

The Voice of Silence in Easterine Kire's Select Fictional Art: A Feminist Reading

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Abstract

Review Article

Easterine Kire is writer hailing from a demure place called Nagaland which is located in the North-East region of India: the social system of which operates along patriarchal tenets. She takes to the medium of writing to address varied issues from peace to war and conflict to gender concerns and more. This paper is specifically premised around Kire's inclination to be a voice for the voiceless through the use of her fictional narratives, addressing a universal disquiet on gender balance which lies basic to feminist tenets. The paper outlets the ardency and genuine vehemence in Kire to exposing the rigid nature of patriarchy and the way it influences the ways of life and attitudes kneading its way into the psyche of both genders as interiorised normal part in the narrative of their lives.

Key words: Patriarchal, tenets, voice, voiceless, universal disquiet, gender, feminist, narrative.

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INTRODUCTION

Easterine Kire[1] comes from a place located in the north east part of India called Nagaland. She is undoubtedly a tall figure in the field of literature as far as Nagaland is concern. A trailblazer litterateur, she was the first Naga poet to have published individually a collection of poetry written in English entitled *Kelhoukevira* in the year 1982. In 2003, she became the first Naga writer to have brought out a novel written in English entitled *A Naga Village Remembered*. Beginning with the genre of composing poems, Easterine Kire began writing at the tender age of sixteen and enjoys a seamless progression of a fine literary career. Brimming in creativity and style, Kire displays dexterous handling of thematic variation bearing witness to her profound understanding and perception of human nature and sensibilities. Life then with all its joy and grief, and the whole gamut of emotions in between situations of life serve as her well of inspiration to creative writing. Naming a few of her prominent works are - *The Windhover Collection* a collection of poems and folktales published in 2001, *Ernie Wombat and the Water Dwellers* and *A Naga Village Remembered* published in 2003, *A Terrible Matriarchy* published in 2007, is one of her most read novels, *Naga Folktales Retold* was launched in 2009 and in 2010 she published her bestselling novel *Mari*. Easterine Kire is also the founder and partner of a publishing house, *Barkweaver*. Kire's artistic versatility

gets fine expression in her art of fine straddling with wide thematic variation. The serious writer is seen from the standpoint of an eco-feminist and a writer dwelling on issues about peace, War and Conflict to gender predicaments and with the same level of dexterity she also writes stories for children and dwells on heavenly beings in Angels. Her latest book entitled *Walking the Roadless Road* 2019 gives a comprehensive exploration on the tribes of Nagaland. In 2011 she was awarded the Nagaland Governor's medal for excellence in Naga literature. She is also a recipient of the Catalan PEN International Free Voice Award. The Government of India selected her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* to be translated into six UNESCO languages. Easterine Kire's novel *Bitter Wormwood* was nominated for the prestigious The Hindu Prize in 2013. In 2015 Kire won The Hindu Prize for Best Fiction for her novel *When the River Sleeps* 2014. Easterine Kire is exceptionally one of the finest gems of a writer Nagaland has produced.

As mentioned hitherto, Easterine touches on the theme of gender in her works especially in her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* where she weaves the firm entrenchment of patriarchal tenets kneading its way into the psyche of both genders as interiorised normal part in the narrative of their lives. The author herself being a Tenyimia (Angami Naga) befittingly uses it as the social setting which is systematised along male rule

canon in most of her novels. As Tenyimia society would have it, it makes an ideal setting for the straight reason that it is but a society founded on strict patriarchal norms where the women themselves not only perform their lives according to what is expected of them but they actually internalise patriarchal living ways as to actually become strict guardians of its tenets as is projected through *A Terrible Matriarchy* as a precise echo to Simone De Beauvoir's assertion that, "The woman herself recognises that the universe as a whole is masculine; it is men who have shaped it, ruled it and who still today dominate it; as for her, she does not consider herself responsible for it; it is understood that she is inferior and dependent; she has not learned the lessons of violence, she has never emerged as a subject in front of other members of the group; enclosed in her flesh, in her home, she grasps herself as passive opposite to these human-faced gods who set goals and standards." (Beauvoir 654) Kire's works may not be in the bracket with feminist literature per se but it certainly carries with it streaks of how, "Feminist Literature highlights and condemns the inequalities and injustices in the treatment of women –the disadvantages women have to bear on account of their gender" (Kumar 9) Channelling thoughts of traditional hypothetical notions on gender theory through her fictional works, the author airs the voice of the covert renderings of women's subjectivity wedged in the unfair discourse of gender politics.

The Naga society is unmistakably undergoing progressive waves from a pristine state of traditionalism to modernity in outlook and lifestyles save for the constancy of the fundamental notion on doing gender along traditional hypothesis which is defined within the premise of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity is defined as having power and being in control over emotional situations, in household interactions, in workplaces, and in sexual relationships. Such early thinking about the difference between women and men falls in line with the notion of essentialism. The essentialist ideas of gender men's and women's differences are a result of biology. The belief that biology is destiny and that the typical and expected masculine and psychological behavioural traits are seen as being tough, competitive, assertive, ambitious, confident, angry and even violent, successful etc as against the feminine traits expectancy of being passive and emotionally expressive, vulnerable, nurturing, supportive, dependent, cooperative, warm and accepting the subordinate status to man. These differences translated into specific character traits, distinctive thought patterns and feelings attributed specifically to each gender gets a sharp unvarnished representation through a dialogue presented in *A Terrible Matriarchy* between two female role characters Bano and Lieno as under –

"Bano said that he was angry his wife had given birth only to daughters. He wanted a boy

to carry his name. "Aren't the three girls doing that?" I asked. But Bano replied 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 clothes and look after the household. If they got married, they would always be known as somebody's wife or somebody's mother and never somebody's daughter. That way they could not carry on their father's name. I thought hard about it but could not think of anything to replace that system so I gave up" (ATM 24-25).

All it requires is a cursory reading of this dialogue between Bano and Lieno to grasp the crux of the matter that the female identity is but a shadow and that *they (women) are not considered as real members of the family* denote. With their birth, the girl child then gets subsumed into their societal system as merely obligatory to participation within the walls of domestic and marital roles. In essence, Bano echoes the novelist's core focus in exposing the visible structure of the system that makes women as flimsy and invisible.

The earliest raconteurs of the Nagas also talks about the dichotomous gender roles and identities. In *The Angami Nagas* J.H.Hutton writes of the Angami women, the people of which Easterine belongs to, that "They are chaste, faithful, merry, and unlike their brothers, never to be seen idle. Their duty it is to fetch the wood, draw the water, cook the food, and brew the liquor, besides working in the fields and weaving cloth at home." (Hutton 173) and that, "By the tenyimia proper and Chakroma she is debarred from inheriting land at all, while among the Eastern Angamis she can only inherit but is subjected to the reversion of the property to the male line on the death of her sons." (Hutton 167) Easterine Kire captures and presents reality with acute veracity that it propels the readers to a transcendence of sombre experiential actuality of her female characters in her fictional world. Kire translates the narratives of these women *A terrible Matriarchy* as somebody's wife or somebody's mother and never a person in her individual entity. In her novel *A Naga Village Remembered* women's identity is engrafted with domestic, familial and conjugal roles. Etched in Kovi's musings, a very traditional gendered picture is delineated where, "Kovi habitually rose early. Even then, as he walked outside in the morning he saw the women returning in small groups with their carrying baskets stacked with firewood. His heart warmed at the sight, Ah, the old ways are good, he thought, our women do us proud when they show themselves so eager to keep the teaching of their fathers. The women would set out before dawn to fetch firewood for the day. But if they already had firewood for their households, they could be seen fetching water in their water carriers. Smoke curling up from the houses hugging the slopes and the still dark house in the valley

signaled that the cooking of the morning meal was in progress.” (ANVR 1) As sanctioned by socially and culturally constructed gender roles, both men and women adapt as well as adopts their identity gyratory to their specific gender roles. The identity of women as portrayed by Kire rests on their familial domestic and conjugal roles whereas man’s identity is demarcated to public spheres. The woman to a man is deemed ‘good’ when she is *mild, meek, soft spoken and obedient* replicating the image of the Victorian women as *the angel in the house* (Woolf 3). Dielieno’s mother presents the supposedly ideal -angel in the house women image as she advises her daughter thusly, “men don’t like women who are aggressive and outspoken. They like wives to be good workers. You are a good worker, Lieno, but you must try to be more docile” (ATM 249).

Closely clenched in a world of domestic angst which Betty Friedan termed as a “problem that has no name” (Humm 30) in *The Feminine Mystique* where she obliterates the myth of the happy housewife, women had little or no voice of value. Easterine Kire joins in the wagon of women writers who takes to the pen as an alternative outlet to break the silence suffered by the women lot alike Virginia Woolf who through her essay *Professions for Women* avowed *killing the Angel in the house was part of the occupation of a women writer.* (Woolf 3). In line with Elaine Showalter’s promulgation of gynocriticism through her work *A Literature of their Own* [2], Easterine Kire took to the medium of writing out the theory of Showalter’s *the feminist Phase* in which women writers protested their marginalization through their writings. As decussated above, with the deeply entrenched and internalised patriarchal practices as precursors to female desolation and repression, women in Easterine Kire’s fictions are highlighted through the shadows of silence. Cultural bias tells that docility and silence are virtuous marks in women, thus reducing women to remain silent irrespective of her situation and circumstances. A close textual reading of Kire’s works like *A Naga Village Remembered*, *Life on Hold* and *A terrible Matriarchy* throws light on how meagre women’s voices are and how silence actually becomes armour of refuge for them. The angst of these character portrayals stands as symbolical figurines to a bigger problem where faultless women endure in silence at the hands of violence perpetrated by man and societal judgments. The exclusion of women’s voice in decision making bodies traditionally is amply reflected in *A Naga Village Remembered* that, “Talk at the *thehou*ⁱ often centred on what was called man’s talk. No women were allowed to come to the *thehou* or enter the male dormitories.”(ANVR 6) In an instance of different tales being shared around the *thehou* the name *thenumia*ⁱⁱ was used derogatorily where one of the speakers spat out saying, “A man is not a man if you let another man kill your kin and torch your houses and you do nothing about it. We have a name for such men –*Thenumia!*” (ANVR 7).

A shufti into a fearful wife’s heart in Peno’s character of her husband Levi’s wrath in *A Naga Village Remembered* renders an inclusive plight of many a woman. Lamenting on Peno’s plight, Kire writes, “Easily irritated by the minutest of things, Peno did not know what could cause her husband to go into a rage. Some days he would be angered by her cooking and throw his plate away angrily. On another day it could be Roko’s shoddy work on his *dao*ⁱⁱⁱ and his wife quietly bore the brunt of the anger he bore against his sons.” (ANVR 107) Peno chooses silence as she was, “wary of his immense rage.....she feared this new Levi-cold and curt.....sometimes he came back very late and she stopped waiting for him, training her body to relax and go to sleep in his absence so she would not know if he came back angry and frustrated.” (ANVR 107) A melange of emotions is seen in Peno after her husband’s demise featuring the depth of the man’s overpowering presence and influence on the woman’s psyche. Peno did feel a seething sense of release but again not without a sense of guilt. She confesses that, “I can tell you alone that I feel a treacherous sense of liberation after his death, a release from the constant tension of living with the man he had become. But how can I say such things, my son? Is it not so wrong? So disloyal?” (ANVR 117)

In yet another novel *Life on Hold*, through the main female character Nime is found a reverberation of Peno’s plight. Nime was married off against her choice and it soon became a breeding ground of endurance through hopelessness with no sign of respite and shoved at the mercy of her husband. In a moment of sheer helpless state, Nime shares her plight that, “he (Zeu, her husband) is a hard man to live with but that is my lot in life: to bear his children and endure the harshness of the things he says. If he is too cruel, I block out his words in my head. I make myself stop hearing him.” (LOH 81) A sharp representation of the silenced voices of women and their hopeless plight gets an apt summation in Nime’s reaction to her husband’s berating verbal abuse. In a resigned tone, she confesses that she could do, “Nothing, Nothing at all. I have seen him in his rages and it’s not something I want directed at me again.” (LOH 81)

CONCLUSION

Easterine Kire advances a sense of empathy for women who has little or no voice and cleverly weaves it in the form of narratives addressing a universal disquiet on gender balance which lies basic to feminist tenets. Ardent and genuine is Kire in exposing the rigid nature of patriarchy and the way it influences the ways of life and attitudes of members posited in such a society. The restraining workings of patriarchy and patrilineal practices visibly is wrought in the plot of *A Terrible Matriarchy* pulling attention to the status of women against the milieu of a strong patriarchal society. In Kire’s *Life on Hold* and *A Naga Village Remembered*,

though the main concern of these fictional works dealt with a conflict ridden land owing to the Naga National struggle, one cannot help but notice that the spontaneity in the dialogues of its characters which reveals how gender disparity is inexorably wedged into the structure of their social system. She poignantly captures the collusion of the dominating order of Patriarchy which subjugates women and registers a protest to this system through her female characters. The fictionists become the representative voice of the so called weaker section of the society.

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ⁱ Community house

ⁱⁱ Woman

ⁱⁱⁱ Naga Machete