



# NAGA WOMEN'S STRUGGLE AGAINST VARIED MANIFESTATIONS OF COLONIALITY AND INSURGENCY

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## Abstract

Naga women's relentless effort in protecting their land from colonial rule and insurgency has had a huge impact in Naga society. Women have been the peacemakers since traditional times and they continue to be so. Women in the traditional times would enter the battlefield in order to stop the dispute between two different villages. Similarly, Naga women have largely contributed to the freedom struggle against colonial rule and during the time of insurgency. Women were enormously affected by the political dispute that occurred during the 1820s and 1950s. However, their struggle in the quest for peace and freedom remains unacknowledged. The present research paper will thus focus on Naga women and their struggle in liberating their land first from the colonial rulers and next from the armed personals during insurgency. In the process of freedom struggle women of the Naga society have not just contributed but they have also been victims of both sexual and physical abuse; and have been brutally murdered by the oppressors. The study will undertake Homi Bhabha's idea of mimicry and ambivalence; and Susan Brownmiller's idea of rape or sexual oppression against women as a weapon in times of war.

**Key words:** Coloniality, insurgency, Nagas, women, gender, oppression.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha's concern does not primarily centre around the issue of gender dynamics, but he also provides an overall view in understanding the negative impact of colonial rule on women. Under any form of colonial power in any society, women are susceptible to experiencing marginalization from the colonizers as well as from their respective societies; their struggles are multifaceted. Women's condition under colonial rule finds its relevance in Bhabha's idea of 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence'. The condition of women became even more complex with the introduction of mimicry. The colonized subjects are often found mimicking the cultural practices of the colonizers as a way of resisting their dominion however, this process also paved the way for stereotypes against women that were enforced by the colonizers as Bhabha in his work *The Location of Culture* asserts:

... Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses and immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers. (86)

The idea of ambivalence can be seen in the ways the colonizers intent to oppress women while also viewing them as an instrument in establishing their culture and belief systems. This ambivalence plays a powerful role in enforcing stereotypes and marginalization further limiting a woman's status in the society as Bhabha opines:

For it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability, which for the stereotype, must always be in *excess* of what can be empirically proved or logically construed. (66)

The endeavour of Naga women in the fight to unfetter Nagas from colonial rule are seldom discussed or acknowledged. Although the freedom struggle involved the entire Naga community, it is generally men who receive the credibility. The struggle for liberation began when the British entered the North-East region in 1826 during the Burmese invasion and began to establish power and control over the Nagas. By 1832, the British occupancy in Naga hills had led to the disruption of the peaceful lives of the Naga community. The Naga people's desire for freedom fueled their demand for an independent Nagaland. However, this demand went unheard even after India had achieved liberation: "after the Independence of India, the Nagas were neither granted autonomy nor statehood. They were placed with the great region of Assam" (Banerjee 137). This ignorant nature of the British compelled the Nagas to start a movement that demanded freedom which later escalated into an intense retaliation and: "over the years the movement became extremely violent" (Banerjee 137). After deliberate efforts and struggles Nagaland achieved statehood however, they remained unsatisfied and continued with the protests which invited the Border Security Force (BSF) to enter Nagaland. The Naga's effort to achieve independence from India and build a separate nation, led to the prolonged and violent struggle which began in the early 1950s. The period of insurgency transpired when the Naga National Council (NNC) under the umbrella of A. Z. Phizo's leadership declared independence in 1947. This movement ignited the tension resulting in the arrival of Indian armies in Nagaland which only led to the rise in conflict between the people of Nagaland and the Indian army.

The insurgency was characterized by periodical ceasefires, bloodshed, sexual oppression against women, and constant attempts at peace negotiations. The insurgency had a massive negative impact on the Nagas with the loss of many innocent lives, violation of human rights, and social as well as economic disorder. For the Nagas, the fight or struggle for independence was necessary in order to secure their unique cultural identity and autonomy, if not complete independence. For the Indian government, it was all about maintaining sovereignty and protecting territorial unification. People not only witnessed men, but also women fighting and making every effort to liberate their land primarily from the colonial rulers and next from the armed soldiers. Understanding the impact of insurgency on the Nagas requires a deep analysis of the factual events, historical records, and distinct complexities linked with insurgency that are crucial in navigating the struggles that Nagas have surpassed in order to restore peace and autonomy. The research study will probe into the historical era of insurgency from the context of women and their predicament. In order to completely understand women's struggle, the research study will discuss some factual events that occurred during the insurgency. Women immensely contributed and supported the fight against colonial rule and insurgency that was looming over the people of Nagaland. Although the intensity of struggle during the insurgency was inconceivable, their perseverance in achieving the goal was remarkable.

Women are generally considered to be the weak links in times of conflict and it is very rare to hear narratives where women play a major role in supporting their people especially during a political conflict. However, this misinterpretation has been rectified with the Naga women's relentless effort in protecting their land from colonial rule and insurgency. The steps taken by women have had an enormous impact in Naga society. Women have always been marginalized from entering into any kind of political affairs, nonetheless women during the political conflict joined the armed rebel groups in order to protect their land: "an exceptional characteristic of the Naga movement for independence was the inclusion of women even among armed rebel groups" (Banerjee 138). Women have played multiple roles during colonial rule and they continue to do so; women have been both victims and combatants.

It is only right to talk about the struggle of women as we talk about freedom. Women played a major role in bringing an end to the political domination exercised upon the Nagas, first by the British and then the armed soldiers. Women were sexually abused and brutally murdered during the time of insurgency. The story of Mayangkokla gives us a glimpse about the struggles of all Naga women. On February 27, 1957 Mayangkokla along with her two brothers were on their way to help the Naga army in setting up camps when the Indian army captured them and began torturing them mercilessly. After a while, they were taken to the church premises where Mayangkokla was raped several times by different people in front of the entire village,

after which Mayangkokla and one of her brothers were forced to have sexual intercourse inside the church: “they were then ordered to commit sexual intercourse on the floor of the church” (Hattaway 42).

The above narration is only a gist of the horrifying experiences that women have had during the insurgency. Rape was used as a weapon against the Nagas in order to defeat them. In *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* Susan Brownmiller discusses rape, specifically in the context of conflict-ridden societies. She emphasizes on how rape is used as an instrument to assert power and subjugate the enemy: “. . . triumph over women by rape became a way to measure victory, part of a soldier’s proof of masculinity and success, a tangible reward for services rendered” (Brownmiller 35). These instances made it difficult for women to venture out of their homes and lead a normal life. They were often forced to stay inside as it was much safer. Along with the horrifying experiences, Mayangkokla’s story also gives us a highlight of what it was like to be a woman during the colonial period and insurgency; and how they contributed in the fight against their oppressors. Although women were unable to fight alongside men in the battlefield, they worked relentlessly behind the scenes. Women played major roles in setting up camps and helping the Naga army through all possible means, as they continued their freedom struggle: “they walked out of their village, eager to give their labor for the brave soldiers who were holding out against the Indian forces” (Hattaway 41).

Another true event that shook the women folk and the Nagas as a whole was the story of Kuonou, a sixty year old woman who was gang raped for several hours. The incident took place on 18th March, 1974, when Kuonou was on her way to the field like any other normal day when she was captured by a group of armed personnel and the rest is history. The price that women had paid in order to restore peace and freedom in the Naga society was enormous. The cases of rape, sexual abuse, physical abuse and brutal killings compelled women to stay back home which contributed to their secondary status in the Naga society.

Furthermore, women also witnessed the death of their husbands who were involved in the fight against the colonizers. They witnessed their men being tortured to death which left them incapacitated. Women were not only physically but also emotionally and psychologically drained by the abuses and killings of their own people, but nevertheless, they continued their journey towards a better Nagaland. Women also witnessed their children and brothers being tortured to death: “They witness their children killed and maimed by the conflict” (Banerjee and Dey 4). Their struggle was not limited to one domain but a collective one. Pregnant women either experienced miscarriages or gave birth to their babies amidst the chaos in the jungle: “During conflict they live, laugh, cry, sometimes miscarry or give birth to their children in the bush and always try to survive” (Banerjee and Dey 4). These obstacles however, did not weaken their determination for an independent state; needless to say, women were remarkably brave and strong.

Human rights were exceedingly violated and women faced numerous challenges during the conflict. The colonizers not only killed or tortured the Naga armies who opposed them but also the innocent civilians and forced women to carry the corpses back to their village: “the villagers were half-dead in the road and women were forced to carry them home” (Riamei 54). They faced constant threats to their safety, witnessed widespread injustice, and endured immense pressure to help the community survive distressing episode of violence.

For a woman to survive in an environment of conflicts was not an easy task. Having no men in the family meant an easy target for the oppressors. It was always a struggle to remain unnoticed at the fore by the oppressors. Losing their father, husband or brothers affected them not only emotionally but also socially and economically: “The loss that women face in times of conflict is not just emotional, or physical in terms of losing a loved one, but also transfers into the economic and social spheres” (Gill 215).

In the social realm, women were denied respect and their importance was marked down after the death of the man in the family. As men were considered to be the sole protectors of families, women automatically lost their status in the society after the death of their male family members. Their life was more or less controlled by the opinions of the society or their immediate male relatives; by and large women were left on their own with nobody to defend them and their prerogatives: “Most women experience a decline in social legitimacy; they find themselves relegated to the fringes of society with no one to care for them or to speak on their behalf” (Gill 216).

Women also struggled a great deal in the economic realm: “Interviews have shown that during and in the aftermath of violence and conflict there is an increase in female-headed households as many men were killed in encounters or raids, or have simply ‘disappeared’” (Gill 216). After the death of male members in the family or during conflict when men were engaged in the battlefield, women were burdened with the responsibility of providing economic stability to the family. Since men were the bread earners, it became

difficult for women to cope up with the sudden undesired changes brought by the conflict. They were compelled to go out and work in order to provide for their families, a necessity that placed them in highly vulnerable situations. This threat loomed over them, making the simple act of earning livelihood an incredibly perilous endeavour:

In times of conflict, with the men engaged elsewhere, the women take on the role of food providers and caretakers; the responsibility of finding alternative sources of food and water and rebuilding falls on them. Often it is they who single handedly bear the burden of growing or finding food (Gill 216).

These instances of sexual oppression against women during insurgency further strengthened patriarchal ideologies that later limited a woman's role in communal affairs. Brownmiller in her work *Men, Women, and Rape* asserts this same ideology of how sexual oppression during wars is a way of manifesting patriarchy wherein a woman's body becomes a collateral damage; a deliberate attempt to subvert opposition. These very tactics used during wars further reinforces male dominance and this is where Bhabha's idea of ambivalence and mimicry finds its relativity in the context of Naga society. Ambivalence adheres to the concept of viewing women as instruments to establish or exert power. This same strategy can be found in the ways the Naga society follows patriarchal ideology through which men establish a male dominant society wherein women become mere subjects of oppression. Again, the idea of mimicry finds its relativity in the ways the Nagas adapt to the colonizers idea of oppressing women. The Nagas are found mimicking their colonizers, but in a different form. While the colonizers established their power over women through sexual oppression, Naga society exerts control over women through social marginalization.

Women faced difficulty from every corner during and after the conflict. They struggled not only against the colonizers, but also against their own society. No doubt Naga society followed patriarchal ideologies even before the British invasion and insurgency but the political conflict intensified their belief in the norms of patriarchy. First, it was coloniality and later insurgency that played a major role in manifesting and establishing patriarchal norms. The unabating state of armed conflict in Naga society entailed episodes where physical power was highly admired and respected. This glorification of a man's ability to participate in the conflict highly contributed to the establishment of male dominance within the Naga community. Decision-making roles were accorded to and controlled by men. This male-centric power structure broadened the scope for male domination and contributed in the expansion of male dominance beyond the battlefield. Women's experience of conflict was different as compared to men. With the Nagas being inclined towards patriarchal principles, it dictated women's behavioral pattern, and reinforced their secondary status in society. Additionally, Political conflict added a lot in placing women in the secondary position. They were censured from taking up roles in the political field and they were excluded from decision-making and other political affairs. Both political conflict and patriarchal ideologies added immensely to the difficulties of women, particularly in terms of their access to equal education. Men and Naga society, in general, acted as internal colonizers in their own society, subjugating women and depriving them of their prerogatives. This internal oppression subjugated women to a great extent: ". . . the reason for failure most often is the much greater scope, organization, and strength of the colonial authorities" (Landry and MacLean 45). Women's role during and after the conflict was confined to household chores and there was nothing beyond the periphery of home. The education of a girl child was compromised either because of security reasons, or because of their strong belief in patriarchal ideologies which does not give any importance to a girl child's education and also often because most of the institutional places were captured by the armed forces. This ignorance caused a woman to remain dependent in all aspects of life first on her father or brothers and then her husband. Lack of education made it easier for the exploiters to take advantage of their oblivious nature. Education plays a vital role in every human life, it is through education that one gains knowledge about his or her prerogatives and therefore it is crucial that every single child regardless of their gender, colour, religion, class, or cast should receive education. Women in Naga society, during and after the conflict, were largely handicapped due to a lack of education. Their oblivious nature often placed them in a vulnerable state.

Women were and are still to some level portrayed as irrational and powerless however, if we look back in the history, one will realize that women were after all not as irrational or powerless as the society had projected them to be; rather they were quite sensible and strong and this is evident in their ability to help the Naga army in defeating the colonizers in many ways. Talking about the struggles of women and how they fell prey to the colonizers and their heinous acts during the freedom struggle, it is also important that we remember how women, with their wit and shrewdness, valorously supported the Naga army who were battling against the colonizers.

Although women were continuously being targeted by the colonizers, they refused to accept being oppressed by the latter and protested by helping the Naga armies. The colonizers tried to manipulate the situation in their favor by exercising their power on women knowing that women possessed lesser physical strength as compared to men however, women clearly proved that it is not physical strength but rather wit, hard work, and determination that one needs in order to win any kind of battle in life.

Women who joined the armed rebels often played the role of messengers by conveying key information to the members of Naga armies which helped them to defend themselves and the Nagas, in general: “These women worked as informers, bearers of loads and rations, cooking and sheltering men cadres et al as even among rebel groups the duties of men and women vary” (Gill 218). The passing of key information was not easy, it came with great risks. There was always a danger of being caught by the colonizers. Women had to remain vigilant on their part and concurrently caution the members of the Naga army. Women spared no effort in fulfilling their duty as messengers, well aware of the consequences, if caught. Despite so many dangers looming around them, they chose to join the fight against the colonizers and not just sit back and watch the tragic situation unfold.

Naga women have been working holistically in order to bring peace and freedom and simultaneously shaping a society that gives equal opportunity and respect to women. One of the most prominent women’s organizations existing in Nagaland is the *Naga Mother’s Association (NMA)*, which came into existence in the year 1984 with the objective of protecting women’s rights and also to work for the welfare of the Naga community. They also initiated a movement in 1994 under the theme “Shed no More Blood” that demanded for peace in the state. The NMA to this day continues to fight against all the social evils that prevails in the society and continues to stand for the rights of women. The emergence of coloniality and insurgency in the Naga hills largely altered the lives of women. They have endured great hardships and challenges that surfaced in various forms. They remained undaunted and were often seen participating in movements that advocated peace and reconciliation. Amidst military operations, women have shouldered responsibilities towards their families and community.

From the detailed study on the struggles of Naga women during and after the rule of colonizers it is safe to state that women suffered a great deal of injustice and discrimination which contributed to their secondary status in the society. It is also important to note that the colonizers not only belonged to a different country or state but they also existed within our own community. Women suffered not only through rape, sexual abuse, physical abuse or brutal killings of their loved ones but also through the patriarchal ideologies that men and the society in general imposed on women folks. The colonial as well as post-colonial times gave rise to multiple layers of challenges especially for women, with the inclination of the Nagas towards patriarchal ideologies that disrupted women’s role and status within the community. The British colonial times brought in massive changes in the socio-political order, which had its own set of drawbacks in the context of power structures. The post-colonial times, which were marked by the insurgency in the 1950’s, further added to the complexities of women. Violence in the form of sexual oppression against women further diminished their status in the society. These instances further gave rise to gender inequality, socio-political marginalization and economic barriers strengthening patriarchal ideologies. However, women demonstrated determination and strength in the face of all these adversities. From contributing in the political conflicts to challenging society’s perception towards women driven by patriarchal ideologies; to demanding equality, women have been persistent and determined. It is also crucial to understand that contemporary Naga society is witnessing a wave of change that is moving towards a more equitable society in the context of gender.

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