

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

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# Synopsis

The Indo-Naga conflict is regarded as one of the longest running struggles for self-determination in South Asia. Since 1947, when the British colonisers left the region and it was transferred to the newly formed nation of India, the region has been beset by a violent conflict that has resulted in the loss of countless lives. The conflict has also resulted in the formation of a highly militarised zone in which the implementation of oppressive legislations such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (henceforth AFSPA) has rendered the existence of even an ordinary civilian fraught with peril. Women, who are often considered as the metaphorical embodiment of their culture and ethnicity in times of war, have been put in a more precarious position because of the long-drawn conflict. The advent of militarization and the application of harsh legislations have led to the formation of a space here that is not only restrictive but also extremely hostile to women.

Additionally, certain customary practises have further contributed to the establishment of this restrictive space for women, by limiting their access to the public-political sphere of decision-making. However, unique to this region are the methods in which Naga women have strategically resisted the formation of this gendered space by employing tradition approved roles. This thesis studies two such sites of agency through which women in this region attempt to negotiate their identities in relation to the State as well as the community, using inventive and adaptive strategies. The difficulties of women exerting agency in a patriarchal society infused with militarism, gives birth to the mobilisation of a counterpublic to challenge and reshape the prevalent gender norms. The objective of this thesis is to explore the ways in which Naga women, who have traditionally been excluded from decision-making public-political

sphere, are asserting their voices by creating what Nancy Fraser calls “subaltern counterpublics” (67).

The theoretical and contextual framework of the work is established in the first chapter of the thesis, wherein concepts like public and counterpublic are elaborated upon. Nancy Fraser introduced the concept of the “subaltern counterpublics” in response to Habermas’ theorization of the bourgeois public sphere, which had its roots in eighteenth-century Europe. Habermas’ idea of the public sphere is revolutionary because it provides a critical analysis of a forum in which individuals may collectively, beyond their own interests, criticise the State and its actions. However, multiple feminists, including Fraser, have pointed out that Habermas’ notion of the public sphere does not account for the question of gender, which significantly limits its liberatory potential. This chapter, hence, presents a discussion on the significance of Nancy Fraser’s concept of “subaltern counterpublics” in a post-colonial world where the State does not provide a liberal atmosphere that was available to the bourgeoisie of 18th century Europe (the subject of Habermas in *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere*), as a critique of the Habermasian public sphere, which is restrictive when it comes to opportunities of entry point for the economically and sexually marginalised. As a result, the idea of the counterpublic becomes more relevant to a post-colonial indigenous society like the Naga’s than the Habermasian public sphere, which focuses mostly on European communities of the 18th century. While the ideal of participatory parity is unlikely to be completely realised in stratified societies, the proliferation of counterpublics may provide marginalised people with a forum in which to consider and work toward such a goal.

The second chapter of the thesis explores the particulars of this gendered space wherein the Naga women attempt to establish their own counterpublics. Gendered space is the repertory of materially as well as culturally established gender roles that creates frameworks within which women form and negotiate their identities; however, these frames within which women construct and negotiate their identities are not rigid, rather permeable in nature (Bazylevych 2). This chapter discusses how the State, religion, and customary practices of the Naga communities have worked together to create a gendered space in which women's identities are controlled and shaped. Examining how the gendered space came to be is important because it provides a framework for the citizenry as well as the State to reimagine their positions in society. This chapter will examine how several tiers of violence, including institutional and structural ones, have created a space for Naga women that attempts to limit their admission into the public-political sphere and decision-making spaces. The chapter includes a discussion of the political history of the Indo-Naga conflict and the repercussions of imposing legislation like AFSPA, which not only propagates the creation of a violent and hostile space, but also a culture of impunity that pervades all social institutions, including the community and the family (Kikon 23-24). Additionally, an analysis of the criticisms made by Naga scholars and activists of the Naga customary laws and practices, is included in this chapter. Despite the crucial importance of the customary practises for the Naga communities, some academics feel that they further contribute to the creation of a male-dominated society by limiting women's access to inheritance rights and political participation; thus, establishing in effect, an even more restrictive space for women here.

The next chapters studies how Naga women have utilised traditionally sanctioned social roles to construct a space for dialogue in order to challenge the gendered space referred to in Chapter 2. The potential to establish one's individuality as a woman in a patriarchal

society frequently necessitates the effective mediation and manoeuvring of traditional gender norms. This chapter analyses two of the strategic positions which Naga women have used to essentially articulate their identity, that of the traditional peacemakers and mothers. The chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of how both roles, which are extremely important in Naga culture, enable women to exercise their agency beyond the private sphere to which they had previously been restricted. The chapter also discusses how in the Naga communities, the peace-building process has become a feasible space through which women may expand their political agency and adopt a far more visible position in the formalized public-political sphere.

In the final three chapters (Chapter 4, 5 and 6) of this thesis, I examine how female authors in Nagaland have used literary narratives to create a counterpublic that voices the identity of Naga women, utilising the traditional role of the storyteller. Through an exploration of some of the novels written by two of the most distinguished Naga authors, Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire –both of whom happen to be women— these chapters will attempt to study how this aforementioned space is shaped in Naga culture. The key emphasis of this section of the thesis would be to explore how the two authors have applied this approach to represent and include the subjectivity of Naga women in a context where several forms of oppression are present. The chapters will also examine how their works generate a counterpublic of their own, a dialectical space where the voices of individuals who have been marginalised by the grand narratives of history and the State come to life.

Chapter 4 of the thesis discusses the history and cultural setting of Naga women's writing in English. The next chapter analyses Temsula Ao's short stories from her collections *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for my Head* (2009),

along with the only novel she has written, *Aosenla's Story* (2017) and her memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags: A Memoir* (2013). The chapter attempts to demonstrate how she creates a discursive space where Naga women can articulate her identity creating a narrative that reframes the history of them. The sixth and final chapter of the thesis will explore Easteirne Kire's works, focusing on those novels that depict defining periods in Naga history that profoundly altered the social space of the Naga communities— *A Naga Village Remembered* (first published in 2003), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) and *A Respectable Woman* (2019). When gender inequality is embedded in the political realities of militarization and protracted violent war, new strategies for defining one's identity beyond the traditional feminist struggle become necessary. This thesis will endeavour to study some of these alternative strategies that Naga women have employed to assert their identities and exercise their agency.

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