

# The Interplay of Alcohol Abuse and Domestic Violence: A Study of Naga Women's Marginalisation in the Works of Easterine Kire

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**Abstract:** The consumption of alcohol among the Nagas, illustrated in Kire's *A Respectable Woman* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*, appears to be a reaction to the existing state of political tension, personal trauma, and economic instability. In accordance with the findings provided by Khantzian, the use of alcohol appears to be a form of treatment which leads to increased patriarchal dominance and the justification of domestic abuse, specifically wife battering. This research will attempt to investigate the link between alcoholism and the phenomenon of violence as well as the marginalization of women as the victims and subjects to social conditioning. The issues related to social stigma associated with women who consume alcohol will be addressed, as well as physical and emotional harm caused by excessive drinking and its negative implications in terms of church- or law-based approaches, including the 1972 Billy Graham Crusade and the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Act, 1989.

**Keywords:** Alcohol Abuse, Domestic Violence, Nagaland, Wife-Battering, Marginalisation.

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## I. Introduction

Alcohol in Nagaland, which was a form of rice beer, was historically associated with tradition and cultural identity, serving primarily as a source of nourishment. (Kaisu 3-4) However, amid various factors, what was once an integral aspect of cultural heritage has now become a significant social concern. Alcohol abuse is represented as a significant social and public health problem in Nagaland. The peculiar socio-political environment of the state, led by insurgency, economic crises, and cultural change, has resulted in the over-imbibition of alcohol even though it is prohibited by law. It has already damaged many spheres of life, such as familial, vocational, psychological, legal, social, and physical. Chronic alcohol abuse has led to severe physical consequences, including liver damage, neurological impairment, and increased aggression. Then why do the Nagas drink to excess despite the grossly negative consequences? The decision to drink is made by the many psychological systems that underpin any motivated behaviour. Drinkers' expectations of stronger positive and weaker negative effects from drinking are the most consistent determinants of their drinking choices.

### Political Suppression and the Psychological Roots of Alcohol Abuse in Kire's Narratives

Women writers from Nagaland have clearly and repeatedly highlighted the detrimental impact of alcohol abuse within the community, particularly its role in perpetuating violence against the Naga women. Easterine Kire critically explores this theme in many of her novels, especially in *A Respectable Woman* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*, shedding light on the social, physical, and gendered consequences of alcoholism in Naga Society. Her writings transport the readers to the transformative and tumultuous period in history experienced by the Nagas at the closing stages of World War II. Kire mentions in her authorial note:

"One of the major reasons for alcoholism was the unresolved political conflict in Nagaland. After the 1950s, frustration over the political suppression of Naga rights by the Indian government led many men to abuse alcohol. Unemployment added to the frustration, which many tried to deaden with drink. Alcoholism has other causes in the Naga situation, yet all are interrelated to the political climate of the state and the increasing sense of social and economic importance" (Kire, *A Terrible Matriarchy* viii).

The Psychological Model implies that alcohol abuse is a result of some underlying mental illness issues, like trauma, depression, anxiety, or conflict that is unresolved. Drinking is regarded as an effort to cope with emotional distress. Khantzian points out: "individuals discover that the specific actions or effects of each class of drugs relieve or change a range of painful affect states" (Khantzian 231). Alcohol abuse treatment under the psychological model involves cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and psychotherapy to resolve underlying psychological problems (Khantzian 231).

Kire traces the early instances of alcoholism in her childhood, highlighting a few individuals struggling with their personal grief, who started drinking rice brew as a coping mechanism. They started scaring the children away while returning home:

“Besides the meat sellers, I had not seen many men drinking when I was growing up. In the village, men would sit all day with a mug of brew, but it was not polite to get drunk. However, we had our neighbourhood drunk who would come home late at night, shouting all the way up the road.” (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 83)

There were many alcoholics in the town who indulged in rice brew, but they seldom caused any ruckus in the street. But Vilhoulie, a widower, often chased the children with his stick. Azuo Zeu tells Kevi: “He’s not a bad man, but doesn’t know how to deal with his problems and keeps using drink to forget them” (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 85). People assumed that it was his wife’s death that turned him into an alcoholic.

The aftermath of the conflict brought with it widespread political instability, economic uncertainty, and deep-seated social unrest throughout the North-East. Nagaland, already grappling with colonial legacies and emerging nationalist sentiments, faced a surge of frustration among the male population. Several of the boys, who were barely teenagers, were already falling victim to excessive drinking, overwhelmed with frustration and an omnipresent sense of despair. Alcohol consumption was no longer a practice restricted to generations older; it was alarmingly becoming more widespread among the younger population, too. Drinking dens, which dispensed rice-brew with no restriction of age, made available convenient and unrestricted alcohol to young boys, fuelling the menace even further.

In explaining the origins of their disillusionment, the young people were quick to blame their difficulties on a mix of harsh realities: the political turbulence and violence that came with army rule, the disorienting shift from old-fashioned rural ways to the requirements of contemporary society, and the alienation of those who had not received sufficient education or skills. The large-scale migration from rural to growing townships only increased the pressure on scarce resources, leading to intense competition and aggravating social disparities.

Life at Kohima, once the centre of cultural pride of the Nagas, grew increasingly suffocating under the constant pressure of military torture, poverty and social dislocation. The persistent threat to their identity, fuelled by political suppression and cultural marginalisation, forced many Nagas into a crisis of identity. Struggling to reconcile the loss of independence and the debasement of their cultural roots, frustration and depression became contagious among the Nagas. Vini mentions the horrific incidents that aggravated his alcohol consumption and his hatred of becoming a part of the so-called mainstream society:

“Leto, didn’t you hear that they killed Lato’s mother? Put a gun to her mouth and shot her dead after they had raped her. Do you know that when Lato went to avenge his mother, they beat him until he was half dead and then they released him...” (Kire, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 227)

### **The Socio-Cultural Intersection of Alcohol Abuse and Gendered Violence in the form of Wife-Battering in Nagaland**

Battered wives, also referred to as abused women, victims of intimate partner violence, or survivors of spousal violence, have endured mistreatment in the Naga society for decades. Vamzuo notes that alcohol is a key driver of wife-battering in the region. Alcohol abuse leads to “unprovoked aggression” and “humiliation and physical harm” inflicted on women in their own homes (Vamuzo). “The most frequent types of physical battering include slapping, grabbing, pushing, shoving, hair pulling, kicking, choking, biting, head banging, throwing objects at, whipping with a belt, and striking with a bat. The most severe abuse usually involves weapons such as knives, cars, bats, guns, and rifles. Recent studies indicate that 90 per cent of spouse/partner abuse victims are women” (Roberts 3).

Kire’s novels provide a detailed description of the prevalence of the battering of women within Naga society, highlighting how deeply entrenched cultural norms perpetuate this practice. Additionally, she emphasises the role of alcoholism as the most significant contributing factor, further exacerbating the social issue of domestic violence against women:

“... the broken families and battered wives that were a direct fallout of alcoholism.” (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 133)

Despite her strong sense of self-assertion and educational background, Beinuo ultimately succumbed to the societal expectations of an obedient and dutiful wife and decided not to disclose her sufferings. Moreover, it was her motherhood that forced her to sacrifice herself for her daughter:

“It was too late by the time the beatings started. I did try once, but I was already pregnant with Uvi, and he threatened to find us both and kill us if I ever left him.” (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 140)

Aware that she would not survive Meslhou’s batterings, Beinou made her final confession to her best friend. Her dying declaration was a horrible recounting of the relentless atrocities inflicted upon her since the first day of her marriage. What was even more alarming was the inability to establish her death as a case of murder due to the lack of substantial evidence, leaving the crime unproven and justice unattainable. In this regard, Azuo holds the patriarchal conditioning of men responsible for their belief in dominance in marriage and ownership of their wives, whom they find inferior to them:

“He’s always had his way and it’s possible that his parents spoiled him thoroughly as a child ... He didn’t want a wife who was more intelligent than him. Whoever his wife was had to be submissive and do his

bidding if she didn't listen to him; it was too hard for her. She would be beaten until she submitted." (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 147)

Vini's demise effectively spared Nisano from experiencing a fate similar to that of Beinuo. Although Nisano's suffering differed in intensity, it was analogous in nature. Not only did Vini abandon his wife and child for drinking alcohol with his criminal friends, but he also accused his spouse of entrapment within this arranged marriage, asserting that the pregnancy was a manipulative strategy. Over time, his alcohol abuse escalated, ultimately culminating in physical violence:

"Lieno, oh Lieno, Vini is drunk and in such a temper, I am afraid to stay at home alone with him. He threw a chair at me but it missed. I was frightened he would hurt Salhou so I ran over to you. I cannot go back tonight. Please let me sleep here. I don't want my family to know about this." (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 226)

This progression reflects a troubling pattern of domestic violence, where a psychological manipulation precedes and fosters a climate conducive to physical aggression, leading to battering of women. However, Nisano was fortunate to receive support from her in-laws during this challenging time.

### **Women's Complicity in Alcohol Abuse and the Perpetuation of Violence in Naga Society**

The women who brewed rice beer and drank this concoction were considered immoral and socially undesirable by the members of the Naga tribe. According to Kire, they were usually considered more vulgar and offensive compared to their male counterparts. The insults they threw at each other, fights, and violence created a sense of fear, especially for the young girls who saw them. Fighting, screaming, and sometimes using bottles to beat each other up were common in and around these taverns.

Some of these women lived on the fringes of society; some of them were widowed, and the rest had been ostracised because they had children outside marriage. With no family to rely on, they sought refuge in these drinking joints. As Bano mentions, social stigma pushed many young girls towards these taverns because respectable families would not take them in out of fear of corruption (Kire, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 119-120).

It was the offspring of these women who paid the greatest price. They grew up neglected and in an atmosphere of constant turmoil, leading them to tend towards violence and antisocial behaviour. Lack of discipline caused them problems at school, which resulted in their being expelled and prevented them from securing any sort of employment in the future. The case of Rocky is a perfect example of this grim scenario. He was left by his father in similar circumstances and ended up becoming a criminal.

Following the war, some women, mostly widows, resorted to making rice wine and operating drinking establishments because it was viewed as an unsavoury line of work. Regardless, it helped earn a living for their families, allowing them to pay for their education. Not only did the women contribute directly to the spread of alcohol, but respectable families did too. In such families, women tend to encourage the misconduct of men in their lives either through indulging or silence. This is evident in the case of Meselhou's mother, who did not object to any form of alcoholism and violent actions committed by Meselhou. In Vini's case, indulgence also led to his alcoholism. Even though Vini's father criticised him for his actions, Grandmother kept on pampering Vini and would offer him some cash, which he used to drink.

The prospect of becoming socially disgraced made them refrain from taking action against him, and instead, they tried to marry her off as a solution. This move is indicative of the patriarchal structure in which excesses committed by men are normalized but they expect women to bring about reform in them. It is in this context that she managed to convince an upright family of her daughter.

### **Biological Decay and the Fatal Consequences of Alcohol Abuse in Kire's Novels**

The consumption of alcohol has "specific effects on the liver and pancreas, as evidenced by the existence of disease categories such as alcoholic liver disease, alcoholic liver cirrhosis, and alcohol-induced acute or chronic pancreatitis." (Rehm 135) In Kire's novels, the recurring themes of alcohol abuse and its consequent prolonged suffering from cirrhosis of the liver ultimately lead to an inevitable, painful death, often within the sterile confines of the hospital. This pattern is most evident in the fates of Vilhoulie, Zekuo, and Sonhie, who brought self-destruction through their addiction. These characters, however, did not assume the role of perpetrators of violence. Their suffering, though profound, was largely internalised, manifesting through alcohol addiction and personal decline rather than outward aggression.

Vini, by contrast, developed alcohol dependence and violent aggression towards people around him, especially towards his wife, despite the absence of a familial history of alcohol abuse or domestic violence. However, his fate was not different from that of other abusers. Handsome Vini lost his good looks soon developing "the ruddy complexion of an alcoholic" (Kire, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 198) and predictably, he turned "blue-green" (Kire, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 198) like Vimenuo's father. Young Vini meets an untimely death in a hospital bed, leaving behind his wife and child. He had been consuming alcohol for a decade, and the occurrence of blood vomiting served as a clear indication of his liver collapsing completely.

Rocky, a murderer and a notorious delinquent who played a significant role in Vini's descent into alcohol abuse, met a violent death. He was murdered during one of his drunken brawls when an individual picked up a huge rock and fatally crushed his skull. Similarly, Meselhou, who beat his wife to death, met a violent end. Heavily intoxicated Meselhou and his friend were found engaged in reckless behaviour by hurling stones at the CRPF patrol unit at night. As a result, they were arrested and subjected to severe physical assault - "His skull was bandaged, and his face was swollen on the left side." (Kire 155) The batterer became battered as "Meselhou had a fractured skull when he was brought to hospital, but that was already too late to save him." (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 154).

### **Ecclesiastical Advocacy and the Paradox of the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Act**

The Billy Graham Crusade of 1972 proved to be a great success in the transformation of the lives of Naga Christians. No less than 500,000 people attended Billy Graham's Crusade from November 20-22, 1972. Many of the long-term consumers of alcohol swore to quit drinking to transform themselves to righteous devotees of God - "I have heard men giving their testimonies in church that they had stopped drinking when Billy Graham came to Kohima." (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 92) For example, Lhouvitso said, "I came to Jesus Christ in the year 1972. Before that I was the worst of sinners" (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 92). However, the experience was markedly different for the women who formerly operated drinking houses. Those who abandoned the business and joined the church were welcomed by its members, yet they continued to struggle with feelings of diminished self-worth.

Vilhoulie's death reignited the debate regarding the operation of drinking houses. The consumption of alcohol was strongly discouraged by the church, and alcoholics and individuals such as Vilhoulie, who had engaged in the harassment of law-abiding citizens, were frequently referenced as justification for supporting the implementation of prohibition. However, the idea of prohibition was more complicated than it seemed to be on the surface:

"The government is earning a revenue on the sale of liquor and may not be willing to cooperate. And the church should be aware that it could land in legal problems if it tries to fight for prohibition" (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 102).

Early missionary E. W. Clark preached moderate abstinence in 1872, but it was only with the arrival of the Perrine and Haggard families in the 1890s that total prohibition of alcohol became a prerequisite for baptism and church membership. Their strict teetotalism deeply affected Christian teaching in Nagaland. Gradually, what initially started as a doctrine of the church became an overall social and legal concern, leading to the establishment of the NLTP Act of 1989 ("NLTP Act 1989: Revisiting the History").

The ease of liquor ban in Nagaland brought widespread societal anarchy, such as domestic violence, early deaths, moral degeneration, and a general loss of social, religious, and personal values. Aware of the mounting issues brought about by alcohol, the Church was resolute in its stand, asserting that Nagaland would not be a "WINELAND." Based on strong Christian moral principles, the Church pushed for total prohibition, underscoring the need for both spiritual and physical health. As early as 1962, it called upon the governor to end liquor sales and divert funds related to it to welfare programs. In 1989, the Church mobilised mass protests, including hunger strikes, forcing the State Government to enact the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition (NLTP) Act in 1990 ("NLTP Act 1989: Revisiting the History").

The church was "handicapped" (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 133 ) by the entangled problem of alcohol addiction. According to Mero, "... the Church throws its support behind the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Act. However, the implementation of this legislative measure in 1989 inadvertently gave rise to an entirely new set of challenges. These challenges also include the deeper-rooted problem of domestic violence" (Mero 150).

Similarly, Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio noted that moves to prohibit alcohol in Nagaland have led to a range of unintended and negative effects, such as the development of black markets, a rise in criminal elements like the flourishing of syndicate suppliers, and the flow of fake and substandard quality liquor ("Prohibition of Liquor in Nagaland and Its Consequences"). However, because of the absence of political and administrative will, the Act was poorly enforced and mostly ineffective ("NLTP Act 1989: Revisiting the History").

## **II. Conclusion**

The consumption of alcohol among the Naga people goes beyond being simply an aspect of culture and regulation. It becomes entangled in the process of creating and sustaining domestic violence. The act started as a means of coping with political turmoil, psychological stress, and economic instability, but eventually became a means of escalating patriarchal brutality in the home environment. Alcohol makes one less inhibited, making violent acts acceptable and normalised, especially domestic violence against women.

Implications of this interaction affect the woman the most. The women, either stigmatised alcohol brewers from the margins or contained within respectable homes, are disempowered in different but just as effective ways. Violence against them, maintaining the honour of the family, and even silencing them, is part and

parcel of their life, and at the same time, they are placed in circumstances that support malice committed by men through indulging them, accommodating them, or simply failing to oppose them.

The reality of these situations is brought to life vividly in Easterine Kire's novels, which reveal both the overt cruelty involved in domestic violence and the psychological and social ramifications. Through her characters, she makes it prominent that alcoholism is not simply an individual issue but one rooted in society with generational implications.

The effort to curb these problems by way of prohibition makes the situation even more complex, since it does not tackle the root cause but rather generates new instabilities. The fact that drinking and violence continue despite all the efforts made proves that any real solution would only be possible if we move beyond mere law and morality. What is needed is an approach that tackles the roots of the problem through questioning patriarchal culture, raising awareness, and creating protective and supportive structures for women.

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