

# Theorizing indigeneity & Indigenous Feminism Reflected in the Narratives of Easterine Kire

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## Abstract

The paper intends to explore the various aspects of indigeneity that are ingrained in the sociocultural dynamics of the Angami-Naga community. While situated among close-knit indigenous communities such as the Angami Nagas, the ideological idea of indigeneity has played a decisive role in influencing the broader discourse of feminism. Situating the ideological notion of indigeneity in the context of Northeast India has been a tough task and plagued with contestations. Yet the very idea of it has been a vital notion to theorise feminism in the context of communities native to the region. The paper will analyse the novels – *A Terrible Matriarchy* & *The Respectable Woman* written by the prolific Naga writer Easterine Kire in the above-mentioned context.

**Keywords:** *Indigeneity, Indigenous feminism, Angami Naga, Socio-cultural dynamics*

## Introduction

The notion of indigeneity has been a contested term as its definition is not fixed. The term has many variations all around the world. In Australia, the indigenous people are recognised as “aboriginals”, while in anthropology they are acknowledged as “tribes” or termed “Adivasis” by the activists of Asia. However, we can come to a comprehensive understanding by the theoretical approach of Social Anthropologist, Guenther, who opines, “Indigenous is a term applied to people – and by the people to themselves – who are engaged

in an often desperate struggle for political rights, for a land, place and space within a modern nation's economy and society" (2006, p. 17). But it gets more complicated as one tries to situate it in the context of the Northeast region of India as this part has been home to multitudes of communities, mostly heterogeneous who migrated, settled and located themselves in different parts of the region at different points of history. Since most of the communities had to go through the challenges of displacement due to harsh life on the hilly terrains, they have been particular about their territorial area and prefer to be identified by their ethnicities. All the communities have their distinct customs, cultural practices and hence at times in order to assert and be protective about their territorial, cultural rights, one community can threaten another community which ultimately leads to conflicts based on ethnicities. In such a scenario, women inhabiting the region find themselves at the disadvantage of being caught in between the hostility committed to each other in the power struggle.

Although issues of indigenous women are still under-examined and not given much importance within the larger spectrum of feminism which again is being charged with allegations of euro-centrism, it is possible to locate it within the rubric of feminism. Within the larger picture of women's subordination, issues of indigenous women fall outside of the larger narrative. But the "strategic essentialism" of being denied equal representation, and equal opportunities puts them in a situation of being related to each other, being in a position to be able to empathize with other women. Emerging as a post-colonial field of study, Indigenous feminism attempts to look at the issues of cultural identity, nationalism, and decolonization in the context of indigenous communities. As an academic field, it seeks to unravel the "collusions between colonialism and patriarchy" (Suzack, Huhndorf, Perreault & Barman, 2010, p. 1), as well as interweave gender with ethnic identity and geographical location. The changing patterns of women's position in the Indigenous communities across time are particularly challenging, especially in the contexts of changes in the societal patterns of Indigenous societies by colonization their subjugation to colonial rule as a community, interventions by colonial officials in their traditional beliefs to "civilize" them. Indigenous feminism seeks to analyze all the mentioned aspects by placing "gender" at the centre.

Indigenous communities of the northeast had the perks of being guarded by laws and constitutional provisions even before the Indian Union was granted

independence. Although, these provisions help them to continue their distinct way of life, at times they stand against the laws that are formed to protect women's rights. Emma LaRocque elucidates, "Although traditions help us to retain our identities as aboriginal people; as women, we must be circumspect in our recall of tradition. We must ask ourselves whether and to what extent tradition is liberating to us as women" (1996, p. 14). In this regard, Samir Das opines:

Women's democratic struggles are in many ways embedded in ethnicity and ethnic movements and the success of their struggle depends not so much on their ability to stand alone (for that is what seldom happens in any society) but very much on how they steer and negotiate their way through conflict between their gender identities as women and as members of some particular ethnic communities. (2013, p. 56)

Women's self-determination in Indigenous communities has been contested as well as they have been relegated to the periphery "first by patriarchal colonial law, policies, and institutions, later by Indigenous men" (Suzack, Huhndorf, Perreault & Barman, 2010, pp. 1-17), who have embraced and internalized the patriarchal colonial rules and that led to the erasure of indigenous women's rights, responsibilities and practices related to the cultural practices that go with those responsibilities.

Women from the indigenous societies have been seen as the subject of many discussions. They are seen as the "exotic other" in the discourse of post-coloniality, whereas in the larger discourse of feminism, they are constantly compared to women of privileged communities due to their supposed better situations, and in the discourse of indigenous feminism, they are seen as dispossessed from their previous better position due to infiltration of the patriarchal practices after colonization as well as attempts to bring to the fore the practices that have become established norms of the indigenous societies which play their part in subjugating women benevolently. It is a fact that women in indigenous societies have advantages, and indigenous cultures are far more liberal regarding posing impositions to their women. They are in a precarious position where their counterparts regard them as being in better situations. On the one hand, it becomes difficult for them to even realize the injustice done to them, whereas it becomes more difficult to let others (outsiders) know their precariousness.

Women in indigenous communities like Angami have undergone different stages of oppression in various stages of history. H. Vanlalhruaia opines, "...there are various levels of patriarchy such as pre-colonial tribal patriarchy, colonial, Christian missionary, and post-colonial ethnic patriarchy" (p. 20). Although he states it in the context of Mizoram, it is equally applicable to the indigenous communities of the Northeast. Nonetheless, the oppression and subordination of women remain almost same in all the forms of patriarchy. In this context, echoing the claims made by Indigenous feminists, Vanlalhruaia expounds, "Tribal patriarchy in the pre-colonial period was more flexible and adjustable than the colonial and post-colonial patriarchy" (p. 20). The standardized form of patriarchy that exists in present times among the communities of Nagaland is the result of the colonial influence that had seeped into the socio-cultural dynamics and alternated many traditional beliefs including flexibility vis-à-vis gender. Built on the ethos of cultural beliefs, indigenous societies like the Nagas had their own set of reservations regarding women's role yet their roles and contributions were acknowledged and celebrated. Albeit they were limited to the private space in that era too, there was some flexibility compared to the present rigid form of patriarchy.

The selected works have authentic women characters belonging to indigenous communities of Nagaland whose lives have been subjected to a 'softer' form of oppression due to their conventional social standing in society. Their subjection to patriarchal oppression has been way more different than other communities. There has been a complex layer of colonial history of settlers, codification of certain sects enmeshed with impacts of modernization of the traditional setup which added to women's subjugation within indigenous societies like the Nagas.

It is important to mention certain customary laws which are a set of rules that are based on the customs of indigenous communities. Therefore, they can also be defined as customs constructed along the lines of ethnic identity and "objectively verified within a particular social setting" (Customary Law and Intellectual Property System, 2013, p. 2). Nonetheless, it has been roughly understood as "non-registered law in the context of tribal society" (Pospisil, 1971, pp. 194-95). It is conflictive in nature as on the one hand, it empowers the protected indigenous communities to have autonomy, on the other end, whenever the issue of women's position within tribal communities and their reiterating demand to make changes emerge male members often cite customary laws as a shield to

refrain from making any effort to bring about positive changes. Proponents of that school of thought often argue against women's rights on ancestral property citing provisions of customary laws to maintain the status quo of women being the "other". However, there is no benefit of doubt that customary laws are an integral part of the conventional setup of indigenous communities and have been playing a vital role in upholding the traditional values of indigenous societies. Anthropologist Malinowski propounds that customary law is,

the positive law governing all the phases of tribal life, consists then of a body of binding obligations, regarded as a right by one party and acknowledged as a duty by the other, kept in force by a specific mechanism of reciprocity and publicity inherent in the structure of their society. (2014, p. 58)

With the passage of time, a series of questions have emerged in the context of customary law's flexibility, and usage within the modern times as sometimes it appears unbending to the modern norms. However, in present times, the complexity of a subtle yet strenuous tug of war between the constitutional law and customary law that govern an indigenous society has enshrouded women in a zone of make believe where they are made to believe their presumed empowered position. In this regard, Patricia Mukhim opines:

Do we enjoy a better liberal space to live our lives by our own rules? I am afraid not. Rules that govern our conduct are circumscribed by our make patriarchs much before we Were even conscious that we have to abide that clearly stated paradigm (2019, p. 9).

## **Contextualizing Indigenous Feminism in Kire's Selected Works**

Easterine Kire's selected works have authentic women characters belonging to indigenous communities of Nagaland whose lives have been subjected to a 'softer' form of oppression due to their conventional social standing in society. Their subjection to patriarchal oppression has been way more different than other communities. There has been a complex layer of colonial history of settlers, codification of certain aspects enmeshed with impacts of modernization of the traditional setup which added to women's subjugation within indigenous societies like the Nagas. Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2013) depicts a

patriarchal world, where patriarchal values have been internalized in such a manner as to give rise to a formidable matriarchal oppression. The novel also sheds light on the customary rules cum laws that add to the woes of women. The fact that “the grandmother” becomes the “terrible matriarch” that she is in the present not only because of the internalization of patriarchy but also because of the injustice done to her mother due to her not being able to bear a son. The male relatives subdued her mother citing the provisions of customary laws that bar women (not having sons) from inheriting anything after the death of their husbands. In such situations, whatever property including land the husband owned immediately goes to the immediate male relative. The grandmother had been a witness to the sufferings of her mother as a child and she learned that it is foremost to have a male member in the family to be protected from such precarity.

Kire in the introduction to *A Terrible Matriarchy* has pointed out elaborately, “The non-status of women is seen again and again. Daughters do not inherit ancestral property” (p. viii). The non-status of women in society is a common factor in pushing them to seek security and stability in the marital relationship and look out for the benevolence of male relatives. On the other hand, it unfolds the complex layers of gender oppression on three levels - social, economic, and political and ironically three generations of women are shown to bear its brunt - grandmother, mother, and Dielieno. To top it all, the grandmother herself becomes the advocate for the male-centric society as she strongly believes that it is the male heir who can give her security and earn respect for their family in society. The opening line of the novel, “My grandmother didn’t like me” (p. 1) and the grandmother’s insistence on offering the best piece of meat to her grandsons are only an indicator of how patriarchal notions are steeped into the consciousness of society that create boundaries in terms of everything where women, from their childhood, are conditioned to believe that they have to follow a certain set of societal rules to be a “good girl/ woman” in their life.

Usually, Naga society has been regarded as a classless and flexible society, but the boundaries put up by patriarchy are forcefully present and create a section of marginal class comprised of women within the rubric of classless society, and like any other marginal class, these women have been deprived of opportunities, oppressed and made to internalize those notions so that they become the carrier of the oppression themselves. Kire has aptly employed

the character of the grandmother to portray those women who become an integral part of the patriarchal ideals and eventually, that leads to subjugation of women by women themselves. In the novel, we get to see that during the process of exerting traditional values and customs, the ‘terrible matriarch’ tried to inculcate in Dielieno the ‘rules of conduct’ in order to be ‘a good wife’ in her forthcoming days. From making the protagonist stay with her (grandmother) to teach Dielieno the household chores including fetching water from the village, everything was made difficult for Dielieno as she has to fit into the image of a “good Naga wife” in the future.

Yet another novel by Kire, *A Respectable Woman* (2019) negotiates with the established order of gender in a more nuanced way. From breaking away from the irrational societal norms, being not married at the socially accepted “right age” to ending up adopting a child without being married and beyond that still standing tall, the protagonist defied the gender norms. It also unfolds the intricacies of customary laws that come into play while putting restrictions on women. The chapter titled “The Perfect Victim”, sheds light on the cultural practices that are rooted in patriarchy. The scene when the protagonist, Kevino asks questions to the family in the context of her best friend’s (Beinuo) miserable married life with Meselhou:

...what’s wrong with our culture that can allow this kind of behavior? Why should we follow a culture that allows a man to be so cruel to his wife? To which her family member replied...you heard Ato say that her brothers had the cultural right to take a woman away from a cruel husband. Sad to say, Beinuo had no brothers. But in the absence of brothers, her male cousins could have stepped and taken her away. Even her father had every right to do that. (p. 148)

This passage is a reflection of how some cultural practices in indigenous societies empower men to be the decision-makers in each and every aspect of life, whereas women have been conditioned to follow that.

### **The Prism of Indigeneity, Women & The Conclusion**

The prism of indigeneity through which the paper has sought to identify the pertinent aspects of Naga society (Angami Nagas) will always be there to put forward the idea of how an indigenous society functions and there can be

certain aspects that could give the feign impression of women's liberated status in indigenous communities like Angami. However, the mentioned hegemonic aspects of patriarchy will always be felt or reflected in indigenous societies too. The emerging literature in English of the region, in this case of Nagaland has always depicted the harsh social realities of discrimination - be it of gender, centre/periphery or the conflicts vis-à-vis various intricate aspects of the region. The selected writer has always been vocal about the socio-political realities of the state and has been a voice of many subalterns suppressed throughout years in the region. And among the marginalized ones, women's issues are the ones that find the focal position in her writings. Through her writings she paints women in the midst of crisis who find their space being violated multiple times and yet the subjugation they are made to do is often being seen in a kind/soft form. Their benevolence of subjugation is often equated with their assigned liberty of being mobile in public space. Being better and getting equal status are two different conceptual notions and cannot or should not be used synonymously.

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