity, a motif that comes to life in this story in the bond between Medemla and her daughter Martha. As an unmarried woman who is about to give birth, Martha’s motherhood experience does not conform to the patriarchal ideals of the society either. However, she is only able to do so because her mother and grandmother have established a protected safe space for her that is shielded from society’s prying eyes. From Lipoktula’s part of the story, readers learn that there is a terrible and traumatic secret surrounding Medemla’s birth that Lipoktula has kept hidden from everyone. Here, she describes the traumatic sexual assault she experienced at the hands of her former neighbour Merensashi, who also happens to be the biological father of Imsutemjen, Medemla’s former fiancé. From Lipoktula, the reader learns that Medemla

was conceived as a result of this assault. Lipoktula, upon learning of her daughter's relationship with Meresahsis's son, mustered the strength to face him, disclosing that he is Medemla's biological father. As a result, Imsutemjen was compelled to call off the engagement. Thus, we learn that Lipoktula's experience of motherhood is also marred by a painful experience, although she has managed to drown that anguish by drawing strength from her motherhood. Ao captures the relationship between the three women wonderfully when she refers to them as "a strange trio, as though encating a ritualistic affirmation of the power of mother-love to mesh the insecurity of innocence in the magic of an emotionally enlarged truth" (72). As though the three have established a unique female space for themselves by enacting the bond of motherhood, which the evils of the outside patriarchal world are incapable of penetrating. This story is notable for its depiction of diverse motherhood experiences that challenge the patriarchal notion of the mother's role as a monolithic entity. These are, in a sense, deviant mothers whose differences in the experience of motherhood have not hindered but rather strengthened their bond, transcending trauma and even identity politics. At the conclusion, the reader is presented with a scene that embodies this "ritualistic affirmation" of the bond between women as mothers and daughters. Martha is about to give birth, but the father Apko can only observe from a distance. She is encircled by Medemla and Lipoktula, the mother and grandmother, as though they are enacting the formation of an exclusively female space from which Apok—the father and the man—is ejected. Ao writes:

Apok, the new father, who is watching the activities of the women from the doorway, now comes forward, directing his gaze towards the bed.... But his vision is obstructed by the daunting circle of these women, these three different kinds of mothers, standing as though mesmerized by the miracle of new life. He is reluctant to break the spell and, feeling like an intruder in a sacred ceremony, slips out unobserved (80).

The depiction of the only male character's physical removal from the place emphasizes upon the idea of an exclusively feminine space fostered by the bond of motherhood, in contrast to the patriarchal social realm. The story celebrates different experiences of motherhood through which women are able to establish a network of solidarity and empathy, thereby assisting each other in overcoming the threats posed by



the patriarchal system. In this story, Ao's depiction of motherhood, thus, evokes the metaphor of the maternal frame, which, as discussed in the third chapter of the thesis, has helped Naga women establish a space for themselves while simultaneously resisting the oppression of multiple forms of patriarchy in the region.

The titular short story of *Laburnum for My Head* deals, albeit subtly, with another depiction of women and space in Naga society. This is the story of Lentina, who is determined to find a space for her burial before she dies, rather than the one by her husband's grave that her family has already chosen for her without her consent. Read in the light of the lack of inheritance rights when it comes to land, as mentioned in Chapter 2, her odd yearning takes on a new significance. In her rather peculiar yearning, one may discern a woman's need to find a space for herself that transcends the roles and spaces predetermined by her society. In this plan, Lentina's only confidante is her long-time driver, Babu; she does not want her sons or her family to dictate her life (or death) anymore. Although somewhat morbid, it appears that if not in life, then in death Lentina wants to possess her own space, her own piece of land where she can be laid to rest. Thus, she expresses a desire for an independent decision that reflects her individuality, which is often denied to women when they are relegated to a passive existence within the private sphere.

The story meticulously follows Lentina's journey through the public sphere of bureaucratic and financial tangles as she maneuvers her way through them to obtain her desired piece of land. Ao highlights the pragmatism with which this elderly woman negotiates with landowners and Town Committee officials —

(S)he knew that sooner than later she would be visited by members of the Town Committee and the issue about 'ownership' would be raised, because all such grounds were to be only in custody of either the church or other religious organizations, with due permission from the Committee. Anticipating their move, she had already drawn up a legal document.... In the document she had declared that she would donate the piece of land to the Town Committee, and not to the Church, if, and only if, they gave a written undertaking that it would be managed according to her terms (12).

In a society where women are typically prohibited from entering the decision-making space, by allowing us a glimpse into Lentina's mind as she considers such a strange yet crucial decision for herself, Ao provides a novel perspective against the generic image of the passive Naga women, performing what she had called "benevolent subordination" upon themselves. Lentina's desire for a separate gravesite away from her husband and family could be read as a metaphor for her desire for a space for herself outside of the private sphere of home and family to which women have been relegated for centuries.

When viewed from this angle, the conclusion of the story, rather than being bleak, turns nearly optimistic in a way. Lentina is finally able to rest on her own land, which she has obtained by herself, and there she plants her favourite laburnum tree. Instead of a pretentious headstone that she viewed as "man's puny attempts to defy death" she desired the "buttery-yellow splendour" of the laburnum flower to adorn her grave; Ao narrates, "So ends the story of the un-dramatic life of an ordinary woman who cherished one single passionate wish that a humble laburnum tree should bloom once a year on her crown" (20). Even in her death Lentina, the "ordinary woman" with an "un-dramatic life", brings about a change that is small and yet significant. One of the conditions Lentina placed on the town committee was that no gaudy headstones will be allowed in the entire graveyard erected on her land; instead, blossoming trees should adorn the graves. And now as Ao describes, "in the entire expanse there is not a single stone monument. Instead, flowering bushes take root blooming in their own seasons" (20). Hence, the morbid space of the cemetery ends up resembling a colourful garden, and Lentina is thus able to change the cityscape, even if marginally. In a society where women are not formally inducted into the decision-making sphere and are subjected to unequal land rights, this transformation seems significant. Through her one wish, Lentina is able to exercise ownership, even in her death. In Ao's narrative, here is where a "ordinary woman" achieves extraordinary heights, and the story concludes with a celebration of this remarkable potential that could be found in any and every common Naga woman— "So every May, something extraordinary" (20).

Ao's women are all ordinary Naga citizens grappling with the difficulties of everyday life—with some coming from then rural and some from the urban spaces. However, it is the recurring theme of resilience and fortitude that binds these characters

together. Every single one of them is portrayed as a strong-willed woman whose empowerment originates from her ability to fight life's obstacles and challenges on her own and survive. Ao weaves a narrative that establishes a discursive space in which not only the Naga women are the focal point, but also their identity may be rewritten from the perspective of their own. The fictional works of Ao are, hence, noted for their resilient female protagonists, which can be found not just in these two collections of short stories, but also in her novel and memoir. In the next part of this chapter, we will discuss two of her most recent works— *Aosenla's Story*, the only novel that she has written, and *Once upon a Life: Burnt curry and Bloody Rags*, which is her memoir. Both of these texts work with the trope of memory writing. Whereas in her memoir it is her personal memory that she shares, in *Aosenla's Story* she weaves a fictional storyline about a woman whose life is depicted in an episodic narrative that mimics the protagonist's own memories.

### **5.iii *Aosenla's Story*: Subversion, Identity and “Benevolent Subordination”**

*Aosenla's Story* is essentially the story of a common Naga woman in quest for her own identity. In a cultural milieu where the question of Naga identity has become a key issue in the socio political reality of the Naga communities, the novel offers a fresh perspective on what the identity of a Naga woman entails. Aosenla, the titular character, is a woman approaching old age who is striving to find out her own identity as she recalls many incidents from her life and the circumstances that impacted them. The novel depicts Aosenla's life, but only via episodes that we learn about from her recollection. At the beginning of the novel Aosenla is seen looking down at a wedding invitation in her hands, as she begins to recollect her own wedding ceremony many years ago. Then she commences upon a profound and poignant meditation on the elements of her life that were constructed for her and those she developed for herself. This novel's narrative is not linear since Ao does not follow a sequential structure of temporality in this work. The novel has been presented in an episodic manner, as it is relayed through the protagonist's memory.

While discussing the “orality-literacy shift” Walter J Ong points out, one of the most significant effects of the shift from orality to writing is the growth and change of narrative, as it is a “major genre of verbal art, occurring all the way from primary oral cultures into high literacy” (137). He also thinks that the process of presenting a story

in an oral culture depends upon the “functioning of memory” (138). Since memory does not work in a sequential manner, the storytelling process inspired by oral cultures also exhibit a narrative framework that does not follow linearity. This is also reflected in the novel’s narrative structure which, following Ao’s conclusion in “Writing Orality”, can be considered part of the “new literature” that is emerging from these erstwhile oral communities. As Ong further notes “you do not find climactic linear plots ready-formed in people’s lives” (140). And since these novel focuses on the memories of the protagonist’s life (which is our only access to the plot of the novel), the story does not follow a climactic linear plot. Ong also mentions that the oral narratives followed an “episodic” structure without a “climactic linear plot” (141). As a result of the integration of orality and writing in these cultures, writers like Temsula Ao, seek to replicate that same narrative framework in their written works. As described in Chapter 4, this is a feature of the “new literature” that Temsula Ao discusses in her essay “Writing Orality,” in which an indigenous writer incorporates elements from their traditional oral narratives in an attempt to preserve the tradition alive despite the introduction of script and print. As an organic intellectual from an oral community, Ao assumes the role of both the writer and the custodian of a culture that is facing the danger of erosion. Thus, Ao uses her position as an author to represent and maintain the history of her community through her own writing, much like a Gramscian organic intellectual operating in the literary public sphere.

The episodic patterning that Ong described, may be observed in this novel as memory and plot are inextricably linked here, producing a pattern that follows the flow of memory. Thus, Ao’s writing here challenges the canonical method of novel writing by defying temporal linearity. As the plot is guided by memory it has little to do with the precise linear depiction of events in a chronological arrangement. This is why the plot structure of this novel might come across as perplexing to readers who are accustomed to the school of realist novels. And probably herein lies the distinctiveness of the said “new literature”, which assimilates an indigenous way of storytelling with a modern form, albeit in a language that is foreign to the land. The readers are thus bound to stay with Aosenla throughout this journey, shifting in time, nearly compelling the reader to actively participate in her tale rather than being a passive audience. The reader follows Aosenla as she negotiates with multiple difficult and traumatic experiences in her life while, she constantly keeps on questioning herself, trying to figure out her

identity as an individual. The reader first meets her as a young and intelligent girl who loves going to college and longs for intellectual stimulation. However, her intellectual quest for self-actualization must come to a stop as her family, eager to move up the ranks in society, pushes her into marrying a stranger from an influential family. She attempts to break out of this arrangement with all her strength, but is overwhelmed by her family members who do not comprehend what she is going through.

The tenets of benevolent patriarchy that were explored in the context of the formation of gendered space in Chapter 2, is exemplified through the character of Aosenla's father in this novel. He is a doting father, but after Aosenla reaches puberty, his attitude toward his daughter changes drastically. There is hardly any communication between the two anymore. While he spoils his daughter with costly gifts, as Aosenla grows older, he refuses to encourage her to pursue further education or even speak to her about his intention to marry her off. He uses formal distance to prevent an honest connection with his daughter, which, according to Aosenla is how "most fathers behaved" in their society (11). Thus, it becomes obvious from Aosenla's memories and observations that no matter how liberated the existence of women may appear in Naga communities; normalization of patriarchy is ingrained in this society as well. Her father probably poses the first point of oppression for Aosenla, and her nonconforming self admits to feeling a "strange kind of antagonism" toward her father, as if he were "an adversary who betrayed her trust" (12). However, as the story progresses this dissident self of Aosenla is slowly lost, as her life is inflicted with multiple points of suppression. Furthermore, her parents' communication also seems to be affected by her father's patriarchal attitude. Her mother is mostly afraid of her father and considers blindly supporting her husband as the "bounden duty of a wife" (Ao 6). Hence, although she is weary of marrying her daughter off to a much older man she still holds it to be her "responsibility" to support her husband's "wish" (9). This unwavering devotion to her husband creates a schism in the mother-daughter connection, as the mother simply withdraws into silence, depriving Aosenla of any answers to her dilemma.

As discussed before, the novel follows an episodic narrative. The entire narrative is viewed through Aosenla's eyes as she sits on her porch many years later, reminiscing about her entire existence. These episodes recount the protagonist's experiences of difficulty and trauma that she had to face through her life, events that

moulded her identity. If her forced marriage shaped her life, her turbulent relationship with her alcoholic husband altered her life and identity all the more. The institution of marriage is critiqued through the prism of all marital relationships shown in the novel—whether between Aosenla’s parents, in-laws or her own marriage. In all of these relationships the husband is always posited in a higher ground than the wife, and the wife is expected to stay subservient to her husband, as is the norm in a patriarchal set-up. Marriage is often viewed more as a pragmatic solution than an emotional relationship in this novel. Ao, in particular, portrays Aosenla’s marriage almost as a ploy, a strategy for her family to gain more power by establishing ties with an influential family. Aosenla thinks she feels like a chess piece while describing her marriage arrangements, or an actor who is “coerced to perform on cues from invisible prompters” (19). Aosenla tries her hardest to say no to her prospective husband directly, but she is unable to do so because her mind was “becoming increasingly scared” of the consequences of her refusal (20). Through details of Aosenla’s marriage Ao reveals that while caste hierarchy does not exist in Naga societies, clan hierarchy is still prevalent. Aosenla’s prospective husband, Bendang, also did not acquiesce to this marriage at first. He was involved with a woman who was not approved by his family because she was from to a “minor clan of the village” (21). This event demonstrates how clan hierarchy, much like caste hierarchy, goes hand in hand with patriarchy in this society.

The couple’s first meeting sheds light on Bendang’s egotistical nature, which Aosenla successfully subverted by merely showing no interest in the marriage. Aosenla’s subjectivity is completely denied throughout the process of marriage, and her consent appears to have little to no significance for the relationship. Details of her own wedding are kept away from her—“(in) the excitement and fanfare of the preparation only one person was left out: the bride-to-be” Aosenla remembers (26) She even comes to know about the date from a cousin (*ibid.*). The description of her wedding concludes with a depiction of the uncomfortable shoes she is forced to wear. The shoes “pinched” her feet, but Aosenla merely nodded to imply that “they were all right” (27). It probably foreshadows the series of compromises that will engulf her self-identity over time. In a patriarchal society a woman is often used as a commodity in the institution of marriage. In Aosenla’s case, it goes one step further when her husband severely chastises her for failing to meet the needs of one of his key business clients:

Bendang is enraged when Aosenla refuses to dance with a certain army major at a party because it may cost him his “army contract of the year” (31). In retrospect, Aosenla interjects– “(w)hat kind of a man was he becoming that he thought nothing of using his own wife as bait” (31). Aosenla thus comes to the realization that Bendang is not even ashamed to use his wife as currency in exchange of his personal gain, completely commodifying her subject-hood. Ao does not fail to mention how canonical Eurocentric literature propagates false narratives about marriage and a wife’s role in a marital relationship – “Her idealistic notions about love and life were further fuelled by high reading of romantic novels where the heroine always emerged triumphant, and the rake, reformed” (32). Hence Aosenla continues to pursue her wifely duties as she has been taught by the discourses around her through the western form of education. The same ideas are also propagated by the women in her society who had advised the new bride “remember it is the wife who has to guide and help the man to become a good husband” (32). When she considers the situation now, when she is far removed from those early days of failed expectations, she realises that she was only entrapped by “her own web of unrealistic expectations” fuelled by the discourses around her (35).

Ao’s novel also captures the public-private space division that was discussed in Chapter 2 of the thesis. As she ruminates on her marriage Aosenla comes to believe that once she leaves the confines of the house of her husband, she has no identity of her own. She is regarded as either the wife of a wealthy man or the daughter-in-law of a powerful family. Thus “she was no longer her own self” once she stepped outside the private sphere and into the public (2). When a woman’s identity is only valid in relation to a man, the public space becomes inherently gendered in nature. In this context, she recalls being humiliated by her husband and his entire family simply because she wanted to assist her cousin in staging a musical performance for her school. Her mother-in-law had attacked her, saying she should be “ashamed” of herself because instead of being at home with her children, she is “gallivanting” all around the town (38). Her claim is based on her orthodox belief that “a mother’s place is in the house”, in the private sphere bound by four walls (*ibid*). Hence, in the eyes of her in-laws, something as innocuous as assisting a cousin becomes an act of transgression. This influential, urbane family’s mentality is so regressive that her husband regards her habit of discussing novels with a younger man as “unbecoming for a married woman” (36).

Over time, even the private sphere of her house becomes an uneasy space for Aosenla; she feels as if “she was there and not there at all at the same time” (76).

The recounting of the couple’s conjugal relationship by Aosenla further underscores the problematic aspect of their relationship. Married off as a young girl, Aosenla feels that her newly awakened sexuality had only “enlarged her vulnerability” (44). She feels “condemned” by her own sexuality because she was led to believe that she “used” it to achieve “some kind of pacification–reconciliation” with her husband (45). It is important to note here that she is reminded of a traumatic sexual experience she had as a child, in this context. When she was a child, a stranger sexually assaulted her under the guise of presenting her with a gift– a pair of dangling earrings. The fact that Aosenla recalls this traumatic experience while contemplating her conjugal life with her husband demonstrates how dysfunctional her marital relationship has become in her mind. Survivors of sexual assault frequently come to despise their own bodies because, in their minds, the body was the very site on which the trauma was enacted and through which the individual experienced it. As a result, children who have been sexually abused frequently develop a sense of self-loathing. In the novel, Aosenla feels that her sexual relationship with her husband “seemed to reinforce this sense of self-loathing” with a passionate force (48). The fact that she connects these two experiences signifies how, in her perception, the relationship she shares with Bendang is full of misogynistic hostility. It presumably foreshadows another incident of sexual assault that she experienced right at her home, the private sphere that patriarchy claims protect her from the horrors of the public. Only later in the novel does the reader learn of Aosenla’s experience of marital rape, which occurred early in her marriage.

As Aosenla reflects on that traumatic experience in retrospect, she realises that she was so brainwashed by the gendered discourses around her that she did not even realise her husband had “committed any offence against her” at the time; rather, she had come to the conclusion that “he was only exercising his prerogative as a husband” (78). By giving her readers a direct access to Aosenla’s thoughts over the years, Ao demonstrates how patriarchal discourses brainwash women into accepting misogyny as the norm. Anne Whitehead writes in her book *Trauma Fiction* –

Trauma carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities. Insufficiently grasped at the time of its



occurrence, trauma does not lie in the possession of the individual, to be recounted at will, but rather acts as a haunting or possessive influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is, moreover, experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition. (13)

As a result, trauma of any kind possesses the capability to “unsettle temporal structures” (ibid.). This could explain why Aosenla’s narrative lacks a rigid linear structure. As Whitehead mentions, in such accounts the narrator “seeks to rethink the relation between memory and trauma to construct models of historical temporality which depart from the strictly linear” (ibid.). She further notes that if trauma is at all amenable to narrative formulation, it necessitates a literary form that deviates from standard linear sequential manner, as the “interruption of one time into another” is caused by the “traces of unresolved past events” (14). It is also significant to note that Aosenla is reminded of her traumatic childhood experience in relation to her conjugal life. Whitehead pointed out the “traumatic incident is not fully acknowledged at the time that it occurs and only becomes an event at some later point of intense emotional crisis” (14). Hence, it is reasonable to assume that when another sexual assault occurs in her life in the form of marital rape, Aosenla’s memory of her childhood trauma is re-lived by her. Aosenla, as a response to these violent experiences, only withdraws into an “innate reticence” that is disguised as “some form of resistance” (Ao 83). In a society where a woman’s family forces her into marriage for social currency and where marital rape is not even recognised as a crime, this was probably the only way left for a woman to save her sanity.

It does not, however, save her in the end. Aosenla realises that suppressing all of these traumatic incidents only pushes her towards an inevitable breakdown. It is probably her miscarriage that finally pushes her over the edge. When she became pregnant again after the birth of two daughters, her husband and his family were quite vocal about their wish for a male child, her husband and his family were adamant about having a son. It did not help that this child that she had lost was a male child, and her in-laws vociferously blamed her for depriving them of a male heir. Because of the complications from the miscarriage, her reproductive organs had to be removed as well, which was frowned upon by her in-laws. The trauma she felt from the loss of the child left an emptiness in her but she hardly had the time to deal with it. She also had no

support system because her husband had left for a business trip before she had even returned from the hospital. Her mother-in-law continued to viciously attack her, with no regard for Aosenla's loss and grief—"I had started to feel sorry for you but now I am convinced that God has punished you for your arrogance" she claimed (61). Although she puts up a brave front, Aosenla's psyche was gradually breaking from suppressing yet another form of trauma. An acute grief that she had to face all by herself, alone, while trapped in a loveless marriage. Just as she had gone through a period of self-loathing following the sexual assault, the miscarriage brought on a new bout of self-hatred, especially towards her body which was still showing signs of maternity—"she cried bitterly and cursed her own body for betraying her so cruelly" (65).

This is how the society pressures the victim to blame herself, despite the fact that it is the misogyny around her that essentially victimises the woman. Aosenla hardly had time or space to grieve for her own deceased child. After reflecting on her miscarriage, Aosenla is compelled to consider her previous pregnancy experiences. Although her husband and his family did not openly discriminate against her daughters, their collective disappointment was palpable when she gave birth to her second daughter—"Aosenla had to bear the silent accusation as if it was her fault that the baby was a girl" (87). Her mother-in-law made sure Aosenla was aware of their disappointment by loudly recounting to a relative the story of a woman who was divorced for giving birth to five daughters. Whereas it is true that female foeticide is not prevalent in the Naga communities, Ao clearly captures the dogmatic view of having a male heir to continue the family name being prevalent in this society, through these parts of the novel. Thus, Ao depicts patriarchy's dominance over Naga women's lives through these snippets of everyday misogyny in Aosenla's life. To escape from these forms of oppression, Aosenla turns to her daughters. The relation Aosenla shared with her own mother was hampered by her mother's obeisance towards her father. Despite her desire to support Aosenla, she was unable to do so due to her commitment to her husband's wishes, which she was taught to always prioritise, even over her own children. As a result, her heteronormative relationship with her husband, which adheres to the norms of a patriarchal institution, severely disrupted the space between the mother and the daughter. However, Aosenla's situation, on the other hand, was different. Neglected by her husband, Aosenla found refuge in her relationship with her

daughters as she engrossed herself in the lives of her daughters. For her it was a “deliberate way to move as far away as possible from any emotional and physical involvement with her husband” (91). Thus, motherhood finally provides the space for Aosenla where she can shelter herself. When she was unable to communicate with her husband during her grief, she found comfort in the bond she had with her daughters.

Ao notes that Aosenla found maternal love to be, “strong, fulfilling and free” (91) Thus motherhood also becomes a liberating space for Aosenla as opposed to the oppressive space that her marriage had become. As studied in Chapter3, the motherhood trope is a very powerful symbol in Naga communities. Activists have used this trope to find a space of agency in a society that intends to restrict them by creating a gendered space. Ao’s depiction of motherhood as a space where Aosenla feels “free”, could be read as a reference to the symbolical power of motherhood in the Naga society. At the same time, the fact that she shares this bond with her daughters, who were regarded as less than a son by her family, may be interpreted as the formation of a bond of solidarity among those who have been victimised by the gendered forms of oppression that surround them. In her mind Aosenla juxtaposes her relationship with her two daughters against her own relationship with her mother. She recalls how hard it was to discuss with her mother about even the most trivial matters, as she would have to back away deliberately before answering her questions—“obviously for fear of incurring the displeasure of her husband” (119). However, instead of feeling resentment, Aosenla feels a sense of empathy for her mother—“ruefully she thought, if there was a living martyr, it was her mother” (ibid). Coming to this realisation helps her form a bond of solidarity with her mother as well, just like she did with her own daughters—all victims of a gendered society. But, unlike her mother, Aosenla understands how to use the space of motherhood to help her daughters find their own agency.

Later in the novel, when her in-laws try to force her elder daughter Chubala to pursue a career in the church, Aosenla decides not to let their decisions interfere with her daughter’s aspirations. Chubala wanted to study medicine, and Aosenla had decided to fight for her daughter’s dreams, giving her the support she lacked from her own parents. Thus, motherhood provides the protagonist with a space for resistance, solidarity, and agency. Not only does she no longer require her husband’s

companionship, but she also no longer requires an identity associated with him, as she did when she was a young wife. She almost begins to despise Bendang's physical presence in her space as well. This is reflected in Aosenla's reaction when Bendang is involved in an accident and is forced to leave their bedroom for treatment. Aosenla feels— "if in the earlier days her bedroom was a space of conflicting experience... it now became her refuge; a sanctuary" (100). Her bedroom, which was once the site of her most painful experiences of suffering and humiliation, has now become her sanctuary— a space where she could be free of any "intrusions" (ibid). The erstwhile discomfort she faced in the private sphere of home is now replaced by a "unique sense of belonging" where no one or nothing could dictate her anymore (101). There are times when she tries to temper this feeling of liberation, as this was caused by a grievous accident of her husband. However, she cannot help but feel a genuine sense of relief, finding a space of her own. She even starts thinking of Bendang's presence as an intrusion and the thought of him coming back to share this room evokes in her a sense of "vague fear", scared of losing her "newfound freedom" (101). The fact that she possesses this perception demonstrates that, unlike her mother or mother-in-law, she has successfully carved out a space for herself that she can truly call her own, away from her husband. We see near the end of the novel that Aosenla has grown so distant from her husband, withdrawing into the "neat little world" she "built around her daughters", that their communication has become redundant for her (178). Her instinct to save this little world with her daughters gives her the strength to face one of the most difficult periods of her life. One day, she discovers the existence of a child Bendang fathered with another woman, which even he was unaware of. This child had now become a mother herself, and she had also died while giving birth to her own daughter. When Aosenla learns that this new-born child's grandfather is planning to visit her home and confront Bendang about the orphaned child, she is compelled to act. The incident rightfully enrages Aosenla because she recognises the hypocrisy of her husband's family and their false sense of propriety —"how could any woman remain so calm after learning of the perfidy of the man she called husband?" she asks herself (122). However, she comes to the realisation that, for the sake of her daughters, she must step up and handle this issue herself, as accusation of this nature will only lead to more "chaos" for her daughter's lives (178). Hence, to "succeed in her scheme of saving the future of her daughters" Aosenla is compelled to take control of the situation (178).

In this context it is important to remember that, as discussed in Chapter 2, women in Ao society do not have the right to inherit their parents' property. As a mother of two daughters, this must have worried Aosenla, and had influenced all of her decisions. Aosenla, hence, comes to the conclusion that she is not doing it to save her husband, but rather to prevent the consequences of his past from "starting to overwhelm" her "little world" with her daughters. (178). She is also compelled to care for the orphaned baby due to her own feelings of victimisation. She felt a connection with the little girl who was born into a "cruel world"— yet another victim of her husband's callous cruelty (112). Aosenla begins to see the child as a "fellow sufferer"— "reminding her of her own sense of being utterly alone" (182). She ensures that the child is placed in a shelter run by their family doctor. Later, the baby is handed over to her grandmother, the woman with whom Bendang had a relationship. Throughout it all, however, the main culprit behind this chaos, Bendang, remains blissfully unaware as his wife assumes full responsibility. On the other hand, Bendang's presence and opinions had become completely redundant for Aosenla after all this, and she no longer bothered to even communicate with him. Although Aosenla attempts to justify her actions as a motherly instinct to protect her daughters, one cannot help but feel that by not confronting Bendang, she succumbs to the patriarchal structures that surround her. Ao interjects in this context— "the person who was responsible for creating this absurd situation was blithely unaware of the storm looming over his seemingly placid life", as Aosenla continues playing the role of an "arranger" for the consequences of his past action (142). And in consequence, once again she is compelled to deal with a traumatic situation all by herself. Aosenla's subservient nature, which forced her into this marriage in the first place, is thus shown to be still present in her somewhere. This is probably why, even near the end of the novel, Aosenla is still struggling with the question she has asked herself her entire life— "who she really is" (195).

Aosenla asks herself: is she just the "timid wife", the "disappointing daughter-in-law", has she "forgotten something essential about herself", adjusting to the many different roles she is expected by others to perform (194)? The novel's final pages shed light on Aosenla's identity crisis. She often wonders if she has suppressed her real self— "the essential Aosenla" that got "diminished" trying to cater to others' needs (195). She despises her identity as the "mistress" of her husband's house— "is this what she has become, just another matriarch lording it over a petty, limited sphere?" (ibid).

She laments the fact that she has only been restricted to the “limited” private sphere because society has demanded it of her. She wonders if she has always been a mere “possession” of her husband, as the heteronormative structure of marriage requires (196). She wonders if “bending over” for others she has “betrayed” herself by “abandoning” her own subjectivity (*ibid.*). She finds solace in the fact that: “no one entirely and absolutely owns one’s own 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” ; and with this realisation Aosenla finally feels: “She is released” (197).

Thus, towards the end of the novel, the quest for Aosenla’s identity becomes a significant motif. Aosenla’s situation is complicated by the realisation that her neat little world with her daughters is about to disintegrate as they grow up and prepare to leave their home—

Somehow the prospect of having both daughters out of the house at more or less the same time brought a chill to Aosenla’s heart. Just the two of them, she and her husband, would be left in the sprawling house (159)

Aosenla feels “truly afraid” as a result of this realisation, and the fact that she is “afraid” of spending time alone with her husband, demonstrates how much she relies on the world she has created with her two daughters (*ibid.*). This is probably why, when her elder daughter Chubala moves out and writes to them about her partner she has decided to marry, Aosenla is both happy and shocked— so much so that she spirals into a state of anger and sorrow simultaneously. It is interesting to note how Bendang is more accepting of Chubala’s decision than Aosenla. Somehow, her husband’s support for her daughter’s decision angers and baffles Aosenla even more. She feels like she is caught in a pensive trap— “the trap of time” (198). It does not seem that Aosenla is reacting in this way because she does not support her daughter’s decision, but rather read in the context of her dysfunctional marital relationship it seems like she is more afraid than anything else. It does not appear that Aosenla is reacting in this manner because she disagrees with her daughter’s decision, but rather because she is more afraid of living only with herself. When read in the context of her dysfunctional marital relationship, this idea becomes even more apparent. And it is probably a warped manifestation of the same fear that Aosenla had felt before, as Chubala was leaving home for the first time (159).

She appears to be concerned that the alternative space of liberation, understanding, and love she has created with her daughters is about to be destroyed, and this is the thought that scares her the most. However, suddenly after a few days, she undergoes an unexpected transformation, as she finally comes to accept the change. Ao does not clearly explain what causes this change in Aosenla, but the fact that it coincides with her quest for self-identity gives us some insight into how she might have been thinking. Ao mentions towards the very end of the novel— “she is no longer afraid because she has outgrown that self... This is Aosenla the mother, rejoicing in the prospect of a new beginning” (202). Thus, motherhood emerges as a space for Aosenla to truly liberate herself. Perhaps the space that she had created for her own self, finally allowed her to see that, unlike her own mother, she had raised an independent daughter. This may be why Aosenla survives, as opposed to her mother-in-law, who deteriorates from a strong matriarch-like figure, to a frail old woman soon after her husband’s death. For Aosenla, however, the scenario is different. She does not need Bendang anymore. Aosenla was afraid earlier, because Chubala did not include Aosenla in her decision, leaving her with a sense of abandonment. However, her return demonstrates that she is no longer afraid of being alone. Through her daughter Aosenla also finds a way of sublimation of her own emotions, as Ao notes— “She cannot fully comprehend what her daughter must be feeling, for she has never known that feeling in her life... but she thinks of her daughter’s happiness as a fair compensation of her own deprivation” (202). Through her daughter, Aosenla thus attempts to find a possibility of liberation of what could have been another “held back life” (ibid). Perhaps this was her way of living vicariously the liberated existence that was always denied to her.

The novel concludes on a ‘happy’ note—material happiness, if not any other form of it. The final lines of the novel perplex the readers. Ao notes :

She is free from her earlier insecurities and doubts. She is no longer concerned about who or what she has become. She is at last at ease, with not only herself but with her husband. She is content. (203)

However, the readers are forced to consider whether this sense of contentment is a consolation for the sacrifice of a liberated existence; especially when read in light of the author’s comment made just a few lines before— “Aosenla might one day realise

that her search for her true self has, ironically, been a long process of subversion of that self by the circumstances around her” (203). Ao thus clearly expresses the view that, despite her attempts at resistance, Aosenla has essentially continued to suppress her own self. When read in this light, her quest for self-identity takes on a new meaning. Perhaps the “essential Aosenla” was truly lost as a result of the “long process of subversion” that dominated her society as well as her life (203). But, at the very least, motherhood has provided Aosenla with a sense of agency and, as a result, probable contentment. Throughout the novel including at the end we see her making compromises in order to keep her family intact and unharmed. Probably, it was for this sense of contentment that she compromised her essence, her “true self”—the “essential Aosenla” (203). Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that the novel ends on a rather complex and problematic note, especially since the author’s ironic interjection leaves it unclear whether Aosenla is truly happy in the end. The reader wonders if this is just a stop gap measure as Aosenla continues to probe her identity and realises how her true self has been subverted by the circumstances around her, forever condemning her to an existence in the purgatory of the private sphere that she simultaneously wants to transgress and keep integrated.

It is interesting to note that the novel began with a quote from Morrison’s *Beloved* – “Freeing oneself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another”. It seems like Ao wanted to point out that in a patriarchal society, the sex-specific social location of a woman like Aosenla, attempting to resist oppressive powers is so difficult that even when the subject finds a way to freedom, they still feel trapped. Thus even if they do find their selfhood, it is seemingly fractured as they are constantly haunted by the hegemonic power relations around them. It is only through wrenching out their narrative from these power relations that they can claim to gain true ownership of their own selves. Similar to her short stories, Ao strives to rebuild the identity of the Naga woman as it is structured between the public and private spheres in her novel. The character of Aosenla is endowed with a sense of agency through her attempts to disrupt the structures surrounding her. However, as previously noted, Ao presents a realistic portrait of the women in her society. Aosenla’s choice (whether forced or not) at the end of the story is probably a subtle reference to Temsula Ao’s concept of “benevolent subordination”. Aosenla’s story is the story of a number of Naga women whose efforts to obtain agency in the private and public spheres of society are rarely included in the



male-dominated political narratives of the region. In such a framework, the literary depiction of such lives assumes a pivotal role, as it is only by freeing their narrative from these power relations that women may assert full ownership over their true selves. The following work covered in this chapter demonstrates how that endeavour is attempted, as Temsula Ao attempts to represent and thereby reconstruct her own “self” through her memoir — *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*.

#### **5.iv *Once upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*: Writing Memory, Writing Identity**

Self-disclosure has always been essential for feminist studies as there is an emphasis on the authors’ explanation of their own individual viewpoints (Bannan “Writing and Reading Memoir as Consciousness-Raising: If the Personal Is Political, Is the Memoir Feminist?”). Autobiographical narratives are defined as a “retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (Lejeune 4). However Temsula Ao makes it clear in the preface, that she is writing a “memoir” and not an autobiography. She quotes a line from Gore Vidal’s memoir *Palimpsest* right at the beginning of *Once upon a Life*, to delineate the difference between the two — “A memoir is how one remembers one’s life, while an auto-biography is history, requiring research, dates and facts double-checked” (vii). Following this conception Ao has chosen to document “the authenticity and intensity” reminisced in the “memory of a heart”, instead of paying attention to strict “chronological detail or sequence” (vii). She calls it a depiction of “the journey of an individual” searching for some “self-worth” that was lost to “time and circumstances” (ibid.). As Sunder Rajan writes, it is through this “process of the creation of selfhood” that “self-cognition” takes place, and as “identity is taken on”, on the part of the subject her “politics is initiated” (143). Women’s memoirs and autobiographies are a valuable and varied source of knowledge for social historians as well as literary researchers exploring issues to gender discrimination, since they assist distinguish narratives of self-justification from the “cobwebs of historical obscurity and neglect” into which women’s narratives are frequently pushed (Chaudhuri 2). In light of the fact that women’s memoirs provide a perspective that is regularly lost in the grand narrative of statist history, it becomes crucial to focus on these works. It is essential to emphasise here that Ao’s memoir is probably the first of its kind in Naga culture. Even though there were few

autobiographies and memoirs written by Naga men before Ao published *Once Upon a Life* in 2013 (for example Reverend I Ben Wati's autobiography in 2 volumes, *My Early Years in Nagaland* and *My Training Years* and Sentsi Pfulon's *Memoirs of a Naga Centenarian*) Ao's is the first memoir written by a woman. Whereas the other memoirs (including *A Naga Odyssey* by Visier Sanyu, published in 2017 by Monash University, after *Once Upon a Life*) focus on the ecclesiastical experience or political narrative of the region, Ao's work documents and celebrates the life of an ordinary Naga woman who led a visibly public life as a traditional intellectual and an organic one. As Supriya Chaudhuri notes, autobiography and memoir are literary forms that "lay claim to the historical archive," positing "meaningfulness" as the main focus of their narrative endeavours as these provide a prototype of a "significant life" even if that "life-story may explain only itself", in the larger historical context (2). As the first memoir written and published by a woman intellectual who is highly visible in the Naga public sphere, Ao's memoir opens up space for the articulation of the Naga woman's identity through her own voice, something that was notably absent from the colonial and statist history as well as political narratives emerging from the region. As discussed in Chapter 4, even the Habermasian public sphere excluded the narratives of women's lived experiences. By creating this space through the expression of lived experiences, Ao is fundamentally helping to the restructuring of the public sphere and especially the literary public sphere in this society. Thus, her memoir contributes significantly to the formation of a counterpublic in which women may voice their identities and demands independently. Therefore, Ao's personal quest for identity through writing this memoir opens up the potential of a resistance politics, since it is the act of writing that distinguishes these personal narratives as "counter-narratives" and "micro-histories" that simultaneously contribute to and challenge the "official" versions of history (Malhotra 209).

These authors also build various subject positions through the act of writing, drawing on current discourses in circulation. As a result, there is a scope for rethinking and reimagining of identity in vastly different ways, with a multifaceted understanding of identity and subjectivity. This is how memoirs may offer unique thematic resources for discussing questions of representation and self. In her fictional works, such as her short stories and the novel, she does so through the use of shared memory. Expressing their identities through memories and remembrance practices, is a core motif of Ao's

work, whether in her short stories, novel, or her memoir. However, in her memoir, she chooses to do so by the use of her own lived experience. As Ao also mentions in the preface, such works give an account of a personal journey to discovery of self— “the journey of an individual in search of the self-worth once lost to time and circumstances” (Ao vii). However, by making that personal journey available to the reading public, the individual establishes a point of entry into the public sphere as discussed in Chapter 1. By incorporating her lived experiences (both private and public) in the literary public sphere, Ao’s writing opens up the possibilities of the formation of a discursive space in which a woman can articulate her identity in her own voice in the discursive public sphere of literary narratives. By creating a place for self-constructions and self-perception, writing can help people not only rediscover themselves but also question notions about authority and agency. Ao believes that the act of writing this memoir has been “cathartic” for her since by revisiting her difficult past through writing, she has “gained new strength” for the future (Ao xii). She also notes that “articulating” her distressing memories was her attempt to “make sense” of her own life-experiences to attain a better understanding of her own self (Ao xiii). Ao’s memoir is divided into 3 parts—the first deals with her difficult childhood, the second describes her time at her boarding school through her formative years and the third depicts her struggles as an adult woman trying to carve her own space in a patriarchal society. The self that she narrates about in the first part of the memoir is that of a child plagued with apprehensions and uncertainties. She describes these early memories as “nebulous spectres” of a childhood “marred by early tragedy” marked by the death of both her parents (3). Her memories of her father are primarily founded upon a few photographs she possesses of him. She mentions three, the last one being a photograph of him lying in his coffin. The most “vivid memory” she has of her father is of the time when he was being taken to hospital on a stretcher for a bleeding toothache, this will also be the last time she saw him alive as he passed away the same night (11). The other vivid memory she has of that night is an image of her mother sitting up on the bed “immobile”, at the dead of night “oblivious of her surrounding”, gazing into darkness out of the window (ibid.). This must have been moments after Ao’s mother had received the news of her husband’s demise. It was much later in her life that Ao had realised the enormous anguish that her mother had probably felt at that moment — “when I grew up and used to think about this midnight scene that I began to comprehend the enormity of her bereavement” (12). However, this image of her mother also evokes in Ao a sense of

empathy, as she muses upon the dejection and fear her mother had probably felt not only as a result for the bereavement but also because now she had to raise six children all by herself—“in a home not her own and away from her own people, barely literate and not fit for any employment” (12). This sense of alienation is generated by a patriarchal system in which a woman is denied the ability to inherit her parents’ property and her financial independence is likewise undervalued. As Ao writes, her mother had neither material nor psychological support that she needed following her father’s death, and this took a severe toll on her health (15). From Ao’s description of her mother’s death, which occurred only a few months after her father died, one can understand her mother’s feelings of loss and helplessness. The villagers described the couples’ death in the light of “legendary” tales of “ill-fated” “true lovers”, but as Ao had later realised for her mother the loss of her father and the subsequent struggle to keep her family afloat was very real, difficult and lonely— “when the enormity of her loss began to sink in, they say she began to lose all interest in life” (22). This section of the memoir demonstrates how society prefers to romanticise women’s suffering rather than making tangible reforms to better their lives.

The theme of loss and rootlessness are a recurring motif in Ao’s writing. The recurrence of these motifs comes out as striking in a narrative that is otherwise rich with the author’s diverse accomplishments. Childhood is a critical time in for an overall development of an individual. The preservation and evolution of a child’s true abilities are threatened when the family environment is endangered by the parents’ sudden death. (Shiferaw et al. 1; Shulgaa et al. 10494). Since her mother died on an Easter Sunday, this particular day in Christian calendar evokes a sense of loss in her mind even now— “it has acquired a negative symbolism as a day of great personal loss” (Ao 24). As previously stated, in the case of “emotional memory” induced by loss and trauma, the way of thinking is characterised by intense sentiments. Hence the fact that even as an adult she still associates this day with an intuitive feeling of “something awful”, manifests the deep sense of loss she had experienced as a child on this day (ibid.). Bloom refers to this phenomenon as “flashback”—“a flashback is a sudden intrusive re-experiencing of a fragment of one of those traumatic, unverbilized memories” (Bloom 6). Ao’s tryst with grief started after her mother’s funeral as she was too startled to comprehend the full ramifications of her parents’ deaths until that point. A substantial part of this section of her memoir reveals her terrible recollections of loss and longing

as a child. She continued to stay in the same house— which was her father’s quarter— along with her siblings, but life was irrevocably changed for her in the span of a few months. She became brooding, aloof and withdrawn. Child psychologists believe that the death of parents can induce distress, despair and withdrawal in children, especially when there is no community to care for the orphaned children; this was also the situation with Ao (Shiferaw et. al 1). She tried to use her imagination to cope with the situation. She would stalk mothers of other children to feel closer to her own mother, she would try to recall her mother’s face, believing that “if you think hard enough about a dead person, you can actually see her” (Ao 25). The motif of loss is prevalent in Ao’s work. In her short stories, the theme of women’s experience as well resistance to loss in a conflict zone recurred frequently. However, in those works, she was dealing with the concept of shared memory; as she even stated in the Preface to *These Hills Called Home*, they were memories of “someone else” and memories of “pain and pain alone” (ix). In her memoir, she discusses her personal experience of loss and familial fragmentation, which she endured not so much because of the conflict but more because of the class and gender inequalities inherent in the society. The descriptions of her helplessness to cope with the pain of her mother’s loss (or her despair at the disintegration of her family, which we find later in the memoir) give a voice in the public sphere to the women whose experience of loss is marginalised in the narratives of statist history and political narratives emerging from the region. The trope of loss and familial fragmentation that runs throughout the memoir may be traced back to this period in her life, when she, understandably, had no access to psychological support to help her work through her grief. It was during this time that she felt the acute sense of “displacement” and “abandonment” for the first time in her life (Ao *Once upon a Life*, 26). The mood of absolute loneliness was followed by a feeling of terrible betrayal, but she could not comprehend at “whom or what”, as she entered a “world of palpable pain and deprivation” (ibid.). Some of her mother’s friends attempted to care for her since her health deteriorated as she tried to cope with her grief. The only thing she recalls vividly from this period is how they attempted to feed her cod-liver oil since she was becoming weaker, she claims—“what I can say with absolute certainty is that I HATE cod-live oil to this day!” (Ao 27). It may be deduced that the flavour of this oil probably reminds her of a particularly painful period in her life, culminating in her abhorrence for the taste even as an adult. Although her elder siblings tried very hard to keep their family integrated, Ao thinks that the appearance of family was only a façade—“we were

not a 'family' anymore, only a bunch of orphans" left to fend for themselves (36). She would eat on certain days and not eat on others, and she began missing school as well. Ao thinks it is a mystery how they survived this "impossible period" afflicted with absolute poverty (43). For the first time "hunger" became an "ever-present reality" in her life (50). Soon, the only way out of this difficult situation was to split up the family by transferring the children to various locations. Her younger siblings were to be sent to their village, while her elder siblings were to remain in Mokokchung, where they had resided since childhood, and she was to be sent to a boarding school. Thus, Ao writes, even the "semblance" of a family finally disappeared and as they parted ways they "never really came together as a family unit ever again" (53). Thus, the trope of loss is combined with a sense of dislocation and a lack of belonging: a feeling that pervades Ao's narrative as she recalls each stage of her life. Even the following six years at the boarding school were spent attempting to cope with this sensation of "alone-ness" and "abandonment" (55). Although she resented being separated from her siblings as a child, she subsequently realised how "momentous" this shift was for her, as it proved to be her "emancipation" from a tough and "hopeless" childhood (57). She has little to no recollection of the period that passed between the decision to relocate and her arrival at Ridgeway Girls' High School's compound. The sole vivid recollection that was left for her, was that of a profound sense of becoming "truly 'orphaned'" as she moved away from what remained of her family and the accustomed atmosphere of her "troubled" childhood (61). As a result, her experience of dislocation becomes embedded in her being and stays with her for the rest of her life.

Ao's narrative of her sufferings and struggle, elicits more than compassion from the reader. It generates admiration for her resilient character. Ao's representation of herself is not limited to that of a victim— a woman dealing with circumstances beyond her control; rather it is also that of a woman in an active position of agency, attempting to meet her ambition to study in order to carve out a space for her individual self. Her academic trajectory aided her in forging a completely self-subsisting identity. Very early in her life she had realised that education was the "only glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak and uncertain future" and the only "redemption" from her plight (63). Her encounter with a Western educational system moulded her identity in a distinctive way, giving her a unique perspective about the social order around her. For Ao, experience and education worked in conjunction to build a resilient sense of self. It was

during her stay in Ridgeway Girls' Hostel that she was confronted with the reality of the world. The two phrases used in the title—burnt curry and bloody rags, also refer to experiences she gathered during this time. While Ao recalls her childhood, images of hunger and food become a constant motif. She would happily accept extra kitchen duty in her hostel, taking extra burden on her shoulders because the cooks used to hand out the surplus rice and burnt parts of curry combined as rice balls to these girls.

For Ao, who had experienced lack of food for a long time in her childhood, this additional food was a “reward” that was even the “high point” of her day (Ao 66). Food memories appear frequently in this narrative. Food, in addition to being a basic requirement, is inextricably linked to tremendous material and symbolic realities in memory narratives. Food memories possess the power to transport us to both the past and the present, and they can set the foundation for future reminiscences, David Sutton calls this “prospective memory” (Sutton 19). According to him, it is a process that takes place “in the present to remember food events in the future” by which a form of “historical consciousness” is created (Sutton 26). The vital link between food and people is never stagnant, it is always revolving. It also accentuates the processes of preservation of tradition as well as evolution of it, through memory and re-creation. The traditional food that a community consume can create embodied memories that shape their history, and hence can impact their cultural memories. While discussing the idea of culinary memories in diasporic narratives, Meredith Abarca notes—

The analyses of these forms of food narratives become the process of decoding the memories—sensory, cognitive, habitual, performative—that food creates. Every time a food memory is narrated—in an oral, written, or performative form—the food recalled is reproduced as an embodied experience. In telling what “we eat,” we are showing who “we are.” Therefore, it is not food that defines our social and cultural subjectivities but the stories we tell about our food practices. (Abarca 7)

Hence it can be said that memories associated with food (or in Ao's case, even the lack of it), can shape one psychologically and emotionally relying on the narratives that are employed to re-create them, as they are performed physically through one's body. As a result, such narratives may become spaces whereby “affirmations,

ambiguities, and contradictions” can influence “cultural subjectivities” of an individual or their community (ibid.). Thus, as an embodied sense, food memory may “season” our experiences and histories (Abarca 2). The memories of food in this memoir may therefore be regarded as memories associated with Ao’s concept of the missing ‘home’. Her sense of not belonging is mirrored in her depiction of food as a communitarian cultural experience that she longed for. She explores how recollection of food may be connected to the concept of home while describing a specific event of her hostel life. A girl in their boarding school managed to “smuggle” some dry fish which they called “nakham”— “she kept on saying that she was homesick and unless she cooked and ate the nakham, her homesickness would not disappear” (Ao 116). The girl went so far as to successfully dupe the hostel Matron while covertly cooking it traditionally with chilli and salt, in the hostel kitchen and shouted contentedly after she devoured the delicacy —“Oye, my home-sickness is gone” (Ao 117). Ao realised that this particular dish “nakham” carried a memory of home for this girl, and she did all of this simply to “taste a bit of that ‘home’” amid the “impersonal” environment of the hostel (ibid.). In this way food memory may be employed as a “mnemonic device” in the rebuilding of narratives of home and belonging (Abarca 4). This trope of linking memories of food with a narrative about the ever-elusive ‘home’, can be found throughout Ao’s memoir, particularly as she links the concept of food to community experiences back home in the Naga villages (Ridgway Girls’ School was situated in Assam, and as Ao notes, it was exceedingly difficult to visit family in the Naga Hills even during vacations due to a lack of connections). Ao’s depiction of Christmas celebrations in her village includes a description of “molasses tea”, a concoction that is available in every household— “a permanent fixture in every hearth” (135). The children drank this in groups after finishing their Carol singing in the village streets till midnight on December 24th. Thus a celebration sustained by the west can end up assisting an indigenous community in coming together and building interpersonal connections. Ao admits that she still loves the drink, despite the fact that her relationship with the village has altered. Probably, in this drink she finds a sense of the traditional community-based culture, a period when she got together with her family and friends from her village during times of celebration. As described in Chapter 4, perhaps by incorporating details of her culture along with features of orality into her work, (thus creating what she termed “new literature”), she maintains an organic relation with her community’s past traditions. By chronicling the Naga traditions in her short stories as well as her memoir, her writing



strives to document the eroding customs and traditions of her own community. Thus when it comes to her community, she fulfils the function of an organic intellectual, through the role of a “literary witness,” as described by Esther Syiem, discussed in the preceding chapter. Ao’s writing on her community, even as she reflects about her own lived experiences, provides an alternate discursive space for chronicling a tradition in need of preservation because of the lacunae of historical documentation in an oral society, as also discussed in Chapter 4 of the thesis.

She also mentions here the grand wedding feasts in the Naga communities, a custom, she laments, is now “out of fashion and have become the stuff of story books even in the villages” (136). The event served as a foundation for community building activities since the entire village would partake in the wedding feast, and children will be given extra food to take home. The cooking was a collaborative effort by the members of the community, and everyone ate together while sitting next to one other. Ao recounts the cuisine served at these feasts with great detail, including the traditional method of preparing meat :

The longish meat pieces would be strung in long bamboo strings with a knot on one end, meaty fat portions would be strung on separate strings and cooked in tins. All the spicy ingredients also would be put in. When the meat was done, it was put on to the big winnowing baskets and sliced into medium pieces” (137).

This way of cooking is going obsolete as she notes, and hence it is probable her attempt to preserve these tiny details of her culture as part of their cultural history. As she points out, this method of cooking is becoming outdated, and it is likely that she is attempting to retain these tiny details of her community as an effort to preserve parts of their cultural history. As previously discussed, food memory may be thought of as a sense that operates alongside sight, touch, and smell, and this is how Ao approaches the complicated links between memories, food and narrative or storytelling. The concept of home and belonging that she has always craved is thus inextricably linked with the concept of food, which becomes a part of the cultural memory for the entire community.

One thing the reader is obliged to notice in this book is how the specifics of the Naga nationalism movement are only mentioned briefly, in contrast to her short story collections. Perhaps she intended to demonstrate how ordinary life continues in its mundane pace even as political strife rages throughout the region. Whereas in her previous collection of short stories, the political conflict had served as the backdrop for most of the tales, here it is only shown in fragmentary glances when it intrudes into her life. For example, she recalls how she was unable to return home for Christmas one year due to the turbulence and was forced to stay in her hostel even through her vacation (138). On another occasion, she mentions a book about the movement that became popular among young girls in her hostel— an Assamese novel by the name of *Noga Bidruhir Hatot (In the Hands of Naga Rebels)* (144). In Ao's works, the impact of the war on ordinary people always finds more importance than the details of the conflict itself. If her earlier collections of short stories described how regular people come to terms with violence and create a way of life under danger from the forces of modernization and war, this memoir is her way of writing about her own coping mechanisms against the systemic violence from her sex specific social position in a patriarchal set up. Spivak describes such narratives as “the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other” (Spivak 7). This is a purpose shared by women's life narratives and subaltern histories in that they both help to shatter and diffract the linear narrative generated by dominating modes of historiography. While talking about the impact authors like Ao and Kire make in their society, Elizabeth tells me during an interview:

Through literature, they enable the discourse on such issues in a more easily acceptable manner. They have also not only awakened the cultural consciousness of their people, but demonstrated the need to be analytical and self-critical as well. And because they are true to themselves and their reality, I believe they resonate well with their audience, even beyond the local community (Elizabeth). The discursive frameworks, that intertwine to form Ao's self-constructed identity in the memoir's third and final section, are discourses about professionalism, motherhood and marriage. Even the elite progressive reformist circles of colonial India, influenced by Eurocentric modernity, could not challenge the idea that a woman needed to marry in order to secure social stability and achieve respectability (Malhotra 89). It is no surprise, then, that Ao's family decides to marry her off as soon as she graduates from high school, although she

is unaware of their plan. There are many parallels between Ao's life and the life of Aosenla, the character she created for her novel. Temsula Ao, like Aosenla, had no clue about her forthcoming marriage, the details of her husband's family, or even the date of the event. She experiences dislocation once more as the concept of home continues to escape her. She had already left her hostel, feeling "displaced and disoriented" and as right after coming back with her brother, she was thrown into the discussion of her imminent marriage, she was once again reminded that she "was without a proper location" (Ao165). The feeling of rootlessness that permeated through her life now almost compelled her for marriage. As a girl still in her teenage, she was led to think by conventional culture that marriage would provide her with the that 'home' that she always longed for— "once again the old feeling of being 'homeless' began to overwhelm me and I finally gave in, consoling myself that I would at least have a 'home' of my own at last" (ibid.). Thus, one can see how her sense of rootlessness pushed her to the illusory promise of marriage. However, her dream was soon to be shattered as she realised that promise of home that came with the concept of marriage was only a chimera. Ao writes that while she did obtain the "physical structure" of a house, converting it into her vision of the home only left her "lost and bruised for life." (171). She talks about a "dichotomy" that she felt in her personality and self after her marriage as she thinks about it in retrospect—at one hand she was to perform the role of a young, "meek" and "docile" housewife while on the other she personally continued to be a "curious, eager" individual "thirsting for more knowledge" (177). Her relatives made it obvious that they would not be able to pay for her higher education, so she realised she would have to find a means to achieve her objective on her own. This "dichotomy" that she feels in her sense of self sheds light on how patriarchal society requires women to behave in a specific manner (what is known as the norm) and any deviation from that standard must be hidden away in order to conform to the society's mould. One can understand how this schism in self must have afflicted her existence and, as a result, ended up affecting her marital life as well, since it only "widened the disenchantment" between the couple (ibid.). Discussing her marriage, Ao comes to the conclusion that "love had no place in the union" as it was a marriage of convenience and false dreams fuelled by a patriarchal setup (ibid.). The breakdown of patriarchal family structures and their failure to provide either any measure of security or to facilitate a space for the accomplishment of individual desires can lead to interrogation of the structures themselves. Thus such memoirs can open up the space for the critique

of patriarchal family systems, whether in an explicit or implicit manner. As perceived through Ao's memoir, a change in the social systems can provide space for self-articulation for women, colonised by or inside the familial structure. It is through her resilience that Ao is finally able to excavate a self as well as an understanding of subjectivity for herself away from the patriarchal notion of family structures. As Chaudhuri observes, memoirs and autobiographies of women have enabled the readers to rediscover, the "hidden lives" of women "in their own words" and at the same time provided them a space in a "social imaginary" with significant literary as well as aesthetic qualities. Thus, they have demonstrated the power to be an extraordinary "ethical and cultural force" especially for literary scholars as well as historians studying gender politics. In addition, Chaudhuri notes that notwithstanding their historical significance, "through the act of narration itself, they gain resonance in textual space" (3). And herein lies their significance, even if, in the larger context, the said "life-story" could only express itself (2).

Ao continued to pursue her aspirations of further education on her own terms even after her marriage. She passed the Intermediate Arts Examination from Gauhati University with first division despite having missed regular classes for a long period. She also started her first job as a teacher at the town Kindergarten school, where she earned a regular income. Although she had to obtain approval from her father-in-law for this position as well. The fact that the Deputy Commissioner's wife was in charge of this project most likely helped. Ao describes her life during this period as a phase full of "disjointed compartments" (180). Her work would be interrupted by her pregnancies, so she would continue to do it on and off. Hence she craved for something beyond wifedom and motherhood— more than "being just a house-wife and a lowly paid teacher" (*ibid.*). She found her situation to be "stifling, limited and uninspiring" (184). Not only had she gone through several childbirths at this point, but she had also lost a child— her eldest daughter who was three months short of her fifth birthday. The trope of loss thus reverberates through the narrative as Ao experiences every kind of loss, including that of parents as a child, and that of a child as a parent.

She considers this phase of her life to be one of the most difficult and darkest periods that she has ever gone through— "it seemed so unfair that life should go on when hers had been so cruelly snuffed out. I resented the awakening in nature which plunged me deeper into sorrow and guilt" (182). The lines in this section of the memoir

are infused with a compelling sense of pathos. Parental bereavement can resemble pathological grief, which, some specialists believe, distinguishes it from other forms of loss (Rando 46; Maier 238). Because the child is often viewed by the parent as an extension of themselves, the loss of a child is often regarded as most devastating for a parent (Maier 238). Hence, for Ao too, the death of her daughter was unlike any other form of loss she had experienced since it was a more like a personal loss of self—“I felt as if a piece of me was buried with her” (182). She lost her will to work and went into a “deep depression, resenting everything alive around” her (ibid.). Her first responses are that of anger and complete withdrawal. However later, with the help of her friends and colleagues, she finally realises—“I was mourning as if death and the unfairness of it all had happened only in our family” (183). She further comes to the realisation that she had to “overcome” her grief, if for nothing then “to care for the living...I still had four children to care for” (ibid.). In a way, she draws strength from the notion of motherhood in order to heal from her loss as a mother and continue her quest for identity and subjectivity.

Her struggle to acquire her Master’s Degree and the “Diploma in the Teaching of English” from CIEFL, Hyderabad, demonstrates the tenacity of her aspirations. The choice to relocate to Hyderabad for the duration of her course was the first she decision that she took on her own, without “consulting” her husband for his “approval” (191). This was indeed a long way from the timid girl who required her father-in-law’s approval even to enrol in the town kindergarten after marriage, and it indicates her evolution as an individual. Ao thinks this was her “first act of independence, maybe even of defiance” (192). Thus, she was finally beginning to construct as well as assert her own identity, even if it meant that her husband felt “slighted” or “threatened” by her decisions (ibid.). Her unilateral decision to join the North Eastern Hill University as a faculty member and relocate to Shillong was yet another act of defiance and resistance of the hegemonic systems surrounding her. People around her regarded it as a decision that would cause dislocation and disintegration in her family, but she found her reasons, which were not only fuelled by the need of her own self-improvement but also for the benefit of her children—“I was clear in my mind; I would not deny myself and the children this opportunity, no matter what the cost” (193). As a result, the role of motherhood, which could have been an impediment to her academic ambitions, actually ended up empowering her choices. Her marriage did actually end after she

relocated, but she managed to maintain amicable relations with her husband even after their divorce in 1978.

A major opportunity came Ao's way in 1992, when she was selected as the director of North East Zone Cultural Centre (henceforth referred to as NEZCC). This was also her first opportunity to work in a public bureaucratic position. By this time she was also promoted to the post of the professor in English in her university. Ao writes that the activities of NEZCC piqued her attention "immensely" because it dealt with the heritage and culture of all the communities of the entire northeast region (208). Thus, she was able to hold an important post in the public sphere and assist in the preservation and continuation of these ancient forms of culture that were threatened with the advent of colonialism, as discussed earlier in this chapter. However, being the director of the cultural centre from the northeast zone and a native of the region, she did face various forms of discrimination from the centre; an experience shared by the common people of the region as well. She writes about these covert forms of discrimination in this section of her memoir:

Such encounters were an eye opener for me when I came to direct contact with the supercilious and condescending attitude of the officers in the Department of Culture at the Centre. More often than not, folk artists from our region were not treated at par with those from other centres. Why it was so, I could never understand... we were in no way inferior to the other regions in terms of talent or cultural richness (209)

This role provided her with a rare opportunity to not only enter the public sphere as a woman, but also to represent her region at the national level. She considers the construction of the Heritage Museum of Shangyu village, in the remote Mon district of Nagaland, to be one of her most significant accomplishments during her tenure. As the director of the NEZCC, she worked on the preservation and public presentation of an old wood-carving artwork that had previously been held in the house-kitchen of the "Angh" of Shangyu. It was a picture of this rare artwork which she found in an International magazine that inspired her to establish this museum to protect and exhibit this artwork. Initially, she had dispatched her officers to the Angh to acquire the woodwork. However, the effort failed because the Angh outright refused to comply

with them, most likely due to mistrust for the Centre and the government that the local communities harbour because of the conflict situation. Hence, Ao decided to meet the Angh herself. As a woman from of a Naga tribe, she was well aware of how traditional chiefs may react while dealing with a woman in a position of authority —“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?” she deliberates (212). However, Ao refused to surrender to the patriarchy perpetrated by some traditional systems and strategically continued with her pursuit in person. She undertook multiple journeys to Mon and continued to discuss with the Angh about the needs of conserving such an important artwork, to preserve aspects of an ancient culture for an entire community. Finally, at one of these meetings, he happened to mention the name of Ao’s brother, who had been the Deputy Commissioner of Mon district and shared a cordial connection with him. As soon as Ao realised the Angh was referring to her brother, she described their relationship and saw a noticeable change in the Angh’s demeanour. Consequently, at last she could make a successful connection with the Angh and was finally able to persuade him to accept her proposal after many strategic gifts and discussions that she oversaw in person (215). Thus Ao successfully accomplished the most important duty entrusted to her as the director of the NEZCC. However, the continuous discrimination from the Centre had started to make her feel rather frustrated about the job:

I was beginning to grow restless with the need to be on the move all the time and having to cope with opinionated babus in Delhi who had little regard for the North-East was unsettling my mental equilibrium... So when I rejoined NEHU in September 1997, it was like a second homecoming for me. (219)

Her experience as a public bureaucratic officer demonstrates that she was capable of successfully manoeuvring operations even while dealing with a conventional patriarch. However, it also illustrates how the Centre’s overt and covert discrimination may prevent driven individuals from properly fulfilling their tasks. Despite all her accomplishments, however, Ao was haunted by a sense of homelessness. In 1992, when she was appointed as the director of NEZCC and posted in Dimapur she could finally devise a strategy to establish her own home in the Naga town, trying to fulfil one of her long cherished ambitions. She confesses that this was one of the main reasons why she

was eager to take up the position— “I needed to be with my people” and “speak my language” she writes (208).

In the Second Chapter of the thesis, the gendered rules of inheritance that are followed in this region were examined, in the context of the formation of gendered space. As a result of this gendered form of discrimination, most women here cannot access landed property which is intricately associated to the idea of identity and home in most South and South-East Asian countries, including India. The fact that women traditionally do not inherit even the home in which they grew up may also add to the sense of rootlessness— as if women do not have a place to belong, thus contributing to the pervading sense of rootlessness. Ao’s sense of homelessness that affected her childhood and youth was so acute that it continued to haunt her even when she pursued academic opportunities outside the country— “(a)way from India at first everything looks bigger better and shinier. But after the excitement at the novelty wears of... the ‘temporariness’ and the sense of not ‘belonging’ hits you with a bang” she remarks (222). Even after she retires and leaves NEHU, she is haunted by the familiar feeling of “‘losing’ the ‘home’”, just as she did when she was forced to leave her siblings and relocate her entire life to the boarding school as a frightened little child (224). The idea of ‘home’ begins to take root into Ao’s mind only after she makes the plan to move to Dimapur. Here, readers are driven to recall her naive ambition of finally owning a home when she was getting married as a teenager. We remember how the stereotypical patriarchal notion of making the husband’s house a woman’s own home, was instilled into her young mind by her traditional society. However, to her credit she did recognise the frailty of the idea quite early in her life. Maybe this is why, neither in her hostel in Assam, nor in her husband’s house in Mokokchung, did she feel completely at home. She feels it for the first time as she creates this ‘home’ on her own, overcoming a major obstacle she had struggle with all her life. Her difficult yet exemplary journey from a poverty-stricken little girl who felt rootless and inherited nothing beyond a sewing machine from her family, to an accomplished woman who worked on establishing a ‘home’ for herself and her children all by herself, shows how women can create their own spaces successfully resisting systems of gender discrimination. Hence, it is critical to explore these memoirs in order to study such journeys, as they form a language of resistance and action from the perspective of a subaltern subject.



Towards the end of the memoir Ao writes about her evolution as a writer. She began her writing career as a poet, since she sought shelter in poetry through times of “internal turmoil” as a single parent facing multiple challenges-- financially and otherwise, struggling to “keep the home fires going” while attempting to meet the obligations of her profession (226). However, she did not consider publishing them until 1988, when she received favourable response and gained the necessary confidence after reciting her poetry in various academic circles. Her first collection of poems was finally published by the legendary publication house of Kolkata, Professor P. Lal’s “Writers’ Workshop”, in 1988— it was named *Songs that Tell*. Her second collection of poems, *Songs that Try to Say* was also published by the Writers’ Workshop in 1992. She went on to publish three additional volumes of poetry through various publishing houses through the following years. The commencement of her fiction-writing, however, was more of a “fluke” according to her, Ao mentions:

It happened during a difficult. When I discovered that all inspiration to write poetry seem to have evaporated and I felt utterly devastated... So one day I stayed back in the department long after everyone had gone and say to myself sage to myself seed to myself that if I could not that if I could not write poetry, I would try fiction. (227)

And she claims this is how two of her short story collections *These Hills called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*, were primarily conceived. Most stories in both of these collections deal with the conflict-torn state of Naga communities, but they also describe how common people negotiate and create safe spaces in the face of tragedy. Through them, Ao describes a way of existence that is simultaneously threatened by modernization and the political conflict. Whereas in her short stories she explores the impact of the conflict on ordinary people, in her novel and memoir she explores the systemic violence of society and the ways an individual may construct their own space of resistance within that framework. Ao believes that being a writer has added an “extra dimension” to her identity, “some purpose” beyond her academic pursuits, adding a “vibrant sense of affirmation” to her selfhood (230). Ao’s position as a writer and academic from the region strengthens her identity as the Gramscian Organic Intellectual, whose works provide insights into experiences which are often disregarded in conventional history and canonical literature. Through her writing Ao has been able to create a connection with her community through a reworking of the myths, histories, and storytelling

practices into her work, that have long been a part of her people's history. In a way she has thus contributed to the resurrection of the Naga oral tradition and sparked a new wave of interest (in her community as well as the outside world) in Naga literature by adding a lyrical touch to these Naga stories and legends. Thus, as an organic intellectual her efforts have aided in the construction of an imagined community, while simultaneously revitalising traditional storytelling methods in her own community and reaching a wider audience that transcends clan/community division. Through her writing, readers beyond the Naga communities too can get a first-hand insight at the turbulent Naga past that has generated a great deal of trauma and instability for the Naga people. Thus, through her contribution to the Naga literary public sphere she is able to create an imagined community of readers that transcends the divisions established by the violent politics of the male-dominated public-political sphere. While explaining how Ao's writings represent the lived experience of Naga women, Vizovono Elizabeth tells me, "Almost all their writings are based on actual incidents and experiences. Their settings are local and historical; the ethos is culturally specific to the Nagas. So it can be said that the writer's sense of identity reflected in literature is also representative of Naga women's identity in general" (Elizabeth).

Ao had to sustain herself and her children economically through a large part of her life. Her life exemplifies how women have had to articulate their selfhood in opposition to patriarchal systems as well as class hierarchy. The lack of right to land inheritance, marital obligations, and other patriarchal norms that she had to struggle against, all contribute to an unequivocal interrogation of patriarchal systems of her society. The identity that she forges for herself is completely self-articulated, as Ao writes—"I can now look at myself without any shame or apology because I have fought the odds with the truth and integrity of my inner self" (231). Autobiographical narratives, especially those written by women, are a great source for obtaining information about women's lives which frequently go undocumented and seldom find representation in official interpretations of history. Meenakshi Malhotra notes:

Also, given the level of interest in print media it could be viewed as the moment of women's entry into the public sphere. In fact, Habermas's notion of the intersubjective constitution of the self and the evolution of self-identity through communicative interaction with others is a significant point to explain how a literary form/mode/genre is publicly shaped. (Malhotra 2)

Hence, such writings entail a deeper examination, as they can serve as locations in the public sphere, where the self is constructed as well as presented (thus bringing the narrative of private experiences to the public), by the woman herself, from her sex and class specific location in her society. These works can serve as a vital supplement as well as counterpoint to the great traditions of conventional histories by providing information that were previously omitted as they shed light on how women write the self in unique ways, resulting in a more nuanced understanding of the relation between gender and identity. The next chapter studies the works of the other major author from the region, Easterine Kire, who is arguably the most prolific Naga writer when it comes to fiction, particularly novels. She is a Naga author from the Angami tribe in whose historical fictions we find a glimpse of the past of these communities that are often neglected in the conventional history writing. These narratives attain a special significance because they provide a Naga woman's perspective—a perspective that was largely overlooked in the process of history writing of this region.

## CHAPTER 6

### Writing Memory, Writing History: A Selective Study of Easterine Kire's Novels

#### 6.i Introduction

The preceding chapter studied Temsula Ao's works to determine how she creates a discursive space through the use of literary narratives, for the reconstruction and expression of the identity of Naga women from their own perspective. This chapter will explore the novels of another major literary figure from Nagaland, Easterine Kire—especially those that depict the Naga society and its women at significant historical junctures and recasts Naga history from an insider's perspective, particularly that of the Naga woman. As described in Chapter 4, writing evolved among the Naga tribes as a result of colonialism and the subsequent introduction of Missionary-education; consequently, as a “colonial inheritance,” the written word was given precedence above the oral, resulting in the decline of the oral culture and ancient storytelling practises in Naga communities (Elizabeth 83). For the Nagas, this shift in their culture not only marked a break with their past traditions, but it also stifled their voice when it came to representing their own selves. Easterine Kire, whose works are discussed in this chapter, poignantly comments on the cultural loss that the Naga community suffered in the following lines—“The voices of these colonisers, though informative, were not free of racism and exoticising of cultures they did not fully understand. The result was that some cultural practices which yielded meaning in the pre-Christian era were dismissed as barbaric” (Kire “The Narratives Silenced”). The Indo-Naga conflict further silenced their narratives by destroying the environment required for the continuation of oral culture and storytelling practises, as well as by disrupting their whole belief system as well as worldview through a protracted violent atmosphere. Kire captures this disruption accurately when she explains, “The grandmother's hearth in the village-world was destroyed, the villages burnt and their inhabitants tortured and killed or forced into evacuation” (Kire “War and the Silencing”). In such a situation, to ensure that the Naga oral tradition is preserved, even if presented in a western format and a foreign language, it became necessary for writers like Kire and Ao to perform the function of the storyteller through their writings. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, Kire's works seek to simultaneously confront and challenge the silences

enforced by the dominant discourses perpetuated by colonialism, the State, and the masculinist public-political sphere through the traditions of Naga storytelling.

### **6.ii A Naga Village Remembered: Writing Naga Resistance**

While addressing the issue of chronicling the history of her community, Kire writes— “the story of Nagaland is the story of the Naga soul on a long, lonely journey of pain, loss and bereavement, a silent holocaust in which words seldom were enough to carry the burden of being born a Naga.” (Kire “The Conflict in Nagaland: Through a Poet’s Eyes”). This “silent holocaust” has not found any space in the documents of statist history. In an interview with ICORN, Kire mentions that amongst all the narratives affected and “silenced” by the conflict situation, the one of Naga folktales was impacted the most— “This was because folk tales require certain settings in order to be told. The Naga war with India, after military operations began in 1956, destroyed the settings for oral narratives. One may not think that something as simplistic as a folk tale would need to be approached with ritual and ceremony in order that its narration might take place, but it does. The folk tale belongs to eras of relative peace in the village community” (Kire, “Bitter Wormwood: Interview”). Her work as a litterateur, then, also entails unearthing those narratives, especially since the Naga culture was mostly dependent upon oral narratives due to the lack of a written script. She talks about this trope in her work during an interview with author Namrata Kolachalam, where she asserts that her work “represents storytelling through the oral tradition” (Kire, “Stories of Nagaland”). This chapter studies those novels of Kire that depict the most crucial junctures of time in the Naga history that shaped the backdrop for the prolonged conflict situation in the region— *A Naga Village Remembered* (first published in 2003) (which narrates the story of the colonial advent in the region, especially with reference to one particular village and the resistance that they put up against the British), *Mari* (published 2010) (that depicts the tumultuous years around the Kohima war of 1944), *A Respectable Woman* (published in 2019) (which portrays the transformative years from the war of 1944 leading to the Indo-Naga conflict) and *Bitter Wormwood* (published in 2011) (that captures the story of the Indo-Naga conflict since independence to its descent into the present infighting and chaos). As noted by multiple scholars and writers from the region, a Naga representation of these events has failed to find much space in the grand narrative of the Statist history in India (Pou 56; Elizabeth 23).

In an article, named “Opening up the Physical and the Spiritual Universe of the Angamis”, Kire notes that her novels aim to “chronologise the socio-cultural and historical life” of her people from information that she collected from the oral narrators of her community (54). This adaptation of the oral within the written narrative gives her an opportunity to include storytelling traditions into her work. Her first novel *A Naga Village Remembered* echoes this oral storytelling performance. It simultaneously features the narrator’s personal story while at the same time rendering a chance to the writer to theoretically inform the readers that these chronicles embody a social document. The novel covers the period from 1832 to 1900 and revolves around the historical event of the Angami-Naga resistance to the British colonisation that took place at the village of Khonoma. The main narrative of the novel is supplemented by accounts of the first settlers of the village of Khonoma, resuscitated through the oral storytellers of three clans from the village— Sebi Dolie of the Mehrü clan, Niu Francis Whiso of the Thevo clan and Thezavilie and Nichüriazo Chücha of the Semo clan. Since Kire is a native author of a culture that used to be predominantly oral, within her oeuvre one finds a successful recollection as well as inclusion of people’s memories and experiences. Her writing, hence, exhibits a rich oral texture. This native orality is applied to historical events in her novels, especially in *A Naga Village Remembered*, to not only recount a resistance largely undocumented in the narrative of Indian history, but also to encapsulate a lifestyle and worldview that are on the verge of extinction because of colonisation and the consequent modernisation of the communities as discussed in Chapter 4. Since the modern written culture has largely replaced these old ways for the native tribal, Kire’s act of giving them a voice in written narrative gains seminal importance. Memory gains more significance than history for someone dealing with the native folklore and imagination, like Kire, because of the intimate nature of the act of remembrance. For the oral cultures memory is more like a “faithful storehouse” that contains the sum total of the past and present experience of entire communities (Patton 6). Although Kire deals with the written form of narrative, she does not fail to make use of native oratory and their belief in the power of the spoken word. In indigenous oral cultures such as the Nagas’ the spoken word held supremacy over writing, and hence verbal negotiations were given utmost importance.

In *A Naga Village Remembered*, Kire portrays this aspect of the Naga communities through the episode of the clan-head Pelhu’s verbal intercession with the

British after the war takes place, to mediate a treaty between the village of Khonoma and the colonisers:

With the help of an interpreter, the General asked Pelhu “Why did you come?” Pelhu’s reply was very straightforward “I came to make peace.” He spoke with a calm dignity that the white man found himself admiring. The General asked again “Do you need a written treaty?” Pelhu shook his head and said firmly “No, if we have said there will be peace between us there will be peace. We do not need to write it down.” General Nation was suitably impressed by the old warrior’s wisdom. He stood to his feet and gripped Pelhu’s hand firmly. The treaty was concluded between village representatives of Khonoma and the representatives of the British Government at Mezoma on the 27<sup>th</sup> March 1880. (107)

Kire uses the oral discursive style of storytelling and paves the path for establishing a worldview that is purely based on indigenous experience and practices, thus subverting the order of knowledge imposed upon them by the western mode of Rationality. In *A Naga Village Remembered* Kire, much like an indigenous storyteller of the past, unfurls the life of the Angami-Naga community through commonplace every day experiences of different characters whose lives are essentially linked to the indigenous spatiality. The novel begins with the observation of simple village life by one such character—the village-elder Kovi. Through his eyes the readers experience the quietude of Khonoma in the dawn, as smoke curls up from the houses huddled along the slope of the hills (1). Such images, evoking the vision of a simple agrarian life of a small tribal village untouched by Modernity, are scattered through the novel. These images transport the readers to a point in time before the British colonised these tribes and imposed their knowledge systems upon them.

These descriptions hark back to a period whilst the native folk culture could thrive, unlike the recent times, when the consequent conflict situation has largely suppressed these narratives amidst the violence of identity politics. Kire describes several ancient customs while presenting the Naga life world to her modern globalised readers. It is important to remember in this context that customary laws are still an integral part of the Naga identity. The Naga customary laws are protected under the Article 371A of the Indian Constitution and still hold importance in the legal framework

of the tribal communities. These customs guide the Naga way of life and hence should be treated as significant social documents that contain the lived experience of the indigenous communities. Kire describes multiple rituals that can be seen as traditional festivals connected to the agricultural cycle, examples would include the observation of the Genna day, the feast of Thekranyi and the festival of Kelipie. These customary celebrations manifest the profound bond that the people of the villages shared with the land. It is this intense love for the land that shaped their warrior culture. As Kire writes in “Opening up the Physical and Spiritual Universe of the Angamis”, “before conversion the culture of the Angamis was a warrior culture... very focused on land and love for land” (54).

Hence when faced with the threat of colonisation it was only normal for them to put up a resistance even if they were outnumbered against the British military forces. The reference to the conflict comes early in the novel, when, in the very first chapter we find an account of the 1849 clash between the British police and clans of Khonoma where an Indian police officer, by the name of Bogchand and his men were killed. The residents of Khonoma describe it as a “matter of honour” since the police were killing their kin and torching their houses (8). In *A Naga Village Remembered* Kire does not merely recount a story about the battle between the Nagas of Khonoma and the British; rather, she goes beyond the action of the conflict (which is not given a lot of space in narrative as well), and attempts to capture the Naga ethos that fuelled the resistance. Herein lays the supremacy of literature over the grand narrative of statist History, where individual and community experiences of an event are given more importance than the empirical truth about the event itself. However it would be wrong to assume that she portrays the pre-Christianised Khonoma to be an idyllic utopia of peace and harmony. The fact that war and violence were part of their everyday life is apparent from the clan-members’ discussion at the ‘Thehou’ (or the community house), where they discuss how vengeance is seen as a duty to the fallen (Kirem 4). Kire does not fail to point out the importance of the act of remembrance when it comes to war and violence—“When the young sang their poem-songs, there were too many songs mourning dead warriors” (41). Memories are thus performed and recreated in these communities through songs and poetry to carry forward the unwritten history of a people.



Kire's works capture a Naga society in transition. In *A Naga Village Remembered* she depicts the life-world of a tribal community with all its customs, rituals and beliefs. However, this community is also posited at a juncture of time when an indigenous society is giving way to a Christian one. It is significant to point out that today about 90% of the Nagas are Christianised and most of them are Baptist ("Naga: A People Struggling"). This situation of flux, when Christianity is on the rise eroding the olden 'animist' religions, is portrayed through the character of Sato, son of the warrior Levi. It is ironic that Sato is amongst the first Nagas to fall for an ideology that was propagated by the people whom his father persistently fought against. Levi dies a broken man while Sato refuses to hold on to the old ways of life, since he finds no point of contention between their old religion and the new one disseminated by the missionaries at his school—

The creator deity we worship and sanctify ourselves unto at Sekrenyi, the one we call Ukepenuopfu has another name in the new religion. He is the father of Isu. Isu is his son and he is our chicken sacrifice - he sacrificed himself for all our ailments and misfortunes so we do not have to make chicken sacrifices again.... the new religion says, do not steal and do not lie, how is it so different from the old religion? (Kire 126)

The conversation between Levi and Sato regarding their positions in relation to this drastic change of society stands for the age-old conflict between the old and the new. However, in the context of the colonial history of Nagaland it may also symbolise the success of the colonial politics in using the Ideological State Apparatus, like the school and the church, to repress the knowledge-systems of the colonial other—the indigenous and the native. Levi declares with apathy:

When your brother and you chose to go to the white man's school, how happy I was that my sons might finally learn his secret. But you have broken me today. How is it that you have forgotten the man who fathered you and brought you up? How is it, my son that you are turning your back on all that we've taught you of what is good in our ways... the white man killed your grandfather's brother and burnt your grandfather's house four times. Do you hear me Sato, four times! You will have the blood of your ancestors on your hands. (Kire 127)

This feeling of treachery is a by-product of the postcolonial condition of the indigenous where they are almost involuntarily thrust into the western idea of Modernity albeit it having little to no connection with the indigenous philosophies. The novel ends at a time of transformation, with the all of the characters of the older generation of Levi facing death, leaving the village and their land in the hands of the younger generation of Sato. But it also carries a sense of confusion that was probably the mark of the time. Sato returns home to see his dying mother Pelhuvino—a woman who is torn between the old and the new perspectives of her dead husband and elder son respectively. Her death in the end may indicate the passing of an era that was remarkably different from the colonised and Christianised Khonoma. Kire's writing bears a stamp of nostalgia—for not only the lost times but a lost *home*. It contains the idea of a homeland that is forever lost in the maze of conflict, almost like a vision of a mythical home. When Kire writes about home, the notion of the mythical homeland gets further problematised. She, as a part of a Naga tribe, identifies herself as a Naga more than an Indian. In an interview with Kim Arora, published in the Times of India, Kire says:

We will always feel we're Nagas. There's a huge cultural difference. But we are able to embrace India, understand Indian culture...only if you're a Naga, you will understand. You have a sense of belonging to a smaller degree to India. Your identity is always as a Naga...you can have a sense of belonging to India. But you know that because of the history and culture, you'll never really be Indian. You'll always be fully Naga in your mentality...we should actually build up on that - the levels of belonging, the levels of Indian-ness. ("Big Indian Publishing Houses Don't Think the Northeast Will Sell")

### **6.iii Bitter Wormwood: Nationhood, Identity and Violence**

In Kire's writing, her homeland is the memory of Nagaland that she left, beautiful, bloody and full of a cultural heritage that India fails to recognize or comprehend. Her identity as an 'Indian' diasporic writer comes into direct clash here, with her identity as a 'Naga' writer. But probably, it is in these critical junctures that postcolonial studies meet diaspora studies. When there is a shift in understanding the homeland–diaspora relationship and the relationship is rethought in the light of the internal ethnic differences, diaspora studies acquire the needed nuanced approach. In the

“Introduction” to her novel *Bitter Wormwood* she specifies that— “This book is not meant to be read as a history textbook.... 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).

The novel follows the life of Mose, from the 1930s to the present day. And through his eyes, Kire shows us the violence that has become a part of everyday life for the Nagas for five decades. The novel commences with a grotesque image of a man lying in his own pool of blood amidst a marketplace, evidently killed by faction conflict. The reader is also made to realize how, even after decades since independence, the consequence of violent colonialism continues to haunt most parts of the Indian Subcontinent. However this conflict situation had reduced their identity to victim/perpetrator to the rest of the world. This was something Kire wants to contend through her writing. She said in the above-mentioned interview, “For many years, the media presented us as the region of conflict. The culture was underplayed. Ordinary life was not valued. We became defined by the conflict” (“Big Indian Publishing Houses Don’t Think the Northeast Will Sell”). Her novels attempt to go beyond the portrayal of blood spilling violence to capture the strength of the people who persistently put up a resistance. The strength of literature resides in depicting the individual, everyday memories of the episodic past, something that history may not be able to provide. As author Rachel Kadish points out the purpose of fiction that deals with history is not to merely “add a pleasing emotional embroidery to what we already know about history. It’s to tell the dangerous stories—the human truths that fly in the face of propriety or power” (“Writing the Lives of Forgotten Women”). This is where the writer, especially the writer as a woman, holds the power to shape the narratives of public sphere. By integrating the stories of individuals who are marginalised in the public sphere and therefore rendered voiceless, the author gains the power to de-centre the grand narrative pervasive in the masculinist public-political sphere, which has lacked the representative voice of women for generations.

In this novel Kire incorporates the voices of the common Naga as they experienced the protracted conflict situation that severely disrupted their way of life. By doing so Kire is able to provide a space for the plethora of Naga voices which were otherwise lost the grand narrative of statist history. The protagonist of this novel, Mose,

is born into a female headed family which is not an unusual sight in these communities. Men in these tribes engaged in war with other tribes and hunting on a regular basis and quite a lot of them faced untimely death. This is most likely the reason that begot the norm of the matrilineal system in the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya as well. Mose's father is also killed in an accident in forest leaving Mose's grandmother and mother the only family left for him. Kire never fails to scrupulously capture the spirit of her homeland as she carefully illustrates the mystic traditions and the reverence for nature that the Naga tribes possess. Even the name of the book refers to one such traditional Naga belief, based into the therapeutic aspect of nature. Amongst the Naga tribes, Bitter wormwood, an herb commonly found in the forests here, is believed to have mysterious powers that keep the evil spirits away. Mose's grandmother advises him to stick one behind his ear, as "it kept away those bad spirits that cause you to do bad things" (47). In the times of violence that came upon them, they needed such an amulet once again to help them survive the evil surrounding them. As the military atrocity reaches a brutal height, when they randomly pick up men and women to torture and brutalize them to death, Mose's mother bitterly laments, "who is there to protect us from all these evils?" (69) It sounds akin to a cry for the loss of innocence itself. In the past, they could afford to believe that an herb has the quality of a talisman to guard them against evil, but thrown into the days of rampant violence that naiveté is not permitted anymore.

The novel, much like *A Naga Village Remembered*, also portrays the peculiar situation that arises when an indigenous populace is suddenly introduced to Christianity through the European missionaries. Kire's Nagaland is a curious amalgamation of the tribal animist spirituality and the western structured religious belief. Hence, Mose goes to a catholic school and learns to worship "Jisu" and at the same time observes "Genna day" with his mother, a day "when no one works or goes to the fields... to please the spirits" (37). The first sign of the 'modern' world comes to Mose's life when he is introduced to the radio at his school, run by the European missionaries. This is also the first time that the event of India's independence is mentioned in the book. Through the radio Mose first learns that "the white man will soon leave and go back to England". But when he breaks the news to his mother it confuses her since they cannot fathom who would be their leader now that the "white man" is about to go (31). Along with the news of India's independence, however, started the movement of Naga Independence. As shown in the novel, it did not strike the Nagas as a strange idea to depart from India,

since they never saw themselves as Indians. India's politics and its leaders were never taken to be *their* leaders. One of the Indian leaders that the tribes were used to hearing about was Gandhi, and when a Naga Delegation, led by Phizo, met Gandhi and received positive responses from him regarding their autonomy, the common people of the Naga hills became even surer of the legitimacy of their demand, as we understand from the conversation of a young Mose with his school friend Neituo. But when the radio brought the news of Gandhi's death, the situation became less optimistic for them. Kire takes the opportunity here, however, to show how far removed the Naga populace was from Indian politics—the *fringe* from the politics of the *centre*. When Mose mentions the news of death of Gandhi to his family, his mother simply wants to know “he is not the leader of India, is he?” (48) Through Mose's mother's failure to understand the very crux of Indian politics, Kire shows her readers, how far removed these tribes had been from the centre, kept into their own abode of seclusion even during the reign of the British, and now all of a sudden thrown into a Nation-building discourse that they hardly understood.

It is only after the arrest of Phizo that they are initiated into a tumultuous political discourse that will haunt them for coming five decades. Kire writes, “One Sunday morning, the pastor announced at the end of the service “we need to pray for our land. The Indian government has taken Zaphu Phizo prisoner for saying that Naga people want independence” (52). Phizo was arrested on the charge of illegal entry to Burma, but the Nagas saw this as an offence towards their demand of independence. The arrest of Phizo along with Nehru's condescending attitude towards their ideology (he termed their demand “absurd”) only perpetuated the discrimination and sense of isolation that the Naga tribes felt since the day of the colonial rule. The centre's idea to force them into integration also failed miserably. Mose's mother Khrienuo echoes the sentiment of her people when she says “We haven't been a part of India before. Why should we join them now?” (53) A region kept in isolation for years, was now to be integrated into a newly-born nation, which did not stop itself from using even maximum military strength to compel the unwilling people into submission. The army brutality only increased since the arrest of Phizo. On 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1952 the police shot upon a peaceful protest march as they approached the Deputy Commissioner's office, in Kohima. The exact number of those who were injured or dead is unknown to date, but at least one person had died from the attack, by the name of Zasibito Nagi, a Judge in

the central Court of Kohima. In the novel Kire shows these violent events through the children's eyes, who fail to grasp the sheer reason of such brutality that they see the Indian state apparatuses perpetrating around them. There are multiple incidents, described in the book, of torture, rape and murder, which at the same time terrorized and angered the Naga people. Sometimes the violence was perpetrated just to terrorise the commoners so that they did not help the underground rebels, who were only starting to organize at this point. The first time the violence hits Mose's family personally, is when his grandmother is killed by a bullet as she was working in the fields. No one seems sure why the army men would target an old woman. The absurdness of the violence is apparent when the neighbours recount the horrifying incident to Mose:

Soldiers. We have seen them for the past five days in our woods... we thought that if they saw us peacefully cultivating our fields they would not harm us. But when we finished working there was a shout and they began to shoot towards the fields. (71)

Not only did the armed forces perpetrate such random violence in the name of maintaining order, they got to go scot free for their actions too. Heightening the pathos of the event, Kire notes—

(T)hey didn't know that the shooting has been documented in the army files and the soldier in question would not face prosecution. He was protected by the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act 1953. The act empowered a soldier, to "shoot and kill in case it is felt necessary to do so for maintaining public order (78).

Kire shows how violence only spews more violence when a passive, peaceful childlike Mose decides to quit school and join the Underground Movement, seething with anger at the brutality of the forces. In the hill tribes of Nagaland, a place of a warrior is at the top of the clan, and so when Mose informs his mother about his wish, she acquiesces peacefully. But even as a part of the underground movement Mose is written as a kind and empathetic soldier. He is against the execution of the "spies" in the underground sent by the government, although they stand traitors to their cause — "It was one thing to be shooting at an enemy soldier. But to have to shoot at someone from your own

village...that was almost murder” (99). At this point in the book, the leaders of the movement are shown as ideological warriors who do not celebrate rampant violence either. “It is not our objective to kill the Indian soldiers first, said one of the officers, “Remember that any action on your part must be guided entirely by self-defense”” (94). This aversion to use violence is lost as the movement progresses. In the present day, the violence has spiraled out of control as one underground clan kills another’s members, driven by their pursuit of power.

With the attainment of statehood in 1963, the scenario in Nagaland started changing. Although they were not entirely happy for this event, it gave them a new government who used both threat and persuasion to disband the Underground and a group of political and religious leaders of the land has at last been able to broker peace and reach a situation of cease-fire. In the novel this turn of incident stands critical, as this is the time that Mose leaves the underground to tend to his ailing mother. Slowly he is completely taken out of his rebellious youth as he settles down into his own family. But the violence at the backdrop continues, the freedom struggle has gone beyond its twentieth year now, without yielding any substantial result. Mose’s wife, who was also part of the Underground with him, is seen pondering at the futility of it all:

At 30, she felt a little disillusioned by it all. Too many had died. Needlessly.... twenty-one years without any respite...if it had been left to the women, maybe they would have talked it over and sorted it out long back. After all it was they who bore the brunt of the deaths... on both sides. But women did not settle wars...the woman’s lot was to mourn their dead. And the very next day try to find food for their families. (113)

For the first time in the novel Kire writes from the point of view of *not* her male protagonist but a female fringe-character; but in her voice echoes the loss of an entire society’s youth. The war was a result of the politics, a sphere that women are largely kept out of. Even in the present day, the 33% reservation rule for women candidates in electoral politics could not be implemented in the state of Nagaland. However, it is not only Mose’s wife, Mose too started getting disillusioned with the struggle as it reached its apex in violence and the insurgents started killing their own calling them ‘traitors’ to their cause. Mose realizes this is exactly what the Indian government wanted and the

underground leaders have simply played into their hands. Neituo, Mose's comrade from his underground days, captures the hopelessness of the situation perfectly when he says, 'I am quite sure it's the end of our Naga cause ... when you begin to kill each other, you no longer have a cause left' (148). By this time, they were well past their youth and could see how their struggle was slowly losing its way into mindless violence.

On the other hand, Kire portrays the inland diasporic existence of the youth of Nagaland in the contemporary time who are coming out of their home state in order to establish themselves in other parts of the country, through the character of Mose's grandson Neibou. Neibou comes to Delhi to study at the Shri Ram College of Commerce. He is continuously picked on by his classmates and seniors who call him 'pahariya' insulting his culture and tradition. He slowly became aware of his precarious condition as a northeastern student in Delhi. Multiple pieces of news of attacks on northeastern students made him realize the discrimination is alive and well in mainland India against its 'other', the tribal populaces living at the periphery, quite literally in this case. It is at this moment that the reader of Kire realizes the irony of the situation where, at one hand, India demands that Nagaland remains a part of its nation-state, but on the other, discriminates against its people as the perennial 'other'. The sentiment echoes in Neituo's voice as he explains the disparate behaviour 'Naga children are being taught they are Indians but when they go to the Indian cities they are completely alienated by the Indian population' (212). Kire, however, does not merely depict this abysmal scene of discrimination. Through the portrayal of Neibou's camaraderie with a Lucknow-born boy, named Rakesh, Kire, probably, wants to highlight the concept of the bond of humanity rising above national identity – a theme that becomes even more significant towards the end of the novel. It turns out that Rakesh's grandfather was posted in Nagaland as a police in the days of his youth. Rakesh's grandfather confides in him and Neibou, the truths of the brutality perpetrated on the Naga people to counter insurgency. He talks about the brainwashing of the soldiers by their leaders in making them believe they were fighting 'deadly fighters' when in reality there were just teenagers with unsophisticated arms. They were kept alienated from the locals, to heighten the sense of the other-ness of the land, which already threatened them, since the landscape and the culture were greatly different from theirs. There was the 'language barrier' too, the soldiers and the locals failed to communicate, thus demonizing one to the other. However, Rakesh's grandfather does not hide behind these



excuses to defend their actions. He acknowledges that “It was not an honourable war and it will stain the reputation of our army forever” (206).

The darkest moment of the narrative arrives when Mose dies at the hand of a Naga Underground insurgent near the end of the novel. The bleak irony lies in the fact that he dies trying to save a Bihari shopkeeper at Kohima who was being attacked by the militants. As he tries to save the man from getting beaten to death, the insurgents shoot Mose in his chest and his throat. Mose’s fight was against the discrimination and the oppression that the Nagas felt at the hand of the Indian government, it is then only apt that he dies guarding the rights of another oppressed man, even if the oppressor in this case was from his own clan. As he dies, the man he saved cradles his head on his lap frantically calling him “baba” (224). It is probably in this moment that we realize that any national or clan identity cannot rise above humanity. When he was young Moses wanted to sacrifice his life fighting for the Naga cause of Nationalism, but in his death he rises above the very idea of nation and its structure as a migrant Indian addresses him as ‘father’. I would like to go back to Kire’s comment on national identity that was discussed earlier in the paper. Being questioned on the issue of Naga integration, she answered, “I don’t believe people from my generation or my children’s generation will ever feel that they’re Indian. We will always feel we’re Nagas. There’s a huge cultural difference” (“Big Indian Publishing Houses Don’t Think the Northeast Will Sell”). But she also mentions “But we are able to embrace India, understand Indian culture... You have a sense of belonging to a smaller degree to India. Your identity is always as a Naga...you can have a sense of belonging to India... You’ll always be fully Naga in your mentality...we should actually build up on that - the levels of belonging, the levels of Indian-ness” (ibid.). In her work, like in her words, she champions the acceptance of the difference, the other. The novel shows that national identity cannot be the logic for perpetrating violence. It also shows that draconian rules like the Assam Maintenance Act or the AFSPA have failed miserably to help the centre in its mission of integration just like faction violence has failed the cause of the Naga nationalism.

The novel ends with a discussion between Rakesh and Neibou on the idea of forgiveness and the perpetuity of violence. Neibou says:

When I cling to my decision of forgiveness, I feel as though I’m flinging myself into the darkness again. It’s not a onetime act. It is an

ongoing thing. I have to continue forgiving, even when I least feel like it. Maybe that is not the right word for what I choose to do. Maybe it is not forgiving that I do, but something else ... like ... choosing to survive (242).

In the end of the novel, there is a return and a departure. The return is that of Neibou to his own culture, as he is seen tucking a bitter wormwood leaf behind his ear as he walks away from his grandfather's grave. The departure is also Neibou's, as, unlike his predecessors, he decides to survive not by the code of revenge and violence but by forgiveness and maybe this is what Kire had meant when she talked about building up on the idea of the multiple levels of 'Indianness'. Thus, in Kire's works, nationalism, which is essential to the literary imagination of the Naga authors, is not recounted as an abstract idea, but rather in connection to the lives of ordinary Nagas and their struggles with issues of homeland and cultural identity. As a result, commemorating the past in literature becomes imperative in such writings, since the past has the potential to connect individuals in an imagined community through forming collective awareness of cultural identity and history.

#### **6.iv *Mari and A Respectable Woman*: History, Memory, 'Peoplestories' and the War of Kohima**

Kire's writing, like Temsula Ao's, is acutely aware of the cultural loss that the Naga communities have endured as a result of the silencing of their narrative—first by the colonialists and then by the state through a protracted conflict that has severely disrupted the region's ancient storytelling practices. Following their traditions, Kire, like Ao, uses storytelling methods to retrieve the past of the Naga communities in her works. As Elizabeth notes, in the context of the Naga writers, "the very act of writing is done with the intention to retrieve stories of the past and preserve them for the future" (84). Through this process of retrieval of the past in their works, writers like Kire are also able to reclaim and reconstruct a historical consciousness that ties individuals into an imagined community. This project, however, is fundamentally distinct from the strategies of the masculinist public-political sphere; since, unlike the narratives emerging from that sphere, Kire's narratives include a myriad of Naga women's voices, a perspective conspicuously absent from the masculinist public-political sphere. Thus, by reconstructing historical consciousness through the private or collective memories of the people, and particularly Naga women, Kire is able to create a narrative that

includes and emphasises the voices of Naga women, thereby contributing to the formation of their own counterpublic in which they can freely articulate their identity and existence.

The War of Kohima is such a historic event that compelled the Naga communities to undergo inescapable social as well as political transformations. There have been several books written on the historic event. But they are mostly military narratives of history, for example, Fergal Keane's *Road of Bones: The Epic Seize of Kohima 1944* (2010), Robert Lyman's *Kohima 1944: The Battle that Saved India* (2010) and *Japan's Last Bid for Victory: The Invasion of India, 1944* (2011), and Arthur Swinson's *Kohima: The Story of the Greatest Battle Ever Fought* (2016). These works provide a narrative that is largely based on a formulaic portrayal of the war's major historical events while categorically excluding the individual stories of the Nagas who were directly or indirectly affected by the war.<sup>xiv</sup> The Second World War finally found its way into the Naga Hills in early 1944 and forcibly exposed the Nagas to the reality of what war might do to people. Yet, because the World Wars were mainly considered a European occurrence, not much is written about the conflicts that took place outside of the West, no matter how crucial they were historically. The significance of the war becomes clear from military historian Robert Lyman's words who describes the war as "the most desperate and bloody struggle in the entire war on the south Asian land mass" (Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory: The Invasion of India 1944* 88). In another book *Kohima 1944: The Battle that Saved India* Lyman notes "Sato's failure to strike against Dimapur cost the Japanese the chance of seizing this jewel in the British strategic crown: its loss would have been a catastrophic blow to the British, leading inevitably to the collapse of Imphal" (315). The war had continued for 79 days, from 4 April to 22 June and witnessed some of the war's most intense fight, killing approximately 4,000 British troops and 7,000 Japanese soldiers (Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory* 88). The Kohima War Cemetery, located in the centre of the town, serves as a tribute to those who perished in the fight, with approximately 1400 burials, many of them are Indian soldiers who fought in various units under the British administration. However, the war monument bears no recognition of the loss and suffering of the Nagas who lived on the very ground where the historic war took place.

The participation and contribution of the Naga communities to the war is discussed by Khrienuo, a Naga historian. She writes:

Even before the battle began, the British Government sent most of the Naga government servants for intelligence purposes to their villages to report any information they found to the nearest military unit. For instance, at Phiphema, Nagas like Nikhalhu, Zhuikhu and Dr. Nandij acted as British informers by giving informations about the Japanese which were extremely useful (60).

To combat the Japanese, the Nagas were also enlisted in the Assam Rifles and Regiment, alongside Assamese, Kuki, and Lushai Hill fighters (ibid). The British also recruited the Nagas as interpreters (61). Arthur Swinson has also emphasised the role of the Nagas in assisting the British in winning the war-- "How many lives were owed to the courage and skill of these remarkable hillmen will never be known; but the figure must certainly run into thousands" (213). Even so, as memorials such as the Kohima War Cemetery were built in Nagaland to foster a notion of collective memory of the war, the contribution of the indigenous population were largely overlooked and hence, have been subjected to a form of cultural alienation. As a result, the experience of the common Naga people was disregarded in the construction of history as well. Through her novels, *Mari* and *A Respectable Woman*, Kire seeks to overcome this vacuum by reframing history to include the subjective as well as communal recollections of the sufferers and survivors of the war as she represents a fictionalised version of personal accounts of individuals who lived through those years. The memories of the protagonists and their families, throughout the war and post-war years, offer insight into the private and public lives of Naga women and men, who struggled to adapt to a transforming society.

This section of the chapter discusses these two works of Kire, *Mari* and *A Respectable Woman*, as novels that employ memory writing to rebuild history from the ground up. Kire does so through individual recollections, thus following the oral storytelling traditions of the Nagas, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Despite the fact that the conflict was not of their creation, the Nagas were pulled into it and had become victims of the war. In these novels, Kire intertwines oral history and memory studies. These writings, thus, function as a repository where the universality of memories and

the representation of history form a confluence to counterpoint the authorised historiography's monolithic narrative. Kire's works, by attempting to chronicle the variegated voices of common people, call for a more inclusionary form of historiography that includes perspectives from the margins that have been largely overlooked by the official narrative. Both novels are set around the period of the war, however, they also follow the subsequent social and political upheavals during the following period of transition. When discussing the background of the novel *Mari*, Kire notes that it is based on the true tale of her aunt Khrielievu 'Mari' O' Leary, who had personally suffered physical and emotional trauma as a result of the war of 1944. Estranged from her family as a result of the war, she survived those days spending nights in forests, sometimes hungry and sleep deprived for days. The novel *Mari* delves into the experiences of struggle and loss that most Nagas of Kohima endured as a result of the war, but for which there is no documentation in any history text. This novel also explores Mari's personal loss and grief as a result of the war, which claimed the life of the first man she loved. Kire reconstructs the details of those war-torn times from the memories of her "oral narrators"— "For Mari and the others of her generation, the Second World War and the Japanese invasion of our lands was the most momentous period of their lives... All my oral narrators told me about this about the war: 'It altered our lives completely'" (Kire 10).

While discussing the gruelling process of finishing this work, Kire mentions, "I started writing *Mari* when I was about sixteen...I always knew I would write it down one day. I finally wrote it in 2003, with the help of Mari and a diary she had kept during the war years" (9). She spent years to finish the book because she wanted to record not just the details of Mari's life but also the town of Kohima and the Naga society while they underwent a major transition. Thus, the narrative does not focus solely on the personal experiences of the protagonist, but rather on the private experiences of the individual in relation to the public, collective experience of history— "*Mari* is not just Mari's story. It is the story of Kohima and its people" (Kire 15). The plot of novel progresses through the narration of a historical episode as it penetrates into the domain of human lives, and hence Mari's narrative functions as a microcosm of the events occurring in the public realm (Bhumika 6).

In the prologue we hear the protagonist claim— “Only we who have seen the war feel this way. We relive it again and again” (Kire 18). Thus, through writing, the protagonist seems to relive her experience of those days of war, repeatedly. The novel meticulously captures glimpses from Mari’s relationships with two soldiers for the British forces, Victor and Dickie and her battle to find a safe space through the war as she is displaced from her home during pregnancy. It also depicts the changing way of life in Kohima in the post-war years, and finally Mari achieving financial independence and settling down into a quiet married life with Patrick. On the very first page of the novel Kire quotes the inscription mentioned on the war memorial of the 2<sup>nd</sup> division of the Kohima cemetery “When You Go Home, Tell Them of Us and Say / For Your Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today”. And thus she attempts to connect the physical and narrative spaces, demonstrating the inherent value of memory novels as they pay homage to a past that has gone undocumented for long. Kire is also able to illustrate how occurrences in the public sphere are intricately linked with the private sphere of the common Nagas through Mari’s tale. The novel can thus be interpreted as a historical novel or a biographical fiction, in which history is presented by the little experiences of people’s lives and expressed in the fictional form (Bhumika 7). While talking about the position of a novelist who is dealing with history in their work, Hilary Mantel notes:

The novelist knows her place. She works away at the point where what is enacted meets what is dreamed, where politics meets psychology, where private and public meet. I stand with my great-grandmother, on the doorstep. I break through the false wall. On the other side I connect my personal story with the collective story. I move through the domestic space and emerge into the buzzing economic space of the mill yard – the market place, the gossip shop, the street and the parliament house. (Mantel)

Kire, too by narrating the story of her aunt and her family as well as other people of Kohima, breaks through the “false wall” and successfully connects a “personal story” with a collective one. And thus her work becomes a site where the private meets the public and thus she is able to successfully break the wall of binary between the two. The private experiences of women of Kohima, that was never a part of the colonialist historiography of the second world war, thus finds its public expression through Kire’s work. This way, Kire is able to successfully break the rigid sphere division and use

literary narrative almost a site that helps in formation of the counterpublic where Naga women can rewrite their identity and history by themselves.

The novel begins with the depiction of the protagonist's early life that took place before the war. It portrays details of her family, school and friends, thus providing a glimpse of the pre-war Kohima. This section also describes the town of Kohima, as it existed before the war with picturesque houses on the hilltop, upcoming colonies and miscellaneous shops (Kire 20). Through mapping Kohima before and after the war Kire amalgamates the space of the narrative with the real spaces where these historical events actually took place. The novel depicts Kohima as a place where people of various ethnicities coexisted together. Mari refers to the Marwari and Bengali stores in Kohima from where they purchased their daily necessities such as soaps, spices or tea (26). The shopkeepers spoke to the Nagas in Tenyidie, their native tongue, but with an accent. Thus, in pre-war Kohima, one can observe how locals coexisted peacefully with people from mainland communities such as Bengalis and Marwaris, which was drastically disrupted by the post-independence conflict condition as portrayed by Kire in *Bitter Wormwood*.

These sections of the novel depict a quaint way of life in the years leading up to the war, with a regular routine of life:

In these pre-war years, there was a steady rhythm to our lives in our little town. Every morning, we saw the same sights. On our way to school, we met the villagers of Kohima on their way to the fields.... Every evening, as they returned home, we exchanged greetings with them (32).

This meticulous portrayal of Kohima and its people, reflect the intense emotions associated with the place, of the protagonist as well as the author. Through these images Kire wishes for her audience to perceive the pre-war Kohima as they recall it through shared remembrance, a distinct entity from the war-torn, conflict-ridden city, which they encounter in *Bitter Wormwood*. Kire notes:

Kohima today is very different from the Kohima of my childhood, and completely unrecognizable from the Kohima of Mari's childhood. Crowded sidewalks. Ugly gaping holes in the landscape where the unstable land has

slipped away. Jostling people on busy streets where only the terror of a sudden bullet flying to its target can temporarily disperse the masses. Old houses leaning against new concrete shopping malls. And faces, people's faces, always anxious, fearful and hardened by the toil of surviving (Kire15).

This idyllic existence, however, was to end abruptly in 1943, when the conflict from the faraway land finally arrived home, Mari writes— “the war that had seemed such a distant thing for so long, finally reached us” (34). The first indications of the battle appeared with the recurring flight of Dakota planes and the beginning of the army influx (32). However, it was not until the arrival of the “Burmese refugees” that the Nagas were forced to confront the horrific reality of war. The “Burmese refugees”, as the Nagas dubbed them, were mostly of Tamil ancestry and were not ethnically Burmese. These were Tamils who had come to Burma as traders prior to the war. Mari describes the tragic situation that these people were in as they fled the invading Japanese forces, which she witnessed first-hand— “They came in wretched bands; starving, diseased dregs of humanity, droves of them dropping down dead by the roadside or in the refugee camps.” (34). Mari, however, was to be affected by the war in a more personal manner. Mari had met “Vic”, a British Army Engineers staff sergeant, a little before the war and had fallen in love with him as well. Vic was also the one who gave her the name “Mari”, which is short for Marigold, his beloved flower (52). The approaching war, however, abruptly ended their courtship. A young Mari wondered— “Did people fall in love in wartime?” (45)

During times of war, the lives of ordinary people are the most affected. Young Mari's innocent musing on the best time to fall in love focuses on the fact that, while the Nagas had little to do with this war, their lives were completely turned upside down as a result of it. Vic was forced to respond to his obligations as a staff sergeant for the British Army by the onset of 1944, when the war preparations had exacerbated. The war started even before Mari and Vic could finalise their church wedding. Mari and her family had to escape into the forests for safety as Kohima was being shelled by both sides on a regular basis. Kohima had practically become a “ghost town” by this time, as the majority of the city's inhabitants had fled for their lives (62). The town, which had once “looked colourful with the trees and flowers blooming everywhere” with



Daisies and Pink Tegu or Bauhinia, was now reduced to a fierce battleground that burned it down to the ground (26). Mari could only get “choked” and “dazed” from her exiled position in Chieswema village as she helplessly watched her “beloved hometown burning” afar, shrouded in plumes of black smoke (74). The novel’s depiction of the difficulties with life and death faced by its protagonist and other common Nagas during the war is one of its most lasting images. The uncertainty of life that looms large as they made the struggles of each day into their diaries. Mari’s writing incorporates the daily unpredictability of life that comes with wartime. For Mari, running for cover in the forest with no food to feed herself and the younger ones under her care were memories that will stay on. Her recollections of cowering in fear in the forest with no food document a history of the common Nagas that can only be expressed through literary narratives. She entered:

I had never lived through a war before and had no idea how long it would take before we could return home. And it occurred to me that we were going away from home indefinitely. I began to weep silently and forced myself to wipe my tears away. I looked around my home, trying to remember everything in it” (69).

Kire, however, chooses to portray the resilience of the Angami Nagas of Kohima, rather than their suffering. She meticulously depicts Mari’s experiences of struggle during the war, as well as the Kohima of that time, which has since disappeared from the historical narratives. The novel poignantly captures the anxiety of the escalating conflict amongst the common Nagas, their anguish of being isolated from family, and their fight for survival without sufficient food or shelter. While depicting the misery and anguish endured by the people of Kohima as a result of the war, she also captures the experiences of all those who were displaced from the land that they lived on that land for generations, because of this war. Mari and her siblings had to be continuously on the run even after leaving Kohima, since all villages around Kohima were also at the risk of being bombarded by both sides engaged in the war. The Nagas were thus caught in the midst of two warring sides even though this was not their war by any means. Hungry and scared, crouching in fear in the dense forest as gunfire raged around her, Mari reaches a state of ennui:

Bullets flew over our heads and all around us. But we had reached a stage where there was such ennui in all of us, we didn't seem to care whether we died of a Japanese bullet or a British bullet (100).

Mari reflected on the comforts she had taken for granted at her house in Kohima as she and her younger siblings walked through the forest and ended up staying at a cow-shed for days, trembling from fear and cold, through the long hours of the night: “the warm beds and clean bedclothes, the food that was well cooked and always there” (79). Their nights were frequently interrupted by wild creatures, including tigers, and frightening storms that led them to believe they were going to get perished soon (87). And when the terrifying sounds of storm and thunder died away, the resounding noise of guns took their place. The sound of gunfire gradually became usual for them, and quietness and calm became unusual— “If there was a lull in firing, we would all stop whatever we were doing, and strain our ears waiting anxiously for it to begin again. The shelling became normal to us, the silence abnormal” (92). For Mari and her siblings, hunger had become an unavoidable reality. Mari notes “Food was uppermost in all our conversations. We rarely talked about other things. Just food and shelter” (91). Food, which is typically viewed as a communal practise in Naga society, takes on a new dimension in this context. The readers also come to learn about the war's impact on communitarian practises through Mari's memories of food during those times:

The dispersion into the forests had hardened people and each thought only of himself. Any food procured was first shared amongst family members and only when it was in excess was it shared with neighbours. How different it was from the teaching of our parents and grandparents who had always shown by example that's the better shares of food where to be given to others (92)

Thus, on some level, the war was also eroding the communitarian practises that the tribes kept protected for generations.

Mari had discovered that she was pregnant when on the run and held out hope to be reconciled with Vic when the war ended. However, it was not to be as Vic was killed by a gunshot in a fierce day of battle with the Japanese. As the news of Vic's

death was brought to Mari by her cousin she felt as if her “world collapsed at his words” (106). Mari’s life had thus devolved into an ordeal of pain and loss as a result of a war in which she had no stake. Despite the fact that the war was over, Mari felt as if her life had ended abruptly even before she could come out of her teenage years— “I clung to whatever explanation I could conjure up. Part of me knew it must be true and other part refused to believe it. Perhaps the doubting part helped me to survive” (107). Hence, even with the grief and pain of loss, she chooses to survive and start over, all the more so for the sake of her daughter, Mari contemplates:

Did life end at eighteen? ... Sometimes it is easier to choose death to end pain, and sometimes, great love will choose life in spite of terrible pain. I chose life; I hope it testifies to the greatness of my love (122).

She names her daughter “Neilano”, which means “happy again” (123). Thus, in a way, motherhood provided her with the strength to pick up the pieces and carry on. Thus, Kire, much like Ao, uses motherhood as a symbol of empowerment in her writing as well. In Kire’s writing, rebuilding Mari’s life corresponds to rebuilding Kohima. With the war being over, the city’s residents return and begin working on their own and their neighbours’ houses—“the building of houses became a communal activity. Neighbours got together and worked on each other’s houses” (124). Thus, the communal harmony that had been hampered by the war gradually began to return. The manner in which Kohima and its residents reverted to normalcy showed how, even in times of war, common people struggle to create safe spaces for themselves. It also sheds light on the inherent resilience of the indigenous population who lived on the very land where the war was fought. Kire praises this resilient Angami Naga spirit through the Mari’s words—“The Angami spirit was a resilient one. People observed long months of mourning for their dead but got on with the business of life determinedly” (127). Through Mari, Kire mentions an ancient practice of the Angami Nagas that aided in this great fortitude of character. The Angamis thought that when the period of grieving for any kind of loss was complete, further mourning should be avoided since it would infuriate the spirits—“if you grieve excessively it angers the spirits and more grief comes to you. After a great calamity, our people always tried their best to keep their spirits up. That was the way of our people” (128).

The narrative then goes on to chronicle the story of Mari's life after the war. We come to know about her brief relationship with another soldier, Dickie; and her eventual marriage to Patrick O'Leary, a British employee of the Assam Oil Company, whom Mari encountered while working as a nurse in Digboi. Details of Mari's migration from Kohima to Chandigarh to complete her nursing education at a college is also chronicled in the novel's second half. Mari and Patrick set up their home in Duliajan, and as Patrick had wished, they also establish a home in Kohima as he felt a strong connection with the town. Kire once again uses the chance to depict the life in Kohima here, as she maps the historical town through the lens of Mari's memories— "Pat had been infected by that spirit of camaraderie and joie de vivre which always appeared in our people in hard times, as though we were trying to defy our fates" (167). In a way then, Mari's story becomes an emblematic tale of all the men and women of Kohima who endured the war and championed that anguish with resilience.

Towards the end of the novels the readers begin to find first signs of the upcoming conflict— a conflict that was to haunt the region for decades. Mari at this time is settled in Assam and receives information on the situation through her family in Kohima, particularly through her father's letters. From the letters she comes to know of the "tense situation" in Kohima, her father writes to her about the "Indian army's killings of many Nagas who were fighting for independence" (161). The situation rapidly deteriorates in Kohima, as memories of the war begin to return to Mari and her family— once again people start deserting Kohima, schools get shut down and gunfire echoes through the long dark nights (162-63). The peace and normalcy that had been slowly returning to Kohima after the war is shattered once more, and this time for decades. Mari's father writes to her "There are so many terrible things happening at home, I do not like living here anymore. We hear of things that we never knew before. It makes me tired of life" (175). Rather ominously, his letters foreshadow the horrors depicted by Kire at the beginning of *Bitter Wormwood*: a Kohima littered with grisly corpses in the streets and marketplaces.

This novel concludes with Mari reflecting upon her recollections of the past— past of herself, her family and of Kohima. As she glances out the window at a quiet and sleepy Kohima in the middle of the night, she feels "as though the past and present are intermingling right at this very moment" (189). As a novel, *Mari* contains, not only a

description of the war-torn years of Kohima and its residents, but also a narrative that aids in reimagining of important historical events as well as how they moulded the Nagas and their society. Novels like *Mari* calls our attention to ordinary Naga people whose experiences are rarely recorded in historical accounts and herein lies the importance of this genre. The Nagas' memories of the Kohima war serve as a historical reference point for them as not only had it awakened them to the horrors of war, but it had also awakened them to the realities of modernity (Pou 26). As discussed in Chapter 4, this rude awakening occurred as hordes of outsiders started flooding into Nagaland all of a sudden—the fleeing Indians from Burma, the invading Japanese and the British and Indian soldiers. Their tranquil existence was thus abruptly thrust into a rapidly changing world governed by “forces, diseases, and even gods” beyond their control (Thomas 2). Hence, works like *Mari* that commemorate that less documented past gain crucial importance here, particularly because of their oral customs, where storytelling traditions have been both the conduit and reservoir for the history of entire communities. *Mari*, thus, becomes a crucial text in the reconstitution and restoration of the history of an important period for the people from this region, as it includes humanistic components in the procedure of memorialising the past and writing history.

Kire's most recent novel, *A Respectable Woman* continues in the same vein. Kire meticulously explores the transformation and evolution of Kohima from the days of the 1944 war to the post-independence days of the Indo-Naga struggle in this work. At the same time, she also illustrates the evolution of two generations of Kohima women—the first who grew up during World War II, and the second who spent their childhood and youth under the shadow of the Indo-Naga struggle. She does this through the depiction of a mother-daughter relationship and their memories –Khonuo and Kevinuo. While Khonuo's narration is set against a backdrop of conflict and loss perpetrated by war, Kevinuo's story is based on the struggle for independent survival in a patriarchal culture. Kire chronicles the evolution of Kohima and its women through the lived experiences of this mother and daughter, as well as their friends and sisters, giving us a look into the lives of women during Kohima's formative years. The novel begins with a poignant line, the narrator of the novel Kevinuo writes—“It took my mother, Khonuo, exactly forty-five years before she could bring herself to talk about the war” (3). Veio Pou finds an echo of a Biblical passage in this line, one from Ecclesiastes Chapter 3, where King Solomon pronounces “there is a time for everything

and a season for every activity under heaven” and verse 7 of the passage indicates that there is “a time to be silent and a time to speak” (Pou 1). Read in light of this verse Pou thinks that the introductory remark made by Kevinuo, implies a similar attitude to silence— “silence is not about forgetting but a process of letting matter, the trauma or tragedy in this case, sink in until one can be strong again to talk about it. Most cultures, in a sense, share this truth” (ibid.).

The novel, which is divided into three parts, revolves around the tale of a mother recounting her memories growing up in Kohima during a pivotal period in the city’s history, as well as others who survived during the war of 1944. Part One narrates memories of the Kohima war as recalled by Khonuo other survivors of the war. Part Two of the novel starts with the narrator’s birth and follows her as she grows up in a Kohima reeling from one war and bracing for another. Part Three concentrates more on the personal conflicts that the protagonist has to face as a result of tragedies and injustices that she witnesses around her. It is worth noting that Kevinuo’s mother, Khonuo, is a history teacher herself, and it is primarily through her recollections that the readers learn about the historic war. Like Mari and her siblings Khonuo and her family too was part of the “mass evacuation of people from Kohima” (Kire 3). Thus, like Mari, Khonuo too is a witness to this historic event. In this novel she narrates her experiences to her own daughter, thus upholding the storytelling traditions of her community where the art of storytelling preserves and transmits the past to future generations. Kevinuo had heard these stories from her grandparents as well as her mother. Her grandparents’ stories, however, were mostly ghost stories about young soldiers who perished in the war. Kevinuo’s grandmother would lamentingly utter— “They were so young, all of them, so terribly young” (4). Anne Whitehead believes that for writing dealing with trauma or violence, the ghost is an ideal manifestation of the temporal disjunction, “the surfacing of the past in the present” (Whitehead 6). She further explains:

In contemporary fiction, there has been an abundance of novels which explore haunted histories. The traces of unresolved past events, or the ghosts of those who died too suddenly and violently to be properly mourned, possess those who are seeking to get on with the task of living (6).

According to Whitehead, the figure of ghost in such narratives frequently indicate some form of unresolved trauma. In *Mari*, Kire showed how the war affected the people of Nagaland and how that trauma remained mostly unprocessed since their experiences were not memorialized in any monuments or documentation. The fact that the Indo-Naga conflict occurred shortly after the war must have triggered their memories of suffering and further traumatised them, as Kire substantiates in this novel. Hence, it is no surprise that people here arranged their lives around such sightings of ghostly soldier who died in a brutal manner on the land that they lived. As described in the earlier part of the chapter, storytelling in Naga society is a generational activity in which elder generations pass on their history and culture to new generations through storytelling sessions. The experience of the war was also passed down to the next generation through stories—those of ghost soldiers and Naga war survivors. Through Khonuo, Kire recounts such a story of a Nepali soldier who sought refuge in a Naga woman's house. When the Japanese soldiers arrived to take him away, the woman claimed that the Nepalese guy was her son and demanded that they first execute her. She was finally able to persuade the Japanese soldiers and rescue the Nepali man's life. Such events seldom find a place in empirical narratives of statist history, and instead live only in the memories of generations and in literature that disseminates them.

Kire provides us a glimpse of Khonuo's childhood experience of the war in the second chapter of the novel, "Remembering 1944". Because the readers come to experience the pictures of the conflict through Khonuo's recollections, and memories do not maintain linearity, the narrative does not follow a linear framework. Her daughter Kevinuo, who refers to Khonuo as "Azuo" (Angami word for "mother"), notes:

Azuo remembered things in a fragmented manner and her stories were narrated without a beginning, a middle, and an end. You would just have to be around at the right moment to catch the story as it appeared, dredged up from her memory bank, and pondered upon as though it had been another lifetime altogether (8).

This chapter of the story, like *Mari*, gives the readers a sense of the devastation caused by the war in Kohima. Khonuo tells her daughter "(w)e cried when we saw the total destruction the war had wrought (9). She describes how the entire town had become

practically unrecognisable since no house in the area had escaped bombardment (9). The streets of Kohima were heavy with the sound of mourning, she remembers. People mourned the loss of their homes as if they were “mourning their dead” (10). We can see from her account how, caught up in a war they had nothing to do with, the people of Kohima lost everything almost overnight. Still, like in *Mari*, in this novel too Kire shows her readers how the people were able to construct safe spaces as a community despite the devastation, Khonuo remembers “it’s amazing how, after a war, people scrambled to get their lives back to normal. We all did this too, rebuilding homes and beginning the cycle of school and field-going as soon as we could” (12).

The glimpses of community reconstruction as seen in *Mari* are also found in this novel. If *Mari* chronicled the pre-war arrangements and horrifying realities of the war through regular people’s experiences, then this novel portrays the post-war experiences of Kohima residents as they begin to reconstruct the devastated town of Kohima. Kire’s writing reframes Naga history and asserts the need of recognising Naga contributions to communitarian development. Her writing does not only chronicle the specifics of Kohima’s new developments but also the identities of Naga participants to that development. She documents the names and details of the Naga individuals that spearheaded many of the improvements in rebuilding the new Kohima. As a result, the book becomes a historical source of Kohima’s past, and hence the reader learns about Dr. Neilhouzū Kire building the first pharmacy in 1953, Benjamin Sekhose starting the first book shop, and Neiliehu Belho and Vibeilie Belho opening a school for local children after the missionaries departed (14-20). Thus, Kire makes a conscious effort to acknowledge individuals who helped in the development of the community, particularly during the formative period of the city. Kire’s writing also informs readers about the first Naga woman doctor, who became a symbol of hope for many Naga women:

Then we heard that one young woman had been brave enough to enrol for MBBS. It was in 1952 that Khrielieü Kire became the first Naga lady doctor. How proud we were and how inspiring the news was. Not only were our girls becoming nurses, they were also becoming doctors! There would be no stopping them now! (51)



The creation of local role models is vital for motivating younger generations, and by recording these local pioneers, Kire enables future generations to learn about their own rich past and follow in their footsteps. Public intellectuals should document important details of their community, thus keeping a record of local initiatives that are often lost in the official narrative of history behind empirical data, so that the history of the preceding generation can be conveyed to the next generation in a way that goes beyond the official format of history. Thus, the author incorporates a humanist aspect that not only helps preserve an entire community's history but also empowers future generations. While talking about the writing of the book Kire mentions:

I interviewed survivors and got their memories and used that to reconstruct what Kohima would have been like immediately after the war. I had earlier written a biographical novel, *Mari*, which was the first insider perspective on the war and the way it affected the Nagas. I had my notes from that earlier research as a starter...I interviewed many survivors and used their memories and recorded the history they carry with them (“Stories of Nagaland”).

Thus, by incorporating the memories of the lived experiences of the common Naga individuals who witnessed the war, Kire is able to produce a polyvocal narrative that holds the power to de-centre the colonial monolithic narrative of history, where the Naga voice was conspicuously absent.

In this novel Kire recounts new changes in Kohima, be it material or political in nature, including the formation of the Naga National Council or the Indo-Naga conflict for independent Nagalim. And she maps these changes using the memories of the people, particularly women, who observed these rapid shifts, a perspective that was excluded from the colonial historical narrative (58). In the novel, the author also depicts the collective loss and suffering of the Kohima people as a result of the conflict. In the chapter “Family History”, she writes about Kevinuo’s war-veteran uncle, who Kevinuo refers to as “Amo” (48). He was so severely wounded with a splinter lodged near his heart while fighting in the Kohima war that he never fully recovered. It could not be operated on, and it was this wound that killed him years later— “He always knew he might suddenly die if the splinter punctured the aorta. That was what happened the day he was rushed to the hospital with profuse bleeding” (33). He was only 39 when he

passed away. Amo's untimely death plunged his mother into a deep despair from which she never recovered. Kire also recalls other young Naga boys who were recruited by the British to fight for them but did not survive. Even their remains were not returned to their grieving families. Khonuo notes that this must have been especially difficult for the families because the Angami mourning customs are performed around the deceased and hence the families of these soldiers struggled to find closure (53). Their remains never reached their families, intensifying their anguish and robbing them of any hope of healing from this trauma. Kire further notes that while people were busy rebuilding the town, they gave little attention to these bereaved families who were forced to live with such profound grief and loss without any form of closure (53). As Veio Pou points out, the war simultaneously brought the modern world and the horrors of war to this remote Naga town (26). Through Khonuo, Kire echoes Pou's sentiments, as Khonuo recounts to her daughter— "The war brought the outside world so much closer to us... And it brought home the reality of death to our young minds" (54). The author also recounts, through Khonuo, the macabre sight of corpses of soldiers scattered throughout Kohima when the locals returned after the war since the army was unable to clear them all. She also recalls how locals, like Zeno, the midwife, had to take it upon themselves to bury all of these gruesome corpses. Khonuo laments to her daughter: "we grew up very quickly after the war. It was inevitable" (ibid.).

*A Respectable Woman*, unlike *Mari*, focuses significantly on Kohima's post-war years, when the British were departing and the political climate was already volatile. Contrary to the rest of India, the Nagas were not elated with the news of the British leaving. The missionaries' widespread influence, as well as recent advancements in Kohima, had had a positive impact on the minds of the city's residents. Kire captures their feelings through recollections of Khonuo—"Many of our people had not known any government other than the British. So when they left our hills many people felt orphaned" (57). This episode also presupposed the Indo-Naga conflict, which would afflict the region for decades. As Khonuo recalls, the political upheaval began when the British mapped the Naga territories and split the land between "India and Burma, the new nations." (57). The specifics of this political history have been explored in various works, as detailed in Chapter 2. Here however, the author focuses more on the impact of this upheaval on ordinary Nagas, rather than politicians and leaders.

The readers experience the horror that had taken over the lives of Kohima residents as a result of this political turbulence via Khonuo's memories—"We were no longer safe in our own homes. At any time, the army would barge in the door and search our homes" (58). The streets of Kohima were especially dangerous for them since curfews were declared and troops could shoot anyone who went out (ibid.). Whereas the situation in Kohima was severe, it was far worse in the rural areas. With tears in her eyes Khonuo recalls—

Whole villages were undergoing 'grouping' as part of the Indian government's strategy to suppress the freedom movement. The villagers were made to sit outside all day without food or water. Old people and young children were all included in that group, resulting in deaths from starvation and beatings" (58).

Reports of civilians being slain and women being raped had become commonplace (ibid.). Khonuo bemoans the plight of her fellow citizens—"it was like a whole generation of men disappeared because they were all killed, one after the other", reminding the readers of the helplessness and rage Mose felt in *Bitter Wormwood* (58). Comparing the days of early conflict to the days of the 1944 war, Khonuo surmises—"Life was so much worse than it was during the Japanese war. In those days, although bombs were falling all around us, we were never the target of the bombings" (59). Like in *Mari*, here too, the reader learns how people gradually became terrified of Indian soldiers, a phenomenon that did not exist during the war of 1944. During the 1944 war, the Nagas not only welcomed Indian soldiers as members of the British military, but they also actively backed and aided them. However, the situation had changed drastically, and the common Nagas had learned to dread even the "sight of the Indian soldiers" (59). The horrors that had haunted the inhabitants of Kohima during the 1944 war had returned—the curfews, the continual gunfire echoing through the night, the uncertainty and anxiety were all back in their lives. Khonuo's grandmother, whom she calls "Atsa", reflects the sentiment of entire generations while she asks—"Wasn't once enough?" (61)

Khonuo also recounts how Naga nationalism and the resulting movement garnered favour among even the most ordinary Naga people:

The members had deep rooted cultural and religious reasons for fighting the war. The non-Christians believed that if they failed to avenge the killing of a family member, they would have failed in their obligation to the deceased member. Our culture was also our religion, so people were prepared to fight desperately or die trying (62).

Thus, their cultural identity influenced their motivations for active engagement in the movement, particularly their concept of communitarian existence and ethics — “it appealed to the Naga man’s sense of nobility and that was partly why it was so hard to suppress”, Khonuo comments (62). Through Khonuo the author wonders if the 1944 war inspired the Nagas to engage with this movement— “was it because it was so close to the Japanese war where they had witnessed men lying down their lives to defend Kohima against the invaders?” (62) Thus, even years after the war ended, it continued to hold an impact on the moral and political fabric of Naga society.

The motif of loss is pervasive in this narrative, as it was in Kire’s previous works. Through the novel, Kire poignantly presents images of many forms of loss, such as the complete devastation of Kohima in 1944, the loss of innumerable houses due to bombing, the loss of young soldiers’ lives, or the loss of family for the protagonists. Kevinuo recounts how her mother was pushed into a severe depression after her father died at an early age— “she withdrew into a shell and grew old instantly at 37, her hair turned grey overnight” (19). Kevinuo was also afflicted by depression as a child. As Khonuo became more and more apathetic to life a young girl felt “when my father died, I lost my mother too” (ibid.). Her father’s untimely death left a significant impact on her mental health and academic performance. Her mother’s distant behaviour only aggravated her emotional trauma. She struggled to concentrate in class, would burst into tears in front of her classmates, and frequently pretended to be unwell in order to avoid school—“Once, the mathematics teacher ask me a particularly tough question which I could not answer. I burst into tears” (88). It was at this point that Kevinuo discovered an ally, a compassionate shoulder, in Beinuo—a fellow student with whom she had connected over her loss. Beinuo too, had recently lost her mother, and the two bereaved children found compassion and healing in one another, “she understood what it was to lose someone you dearly loved” (89).

The bond that these two girls shared was to become a form of solidarity that would last a lifetime—a bond that would influence both of their lives profoundly. As they grew older and chose different paths in life, it was their friendship that kept them from drifting apart. The novel's title is derived from an incident that the two girls experienced at school. One of their seniors was expelled because she became pregnant unexpectedly. Kevinuo recalls how, following this episode, their headmistress admonished them with a lecture on the “evils” of being pregnant before marriage (96). As a result, these young children were frightened as they were told that such girls would “never find husbands” and therefore “no one would consider them respectable anymore” (ibid.) Thus, these young children are indoctrinated into a lifelong struggle to become a “respectable woman”, moulding their lives to conform to gender norms around them. Unfortunately, Beinuo too is forced to fall for this narrative as she grows up. Her tragic ending becomes even more heart-breaking when the readers are reminded of her fierce character as a child. Even as a little child, Beinuo had strong opinions on critical matters such as accountability. When a neighbour was abused by her alcoholic husband and the neighbourhood started blaming his friends and alcohol rather than the man, Beinuo vehemently stated to Kevinuo:

Why do people say things like that? That he was with this person or that person? They are putting the blame on someone else when they bring that up. I think the husband has to take responsibility for beating the wife instead of hiding behind his friends and his alcohol habit (106).

Thus, Beinuo is revealed to be more defiant and perceptive as a child than Kevinuo. When Kevinuo asks her how she would react if her partner abused her, a young Beinuo responds defiantly— “He has no right to beat me. I won't let him” (106).

Hence, when this same Beinuo is seen silently suffering in an abusive marriage after growing up, it comes off as both shocking and tragic. Soon after her marriage, Kevinuo observes a change in her. When Kevinuo asks her if she's happy in her marriage Beinuo can only reply “I'm sure I am” (121). Kevinuo notes “the vibrant girl” that she had known since her childhood has “disappeared altogether” (121). Beinuo's husband and family are also dissatisfied with the fact that she gave birth to a daughter—Uvi (123). She gradually becomes more withdrawn, and there is a visible schism between the two friends. However, after Beinuo's second child, her son, died as a new-

born, Kevinuo realises that her friend needs her support. She is admitted to the hospital with grievous injuries only one week after her son dies. As Kevinuo rushes to see her in the hospital, she realises that Beinuo is there because her husband has violently assaulted her. In the hospital, with her face and left eye bandaged, she finally tells Kevinuo about the severe abuse she endured throughout her marriage. She also makes a desperate plea to her friend, “I know I won’t survive this, but I want you to promise you will take Uvi away from them him. He has destroyed my life but you mustn’t let him destroy Uvi’s life will stop she doesn’t deserve” (140). Soon after, Beinuo dies in front of Kevinuo as a result of a fractured skull. The remainder of the novel depicts Kevinuo’s struggle to fulfil Beinuo’s last wish as she seethes with rage seeing the severe injustice faced by Beinuo, in her life and her death. Even a case was not filed because there was insufficient evidence, and her body had already been buried hastily (145).

Kire also includes a discussion on Angami customary laws in the context of gender justice, in this section of the novel. The readers learn about the Angami customary laws, their original egalitarian purpose and how men can abuse them to harm women, from a conversation between Kevinuo and her family. Her brother explains that according to the Angami customary laws if a woman is victimised in a marriage, her brother and even her father retains the right to take her away from her husband. He believes Meselhou, Beinuo’s husband, made a calculated decision when he married her, a woman with only a distant, indifferent father and no brothers of her own. “He found a perfect victim!” concurs Kevinuo’s brother. He also believes that Meselhou chose Beinuo strategically, not only because she lacked a loving family to support her, but also because she came from a less fortunate background, so that he could successfully dominate her life. Khonuo points out that Beinuo’s father had also the cultural right to bring a case against Meselhou by appealing to the village elders about the torture his daughter endured according to the customary laws. However, he chose not to do so, failing his own daughter even more (149). Kevinuo feels helpless and enraged as she speaks out about the need to reform customary laws, which evidently fail to protect women like Beinuo— “I think we should find ways of reforming cultural practices so we can ensure justice for those who are truly in need of it” (149). Thus, through her protagonist Kire makes the case for the need for reforming customary practices, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

The novel ends with Kevinuo successfully adopting Uvi after Meselhou dies a sudden accidental death. Kire seizes this opportunity to demonstrate how customary laws can be used for egalitarian purposes. Kevinuo's brother, who supports her wish, points out that, while a friend of the mother adopting the orphaned child is not customary in the Angami community, there are provisions in their customary laws that do allow it. He explains— "It's easier to establish our cultural obligations as the reason for wanting to take you Uvi in" (159). Thus, Kevinuo and her family decide to use their traditional cultural rights and customary laws to aid in Uvi's adoption. According to Angami customary laws, a male relative with a common ancestor with the child's family can claim the right to adopt on the basis of looking after his kinsman's orphaned child. Kevinuo's brother decides to assist her by utilising this particular point of the customary laws and presenting himself as the adoptive male relative. In this way, they decide to use customary law to ensure that the community cannot deny them the right to adopt Uvi. The purpose of the customary laws in the ancient Naga society, was to provide a set of guidelines for communal living. Its original purpose was to preserve unity and equity in their communities. This original egalitarian aspect of the customary laws becomes perceptible only through such interpretations of the laws, as we see Kevinuo and her family making.

As previously noted, this novel not only documents the growth and change in Kohima through the eyes of two generations, but it also records the growth and transition of the generations themselves. That change can be seen through Kevinuo. She refuses to let the gendered discourses of "respectability" dictate her life, as was taught by her school and society. "I am 35 years old now, a registered spinster. My chances of becoming a part of respectable society through marriage are very slim" (161) she ironically comments. In this way, Kevinuo structures her entire subjectivity as a challenge to the idea of respectability as constructed by our society's heteronormative discourses. Kevinuo gives Uvi a formal name for her school, "Melouvinuo"— "the brave-hearted one" (161). As in Ao's work, the trope of motherhood becomes crucial in Kire's writing as well. Through Kevinuo, the author depicts motherhood as a bond with the potential to defy gender norms, despite the fact that it is reduced to a gender specific role in our society. In this sense, the role of motherhood that Kevinuo embraces without being shaped by patriarchal definitions aids her in challenging patriarchal norms of respectability in a society. As a result, she is able to carve out a space of

agency for herself and her daughter, regardless of how discriminatory society is around them. Thus, through Kevinuo and her daughter Uvi, the reader witnesses the emergence of a new generation of Naga women— a generation that understands and fights for their rights. Kire thereby encapsulates the bravery and resilience of a generation of Naga women who have struggled against communitarian discrimination as well as statist violence and, in the end, succeeded in making their voices heard.

Kire's works combine personal experiences and stories from her family and community with written history. In an article named "The narratives silenced by war: the Barkweaver project of peoplestories and folktales" Kire discusses how the war has successfully silenced the tradition of oral narrative in Naga communities. While discussing the importance of excavating such narratives in a conflict zone she uses the term "peoplestories", which she defines as narratives about regular people and their familiar lives:

One form of oral narrative silenced by the war was the many and varied peoplestories. These are not mythical tales but the accounts of ordinary people and their lives. Yet I believe that people need to tell their stories and they deserve to be given the opportunity to share their stories ("The Narratives Silenced by War")

These "peoplestories" can be found in Kire's novels where ordinary Naga individuals are rendered a voice. Thus, authors like Kire and Ao strive to record the diverse voices of common people to counteract the formulaic discourse of institutional form of history writing. While addressing the author's role as a public intellectual, Odile Heynders discusses the significance of literary texts in the modern public sphere, he points out— "the literary work is opened up by writers who depict and rethink social and political issues in their texts, and in doing so are interweaving aesthetic culture more and more with (items of) popular and politicised culture" (16). This framework, as discussed in these last chapters, appears prominently in the works of authors such as Kire and Ao. These authors also open up their texts by fusing representation with information, the present with the history, for an examination of contemporary society and culture— thus fulfilling the role of the public intellectual (Heynders 24).



In their texts both Ao and Kire, include and emphasise upon the voices of Naga women, a motif that distinguishes their work from the narrative coming out of the masculinist public-political sphere of the region. By incorporating the private memories of Naga women to recuperate the community's cultural memory and historical consciousness, these women have contributed to the formation of a counterpublic in which the voices of those rendered voiceless by the dominant power narratives of the region have found a space to articulate their existence. As Veio Pou points out, “And therein also lies the power of literature which history may not be able to write about: the simple and ordinary individual experiences of the episodic past” (56). In this sense, authors such as Ao and Kire contribute to a more inclusive and collaborative understanding of the Naga history, as it encompasses not just the perspective of common Nagas but also that of Naga women. Therefore, the perspectives that the historical narrative has rendered invisible can be accommodated in literary narratives, where the real and the imagined can be combined, thus creating a space for further dialogue, as discussed Chapter 4. Thus, literature can generate a counter-narrative that resists the narratives disseminated by the state or the dominant masculinist public-political sphere, thereby attempting to build a counterpublic where the voiceless can finally articulate their existence. Kire has not only contributed to the process of establishing this counterpublic as a writer, but also as a publisher. As noted in Chapter 4, not only has Nagaland seen a rise in female authors in recent years, but also in publishing houses led by women. PenThrill Publication house and Heritage Publishing House, two of the most successful publishing houses in Nagaland, are both led by women: Asangla Tzudir and Vishü Rita Krocha.

Easterine Kire, along with Michael Heneise and Paul Pimomo, launched her own publishing platform, Barkweaver, in 2009 with the intention of rehabilitating Naga storytelling traditions by preserving ‘peoplestories’ and Naga folktales. Regarding their inspiration, the publishing house states:

Barkweaver draws inspiration from the bark-weaving of women in the Naga villages, who harvest the bark of the nettle and weave a sturdy body-cloth out of it. It is one of the oldest ways of weaving being kept alive by a handful of women. Our efforts at storytelling in print imitate the solitary bark-

weaver in whose nettle-cloths are woven, the stories of her village and her forests, the twin-cradle of our stories and culture (“About Barkweaver”)

While talking about the aim of the publication house Kire asserts, “Barkweaver recognises the narratives of children and women as silenced narratives. These were never voiced and were suppressed under the meta-narrative of war which is a narrative of men” (Kire “War and the Silencing of Naga Narratives”). Hence, along with retrieving the folktale traditions of Naga communities, the publication house also focusses on “stories that people want to tell of themselves, their childhoods, the memories of their lives” as, Kire observes, “people need to tell their stories and they deserve the opportunity to share their stories” (ibid.). Asojini Rachel Kashena who has worked on the stories of loss and trauma of the common people in the backdrop of the Naga-Kuki clashes, observes—“Storytelling, a part of the human experience, helps us to relate to another person more closely. Stories build a bridge between the past and the present” (19). Thus, survivors’ narratives recreate the past through the process of storytelling, rewriting history from the ground up, seizing the narrative away from dominating groups such as the State. However, scholars from this region have pointed out another vital function that the process of storytelling performs—that of healing (Elizabeth 85; Kashena 20). Kire herself asserts, “There are still so many stories in the land waiting to be shared. Not all of them will find a place in world literature, but the telling of individual stories is so important to the teller. It is part of his or her healing, and particularly amongst my people who have stories of deep pain” (Daftuar “For Easterine Kire, Bitter Wormwood is an Exercise in Catharsis”). These sentences vividly recall Ao’s words from her Preface in *These Hills called Home*:

What do you do when it comes to someone else’s memory and when that memory is of pain and pain alone? Do you brush it aside... And if you can do that, are you the same person that you were, before you learnt of the pain of a fellow human being? I think not, and that is why, in these stories, I have endeavoured to re-visit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged (ix).

These writers (who, it should be noted, are also two of the most significant literary figures from contemporary Nagaland) have thus been performing the role of the organic

(and public) intellectual by bringing into the public sphere not only the narratives of their own lived experiences, but also those of Naga women (and men) at large. Kire calls her novels that deal with Naga history— “living books of history” (“Stories of Nagaland”). These works transcend the historical narratives by providing a space for the voices of the survivors, both living and deceased, to come to life. The polyvocal nature of these novels, often told from multiple perspectives, also opens up a space for dialogue in which diverse points of view can coexist without overriding each-other or establishing a hierarchy. Simultaneously, they document and preserve a past that is often overlooked by Statist history. Thus, these literary works provide a discursive space in which individuals previously rendered voiceless, can find an articulation. In this way, the writers like Ao and Kire, attempt to de-centre the monolithic narrative propagated by the colonials, the state and the masculinist public-political sphere. Through this process the writers contribute to the formation of a counterpublic which generates narratives that emphasizes on the lived experiences of women, which is one of the main prerequisites for a woman’s counterpublic. As Rachel Kadish notes:

What the historical record has rendered invisible will remain so unless we avail ourselves of the power to fictionalize, to blend the real and the imagined with rigor and transparency. Facts are essential, but when they’re absent or insufficient, the informed lie of fiction can be the only way to get at the overarching human truth. The full story of a real Sethe will never appear in any historical record, but we have Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.  
(Kadish)

In the writings of Ao and Kire, too, one can locate the attempt made to excavate the past, which has been rendered invisible by the prevalent narratives of power. Kadish considers literary narratives to have the power to work as an “act of repair” for the all the “lost” stories (ibid.). This endeavour to repair and reconstruct the cultural memory and history of a people whose past has been marginalised and appropriated by the grand narratives of history is present heavily in the works of Ao and Kire; thereby reaffirming their roles as organic intellectuals contributing to the formation of a counterpublic where the voiceless can find a space to exercise their agency. As Vizovono Elizabeth points out to me in an interview:

I agree that Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao have both been instrumental in their roles as organic intellectuals. They are strong women who have been able to withstand societal pressures and gain strength from their own personal experiences. Their literary outputs reflect the dialectic of balancing adaptive ways while being committed to rootedness. They have questioned stereotypes, raised issues about hitherto taboos subjects, given voice to marginalized stories/peoples... Through literature, they enable the discourse on such issues in a more easily acceptable manner. (Elizabeth)

## CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that the history of women's movements in India's northeast is well documented, as Åshild Kolås notes in *Women, Peace and Security in Northeast India*, it is typically construed within the frame of reference of the wider struggle of self-determination rather than as movements with significance and agendas of their own, since concerns over political compromises and politics of the "homeland" continue to be the primary focus (1). As a result, as Indu Swami notes, the "mainstream Indian feminist theory" also largely fails to recognise the presence of the element of agency among the women from this region (387). Although such a broad generalisation may not accurately characterise an entire field of research and movement, it is true that in any conflict situation, women are frequently portrayed as passive victims (Kolas 1; Banerjee and Dey 4; Bhattacharjee 104). According to Sukalpa Bhattacharjee this could be a consequence of the patriarchal hierarchies inherent in the academic systems (Bhattacharjee 105). Given that gendered power relations and identity are both recast or reconfigured in the course of conflict, it is undeniable that a conflict situation is also a location of potential change (Kolas 1; Bhattacharjee 104). Considering that conflict includes a disruption of existing norms, scholars believe that it could have inadvertent positive implications on the position of women within their cultures by changing the gendered distribution of labour. Therefore, any study of women's status in such settings must take into consideration the diverse ways in which they operate in that space.

This is especially true of the roles that allow women to speak out against the multiple forms of patriarchal subjugation they face. The objective of this thesis, thus, was not only to highlight the myriad ways in which patriarchy manifests and re-emerges as a system of oppression in the region but also to locate the element of agency in the emergence of individuals and organisations that aim to carve out a space beyond the discourses propagated by the State and the masculinist public sphere, to express their identity and resistance in their own language. As Paromita Chakravarti notes when the state engages in routine acts of violence through laws like AFSPA and a "state of exception" becomes the norm for everyday life in the face of increasing violence, conventional tools appear not only ineffective but unattainable, as the rule of law breaks down. In such situations it becomes imperative that a vocabulary of protest is developed

that is non-violent but not apathetic, one that can effectively highlight the horrors of violence while still avoiding violence —methods that will captivate people’s imaginations and “break their stupefied submission to violence” that simply serves to normalise it (47). It is in this context that this thesis uses the notion of the counterpublic to trace the formation of a space where alternative forms of agency have the opportunity to contest the hegemony of discourses of the State as well as the patriarchal institutions that surround women in their immediate environment.

As discussed in the first chapter of the thesis, counterpublics, in Fraser’s view, are discursive arenas where participants from marginalized social groups may construct and disseminate counterdiscourses outside the scrutiny of dominant publics in order to cultivate conceptual frameworks of their identities and the surrounding world (Fraser 67). Frank Farmer further notes that in order to be considered a counterpublic, the minimum requirements that must be met are— “an oppositional relationship to other, more dominant publics; a marginal, subaltern, or excluded status within the larger public; and an identity wrought by, and refined through, the reflexive circulation of texts”— requirements that correspond to the conditions of the space established by Naga women, as evidenced by the analysis undertaken in Chapters 1 and 2 of the thesis (*After the Public Turn* 14). In accordance with Farmer’s last criterion as cited above, counterpublics might be defined as a social space formed through the reflexive circulation of discourses. And hence, as Kyle R. Larson notes, the rhetoric belonging to this space of counterpublicity can comprise of “oppositional practices” of alternative modes of public discourse that challenge the dominance of the “rational-critical deliberation” as the sole acceptable form of public discourse (7). Larson further explains that this emphasis on circulation of discourses is important as it provides a deeper perspective into the ways in which the discourse of the counterpublic operate through counterpublicity (13).

As studied in this thesis, since the voice of women in the region has been meticulously muted in the decision-making sphere by various modes of patriarchy (and most notably the culture of impunity propagated by the State), the alternative spheres of protest, movements, and literature assume a greater significance in the process of articulating resistance and identity. The objective of this thesis has been to highlight how, through these alternative modes of public discourse, these women construct a path

distinct from those controlled by the masculine public-political sphere, to express their identities – an alternative sphere where they can articulate their identity and, in the process, resist oppression. In order to reject the hegemonic power-play that both sides of the conflict are engaged in, women in this region have had to create a new vocabulary to communicate their concept of self. In order to assert her subjectivity within a system that inhibits her, the woman needs to carve herself a space that is both inventive and flexible. If her voice has been painstakingly erased from the grand narrative of History, she will need to create a whole new lexicon and carve out a space for herself within the confines of the patriarchal system in order to have her voice heard. This thesis aimed to trace the emergence of a space where women can circulate these counterdiscourses, beyond the reach of the discourses of the State and masculinist public-political sphere and articulate their subjectivity through alternative modes of public discourse— a space similar to what Nancy Fraser had referred to in her essay as the ‘counterpublic’.

While talking about counterpublicity in her essay “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World”, Nancy Fraser cites “political efficacy” as one of the key components that contribute to the vitality of the public sphere and its crucial force. She notes “public opinion is considered efficacious if and only if it is mobilized as a political force to hold public power accountable” (31). In the framework of counterpublicity, this thesis examines two of the alternative methods utilised by women in this region— peace politics and literary narratives. When it comes to the issue of political efficacy, particularly in the context of an organisation like NMA whose actions began with a narrative of peace politics, we have seen them not only use their platform to promote peace and help negotiate between the two warring sides, but also to actively rally in support of the implementation of the 33% reservation for women in Nagaland, as discussed in Chapter 3. They had founded the Joint Action Committee for Women’s Reservation in 2011 to agitate for this cause, and they went to court to actively seek it. In the same year, they also won a favourable judgement from the Guwahati High Court, which ruled against the state and ordered that the Urban Local Body (henceforth referred to as ULB) elections be held as soon as feasible with the reservations in place. Furthermore, the NMA has vigorously opposed the notion that the enforcement of the 33% reservation will affect the Naga customary laws, and as discussed in Chapter 3, these women have effectively utilised traditional roles to promote peace and women’s

rights in their society. Rosemary Dzüvichü, advisor to the NMA, provides a compelling argument in this context, as she notes— “Even the Nagaland government didn’t object when the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 was passed where 243 (T) was inserted requiring one-third reservation of seats for women and 243 (U) was inserted which lays down that election to every municipality would be held before the expiry of its duration” (“Naga Women Approach Supreme Court”). As mentioned in Chapter 3, the NMA was compelled to withdraw their petition for the reservation in 2017 due to the violent protests that occurred in Nagaland when the government attempted to implement the 33% reservation in the ULB elections, despite a lengthy and ultimately successful Supreme Court battle. However, in 2016, the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (henceforth PUCL) filed a petition with the Supreme Court of India to reverse a Nagaland Assembly resolution that had previously rejected the implementation of the 33% quota in ULB elections. And in March 2022, a meeting organized by the government of Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio finally resulted in a unanimous recommendation that the upcoming municipal elections in Nagaland be held in accordance with the 74th Amendment Act of the Constitution of India. Consequently, in April, the state of Nagaland notified the Supreme Court of its intention to organise ULB elections with the implementation of the 33% women’s reservation<sup>xv</sup>. Although the NMA were compelled to withdraw as petitioners following the 2017 violence, they did display public support for the PUCL, and thanked them once the state informed the court of its intention to ultimately implement the reservations (“Naga Mothers’ Association Welcomes Resolution on ULB”). In 2022, 45 years after Rano Shaiza, Nagaland also witnessed its second woman entering the Indian Parliament. In March 2022, S Phangnon Konyak of the Bharatiya Janata Party (henceforth BJP) became the second woman from Nagaland to serve in the Indian Parliament and the first to enter the Upper House. Konyak (who is the president of the *Mahila Morcha* of the BJP in Nagaland), was elected uncontested to the Upper House as MLAs of the NPF (Naga People’s Front) were unable to negotiate on the nomination of their intended candidate. Whether this should be considered as a victory for women in Nagaland’s political sphere is still debatable, as Konyak will be the first woman from Nagaland to serve in the Rajya Sabha since no other candidate filed a nomination and she won without facing any election.



Studies that examine the societies belonging to India's northeast have questioned whether reservations necessarily increase women's autonomy in the public sphere (Brara 83; Deka 41; Kolas 1). Although these are still contentious concerns, it cannot be denied that the implementation of the 33% reservation will definitely generate a stronger push for women to enter the public-political sphere here—a push that is critically required in a space where numerous systems of patriarchy, particularly those fostered by the State and its violent discourses, converge to establish a rigidly gendered space for women, as discussed in Chapter 2 of the thesis. Rekha Rose Dukru, one of the five women candidates who ran in the 2018 Assembly Elections, discusses this in an interview with me, while addressing her experience as an independent woman candidate in the political sphere of Nagaland:

This experience has also changed my perspective. Reservation would have been easier. Because if you look at the culture and tradition of the Nagas, it is so difficult for women to enter into politics, reservation would have actually pushed you to get into politics. Like the Nagas say, “We don't have discrimination”. But there are so many discriminations, and this experience has also shown me that reservation would have really helped some women to get into politics. (Dukru)

However, it goes without saying that merely reform in the realm of political participation will not result in a change in women's status; there must be a shift that includes the approach of several societal institutions, most notably the people's mindset, their way of thinking. Several activists and scholars from the region share this viewpoint. Vizovono Elizabeth effectively conveys the essence of this idea in an interview with me when she states that having women to formally participate in decision making is more of a “temporary appeasement solution”, she notes during an interview with me:

The issue of women's participation in decision making is more of a temporary appeasement solution. I do not believe the status of the average woman will dramatically improve just by having elected women representatives in the public sphere, though of course that is also required. There are deeper aspects that need to be resolved at the core. And those will

take time because they demand attitudinal changes both on the part of men and women (Elizabeth).

Temsula Ao (whose works are discussed in Chapter 5) who served as the Chairperson of the Nagaland State Commission for Women for two terms from 2012 to 2019, echoed same thoughts regarding the necessity for not only men but even Naga women to change their way of thinking if they wish to achieve agency and autonomy. She observes, “Women have been silent for so many years. Naga women, to a very large extent, have accepted the situation as it is. We accept our lot as secondary, as subordinated by patriarchal voices” (“Raise Voices through Dialogue”). Ao had not shied away from questioning the status quo she observed about the subject position of women in her society. She pertinently poses her question— “Have the situation inched perceptively as a result of the positive orientations advocated by NGO pressure groups or even the government ostentatious efforts to dispense gender equality through adopting concepts like gender budgeting and gender safe working environment in the work place?” (ibid.) Ao argues that regardless of the effects of such endeavours, they would at most be “superficial” since the “core of gender discrimination” remains at the “heart of the customary laws” that continue to regulate Naga society even in contemporary times (ibid.). Consequently, she highlights the necessity to “redefine” the prevailing customary laws and practices with a particular emphasis on women’s admittance into public-political decision-making spheres such as the village councils and the legislative assembly, in addition to inheriting parental property equally (“Allow Naga Women to Inherit Parental Property”). While she acknowledges that Naga customary laws are the “bedrock” of their communities and believes that the loss of customary laws would result in the loss of the Naga “identity within our right,” she argues that redefining them is not the same as abolishing them, but rather re-working the practices in light of new realities:

When one speaks of ‘redefining’, it means ‘re-doing’ or ‘changing’ an existing entity or a concept and giving it a new meaning. In today’s context, it is assumed that when we use the word ‘customary’ we are referring to Naga customary laws and that we are proposing to ‘redefine’ it from a gender perspective (ibid.)

As discussed in the fifth chapter of the thesis, Temsula Ao's fiction as well as her memoir addresses these topics as well. The chapter explored how through her work, Ao has paved the way for a counterdiscourse that critiques not only the State and its violent laws, but also the structural violence women confront in patriarchal societies. Easterine Kire has done the same, particularly in her questioning of the discourses of violence and the culture of impunity perpetuated by the State, which she depicts in a number of her novels that are analysed in the sixth chapter of the thesis.

As Laura R. Micciche notes, a feminist approach to writing generates "lines of deviation rather than lines of obedience" as feminist rhetoric highlights writing as an act that is at the same time imaginative as well as political helping in reimagining reality (176). She observes:

writing is not a transparent reproduction of what is; it is an active construction that reflects and refracts, creates and distorts, imagines and displaces. How we choose to position writing reflects larger configurations of meaning and power; in short, writing is fertile material for doing feminist rhetorical work because it establishes links between language, action, and consequences (176)

Thus, through literary narratives, authors like Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire are able to construct a discursive space (a space that this thesis is referring as counterpublic, following Fraser) where counterdiscourses can engage with the political actions and efforts that Naga women have demonstrated through their active endeavours taking place in the heavily masculinized public sphere, as outlined in Chapter 2. While discussing the idea of counterpublic intellectualism, Larson points out that it functions differently regarding legitimacy and locality as the prevailing discussion on location and legitimacy in public intellectualism, like Habermas' liberal public sphere, fails to explicitly recognise power differentials (17). According to him, the discussion and the dialogue, rather than their appearance on established publication channels, are what establishes legitimacy in counterpublic intellectualism, he notes "its legitimacy depends on the audience's identification with and uptake of the insights in a text" (ibid.). He further observes since counterpublics generate and disseminate counterdiscourses to produce oppositional readings of their identities and experiences,

“consciousness-raising” comes up as a crucial strategy for the counterpublic intellectual for the means of identification:

The argument’s quality matters... But without the institutional power structures of dominant publication avenues, issues of circulation come to the forefront. Therefore, counterpublic intellectualism operates through counterpublicity as a means to circulate oppositional texts with which audiences identify for the sake of raising and transforming consciousness” (18).<sup>xvi</sup>

As examined in the last three chapters of the thesis, both Ao and Kire, as authors and intellectuals who have heavily utilised the concept of collective memory of their people to encapsulate their identity, experiences and their past, have successfully created this bond with their audience, particularly their people; and have thus been able to partake in the action of consciousness-raising among their audience through their work. Vizovono Elizabeth elaborates on their consciousness-raising action while discussing Ao and Kire’s successful rise as Organic Intellectuals in the Naga society, she explains:

They have also not only awakened the cultural consciousness of their people, but demonstrated the need to be analytical and self-critical as well. And because they are true to themselves and their reality, I believe they resonate well with their audience, even beyond the local community. I see both Kire and Ao as progressive intellectuals who have a real impact and influence on their audience, especially the younger generation (Elizabeth).

The works of these authors, according to Elizabeth (who is not only an established researcher on Naga literature but also a teacher of the same) do have a significant impact on the younger generations of reading public from their immediate community. Consequently then, the remarkable rise of women authors, as noted by numerous scholars in the region and discussed in this thesis, may also be interpreted as evidence that the circulation of their works has successfully contributed to the formation of a discursive space in which women can finally freely express their identity outside the constraints of discourses of the masculine public sphere.

Vishü Rita Krocha, founder of one of the most prominent publishing houses in Nagaland, PenThrill, discusses this issue as she analyses the emergence of women's literary sphere in Nagaland. As the owner of a prominent and prolific publishing house from the region, her opinions bear substantial importance, as the literary public sphere (or, in this case, counterpublic sphere) consists not only of writers and their readers, but also of those who actively participate in the transmission of works, the publishers. In an interview she discusses the unprecedented rise of women in Nagaland's literary public sphere by drawing on her own professional experiences:

I was recently part of a 3-day Creative Writing Workshop where 18 young people signed up. Out of these, only 4 were men and majority of them were women. I would like to think this particular case is also reflective of the 'writing' scenario in the state. Generally also, I think women are natural storytellers. As far as publishing is concerned, out of about 60 authors that PenThrill has published over the last 8 years, 45 are women while male authors are just about 15. Most of the manuscripts that we have currently acquired for publication are also by women writers. Personally for me, this is something that I take delight in. Mostly because even though there is a certain lack of women representation in decision making bodies, when women are taking to writing, somehow it means that their voices will continue to live on. (Krocha)

Like Elizabeth, Krocha also believes that the prominent female authors like Ao and Kire, have successfully established an organic connection with their own communities, particularly the women; and Krocha feels that this has happened because they have gotten their inspirations mostly from "ground realities"—"if Naga women writers are emerging in the field of creative writing, one common thing I have observed is also how, either consciously or subconsciously, they are portraying the ground realities of being a woman in the Naga society whether it is through their poems/stories/novels" (Krocha). She reiterates the viewpoints presented in the last three chapters of this thesis, namely that storytelling has been a methodical instrument for the Nagas to preserve their identity, worldview, and history, and that traditionally it has been Naga women who have been entrusted with this responsibility. Krocha is

reminded of her grandmother while discussing the traditional roles of women in Nagaland as storytellers, she mentions:

Storytelling, for me, has been always been associated with women. It was my grandmother who lived to be 104 (she passed away in December 2016) who introduced me to this enchanting world of stories as a child. Even when she came to live with us in Kohima, it was her who continued to regale us with stories. As an adult then, I listened to these stories with a newer perspective and felt even more deeply, the need to preserve them. Perhaps, because women always felt more than men do and are naturally more emotional that they are also able to express themselves better in writing.  
(Krocha)

Storytelling has thus been a traditional way of transmitting history from one generation to the next; and these authors, continue to do the same in an effort to fill the lacunae, especially in light of their oral past and the rupture they experienced from it due to double colonization (issues that are discussed in details in Chapters 4, 5& 6 of the thesis). As a result, they emerge not only as Organic Intellectuals but also counterpublic intellectuals, as they produce a discursive public space through their texts that generate counterdiscourses challenging the hegemonic narratives promulgated by the State or the colonisers (as outlined in the last three chapters), effectively producing an insider's perspective counteracting the outsiders'

In order to challenge the subordination that the women experience here at the hands of multiple forms of suppression, they had to build a self-reflexive space inside the very cultural framework that strives to constrain them. To overcome their fragmented subjectivity, the women addressed in this thesis have thus devised alternative strategies to broaden the scope of their tradition-specific positions and strategically employ these roles to engage in the highly masculinized spaces of conflict and politics. In order to accomplish this, women from this region had to develop new methods of articulating their agency that were uniquely distinct from the mainstream feminist struggles. In this thesis, I have chosen two such distinct tactics of resistance that allowed women to simultaneously articulate their subjecthood and construct a vocabulary of defiance. These tactics may appear to be detached methods, but in order to trace the trajectory of social movements and the formation of the discourse of

resistance amongst the women of this region, it is important to contextualize and read them in light of each other. As Nancy Fraser points out, not citizenship per se, but their “co-imbrication in a common set of structures and/or institutions that affect their lives” is what makes a group of people into a “public” (30). Because of this, the researcher needed to take a more comprehensive look at two of the most significant avenues through which Naga women have circulated alternative discourses that challenge not only State-sponsored oppression but also systemic forms of discrimination that they encounter in their everyday lives. In their struggle to gain agency, the women of this region have shown an incredible capacity for innovation, negotiation and resilience. While talking about the position of a public intellectual in the present Indian society, Romila Thapar very poignantly makes the following observation— “a society like the one we live in needs its public intellectuals: people who can ask the right questions at relevant moments” (138). The women whose actions, efforts, opinions and creations that this thesis deals with have been engaged in that endeavour for decades now— relentlessly questioning not only the patriarchy their society places upon them, but also the system of violence and culture of impunity perpetuated by the most powerful actor in this situation, the State. Through their work, they have strived to establish a space that enables them to renegotiate their identity and that of women in Nagaland at large at a crucial juncture of history when their society is envisioning rapid change— a space addressed by the thesis as “counterpublic” in accordance with Nancy Fraser’s idea. In an effort to comprehend the socio-political realities of the communities here, via the prism of gender, this thesis has sought to emphasise the intricacies and the diversity of women’s resistance manifested in their everyday power-interactions, in order to highlight the importance of women’s agency in peacebuilding, especially in a region beset by multiple forms of violence and oppression.

## NOTES

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- i Habermas clarifies this idea of the bifurcation in the following lines: “The *res publica* is the property that is universally accessible to the *populus*, i.e. the *res extra commercium*, which is exempted from the law that applies to the *privati* and their property; e.g., *flumen publicum*, *via publica*, etc.” (Habermas 251).
- ii In the British islands this was done with the help of the institution of Justice of Peace. In the rest of the continent the local administrations were brought under the state’s control through the help of superintendents following the French model. (Habermas 18)
- iii Source: [http://mospi.nic.in / sites / default / files / reports \\_ and \\_ publication / statistical\\_publication / social\\_statistics / WM16Chapter4.pdf](http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/reports_and_publication/statistical_publication/social_statistics/WM16Chapter4.pdf)
- iv The role of English language became important in this event, since not only the “Yehzabo” was written in English, but the NNC discussions were also conducted in English. Most probably to overcome the language barrier between the Naga tribes whose native languages vary widely from each other.
- v The regulation is a derivation of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations, 1873, which safeguarded the British Empire’s holdings in the tea, oil, and elephant trade by banning “British subjects” from accessing certain “Protected Areas”. In 1950, the term “British subjects” was substituted by “Citizen of India”. (Source: <https://ilp.nagaland.gov.in/about>).
- vi *Jhum* or shifting cultivation is a practice of cultivation in which a plot of land is cleared of vegetation and farmed for several years before being vacated till its fertility has been replenished naturally. It is an ancient tradition with a unique place in tribal agricultural production and economy and is a crucial component of the indigenous life's societal foundation.
- vii As seen through the discussion on economic and inheritance rights of women in this chapter, economic visibility also does not translate to economic freedom or empowerment in any way.
- viii Lefebvre describes social space as a space that contains and assigns proper positions to “social relations of reproduction” and the “relations of production” (Lefebvre 40). Lefebvre defines “social relations of reproduction” as the “biophysiological relationships” between sexes and age groups, as well as the unique organisation of the family; whereas the relations of production, refers to the “division of labour” and its arrangement in the shape of “hierarchical social functions” (ibid.). These are two sets of relationships that are intrinsically tied as according to



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Lefevbre this division of labour has ramifications for the family and is intertwined with it and correspondingly, family organisations interfere with the division of labour.

ix Brara talks about the religious festival of Lai-Haraoba in this context. Lai-Haraoba is not only an important religious festival in Manipur but it is also the most important form of public entertainment. While referring to the theatrical exercises pertaining to the festivals, Brara points out the important role that the *maibior* the traditional priestess plays in it. The maibi enters clad in white and initiates her invocation while ringing bell in her hands. The whole performance reaches its climax when she starts giving oracles. She becomes the medium through which the goddesses will bless the whole land. Thus, Brara opines, 'it was the women who set the future prospects of the state structure...She, as a citizen, was regarded as ensuring the prosperity of her state actors and the state apparatus. This was the extent of her empowerment.' (Brara, "Performance: The Gendered Space In Manipur", 279)

x This notion does become problematic in the context of women's peace activism because it can be founded on the essentialist idea that women are innately nonviolent reinforcing the notion of conventional femininity. As Weaver notes, "Men are assigned the role of protectors: women and children are protected. This inherently unequal dichotomy alienates women from the conditions of their own protection and frequently forces them into passive and weak positions; this, in turn, can undermine their claims to women's rights and depoliticise their actions, especially in regard to peace activism" (Weaver 2). However, it is essential, while striving to comprehend the gendered construction of experiences, that social actors not be viewed as passive carriers of frameworks, but rather that human agency is recognised as an important ingredient in creating and contesting gendered identities. Vincent observes in this context, "This point is particularly important in post-conflict contexts where social relations tend to be in enormous flux and where wartime conditions create a radically new set of experiences for many people, which can lead to new ways of viewing both themselves and their relationships with others" (Vincent 4). As will be discussed in this chapter, women peacebuilders in Nagaland utilise this space to reimagine gender norms within their community. Therefore, it will be incorrect to believe that these peacekeepers have just carried out their gendered social responsibilities and perpetuated the same gender structure.

xi As Einwohner points out in this context, whereas the adoption of conventionally feminine motifs and tactics, like motherhood, may aid a movement, same connotations can also hinder the political efficacy of the it and hence the gendering of social movements may make it challenging for them to succeed in particular political circumstances—"Women have traditionally been ignored as political actors because femininity is associated with emotionality and passivity—characteristics that are thought to be at odds with the masculine traits of toughness aggression

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and objectivity believed necessary for political involvement” (Einwohner 693). As evidenced by the socio-political pursuits of NMA, particularly in relation to the 33% reservation, this is not the case for the Naga Mothers. Their stand against the gendered structure of the community demonstrates how they have utilized the maternal frame to establish a less gender-rigid space in Naga society.

- xii Although there are other celebrated women authors from the region, such as Monalisa Changkija or Nini Lungalang, my research focuses on the genre of fiction and how it has been used to recast the history and identity of the Naga woman. Since Monalisa Changkija and Nini Lungalang, primarily write poetry, I am selecting the works of Ao and Kire because they have the most extensive body of work when it comes to Naga fiction.
- xiii To elucidate the issue of loss of ‘consciousness’ I would like to refer to RoshmiGoswami’s essay “Shifting Sands: Negotiations, Compromises and Rights in Situations of Armed Conflict”. She writes, “to develop a consciousness of their (the women) rights” it has to be made sure that they are able to “define these rights from their own needs and experiences” (94). Ao too mentions in her essay “‘Benevolent Subordination’: Social Status of Naga Women”, that until and unless the women themselves can realize how their rights of articulation is snatched away by the traditional society, any attempt to reform the current gender-biased system would face a strong opposition not only from men but from ‘section of women’ who are themselves still ‘traditionalists’ at core and ‘would like to continue in the state of ‘benevolent subordination’ as in their hearts they still have not let go of the myth of the ‘male superiority’ in all walks of life (107).
- xiv *The Road to Kohima*, written by Charles Chasie and Harry Fecitt, published recently in 2017 (seven years after Kire’s *Mari*), is probably the first non-fiction book to present the Naga perspective on the history of the Kohima War.
- xv The state of Nagaland was also rebuked by the court in July 2022 for delaying the ULB elections with the implementation of the reservation, and the court ordered the state to hold the polls by January of the following year in an order dated July 29. However, in August2022, the state asked extra time, arguing that December and January are festive months in Nagaland and that elections cannot be held until the celebrations are complete.
- xvi Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar articulate five rhetorical practices of feminist consciousness-raising: 1) sharing personal stories through public venues; 2) engaging with feminist perspectives and texts in classrooms; 3) interacting with popular culture; 4) exploring issues of diversity and new audiences; and 5) creating new means for self-expression. Consciousness-raising rhetorics evolve in response to rhetorical exigencies based on social, cultural, and political changes (Sowards and Renegar 541).

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