

Language and Identity: With Reference to Naga Woman Writers

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Abstract

This paper intends to specifically highlight the changes in the context of Naga women and how they opposed or accepted the situation when their movements, daily life, and tongues are being controlled by the dominant other, i.e., men. Therefore, taking the contemporary situation of the Naga community in North-East India, this paper talks about the way in which Naga women open up in order to welcome the transformations that are ushered in through the space of writing. By doing so, I discuss the role that language plays in the context of the Naga women's community, considering language as that which constructs the community—in this case, a community of women writers. Through the mode of writing, women construct the idea of community that is basically understood as a source of security, and also one that is constantly in transition.

Key words

women, language, transition, community, identity

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the role of writing with special reference to the status of Naga women writers. The study of the position of women in Naga society in North-East India is unfortunately a difficult one, not only due to the unavailability of sufficient written records and materials, but also because they are generally considered to be more privileged than other women in the rest of India. Lucy Zehol in *Women in Naga Society* rightly asks, "Is this observation a myth or a reality?" (Zehol, 1998, p. 1). However, if we examine Naga society closely, we find that many patriarchal values are ingrained in the minds of the Naga people and practiced in day-to-day life, to the extent that they themselves sometimes fail to realize the extent of inequality and discrimination that is being imposed on Naga women.

Before going to the central point of the discussion, to better understand this patriarchal system in the context of Naga society, I would like to provide a brief overview of the patriarchal system that was rigidly followed by the Nagas before the arrival of Christianity. Traditionally, it has been the culture of the Naga people that the family is the primary social unit and the father is the head of the family. Although there are many differences between different Naga communities, the common features of traditional Naga society included hunting, engaging in warfare, and cultivation for men, while weaving, pottery, and spinning were some of the most important duties assigned to women. Most of the domestic chores were expected to be performed by women and the men controlled the decision-making, which is commonly seen even today. Being patrilineal and patriarchal in character, the Naga men even today hold the primary power in every decision and control moral authority and political leadership; all immovable property and titles are inherited by the male. In some communities, like the Ao Naga, property can be given by a father as a gift to his daughter.

However, while males are generally dominant in Naga society, the impact of patriarchy varies from community to community. For the Konyak women, apart from being bound to household work and the domination of their husbands, they also suffered under numerous restrictions and taboos¹ thus preventing them from enjoying the right to freedom (K. Zehol & L. Zehol, 1998). For Rengma women, on the other hand,² “Except in inheritance and property ownership, she enjoyed almost equal and liberal status with men” (Kath, 1998, p. 82). Concerning the status of Ao women, “[...] there are certain areas where women do not get recognition but in many respects, the Ao women are considered as equal partners to their menfolk” (Aier, 1998, p. 93).

In today’s world, certain concessions can be seen with regard to education. The adoption of Christianity led to the spread of education, which played a role in altering the situation of Naga women. Parents have now come to understand that education is important for both men and women. Although women still have less access to education than men, they are not necessarily deprived of the best opportunities. However, concerns still remain because, despite a move away from

¹ One of the taboos was that if a woman enters a morung (a bachelor’s dormitory or a self-governing educational institution where men are trained to develop their own potentials, learn about their culture, politics, public speaking and so on), the morung would be struck by lightning (K. Zehol & L. Zehol, 1998, p. 78).

² Women worked side by side with men in the fields, except for the felling of trees. (Kath, 1998, p. 83).

the traditional idea that the ability to read the Bible and a song sheet was considered enough education for women to that of excelling in education. Temsula Ao reiterates that confining women to reading Bible and a song sheet, “was never considered a *sacrifice* but the *duty* of girls to do so, even if they happened to be better students. Merit was never the decider, being male was.” (Ao, 2013, p. 125). Zehol observes that most of the ethnographic materials are written by male scholars and administrators and therefore represent a male point of view (Zehol, 1998). Currently, as women are embarking on a journey by venturing out of their homes, and with their self-awareness refined, we see that many contemporary educated Naga females have undertaken substantial research on Naga women. Although the patriarchy persists, it is hoped that, through writing, there will eventually be a considerable impact that will holistically address women’s issues. There are many girls in the villages who are still bound by traditional norms and, unaware of their rights, continue to obediently follow the customs. Over the years, however, considerable changes have taken place in the overall aspects of Naga culture and tradition since the arrival of the British Army and American missionaries to the Naga Hills in the nineteenth century. Among others, they succeeded in stopping the Nagas from killing other human beings (the culture of headhunting). The American missionaries not only brought the gospel (the word of God), but also the colonial language, English (Singh, Imchen, & Das, 1994). Accompanied by his wife, Mary Mead Clark, Edwin Winter Clark translated the New Testament of the Bible into the Ao Chungli³ language, which went on to become the standard language of the Ao community.⁴ Thus, in this way English was introduced to the Ao in the form of the word of God.

The present paper is purely an academic venture and attempts to provide an understanding of the writings of Naga women in English and how, through their varied genres of writing, they highlight their concerns, worries, desires, and subordination. As Anungla Aier reminds us, “there is a growing concern regarding the status of women in the society.” (Aier, 1998, p. 92). Bearing this in mind, the analysis of the literature has paid special attention to gender issues.

³ Ao is one of the Naga languages spoken by the Ao community in Northeast India. Belonging to the Tibetan–Burman language family, the Ao language has several regional dialects, of which Chungli is the standard.

⁴ The Ao are one of the major Naga communities of Nagaland and were also the first Naga community to embrace Christianity. “Ao” denotes both the language and the community.

Language and Identity

English is rapidly becoming the lingua franca for present-day Nagas. The acceptance of English through the introduction of English-language education eventually became the household language for the “educated” Nagas.⁵ The question has now become “who speaks and who writes?” (Barthes, 1982, p. 185) or “who can write? What can writing do?” (Derrida, 1979, pp. 117–147). Naga women from different backgrounds have started writing in English in genres including short fiction, novels, folktales, and poetry. For example, one recent work is by Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton (2017). Her collection of thirty Lotha folktales was translated into English, thus making her the pioneer of Lotha folktales in English. Traditionally, these used to be orally narrated and were specifically reserved for men. This is an example of an entry point to a different worldview located within a specific geography and context. By doing this, a different community is constructed where the writer becomes the custodian of the English and thereby uses it as a tool to resist violence (Barthes, 1982). In this sense, a kind of silent protest is displayed by portraying the status of women in the form of words. Through their writing, women writers discover a kind of world where they not only find solace and peace but are also discovering a certain kind of identity that makes them feel empowered.

Writing gives the Naga women writers the option of building an alternative world—a *refuge* that is habitable and hospitable to sustain their alternate life. Literature, according to Blanchot, has the power to create and construct an experience that one longs for, that one does not already know (Blanchot, 1995). For the Naga women, the tool of writing has shown its productivity by allowing women to claim a space that can be called their *own*. It is a task of constructing and unfolding oneself, and therefore, redefining oneself (Showalter, 1977). Through writing, women have also brought forth other sides of themselves. In this context, Blanchot observes that the discourse of writing also helps in discovering oneself (Blanchot, 1999). Writing is a way of discovering and revealing the ‘you’ that you are yet to encounter. It is a platform where one breaks open the strict closure of the self and finally opens up what is repressed in oneself. It is a space where one becomes, what one wants, who one wants to be. It is about infinite possibilities, which are not pre-determined or present in the given discourse but are constructed

⁵ It is observed that *linguae francae* like English and Nagamese are being simultaneously used for conversation between siblings, and between parents and children, although they already share one regional common language.

in the discourse through the usage of language and thereby invent a new desire that only appears when it is written (Cixous, Cohen, & Cohen, 1976).

Although the arrival of Christianity, accompanied by education, brought certain concessions to the Naga women, it clearly also stemmed from a strong patriarchal tradition; therefore, it was not a difficult task for the Nagas to embrace the new norms that came attached with Christianity. Today, women are allowed to go to school and take part in church activities, however, their subordination toward men continues. For example, the Head Pastor and members of the church Deacon Boards are all male; a woman could only become an Associate Pastor, which always comes below the rank of Pastor. Women are strictly prohibited from being decision makers in any social matter or at home. Women leave their respective homes and families only when they get married. Through the institution of marriage, a woman becomes a vanishing identity because through the act of marriage, she enters a future in which her life is directed toward the other (husband), a life dependent on the other.

With the passage of time, women have found an alternative recourse to overcome the old Naga traditional policies. When it comes to employment, women are now allowed to enter the profession of their choice and, on the economic front, women have gained the right to hold assets in their own names. However, the fact remains that most economic power is still controlled by men. This also shows that Naga society may be modern in outlook but is traditional in its practices. Despite attaining higher education, women's achievements are stigmatized with the phrase "she did it even though she is a woman" (Ao, 2013, p. 128). This clearly signals that women do not have voices of their own and are assigned a lower rung in society.

Nonetheless, writing serves as an abode for women where they can express the depth of their feelings. The context of Naga women's writing is often based on first-hand experience of subjugation and exploitation set against a backdrop of patriarchy and customary law. Literature in the form of writing for Naga women is an attempt to reconstruct a Naga female ideology that is denied in real life. It is also observed that a major proportion of these writings come from the "elite" class of women who have a higher English competence. Thus far, these "elite" women writers have been vocal enough to bring out issues faced by Naga women grounded on *self-awareness*. Naga women writers are on the rise and the context of female imagination is being expanded. Quoting Cixous on the idea of women's imagination in *The Laugh of Medusa*, "Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing; their stream of phantasms is incredible" (Cixous et al., 1976, p. 876).

Literature and Naga Woman

In recent times, there has been renewed enthusiasm where self-awareness has emerged through literature. A collection of poetry mostly written by Naga women titled *Poetry from Nagaland* highlights diverse issues related to women. For example, in *An Old Mother's Lament* a mother laments her children who see her as a burden and a responsibility not worth accepting (Longchari, 2005), and the strength of women is boldly highlighted in *I am a Woman* (Longkumer, 2005). In another poem, titled *The Tale of a Woman*, Zümvä talks about a father's disappointment at the birth of a girl child (Zümvä, 2005). The above poems are few examples of how women are portrayed in Naga society. These writings also show how Naga women writers forge in the space of writing, expressing themselves and the subjugated life of women in general. The possibility of writing is also to say that the act of writing is a phenomenon that is being produced and reproduced all the time.

Naga women writers also write fiction with a backdrop of bloodshed, war, violence, and conflict in Nagaland (where the major share of the violence is meted out to women and children) but always keep their focus on women's issues. In this way, they seek an identity of their own and attempt to achieve an articulation that is also free from self-deception. One prominent Naga woman writer is Temsula Ao, who has published eight books, including five books of poetry and a collection of short stories. She has also contributed a number of articles on oral tradition, folk songs, myths, and cultural traditions of the Ao Nagas to various journals. Esterine Kire, who was a guest of Norwegian PEN from 2005 to 2007, is another writer who has published anthologies of poetry and short stories. Her novel *A Naga Village Remembered* was the first novel to be written in English by a Naga writer. She and other Naga women authors write against the backdrop of post-Independence India, exposing the subjugation of the Nagas by the Indian army and the suppression of Naga women by their own dominant male counterparts. However, of late, "[...] there has been a renewed enthusiasm for the idea that a special female self-awareness emerges through literature in every period." (Showalter, E. 1977, p. 8). And as we can see now Naga women writers have translated their self-awareness into novels and poems. Therefore, Cixous rightly comments, "writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (Cixous et al., 1976, p. 879).

From the examples mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is clear that the old is giving way to the new, breaking away from the traditional practices to con-

temporary values. The present dominant values, which already control morality, sense of equality, and justice, can be driven by a will to power by the other, in this case, the women, where women can be seen as powerful through the way of writing. However, according to Temsula Ao:

[...] the obvious opposition will be from men; but equally strong would be the opposition from a section of women who are themselves still traditionalists at heart and would like to continue in the state of benevolent subordination rather than be involved in a struggle to reform the mind-set of men so strongly entrenched in their age-old belief in male superiority. (Ao, 2013, pp. 131–132)

Nevertheless, Naga women writers take the risk of writing, because writing inevitably involves exposure to the outside where millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, constitutes her and forms her. In this case, women's act of writing is equivalent to the kind of writing where you burst open:

[...] invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence," the one, that aiming for the impossible stops short before the word "impossible" and writes it as "the end." (Cixous et al., 1976, p. 886)

Through the mode of writing, a woman finds her "silent voice" which was dislocated from within. She invents a language for herself—a language not to internalize or manipulate but to break through. One may question if writing by women is an act of seizing the moment to speak. Women simply must discover themselves and avoid looking at perspectives through the same lens as men. Women thus must continue writing because it is through writing that she can break free from her own self and can identify herself as a person—an individual with no identity, no language to define her, no violence imposed on her, but only a tool in the form of ink and pen to scribble down her thoughts because "thought is free" (Kafka, 2012, p. 6).⁶ To venture into the necessity to break free from fixed orders of cul-

⁶ Monalisa Changkija in one of her poems that appears in *Monsoon Mourning* also shares similar

tural codes and practices, women's literature in the form of writing is an attempted possibility to secure freedom that is denied in real life. Keeping this in mind, I would like to discuss here the kind of writing which is not about living but highlights the means of survival through the very act of writing.

Temsula Ao's Short Stories

These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone (Ao, 2006) is a collection of ten short stories by Temsula Ao that locate and dislocate Nagaland as a space of political disharmony, its people, and history. Her stories give a fine understanding of ordinary Naga people trying to cope with violence and negotiate power with both the army and Naga nationalists⁷ and in the midst of all these how Nagas chose to live in peace by finding spaces for enjoyment in times of terror. Besides the particular events in the stories, Ao does not fail to project women's heroic role during conflicts. Hence, through these fictional yet compelling stories, Ao brings out the other side of women, thereby not only creating a body of work but simultaneously delivering a message.

In *The Jungle Major* (Ao, 2006, pp. 1–8), Ao narrates the turmoil into which the Nagas have fallen during the ongoing political crisis that ravaged Nagaland. The main highlight in this story is the quick-witted mind of the protagonist's wife, Khatila, who saved her husband from death. In this story, Ao brings out one of the qualities of women that can appear only in the *text*, because the heroic act of a woman is rarely discussed in real life. In *The Last Song* (Ao, 2006, pp. 23–33), Ao recounts the tragic tale of atrocities let loose on the unarmed Naga villagers, particularly on women, when the widow Libeni and her daughter Apenyo are raped by Indian soldiers in the church. In the midst of confusion, fear, and trembling, Apenyo continues to sing while people, including the choir members, scatter. Perhaps, the manner in which their despicable action is opposed by a female becomes an unbearable sight for the young Captain, in that he immediately drags Apenyo to the old church and rapes her just to “silence” her. Her mother, who comes to her rescue, also meets with a similar fate. Apenyo continues singing

knowledge: “We couldn't be more imprisoned, when we have to apologize even for our thoughts” (Changkija, 2013b, p. 46).

⁷ When the British occupation in India ended, Naga nationalists demanded freedom from India and since then the Naga–Indian conflict has continued. For more details, see Aosenba (2001), Yonuo (1974), and Vashum (2000).

(which is also her last song) while she is being raped to death. Her act of singing is a tool to resist the atrocious act of the aggressors.

Discussion on Avinuo Kire's "*The Power to Forgive*"

Avinuo Kire's *The Power to Forgive* in *The Power to Forgive And Other Stories* (Kire, 2015, pp. 1–12) depicts women and their relationship with other women in general. In this fictional story, the protagonist and her mother are both being engulfed by man-made ideologies targeting women. Sixteen years have passed since her uncle raped her, and was forgiven by her father and society. The punishment her uncle received was seven years behind bars, but for her this is not sufficient penance for destroying her life. "People will think you have no shame"⁸ are the words that her mother uses constantly to remind her whenever she tries to have a normal life like any young woman in her village (Kire, 2015, p. 4). She is living, and she will die one day, she eats and sleeps, endures illness and violence, but the dominant emotional state which she had been enduring silently for the past sixteen years is *fear* of the uncle and *shame* over his unforgivable act. However, this fear is easily overtaken by another one—of losing the person she loves, her father, against whom she has built a wall of hatred since he declared his decision sixteen years ago, "I have decided to forgive your uncle" (Kire, 2015, p. 5). These words remain in her memory for a very long time while the feeling of betrayal echoes in her ears "[A]s if *he* had been the victim" (Kire, 2015, p. 5).

In this story, the author highlights the social sanction toward a woman who is not only suppressed by her immediate family—in this case, her mother, who is also a woman—but is also overwhelmed by the man-made ideologies where she is compelled to live with the stigma of rape. On the other hand, her uncle was set free after spending seven years in jail, happily married, with wife and children; society imposes no abusive stigma as such on him. It does not make sense at all that in the eyes of society his actions are forgiven by serving seven years behind bars, but for her the fear that was created inside her still haunts her, metamorphosed as recurring nightmares.

Now the question is whether the *tragedy* is the *truth* or the given *ideologies* are the *truth*? Why should she have to endure a life where she can only exist in the context

⁸ It is to be noted that the prejudice inflicted on Naga women in Naga society is that no matter the severity of wrongs committed by a man, the fault is always assigned to a woman.

of the appalling stigma society inflicts upon her? Thus, she creates another world—which is the *other* truth. By doing so, she challenges the *truth* itself. Now we are faced with two kinds of truth—the *invented* truth and the *given* truth. The *given* truth is contestable, as she had been doing by telling her mother of her plan that goes against Christian custom—asking her younger brother Pele to walk her down the aisle for her marriage instead of her father. Through this act, she constructs a world where she lives away from her father in *silence* and her mother, who had also learnt the language of *silence* through her. This is the punishment she creates for her father “for denying her the right to forgive a crime committed against her” (Kire, 2015, p. 10).

The relationship with her father has soured as the years passed by. She has not forgiven him for the words he uttered sixteen years ago. On the other hand, her engagement to a man seems to have made way for a different kind of relationship between her and her mother—one that had “finally released her mother from her unhappiness” and a new bond is built between them that silently *opens* the *closed kind of bond* to *share* (Kire, 2015, p. 9). A day before her wedding, she finally gathers up her courage to confess to her father all the words that have been bottled up inside her during the past sixteen years. But all the pent-up hateful feelings die instantly the moment she sees her father weeping, tucked away in his room. It is at this moment that she realizes that it was she who had caused her father immense grief. With her eyes and body trembling, she gathers up the newspaper clipping that contains the tragic story of her rape (which she had secretly hidden away for the last sixteen years) and, for the first time, she is able to face the letters and words inscribed on the paper without fear. She decides to stop playing the role of a victim and flings the paper into the fireplace. Thus, she throws away her painful memories, which are consumed with the paper by the flames. She finally sets herself free and invents for herself *another other*. In that sense, it is not what has happened that matters, but the capability to *forgive* what happened in the past. She experiences a new sense of courage as she feels no fear of encountering her uncle.

Easterine Iralu’s “*A Terrible Matriarchy*”

Another significant writer, Easterine Iralu, highlights in her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* (Kire, 2013) the harsh reality of the Naga socio-cultural set-up that dictates who you are, what you are, what you should do, what you should not do, how to behave, how not to behave—all these because you were born a woman. Narrated by the protagonist Lieno herself, the story has Naga society as its back-

drop, which is undergoing a transition, while Lieno herself is simultaneously confronted by the already given norms that she must adapt to. Iralu also tries to show that there are women who are strong despite the society's portrayal of woman as weaklings. This is shown through these lines which are uttered by the protagonist's mother:

I am sometimes very surprised at your strength, Lieno. The way you took over the household when Pete died. You were just eleven and a half then and yet you took over my role in our family so naturally. I can see that women are not weaker. They simply have strength different from men. (Kire, 2013, p. 251)

In this story, the conflict between Grandmother and Lieno can be interpreted as a generation gap, but it is also two different ideologies that stand poles apart. By the time Grandmother dies, Lieno is aged 21. Iralu, as in Avinuo's *The Power to Forgive*, also shows the characteristics of women who challenge the given ideologies that exist in Naga society and continue to rebel against those who try to control them and the way they wish to live; living in a male-dominated society, women's voices are suppressed, and the freedom to live a life of one's choice is not given. In Lieno's case, she is given away to be raised by a strict and disciplinarian grandmother who feels that a girl is supposed to remain at home and taught the household tasks at a young age. This is so that Lieno will grow up the way her grandmother wants—a “good natured, cultured woman”; what would you do then when you are always hungry because the portion of delicious meat is given away to male siblings and there is none reserved for you? *A Terrible Matriarchy* indirectly highlights these important questions while interpreting the life of a girl who is directly experiencing the harsh reality of the current socio-cultural set-up. It is the story of a young girl named Dielieno (Lieno), aged four and a half. Apparently, this also happened to be the time when she has begun to realize the prejudices stacked against her and in favor of her male siblings by her grandmother, for whom Lieno had built up an intense hatred, even to the extent of wishing her to die: “How I wished Grandmother would die. It was a wicked, wicked thought but I thought it as even more wicked to hit a child for playing” (Kire, 2013, p. 6).

Being brought up in a poor family, she is sent away to live with her grandmother. According to Grandmother, Lieno's mother was not “raising her right” and therefore her grandmother is there to teach her how a girl should be “raised properly.” Lieno's mother tries to reason with her husband: “[...] I worry

that Lieno is not going to turn out to be the ideal girl your mother wants her to be. She is too full of life for that,” but as expected, these words go unheard as her husband makes a firm decision by accepting his mother’s *demand* to send his daughter to live with her, which horrifies Lieno (Kire, 2013, p. 9). The key issue here is the decision that is being made for Lieno by somebody—an *authorized* person, whose decision to send her away to his mother’s house will affect her, her life, and her future. Right from the beginning, Lieno rebels against his father’s decision even though the prevailing social norms give him the authority to make such a decision. Before she starts living with Grandmother, she already wishes to *break free* from her clutches, the grandmother who calls her “the girl” despite the name Dielieno having being given by Grandmother herself. She already feels bound by Grandmother’s shackles from which she needs to set herself free. Will she ever attain the freedom once she has been bound by these shackles? She is too young to even find ways to set herself free. If she were old enough, perhaps then she would be *compelled* to break the shackles through her own strength; however, the only way to remove the shackles is owned by some other authority that has the power to decide when to remove them or whether they should be removed at all. But Lieno’s story is different; despite all her protests, the outcome was ending up with Grandmother.

The other authority here is the grandmother who also has the power to distinguish between families with “bad blood” and those with “good blood.” Lieno is therefore commanded to mingle only with the good blood group to which she herself belongs, a distinction Grandmother demarcates based on status and morality in the society. Even Lieno’s friendship with Vimenuo was handled by Grandmother stopping her visits to Vimenuos’s house on the pretext that she came from a bad blood group and therefore was not respected by society (Kire, 2013). Grandmother is also of the opinion that she will “become” one of them if she continues with the friendship and thus makes sure that her family bloodline remains “pure.” This means that “bad blood” is not only inherited at birth but that one can also become polluted through friendships. Through this, we see Lieno exist within a system, an identity belonging to the “good blood” group. Here, Kire brings out this prejudice as an example to show that there are people in Naga society who actually believe that such a good/bad blood status is an inherited one, something that exists in a family bloodline from birth.

As the story unfolds, Kire narrates the struggles and physical hardships that Lieno had to undergo—drawing water from a nearby river, collecting wood for cooking, etc.—which are supposedly understood to be the norm for a proper

woman and according to her grandmother, “[...] that is girl’s work. No man in my day has ever fetched water” (Kire, 2013, p. 3). However, the household chores had become more difficult and longer for her because she had started going to school and this was the way Grandmother wanted to punish her and let her know that education is only for boys. Lieno turned out to be a bright, clever, and intelligent girl who made her parents, especially Uncle Atu, proud, but not the Grandmother who feels that “[S]he’ll only get ideas about herself if she is put with other children” (Kire, 2013, p. 35). Moreover, her intention in letting Lieno live with her was to change Lieno’s impudent ways so that she would stop behaving like a “monkey.” She even retorts to Lieno’s father that she is unable to understand what his generation sees in school and education because it keeps the children busy studying, thus keeping them away from learning life skills. She worries that all her attempted efforts to teach Lieno the basic skills of life would go to waste as education would supplant all that Lieno had learnt from her.

Despite living with a domineering grandmother, Lieno refuses to be who Grandmother wants her to be—an ideal woman. In contrast, Bano, the illegitimate child of Grandmother’s brother Sizo, who also lives with Grandmother and who addresses Grandmother as “mother,” represents a woman who has accepted the ground rules laid down by Grandmother and believes that women are born to be subordinated to men. Grandmother, on the other hand, projects the kind of woman who holds strongly to traditional and cultural values, refusing to let go of the norms that existed during her generations, and therefore trying to impose her worldview on younger generations. While Lieno’s mother represents the woman trying to bridge the gap between the two generations by trying her best to be a meek, self-sacrificing, and subordinate woman to Grandmother, to Lieno she appears to be the mother who encourages, supports, and loves her unconditionally.

Lieno thinks that she will never be able to forgive her grandmother. However, there are always interruptions that disturb the continuity in life and it is the demand that comes from the outside, the other that commands you to face the discontinuities that breaks the continuity of self-sameness. For Lieno, the command from the other comes when her mother narrates the story of Grandmother and asks Lieno to forgive her. This is an important juncture in Lieno’s life, an interruption in the flow of her bitterness, which she had held against her grandmother for as long as she can remember. If she is won over by her mother’s words then she has to forgive her grandmother but it is an impossibility.⁹ Yet, as her mother reminds her, it is her responsibility to forgive her, a necessity. “It is not possible to change her. But you are young and you can change your feelings towards her. You

could start by learning to forgive her” (Kire, 2013, p. 251). Here, Kire highlights the necessity of forgiveness, which is a moral necessity. For Lieno, it is an impossible task: “how do you forgive someone who has borne a grudge against you for being born a girl?” (Kire, 2013, p. 251). From this, two aspects are foregrounded: the necessity and demand for forgiveness on the one hand, and the impossibility of forgiveness on the other.

In the novel, we can understand that Kire had projected the act of forgiveness on Lieno because it is she who has to forgive Grandmother, and not Grandmother, the culprit, who must forgive. But Grandmother is not aware of the gravity of the hurt she had caused to Lieno. Therefore, she had not taken the responsibility to ask for forgiveness. Only Lieno can feel the depth of the wound, which seems impossible to heal. Unlike love which happens unintentionally and without realization, forgiveness is intentional because we are asked to forgive and thus we are compelled to forgive. Love, on the other hand, can also be harmful to the other. Kire highlights the impact of love if loved for the wrong reasons:

Try and understand why Grandmother feels that she has to be more generous to your brothers, why she was so loving to your Vini. Sometimes one can love wrongly by loving too much. Your Grandmother doesn't know that. Try to see her as a weak, old woman who has lost her husband and therefore, she has to make sure one or more of her grandsons and sons will look after her. She tries to secure their loyalty by giving them food and money or the fields as she did with Vini. But she did not have the foresight to see that she was doing more harm than good to Vini by plying him with money. That was a tragic mistake. We cannot buy love. We can only hope that when we have loved our children well, they will in turn, grow up to love us. Please do not hate her, you are wise enough to understand that she is the way she is because she did not want to suffer as her mother had. (Kire, 2013, p. 251)

It is impossible to heal the wounded heart completely, and so the only thing one can do to find peace in one's heart is to forgive and in this context, forgiving is the one thing that Lieno feels is an impossibility. Hence, she is faced with the demand to do the impossible. Also, her mother reminds her that Grandmother is not going

⁹ For the idea of impossibility in forgiveness highlighted in this context, we refer to Derrida's notion of forgiveness which can be found in 'On forgiveness' in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (Derrida, 2001, pp. 25 - 60).

to live for long. Her mother's words bring tears to her eyes and for the first time in her life, she feels the need to forgive someone whom she hates the most, someone on whom she has wished death. Thus, she attempts to do the impossible, which is to forgive the unforgivable. Doing so, her action becomes an ethical responsibility because she is doing it out of necessity. She finally decides to tell her grandmother that she has forgiven her, but the intention to forgive becomes urgent when Bano comes rushing to tell them that they are unable to revive Grandmother after she slumped in her chair the same morning. They rush to Grandmother's house and Lieno finally manages to find time alone with her and finally tell her that she has forgiven her. Her mother stops her from continuing because tears silently roll down Grandmother's cheek. By forgiving her, Lieno breaks away from her own self and accepts her Grandmother as she is. Hence, her belief that she will remain fearful of her grandmother changes. Her life seems to have just begun the day Grandmother died. All the fear for her grandmother died along with her burial and is now replaced with pity because although a rebellious woman, Lieno was kind at heart, and at twenty one she could understand her grandmother's attitude clearly. At the end, Lieno allows herself to be invaded, in gentleness, by a true childhood memory, which is not a dream or her Grandmother's spirit visiting her as it did one time after her death, but a memory which she no longer views with disgust but which she will no longer embroider.

Discussion of Monalisa Changkija's Poems

Monalisa Changkija, another prominent writer and poet expresses in *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain* (2013a) and *Monsoon Mourning* (2013b) her feelings about atrocities, injustices, and suppression that either go unheard or are silenced, unlike the majority of women who consciously or unconsciously remain silent. The words in her poems, however, portray the signs of breaking free, questioning the given ideologies and whether there is any alternative at all to come to a consensus regarding the identity of the other, i.e. woman. This is clearly reflected in Changkija's words "If I didn't do what is expected of me/would it stop your world?/Or, merely cause you inconvenience/till you got yourself or someone else to do the things/that I do?" (Changkija, 2013b, p. 48).

Conclusion

All the writers discussed above have one general concern in their mind—to write freely, not by being captive, but by letting themselves loose. Most of their stories are fictional and speak of the truth/reality of Naga women. What is the thing that stops woman from unveiling what veils her? It is the native veil that dictates to the woman from birth what she should do and what she should not do. Is it achievable, the task of discarding the veil? Perhaps she has to dare to write the letters, syllables, word by word, or many words, some of them audible and others visible, but to continue writing until there is nothing to write because there is no closing those once they have been opened. After all, “What does it take to stop thoughts from invading and eroding minds that think them?” (Changkija, 2013b, p. 50).

Not only have woman writers created life through words, they have created their lives as they wish them to be pliable, responsive, and purely creative. Thus, by writing, they make anything and everything possible. In other words, writing has become a revolutionary tool where you reject any sense of any institution. You are not bound by anything, and thus, you go beyond the space of language, a language which is always in the process of reconstructing itself.

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