

## Overcoming Silence : Representation of Women in Easterine Kire's novels

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### Abstract:

Easterine Kire is a prominent literary voice from North-East India who keeps alive her people's memory, their history and traditions in her poetry, fiction and non-fiction. Coming from a region rich in its oral tradition, she recreates the poetry of the hills, the vibrant stories of a people whose history and civilization have remained marginal in the collective consciousness of the Indian State. Women who constitute one-half of the race have had their stories and voices subsumed under the paternalistic, patriarchal ideology of the region. This paper seeks to examine the articulation of the Naga woman's voice which has remained in a culturally imposed silence in the novels of Easterine Kire through the telling of 'herstory' in history.

**Keywords:** *Women's voice, historical specificity, silence, patriarchy, gender bias, matriarchy, discrimination, girl-child abuse, autonomy, womanist*

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### Introduction

Studies in Social Sciences show how factors like race, class, caste, community, economy, political empowerment and literacy contribute to the condition of women. Women's roles within their particular social, communal and traditional practices contribute to the shaping of their individual, racial or ethnic identities and thus to their condition. Women writers, particularly those from the former colonies (now postcolonial countries) address issues pertaining to women working feminist themes and concerns into their writings. They critique, for example, patriarchal practices, the role of the family, the use of customary laws and religious doctrine in controlling, subordinating and oppressing women. Often, these practices become deeply encoded in the society and women are socialised into accepting their lower status as a norm. Women therefore defer to their men and play their assigned role (even in cases where the woman is more educated). Men, because of the belief in their superiority, devalue women and the woman's voice. The large canvas of women's writing allows for the diversity and multiplicity of themes and the differences of women's experiences depending on the local, micro condition or concern that is addressed. Women's literature addresses themes such as - the sexual, ethnic, cultural, socio-political and national identities of women; the institutions of marriage and motherhood; women's body and sexuality; subaltern writing; patriarchy; and the close link between women and spirituality.

The north-eastern part of India is rich in culture, in the diversity of ethnicities and in

biodiversity yet it is an under-represented region in many ways. The troubled political climate, the beautiful landscape and the confluence of various cultures have contributed to a body of writing that is very different from Indian English Literature. Sadly, its literature like its people has been neglected by the mainstream Indian Writing. It is a 'remote frontier' on the periphery of the nation and barely figures in the national imagination or national press. But to its people, their histories and stories recorded in their art and craft, folklore and oral traditions, in the music, poetry, customs and beliefs, oral and written narratives of the richly heterogenous vibrant cultures are unremote and 'central to themselves'. Existential dilemmas, questions of identity, erosion of traditional values, economic instability, corruption, drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment and ethnic clashes are a few of the problems that beset the region. The writers of the North-East, many of whom are located within their communities capture these realities in writings of anguish and protest. The marginalization and subalternization of tribal communities and the tragedy of these injustices is brought home by both male and female writers.

Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire are two prominent literary voices from Nagaland. They speak for the thousands of their fellow men and women whose narratives have remained silent and unacknowledged, for those whose stories and identities are misrepresented, misinterpreted through bias, discrimination and stereotyping. Women, particularly have been victimised and disabled by multiple or multifaceted forms of discrimination and subordination in male-dominated culture. The stories of mothers and daughters, wives and widows, speak through their poems, short stories and novels seeking to be heard and acknowledged. In her collections of poetry, short stories, folk tales and novels, Easterine Kire writes from an understanding of the historical dialectics of the Naga people and a life intimately connected with the struggles of her people. *Kelboukevira* (1982) is her first volume of poems. *The Windhover Collection* (2001) is a collection of short stories and poems. Her novels include *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010) and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011). She has also authored *Forest Song* (2011), a collection of spirit stories, *Life on Hold* (2011), a novella and a children's book *Once in Faraway Dorg* (2011).

Easterine Kire's novel *A Naga Village Remembered* (ANVR), was the first novel to be published by a Naga writer in English. She is credited with bringing the Naga human condition to the fore, focusing on the untold Naga story – the story that has been silenced and hidden from history. In articulating the socio-cultural, historical and political narratives of her people, she speaks for the Naga women whose stories have remained unknown in the dominant colonial and postcolonial discourse of the region. In her poetry and fictional works, she evokes "the poetry of



the hills and dark, dense woods, the spirit stories that nestle in every village, the high romance of star-crossed lovers ... and now, in recent years, the long holocaust of genocide, rape and torture of a gentle people.”<sup>1</sup> Paul Pimomo calls Easterine Kire “the keeper of her people’s memory, their griot. She is a master of the unadorned language that moves because of the power of its evocative simplicity.”<sup>2</sup>

The present paper will focus on two of Kire’s novels *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) and *A Terrible Matriarchy* (ATM). Naga identity inextricably linked to its traditions, its folk tales, rituals and religious and spirit beliefs is a recurrent theme in her poetry and fictional writing. Her people’s abiding love for freedom from foreign domination too is one of her concerns. The predicament of Naga women whose voices have been muted for centuries finds representation in the two novels which present differing images of women whose lives are defined and circumscribed by power structures in a traditional tribal society operating within its cultural and social ethos and which exists as Temsula Ao succinctly puts it - “on the strength of male superiority and male prerogative.”<sup>3</sup>

### **A Naga Village Remembered - History Revisited**

The Naga tribes residing in the Northeastern part of India have been objects of curiosity and interest for the exoticity of their society. Their rich, vibrant culture, their reputation as headhunters in the past, their deep spiritual attachment to their land and their resistance to British domination have been documented in numerous anthropological and historical accounts. In the turbulent history of the Naga Hills, the story of the battle of Khonoma remains an inspiration and the spirit of liberty still resonates in the hearts of its people. Khonoma is an average-sized Angami Naga village famed for its fierce reputation even before the first British expeditions to the Naga Hills in 1832 led by Captain Jenkins and Captain Pemberton which sought to open a route from Manipur to Assam via Naga country to protect their subjects from Burmese invasions. Historical accounts testify to the fierce resistance by Naga villagers to the entry of British troops among which Khonoma was the fiercest. From the first expedition to the village in 1844 to its final destruction in the spring of 1880, Khonoma put up the longest resistance. The help of neighbouring villages prolonged its resistance till a treaty between representatives of the British

- 1 Iralu, Easterine. “Should Writers Stay in Prison?” in *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. ed. Tilottoma Misra. New Delhi: OUP, 2011. 273. Print.
- 2 Pimomo, Paul. Rev. of *Bitter Wormwood*, by Easterine Kire. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011. Print.
- 3 Ao, Temsula. “‘Benevolent Subordination’: Social Status of Naga Women.” in *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India’s Northeast*. ed. Preeti Gill. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010. Print.

Government and the elders of Khonoma on 27<sup>th</sup> March 1880 brought an end to the the conflict.

*A Naga Village Remembered* recounts through historical fiction, the nineteenth-century life of this proud and valiant Angami village. The Battle of Khonoma fought during the bitter winter of 1879 – 1880 between the colonial forces of Britian and the warriors of the village is told from the ‘insiders’ point of view. It says in fiction what history has not fully told. The novel traces the stories of three generations of a warrior’s family – Vipiano, the warrior Vicha’s widow, her sons Kelevizo and Lato, Kelevizo’s wife Pelhuvino and their sons Rokokhoto and Sato. The central concern of the novel is the sequence of events leading to the Battle of Khonoma and the turn in the tide of its history. Kire has also subtly woven in the women’s role, women who existed in a society dominated by male power and privilege. In delineating the lives of the people, Kire depicts a village steeped in the teachings of Angami culture recording in particular detail the practices and beliefs of its inhabitants who lived by strict codes of behaviour which in her words tells of the “ingrained sense of honour and deep love of independence bred by it which drove its men to repulse any invasion on its lands.”<sup>4</sup>

#### **Daughters of Kelhoukevira**

In recounting the historical details surrounding the final defeat of Khonoma and its catastrophic aftermath, the narrative dwells on tribal customs, local beliefs, religious traditions, taboos, customary laws and the values of a people deeply moored to their culture. The writer evokes with nostalgic touches the lives and times of a community which resisted colonial forces to the utmost eventually being defeated (in the material sense) but remaining undefeated in spirit. In giving the Khonoma side of the story, minute aspects of village life essentially patriarchal and male-dominated, come to the fore. The clear division of roles on gender lines in its socio-cultural historical milieu is expressed giving readers a picture of the position of women in a warrior community. The heroic exploits of able-bodied men who loved going to war to defend their women, children and village often led to their untimely deaths leaving widows and fatherless children to an unknown fate. Women played a vital role in supporting their men, sustaining their families, performing the menial tasks at home and in the fields. Their contribution in upholding the customs and rituals of their families, clan and village was immense. It was imperative for a woman to be hard-working, strong, for then only would she be able to feed and support her family. She would be able to survive, should her warrior husband/father be killed, an inevitability

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4. Iralu, Esterine. Introduction. *A Naga Village Remembered (ANVR)*. Kohima: Ura Academy, 2003. xv. Print.



considering the reputation of Naga warrior villages. Women would have had to survive as widows, fatherless daughters, mothers without sons and this egregious condition would have bred a kind of stoicism brought out clearly in the portrayal of Vipiano, the widow of Vicha, mother to two young sons Kelevizo and Lato who bears personal and private sorrows which she cannot share with her sons.

In the novel, the refusal and defiance of Khonoma to submit to colonial hegemony which sought to subdue and suppress the freedom-loving spirit of its people, the harsh and painful price it paid for its "intransigence" in the total destruction and ransacking of the village depicts the grit, stubbornness and resilience of its inhabitants. The parallel story of women who would have shouldered the major burden of keeping the home-fires burning can be drawn out from the depiction of women characters - Vipiano, her daughter-in-law Pelhuvino and Megozou, wife of Keviselie. In her reconstruction of Khonoma's history, we may deconstruct the historically specific position of its women who appear as adjuncts to their men. Their subject status limits them to a supporting role compared to the dominant one of men. Nevertheless, this precisely is where they play a crucial role in the development of the narrative.

With male and female roles clearly defined, the warriors like Vicha, Keviselie and Kelevizo proved their masculinity in various forms - through 'battlesport' involving raids or attacks on hostile villages, taking of heads (human), tiger kills, hunting and wrestling. Women's role and activities were confined to the home, hearth, fields and child-rearing. A warrior's wife like Megozou enjoyed a privileged position as well as the considerable work of busying herself with cooking and making rice brew when a feast-of-merit was hosted. Vipiano, a young widow with two sons, who lost her warrior husband in one of the innumerable raids, has the task of ensuring their survival by labouring in the fields struggling to ensure their granaries were full. It was a matter of respect and even for a widow, "a household was(is) not worth its name if its granaries are empty."<sup>5</sup> Both men and women observed strict adherence to the traditions and particular rituals according to the time, season and occasion. "Like other women of her generation, Vipiano knew how important it was to abide by all the rituals and especially the taboos forbidding work".<sup>6</sup> In Vipiano's figure, the widow's struggle to rear her young, the vicissitudes, heartaches and hardship of single parent household is evinced. Training her sons in planting paddy, exercising patience while guiding them through various tasks and duties and the constant burden of the question of survival robs her of any levity and Lato, the younger son observes that it was rare to hear his mother laugh.

5. *ibid.*, 10.

6. *ibid.*, 11.

Toiling under the sun, wind and rain had etched harsh lines in her handsome face as she steadfastly persevered. The plight of widows deprived of spousal support, companionship and assistance in household duties, reduction in social status - a painful condition borne in silent grief and sorrow is brought out in Vipiano's predicament. That women like her accepted their lot unquestioningly reflects their condition in a pre-colonial, male-dominated tribal society which purportedly respected its women and also ironically disempowered them.

In dwelling on the exploits of men, the power and prestige they enjoyed after successful raids on hostile villages, the battles lost and won, the disgrace or honour following these, the narrative touches on how women were associated with honour or defeat. During pre-colonial times, inter-village warfare led to frequent raids in which enemy heads were taken. Women reposed faith in the valour of their men to protect them particularly those villages which were noted for its brave warriors, brought out in the following description: "On the day of battle, the women of Garipheju were unperturbed by the news of approaching enemy warriors. They continued their weaving, confident that their men would protect them".<sup>7</sup> It was another matter when the tables were turned and Garipheju suffered loss, its warriors and women being cut down when Khonoma defeated them in a retaliatory attack. Men proved their prowess by avenging enemy raids in battle to show themselves worthy of defending their village and womenfolk, thus earning ornaments of war and striving to live up to the obligations of manhood. It was a way to also pay suit to young women, for women sang praises of warriors who took heads and held them in high esteem ridiculing those who were unsuccessful. The corollary to such heroism was that the lives of many young men and the fathering days of married men were shortened. Paradoxically, by encouraging their men, women themselves became and created victims. Women were acquainted with death and grief and many songs were there mourning dead warriors. Thus, while men took part in 'battlesport' and the reputation of the village grew from the triumphs of its warriors, it can be inferred that the number of widows must have commensurately increased. The statement: "Many women were widowed early by the love of war among the men"<sup>8</sup> bears out this fact.

Kire shares the dilemma of a warrior's widow doubly burdened - firstly to honour the reputation of her husband and secondly, to be driven by circumstances and fear; fear of failing in her role and being faulted by her clan in bringing up her sons. In a tradition-bound culture, the widow's lot was not a happy one. Vipiano often checked herself and drew back from laughing too

freely for life had taught her not to be too happy. In Vipiano's character, Kire proves the strength

7. *ibid.*, 3.

8. *ibid.*, 11.



and tenderness of women, women who are courageous mothers. Brave widow, courageous mother, wise teacher - these qualities ensure Levi and Lato's growth into able-bodied young men well-versed in the village customs, rituals and beliefs, thus making her a happy mother but a sad, melancholy widow who remained faithful to her husband's memory.

When Levi comes of age, Pelhuvino, a girl approved and chosen by his maternal aunt and mother becomes his shy bride. The shadow of his failed raiding mission, his capture and imprisonment for six long years grieved his mother. The mother's joy could not hide the toll that Levi's absence had taken on her in her hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. But her wellbeing is restored with Levi's unexpected return and taking a young wife. Vipiano, in her wisdom adopts non-interference in her son's marriage to allow for better relationship with her daughter-in-law. In the second year of marriage, Pelhuvino bears a son to the relief and delight of her family for to remain childless provoked uninvited gossip. The birth of a second son within a few years gives fulfillment to the young parents.

### Survival

In sketching the maternal figure of Vipiano, Kire exhibits the enormous challenges Naga women faced living in villages that were constantly at war. The warrior figure enjoyed honour and respect and to reciprocate his good fortune on being blessed by the spirits, reputed men like Keviselie gave feasts-of-merit in gratitude. The people's mystical bond with their land, the spirit beliefs that were part of their daily existence kept men and women deeply rooted to their village, their people. This love for village and land would be tested when Khonoma refused to submit to British authority and defied attempts to subdue them. The circumstances leading to the historic battle of Khonoma, the bitter and bloody battle during the winter/spring of 1879-1880 saw the village ravaged, its inhabitants reduced to homeless wanderers and many of its members punished or imprisoned. But the spirit of its people refused to die and the village was rebuilt after a year of acute deprivation and hardship.

Soon after their return, Vipiano falls ill and dies. Her death signals the end of one generation coinciding with the rebuilding of Khonoma. This event marks a turning point in the character of the village as the long arm of British imperialism and colonial authority started altering the lives of colonial subjects. Under the new dispensation, men and women who had lived by age old beliefs and customs saw their traditions being eroded by the winds of change which started invading and pervading every aspect of village life.

The advent of British colonial authority paved the way for Christian missionaries to enter

Naga society with profound and far-reaching consequences.<sup>9</sup> The Christian religion and introduction of education brought in changes that would alter Naga society irrevocably. The effects of the two 'irresistible forces' is played out in Rokovoto's rejection and Sato's acceptance of the new spirit that was spreading in the land. Roko, Kelevizo's older son clings to the traditions of his father and grandfather and views the missionary's religion and education with suspicion. Sato, by contrast, is receptive to the teachings of Dr. Rivenburg who used primers in Angami using the Roman script and encouraged his pupils to converse in English. The clash between tradition and modernity is brought out in the conflict and tension between the brothers. Sato fears his father's wrath but is drawn to the new religion which identified the Creator deity *Ukepenno p fii* as the father of *Isu* (Jesus).<sup>10</sup> Sato exemplifies the dilemmas and anxieties of those who first accepted and converted to Christianity facing great ostracism in the village which adhered strongly to its indigenous culture. His father and elder brother consider his conversion a betrayal and shame on the family and threaten to disown him. Pelhuvino or Peno, the mother, stands between the two conflicting parties trying to mediate and resolve the crisis in her family, reflective of the larger tensions that affected Nagas. Charles Chasie says: "The cumulative impact of these new changes was that while the world of the Naga grew and his mental horizon expanded, the Naga also became confused and began to suffer an identity crisis which he had never known before."<sup>11</sup>

The internal divisions that the effects of Christianity and education created in traditional Naga society is borne out in Levi's question to Sato: "How is it, my son, that you turn your back on all that we've taught you of what is good of our ways?"<sup>12</sup> In the differences between father and son, Peno, the wife and mother intervenes. In the woman's role as peacemaker, she tries to restore peace and harmony. She is pained by the distance that develops between her and Levi, the loss of marital harmony and is saddened by the absence of Sato's singing in the home. And when tragedy strikes her family, with a woman's intuition, she knows that Levi is dead. He dies an unnatural death killed accidentally while hunting by his closest friend Penyu. Like her mother-in-law before her, Peno is widowed and she is left to grapple with the problem of one son having a fondness for brew while the younger becomes a follower of *Isu*. Towards the end of the novel, Peno feels a sense of liberation that Levi's death freed her from, the tension and fear that had

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9. Chasie, Charles. "Nagaland in Transition." in *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-east*. ed. Geeti Sen. New Delhi: OUP, 2006. 256. Print.

10. Iralu, *ANVR*. 101.

11. Chasie, *op cit*, 256.

12. Iralu, *ANVR*, 102.



marred the last years of their married life. She hopes Sato will return to the old ways but realises in her son's belief "Our lot is not hardship and constant pain,"<sup>13</sup> that the changes she was witnessing at home mirrored those occurring on a wider scale beyond. Her death with her younger son by her side is an assurance that the old ways will not be completely lost and men like Sato would take their village and people forward with the blessings of their elders who believe them.

In presenting women belonging to a pre-colonial, pre-Christian world surrounded by myths, legends, taboos and rituals, Kire shows how women in the past accepted their traditional unequal status without question. The deeply patriarchal structure of Angami society was embedded in the psyche of the women who submitted to the male-ordered authority since men were the defenders, protectors and providers and belief in male-dominance was an accepted norm. It can be considered that Naga women were the 'Other' to the 'Self' of man. Feminist writer, Simone de Beauvoir's definition of men as the Subject - self, the 'I' and woman as the object, the Other because they are both similar to and different from men is pertinent in the Naga context. As Beauvoir puts it, in a male-defined culture, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other."<sup>14</sup> Though drawn from the situation of women in western culture and examined from an existential position, Beauvoir's argument that women have been forced and conditioned by patriarchal social traditions into a secondary or inferior position in relation to men holds true for Naga tribal society.

*A Naga Village Remembered* shows nineteenth century Naga women within the traditional and culturally created roles of a subordinate nature. Women are portrayed accepting their secondary position and not questioning male traditions but abiding by customary laws and having no part in male-only village councils. Women compliantly deferred to male authority according to 'custom' allowing their men to take the leading role. It may be noted that, though denied public voice, some women, in Kire's portrayal, did have a measure of influence over their men in the domestic domain borne out in Vipiano's influence over Levi and Lato and Pelhuvino's over her husband and sons albeit at high personal cost.

### *A Terrible Matriarchy - Wo(e)men's Stories*

13. *ibid*, 117.

14. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans and ed. H.M. Parshley. 1953. London: Vintage Books, 1997. 16. Print

Easterine Kire's second novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) takes us to the 1960s and 1970s town of Kohima coinciding with the birth of the state of Nagaland. It traces the coming of age of five year old Dielieno, the youngest and only daughter with four brothers. Dielieno's is the story of many girls growing up in a traditional Naga society undergoing rapid change and who have faced discrimination in some form or the other. The various denials that she experiences from a young age at the hands of her grandmother sets the stage for more denials that are overtly and covertly practised under the guise of upholding patriarchal traditions. While most women subscribe to the male privilege, Kire draws out how some women subvert and abuse the system to perpetrate gender abuse within the same gender. The multiple layers in the novel address social, political and cultural themes giving a wide-angled detailed look at Naga society as it grapples with complex issues of customary practices, tribal culture, Christianity and changing mindsets about male and female roles that impact men, women and children in diverse ways. From the personal to the political, from gender issues to the religious, from the beginnings of status-consciousness to the underlying frustration that beset Naga society during a critical period of its growth - Easterine Kire takes readers into the heart of Naga society and reveals the layers of experience that make a society. The novel shows three generations of women and each in her turn - Dielieno, her mother Nino and grandmother Vibano get to tell their stories. Through their narratives, the novel connects the experiences of women at different stages of the history of the Nagas in the century before the birth of the state in the early 1960s.

The many female characters serve to portray the generational differences in Grandmother Vibano, her unmarried sister Neikou, Dielieno's mother Nino, her sister Pfünuo, Bano, Vimenuo, Nisano and Dielieno. Minor characters such as Bino, Dielieno's paternal aunt, Leno and Sini, wives of her paternal uncles and Benuo, the woman at the water source serve to highlight negative aspects of female nature – scheming, petty, manipulative, gossipy. To understand the attitude and actions of the women characters, it is important to look at women's position in Naga society and see how and to what extent the woman's role has been changing.

A century ago, during Grandmother Vibano's mothers' time, the situation presented in *A Naga Village Remembered* prevailed. Grandmother's mother had no brothers so she had a hard life when her father died. Without male heirs, a widow and her daughters faced a bleak future. Customary laws related to marriage and property rendered such households dependent on in-laws with the daughters having little or no status. Such a scenario would have bred a deep fear in



women and brothers or sons would have been looked upon as an investment to one's survival. Therefore, the situation put women at a disadvantage leaving a widow and her daughters economically and socially insecure.

In delineating aspects of Naga social life with particular interest in women's condition, position and predicament in a patriarchal culture, the novel presents the minutiae of a young observant girl-child's perception on the world around her. Through Dielieno's eyes, we encounter a clear description of gender divisions, family relationships, economic conditions and cultural realities shaped and translated in the awareness of the young child who grows with them. Through the naive eye of the protagonist, Kire traces the struggle of the girl-child to get educated, the sacrifices she makes from her subservient status which enable her to reach the position she creates for herself.

The novel begins with denial. Dielieno is told pointedly by Grandmother when she asks for the chicken leg: "That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions"<sup>15</sup>. Grandmother's retort sets the tone for the series of denials that girls are subjected to. Though she does not understand the reasons for Grandmother's discrimination, she perceives that there is more to Grandmother simply refusing her a chicken leg. She sees this in her mother's nervous anxiety around Grandmother, in her father's lack of assertiveness when faced with his mother's dominating ways. More instances are encountered as Dielieno learns that being the youngest gave her no privileges in the matriarch's eyes. Girls had to fetch water and not boys. Her older brothers were given sweets and tasty portions of meat and excused from menial work but girls had to perform the various household chores - fetching water, sweeping and cleaning the house, washing clothes, feeding the chickens, drying and storing vegetables, running errands and after being subjected to constant reprimands and put-downs having to massage the large calves of her oppressor. The reward for all the work and tasks that she performed was a meagre meal with a piece or two of meat or a cup of tea with one biscuit. Forced to live with her termagant grandmother and be an "errand girl", Dielieno starts understanding the unequal world that girls and boys live in. From being denied warm water for a bath, play time or rest, Grandmother even tries to deny her education. It is her mother Nino who stands up for her to be sent to school, not her father who curiously has his words stuck in his throat when he has to face his mother.

### Daughters of Patriarchy

15. Iralu, Easterine. *A Terrible Matriarchy (ATM)*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2007. 1. Print.

Why grandmother Vibano subscribes to patriarchal ideology and is “the clan’s notorious enabler of male ego and spoiler of female confidence and modern education”<sup>16</sup> can be understood in the light of what Anungla Aier elaborates in her essay “Folklore, Folk Ideas and Gender among Nagas”. She notes that some aspects of Naga oral tradition and the ideas that emanate from such tradition “contributes towards the construction of gender identity and roles in Naga society”<sup>17</sup> Aier explains that the structure of the relationship between the genders in patriarchal, patrilineal Naga society gets “the legal sanction through institutions such as the customary laws”<sup>18</sup> The belief in male dominance is amply demonstrated in folklore and oral traditions of various Naga tribes. She observes: “This perhaps legitimises the patriarchal form of society and the internal arrangement of power structure between men and women”<sup>19</sup> Adrienne Rich’s definition of patriarchy bears out what Aier says in the Naga context: “Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: A familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour determine what part women shall or shall not play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male”<sup>20</sup> As a result, the culturally constructed, regulatory structure of gender hierarchy legitimises patriarchal ideology which allows men to dominate women. Women are thus rendered subordinate to men.

The question of gender discrimination and gender abuse has a peculiar twist because it is the grandmother who abuses the granddaughter. In Delieino’s personal experience of victimization at the hands of Grandmother Vibano during her childhood, Kire gives insight into a reality of Naga society where girls’ education was not prioritised. Boys were given preference and a girl had to face tough battles to get an education, to find a place for herself in her family and society which was governed by a pervasive patriarchal attitude that thwarted the aspirations of many girls for education. From confronting prejudices to swallowing humiliations, the girl-child faced deprivations in many forms. From the details of the narrative, Naga girls during mid-twentieth century Nagaland encountered multiple challenges - at home, in the clan, village, town and even the Church. Only through persistence and forbearance could girls survive the struggles towards

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16. Humtsoe-Nieniu, Eyingbeni, Paul Pimomo and Venusa Tunyi. *Nagas: Essays for Responsible Change*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2012. 187. Print.
  17. Aier, Anungla. “Folklore, Folk Ideas and Gender Among Nagas”. in *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. ed. Tilottoma Misra. New Delhi: OUP, 2011. 303. Print.
  18. *ibid.*
  19. *ibid.*, 306.
  20. Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1995. 57. Print.



autonomy. The situation exposes a dichotomy between, on the one hand, Naga male rhetoric of according women a high status, of respecting women, and on the other hand, of depriving women the privileges that only men give themselves - a political voice, decision making in governance and inheritance of ancestral property. A further dichotomy is observed in Grandmother, mother to three sons and a daughter and grandmother to several grandsons, maneuvering herself into a position of authority and thereby being recognised as a matriarch.

An important point to consider is that, women who experience discrimination/oppression in various ways react in different ways. Some women emerge strong, a champion of her own worth, by challenging or overcoming such oppression. In such an instance, she is glorified as a strong matriarch. On the other hand, a weak form of submission to the various strands of oppression by the patriarchy would be to perpetuate or uphold the discriminations against women, herself becoming an instrument of oppression against her own sex. Thus, she becomes a 'terrible' matriarch rather than a strong one. Grandmother Vibano is an instance of how the dynamics of patriarchy can twist the inner workings of a woman. As a result, she abuses her position and ironically other women practicing "a terrible matriarchy".

Dieliemo is sent to live with her grandmother at five years of age having little choice but to submit to the dictates of her elders. Grandmother's ideas of how young girls should be brought up are dissonant with the times. Her harsh rebukes reduce the little girl to tears who wonders why Grandmother hates her. Bano, Grandmother's niece/adopted daughter consoles her: "She doesn't hate you, Liemo, she doesn't really. She wants you to be a good girl. It's her way of bringing you up to be a good woman"<sup>21</sup> A good woman in Grandmother's view was akin to a workhorse without bad blood. Boys, in her opinion, will be boys. In her eyes, "They should be taught to be manly. In my father's day, boys never did any work because they had to look after the village and engage enemy warriors in warfare. The household that did not have a male heir was considered barren."<sup>22</sup> Echoing what *A Naga Village Remembered* depicts, boys were expected to grow into manly warriors. Boys were valued and women were expected to produce sons to maintain the male lineage. On the other hand, Bano informs Dieliemo that "Girl-children are never considered real members of the family. Their mission in life is to marry and have children and be able to cook and weave cloth and look after the household. If they got married, they would be always known as somebody's mother and never somebody's daughter".<sup>23</sup> Women as daughters appear to lose their identity on

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21. Iralu, *ATM*. 39.

22. *ibid.*, 37.

marriage, and as daughters, they remain devalued and marginal.

One aspect of the inequities between the sexes Dielieno observes first hand is that between her parents. The unequal distribution of work is very clear. Her mother slaves from early morning performing the innumerable domestic chores. The running of the home, the comfort and welfare of the family members rests on her frail shoulders. With the weight of so much work, Nino has a permanently worried look. Like many married women, Nino is trapped in her domestic role trying to live up to the expectations of others, to please others and neglecting herself in the process. Dielieno observes that "Father did not help much. He would expect Mother to clean the house and wash all the clothes and have cooked food ready when he got home."<sup>24</sup> The father's expectations were too much for a woman of Nino's constitution. Indicative of the common predicament of many women from low-income households, Nino is overburdened and caught in the never-ending cycle of domesticity. Grandmother, however, enjoyed the benefit of having two helpers - Bano and Dielieno, leaving Nino to struggle alone.

In the close-knit family life and community spirit that pervades Dielieno's small world - Family, School and Church were paramount. A key theme that links the condition of women, their devalued status and thereby their victimhood is the connection between education and economic empowerment. As education for the girl-child was not prioritised, uneducated young women faced an uncertain future. Kire draws the connection between the two related factors in women like Bano, who without education are dependent on others. Nino may not have had much education but she realises its importance as a key to unlock the door to one's empowerment. After her father's death, Vimenuo's mother gets a job as a typist having studied upto the tenth standard. Despite Grandmother's objections, her parents do not discourage Dielieno in her plans to complete her graduation with her brother Leto's financial support. Having some education is thus an advantage. Grandmother, the uneducated uses emotional blackmail and her economic resources to get her way. Education is underlined as a tool towards one's personal growth and development.

A situation taken from real life and woven into the novel is the presence of numerous drinking houses in many neighbourhoods in Kohima. The fondness for drink led to the untimely deaths of many men. The demand for alcohol led to the proliferation of adulterated liquor. The unresolved political imbroglio during the fifties and sixties led to frustration and feelings of

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23. *ibid.*, 26.

24. *ibid.*, 49.



impotence compounded this frustration giving rise to an increase in alcoholism. Dielieno's best friend Vimenuo, with whom she bonded from the first day of school, comes from a home with an alcoholic father. Her mother, Vimenuo and her two sisters live in constant tension and fear over the unpredictability of her father Zekuo who vents his frustrations over a low-paid job and the lack of a son in drinking. The violence and domestic abuse by Vimenuo's father reflects the problem of the social menace of alcoholism which affected many families. It is reflective of the anger many men felt over the volatile atmosphere that prevailed in Nagaland and who vented this anger in the home. Zekuo's abusive behaviour terrifies the wife and children who find relief when he dies an early death. Dielieno's second brother Vini, Grandmother's favourite, grows into an arrogant young man who becomes a burden to his parents. The solution to straightening their wayward son is to marry him off to young Nisano who has a harrowing short married life and is released from the terror of drunkenness and domestic violence when Vini too goes to an early grave, repentant, leaving a young widow and an infant son.

Of particular interest is Kire's portrayal of Bano. Bano, Grandfather Sizo's illegitimate daughter is emblematic of the open secret in many families. As Kire has stated in a talk on the novel: "There is a Bano in every Naga family. The one looking after other family members is always a girl who is taken for granted."<sup>25</sup> The Banos of Naga families are the most marginalised. Dependent on others for their survival, they spend their lives serving others. Their options are either limited or non-existent leaving them helpless. Without education, she has no economic freedom, development and growth. On Grandmother's death, she becomes completely distraught and is beside herself with grief. Dielieno realises that in spite of Grandmother's exploitation of her "adopted" daughter, "Bano had always regarded Grandmother as her real mother, never having known her own biological mother. She had stayed on, not only because of her circumstances but because this was home to her, no matter how brusque Grandmother could be at times."<sup>26</sup> Grandmother scuttles the one marriage proposal for Bano and as the prime of her youth passes by, the chances of marriage fade and the once pleasant-looking young woman takes out her frustration and lack of suitors in frequent snacking, becoming overweight and slovenly. It must be noted here that Bano is a sisterly figure in Dielieno's years in Grandmother's house providing comfort, support and companionship to the little girl in her struggles. She is there when Lieno reaches puberty and helps her understand the bodily changes when girls start menstruating, clearing the younger girls' fears and advising her on the best way to cope with it.

25. Kire, Easterine. *A Terrible Matriarchy* Lectures, Fazl Ali College. 21<sup>st</sup> June. 2013.

26. Iralu, *ATM*, 285.

The struggles of Naga girls, the sacrifices they make is underscored by the fact that more girls than boys drop out of school. When Dielieno reaches the seventh standard, many girls drop out to marry or to let a brother continue his education. She is among the few who copes with studies and bullying from older classmates who are not as bright as her. It is at this juncture - reaching puberty, being in school, outnumbered by boys that Dielieno's life takes a major turn. Pete, her sickly third brother, tragically passes away leaving the family devastated. Nino takes the loss very deeply becoming listless. Her mother's weak condition enables Dielieno to return to her parental home after six years under the matriarch's control. Significantly, the daughter takes over the running of the house, putting Grandmother's cultural education into practice. Dielieno's restoration to her parents marks a turn in her growth and helps her resolve the resentment over Grandmother's harsh treatment. Not only the matriarch, but the petty, gossipy, women at the water source who damage people's reputations, the proud Aunt Bino who makes Dielieno feel ashamed of her poverty, the manipulative Leno and Sini, wives of her paternal uncles who victimise Bano by turning her out of Grandmother's house on the matriarch's death, through each of these, she sees cultural aberrations in how some women abuse other women.

In Dielieno's story, Kire encapsulates the experience of young girls who needs had to possess a well-spring of personal courage and strength. In her struggle, she has the support of her mother who appears deceptively weak and frail but gives maternal encouragement through her quiet strength and wisdom. It is women like her - sensitive, long-suffering, spending their lives caring for others who symbolise the strength of Naga women.

Nino and her sister Pfünüo are a product of the times growing up as they did during the war years, the 1940s to be precise. Having lost her mother when she was only sixteen, Nino shoulders the burden of 'mothering' her younger brother and sister during a critical phase of Naga history. Life in Kohima before, during and after the Second World War is brought out in Nino's experiences. Forced by circumstances to grow up quickly, she exemplifies the tenacity of young women who turn life's setbacks into stepping stones towards personal courage. She survives the war and with the maternal guidance of her father's second wife, she learns to be a 'good worker' able to cope with the stringent requirements of her mother-in-law when she gets married. Nino forges a deep bond with her much younger sister Pfünüo and this sisterly bond gets strengthened through the years as each one goes through her personal trials, living as they did in a society that made heavy demands on women and women's work and repaid them with token recognition. In her mother and aunt, Dielieno sees the affectionate bond only women as sisters



share. Pfünuo is a model of sisterly support through the years and is by her side when Nino is devastated by the loss of a sickly son. She is an aunt her niece can look up to for her beauty and her kindness, who overcomes youthful vanity, self-centeredness and the stigma of pre-marital pregnancy into lessons towards character growth.

A crucial element in understanding women's position in Naga society is revealed after Grandmother's death. Lieno carried the scars of being a victim of Grandmother's abuse. In trying to help her, her mother makes her understand that Grandmother too and her mother before her had been victims of gender oppression. The eldest of three children, Grandmother saw her mother suffer for not having brothers, losing their lands and fields when her father died. Kire shows the precarious condition of widows without sons. In the village, it meant "Widows without sons lost all their husband's property to other male relatives."<sup>27</sup> The patrilineal system of inheritance disallowed daughters from inheriting ancestral property. Such a system would have deepened a widow's sense of insecurity. When Nino tells Dielieno "Grandmother saw her own mother suffer hardship and poverty and exclusion from many aspects of social life because she had no brothers. It hardened her and made her determined not to suffer as her mother had".<sup>28</sup> Her mother's words are an eyeopener to understanding Grandmother's fears and insecurities that instilled her belief in women's dependency on men and her obsession in male-heirs.

### Navigating the Waters

When her mother advises her to forgive Grandmother, she wonders "How do you forgive someone who has borne a grudge against you for being born a girl?"<sup>29</sup> It is her mother's faith in her that restores Lieno's feelings of self-worth. The mother tells her "You know that our people say we should love our sons because they are the ones who look after us in our old age. That may be true but for your father and I, it is you, our daughter who has brought us the greatest comfort. We love all of you equally. You must always know that."<sup>30</sup> Dielieno's coming of age is confirmed when Nino sees in her daughter the makings of the "new woman". As a mother whose outlook was undergoing change, she validates her daughter's worth and endorses her love by giving Dielieno this assurance. In the epiphanic mother-daughter moment, Nino reveals that she too had grown up with the belief that girls were weak and not as good as boys. She cements her belief in her daughter by stating "I am amazed at your strength, Lieno. The way you took over the household

27. *ibid.*, 272.

28. *ibid.*, 273.

29. *ibid.*, 274.

30. *ibid.*, 273.

when Pete died. You were just eleven and a half and yet you took over my role in our family so naturally, I can see that women are not weak. They just have a strength different from men.”<sup>31</sup> It is this strength that helps her cope with difficulties that would have defeated others.

Dielieno is the pivot whose coming of age from victim to confident young woman is a reflection of the changing mores in a tribal society. Grandmother Vibano and her mother’s generation could not shake off the ideology of male superiority on which they were reared. Nino and Pfünuo belong to mid-twentieth century Naga society which grappled with the enormous impact of the World War and post-war developments in and around Kohima. Bearing witness to the slow and gradual change affecting Naga society, women of Nino’s generation looked to the past to understand that Naga women need not let themselves be victims of an androcentric culture. As they learn to value themselves, they pass this lesson to their daughters who learn to navigate the choppy waters of tradition, discrimination and gender bias. As a symbol of womanly grit, Dielieno’s story is a paradigm of Naga women’s predicament, a touchstone for the troubles of a gender who turn the oppressive strings of “a terrible matriarchy” into doughty womanliness.

Using Alice Walker’s term, Kire posits her as a womanist rather than a feminist. A womanist is defined as “a woman who loves other women, sexually/non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility... and women’s strength”.<sup>32</sup> Womanism is a philosophy conventionally applied in black culture characterising women as audacious, capable and strong - “Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female.”<sup>33</sup> Womanism is a commitment to women’s empowerment from a broader vision of the interconnectedness and heterogeneity of women’s struggles of and in their communities against inequalities and exploitation - politically, socially, racially and economically. It is a redefinition of the feminist struggle to end female oppression.

### Conclusion

Within the wider debate of Naga assertion for identity, lies the Naga woman’s struggle for a female identity. In the larger discourse of nationalism and patriarchal tradition, under the “layers of subservience” that Naga women experience, the woman’s voice is muted. Using the *Bildungsroman* form for her novel, Kire explores the issues of education and socialization of the girl-child whose coming of age parallels that of her community and opens it up to critique women’s subject position in contemporary Naga society.

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31. *ibid.*, 274.

32. Walker, Alice. *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Orlando: Harvest Book Harcourt Inc., 1983. xi. Print

33. *ibid.*,



Dielieno's battle to acquire an education, an identity within the family and beyond, to be acknowledged as an autonomous individual mirrors the battle many Naga girls have had to surmount in their quest for emancipation, eloquently worded in Pimomo's comment "So it is Lieno's intelligence and hard work, coupled with her humanity and sense of social justice, which in the end assure her personal victory".<sup>34</sup>

In recuperating the history of the village in *A Naga Village Remembered*, the decentered history and terrain of women's experiences hitherto confined "deeply in shadow" is brought to light. A Naga Village is remembered and the silence on the narratives of its women is broken to voice "her story" along with history. *A Terrible Matriarchy* reflects the vision for women to take control of their destinies by believing in themselves. To liberate themselves from the belief of their inferiority due to gender bias, to equip themselves with the conviction of their selfworth, women have the task of building a network of woman-to-woman solidarity to overcome "benevolent subordination" and be agents of their collective freedom.

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34. Humtsoe-Nienu *et al.*, *op. cit.*, 189.