

**WOMEN'S PREDICAMENT IN THE SELECT WORKS OF EASTERINE
KIRE, TEMSULA AO, INDIRA GOSWAMI AND MITRA PHUKAN:
A FEMINIST READING**

A thesis submitted to
NAGALAND UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

By

WATIMONGLA PONGENER

Ph.D. Regd. No. 510/2012 of 21.08.2012

Under the Supervision of

Dr. JANO S. LIEGISE

Associate Professor
Department of English
Nagaland University
Kohima Campus, Meriema
Kohima – 797001
2017



Nagaland University
(A Central University established by the act of Parliament, 35/1989)
Department of English
Kohima Campus, Kohima-797001

3rd May 2017

SUPERVISOR'S CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this thesis entitled **WOMEN'S PREDICAMENT IN THE SELECT WORKS OF EASTERINE KIRE, TEMSULA AO, INDIRA GOSWAMI AND MITRA PHUKAN: A FEMINIST READING** is a bonafide record of research work done by Ms Watimongla Pongener, Regn 510/2012 of 21.08.2012, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema during 2012 - 2017. Submitted to the Nagaland University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, this thesis has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma or other title and the thesis represents independent and original work on the part of the candidate under my supervision.

Ms Watimongla Pongener has completed her research work within the stipulated time.

The 3rd of May, 2017
Kohima

SUPERVISOR
Dr. Jano S. Liegise
Associate Professor
Department of English
Nagaland University
Kohima Campus, Meriema
Kohima-797001, Nagaland.

CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

I, Watimongla Pongener, hereby declare that the thesis entitled **Women's Predicament in the Select Works of Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Indira Goswami and Mitra Phukan: A Feminist Reading**, is a bonafide record of research work done by me, under the guidance and supervision of Dr Jano S. Liegise, Associate Professor, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, during the period of my research (2012-2017) and it has not been submitted, either in full or in part, to any other university or institution for the award of any degree, diploma or title.

Place: Kohima
Date :(3rd May 2017)

Watimongla Pongener
Research Scholar

Countersigned

Countersigned

Dr Rosemary Dzuvichu
Head
Department of English
Nagaland University
Kohima Campus, Meriema.

Dr Jano S. Liegise
Supervisor
Associate Professor
Department of English
Nagaland University
Kohima Campus: Meriema

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work would not have been possible without the support, advice and encouragement of those who helped bring this work to fruition.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Dr Jano S. Liegise for steering and guiding me throughout the course of this work with gentle wisdom, valuable insights and infinite patience.

I thank my colleague Dr Lanurenla of the English Department of Fazl Ali College, Mokokchung for the fruitful discussions and exchanges in the College for the last few years.

I also owe my deepest gratitude to my husband Dr Imtiwati Jamir for his constant encouragement and support.

Women who toil all their lives to ensure their families are cared and provided for, who are the rock on which the family bond is built and strengthened – among such women, one of them was my mother. I dedicate this work to the memory of my mother Rongpangdangla Imchen who made immense sacrifices in her life to ensure that her children could aspire to and realise their dreams.

Date: 3rd May 2017

Watimongla Pongener

CONTENTS

Chapter I

Feminism and the Northeast Women's predicament

Introduction	1
Works Cited	40

Chapter II

Easterine Kire: Shaping a Feminist Consciousness in a Man's World

Introduction	42
1(a) A Naga Village Remembered - History Revisited	46
1(b) Daughters of Kelhoukevira	47
1(c) Survival	57
2(a) <i>A Terrible Matriarchy</i> - Wo(e)men's Stories	62
2(b) Daughters of Patriarchy	67
2(c) Navigating the Waters	80
Works Cited	86

Chapter III

Female Strength in the Precarious World of Temsula Ao

Introduction	88
1(a) Voices from a War Zone	92
1(b) The Jungle Major's Wife	98
1(c) Khatila's Audacity	100
2(a) Soaba: Silent, Silenced Subaltern	104
2(b) Woman: Struggling in the Shadows	107
2(c) Humanity in a Time of Evil	110
3(a) Libeni and Apenyo	112
3(b) Women's Predicament in War	116
4(a) Innala's Night of Turmoil	119
4(b) Moral Lens of Society	128
5(a) Three Women	132
5(b) Personal Stories, Private Agonies	134
5(c) Bonds of Love in Maternal Kinship	144
Works Cited	148

Chapter IV

A Woman's heart: Female Protagonists of Indira Goswami

Introduction	149
1(a) Widows in a <i>Sattrā</i>	153
1(b) Women and Caste	160
2(a) Saga of Oppressed Widowhood: Durga's Miseries	162
2(b) Defeated by Her Demons	168

3(a)	Saru Gossainee: Desire and Frustration	172
3(b)	Conflict between Strisvabhava and Stridharma	176
3(c)	Religious Sanctity versus Sanctimony	180
3(d)	Shattered Dreams	183
4(a)	Giribala: The Rebel	188
4(b)	A Loveless Marriage	192
4(c)	Passion and Pains of Young Widowhood	195
4(d)	Giribala's 'Heinous' Defiance	198
4(e)	Victimization from 'Sin of Puberty'	203
5	Eliman's Calamitous Dilemma	211
6	Struggling Against Odds	218
	Works Cited	225
	Endnotes	227

Chapter V

Patterns of Predicaments: Mitra Phukan's Fictional Art

	Introduction	228
1(a)	Friction between Social Responsibility and Inner Hopes	232
1(b)	Complexity of Frustrations	239
1(c)	Women and the Curse of Childlessness	243
1(d)	A Woman's Silent Pain and Anxieties	249
1(e)	Towards Feminist Analysis of Rukmini	253
1(f)	Social Expectations versus Authentic Identity	260
2(a)	Resolving the Angst and Anxieties	268
2(b)	Getting Out of a Rut	273
2(c)	Predicament in Joy	275
2(d)	Ironies of Life and Death	285
2(e)	Denouement	293
	Works Cited	299

Chapter VI

Conclusion

	The Woman's Story Continues	300
	Works Cited	310

Select Bibliography	311
----------------------------	-----

Chapter I

Feminism and the Northeast Women's predicament

Introduction

The human race consists of men and women who have struggled, evolved and survived through millennia. In the history of humankind, man's struggle, achievements and intellectual contribution has been acknowledged and recorded consistently. The question here is - in the records of the story of the human race, where is the woman's story, the woman's history and her contribution to the advancement of her kind. In looking at the past, since antiquity right up to the contemporary situation, it is clear that the story of one half of the human race has not been adequately told. There is a marked imbalance in the representation of the story of womankind. Women in almost all civilizations, across cultures and through centuries since patriarchal times have been considered the subordinate sex from the belief that women are inferior to men. Their secondary status in relation to men under patriarchally-designed laws and structures has created for them a position that perpetuates their subjugation and oppression. Women's bodies are policed, their actions are controlled and their voices have been suppressed or in some cases kept silent under male-designed rules.

As one half of the human race, women are an integral part of human civilization yet throughout human history, the woman's place in almost all societies is not considered equal to that of men. They have been denied social powers and rights equal to that which men enjoy, denied an equal share in the benefits that development and progress have given to humankind. This begs the question - without women's

contribution, would human civilization have come this far? Why does the idea exist that women are not equal to men? Would human society or the human race have survived or been perpetuated without the involvement and contribution of womenkind?

History and reality reveal clearly that women of different races, ethnicities and cultures belonging to varying socio-economic classes share a common experience of subordination under men who in various ways have dominated, regulated, controlled, prevailed, ruled and governed society and women. Language too is permeated with male authority. Men enjoy - mastership, lordship, chieftainship or kingship; while dictatorships from the past to the present are male. Women have been victimized through this subordination. For millennia, the process of subordination has existed due to the socialization of roles of men and women along gender lines. Due to a variety of factors and forces determined by morphological and physiological differences between men and women, women are characterized as the female *sex*. Their distinct behaviours, mental and emotional characteristics, roles developed and socially constructed, distinguishes them as the female *gender*. Feminists draw a distinction between the terms *sex* and *gender*. *Sex* refers to biological differences in the reproductive organs and genes of humans which categorises them as male or female. *Gender* is considered a social and cultural construct referring to psychological, emotional and behavioural traits that differentiate and categorise the feminine from the masculine. Gender is a socially constructed, culturally specific, politically ascribed, historically changing reality.

Examining social and cultural constructs about sex and gender reveals how in almost every domain where patriarchy reigns, women is the 'Other'. From the social

ethos regarding the status and role of women, the differential socialization process of how males and females are treated and accorded status, their essential biological differences, behaviours that are labelled as feminine and masculine which differ from culture to culture, such factors among others tend to gender being socially constructed. In their historical and material reality, particularly in male-dominated cultures, women are accorded a lower status; They are regarded as innately inferior to males. From a critical examination of the socialization process, it is clear that the rules of behaviour, assumptions about differences between the sexes in personality traits, intellectual abilities and behaviour patterns are learned and internalised. Rules which are defined by sexist male prerogatives which define women's difference from male norms or values as lower, inferior or weaker, reduces women to a subordinate disempowered position and privileges men. Women and men therefore learn to present themselves according to these rules. Men and women are gendered and to be a 'real man' or a 'good woman' indicates they are expected to conform to masculine or feminine norms.

The word 'predicament' refers to a state, a situation or condition which is difficult or unpleasant, one where it is difficult to know what to do. It is, in effect, a quandary or a dilemma which one finds oneself in. Through various forms of social control borne out by history, the differential socialization process between the genders, from their greater physical strength and also emotional, mental and psychological differences, men have dominated women. With the purpose to 'protect' them but also expressly to put restrictions and exercise control over them, women have been subjected to subordination by men. Being treated as subordinate, women are subjected to discriminations. These discriminations can be in the form of control,

exploitation, humiliation, oppression and violence. Women experience discrimination when their right to food, to education, health care, employment or livelihood, their reproductive rights, their bodies and decision-making, is controlled or denied. Gender-based discrimination and gender differences in the roles and responsibilities, abilities, behaviour patterns and personality traits between men and women contribute to irregularities, putting women in a lower position, in a subordinate predicament. The women's predicament is therefore an unenviable one.

Women are regarded as the 'Weaker Sex' on the basis of which she has been socially, economically, politically and constitutionally denied full justice. From birth till death, when a woman faces discrimination, she is undervalued, is inferiorized by male-designed social mores and is denied equal rights or granted recognition as individuals or a group on par with men. Women have endured and suffered second class citizenry for ages. But women, as their history in feminism testifies, have not allowed themselves to be completely dominated or silenced. There are instances where women, aware of the injustice done to them, have challenged or questioned this injustice, inequality and oppression. This struggle for gender equity is not a new one. Women have responded in creative, intelligent, quiet or subversive ways to their historical subordination. Women's struggle for equal rights is manifested in the movement called Feminism. Feminism is a fairly recent movement that challenges prevalent social, political and cultural paradigms which subordinates women. It advocates equal rights, privileges and opportunities for women who want to improve their lives and living conditions particularly with respect to problems that are unique to them. It stands for women's struggle to overcome gender discrimination and male dominance.

The word ‘feminism’ is of fairly recent coinage coming from the French word *féminisme*. It has its origin from the Latin word ‘*femina*’ meaning woman, its original meaning in English being the “state of being feminine”. The term appeared in English only in the 1890s. The word feminism in the expanded meaning of the term, is a socio-political movement aimed at defining, establishing and defending equality of rights, status and power for women. Feminism, however, is not only about equal rights for women. It is a continual struggle and quest for social justice; it is an ongoing critical project which protests legal, economic, social and political restrictions on the basic rights of women. It seeks to overcome the inequities and injustices that women throughout history, in all civilizations have endured for millennia. Margaret Walters in *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* says: “Over the centuries, and in many different countries, women have spoken out for their sex, and articulated in different ways, their complaints, their needs and their hopes” (2). While not necessarily describing themselves as feminists, many women have been deeply engaged in working for women's rights. The unequal power structures between men and women gave rise to feminism and feminists, both men and women, questioning this inequality and championing the political and social rights for women, for gender, class and racial equality and advocating women's political emancipation, equal opportunities in education and employment. The demands include salary equity and control over one's sexuality and reproduction. With time, feminism has evolved and broadened in its political scope by the influence of progressive left wing beliefs. This has led feminists to challenge sexism and the capitalist system which is said to encourage and perpetuate patriarchy. It must be made clear that feminism is not ‘anti-men’ but against female oppression, against misogyny and works for women's

emancipation from various forms of suppression and subordination.

Though feminism is thought of as a phenomenon of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the principles of feminism were articulated a few centuries ago. During the Renaissance, the revival of learning and the Enlightenment had a wide influence on women and men whose writings reflect an ongoing discourse on misogyny and male dominance. Their arguments called for an improvement of the female condition and demand for a public voice for women to speak on behalf of their sex. These early voices and struggles gave rise to women's increased consciousness about their rights, liberties and status. It is those women who spoke out in support of their sex, who articulated in their writings, their protests, their actions and beliefs, the needs and aspirations of women, who laid a feminist ground work for later generations to carry on the movement for women's rights. Thus, with greater awareness of their rights, feminism evolved from mid-nineteenth century demands for women's suffrage or voting rights and liberty in the first wave of feminism to ideas and actions for women's emancipation which grew into the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s. The second wave of feminism campaigned for women's legal and social equality in education, the workplace and at home. The third wave, beginning in the 1990s, is a continuation of the struggles of the first and second wave and has expanded the sphere of influence by bringing attention to the differences among women due to race, ethnicity, class, nationality and religion and lays emphasis on 'identity' as a site of gender struggle.

As a philosophy, an ideology or doctrine, the central tenets of feminism has come to refer to a system of ideas that determine how women conceive of themselves, how women experience culture, how they examine and affirm the value

of women, how they raise consciousness to remove barriers to women's freedom from discrimination, injustice, oppression and male dominance. Some of the pioneering feminist ideas, politics and critiques originated from Western Europe and North America where capitalism, industrialisation, democratic and socialist theories and critiques challenged the thinking of men and women. From this intellectual ferment emerged some distinct voices who courageously and outspokenly criticised attacks on women by male writers and defended womenkind. Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* in 1399 presents a dream vision, a feminist utopia and questioned the misogyny of her time. A few centuries later, the ideals of the French Revolution would inspire Olympe de Gouges, a French activist, feminist and playwright to come out with her *Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen* in 1791. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft in England wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a powerful treatise calling for the education of women to improve their lot, to have a voice and demanding justice for one half of the human race. The backlash on the two eighteenth century pioneering feminists brought outrage, vilification and scorn so severe that Olympe de Gouges was tried, found guilty of treason and executed in 1793. Mary Wollstonecraft was even branded a "hyena in petticoats" and a "philosophical wanton".

Women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges paved the way for other women to write, speak and actively work towards the upliftment of women, to free women from various forms of oppression. From the pioneering works of the early feminists grew what is today a wide, expanding, evolving field of feminist thought that examines and explores from a multiplicity of philosophical approaches the concept of gender and the meaning of sexual difference. It explores the origins of

women's oppression, the concept of patriarchy, the arrangement of gender roles and interrogates the reason for women's relative powerlessness. The historical subordination and exploitation of women, the recognition of injustices to women makes any definition of feminism difficult. Aspects of female experience from the personal, the political and philosophical stances which evolves with ever-expanding thought creates for feminism its dynamic, constantly changing ideology.

Examining the works of western feminist theorists and critics from their long tradition of addressing the concerns of women as producers, consumers and subjects of literary texts, on the reception, circulation and the effects of culture from the point of view of gender, it is clear that much of their work dwells on the specificity of female experience, of subordination, denial of rights, voice and agency. However, the feminist insights and cultural perspectives drawn from African American and post-colonial feminist critics has added a richness and depth to the analysis and criticism of newer feminist approaches. Some of the most prominent 20th century feminist writers and critics Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, Kate Millet, Barbara Christian, bell hooks and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have addressed concerns on women's situation and predicament raising questions that echo the ones Gilbert and Gubar raise in their introduction to *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism*: "How does one become a woman? Why are women subordinated to men in most known cultures? How prevalent has women's oppression been? What forms does it take and what are its societal or cultural consequences? What can be done about it?" (293).

The present thesis attempts to find the answers to questions on the reasons for women's predicament, to critically examine how the major tenets of feminism

operate in the works of the chosen writers and in the selected literary texts. The theoretical frameworks advanced by Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Kate Millet, Sheryl Ortner, Gayle Rubin, bell hooks and Alice Walker in their literary and cultural perspectives and those of post-colonial critics Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak with Indian feminist Jasbir Jain and Northeast Indian literateur Tilottoma Misra's contributions will be considered to map the design of their feminist ideologies. Drawing insights from these three perspectives will help contextualize how a woman's consciousness and identity is constantly reconstructed in relation to the men and how they contribute to women's subordinate predicament in the works of the chosen writers.

The assumptions adopted herein are two fold:

- (a) The Naga, Assamese woman as a gendered class, and the position she occupies as *subject* in the construction of narratives of contemporary Northeast Indian society.
- (b) The subordination, marginality and 'voicelessness' of the Naga and Assamese woman in a socio-cultural, politico-historical paradigm governed by a predominantly patriarchal ideology is responsible for the woman's predicament.

The Northeast region of India, like the rest of the nation, has been a former British colony. Despite independence, the influences of British culture and the proselytizing by American missionaries in the Northeastern region left a lasting legacy in the form of the English language and the Christian religion particularly on the Naga people. In the state of Assam, the Vaishnavite culture, the Vaishnava form of Hinduism predominates in harmony with other religions like Islam, Christianity,

Buddhism and Sikhism. The socio-religious landscape of Assam has been coloured by the Bhakti movement under Srimanta Sankardeva, a fifteenth century Saint. The Northeast region of India, particularly Assam with its confluence of ethnic communities and religion, has a rich syncretic culture. Nagaland is a mixture of many distinct tribes with Christianity as the dominant religion. The governing principle for any feminist approach would be to negotiate the identity of women belonging to two very different cultures at the intersecting lines of tribal and Christian on the one hand and non-tribal and Hindu on the other. As someone from the region with a deep understanding and empathy for the concerns, hopes and aspirations of its people, Sanjoy Hazarika says:

Ethnic coalitions, oral traditions and lifestyles based on respect for nature have mattered more in these regions than frontiers. Here men and women, with common origins but different nationalities, share a racial, historic and anthropological and linguistic kinship with each other that is more vital than their links with the mainstream political centres. . . India's Northeast is a misshapen strip of land linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor which is referred to as the Chicken's Neck. The region has been the battleground for generations of sub-national identities confronting insensitive nation-states and their bureaucracies as well as of internecine strife. It is a battle that continues, of ideas and arms, new concepts and old traditions, power, bitterness and compassion. (*x/v*)

As feminist movements from the 1960s in the west gained momentum postcolonial feminists brought attention to the gender oppression of women within non-western cultures and societies. Having strong ties and overlaps with black

feminism, both groups respond to racism and critique patriarchal practices, the role of the family and the use of customary laws and religious doctrines in controlling, subordinating and oppressing women. Theoretical insights gained from these multiple strands of feminism have expanded and developed studies on women's roles within their particular social, communal and traditional practices which contributes to the shaping of their individual, racial or ethnic identities and thus to their condition.

The ideas and actions of feminist critics and writers from the second wave and third wave feminism provide important material for critiquing contemporary Northeast women's writing in English. This period is marked by the work of the influential French writer Simone de Beauvoir who broadened the scope of feminist explorations of women's experience. Her book *The Second Sex* (1949) allowed women to examine their situation which since patriarchal times, has been secondary in relation to men. Second wave debates on a wide range of issues regarding family, sexuality, marriage and reproductive rights and official legal inequalities took the feminist agenda further to free women from patriarchal control and allowed greater freedom over their own bodies and an identity of their own. The Women's Liberation movement which grew out of the Civil Rights Movement in America saw Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and the National Organisation for Women (NOW) founded by her in 1966 play a crucial role in awakening women and men with insights into the subordinate position of women. The theoretical insights and approaches formulated by feminist critics and writers during a period of heightened political activism and movements can still be applied to analyse issues

relevant to women's experiences and examine the predicament and position of women in contemporary Northeast Indian society.

While western feminism opened the door for women to progress, to raise consciousness about women's individual problems and experiences and work towards improving their position, feminists in India like their feminist counterparts around the globe were also seeking and striving for gender equality. Women in the emerging post-colonial country faced their own culture-specific challenges within a deeply patriarchal society. Women living in modern India faced their own set of problems and issues. While the United Nations in 1945 issued a Declaration of Human Rights which granted equal rights to men and women and feminist ideas supporting equality for women raised questions about male domination and patriarchal control, in India women faced a set of issues that differed from western feminism. The diverse historical and social culture of India, the variety of traditional values and practices and the heterogeneity of Indian culture makes for multiple feminisms. Demands for education and equal rights and appeals for abolition of *Sati* or widow immolation, the custom of child-marriage, female infanticide and foeticide, for protection of women from dowry-related deaths, the disfiguring of widows, promoting women's education, demands for land rights, to own property, these diverse issues gave feminism an Indian character of its own. However, the universality of human rights and the appeal for upliftment of women's status in India gave feminists a set of concerns that addressed their subordinate status and the multiple discriminations suffered by women particularly those based on caste.

Women writers from Northeast India unlike their counterparts in the country, find a different set of problems. As women in the west progressed and Indian

feminists worked towards recognising and removing inequalities between the sexes, the disparities within power structures such as caste, class, language, religion, tribe and region; the Northeast region witnessed its own movements. Unfortunately not towards women's emancipation but towards women's deeper subordination under militarized conditions.

The regional geopolitics, the diversity of ethnicities, cultures and histories make the Northeastern part of the country a mini-India. Women in the Northeast of India situated as they are in a far-flung region, exist in a world which has witnessed turbulence, prolonged violence and bloodshed. The ethnically diverse, heterogeneous socio-cultural history, the unstable political climate and pervasive lack of development makes it a place where the woman's predicament can be painful, tragic and uncertain. Living as they do under the constant gaze of the security forces to ensure security, ironically instead, women in the region face threats to their security and freedom with militarism on the one hand, particularly with the imposition of the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and traditional patriarchal control on the other. Between these two repressive forces, a host of other socio-economic, political, religious and cultural factors contribute to disempowering women, creating conditions that affect women's daily existence.

Women in this part of the world are exoticized and stereotyped in the general Indian consciousness. They are seen as having greater social freedoms or privileges as compared to their more conservative counterparts in other parts of the country. For this seeming freedom, they are considered morally loose or easily 'available' by prejudiced and ignorant countrymen from other states. What seems on the outside is different from the unseen reality. The reality in the ethnically diverse tribal and non-

tribal societies in the Northeast is the deep-rooted, male-dominated social customs and cultures which suppress its women. While superficially, women are seen to have greater liberties in the choice of attire, food, mobility or entertainment, the truth is that women's subordinate position under an entrenched patriarchy has not changed for generations. While education has brought some enlightenment, men cling to their bastions of patriarchal power and privilege keeping women particularly in the case of Naga tribal society, excluded from decision-making bodies in the all-male village-governing bodies, the State Legislative Assembly, in the Hohos, the apex body in Naga society, and even in the Church.

The unstable political climate in the region, the unrest and insurgencies which have troubled the Northeast for decades, have left its women with concerns more for their day-to-day survival. While the political battles raged on in the hills and jungles of Nagaland and Assam, the writers did not remain silent. People's safety and survival at risk, men and women's bodies maimed and tortured, many writers poured the trauma of the Northeast into their poems, stories and novels. Northeast Indian writers engage with issues of marginalisation, insurgency, underdevelopment and corruption to name a few. Pramod K. Nayar critically points out: "The Northeastern states remain marginal to 'mainstream' India. Underdevelopment, militancy, cross border refugee and smuggling problems, tribals who never figure in public debates - the Northeast is the silence at the heart of India" (102).

Naga writers like Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao write about their people's trauma and underwritten in their narratives is the women's narrative, the woman's voice that speaks about her marginalisation, her silencing, her pain and suffering and her subordinate status within a tribal male-dominated society. Women from within

their tribes and communities continually struggle for space. They exist under the hegemonic control of their menfolk. What the four chosen writers do in their writings is address this unequal treatment of women from a woman's perspective, giving sharp critiques of the multiple denials women experience and delineate the ways women are suppressed, their labour and intelligence unacknowledged or unappreciated. In addressing these themes and exposing the subordination of women, the inferior role they are given and the way this becomes a part and parcel of women's predicament in their daily existence, the writers reflect feminist ideas in their works when their characters resist or try to subvert their oppression. In examining their works, it is clear that they write with empathy, with a keen awareness of the material reality of women whose lives in the past to the present is one of a long saga of living under various discriminations under male domination.

Feminist ideology and praxis for scholarly research in women's literature is an ongoing project. In the aesthetics of Northeast Indian women writers and the dialectics of women's rights activists who address, engage and study the problem of women's subordination, the quest for answers to the state of women continues. In their lives, women encounter the complexities, the existential challenges of surviving in a world where they have to define their roles as girls, mothers, wives, widows, daughters, daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law on the one hand and as women who are contributing as home-makers, farm workers, earning as professionals, teachers, artists in villages or towns. Their stories and novels draw attention to women and their condition. A careful reading of their writings reveals a continuous woman's story where women are trying to negotiate a space for themselves, trying to ensure

through action, in words or in silence to have more say, in matters that impact them directly.

The Northeast region is a hotbed of political unrest, ethnic conflicts, violent insurgencies and counter insurgencies. All too often, in the unrest, in the instability and the climate of fear and violence that prevails, the woman is put in a dangerous predicament. She finds herself in a quandary and is often trapped in a situation which can prove devastating or fatal or both. The states of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur have seen decades of violence. The region is seen as a conflict zone. In her personal interaction with people in the Northeast and with reference to Nagaland, Preeti Gill, in the introduction to her edited volume *The Peripheral Centre* (2010) says, “I met many people whose ordinary, everyday lives had been changed irrevocably by what had happened in the state ... Each family in Nagaland has a story to tell, of personal loss, of bereavement, of physical and emotional trauma... Many of these are stories that the world outside does not know, has not heard, that have been silenced and marginalised” (6-7).

The painful, traumatic events of the past, the tragedies, the angst, agonies and dilemmas of women who inhabit the strife-torn hills and valleys, who are at a crossroads of age-old traditions and new age modernity, find a voice in the pages of the four writers. The experiences of ordinary people, their own experiences, have provided them with a motherlode of material for their poems, stories and novels. With the multiplicity of challenges that women encounter socially, economically and politically, the four writers redefine women's roles, pay attention to the predicament of women and embody in their stories a 'politics of resistance' which works towards social justice, upliftment and empowerment of women.

To understand the lower position of women, it is helpful to refer to the history of feminist critical thought. Examining and exploring from the works of the early writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet, later feminist critics would expand and built on their insights developing and adding to the ever-growing body of feminist scholarship on issues related to the female sex, gender, body and identity . Mary Wollstonecraft is considered one of the first women writers whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* can be considered as a feminist manifesto which rejected the long-held view that women are naturally inferior or weaker to men. She attacked the system of education at the time which she felt, kept women in ignorance under the name of “innocence”. The unequal nature of gender relations in her opinion was because the lack of education kept women in an inferior position and to change their status and role, she argued, women should acquire an education. Wollstonecraft is one of the first major feminist voices to speak for women's emancipation and greater rights.

It is Simone de Beauvoir who is credited with presenting a comprehensive well-researched scholarly work on the historical and contemporary situation of women in western culture. In The *Second Sex*, she asks the question, What is a woman? The truth, she says, is in the distinction of the terms masculine and feminine:

A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality, the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents the positive and the neutral, as is

indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (15)

Women have historically been considered female by virtue of a certain *lack*. A woman is an 'imperfect man' which is why "humanity is male and man defines women not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (16). She appears as a sexual being to the male hence for him she is sex - absolute sex, which is why Beauvoir says:

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.

The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality - that of the Self and the Other. (*ibid*)

Women are defined and situated as the Other whereas men are the One or the norm. She is seen as the Object and never the Subject. It is this distinction between men and women from cultural myths to social standards and life situations of women that she remains in a secondary position to man. Beauvoir adds, it is also because "Woman herself recognises that the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it and still dominate it today are men" (609). Women are forced by social tradition to view the world, to make their choices from their secondary or inferior position. They are deprived of human dignity and intellectual equality with men. The various forms of restrictions and social injustice thus keeps them oppressed.

The social arrangement of relationship between the sexes exposes the patriarchal nature which can be termed as fundamentally political. The aim of feminist enquiries lies in exposing the mechanisms in society upon which patriarchy rests and is maintained from women's historical status, biological sex, her socially constructed gendered position. In Kate Millet's theory of "sexual politics" the term "politics" refers to "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (23). The female characters in the literary texts under study belong to a world where the operative word "control" has a bearing on their lived predicament. They are subordinated to men in a patriarchal system which views women and identifies them from their biological functions with less importance being paid to their intellectual abilities. Women's and men's roles are clearly defined. In almost all major structures of power, socially, culturally, materially and psychologically, the male role is considered superior to that of the female.

In most known cultures, women are subordinated to men. In Sheryl Ortner's study, cultural evaluations of the universality of female subordination stems from the roles, the tasks, the products and the social milieu of women being accorded less prestige than that accorded to men. The female body and the natural procreative functions are specific to women alone. Ortner argues:

Because of women's greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than man is. Yet in part, because of her consciousness and participation in human social dialogue, She is recognised as a participant in culture. Thus

she appears as something intermediate between culture and nature, lower on the scale of transcendence than man. (358)

Woman is seen thus to occupy an intermediate position between culture and nature. This middle situation of women in her physical, social and psychological aspects contributes to a devalued view of women. Human society expects men and women to think, live and behave in certain particular ways. They belong to and are parts of systems of thought and action which men and women have constructed over centuries and which categorises them as male and female with masculine and feminine attributes. The idea and meaning of what it is to be male or female has been influenced by factors such as time and place and geography and history. In her essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex”, Gayle Rubin delves into the political implications of the sex/gender system and holds the view that:

The realm of human sex, gender and procreation has been subjected to, and changed by, relentless social activity for millennia. Sex as we know it - gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childbirth - is itself a social product. (394)

Any society has some systematic way to deal with sex and gender and in theory such a system maybe “sexually egalitarian” or as in most known cases “gender stratified”. Rubin stresses: “But it is important. . . to maintain a distinction between the human capacity and necessity to create a sexual world, and the empirically oppressive ways in which sexual worlds have been organised” (395).

These concepts and approaches point out how, by virtue of her body and its functions, the social process of sex and gender arrangement allows women to be subordinated to men. This process takes time and once it becomes a regular pattern, women's subordination becomes systemic and systematic from particular environmental, cultural, social, religious and economic circumstances. In the texts of Northeast Indian women writers, male authority and female subordination is brought out as an everyday accepted reality for women. By their identity as the female sex species and their gender status, the patriarchal nature of Naga tribal society and Assamese Brahmin society situate women in a position of lesser value to men.

Women's function in reproduction, her traditionally defined subordinate role, the belief in women's innate inferiority to men, the prescriptions of appropriate feminine behaviour for women, the home, the domestic world as their proper sphere, these factors are instrumental in placing women in a lower position depriving them of power equal to men. In Naga society, male rhetoric claims to accord a high status to women but the irony of this is that no matter how high a woman's status is, she cannot voice an opinion or speak out in public in male-only decision-making bodies. She is in effect rendered a mute, voiceless entity who has no representation in crucial matters of a political nature which affect her. This arrangement of power-relationships between the sexes is an unequal one. As Kate Millet points out: "For it is precisely because certain groups have no representation in a number of recognised political structures that their position tends to be so stable, their oppression so continuous" (24). The system of sexual relationship between the sexes throughout history to the present is one of male dominance and female subordination. Millet asserts that, "Sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive

ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power” (25). This power is the power of patriarchy which in every avenue of power within society is in male hands.

In its simplest definition, patriarchy means “The rule of the father for the eldest male member over his family”. In her book *Patriarchy*, V Geetha gives a definition of patriarchy:

Patriarchy rests on defined notions of masculine and feminine, is held in place by sexual and property arrangements that privilege men's choices, desire and interests over and above those of the women in their lives and is sustained by social relationships and cultural practices which celebrate heterosexuality, female fertility and motherhood on the one hand and valorise female subordination to masculine authority and vitality on the other. (8)

Patriarchy allows men power and male hegemony over females in both Naga tribal society and Assamese Brahmin society. These are two completely different societies. One is tribal and follows Christianity as its dominant religion while the other is non-tribal and follows the Hindu religion. In both these societies, in spite of the vast differences in their social, cultural and traditional customary practices, a common feature that marks the societies is the dominance given to male members of the family, particularly the patriarch. In Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the grandmother is the matriarch in her large household and she wields considerable authority and influence over her family but she is a subscriber to patriarchal authority where boys and men are given preference over girls and women. Her protagonist

Dielieno suffers discrimination at the hands of the matriarch who favoured boys to girls.

In Temsula Ao's stories, the women are aware they occupy a lower position to the men. A woman can possess intelligence and ability, she can perform menial, laborious tasks as well as the male, she is the bulwark in her household who holds the family together but when decisions are made that will impact her individual self, her children and her family directly, she is not allowed to speak in the male-only village councils. The woman is given no political voice, it is appropriated by men who make the decisions. The story "The Night" brings out a woman's victimization at the hands of men who sexually exploit her. When the child is born, the customary practice is for the biological father to name the child thus recognising and acknowledging the paternity of the child. When a man refuses to give the child a name, the child is rendered a 'child of the streets', an euphemism for illegitimate children. Imnala's predicament is one where she is doubly victimized when she is hauled before a village council because her lover's wife accuses her of trying to break the family. The husband's guilt does not seem to be addressed and the adulterer having exploited a young girl's gullibility, gets away with the infidelity he has committed. In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Indira Goswami portrays the female figure oppressed by widowhood and cruel religious and social practices which destroy the body and mind under Hindu patriarchal traditions. Mitra Phukan's protagonist is a woman negotiating her identity as a childless married woman who is unfulfilled and frustrated. These various female characters are situated and placed in various predicaments that illustrate the ways women, from a girl child, to young women, to married women, mothers, grandmothers and widows, to daughters-in-law,

mothers-in-law or as aunts, experience discrimination, prejudice and oppression. Female figures from childhood, girlhood, womanhood, wifedom and widowhood toil and labour in an androcentric world.

The writers face the challenge of presenting their works as authentic commentaries of the Naga and the Assamese women's predicament. The writers themselves have overcome pain and suffering in their personal lives. The characters they create, each from her individual predicament represent facets of how culture and society undervalues women, denies and deprives women from material benefits, emotional and psychological support, to having a voice of their own. Women face these multiple denials and discriminations yet they do not allow these to hinder or impede their growth. The widows who try to exist under harsh and cruel privations is a pathetic picture of how man-made laws and rules are designed to make women suffer in the name of upholding religious codes. Women's predicament under the structures of culture, tradition and religion becomes a zone of conflict. The individual characters placed in their particular predicament find themselves having to negotiate through a thicket of restrictions and rules designed for women to keep them in their traditional secondary role. The female sex, the female gender, the qualities of femininity which distinguishes and differentiates them from the male are socially, culturally and politically constructed identities and roles which ascribes and invests women with various, attributes, values and images that circulate in society and have a bearing in shaping and determining a person's outlook and attitude to life.

Women exist in these artificial constructs where they are expected to conform to some prescribed role, where their consciousness is ideologically constructed and where they are positioned to see themselves as 'subjects' to assume a particular

identity. Women by submitting to the sex and gender norms constructed for them, become instruments in their own subordination and subjection. They are socialized into accepting their oppression which traps them in a position of marginality.

From this position of marginality, being deprived of voice to articulate their pain, the women become doubly oppressed. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” uncovers the hegemonic practices of the privileged to speak for the Other, the Subaltern who remains on the margins. Women who are often the marginalised, suffer but their pain is less heard than men. The woman is a Subaltern subject who is unable to voice herself. As Spivak mentions: “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (82-83).

bell hooks in her *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (1984) states emphatically that: “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (xvi). She argues that women:

who are victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically and spiritually - women who are powerless to change their condition in life. They are the silent majority. A mark of their victimization is that they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organised protest, without collective anger or rage. (1)

She was critical of the feminist movement for ignoring race and class issues and the deep inequalities in American society which white, middle-class feminists ignored. hooks points out that as a group, black women often occupy an unusual position - at the bottom of the social hierarchy. “Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist and classist oppression” (16). White feminists strive to

liberate women but continue to uphold racism which undermines the feminist struggle. On the other hand, black men are victimized by racism but perpetuate sexism against black women. Black women are the victims of double oppression - of racism on the basis of their skin colour and sexism on account of gender. Black women's lived experience shapes their consciousness in a way that shapes the world view differently from those who have a degree of privilege. hooks believes:

It is essential for continuous feminist struggle that black women recognise the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony. (*ibid*)

The situation of the female in Naga society is of a silent/silenced group who have no political platform or voice in public, political discourse. Tamsula Ao in her essay "Articulate and Inarticulate Exclusion" refers to some form of rationalization in introducing and implementing the practice of exclusions. Women on account of their gender are excluded from centres of power, a situation common to most of the Naga tribes. In Ao Naga society, she observes, the process of exclusion begins with lineage which is always traced to the male. The names given to females belong to the clan and not the woman. Certain clans are marriageable and some are not.

When she marries and dies, a woman's name is given back or taken back by her clan. Her children adopt the father's name and will belong to his clan. Under customary laws, women cannot inherit ancestral land. When a woman becomes widowed, the house of her husband is inherited by the eldest son and if there is no son, the house or property goes to the nearest male relative. On the matter of garments, Tamsula Ao says, "The distinction between men's and women's garments

is also fraught with telling semantic interpretations of the woman's inferiority" (97). Women are prohibited to wear the warrior's shawl woven by them and for a man, to touch or wear a woman's shawl or skirt is a matter of great shame as it signifies his emasculation. But the most telling exclusion and the most significant of all is women are debarred from participating in any general assembly of the village. They are not allowed to sit in the village council where all decisions are made by men. What is surprising is that this custom has continued without being challenged.

From among all the factors that contribute to women's exclusion, the absence of women in village councils is the exclusion of women's voice. Without representation, she is voiceless. This imbalance of power gives men the advantage. What Tamsula Ao is critical about is how women themselves have bought into this arrangement. They are protected from physical abuse/domestic abuse by their clansmen. They have been raised with an acquiescent attitude towards their men and appear content in their passive identities. Any effort to remove these exclusionary practices will have to begin from the base: the village polity. According to Tamsula Ao, "In a society where the indoctrination of women in this discriminating culture has been so complete, this is indeed a Herculean task" (99).

What is drawn from this evaluation is that over and above the cultural practices and customary laws, the psyche of both men and women contribute to women remaining powerless. Outwardly, as women are not subjected to physical forms of abuse, the notion of their enjoying a fairly high status is mistakenly perpetuated. A closer examination of the devolution of structures of power and authority reveals the women's status as one without voice or power. Women have been so thoroughly conditioned through the centuries into accepting traditional

gender roles they have become socially programmed to not see the way they are kept powerless. From Temsula Ao's observation:

The very strength of the network of bonding forged through clan affiliation only perpetuates women's inferior status in Ao society. Men's long-held conviction of this and women's conciliatory stance in order to survive in society are so pervasive, barring a cataclysmic natural event or a historic social upheaval, the exclusionary practices against women may continue for another millennium! (100)

Women in Northeast India are caught between two patriarchal entities - the armed groups, both state and non-state and their male-dominated societies. One view of tribal women is their superficial, western-influenced liberated image. With their tradition-bound counterparts, they present two faces of women. On the strength of the modern face, there is a false perception that Naga women are emancipated since they enjoy the protection of their men and are treated with respect. On this ground, male bodies question what do women need more? But this liberated image is an illusion. Women's movements has not translated into advancement of rights for Naga women who till today have no political voice and are denied inheritance of ancestral land. Women from within their tribes and communities continually negotiate for space within their male-dominated political and social structures. On the other hand, non-tribal women have not faced barriers towards political representation but their socio-economic, religious mores keeps them moored to male-designed laws.

It is pertinent in the light of the struggles of women of Northeast India to concur with bell hooks' stand:

Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men, It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. Most importantly, feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into.

(28)

One of the tasks at hand is to define a feminism which specifically addresses the concerns of women located within local cultures and traditions. On this front, women writers have offered insights to debate on the issues, position and scope of feminism for Naga and Assamese women. Like women the world over, women in the Northeast region also have concerns specific to their situation and condition. While feminism has made great advancements for women in the west, in the Northeast states like Nagaland and Assam witnessed decades of violence in the second half of the twentieth century. This period in the history of the region was occupied with suppressing various conflicts and insurgencies, with unstable political governments grappling with the violence. Women's concerns have not been given the attention it deserves. The women have been struggling and suffering along with their men. They have formed action groups to protest human rights violations and are involved in tackling drug addiction and alcoholism. Women's groups have been successful in their efforts to tackle these problems. Their efforts without using the term feminism is coloured by feminist and humanist impulses. From their decades of campaigning to support the rights of all, to address women's safety from sexual violence, harassment, gender discrimination and sex trafficking, these women's groups can be described as carrying the feminist agenda forward.

Northeast women writers in writing women's stories redefine tradition. They address the literary history of the region, they question and confront the ways women are erased or written out of history. For women writers, writing can be a mode of resistance against particular or various historical conditions. They construct the identity of Naga and Assamese women by retrieving their lost and silenced narratives from a past that is inaccessible and in recording the personal narratives of women, they inscribe the women into an agentive position in history. Writers like Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Indira Goswami and Mitra Phukan enable the reconstruction of women's history connecting texts and bridging the gaps in their silenced narratives by representing and re-presenting women. In the environment of the Northeast, a region that remains marginal to the mother country, the woman's position is further marginalised. Women writers have taken to writing as a medium to articulate the hardships, the sufferings of men and women within their society.

Fiction by women, fiction that incorporates feminist ideals and a feminist reading opens the door for a better understanding of the woman's predicament. The writings by women written from a feminist paradigm presents multiple aspects of women's situation, experience and identity. A clearer picture of women's experiential reality from their position in their society can be drawn from women's writing. The literary space offers liberty to writers to create situations and conditions that reflect the reality of the lives of women and offer insights to solutions that are acceptable to both men and women in the context in which they are drawn. Their writings bring out the male prerogative in society where females experience various denials and struggle against odds to build an identity of their own. The world created by the four chosen writers portray in their writing the social and cultural climate of a patriarchal

world. In *Recasting Women*, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid say that many questions remain about “the nature of the social and cultural process within civil society which determines the working of patriarchies in the daily lives of women” (1). In looking at women’s lives in a feminist light which they call “feminist historiography”, they mean a historiography that:

acknowledges that each aspect of reality is gendered. . . A feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women as something to be *framed* by context, . . . to think of gender difference as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations. (3)

Such investigations into the changing position of women and rewritings of history can be approached by looking at “materially specific studies of patriarchal practices, social regulation and cultural production” (2). This should pay attention to the “regional, class and caste variation of patriarchal practices and their diverse histories” (1).

The writings by women of diverse cultures creates a literary tradition that values the experiences of and stories about women. The well known names in Indian English literature – Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande, Uma Vasudev, Gita Hariharan, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur, Shoba De, to name a few are a major force in women writing. The suppression of women, the denial of rights and privileges, the lack of individual identity, discrimination against females and women’s secondary position in patriarchal structures are some of the concerns

addressed by women writers. S. Prasanna Sree in her essay “An Introduction to Women and Women Writing in English” points out:

Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment in Indian English literature. The struggle to establish one’s identity and to assert one’s individuality has led the women to wage a desperate fight against the existing social order of the day. It is therefore, imperative for women to determine their new role and to redefine its parameters. The portrayal of women in literature helps them to do so as it provides them with role models drawn from the suffering of the women characters, harassed under the chauvinistic male domination. Their thematic concerns and ideological preoccupations paved the way to establish the synchronic and diachronic developments and continuity in the construction of the subjectivity of women. The similarities and dissimilarities in the writer’s perceptions of the selfhood of women, given their different socio-cultural milieu, suggest a continuum of different possible responses. (137)

The portrayal of women, the construction of female subjects, characters and identity presents a challenge to feminist scholars who attempt to speak on behalf of the Northeast woman. Tilottoma Misra in “Feminist Scholarship in North-East India: Retrieving and Reconstructing the Woman” talks of how the “voices of the women can be heard in . . . texts by women” (26). In her opinion, the two categories “north-east” and “woman” requires unpacking as each category carries with it innumerable ethnic linguistic and cultural dimensions. Women situated within a heterogeneity of communities are in the process of constructing a “cross-cultural platform” (*ibid*). Misra is critical of the multiple erasures that feminist scholarship uncovers from the

erasure of the whole of the 'North-East' in 'mainstream' Indian writings to the larger erasure of its women. One of the reasons for the absence/silence of women from the peripheral areas in the discipline of women's studies is that the 'North-east' woman does not conform to the stereotypical image of the Indian woman nor does she fit into the structure framed by feminists. It is the task of feminist scholars in Misra's view to "analyse the language, imagery, metaphors, myths and the perception of inner space in . . . texts in order to understand the emerging trends in women's literature of this region" (29).

From the themes, the portrayal of characters in recent fiction by women writers, they question women's position within multi-ethnic societies, challenge the traditional roles for women and attempt at reconstructing the Naga woman and Assamese woman's identities. To examine the way women's writing reflects the social changes of their time, it is helpful to refer to Elaine Showalter's book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) where she identifies three phases of British women's literary development. The first is the *Feminine* phase (1840-80), a phase of imitation when women writers imitated the dominant traditions without challenging the domestic position of women within society. The *Feminist* phase (1880-1920), a protest phase when women writers demanded autonomy and advocated for their rights. The third, the *Female* phase (1920 – present) is marked as a phase of self-discovery by women and rediscovery of women's texts. Feminist scholarship being a fairly new field in Northeast writing, the three phases overlap and can appear in a single author. Easterine Kire's characters can be said to fall under the three phases. They are portrayed in roles subordinate to men. When they realise their subordination, they skilfully negotiate their way to obtain a position for themselves

within their society. Temsula Ao's characters can be placed under the second and third phase where they discover their inner strength when confronting male hegemony or social prejudices. Goswami's characters fall in an oppressive socio-religious milieu question their condition and allows the reader to make their own judgements. Phukan's protagonist is a modern educated woman who knows her rights but has remained passive for a decade until she embarks on a course of self-discovery.

The chosen writers and the texts examined for the present thesis are illustrative of what Elaine Showalter in her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" termed 'gynocritics'. Gynocriticism represents two modes of feminist criticism. The first, ideological, is concerned with women as *reader*, offering as Showalter says "readings of texts which consider the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism and woman-as-sign in semiotic systems" (327). The second mode engendered by gynocriticism is the study of: "Women as *writers*. . . the history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition" (329).

This mode of criticism allows feminist scholars to learn the real and enduring relation of women to literature as male critical theory colours literary creativity, history and literary interpretation based on the male paradigm which is posited as universal. Showalter uses four models of difference on theories of women's writing: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. Each of these strategies is a model for applying gynocriticism. The biological mode looks at woman's body as a source

of imagery in women's writing, the linguistic model looks at women speaking male-centric language and asks women to create new languages of their own, to look at the relationship of women and language and extend their use of language. The psychoanalytic model identifies gender difference as being located in the author's psyche and finally the cultural model which draws attention to the specific cultural environment which places feminist concerns in the social contexts, explains the difference of women's writing. Showalter states:

Indeed, a theory of culture incorporates ideas about women's body, language and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur. The way women conceptualise their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environment. (*ibid*)

These four theoretical models advanced by Showalter are helpful in determining and understanding various aspects of female creativity with depth and provides the framework to critically explore the writings of the chosen Northeast Indian women writers. In Showalter's words:

A cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers: class, race, nationality and history are literary determinants as significant as gender. Nonetheless, women's culture forms a collective experience that within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space.
(339)

Northeast Indian, specifically Naga and Assamese women's writing is shaped by a number of intersecting factors – biological, linguistic, psychological and the most crucial, the cultural. Naga women, living under a form of benevolent subordination are deprived of voice – the linguistic freedom to give an opinion on a political platform. Brahmin women oppressed under religious laws legitimised by Brahmanical patriarchy is brought out from the author's psyche.

The male prerogative in tribal and non-tribal culture is an undeniable fact. The thesis explores the complex intersections that impinge in the lives of women in these societies. It highlights how entrenched patriarchy and deeply-rooted socio-cultural customs and religious orthodoxy controls, victimises and oppresses women. The study aims to uncover the strategies the women characters adopt to resist or subvert patriarchal structures and the rigid gender roles that limit their growth. In examining the predicament of women from their individual stories, it is hoped that a gender-just view of women from a much needed study of the hitherto unknown position of women will be better understood from their portrayal.

The following gives a brief overview of the writers and the works selected for the present study. The themes on women's predicament is traced and discussed in each of the novels and short stories.

Chapter II on Easterine Kire looks at women in *A Naga Village Remembered* belonging to a historical past, accepting their subordinate role without question. They exist in a world of strong patriarchal customs which place women in a fixed role. Their acceptance of this role keep them thoroughly subordinated to their men. *A Terrible Matriarchy* presents Dielieno, her mother Lino and the matriarch Vibano, three females from three generations show the women's predicament under the grip

of patriarchal ideology. The matriarch upholds and enables male privilege thus becoming an anti-feminist oppressor to her granddaughter who struggles to understand this rigid gender division in her tribal world.

In Chapter III, in Temsula Ao's short stories, we look at women, who, when faced with a warlike situation, turn to their inner resources to resist or challenge life-threatening situations - with wile as in the case of Khatila, the jungle major's wife or with defiance by Apenyo who refuses to let her last song be silenced even when she is brutally raped. Imnala, the young unmarried mother, has to face the dilemma of whether her unborn child will be acknowledged or not by the father so that her child would have an identity for this power rests in the man acknowledging or denying paternity. Three women from their individual testimonies tell of women's predicaments in diverse situations and conditions but forge a bond that only women share.

Chapter IV examines *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, an award-winning work, one of Indira Goswami's numerous novels which portray deeply sensitive accounts of the great misery women suffer as widows. Her monumental work is a saga of the declining power of a religious institution belonging to the Vaishnava faith, founded by the fifteenth century saint Srimanta Sankaradeva in Assam. Centred on the oppressed figure of the widow, the novel captures several paradoxes and contradictions in the complicated intertwining of caste, religious norms, socio-cultural traditions and gender. It details the miseries of widows, how widowhood inflicts various horrors on the unfortunate woman for whom, once the husband dies, faces a grim existence. The high-caste Hindu widow's life is characterised by various penances and privations which can torture and break a

woman. At times, young widows, barely in their teens, are forced to undergo various cruelties under the express purpose of obeying religious laws. Her widowhood renders her an impure, inauspicious creature. It changes a woman's status dramatically. She becomes a non-entity deprived of rights in her own home. Her fate becomes one of constant suffering. Widows are duty-bound to continue paying obeisance to their late husbands' memory so as to gain eternal salvation. The sorrows, frustrations and psychological torture widows suffer is brought out with profound empathy.

Chapter V analyses *The Collector's Wife* by Mitra Phukan. Rukmini, wife of a District Collector who lives a comfortable, sedate life enjoying the privileges that come with being the wife of the administrative head of the district. A part-time lecturer in English in a local college, she has yet to fulfil her desires – to become a mother and a writer. Despite the status of being a bureaucrat's wife, she does not escape the stigma of being childless. A barren woman is an inauspicious presence whose shadow should not be allowed to fall on others, especially a bride. Under the sheltered existence in the secure environs of the DC's bungalow, she cannot escape the rising tide of the anti-foreigner movement which has grown in volatility and violence. The situation in the external world matching the disturbance that is going on with her emotions and mind, events develop, converge and culminate in unexpected tragedy. The thwarted desire of motherhood and the entry of a new man alters the even tenor of life leading her, her husband and her lover on an unsettling course towards a final painful denouement presenting another picture of woman's predicament.

Chapter VI highlights the major themes applied from a feminist paradigm that runs across the works discussed and stresses that women's predicament can change and women can take their lives in their own hands to make their lives better. In a patriarchal world, women find their lives and actions monitored, ruled, policed and punished which exacerbates their predicament. The thesis concludes on the note that in telling the stories of women, women writers will contribute in manifold ways towards understanding the position of women in little known or understood societies and at the same time open up a deeper understanding of women's predicament in Northeast India.

Works Cited

- Ao, Temsula. "Articulate and Inarticulate Exclusion". *On Being A Naga: Essays*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014. 93-100. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. 1949. London: Vintage Books, 1997. Print.
- Geetha, V. *Theorizing Feminism: Patriarchy*. Kolkata: Stree. Rpt. 2015. Print.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. ed. *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader*. New York: Norton & Company, 2007. Print.
- Gill, Preeti. ed. Introduction. *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010. 1-23. Print.
- Hazarika, Sanjoy. Introduction. *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*. 1994. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011. xvi-l. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 1984. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000. Print.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. 1970. Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 2000. Print.
- Misra, Tilottoma. "Feminist Scholarship in North-East India: Retrieving and Reconstructing the Woman". IAWS Newsletter Dec 2007. 26-29. Print.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Post colonial Literature. An Introduction*. New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008. 102. Print.
- Ortner, Sheryl B. "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture". *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism. A Norton Reader*. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. New York: Norton & Company, 2007. 350-367. Print.
- Rubin, Gayle. From "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex". *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism. A Norton Reader*. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. New York: Norton & Company, 2007. 392-413. Print.
- Sangari, Kumkum and Sudesh Vaid, ed. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 1989. Print.
- Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*. 1977. London: Virago, 2009. Print.

---. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2010. 325-348. Print.

Sree, Prasanna. S. "An Introduction to Women and Women Writing in English". in *Indian English Poetry and Fiction: Critical Elucidations Volume 1*. Ed. Amar Nath Prasad and Rajiv K. Mallik. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2006. 121-143. Print.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourses and Post-colonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. 66-111. Print.

Walters, Margaret. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP, 2005. Print.

Chapter II

Easterine Kire: Shaping a Feminist Consciousness in a Man's World

Introduction

Easterine Kire was born on Easter Sunday, 29th March, 1959 in Nagaland. She did her schooling in Kohima and her undergraduate studies in Shillong. She completed her Master's degree in English literature and she has a Ph.D. in English literature from Pune University. Starting from occasional writings in a column for local newspapers in Nagaland, she turned to teaching and became a College teacher, then moved on to a teaching job at the University in Kohima. In 1982, she published her first book of poetry *Kelhoukevira* in English which is one of the first volumes of poetry to be published individually by a Naga poet. The main poems mourn the deaths of Naga warriors in the 1950s Indo-Naga conflict. Her second publication *Folk Elements in Achebe* (2000) is a comparative study of Ibo culture and Tenyimia culture. *The Windhover Collection* published in 2001, is a collection of poems and short stories. The year 2003 saw the publication of a historical novel *A Naga Village Remembered*, which gives an account of the last battle between the troops of the British Imperial Army and the warriors of the village of Khonoma who fiercely defended their ancestral lands and defied the colonial power of Britain. Her major novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) was followed by *Mari* (2010) and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) to critical acclaim. She has also authored *Forest Song* (2011), a

collection of spirit stories and *Life on Hold* (2011), a novella which captures the tumult in the lives of ordinary Nagas during the years of the independence movement in the Naga Hills. A strong advocate of native wisdom and lore, preserved in the oral narratives of her people, she has transferred this into the written form as *Naga Folktales Retold* (2009). She has been a guest of Norwegian PEN from 2005 to 2007 and during this period of refuge and freedom, travelled and spoke extensively on the idea of self-exile, on writing without the constant fear of death, on Naga literature and on the protracted conflict in Nagaland.. Her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* has been translated and published in Norwegian and German. She has written *Once in Faraway Dorg* (2011), a children's book, articles and essays and performs with her Jazzpoesi band. For her novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014), an exploration of the Naga spirit universe, she was awarded the prestigious Hindu Literary Prize in 2015. She has gone on to publish *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), a novel drawn from the rich heritage of folklore and legend that permeates Naga life.

Easterine Kire's simple and evocatively written novels bring alive the history, culture, traditions, rituals, beliefs and the geography of her time and place in the life of the Naga people. Her works are more than just stories. From historical fiction to addressing the treatment of girl children, from folktales and spirit stories to recapturing the silenced stories of men and women during times of war and conflict, her writings capture the essence of a fast disappearing Naga life and society. In an interview with Fiona Fernandes, she describes how oral literature is integral to a story-telling society. She tells of growing up with grandparents who had an amazing stock of stories. She found it a natural progression to transfer what she had heard

from the spoken medium to the written medium. With her publications being well-received, she believes her writing the stories of her people will help them find healing in reading about it. With a multitude of voices within a given tribe, she considers it vital for those voices to be heard. She says “It's been a long period of silencing of the narratives of my people by the meta-narrative of war. So, finding a voice through books is a communal healing experience for my people”.

As one of the most powerful literary voices to emerge from Nagaland, Easterine Kire takes incidents and facts from the lives of her people and weaves them into stories which are like documents and chronicles of the marginalized voice of the Nagas. She brings the past alive through her novels allowing readers to come to a nuanced understanding of the complex social, tribal and political world of the Nagas. From the rich and vibrant store of oral narratives to the trauma and brutality of prolonged conflict, Easterine Kire's stories reflect the variety of subjects the Naga world offers to an interested reader. In her poetry, short stories, folk tales and novels, she writes from an understanding of the historical dialectics of the Naga people and a life intimately connected with the struggles of her people. They are the articulation of voices which have remained silent and unknown, those whose stories and identities have been misrepresented or misinterpreted through bias, ignorance, discrimination and stereotyping.

While talking about what is the story of her people in Nagaland, in “Should Writers Stay in Prison?”, she says it lies in, “The poetry of the hills and dark dense woods, the spirit stories that nestle in every village, the high romance of star-crossed lovers as well as the people who turn into stars and now, in recent years, the long

holocaust of genocide, rape and torture of a gentle people” (273), Paul Pimomo in his review of her novel *Bitter Wormwood* calls Easterine Kire “the keeper of her people's memory, their griot. She is the master of the unadorned language that moves because of the power of its evocative simplicity” (*blurb*). In articulating the socio-cultural, historical and political realities of her people, she speaks too for the Naga woman, a politically and historically silenced group. The Naga woman's story has remained unknown in the dominant colonial and post-colonial discourse of the region. Naga identity inextricably linked to its traditions, its folklore, rituals, religious and spirit beliefs, is a recurrent theme in her poetry and fictional writing. Her people's abiding love for freedom from foreign domination is one of her major concerns. While the main focus of her writing is on the struggles of the Naga people, she has not failed to address the predicament of Naga women whose voices, muted for centuries, finds representation in *A Naga Village Remembered* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the two novels selected for study 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.

Temsula Ao, in her essay “Benevolent Subordination” asserts that the patriarchal structure of Naga society has women playing a subordinate role to men in almost all the crucial decision-making institutions in society. The traditional power structure in Naga society exists in the village, the heart of Naga country. In such a world, a woman's well-being as a member of a particular clan, her role and status is strictly defined by the tradition that allows only men to be the decision-makers in almost all important matters in private and public affairs. Women enjoy the

'protection' of the men and though they may play an active role at the domestic level, in the village they are denied a voice in the decision-making bodies. Naga society, culture, its traditions and belief in the ideology of male superiority allows unequal power structures to operate which controls, subordinates and undervalues women. Women's value due to their innate physical weakness and assumed inferiority is never on par with men. Women accept their assigned lower role and perpetuate what Temsula Ao calls "benevolent subordination". The two novels chosen for the present thesis aptly illustrate the operation of what she states: "For centuries, Naga society existed on the strength of male superiority and male prerogatives" (46).

1(a) 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 troops under the colonial power of Britain among which Khonoma was the fiercest. From the first expedition to the village in 1844 to its final

destruction in the spring of 1880, this warrior village defied the invading troops on their ancestral lands putting up the longest resistance. The help of neighbouring villages in the form of manpower prolonged its resistance till a treaty between representatives of the British Government and the elders of Khonoma on 27th March 1880 brought an end to the conflict.

A Naga Village Remembered recounts through historical fiction, the nineteenth-century life of this proud Angami village. The Battle of Khonoma fought during the bitter winter of 1879–1880 between the colonial forces of Britain and the warriors of the village is told from the 'insider's' 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, his 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 detail the practices and beliefs of its inhabitants who lived by strict codes of behaviour which in her words in the Introduction to the novel 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” (xv).

1(b) 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 delineated 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 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.

The main thread in the novel dwells on 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 depicting 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, submitting to being the work horses for their men can be drawn out from the portrayal 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 vital 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 despite being subordinate, their role is crucial for without the women, the warriors would be hampered in their warring exploits as exemplified in the narrative.

The novel opens with details about the daily routine of Kovi, an inhabitant of Khonoma, his wife and children. He is a traditionalist who stands by the good old ways. The morning routine of the villagers reveals the division of labour that is clearly defined along gender lines. Kovi's heart is warmed seeing the village women returning in small groups with their carrying baskets stacked with firewood. “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” (1). Women fetched the firewood, then fetched the water in their water carriers and the smoke curling up from the houses signalled the cooking of the morning meal. It is clear from this picture that women worked hard from dawn till dusk. Through the eyes of Kovi, his domestic life on the one hand and as a member of his clan who attended the all-male night meetings on

the other, Easterine Kire paints a picture of how men and women's worlds was demarcated clearly into the public and the private spheres. Women laboured with the domestic work, tended to the fields, while the men cleared the forests for firewood and cultivation. Women would weave body cloths and ceremonial shawls, make ornaments while men made tools, weapons and young boys were taught how to weave baskets. They also learnt about hunting and warfare which were critical to their survival and existence.

The unfinished business of settling scores with warring villages is brought out in the hostility between Kovi's village and Garipheju, a village noted for its brave warriors. The loss of warriors in an earlier battle led to retaliatory attacks from both sides with increasing ferocity till the valiant warriors of their village emerged victorious. Kovi and his brother were among those who celebrated their villages' victory. But his happiness is short-lived as the situation at home takes on a dark turn. His pregnant wife's time for delivery was very close and the warrior husband was undecided whether to stay at home and help or go to the *thelhou* (community house). Kovi decides to stay at home as he knows that the ritual of claiming the newborn by smearing saliva on his finger and touching it on the baby's forehead while saying "I am first" ensured that the spirits could not claim the child. There had been too many deaths of newborns in the village as the fathers had not quickly staked claim before the spirits.

But tragedy occurs when after a long hard labour, in spite of the traditional midwife's ministrations, his wife unexpectedly dies in the throes of childbirth. It is a devastating shock and as Kovi breaks into terrible sobs, the midwife cautions him for

none may mourn a *lashü* death (during childbirth). There is the strictest of taboos upon the *lashü* death since it is unnatural, the most abominable of apotia deaths. In Kovi's wife's death, in interweaving the beliefs and taboos associated with birth and death at childbirth, we become aware of the high death rate of newborns and the great perils for pregnant women during labour and child delivery. Kovi and his surviving daughter and son grieve her death but remain under the grip of taboos and fears.

When he returns to the *thehou* after observing the due rituals, he catches up with the man's talk about the hunts and battles. Taking part in these exploits formed an integral part of the passage from youth to manhood and the *thehou* served as an institution for males to learn the stories and customs of the village. Women were not allowed into the *thehou* or those considered male domains. Quarrels and feuds between villages and the entry of the white man's soldier who acted with impunity under the orders of their officers added to the tensions. These tensions gave way to attacks on the intruders with high loss of soldiers. In recounting the many battles from feuds, Kire makes it clear that in the eyes of the warrior, it was a matter of honour. Kovi is only too aware that attacks must be avenged. It was understood that, "A man is not a man if you let another man kill your kin and torch your house and you do nothing about it" (7). Such men would be labelled *Thenumia* (derogatory term for women). "That is what drives a man to battle, the need to prove himself worthy of defending his village and his womenfolk and to earn ornaments of war" (*ibid*). In a warrior community to be called a woman denotes the pejorative application of the word and indicates the view of women as weak and therefore far inferior to the

defenders of manly honour.

With male and female roles clearly defined, the warriors like Kovi, 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. The hard and difficult life for a widow under the exigencies which prevailed during the nineteenth century reveals the threats and insecurities faced by women like Vipiano, a young widow with two sons who lost her warrior husband in one of the innumerable raids. Her brother Kovi was disconsolate after his wife's unfortunate death and Vipiano understood his pain. Being widowed, she has a heavy burden on her head and in her heart with two young sons to bring up. She has started training her sons Kelevizo and Lato in field work. After working on hers, she would help her brother in his field. Her sister-in-law had been a good woman, a hard worker and a caring wife and mother who did not indulge in gossip. Vipiano recollected how she worked as well as any man wielding a *dao* (a machete), working extensively on her field. In the depiction of women in the traditional village setting, Kire shows how women were kept out of male domains – the *theshou*, battles, war and male sports like wrestling. She makes it clear however that women played a vital role for without a woman's labour, her contribution in sustaining and feeding her family, men would have faced difficulties illustrated in the following line - “The womenfolk were used to being left to finish field work on their own, leaving their men free to go raids”(9).

While a warrior's wife like Megoizou enjoyed a privileged position, she had

the considerable work of organizing the cooking and making rice brew when a feast-of-merit was hosted. Those who had earned renown as warriors, who possessed wealth and prestige hosted these feasts as a mark of honour. Once a warrior's wife is widowed, her status changes perceptibly. Vipiano struggles after Vicha, her husband is killed by the white man's soldiers in one of the raids to Assam. She 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, in spite of her difficulties she believes, "a household is not worth its name if its granaries are empty"(10). 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" (11). There was an unspoken understanding that taboos should not be broken and being an obedient daughter, Vipiano adhered to what her father had taught her. But it was difficult to understand why her sister-in-law, circumspect, careful and polite in her conduct, had to meet such "an ignominious death" (*ibid*). 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 cheer and Lato, the younger son observes that it was rare to hear his mother laugh. 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 by limiting them to defined gender roles where women performed most of the domestic work and were kept out of the public domain.

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. The novel illustrates how 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. And protect them they did leaving many dead. The warriors of Garipheju pursued Khonoma's men till the borders of Nerhe and many of the Khonoma men were killed. (3)

When the tables were turned, 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. This aspect of loss and grief is borne out in the statement: "Many women were widowed early by the love of war among the men" (15).

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 a hard one. Vipiano's predicament is the struggle of a woman who possesses the capacity to bear hardship with commendable fortitude. The exploits of the warriors of her village often resulted in death and it pained her every time she saw a warrior's new burial house which reminded her of the day Vicha's body was brought back bruised and bloodied, wearing the new body cloth she had woven for him. In her faithfulness to his memory, "Every few days, she went to the woods to bring back new leaves to replace the old ones on his burial house. That was her way of showing her devotion to a husband whose love for battlesport has shortened his fathering days" (31). As the days passed, she takes on the burden of striving to fulfil the role of both mother and

father alternating between being severe or lenient to her sons, wondering whether her husband would have done the same. Kire shows how a widow's pain, sorrow and struggles can colour her outlook and actions brought out in the statement: "Still, she was a stern mother driven by circumstances to adopt a sternness she sometimes did not feel" (*ibid*). There are times she wonders whether to be authoritative like a father would be or to adopt a maternal softness in bringing up her sons. Her father, had been stern and harsh with the son who had been the most defiant towards him. But when her brother was killed accidentally by a friend's spear, she remembers her father becoming like a demented man. He grieved deeply for the son who in his eyes possessed a man's heart and died two months later broken-spirited. Vipiano wondered at times whether she too was harsh with her older son Levi while with Lato, she was gentler. She braves what life pits against her with the same grit and determination of her father. Her sons grow into responsible young men – Levi, the spitting image of his father having to grow old before his time and assume the role of the man of the house; Lato, gentle and affable, who had inherited his father's voice and loved to sing. She felt fulfilled in her sons and through the bittersweet years, Lato learns how his mother struggled with sleepless nights and acute loneliness after a beloved husband's death. Like his father, Levi becomes a warrior while Lato prefers quieter activities that did not endanger his life. Vipiano's spirit helps her to survive, to learn the painful lessons of life with equanimity. "Life had taught her not to be too happy. Piano checked herself cautiously, drawing back when she felt she had laughed too freely" (32). In Vipiano's character, Kire proves the strength 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. Her sons see the resilience of a woman in her struggle to care for them and in turn are devoted to their widowed mother who worked hard "to give them a semblance of a normal family" (15).

When Levi comes of age, Pelhuvino, a girl approved and chosen by his paternal aunt Niseno and his mother, becomes his shy bride. The shadow of an earlier 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 well-being is restored with Levi's unexpected return and eventually 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.

1(c) Survival

In sketching the maternal figure of Vipiano, Kire exhibits the enormous challenges Naga women faced living in villages that were constantly in a state of 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 to the village, 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. Charles Chasie in his essay “Nagaland in Transition” attributes the advent of the British and the exposure of the Nagas to the outside world for turning Naga society upside down and ushering in profound changes that would be indelible and unerasable. In his view:

The British paved the way for entry into Naga society by the Christian missionaries with profound and far-reaching consequences. They brought a religion that was universal to make the Nagas part of the larger human family. They brought education and introduced the Roman script, and made communication easier between the Naga tribes as well as with the outside world. Tragically, many of the early missionaries also treated

Naga culture and traditional practices as ‘pagan’ and ‘evil’ and to be shunned. (256)

Levi and Pelhuvino witness the changing of the times in their homeland. The effects of Christianity and education is played out in Rokokhoto’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 *Ukepenuopfū* as the father of *Isu* (Jesus). 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. According to Charles Chasie: “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” (*ibid*).

In the novel, 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?” (102). In the differences between father and son lie the tensions between the generations in which 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 marred the last years of their married life. She hopes Sato will return to the old ways, that the changes she was witnessing at home mirrored those occurring on a wider scale beyond but realises and takes heart in her son's belief, “Our lot is not hardship and constant pain” (117). 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, spirit beliefs, 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. In her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* (1949), French feminist writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir from her study in the cultural myths, social standards and the contemporary situation of women, her 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 can be applied in the Naga context. As de 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. (16)

Though drawn from the situation of women in western culture and examined from an existential position, de 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. Several factors are responsible for the lower status of women under traditional patriarchal power structures in the social and political spheres of Naga society. Women are

excluded from governance and decision-making. Their greater physical prowess, their role as 'protectors' allowed men to assume a superior status in the male/female gender binary. Naga women compliantly deferred to male authority according to 'custom' allowing their men to take the leading role. What this reveals is that Naga women's lower status in the hierarchy of power and their acquiescence to such an arrangement allows their subordination to take place with their 'cooperation' and consent. By being obedient to the beliefs and practices in their socio-cultural world, women allow themselves to remain in their lower position and disempowered predicament. However, 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.

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

Easterine Kire's second novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* 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. In "A Note from the Author" in the second edition of the novel, Kire explains, "While the visible structure of the novel is patriarchal and seems focused on bringing out the misuse of the

patriarchal system, the less visible under-structure is matriarchy and how it abuses the patriarchal structure resulting in gender abuse within the same gender” (*ix*). The multiple layers in the novel address social, political and cultural changes presenting a multi-faceted view of 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 Pfünüo, 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, how with disadvantages on the social, economic and domestic front, women keep striving.

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. The novel provides an insight into these struggles, the disadvantages women suffer and struggle with a predicament which is the result of their historical, sexual and gendered subordination. Deprived of inheritance and recognition as a person with identity under the grip of economic dependency and assorted taboos, Kire emphasises these factors which contribute to a woman's sense of insecurity. Different women each in a different kind of situation, reflects the predicament she is caught in. No woman is free from the invisible chains of male dominance which is a way of life. In presenting the breaking point between the old traditional way and the new currents flowing in Naga society, we see society changing but attitudes not changing along with it. We see women desiring opportunities for education, for a place or standing in her family or society, for improvement of her lot but patriarchal attitudes which have not advanced with the times appear to obstruct a woman's quest for self-improvement, independence and individual identity.

The novel sketches in fine detail the familial and gender relations against an

Angami Naga cultural background. It is an examination of gender politics in the face of changing cultural and social demographics in latter day Nagaland. Easterine Kire depicts a new emerging urban culture which has been moving away from the agrarian traditional rural life depicted in *A Naga Village Remembered*. In the picture of close-knit community life, the strengths and weaknesses of a culture under immense pressure to change taking a great leap from age-old practices to twentieth century modern reality, is etched the struggle of individuals who wrestle with the tensions brought on by the pull of contrary forces.

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 characterization 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, innocent 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. In her struggle, her mother's support, strength and wisdom guide and help her cope with the pressures of having to constantly navigate herself through the prevailing cultural currents of her time.

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" (1). 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 and Bano's predicament in Grandmother's household. 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. Her widowed grandmother needs a helper so a little five year old girl's childhood is sacrificed for alleviating an irritable woman's loneliness. Forced to live under the strict supervision of her termagant grandmother, separated from her parents and brothers from a young age to 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 an education. It is her mother Nino who quietly and firmly 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.

2(b) Daughters of Patriarchy

The novel demonstrates Grandmother Vibano as a subscriber to patriarchal

ideology and is, in Paul Pimomo's opinion, "the clan's notorious enabler of male ego and spoiler of female confidence and modern education" (187). Grandmother Vibano's attitude 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" (303). 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" (*ibid*). 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" (306). 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. (57)

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 theme of gender discrimination and gender abuse has a twist in it 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 blighted the aspirations of many girls for education. When her parents broach the subject of sending Dielieno to school like her age-mates, the matriarch in her response offers a significant revelation of an older generation's view on the gender role for girls and boys. Her opinion reveals the gender prejudice which prevailed against education for girls on the grounds that getting girls educated made them immoral whereas such strictness could be relaxed for boys.

“In our day”, Grandmother began, “girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learnt the housework. Then we went to the fields and learnt all the field work as well. That way one never has a problem with girl-children. They will always be busy at some work or other, too busy to get into trouble. It is all right if boys have a spot of trouble now and then, but with girls, it is different. You would never be able to get rid of her once she has caused trouble. I really do not approve of girls getting educated. It only makes them get fancy notions about themselves and they forget their place in the family.” (23)

The cultural context of *A Terrible Matriarchy* reflects the social predicament of women in a tribal culture that values men above women. Patriarchal practices ensure women's subordinate position which entails the performance of most of the domestic

work falling on the woman, while men appear to do much less. From confronting prejudices to swallowing humiliations, the girl-child faced deprivations in many forms. From the details of the narrative, Naga girls like Dielieno during mid-twentieth century Nagaland encountered multiple challenges - at home, in the clan, village, town and even the Church. Cultural attitudes during Grandmother's childhood in the past continue in the present reflecting the situation for girls whose female identities are circumscribed by the dictates of culture, tribal ethos and the ideology of male prerogatives. Only through persistence and forbearance could girls survive the struggles towards 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 men only 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 and granddaughters, manoeuvring 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 practising what can be described as an androcentric matriarchy, a matriarchy which supports or buttresses patriarchy in her support and deference to male privilege. In her advocacy of upholding the traditions and customs of her forefathers, in using the patriarchal system to abuse younger females in her household, to keep them dependent and subordinate, Grandmother can be considered an anti-feminist who believes in women's innate inferiority to men. As a result, she abuses her position and ironically other women by practising "a terrible matriarchy".

Dielieno 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 abrasive manner and 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, Lieno, she doesn't really. She wants you to be a good girl. Its her way of bringing you up to be a good woman" (39). 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" (37). Echoing what *A Naga Village Remembered* depicts, boys were expected to grow into manly warriors. Boys were valued and when girls grew into women and got married, they were expected to produce sons to maintain the male lineage. On the other hand, Bano

informs Dielieno 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” (26). Women as daughters appear to lose their identity on 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, her mother-in-law, her husband, other in-laws, putting the interests of others before hers 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” (49). 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 advantage 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, despite being 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 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 illustrates 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. In Vimenuo's father, it is his anger over his wife giving birth to three daughters. His desire for a son to continue the patrilineage being unfulfilled, he blames his wife for not producing a son. Zekuo's abusive behaviour terrorises 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". 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. During her stay with Grandmother and Bano, Dielieno comes to know Bano's story. Bano tells Dielieno, "Father never married my mother and I have seen her just three or four times. I was not allowed to call her Mother and I could not call my father 'Father' when your grandfather was alive" (43). She is pained by the taint of illegitimacy that shadows her existence even though Grandmother, her father's older sister, 'adopts' her to avoid scandal. She is fated to

work in Grandmother's house. From Bano's sad predicament, it is clear that she has grown up not knowing a mother's love. Completely dependent on Grandmother for food and shelter, her father loses his claim over her. When Dielieno returns reluctantly to Grandmother's house after the Christmas week with her parents and brothers, she innocently asks the older girl did she not want sometimes to go home. Bano's reply poignantly brings out her helplessness: "Where is home, Lieno? This is home for me. I don't know of any other home and it was a nice place when your grandfather was alive. Besides, I am used to your grandmother's ways and I know how to work in such a way that she will not be shouting at me all the time" (76). Dielieno's young mind manages to grasp that in her situation, Bano was resigned to her fate. She realises, "Grandmother's house was the only home she had ever known so I could see how she would not be homesick for the mother she never knew or the family she never had. I understood that I felt lonely because I longed so dearly for mother. But Bano looked to Grandmother as her mother and so she didn't have the same longing as I" (*ibid*). In her predicament, it is clear that Grandmother keeps Bano tied to her ensuring she has her services by keeping her beholden to her. She showers her grandsons with food as a way of showing affection and giving them body cloths woven by Bano as gifts but nothing for Dielieno.

While Dielieno's parents ensure she goes to school in spite of Grandmother's objections, Bano has no one to come to her rescue. On Grandfather's insistence, she is sent to school for a few years learning to write her name and read the Bible, to count and read a little. But Grandmother's constant carping and fighting with Grandfather discourages her to the extent that she takes the decision to stop going.

The reason she tells Dielieno is that, “I could see that it was the cause of all their arguments. Your grandfather wanted me to go but I said I was tired of school. It was not true but I realised it was what I was expected to do. There are times in life when you have to sacrifice some things that you really like in order to bring peace into the family” (78). In *Bano*, Kire paints the helpless pitiable predicament of those for whom life offers no choices. An illegitimate girl-child, her status reduces her to complete dependency on Grandmother who ensures Bano’s life follows according to her dictates. Deprived of her mother’s care, Grandmother goes on to deny Bano an education. Without education, her future looks bleak with little possibility for development and growth. Her life becomes a series of denials, her personal desires sacrificed for the wishes of others to the extent that she has little resources to chart her own life. Her only hope of getting another life is in marriage but Grandmother scuttles the one 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. 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” (285). 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.

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 traditional education into practice. Dielieno's restoration to her parents marks a turn in her growth and helps her gradually resolve the deep resentment she felt over Grandmother's harsh treatment. 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 Pfunuo 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 Pfünuo 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.

Other women's stories are interwoven with those of the principle female characters. Vimenuo, Lieno's best friend whose family is dismissed as one with "bad blood" by Grandmother because of an alcoholic father has an unstable and disruptive family life in her formative years. On her father's death, her widowed mother is left with three daughters. In spite of losing her father, her father's pension and her mother's job as a typist after the father's death helps them survive. What Kire reveals in Vimenuo's family story is the pertinacity of women to survive in spite of the odds. With hard work, perseverance and humility, Vimenuo with her mother and sisters

learn to overcome their difficulties. To Dielieno's delight, her best friend becomes her sister-in-law when Leto, her eldest brother marries Vimenuo in spite of Grandmother's vehement disapproval. Nisano, who is married off to the troublesome Vini, Dielieno's second brother and Grandmother's favourite grandson, is a young woman whose life appears to be sacrificed in the hope that marriage will tame and stabilise a violent, drinking man. Her brief marriage is a harrowing one where she is mentally harassed and frequently suffers domestic abuse at Vini's hands. She becomes pregnant and after a difficult delivery, gives birth to a son, Salhou. On the day of his son's birth, Vini is in one of his drunken stupors. Nisano is trapped and victimised by the cycle of violence and abuse that women face in such marriages. She is eventually released from this bondage when Vini dies quite suddenly from cirrhosis of the liver. The young widow finds an unexpected benefactor in Grandmother who takes Nisano and her infant son under her wing. The novel reveals an unexpected side to Grandmother who before her passing away, to secure her great-grandson's future leaves her house to him. Neikuo, Grandmother's younger sister, is the poor spinster who at times is at the receiving end of her sister's scorn. Her humble house and her frugal kitchen larder do not stop her from being far richer in compassion and affection towards others than her proud, overbearing sister; her sister's wealth and status-conscious daughter Aunt Bino and younger sons – Uncles Abi and Bilie and their wives Leno and Sini.

An interesting aspect in Kire's delineation of the many female characters is the ways each one grows to reveal positive and negative facets of female character. Despite living in a socio-cultural, politico-historical moment within an entrenched

patriarchy, females like Dielieno, her mother Nino, Vimenuo, Nisano and Pfunuo do not allow themselves to be beaten or defeated. Each woman appears to gain strength from her individual hardship and pain. They suffer psychological and mental cruelty, emotional trauma, physical violence from husband's cruelty as in Nisano's case, prejudice, bias and even feelings of worthlessness. Their needs are not given priority and some of them are silent victims. Bano and Neikuo are victims in several ways but their victimhood does not reduce their humanity. Benuo and her sister, the women at the water source, Aunt Bino, Leno and Sini reveal their mean spiteful natures which is directed at others, particularly other women. They hurt others and are petty and dangerous as in the case when Leno and Sini cleverly manipulate their husbands to turn Bano out of Grandmother's house after her death on the pretext of renting it out. In these portraits of different female characters, Kire provides a narrative of women's stories. Stories that tell of ordinary women's lives and their concerns which are as varied as their natures. As the stories of women's experiential lives, emotions, thoughts and dreams unfold, the novel takes us to different realms of women's consciousness, amply demonstrating the multiple ways women struggle in a male-dominated world.

A crucial element in understanding women's position in Naga society is revealed after Grandmother's death. Leno 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” (272). The patrilineal system of inheritance did not allow 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” (273). Her mother’s words are an eye-opener to understanding Grandmother’s fears and insecurities that instilled her belief in women’s dependency on men and her obsession in male-heirs.

2(c) Navigating the Waters

When her mother advises her to forgive Grandmother, Dielieno wonders “How do you forgive someone who has borne a grudge against you for being born a girl?” (274). 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” (273). 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 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” (274). It is this strength that helps her cope with difficulties that would have defeated others. Her mother's words give Dielieno a new insight to her grandmother:

After talking to Mother, I understood the deep sense of insecurity that led Grandmother to hold the world-view she did. I think I mellowed somewhat towards her. My fear of her changed to pity. Indeed, Grandmother was to be pitied. Imagine living all of one's life trying to buy love. That was what she had been doing with Vini all along and Vini had been too foolish not to see it. I was looking at Grandmother in a different light and it also helped me see myself in a better. I felt a new sense of worth. I was not unfortunate to have been born a girl. (276)

Soon after Dielieno's moment of understanding, the matriarch suffers a stroke. She clings to life for two days. Looking at Grandmother felled like a large tree, Dielieno finally is able to resolve her pain and resentment by forgiving the old woman for being harsh with her. In doing so, she heals herself from the bitterness that had haunted her from childhood. Grandmother's passing is replaced by the dawn of a younger generation that looks with hope for their future. Interestingly, it is Grandmother's spirit that returns and disturbs the living to ensure that her house is restored to the rightful owners who had been turned out by the machinations of Dielieno's uncles and their wives. Once Bano, Nisano and Salhou return to the old house, peace returns. The novel ends with the prospect of Bulie, the youngest brother

marrying Nisano, and Dielieno too looking forward to marriage with Bulie's friend who was the fourth boy to come with a marriage proposal, the earlier three being rebuffed by Aunt Bino, who by custom would be the intermediary. Fortunately, the boy and his family decided to approach Dielieno's parents directly bypassing the custom of approaching the paternal aunt.

Starting her journey as a four and half year old child to a young woman of twenty three, 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 and the conventions of womanhood 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. Dielieno's awakening to a feminist consciousness comes from the lessons she learnt living under Grandmother. 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.

In the author's note to the novel, Kire describes Dielieno as "a powerful young woman who has not lost her femininity. She is not a feminist, but is more a

womanist” (viii). Alice Walker coined the term Womanist in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, published in 1983. A Womanist according to Walker is defined as:

A black feminist or feminist of colour ... Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *wilful* behaviour ... Responsible. In charge. *Serious* ... A woman who loves other women, sexually/non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength ... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. (xi)

Womanism is a philosophy conventionally applied in African-American culture characterising women as audacious, capable and strong. Womanism is a commitment to women’s empowerment from a broader vision of the interconnectedness and heterogeneity of women’s struggles of and within their communities against inequalities and exploitation - politically, socially, racially and economically. It is a redefinition of the feminist struggle to end female oppression.

An interesting parallel to Dielieno’s story in the novel can be drawn to the real life experience of Ellen Phamnei, the first woman graduate from the Konyak tribe who has said in an interview (in Gill's *The Peripheral Centre*): “My parents were not educated. I saw and learnt first hand how tough life was for the woman. My battle to get an education was a very tough one” (381). From her experience of hardship and struggle, “Phamnei empathizes with the layers of subservience that a Naga girl in a village faces” (382). Dielieno’s story set in the town of Kohima is not

very dissimilar to the enormous struggle Phamnei faced as a young girl. In the real world and in the world of fiction, the account of a young girl's development from girlhood to womanhood is the story of Naga women who struggle against great odds.

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. 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 observation, "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" (189).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her famous essay entitled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1993), presents a cogent analysis and critique of attempts to speak for the oppressed, the marginalized. She highlights the problems and politics involved to represent this marginal Subject; the Subaltern. The Naga woman whose stories have remained unrepresented, unvoiced and marginalized under structural domination from the operation of patriarchy, finds a vehicle in Easterine Kire whose narratives of women brings to light what history has effaced and silenced. As a group, Naga women's experiences in the past have suffered from lack of visibility or audibility. In

analysing this aspect of silencing, Spivak's statement can be applied to the predicament and representation of Naga women. "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (82-83). However, Easterine Kire has turned this around and brought the marginal Subject, the subaltern Naga woman's voice out of the shadows. The stories of her women – young and old, reflect a shaping of a feminist consciousness, particularly in Dielieno, who learns to take control of her destiny by believing in herself. Regardless of the pains, the struggles and daily challenges to overcome the bonds of patriarchy, Kire's women continue quietly and valiantly to take control of their destinies by believing in their self-worth.

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 continue valiantly to resist oppression and subordination and 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 self-worth, women have the task of building a network of woman-to-woman solidarity to overcome "benevolent subordination" and be agents of their collective freedom.

Works Cited

- 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. 301-308. Print.
- Ao, Tamsula. "Benevolent Subordination: Social Status of Naga Women." *On Being A Naga: Essays*. 45-53. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. 1949. London: Vintage Books, 1997. Print.
- Chasie, Charles. "Nagaland in Transition". *Where the Sun Rises when Shadows Fall: The North-east*. ed. Geeti Sen. New Delhi: OUP, 2006. 253-264. Print.
- Gill, Preeti, ed. "Mosaic: Four Interviews". 3. Ellen Phamnei. *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010. 331-391. Print.
- Kire, Iralu, Easterine. *A Naga Village Remembered*. Kohima: Ura Academy, 2003. Print.
- . *A Terrible Matriarchy*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008. Print.
- . "A Note from the Author". *A Terrible Matriarchy*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008. vii-x. Print.
- . "Should Writers Stay in Prison?". *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. ed. Tilottoma Misra. New Delhi: OUP, 2011. 272-275. Print.
- . "When the written word Heals". Interview with Fiona Fernandes. E-paper, Mid-day, 24-Jan 2012. Web. 24 Mar 2014.
<<http://www.mid-day.com/articles/when-the-written-word-heals/151668>>.
- Nayar, Pramod K. "Gender." *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008. 116-157. Print.
- Pimomo, Paul. Rev. of *Bitter Wormwood* by Easterine Kire. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011. Print.

---. Rev. of Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy in Nagas: Essays for Responsible Change*. Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienü, Paul Pimomo and Venüsa Tünyi. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2012. 186-192. Print.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1986. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1995. Print.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourses and Post-colonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. 66-111. Print.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Orlando: Harvest Book Harcourt, 1983. xi-xii. Print.

CHAPTER III

Female Strength in the Precarious World of Temsula Ao

Introduction

Temsula Ao, poet, short story writer, ethnographer, essayist and academic from Nagaland, is a celebrated name in Northeast Indian writing. She was born in October 1945 in Jorhat, Assam where her father worked as a supervisor at the Mission Hospital. Temsula Ao and her siblings lost their parents at an early age when their mother passed away just 10 months after the father. The family was split up with the younger ones being taken to their native village Changki in Mokokchung district, the two eldest brothers continuing their studies in Jorhat and Temsula Ao being sent to hostel in the Ridgeway Girls' High School, Golaghat from where she passed her matriculation examination. She received her B.A. with distinction from Fazl Ali College, Mokokchung, Nagaland and obtained her M.A. in English from Gauhati University, Assam. She completed her Post-Graduate Diploma in the Teaching of English from the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (now English and Foreign Languages University) Hyderabad and her Ph.D. from North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, Meghalaya. She served as Director, North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur from 1992-97 on deputation from NEHU and was Fulbright Fellow to the University of Minnesota in the year 1985-86. She retired as Professor in English from NEHU where she taught since 1975.

A member of the General Council of the Sahitya Akademi, she was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 2007. She is a recipient of the

Nagaland Governor's Award for Distinction in the field of Literature in 2009. In 2013, she received the Sahitya Academy Award for her short story collection *Laburnum for my Head* (2009) given by the Sahitya Academy, India's National Academy for Literature. She is currently the Chairperson of the Nagaland State Commission for Women. While teaching at NEHU, she published her first collection of poems *Songs That Tell* (1988) and went on to publish four more - *Songs That Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003) and her fifth collection *Songs from the Other Life* (2007). These five volumes have been reprinted as *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007* (2013) and is dedicated to all Song makers. As a Fulbright Fellow in the University of Minnesota, she came in contact with Native Americans, their culture, heritage and their oral tradition. This exposure inspired her to undertake a project to document the history, culture and social mores of her community, the Ao-Nagas and their oral tradition resulting in an ethnographic work entitled *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition* (1989). She has two short story collections to her credit. *These Hills called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) which deals with the insurgency in the Naga Hills during the 1950s and 1960s over the assertion of the Naga people's right to self-determination and its impact on the lives of ordinary people and *Laburnum For My Head*, a collection of eight stories which depicts with wit, irony and sensitivity a deep understanding of the human condition. She has published a book *Henry James and the Quest for an Ideal Heroine* (1989) and *On Being a Naga: Essays* (2014) which re-appraises Naga culture, history, identity and folk literature. Her memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* (2013) is a powerful and moving account of her bleak childhood and growing years after being orphaned. With grit and determination, she

overcomes the odds to build a distinguished career as an academic and become one of the finest writers of the country.

In her poems, she echoes the oral tradition of narrative in song covering a wide gamut of personal thoughts and emotions in her concerns over the rapid changes taking place in her homeland and with her people. In her stories and essays she dwells on the history, culture and traditions of her community, raising questions on gender identity and acknowledging the danger of erasure of history. Concerned with the modern human predicaments, her writing gives political and epistemological meaning to the marginal voices of her people, a race whose existence remains peripheral in the imagination of mainstream India. The eight states of Northeast India and the heterogeneous, widely-diverse ethnicities with their distinct indigenous cultures, traditions, languages, religions and geographical spaces has suffered from being lumped into a homogeneous entity as the Northeast in the consciousness of the Indian Nation state. These Frontier States which are geographically distant from the centre suffer from a lack of interest and remain a distant Other on the margins.

The recent history of the Naga people on the periphery of the country has been one of tumult, turbulence and terror brought on by their demand for self determination and the desire to be left alone once the British left India. Having little social, cultural or linguistic affinity with the rest of India, the Nagas considered themselves uniquely distinct and refused to be subject to India which was seen as an alien entity that would co-opt a smaller race. This refusal can be understood in the light of Patricia Mukhim's assertion that after independence, the people of the Northeastern frontiers who had a peripheral engagement with the freedom movement were not consulted or given a free and clear choice to chart their future course of

action. Mukhim astutely points out, "to assume that people of a particular race should be willing to be subsumed under another emerging nation is presumptuous" (178). Beset by economic underdevelopment, exploitation of natural resources, environmental degradation and the changing demographics which create a sense of neglect and deprivation, the Northeast has become the breeding ground for various secessionist movements and insurgent groups demanding independence from a callous big brother. This has created an unstable political climate aggravated by the imposition of oppressive laws and counter insurgency operations where the ordinary people are the worst victims.

Temsula Ao in her poems, essays and stories has tapped into this existential predicament which has created a dilemma for tribal people whose culture and social ethos is at odds with the caste-conscious, predominantly Hindu culture of the Indian subcontinent. In representing the history and politics of the Naga homeland, Temsula Ao brings out the paradoxes and the contradictions in what Kailash C. Baral calls the "ancient and the modern, the mythic and the contemporary" character of a land which has, "existed for centuries through its legends, myths, stories, poetry, songs, dances, arts and crafts as well as through its conflicting history and moribund politics" (5). The people of this land face existential dilemmas trapped between their traditions, identity consciousness and the ever-increasing onslaught brought on by the socio-cultural, politico-historical developments.

The stories from *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head* have been chosen to throw light on women's predicament in politically volatile, violence-ridden worlds. The women's situation becomes insecure and dangerous during military operations. They become victims of military brutality and their own tribal

traditions some of which are not women-friendly. Some stories throw light on the Naga way of life affording a view of women's experiences in tradition-bound villages and towns. The young unmarried mother is ridiculed and stigmatized for having an affair with a married man and is the butt of jokes but her predicament is to ensure her unborn child is not labelled with illegitimacy. "Three Women" whose stories illustrate the maternal bond that links women, addresses multiple themes of adoption, rape, incest, sex and gender discrimination. The stories dwelling on women's experiential predicaments will be examined as follows.

1(a) Voices from a War Zone

In her short story collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, Tamsula Ao brings a sense of the past in her narratives on the experiences of men, women and children whose stories and voices have been unknown, unheard for decades. Set against the political background of the independence movement of the Nagas, the call for the right to self-determination and the military operations launched by the Indian state to counter this movement, Tamsula Ao writes from the anguish over the violent and turbulent years of bloodshed witnessed in the Naga Hills from mid-twentieth century onwards. The political background to the violence unleashed on the Naga people is their refusal to recognise the sovereignty of the Indian state when India became an independent country free from British Colonial rule on 15th August 1947. The Nagas did not identify themselves as Indians citing their unique culture, traditions and racial difference. The Nagas, although comprising of more than forty disparate tribes each dependent and distinct in language, dress and cultural practices, established a strong bond from their common identity as Nagas and a movement for independence from Indian control was launched soon after the

British transferred power to the Indians. To quell this movement, brutal repression was carried out against the Naga people. The enormity and brutality of the military operations on ordinary Nagas only served to strengthen the underground movement which engaged in jungle warfare with the far larger Indian troops. In the unequal battle between a well-armed army and the insurgents, the ordinary Naga was trapped and faced dire reprisals whenever the Indian troops suffered losses during a rebel attack or encounter. Documented evidence and reports reveal that under the pretext of carrying out counter insurgency operations, unimaginable atrocities, rapes and barbaric crimes were perpetrated on men, women and children. In the author's Introduction in *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), Easterine Kire says:

In 1956, the Indian Army began taking prisoners and using them for target practice. Groupings of villagers and torture of the villagers became routine by 1957. The stories of torture documented by both the IWGIA and *The Naga Chronicle* seem to surpass each other in the army's inhuman treatment of the Nagas: men were tied to poles and burned; they were buried alive; their genitals were given electric currents. Each instance of torture was more gruesome and horrible than the next. The report lists the tortures and repression of the Nagas by the Indian army as "i) execution in public; ii) mass raping; iii) deforming sex organs; iv) mutilating limbs and body; v) electric shocks; vi) puncturing eyes; vii) hanging people upside down; viii) putting people in smoke-filled rooms; ix) burning of villages; x) concentration camps; xi) forced starvation and labour." One of the stories of rape had as its intention the desecration of the village church of Yankeli where four minor girls were raped by the

Maratha contingent on 11 July, 1971. The church building was abandoned by the villagers after that incident. (2-3)

The military operations and vicious killings left thousands dispossessed of their lands, homes and livelihoods. Many were left with permanent physical and psychological injuries and disabilities from torture and rapes. Granaries and paddy fields were burnt and destroyed to starve a people who sought independence to chart their own destiny. The agony and anguish of that violent and brutal phase in the life of ordinary Nagas remains etched in their collective memory leaving the Naga psyche indelibly scarred.

In the preface to the collection, “Lest We Forget”, Temsula Ao refers to the memory of the traumatic experience, the pain and agony in their retrieval to be recounted and represented in written form. In her stories, she says “I have endeavoured to revisit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged” (*ix*). She states clearly that the stories are not about “historical facts” nor is she attempting to voice condemnation or judgement about the events which raged through the land like a wildfire. In the warlike situation that prevailed when a people's humanity was assaulted and violated, the survivors were left with their minds and souls permanently damaged. While the actual struggle remains a backdrop, Temsula Ao asserts, “the thrust of the narrative is to probe how the events of that era have restructured and revolutionized the Naga psyche” (*x*). In the cataclysmic upheavals, Nagas faced dire realities and predicaments in the ongoing struggle for a legitimate identity. It was, in her words “a birth by fire” (*ibid*). But tragically, she says, “Nagaland’s story of the struggle for self-determination started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism somehow got

rewritten into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome” (*ibid*).

The deeper, long term implications of war which impacts and spreads over multiple areas of human life is evident in recent Naga history which has created a dilemma for the young who have been displaced from their placid existence in rural areas to a world of conflict and confusion in urban settlements. A few of the stories in the collection capture the ambience of the traditional ‘Naga way of life’ which is becoming in Temsula Ao’s opinion “increasingly irrelevant in the face of the ‘progress and development’ which is only now catching up with the Naga people” (*ibid*).

According to Temsula Ao, what the stories on the conflict reveal is that there are no winners, only victims and “the results can be measured only in human terms” (*ibid*). While the past cannot be redeemed and the survivors carry prominent scars in mind and soul, Temsula Ao retains a hopeful vision for the future with faith in the belief that:

The inheritors of such a history have a tremendous responsibility to sift through the collective experience and make sense of the impact left by the struggle on their life lives. Our racial wisdom has always extolled the virtue of human beings living at peace with themselves and in harmony with nature and with ourselves. It is only when the Nagas re-embrace and re-write their vision into the fabric of their lives in spite of the compulsions of a fast changing world, can we say that the memories of the turbulent years have served us well. (*x-xi*)

The ten short stories can be viewed as a montage which offers a multidimensional view of Naga society, history, art, culture and traditions. The idea of home in the title *These Hills Called Home* encompasses the individual domestic household and the Naga homeland. The subtitle *Stories from a War Zone* takes the reader into a world of sharp, stark images of ordinary people struggling to survive in a menacing atmosphere with the ever-present shadow of death. Violence and warfare is the connecting thread linking the stories about the Naga independence movement and the repressive measures of the Indian state reveals the impact this had on the lives of ordinary villagers and small-town inhabitants. In such a situation, what Temsula Ao brings out is how women are often the biggest victims. Women bear the brunt of violent reprisals, particularly from the Indian soldiers who acted with impunity.

“The Jungle Major”, “Soaba”, “The Last Song”, “The Curfew Man” and “A New Chapter” have female figures forced into critical situations and predicaments when warlike and unstable conditions prevail. The women, as mothers and daughters, wives and widows, in their particular circumstance display various facets of womanly character. They respond with courage, strength, defiance, cunning or reveal their vulnerability, taking risks to protect their families, their people and themselves, some even losing their lives in the face of oppression. Stories such as “The Night” offer critiques of Naga patriarchy, “The Pot Maker” is a nuanced presentation of the struggle of a girl to learn a traditional art and “The Journey” is a pithy vignette of a young girl realising a truth about human relationships.

Stories such as “The Jungle Major”, “Soaba”, “The Last Song” and “The Night” for the current study will examine women's predicament in volatile

environments under patriarchal control. “Three Women” from *Laburnum for My Head* will look at women's private experience as mothers and daughters whose individual experiences and dark secrets do not stop them from establishing deep bonds though social, cultural and ideological concerns impinge on their daily lives. The women, residing in villages or small towns, cope with issues that revolve around their domestic affairs. The larger issues of living in a conflict area, vulnerable to physical or sexual violence, the psychological trauma of exposure to prolonged brutality and the restrictions placed on women existing in a patriarchal society - these have more serious and long term effects in their physical, material, emotional and psychological well-being.

In her essay “Women in the Time of Conflict: The Case of Nagaland”, Preeti Gill observes: “The loss that women face in times of conflict is not just emotional or physical in terms of losing a loved one, but also transfers into the economic and social spheres” (215). Further, women particularly the uneducated and unemployed, face greater burdens in running their households when their fathers or husbands are killed in encounters or remain in the jungle during army operations or even “disappear”. Normal life is completely disrupted: people cannot go to their fields to work, schools are shut down, churches are desecrated and able-bodied men and women flee to the jungles and survive on wild leaves and roots. The villages are razed, their foodstock - the granaries and livestock destroyed. In effect, what the stories detail are the lived experiences of ordinary men, women and children who lived through a period of turmoil, whose lives, livelihoods and childhoods were destroyed. The stories and experiences of women who lived in such a world shadowed by violence, death and fear is thus clearly delineated.

1(b) The Jungle Major's Wife

Against a scenario of war, the story “The Jungle Major” set in a village in Mokokchung district, introduces a mismatched couple. The tall, beautiful, rich, better-educated Khatila and her short, ugly, poor, less-educated husband Punaba. The considerable disparity between the beautiful wife and unprepossessing husband in their appearances extends to their family positions - Khatila comes from a major clan while Punaba belongs to a minor one. Despite the amazed wonder of their relatives and villages Khatila's father consents to the marriage and the two get married to settle into a placid rural existence. Unfortunately, they were a childless couple and over time, both of them become the subject of various speculations and lewd jokes, gossip and rumours regarding them - he was sterile or she was barren, circulated in their village. But the rumblings of resistance to Indian rule in the Naga independence movement start spreading through their land, sweeping the imagination of the people, drawing them into a vortex which many did not understand but which would be burnt into their consciousness.

In Temsula Ao's telling, Punaba, a driver by profession, is drawn into the independence struggle a year after their marriage. Their homeland is wracked by clashes between the ‘patriotic’ warriors and government forces. Reprisals against the villages to which underground leaders belonged was severe. Houses were ransacked, granaries were burnt and people were herded to be incarcerated in stockaded enclosures - the infamous ‘groupings’ of villages. Large-scale molestation and rape of women and the torture of menfolk ensued. A brutal campaign of oppressing and torturing a people into acceptance of Indian control was unleashed. Brief and pointed

pictures paints the devastation and cumulative impact of army operations on the psyche of a whole generation of people.

Despite the secrecy, living under a constant threat of fear, aware that the slightest information of her husband's presence in the village poses a danger to herself and the villagers, Khatila learns to respond cautiously to queries about Punaba's whereabouts. The husband's work takes him into the jungle, into the danger zone, while the wife remains at home minding the home fires to provide the comfort and warmth of wifely care on the rare occasions he could come and spend time with her.

Punaba's membership in the underground army affects Khatila's life in the village. He faces dangers living in the jungles and the danger of being a wanted man hunted by the government forces. On the other hand, Khatila becomes a target of surveillance and reports of strange visitors with provisions coming to her door in the absence of adults who would be working in their fields soon reaches the ears of the authorities who question the villagers and Khatila too. She would feign indifference to her husband's absence but the shadow of the threat of rape for lying to the government agencies remained. Leaving no doubt about their intentions, the dangerous predicament for her is heightened when she understands the perilous course she has to navigate. The fires of conflict that is scorching the land is reaching her doorstep and village. She is threatened with punishment of a special kind. "We know how to deal with women like you, the officer said, giving her a lascivious look" (4). The village is in danger of being razed. Under such threats, the village elders entreat her to send word to Punaba not to visit the village. She is aware that her husband would soon be informed of such incidents through the underground

grapevine. What is to be noted is that, despite her attempt to protect her husband, both she and the village are at risk and danger. She has to negotiate a dangerous course being the wife of an underground functionary. The individual and the community, both are at risk. In such a predicament, she realises she has to play the part of a dutiful woman because “in her position, she could not afford to antagonize the village authorities in any way” (*ibid*).

As government forces use oppressive measures to quell the rebellion, villages that suffer at the hands of the armed forces become sympathetic to the underground cause. Punaba, with age, experience and leadership qualities is promoted to the rank of a captain in the rebel army. His village becomes a strategic conduit for supplies and information for the so-called rebels. But even the jungle fighter cannot keep away from his beautiful wife for too long and on one of his brief visits, while recovering from a bullet injury, the army learns of his presence and a search party is sent to apprehend the notorious rebel leader. Hearing this, Khatila realises the extreme perilousness of her husband’s predicament who, if spotted, would be “shot down like a dog” (*ibid*).

1(c) Khatila’s Audacity

The village belle who has so far played a minor role in the theatre of armed conflict as compared to her husband, realises the gravity of their situation. With deft thinking, she resorts to an audacious ploy. In Khatila, Tamsula Ao brings out a facet of woman who does what she does in moments of extreme danger to protect and save her husband, herself and village from sure death.

Punaba is disguised with shabby clothes and ash smeared on his face, hands and feet. He is the lazy servant who has failed to fill up the water containers. Khatila

berates him loudly and at the same time empties the water containers on the bamboo platform in the rear of the house. Loading the water carrying baskets with the empty containers, the servant is harangued to fetch water when the search party arrives. It is a nonchalant, irritated, dishevelled angry woman scolding her lazy servant who opens the door. Though intelligence reports were accurate, the officer not having a clear idea of the wanted person was confused. Seizing the moment, Khatila pushes the disguised Punaba passed off as an inarticulate simpleton to fetch the water. Punaba, eluding the security cordon, escapes to the safety of the jungle while Khatila tries to charm the captain with an offer of tea. With more houses to search, the party declines her offer and leaves. Khatila is extremely grateful that the ugliness of her husband had saved them and their village. The young and inexperienced army officer did not realise that: “The beautiful but simple village woman had thus foiled a meticulously planned ‘operation’ of the mighty Indian army and that a prized quarry had simply walked away to freedom” (7).

The consequences for harbouring a notorious rebel and not informing the government forces brought reprisals. As had happened to other villages, “their barns would have been set on fire, their houses destroyed and the people would have been taken to the ‘grouping’ area” (*ibid*). In Khatila, Temsula Ao depicts a woman who is beautiful, resourceful and courageous. Aware of the dangerous predicament she is confronted with, her instinct for survival guides her actions. Armed with audacity and pluck, she is a figure of resistance and rebellion in several fronts. Standing up to threats, bullets and possible death, she is an unusual heroine.

By granting Khatila the quickness of mind to defy the power of the army captain, Temsula Ao challenges preconceptions about women, their abilities and

intelligence. Her Khatila is similar to the legendary heroines in Ao-Naga folklore. In her essay “Gender and Power: Some Women-Centered Narratives from Ao-Naga Folklore”, Temsula Ao states: “The image of women is generally projected as the weaker sex in the normative hierarchy of any patriarchal system. . . . The power structures with the family and society among the Nagas has always rested with the male” (71). The Ao-Nagas, like other Naga tribes, are patriarchal. Interestingly, in the four different kinds of narratives from folklore enumerated in her essay, Temsula Ao illustrates the depiction of women as domestic characters wielding power which traditionally belongs to the man. These female protagonists represent different aspects of the concept of reversal of role and subversion of the male power structure within society. In the women-centered narratives, Temsula Ao explains how “these women possess or are endowed with that extra power or mental energy through which they can control or manipulate events and fortunes at the most critical moment in their lives” (72). In Khatila, Temsula Ao offers a redefinition of women as the weaker sex which is a male construct. Women are considered marginal or of little significance in the origin, history and civil life of the people. But Khatila’s presence of mind, audacity and her clever ploy illustrate the nature of power women are shown to possess. In delineating such a character, Temsula Ao subtly highlights the dichotomy between the real and the mythical, the factual and the fictional in understanding women’s power.

Like the legendary heroines in Ao-Naga folklore and oral history, Khatila in “The Jungle Major” combines the common sense and intelligence of Akangla of Waromung village who helped the warriors of Longkhum in their war against the warriors of Nokrang and the cunning of the woman in the fourth narrative who has

no name but who, according to Temsula Ao in the essay “represents every woman and whose clever handling of a potentially dangerous situation has become idiomatic on the Ao language to refer to this inherent cunning in women” (78). Khatila through a combination of luck, quickness of mind, calculation and ingenuity, manages to avert a major disaster.

It should be noted however, that though it is the woman who puts her life on the line and pulls off her husband’s escape under the noses of the army, Punaba’s underground bosses ironically attribute it to his “shrewd planning” denying credit to the woman. Several years later during a general cease fire, Punaba now promoted to the rank of Major, ‘surrenders’ and is rehabilitated as a mechanic in the State Transport Department and eventually comes overground to join his wife.

In Khatila’s action, Temsula Ao displays a woman’s resourcefulness and bravado. She does not fit the stereotype of passive, obedient-to-tradition, domestic housewife nor does she fall into the image of a modern, progressive woman. She is an ordinary village woman who lives under a patriarchal culture which places women in a subordinate position. What is interesting is that while Temsula Ao ascribes Khatila with the strength or cunning inherent in women which saves her husband, herself and her entire village, the woman’s heroic action is unacknowledged. The conflict between two forces - the Indian army and the underground army is between two patriarchal entities. Women do not appear to figure in the ranks of the two armies nor are they shown as active agents in the war. They are, however, the soft targets of the government forces when search operations are launched and who like Khatila, take great risks to defend and protect others but are not given the recognition they deserve.

Khatila's motivation for her husband's survival ensures her own as a married woman, childless or not, in the world created by Temsula Ao. Her predicament is such that being the wife of the jungle major, she is placed in a dangerous quandary. When her husband is with her at home, they have to be alert and constantly on guard that the army authorities do not come to know of his presence. When he leaves her alone and remains in the jungle fighting for his beliefs, she faces a lonely, insecure existence. Considering the volatile climate of the times, it shows women like Khatila fighting her own battles for survival in a war zone. Though Khatila is beautiful, shrewd and from an affluent family, what is foremost in her mind is survival, particularly the survival or saving the life of her husband. Despite her family status and affluence, a woman in Ao Naga society in Temsula Ao's critical eye suggests that as she derives her identity from the man she is married to no matter what background he comes from, her individuality is unrecognised and effaced.

2(a) Soaba: Silent, Silenced Subaltern

In "Soaba", or idiot in the Ao language, the story revolves around an orphan who was slow in the head, talked incoherently and without a home or family, lived on people's charity. His actual name was Intimoa but his condition earned him the nickname that he was known by. He was "totally unaware of any reality except hunger and thirst and shelter from the cold and rain" who would be destined "to be caught up in the whirlwind sweeping through the land, creating havoc in people's lives" (9). A new environment in the towns was emerging, old ways were being overtaken and the younger generation found itself at the crossroads of Naga history.

Seen from the eyes of an 'idiot', a sequence of events unfolds which reveals a sinister aspect in the developments taking place. Caught in the wave of nationalist

fervour, dissidence and open rebellion against forces inimical to the aspirations of Nagas for freedom, inspired many to join the underground army. A new vocabulary crept into the everyday language of people. Words like “convoy, grouping, curfew and situation began to acquire sinister dimensions as a result of the conflict taking place between the government and underground armies” (10). The pristine Naga Hills saw the massive deployment of army personnel in long convoys which churned the dust. These convoys were regular targets of ambushes by the underground army resulting in casualties for the government forces and unfortunate civilians. To curb the movement and to punish those villages that helped members of the underground, whole villages would be dislodged from the ancestral sites and herded into new stockaded ones. This ‘grouping’ was, in Temsula Ao’s words;

the most humiliating insult that was inflicted on the Naga psyche by forcibly uprooting them from the soil of their origin and being, and confining them in an alien environment, denying them access to the fields, restricting them from their routine activities and most importantly, demonstrating to them that the freedom they enjoyed could so easily be robbed at gunpoint by the ‘invading army’. (11)

While the conflict continued in the jungle, a disturbing development was growing which was eating into the moral fabric of society in the conflict of interests that started destroying friendships and where loyalty became dispensable. The narrative tells of a new breed of disquieting elements in the towns who operate from shadowy positions as the ‘extra arms’ or ‘guides’ between the government forces and the underground army, in effect, spies or double agents

The story tells of this breed which played a role in perpetrating its “despicable designs” on their own people. Composed of deserters from the underground and hardened criminals, these self-seeking opportunists designated as Home guards supplied with vehicles, firearms and liquor are members of a unit called the “flying squad”. Led by a notorious former cop, they unleashed a campaign of intimidation and harassment of the public, settle old scores with opponents and create an environment of fear against anyone opposed to them. The leader, Imlichuba, known as Boss and his men were the new hierarchy “created by the Government forces to counter the influence of the rebel movement” (12). Seen from the eyes of a simpleton, the narrative captures the transformation and degeneration of an individual who lives by no code of honour or respect for others. Drunk with the power and authority given under the patronage of army bigwigs and senior administration officers, Boss is a menacing figure in the small town in which he operates. Soaba view of events and life around him is from an innocent, uncorrupted, simple-minded view of the world. He is the mute observer, the silent subaltern who cannot speak or even know himself. Between these two extremes stands Imtila, Boss’s wife, an ordinary housewife who witnesses the growing deterioration of her husband into brutality and savagery. In the activities of Boss and his men, Temsula Ao offers an insight into the sinister world of a thug who uses torture, threat, intimidation, violence and murder to serve the interests of his shadowy masters. Soaba is fascinated by the speeding squad vehicles that operate from Boss's house and by loitering around the area, becomes a mute fixture in the vicinity. Even the simple-minded boy senses that bad things happen in Boss's house.

2(b) Woman: Struggling in the Shadows

The wife, witnessing these developments finds herself trapped in an unpleasant predicament. Against her will, Imtila becomes a prisoner of her husband's notoriety. His changed fortunes bring unwelcome changes in her life. Her desire to be a normal house wife looking after her husband and children becomes a distant dream. She has to cater to the requirements her husband's new status demands of her - to dress up in the expensive clothes and jewellery he bought for her and play the amiable hostess to his guests. Her freedom is restricted and she cannot go out anywhere without a bodyguard. Her family and friends who cannot come freely to the house unlike before feel uncomfortable and stay away leaving her lonely and isolated in the unpleasant environment. Under the circumstances, looking for some relief from her dark and terrifying predicament, she finds a welcome diversion in the activities of Soaba or Supiba, short for “stupid bastard”, an expletive Boss uses, which in his simple mind he preferred to Soaba, who arouses her compassion.

Soaba appears to be the sanest link to humanity in a house infested by criminal elements. The sinister activities of Boss and his henchmen is gauged by the movement of shadowy figures that move in and out of the house after dark, the raids on a nearby village or part of the town soon after these visits and the arrest of suspected collaborators or agents of the underground outfit. Imtila's initial happiness at her husband's new job gives way to growing unease as she realises the true nature of his work. She watches his degeneration as the company of hardened criminals becomes a scourge in her house. “These people seemed to infest her environment. She could no longer call her home her personal domain. there was no peace and quiet for her or her children because her husband’s lackeys seemed to be everywhere”

(15). Their drinking parties lead to abusive outbursts of violent temper and unfortunate detainees undergoing interrogation bore the brunt of their drunken savagery. During such occasions;

The night would erupt with the unearthly screams and cries of the victims and even though the record player did its best to muffle the sound, the walls of the house seemed to reverberate with their agony and the poor woman with this knowledge in her heart would writhe in an agony of helplessness. Sometimes she would even run to the bathroom and vomit whatever little food she had eaten. (16)

Living under the same roof with Boss took its toll as he becomes distant from the wife and children. From their growing estrangement, “he sensed that his wife had gone away from the sanctuary of their relationship and had retreated into a world where he had no place” (*ibid*). His degeneration and growing brutality concurs with the breakdown of family life and decline of their marriage. Imtila takes to sleeping in another room. He loses his physical desire for her and other women. However out of an egotistical perversity, to prove his manhood, women hired with promises of money and a good time are brought to his house to be used, abused and discarded. Imtila finds herself in an impossible predicament. Lonely, insecure and uneasy, living in the same house as her husband, her life is one of unspoken misery and unshared problems. She retreats into the sanctuary of her room to shut out the miasma of the unpleasantness. On the other hand, Boss, a one-time asset was now becoming a liability to his handlers who apprehended exposure of their sinister abuses unless something was done to check him. On a particularly boisterous party night, Boss receives the message of an imminent threat to his life. He reacts with defiance and

rage rather than fear over a suspected assassin from within his squad and threatens to finish the traitor when he finds them.

On that fateful night, Imtila takes the frightened and bewildered Supiba who had hidden himself in the pantry by giving him refuge from the raucous party in the quiet of her room in the rear of the house. She pushes him under her bed motioning him to keep quiet. After several hours, feeling cramped, he crawls out and looks about him curiously. While Imtila is in the bathroom, he espies what looks like a toy in her dressing table drawer and picks it up. At that moment, Boss who has been rampaging through the house hunting for the traitor bursts into Imtila's room and comes across Supiba holding a gun. Mistaking him for the assassin, Boss is about to shoot him when Imtila emerges from the bathroom to see her husband taking aim. Amidst Imtila's screams and Supiba's frightened growls, the drunken man kills the innocent boy. Imtila, in anguish, cries out: "Oh my poor boy, were you born for this? Why did I let you come to this evil place? (19). She becomes disconsolate weeping and muttering the words repeatedly while a "stupefied Boss" is led away by his bodyguards back to the noisy party which carried on as if nothing had taken place.

But things would not remain the same after news spreads of the unexpected death. The actual circumstances leading to Supiba's death are never properly investigated nor talked about but the townspeople started witnessing changes in Boss. The death of the "poor idiot boy who chanced to be in this malfeasant circle created by Boss and his cohorts" (19) is mourned by no one but Imtila who after locking herself for three days in her room emerges on the fourth to have Supiba's effects - his cot and clothes taken to a far corner of the garden to be burnt. In exorcising through fire, "she was obliterating a painful chapter of her own life

through this ritual” (20). Outwardly, the old routine resumes but Imtila notices her estranged husband becomes a changed man. Her conflicted feelings change by turns from fear to indifference to pity as she notices his diminishment from his former self to a brooding, guilt-ridden creature.

In Imtila, Tamsula Ao presents a woman caught in a painful plight. Whether lacking a strong will or economic independence, Imtila does not lack in compassion despite being married to an uncompassionate brute, taking an unfortunate idiot boy under her protection. It is the tragic death of Supiba that jolts her husband out of the miasma of evil he had descended into. Caught in the dilemma of living in a house that was no better than hell or to salvage her marriage: “She tried to pick up the broken pieces of their former life and create new order from the pathetic remains. It was not an easy task but she persevered because the alternative was too frightening to contemplate” (20-21).

2(c) Humanity in a Time of Evil

Through this depiction, Tamsula Ao illustrates the degrading and dehumanizing effect of conflict in the sinister, shadowy forces that damaged marriages, homes, lives and above all the character of men who victimized others and themselves were victims of the debilitating and corrupting disease that started growing in Naga society since the fifties. The vain, power-drunk menace in the town appears to shrink literally and figuratively as people notice the one-time, fashionable, three-piece-suit wearing thug is never seen wearing one again after the “sad accident” and Supiba’s burial unbeknownst to him, in Boss’s best suit. In “Soaba”, Tamsula Ao presents the dehumanizing aspect of conflict on players like Boss and his flying squad who are instruments of and active participants in opportunism,

profiteering from the prevailing conditions. Imtila as the wife and mother to the children of Boss, is trapped in an unpleasant predicament desperately trying to cling on to humanity amidst the chaos that had engulfed her world. In spite of the wretchedness of her own life, she tried to give Soaba a certain measure of love, protection and care. Sadly, her concern and care could not save him. Soaba's madness shields him from the pressure of living in a world fraught with fear, violence and death. While Boss succumbs to the pressure, Imtila struggles against the wretched condition she is trapped in. Boss is representative of the decay that erodes the moral fabric of society. Imtila clings desperately to her humanity but is unable to exert influence on her husband's behaviour leading inexorably to an avoidable tragedy.

"Soaba" illustrates what Temsula Ao says about conflict in which there are no winners, only victims. The human cost is brought out through several ironies woven into the tragedy which exacts a heavy toll on a person's humanity. Soaba's madness insulates him from comprehending what to a sane person is incomprehensible violence, lust for power, money and moral decay. Imtila finds her husband, the one-time police officer, ironically a symbol of rule and law, gradually degenerating into a figure of lawlessness and madness. She finds comforting refuge in the company of Soaba who appears the only sane link to the external world in an insane environment. Boss's wealth, power and lavish lifestyle cannot hide the ugliness of his mind and soul. It is the woman who suffers the pain of watching her husband's degradation and witnesses the murder of an innocent boy who did not understand the evil that killed him. From her dark and fearful predicament overshadowed by horror, Soaba's tragic death appears to clear the malfeasance that had descended on Boss and his house. It

is as if in the death of innocence, Boss wakes up from the madness he had descended to.

Though Imtila appears to be held hostage to her husband's will and power and lacks the economic resources to leave, she retains her humanity. In the chaos and wretchedness of her life, it is left to Imtila to pick up the pieces for Soaba's innocence and senseless death teaches her that love and compassion can exist even when the world is darkened by evil.

3(a) Libeni and Apenyo

"The Last Song" is a poignant tale of a beautiful and talented young girl Apenyo endowed with an exquisite singing voice who is brought up by her widowed mother Libeni. Temsula Ao translates the social reality of the times into telling portraits presenting the story of a lonely widow struggling to bring up her young child in a rural world with limited opportunities of any kind giving the reader an understanding of a widows' plight. Libeni works on the land and with her weaving skills as one of the best weavers in the village sustains her and Apenyo economically with self-sufficiency to survive with dignity. Through her struggles, Apenyo remains a source of comfort and joy for Libeni. Her daughter, who had inherited her love of singing from her father, Zhamben, blossoms into a natural beauty with an enchanting voice.

Zhamben was a school teacher, a gifted singer of both traditional songs and Christian hymns who was taken ill while undergoing a teacher-training course in Assam passing away prematurely when Apenyo was only nine months old. Widowed too soon, life becomes "a lonely struggle for the mother trying to cultivate a field and bring up small child on her own" (24). Her in-laws and her own relatives help her

occasionally, they also encourage her to remarry ostensibly to have a man who would at least protect and looked after them. Libeni however chooses to remain single, to be independent and to devote herself to her daughter's and her survival. Apenyo grows into a bright school student, assisting her mother and learning the art of weaving from her to become an excellent weaver.

In Libeni and Apenyo's story, Temsula Ao reveals the myriad challenges women, particularly widows, encounter in their struggle for survival, made harsher by the turbulent times in which they leaved. Though lacking in material wealth, the mother and daughter have a strong and rewarding relationship as Apenyo's exquisite singing voice "gets her inducted into the church choir as the lead soprano" (25). Their village life revolves around working on the land, weaving traditional body cloths and upholding their faith in Christian religious practices which occupied a prominent position in the lives of rural people. Libeni's struggle against the odds reveals the self-reliance of women without male members who refuse to be defeated by adversity. Though lacking in formal education or material wealth, her survival skills of working with her hands ensures she can feed and clothe herself and her daughter. Her struggles are rewarded as Apenyo, the little girl who was "born to sing" grows into "a singing beauty". Libeni was overjoyed and "she was happy that all those years of loneliness and hardship were well-rewarded by God through her beautiful and talented daughter" (*ibid*).

However the peaceful tenor of their lives takes a dark turn as "these troubled times for the Nagas" brought in upheaval and catastrophe in the lives of ordinary people. Libeni and Apenyo's village was preparing and looking forward to a special event one year - the construction of a new church building and its dedicatory service

on completion which was planned for the first week of December after the harvesting of fields was over. The preparations got underway months in advance and Apenyo would be the lead singer of the church choir. The shadow of the Naga independence movement was gaining momentum. The villagers were either joining the underground army or “paying taxes” to the underground “government”. Tragedy befalls their village as the Indian army, getting hold of incriminating documents from a raid on an underground camp, decides “to teach all the villages the consequences of supporting the rebel cause by paying the taxes” (26). Unaware of such a sinister plan, the villagers caught up in their hectic activities and celebratory fervour were busy preparing for the dedication Sunday.

Just when the pastor pronounces the invocatory prayer followed by the choir’s first song, ominous sounds in the distance signalled the arrival of an army search party. The scene Temsula unravels in the story is a scene that was replicated in many villages and parts of the Naga homeland. Villagers who had gathered for a festive occasion of the new Church with worship and singing were rudely interrupted by a group of Indian Army men. The nervous pastor and frightened dobashi or translator try to reassure their villagers. Unexpectedly, Apenyo in youthful zeal to overcome fear, bursts into her solo number followed by the other choir members. The soldiers react with fury at the ‘defiance’ and set about to exact ‘proper retaliation’. There is confusion and fear as the villagers are roughly pushed and assaulted with the pastor and gaonburas ‘village elders’ being herded by rifle butts towards the waiting army jeeps. In the ensuing melee, “only Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her” (27). The mother's call to Apenyo to stop goes unheeded. As she attempts to pull her daughter

away to safety, the leader of the army group grabs Apenyo and drags her off by her hair towards the old church.

In the ensuing chaos, villagers fleeing from the scene are kicked, clubbed, shot at by the soldiers. Many seek shelter in the old and new church hoping for divine protection. Libeni frantically searches for her daughter in the direction of the old church and comes upon a horrifying sight - the rape of her beloved daughter by a depraved group of soldiers. In a desperate attempt to rescue her daughter, Libeni lunges forward to haul off the rapist. Instead, she too is caught by a soldier. Realising his intention, she spits on his face, twisting and trying to free herself from his grip which infuriates and arouses him. The following passage describes the atrocity:

he bashed her head on the hard ground several times knocking her unconscious and raped her limp body, using the woman's new lungi afterwards, which he had flung aside, to wipe himself. The small band of soldiers then took their turn, even though by the time the fourth one mounted, the woman was already dead. Apenyo, though terribly bruised and dazed by what was happening to her, was still alive though barely so. Some of the villagers who had entered the old church saw what happened to mother and daughter and after the soldiers were seen going to the village square, came out to help them. As they were trying to lift the limp bodies, the Captain happened to look back and seeing that there were witnesses to the despicable act, turned to his soldiers and ordered them to open fire on the people who were now lifting up the bodies of the two women. Amid screams and yells, the bodies were dropped as the helpless villagers once again tried to seek shelter inside the church. (28-29)

The captain returns with his men who take positions around the church and empty their guns into the old building killing those inside the house of God. To ensure there would be no witnesses to their diabolical crime, the church with its dead or dying witnesses is set on fire. So too are the granaries and houses.

3(b) Women's Predicament in War

In her poignant rendering, Temsula Ao highlights the gender dimensions of conflict. Apenyo and Libeni's tragedy represents the vulnerability of women in times of conflict or war. Men, women and children are victimized. However, women who are seen as symbolic upholders of culture, tradition and identity become the prime targets. Rape as a weapon of war is used as a strategy to sexually violate the women but also an act of aggression, to humiliate, terrorize and dishonour communities. Several painful ironies stand out and the metaphor of fire recurs to reinforce the 'birth by fire' of Nagas, many of whom died fiery, terrible deaths.

Examining the women's predicament, it is clear that a widow with a young daughter faces great hardships in their daily existence. What compounds the tragedy for widows and their daughters is the lack of physical security during armed attacks. Though life was hard, it was idyllic and Libeni is happy her daughter had turned into a joy and consolation for her. Their peaceful existence is shattered with the intrusion of the "arrogant Indian army" which carried out operations against Naga people who were seen as the enemy, 'the Other'. The peaceful villages invaded by military aggressors, unarmed villagers facing armed soldiers, reflects the irony of the unequal battle. As the captain and his soldiers carry out their diabolical crime, Apenyo's only weapon, her voice was not silenced. The rape and murder of the young girl and her mother, the killing of their villagers, stand as metonymic embodiments of the rape of

the Naga country. Their story is emblematic of the injustice and oppression of Nagas at the hands of a military force. Though the captain obliterated evidence of his crime, he could not obliterate or stamp out the sound of Apenyo's last song, a song she sang over and over again while she was being raped. That it occurred in a church points to the desecration of a house of worship. Apenyo's body, representative of the Naga homeland can be seen as a site of battle upon which the Indian Army asserts its dominance. The savagery with which it is carried out, the sacrilege of a holy place symbolises the barbarism enacted in the name of upholding patriotism. That a travesty had been committed is reinforced by the rain which fell that whole night as if nature too mourned the tragedy.

In her telling, Temsula Ao's anguish at the collective trauma which has deeply wounded the psyche of generations of Nagas is very clear. That women often bore the brunt of extreme brutality is clearly explicated. The mother and daughter's tragedy extends to the denial of burial in the village graveyard on the grounds of their unnatural death. Superstition and tradition override Christian faith and their final resting place is on the perimeter of the graveyard without gravestones. A passage of thirty years has not stilled Apenyo's last song and voice. The memory of that dreadful Sunday is not forgotten. The two grassy knolls near the village graveyard remind the villagers of the painful past, "especially of the young girl whose last song died with her last breath, who lived on in the souls of those who survived the darkest day of the village" (31).

Examining the story of women's victimization, Temsula Ao offers a sharp critique of militarism with its attendant 'hegemonic masculinity' manifested in violence against women. In the context of the turbulent situation in the Naga Hills

during the 1950s, the Naga homeland became a highly militarized zone. The bloodshed, killings and atrocities made the women's predicament dangerous and insecure. The young, virginal Apenyo's song is a voice of defiance symbolically resisting, standing up to male military power which reacts with disproportionate force. Rape is used as a weapon of war to teach Nagas a lesson. Apenyo and Libeno's tragedy is symbolic of the oppression and victimization of countless women during the unstable times who paid the price for their 'crime' of supporting the rebel cause.

Aspects of Naga society with its adherence to traditional systems, beliefs and practices are blended in Tamsula Ao's narrative strategy of oral story-telling. The old story teller who tells of the past to a younger generation, serves to remember, to retrieve, recover and transmit the history of their traumatic, painful history. The memory of the Black Sunday and Apenyo's story which has become a local legend, is passed on through verbal testimony to the young listeners. Rebuking the sceptical youngsters for not paying attention to the environment around them: "She tells them that youngsters of today have forgotten how to listen to the voice of the earth and the wind" (32). Instructing them to listen carefully, the eerie, haunting sound in the wind she says, is Apenyo's last song, heard during the anniversary night of that dreadful Sunday. As the old story teller gathers the young audience around here, she tells them of a dark day: "When a young and beautiful singer sang her last song even as one more Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined children" (33).

Through the powerful concluding metaphor, Tamsula Ao encapsulates the tragedy of Naga women and their Naga country symbolized in the figure of a grieving mother. As the political landscape turned the lives of ordinary people into nightmares, the woman's story which for ages remained untold in the pages of the

report of bureaucrats, anthropological studies and military analysts, find visibility and voice in the hands of writers like Temsula Ao who ensures the Naga woman's voice, marginalised and silenced, find articulation in her literary productions. Writing from the position of marginal communities on the national periphery, a woman, a tribal, a Naga, writers like Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire through their work set up a resistance to the modes of silencing - customary laws and traditional practices by refusing to remain mute.

4(a) Imnala's Night of Turmoil

In the story "The Night", Temsula Ao presents an aspect of Naga culture which lays great emphasis on the identity of a person through acknowledgement of paternity by the biological father. Failure to grant paternal recognition renders the child, particularly those born out of wedlock an *Imdongchar* or child of the street. Society cannot confer paternity on that child if the biological father refuses to acknowledge and accept the child as his. The child is thus reduced to someone who in Ao society is regarded a non-person without this form of social insurance. The young unmarried mother Imnala does not want that fate for her second as yet unborn child. Her daughter from a previous liaison is already tarred and remains unacknowledged as his daughter by an earlier lover, who abandoned her to join the underground army, leaving Imnala feeling betrayed and humiliated.

"The Night" offers a critique on Naga social mores, patriarchy, the politics of male/female relationships, gender discrimination and sexuality. As a commentary on social morality and its victimization of women, Temsula Ao presents a sharp critique on the ways women are conditioned by patriarchy to become victims from self abnegation in multiple ways. The opening lines tell of Imnala's painful predicament:

“It was a night she would remember all the days of her life. It was the night before the day when the fate of the baby in her womb would be decided” (44). During the night, various questions weigh heavily on her chest. Her inner turmoil on her predicament - unwed motherhood from an affair with a married man, the prospect of coming face to face with the wronged wife, who had requested the Village Council to deal with Imnala's case, remind her of the pain of an earlier affair where her lover, with words of love and passionate advances, had bowled her over into an intimate relationship which led to her earlier pregnancy and consequently, the lover's exit from her life. The memory of the past brings a bad taste in her mouth. The turmoil in her mind reminds her how she has once again been seduced a second time by a lover whose promises and assurances she has swallowed to be betrayed a second time.

In Imnala's story, Tamsula Ao explores the ways young single women become victims of men who love and leave them, women who fall prey to men's advances, seduced with promises of marriage and are left in the lurch when the woman becomes pregnant. The children out of wedlock of such affairs are labelled as illegitimate ‘child of the street’. The woman bears the stigma of immorality becoming an object of derision and the butt of jokes. Imnala, a beautiful and accomplished girl, was hard working, a fine weaver and a great house keeper who was an asset to her mother whose labour at home and in the fields made her invaluable to her mother. She was a high school student who contributed with her domestic labour to make her mother happy and relaxed, especially during her vacations. A young, unsophisticated girl, she would learn the hard way when her trusting nature leads her to believe the assurances of her lovers. In Imnala, Tamsula Ao presents the gullibility of young girls who are lured with false promises and

sexually exploited by older men who with pretensions of concern for the girl and her family, particularly those that are economically disadvantaged, take advantage of their simplicity.

The story illustrates female powerlessness and male privilege in the affairs of Imnala. The patriarchal bias towards women, the male-dominated perspective of society is evident in the way the victim and her family are scrutinized through a moral lens which places social stigma on them, with questions and aspersions being cast on the woman's character. The male prerogative of admitting or denying paternity puts the expecting mother, particularly unmarried young ones, in a very painful predicament that can cause deep anxiety, mental, emotional and psychological stress. Her pregnant state compounds the feelings of victimization and exploitation as the critical eye of society is harsher on women than on men whose roving eye or licentious behaviour is looked askance whereas the woman is branded with various labels. The manner in which the lovers so quickly discard the women reflects how women are used for sexual gratification with little concern for their emotional well-being from such forms of rejection. Not only the young girl, her family too suffer as Imnala's parents in their individual capacities feel the humiliation of being objects of ridicule and gossip. Throughout the night, the young woman recollects the chain of events leading to her present situation. The uppermost concern in her mind is about the survival of her unborn child, who will have an identity, a place in society, when he or she is acknowledged by the father. Portrayed as a village beauty courted by many suitors, Imnala's previous lover had managed to overwhelm her with his persistence, expensive gifts and impressive courtesy towards her parents. Bowled over by his ardent attentions, her parents too, by relaxing their

vigilance, encourage the liaison hoping their daughter would be married soon by the young man who came from a major clan and was working as a junior engineer. Young Imnala and her parents are taken in by the young man's fervour. Unfortunately, they are shattered when on discovering Imnala's pregnancy, the lover makes an abrupt exit from her life citing important business and to their dismay, learn of his marriage to a female functionary of the underground army which he had joined. Left in the lurch, the young girl painfully realises how gullibly she had believed her lover's expressions of love, how easily she had become an accomplice in her self-exploitation and victimization.

The realisation of her lover's perfidy causes deep wounds which hurts her further when he refuses to send a name for the child rendering her a bastard in people's eyes and casting doubt on his paternity thus questioning the mother's moral character. Imnala's predicament tells of the experience of young unmarried mothers who bear the brunt of social judgement and criticism when a man and a woman are involved in an intimate relationship which results in an illegitimate child. It reveals the multiple ways women are victimized in the power dynamics of male/female relationships. Her parents value their daughter but the men in her life treats her as a commodity to be used and discarded. A man and woman mutually enter into a love affair: As the affair progresses, the man's pledges of love build expectations of the security of marriage, financial security and social standing in the woman. It is with these expectations that Imnala is seduced into her affair as a willing partner. These expectations are belied when her lover abandons her the moment her pregnancy is revealed. Temsula Ao depicts the turmoil a young woman experiences when men, having satisfied their libido, bolt from the relationship the moment the pregnancy is

discovered. Women are left to bear the consequences of such affairs - the stigma of promiscuity, unwed motherhood, loss of character and the burden of bearing and nurturing a child without the father's financial and moral support.

Shattered by her lover's betrayal, Imnala's mental torture, feelings of guilt, the loss of face and the prospect of single parenthood, create deep angst which no one understands. The men, the cause of the women's predicament, appear by comparison to get away lightly. Revealing the double standards of society, Tamsula Ao raises a question here - Why is the man who is guilty of infidelity not in the dock? Why is only the girl hauled up before a court? The answer lies in the patriarchal organisation of society where power lies in the hands of men. The social world inhabited by Imnala, the men in her life and her community is a world that operates on traditional power structures where women have always been subordinate to men. In her essay "Benevolent Subordination", Tamsula Ao says that: "The Nagas are a patriarchal society where women have always been subordinate to men. In varying degrees among different tribes, they have however enjoyed the protection of the men in terms of their physical well-being and as members of specific clans" (46). However, due to strictly defined roles of women in such tradition, only men can be decision-makers in important matters, both in private and public affairs. The subordination and exclusion of women operates not only in decision-making but extends to governance, power and economic areas. V. Geetha's definition of patriarchy can be relevant in the Naga context:

Patriarchy rests on defined notions of masculine and feminine, is held in place by sexual and property arrangements that privilege men's voices, choices, desires and interests over and above those of the women in their

life and is sustained by social relationships and cultural practices which celebrate heterosexuality, female fertility and motherhood on the one hand and valorise female subordination to masculine authority and virility on the other. (8)

It is clear from this definition that patriarchy's privileging of men through biological, social and cultural arrangements create women's sexual and social subordination on the discriminatory and unjust gender systems. In the story, Temsula draws out how from the social organisation of male/female relationships and division of roles, young girls like Imnala face enormous challenges as the odds weigh heavily against them. Her family's modest financial standing and her limited education create room for men like Alemba, her second lover, to take advantage. While her father enters into a business arrangement with the 'school-dropout-turned contractor', the family has little realisation that by extending the hand of friendship and trust to the young man, they were inviting future turmoil and heartache into their household.

Alemba is a persuasive young man. His generous gifts for Imnala; meat and vegetables for the house on a regular basis establishes familiarity with the family. While the contract business went on smoothly, Alemba becomes a frequent visitor. His easy manner, his fund of stories of the girls in town flirting with young officers of the Indian army and flattery overcome Imnala's reserve. Though Tekatoba her father, knew Alemba was married with two children, he interpreted their visitor's kindness as pity for his unfortunate daughter. His friendly approach wins the trust of her parents and Imnala though cautious, begins to look forward to his visits. On a particular occasion, when her mother leaves home to visit a sick friend, she entrusts Alemba to keep an eye on Imnala who was unwell. The mother leaves Alemba and

Imnala in the house. “This was just the opportunity that he was looking for” (49). What arises from this statement are questions about Alemba's less chivalrous intentions disguised as concern for Imnala by his offer to make tea and to massage her head.

Surprised by this offer and disturbed by his presence, Imnala is overcome by dizziness while raising herself from the bed. In attempting to support her, he touches her body and “A gesture made in momentary confusion was all that was needed to initiate the inevitable” (*ibid*). Against her better judgement, Imnala gives in to a ‘primeval urging’. Unbeknownst to her other family members: “What started almost as an accident grew into an uncontrollable passion for both and in due course, the inevitable happened. Imnala became pregnant out of wedlock for the second time” (50). This news soon gets tongues wagging with jokes about her father's venality and Imnala's sexual appetite. When her pregnancy becomes public, Alemba's visits become rare and Imnala remains indoors avoiding people eyes.

Temsula Ao reveals the ways women can become victims of their own unconstrained desires. One of the painful lessons Imnala learns from her predicament is society's double standards of morality for men and women. With remembered sensations, she recalls how her body had responded hungrily to the touch of a man. But now, with the child growing in her, there is a growing awkwardness her condition has brought upon her family. She has to face Alemba's wife and a customary meeting of male elders that would decide the fate of her unborn child. Temsula Ao demonstrates through Imnala's predicament the multiple dilemmas for women who live under male-defined rules and customary laws. In her essay “Articulate and Inarticulate Exclusion”, Temsula Ao explains how the process of

exclusion of women in different spheres of social, political, traditional and cultural practices takes place in Ao society.

In the patriarchal culture of the Ao tribe, every aspect of life within the community is dominated by men. In the essay, according to Temsula Ao, curiously enough, “the exclusion of women from structures of power within the village polity and in other social and religious activities has not so far been considered to be so, either by the women themselves or by men” (94). The allocation of roles and division of labour on traditional gender lines, the disqualification of women due to her physical weakness and sex led to her exclusion in participating in traditional leadership and decision-making positions, thus promoting the biological essentialist view in the innate inferiority of women to men. This leads to unequal gender relations and the most telling exclusion of women in Temsula Ao’s observation is in the domain of governance: “No woman can sit in the Village Council, no woman can participate in any general assembly of the village where village affairs are discussed and decisions are made” (97).

The psyche of the women themselves is a factor in not voicing or protesting these seeming injustices. Unlike other cultures, Ao women do not suffer physical abuse from their men folk. Her physical and mental well-being whether single or married is ensured through the protection guaranteed by her brothers, uncles and clansmen. The women themselves have brought into this arrangement by their unquestioning acquiescence for ages, thus allowing, in Temsula Ao’s observations, for ‘benevolent subordination’ to operate under an entrenched patriarchy.

In Imnala's predicament, Temsula Ao points out how ideologies of family, patriarchy and culture define women's position in the social and political Ao Naga

world and contribute to their subordinate predicament. Reading from a feminist paradigm, women like Imnala are trapped in situations which offer little scope for redress. Under male-designed customary laws, the woman more than the man, is stigmatized creating strains in the family relationships among the members, between parents, between parents and daughters and between siblings. In the story, her emotional and mental turmoil is aggravated when Alemba tells her not to worry about the child:

She felt like tearing her hair out and shouting ‘What about me? Is everything going to be alright for me ever again? Her whole life lay shattered now, her mother had not said a word to her since the discovery of her pregnancy while her father rarely went out. He sat morosely on the bamboo platform all day. Her brother left her smarting with shame and hurt at his abuse, her sisters. . . enquired how she was feeling, not once mentioning Alemba's name. . . In short, life became a living hell for everyone in the family. (51-52)

The day comes when the family receives summons from the wronged wife's maternal uncle for a joint meeting in the presence of village elders. Imnala's maternal uncle escorts her to the meeting in the evening. When her father tells her mother to tell Imnala not to open her mouth in the meeting, the mother retorts: “You tell her yourself. Isn't she your daughter too? And that rascal. Wasn't he your partner?” (52). The vehemence of her words and the recollection of events over the past year and a half fill his mind with many questions. As sleep eludes him during the night, he realises “There could be no answer to these questions except the certainty of the shame and ridicule that awaited the family the next day” (*ibid*).

On the fateful day, the mother completes her domestic works and prepares to go to the fields. Before leaving, she warns Imnala to keep her mouth shut during the meeting. On her way, she slackens her pace and falls behind from the other villagers. Alone, the brusque, nonchalant mask she had worn ever since learning of her daughter's pregnancy falls off. Her reticence and silent bravado gives way to a flood of tears from the "immense heartache" she had kept hidden from others and from her "bruised heart" (53). Her tears flow from the emotional and mental sorrow she feels for her daughter and the family's predicament: "She wept for the daughter so helplessly caught in the web of youthful passion. She wept for her husband who had only wanted to build a good house for the family and above all, she wept for herself for being a mere spectator of the sorrow now engulfing them all, including the innocent unborn child" (*ibid*). Tamsula Ao brings out the anguish of a mother who recognises how the biased eyes of society victimizes her daughter, her family and above all, a child who will become an innocent victim as a consequence.

4(b) Moral Lens of Society

With each succeeding story, Tamsula Ao spins and weaves narratives of women's diverse predicaments, their particular challenges in the various roles they are depicted in and the different ways women are subordinated, victimized and oppressed. Her women characters are not always passive agents. There are some when pushed to an extreme, take things into their hands. The mother's sense of victimization contains subliminal anger at the whole state of affairs which is directed at the father whose business partnership with Alemba led to Alemba's frequent visits to their house. In her moment of private grief, Imnala's mother recalls her own mother's words which haunt her: "Remember, in our society a woman must have the

protection of a man even if he happens to be blind or lame. A woman alone will always be in danger” (*ibid*). This injunction from a woman of an older generation to her daughter significantly underscores how the male prerogative has been in operation for generations. In “Articulate and Inarticulate Exclusion”, Temsula Ao explains that:

For centuries women have been raised with the acquiescent attitude of mothers and grandmothers, that the male of the species is superior to them in every way. Girls are told to get married, even if the man is blind or lame because, the older women say, he is a MAN! And a woman without a man in her life is missing something vital; she is considered a person of no consequence in society without a husband” . (99)

Imnala’s mother is only too aware how men have the advantage while the woman bears the consequences in more ways than one. In the story, Temsula Ao reveals how, in the event of a critical situation as in the case of Imnala's pregnancy - the family shares the burden of the unwed mother’s pain. As the family goes through the discomfort, despite the tension brought on by her pregnant predicament, her family remains a refuge, a safe harbour. In spite of the awkwardness, the feelings of humiliation Imnala brings with her ‘shame’, it is clear that her family neither disowns nor rejects her. Though each member reacts in different ways, the bonds remain unbroken. Imnala exists in a social world where a woman's position and life, bound by various narrow social and customary laws, can be deeply insecure. That her fate hangs in a precarious balance is brought out tellingly in the following quote: “She would have to face and bear the scorn and abuse of Alemba's wife and the

censure of society whose balance of justice always tended to tilt against the women” (54).

The lover, an older married man and an adulterer, is equally guilty but the woman becomes the sole accused. This skewed view of justice, the accusing eyes of society directed at the women makes it enormously challenging to go through day to day life. In such a world, young unmarried mothers such as Innala need a support system which she has in her family. Despite a second pregnancy, she does not remain defeatist. She derives strength from her family which shoulders her dilemma with their grudging acceptance of her condition. They do not condone her behaviour but they do not abandon her. With her, they await a reasonable resolution to the crisis. Emboldened by a mysterious energy that gives her hope, she comes to a decision. With a renewed sense of self, she decides to complete her school, get a job and educate her children to ensure they have a better life than hers. Revitalized with these thoughts, she is no longer the woman who “grappled with fear and utter despair in the darkest night of her life” (54).

As Innala makes elaborate preparations for the meeting, her parents silently note the change in her. Her mother particularly appears nonchalant, sitting by the fire to drink tea and smoke her pipe which hides a deep concern. Her father makes a special appeal to the maternal uncle to ensure his daughter’s safe return knowing that “there were instances where under similar circumstance, a girl’s hair was chopped off and her clothes stripped off to shame her” (55).

In the meeting, Alemba unlike the earlier lover, behaves like a ‘true man’. When she returns unharmed, her father gratefully acknowledges his brother-in-law’s customary obligations. Innala is restored whole to her family. Under her uncle’s

protection, the crisis is resolved. The biological father's admission of paternity lifts the darkness that like "a dreaded storm" had come and gone. The parents can now sleep peacefully knowing that there would be no "dreadful spectres" to haunt them thereafter.

Imnala is aware of the difficult life that lies ahead. With two illegitimate children, the stigma of unwed motherhood would remain all her life. She has no answer to the silent recriminations and pain of her parents, but takes comfort in the fact that they would never abandon her. However, the biggest consolation for her is that her unborn child has secured his identity with the social insurance that acknowledged paternity grants a child born out of wedlock.

A gender-sensitive reading from a feminist stance in examining women's predicament looks at issues of unwed motherhood, illegitimate children, women's powerlessness and denial of voice in a male-dominated culture. It looks at social opprobrium, stigma and the relative voicelessness of women trapped in her particular predicament.

It is clear from the events, the circumstances which impact Imnala, her feelings and perceptions of the judgemental attitude of her society brings out women's insecure position. The all-male jury makes the decisions granting greater power to the man. The fate of the mother-to-be and the unborn child lies in the hands of the would-be father who has the power to admit or deny paternity. His word, not that of the women will decide the outcome. He holds the power of the word, the power of voice. The woman's voice, the woman's word is of little significance. Aware of this, Imnala is deeply concerned that her unborn child should be acknowledged so

that he or she will have a place in society. Survival and identity are more important in her instance rather than morality which appears to be anti-women.

Temsula Ao critiques the operation of a patriarchy which denies women selfhood, victimizes them socially, causes deep emotional and psychological stress, hurts them materially and most critically, denies them the power of voice. Her Imnala will face continual challenges, Hers will be the constant struggle Naga women experience throughout their lives which is defined by articulate and inarticulate exclusion under ‘benevolent subordination’. In her grim observation in “Articulate and Inarticulate Exclusion” over the exclusions experienced by women, “barring a cataclysmic natural event or a historic social upheaval engendered by men in Ao society, the exclusionary practices against women may continue for another millennium” (100).

5(a) Three Women

In her collection of short stories, *Laburnum for My Head*, the story “Three Women” tells of a woman's “terrible secret which comes full circle, changing her daughter's and granddaughter's lives as well as her own” (*blurb*). In the epigraph to *Laburnum for My Head*, the writer says: “Stories live in every heart; some get told, many others remain unheard – stories about individual experiences ... and those that are ... at times confessions”. “Three Women” tells the stories of three generations of women who relate their individual experiences and confess dark secrets that have haunted them for years. With a deep understanding of the dilemmas, confusion and conflicting emotional states that women experience in their predicaments, the writer has brought out a story about three women and their private testimonies in a manner and style which emphasises the ties that women share between themselves and give

each other the support that they do not or cannot share with their spouses or male relations. Told entirely from a woman's point of view, the narrative highlights the complex emotional impulses and personal angst that women go through within their social and cultural milieu. With adept irony, the writer has kept the men in the margin and given her women characters voice and agency. Adopting the autobiographical mode, Tamsila Ao begins the story with a prologue, followed by the three women each telling her story in the first person narrative – Martha's Story, Medemla's History and Lipoktula's Secret. A second sequence of brief narratives by the three women concludes with an epilogue.

The confessional tone of their stories reveal their private experiences as mothers and daughters and the ties that bind them through the bond of motherhood and daughterhood. Each woman's narrative highlights various aspects of the mother-daughter relationship which changes in perspective as the person grows and changes. As with Adrienne Rich's assertion, their lives are seen “in the context of 'a female world' distinctly separate from the larger world of male concerns” (233). In her opinion, “The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities” (246). The pattern of close relationships between women, the bonds that develop as women mother and train their daughters, the help given in childbirth, nursing and child-rearing and the inter-dependent network of close female filiality which strengthens the bond of love they share and which remains constant through the generations is clearly illustrated. Through their personal accounts, the author manifests social, ideological and cultural concerns that affect a woman.

Written with sensitivity about women's diverse situations, the story raises questions about how women respond to their predicament in individual ways. Martha's innocence is shattered when her identity is challenged. Medemla withdraws emotionally from men when her fiancé breaks off their engagement and Lipoktula's secret remains a secret so her family unit remains intact. Each woman's narrative presents the female character struggling in her predicament. The underlying thread connecting their stories is women working to overcome their pains, sorrows, angsts and dilemmas but the message Temsula Ao puts across is that the ties women share can be a source of strength to overcome their difficulties. In the exploration of women's thoughts, feelings, intellect and emotions, there is a female consciousness that seeks economical, political, social, educational and artistic freedom.

5(b) Personal Stories, Private Agonies

The prologue introduces a young man hovering near the doorway of a humble cottage in a village. He hears the chatter of women who had assisted at the birth. He wants to see the baby but his view is obstructed. He has to wait. As Martha delivers a new baby, she is surrounded by women. Metaphorically speaking, as Apok waits outside, the door to a woman's world is opened to reveal the profoundest experience in a woman's life – childbirth. Though childbirth is a natural phenomenon, the institution of patriarchy and the literary canon have given scant attention to this natural occurrence in literature since men are not the ones who directly experience this phenomenon. Temsula Ao highlights this aspect of women's life which helps cement the connection between women especially mothers and daughters. Three women, though distinctively different but “linked through a mysterious bond that

transcends mere blood ties” brought together by this occasion tell us their stories (63).

“Martha's Story” begins with her life as a little girl living with her mother and grandmother in a village in the hills. She was different and not really so at the same time. She recalls being called “coolie” and laughed at for her dark complexion and strange features. Whenever she asked her grandmother why she was called coolie, her grandmother would shrug and advise her to ignore it. She endured the taunts but wondered why she had strange, thick, curly hair unlike the other children. The taunts continue when she starts going to school. The other children would refuse to sit near her or play with her. They would giggle when she asked permission to go out and at times, even the teacher could not control their behaviour. Martha says that she “was tough even then and wanted to show them I was smarter than all of them and I learnt my lessons well” (64). Her progress is noted by the teacher who tells her mother “Medemla, this child of yours is very clever. One day, she will become someone” (*ibid*). When she was in Class IV, some girls became friendly with her. One day, Martha asks the girls why they called her “coolie”? They look away and after some whispering, one of them tells her that she did not belong to the village and that Medemla was not her real mother. Her confusion about her origins lies in her friends' question: “Haven't you ever wondered why you look so different from us? You speak like we do but it is not your language. Our mothers have always known this and they told us” (*ibid*).

The shock and horror of this information fills Martha with a dark dread and she runs home to sit on her bed benumbed. When her grandmother checks to see if she is alright, Martha angrily demands to know who is her real mother. The older

woman withdraws into silence but Martha asks in an angry voice: “Tell me, who *is* my real mother?” (*ibid*). Martha's ignorance about her origins fill her with shock and horror and she is struck by an acute sense of insecurity as doubts about her origins, her identity strike her. Her world is shaken in that moment and her fear brings on feelings of alienation. In spite of the maternal care and affection she has received till that moment, she suffers a sense of loneliness and alienation. Her anxiety draws her towards the grandmother, who represents stability in that moment of turmoil. Through the anger and pain, Martha is drawn towards the reassuring presence and smell of the older woman who “smelt like the earth after rain or the smoke from burning wood and sometimes even like crushed leaves” (65). The soothing effect of her grandmother's peculiar body odour and the contact with her body when she was carried on her back with the help of a cloth whose ends were tied firmly across her chest always filled Martha with a sense of security and comfort during her early childhood. But instead of feeling comforted that day, Martha was filled with dread. A dark dread like the black lice that infested her hair and made her life miserable when she was younger. She doubted whether her mother and grandmother would be able to rid her of her misery.

Martha suffers an identity crisis when she learns that she belongs to a different community. Her skin, features and hair set her apart but in her heart, she did not *feel* different from the others in the village. She wanted to scrape off her dark skin and wished she could rearrange her features. A brooding fear of being sent back to her “real” people away from the people she loved and the village she considered home enveloped her. Her grandmother's silence agitates her further and with growing anger and resentment, she wondered how she would confront her mother for

withholding the truth about her origins. But she acknowledges to herself they “had shown only love and concern for me all this time” (66).

Martha's story illustrates the crisis that an adopted child experiences as she grows and learns that she is not the biological child of her family. The dread and fear mingled with anger and resentment reveal the turmoil for such children when they learn the truth. In such a predicament, she cannot imagine being sent back to her “real” people away from the only family she knows. Her story highlights female ties between women, even between a child and a foster mother. Temsula Ao emphasizes this aspect of maternal love. Martha, an adopted “coolie” girl-child has been nurtured and reared with love, regardless of her dark skin, strange features and curly hair. The depth of maternal love transcends the barriers of race, religion, gender and ethnicity.

“Medemla's History” follows. She is Martha's mother and she recounts the day she received a “terrible letter” from her long-time fiancé Imsutemjen informing her that he could not marry her because his father was vehemently opposed to their prospective marriage. The intensity of betrayal and rejection was so strong it burned her to the core reducing her to “nothingness”. She wondered whether some quality in her repelled Imsutemjen's father. Her busy work as a resident nurse in the hospital where she trained, helped her maintain a facade of normalcy. Her father was disappointed and shared her pain but her mother considered it fortunate that the marriage did not go through. Thereafter, though several proposals came her way, she rejected each one. Medemla comes across as neat and orderly in work and character. She seems in control of herself but the rejection by her fiancé colours her attitude towards men and marriage. She becomes emotionally scarred and chooses to remain single.

It is at this juncture by some twist of fate, that Martha, the abandoned baby of a tea garden labourer whose wife died at childbirth, enters Medemla's life. Martha's mother was brought in a critical condition to the hospital where Medemla worked. She dies soon after delivering Martha. When the father hears of the mother's death, he is inconsolable but the moment he learns that the baby is a girl, he goes into a rage and curses the nurses, the hospital and a cruel God who had denied him a son. He bursts out in disgust; "What will I do with another girl? Do whatever you want; I don't want to see her ever, she who has killed my wife" (68).

In the father's reaction is the attitude to female children who are not valued. The innocent infant is blamed for the death of the mother. The father rejects his daughter but it is a foster mother who gives her the love that sees no barriers in the colour of the skin or the texture of the hair. Martha becomes one more addition to the abandoned children in the hospital who are looked after by the Mission. The name Martha was given by one of the nurses after she was rejected by her father. For some inexplicable reason, Medemla was drawn to the infant whose entry into the world was accompanied by anguish and tragedy. She developed a bond with the baby and would visit her every day. She recalls: "It was as if some unseen hand was forging a bond between my lonely self and this abandoned child" (68-9).

Being a single, unmarried woman, she considered the risk of adopting a child with genetic and cultural differences. She was a fair, Ao-Naga girl of twenty six and the baby was dark with distinctly aboriginal features and kinky hair. Despite all this, Medemla is filled with a maternal desire to make Martha her daughter. Her mother agrees to look after Martha on Medemla's request who highlighted the abandoned child's tragic history without mentioning her physical details in a letter. But

Medemla's humanitarian intention is looked upon with reservations by the Nursing Superintendent of the hospital where she worked. If she went ahead with the adoption, she was told, she would have to leave her job without getting any letter of reference from the hospital. Medemla realises the gulf between what people preach when they talk about loving the unfortunate and what they practice. Her resolve is strengthened. She leaves her service and goes back to her village with Martha.

Her parents react with “disbelief, shock and disgust” when they see the dark-skinned bundle that Medemla brings home. However, their reservations melt under the baby's innocent smile and they accept her with genuine warmth. The little girl grows under the care of the two women and Medemla is proud that her daughter was a bright student. She dreamed of sending her to medical college to become a doctor. But Martha has grown and wants to know who her real mother is. After explaining the history and eventual adoption, Medemla asks: “So now, don't you think I am your mother though in a different way?” (71). Martha answers clearly: “Mother, I may look different from you or grandmother or from all others in the village but I *feel* no difference in my heart” (71-2). Overcome by emotions, the women embrace each other and Medemla assures her daughter: “Just as you feel, I am your real mother. Do you understand?” (72). This emotional exchange is a significant moment in the lives of the three women. The comment: “The three of them just stood there ... as though enacting a ritualistic affirmation of the power of mother-love to mesh the insecurity of innocence in the magic of an emotionally enlarged truth” (72) vividly captures the remarkable link of mothers to their daughters and vice versa on an emotional, physical and psychological level.

“Lipoktula's Secret” ties the narratives of the preceding two and reveals the long-held dark secret that the grandmother has guarded for many years. She narrates the difficult life of living off the land and the strain of poverty that drove her sons away to join the army. Her consolation was that her daughter, a bright student, was obedient, humble and balanced. But Lipoktula's past returns to haunt her. She recounts how she had been raped long ago by Merensashi, the guilt and shame that she experienced and the despair and anguish when she realised she was pregnant. Medemla was born out of that rape and now, by some cruel twist of fate, she wanted to marry the son of the man who had fathered her. Lipoktula realises she has to finally confront her rapist with the truth and stop her daughter from entering into an incestuous marriage. When Merensashi, who is now a village council member, is informed, he expresses doubt about being Medemla's father. But Lipoktula's information that Medemla had a similar birthmark like his confirms the parentage. She threatens to let out the secret of the rape if Merensashi did not stop the marriage plans. Thus, Medemla's wedding plans were foiled.

Lipoktula's secret tells of the private agony of a woman who has been haunted with feelings of guilt for many years over a secret shame. In her recollection, she wonders why she had failed to resist the man. She could not explain her own conduct as to why she had not resisted more vigorously. She accepted with remorse her own participatory submission to her rapist who violated her twice in the space of half an hour. The question of Lipoktula submitting to Merensashi and keeping her husband in the dark lends doubt to the 'rape', which could have added to her remorse and guilt at having 'cheated' her spouse who unknowingly rears the child born out of this incident.

Temsula Ao highlights the feelings of guilt and shame that a woman experiences in the aftermath of a rape and the lifelong scars of such an incident. When she discovers she is pregnant, Lipoktula unburdens her turmoil to her mother who shares her heartbreak. Her mother chides her for not evading her rapist but advises her daughter: “You know, it is always wise for a woman to keep a part of the self all to herself and sometimes she has to choose between telling the truth which destroys and living with a lie which may remain a secret forever. I cannot say anything more because it is only you who can make the choice” (75). These words offer little comfort to lessen her confusion and agitation.

Lipoktula chooses to remain silent. Her silence reflects the strategy many women adopt to hide such a shame. A silence to protect themselves from social stigma and humiliation. In Lipoktula's case, to protect her marriage and family. She agonises over a past, irretrievable incident for which she has a lifelong reminder in her daughter. Medemla is born, ironically to the delight of Lipoktula's husband who longed for a daughter and got one never knowing that she was not biologically his. As her daughter grows, she is relieved and so is her mother that the child did not look very different from her brothers. Now, with the “terrifying spectre” of an incestuous marriage staring at her, she takes decisive action. Her daughter's happiness has to be sacrificed to ensure that the “curse of incest” is avoided.

The three women continue their narratives in the second phase of the story. Starting with Martha, she discloses her mother's ambition for her to become a doctor. But teenage rebellion leads to resistance to her mother's plan as it would mean being away for many years from her anchors. Medemla's dreams for her daughter are spoilt by Martha's promiscuous behaviour. She had fallen in love with her classmate Apok.

Their adolescent explorations of sexuality in premarital sex leads to an unplanned pregnancy. When Martha discloses this, her mother is deeply disappointed. Now, there would be no “proper wedding” and only a small gathering of relatives to formalise their marriage. In retrospect, Martha wondered: “How could one describe the responses of a woman's body to the touch of a man she loved to such a person as my mother, who had never felt the demanding power of such love? And harder still, convince her that once you have tasted love like that, there was no stopping?” (77). Martha's remark raises a question on the casual attitude of a percentage of teenagers towards premarital sex where promiscuous behaviour leads to erosion and degeneration of moral values.

Medemla, on the other hand, reacts with shock and amazement to the news of Martha's pregnancy. When she sees the young couple openly displaying their love for each other, she asks herself: “What is it that pulls a man and woman together and makes them so irresistible to one another? Why did I never feel that way with Imsu?” (77). When Imsutemjen rejected her, she felt dejected and abandoned but these feelings did not hurt her in a personal or intimate way. She regards her failed romance like a “disruption” in the smooth order of things which occurs at times in a woman's life. Her reaction and attitude reflect a personality who followed an orderly daily routine. She was a working woman, a nurse with a rather antiseptic love life. After the disappointment, she stays away from men but often asked herself: “Am I abnormal or just a different kind of woman?” (78).

In the final intervention, Lipoktula advises Medemla that Martha's relationship should be formalised without delay. Her daughter poses a question for which Lipoktula has no easy answer. She could not understand why Martha and her

lover had to indulge in sex before marriage, why they couldn't wait and what was it that drove them when she herself had never felt that way with Imsu even when they were alone. The mother cannot explain why the “law of attraction” between a man and a woman did not apply to them and why she had not felt that way with Imsu. From her own experience, the grandmother reflects and observes that: “Since she had never entertained any other man's overtures, Medemla would never experience the impulse that draws a man and a woman into that kind of intimacy” (78). She confesses at the end that when Merensashi violated her, she could not explain her inability to resist his intentions and how an “inexplicable reaction of my body turned my feeble resistance to participatory submission” (79).

The epilogue shows Martha in the labour room surrounded by women including her mother and grandmother. The exclusively female experience of childbirth is described. As Martha struggles through her labour pains, her man Apok waits expectantly outside. When her baby is delivered, he is welcomed with joy. The scene contrasts markedly with the events following Martha's birth – the death of her mother and the father's rage and rejection of a girl-child. The prologue and the epilogue significantly describe childbirth scenes. In depicting the natural phenomenon of childbirth, Temsula Ao describes an experience unique to women and it is this which justifies 'maternal love'; a love as strong and vital as the umbilical cord that binds mother to child. This ritual reinforces the ties between mother and daughter, the woman-to-woman circle where an older woman with instinctual knowing and the wisdom of her experience helps a young mother bring new life into the world. As Martha goes through the pangs of childbirth, the women assisting her

understand her pain in a ritual where menfolk cannot intrude; symbolically brought out in Apok who “feeling like an intruder in a sacred ceremony, slips out unobserved” (80). The experience of childbirth affects Martha profoundly who felt that it was “more sublime than the transient ecstasies of sex” (79). As she looks at her newborn with awe, she is filled with sadness for her mother who has never undergone the “pleasurable pains of motherhood” (79). As the older women encircle Martha and lay the baby ceremoniously next to her “in a ritualistic acknowledgement of her motherhood” (80), she is filled with a sense of fulfilment at having joined their ranks.

5(c) Bonds of Love in Maternal Kinship

In the story, Tamsula Ao explores the mother-daughter kinship and highlights the unconscious bonds that link women to each other in special ways. When Martha runs to her grandmother in distress after learning of her alien origins, she seeks comfort and security in the earthy odour of the maternal body of her grandmother. When Medemla desires to marry, her mother protects her from committing incest, though at the cost of Medemla's happiness. Regarding the issue of rape, the writer shows the consequences that women suffer and the secret guilt and shame they endure throughout their lives. Incest is looked upon both in the past and in the present as a grave crime, a taboo which in ancient times carried the death penalty. Tamsula Ao's women are cast against a socio-economic cultural backdrop that sees their status shifting with time. From the experience of her difficult life, Lipoktula ensures that her daughter does not have to suffer financially. Medemla has ambitions

for Martha. Through their lives, the writer manifests the dreams of village women who exist in a world order frequently tilted against them in favour of men.

In analysing the story, we draw social, ideological and cultural inferences. Social issues such as adoption, rape, incest, gender-discrimination and teenage sex are dealt with. Ideological considerations reveal an erosion of moral and traditional values and “woman” as constructed in a tribal society. As a cultural document, Temsula Ao represents the material considerations in women's lives, the institution of motherhood, female bonding and ethnic and cultural identity. Her women display the strength that their special relationship as mothers and daughters gift each other by nurturing. They inhabit a world where moral values are degrading, traditions are being challenged and where a variety of social practices are being transposed.

In the narratives of the three women, what becomes clear is that the community of women across racial and age divides, share a bond that ties them in special ways affirming and supportive of one another. As Adrienne Rich states:

The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. . . *To refuse to be a victim.* . . As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need not to be the vessels of another woman's self-denial and frustration. The quality of the mother's life – however embattled and unprotected – is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter and who continues to struggle to create liveable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist. (246-7)

While maternal love remains universal and unrivalled, the bond between mother and daughter remains an enigma. The relationship between women where mothers train and guide their daughters is an ongoing one, for daughters never outgrow the need for maternal guidance and advisory. They share a psychic understanding and womanly connection that remains constant through the generations. The experience of childbirth is not proportional to this enigmatic bond as suggested by Tamsula Ao in the life of Medemla, a woman who has never gone through the 'ecstasy' of childbirth but can still experience the unconditional love of a mother towards Martha. The enigma is again revealed through Lipoktula, the grandmother who goes through feelings of guilt and disgust after the rape but possesses the heart to love her daughter born of this rape, unequivocally and through the unconditional love that the mother and grandmother have for Martha, the adopted "coolie" girl.

Through the testimonies of the three women, Tamsula Ao unfolds the private experiences of women who seek to empower themselves despite adversities. Women writers speak a language different from male writers. They articulate women's experience from the woman's point of view where their lives are not devalued and trivialised. In celebrating womanhood, they sing women's dreams drawn from women's imagination and raise consciousness to let women's voices be heard to empower and enrich themselves. The women in Tamsula Ao's world give each other warmth, nourishment, security, sensuality, support, trust and above all, love wrapped in the mantle of motherhood. The bond that Martha, Medemla and Lipoktula share is strengthened as they welcome a new life. Through the guilt, shame, anger and dark and secret agonies, they survive their predicaments to forge a relationship cemented

with love. The “miracle of new life” reinforces these ties to grant them hope and new meaning in their lives.

Works Cited

- Ao, Tamsula. *These Hills Called Home*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- . *Laburnum for my Head*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2009. Print.
- . "Articulate and Inarticulate Exclusion". *On Being A Naga: Essays*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014. 93-100. Print.
- . "Benevolent Subordination". *On Being A Naga: Essays*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014. 45-53. Print.
- . "Gender and Power: Women-Centred Narratives From Ao Naga Folklore". *On Being A Naga: Essays*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014. 71-83. Print.
- Baral, K. C. "Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India". *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity*. Ed. Margaret Ch. Zama. New Delhi: Sage, 2013. 3-13. Print.
- Geetha, V. *Theorizing Feminism Patriarchy*. 2007. Kolkata: Stree. Rpt. 2015. Print.
- Gill, Preeti. "Women in the Time of Conflict: The Case of Nagaland". *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-east*. Ed. Geeti Sen. New Delhi: OUP, 213-226. Print.
- Kire, Easterine. Author's Introduction. *Bitter Wormwood*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011. 1-6. Print.
- Mukhim, Patricia. "Where is this North-east?". *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-east*. Ed. Geeti Sen. New Delhi: OUP, 177-188. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Motherhood and Daughterhood." *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1986. New York: W. W. Norton, & Co., 1995. 218-255. Print.

Chapter IV

A Woman's heart: Female Protagonists of Indira Goswami

Introduction

Indira Goswami, popularly known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami or Mamoni Baideo (elder sister) was born in 1942 in Guwahati to Umakanta Goswami and Ambika Devi. Her grandfather, Raghunath Goswami was the *Sattraadhikar* or religious head of Amranga *Sattra*. Her family was deeply associated with *Sattra* life, the religious Vaishnava monastery, peculiar to Assam, which traces its roots to the *Ekasarana Dharma*, i.e. devotion to one Supreme God, of the fifteenth-century Saint Srimanta Sankaradeva, the progenitor of the Vaishnava faith in Assam. A writer, scholar, professor, editor and poet, Indira Goswami is an eminent voice in contemporary Assamese literature. A celebrated author, she has won numerous national and international awards and was the winner of the Sahitya Academy Award (1983), the Jnanpith Award (2000) and the Principal Prince Claus Laureate Award (2008). She was awarded the Asom Ratna (2011), Assam's highest civilian award posthumously.

Gifted and articulate, deeply sensitive and perceptive to her surroundings, she brought a boldness with passion in her writing to speak for those who could not articulate their sufferings, for those whose voices had not been heard or been silenced. Endowed with compassion and empathy for the weak, the marginalised, her

writings tell of the stories of the unfortunate, the powerless, the women oppressed by social custom, caste, religion, superstition, prejudice and discrimination.

Though born to a world of 'genteel privilege' of a conservative Brahmin family, she did not submit to social norms of caste consciousness. Instead, she was a keen observer of the kaleidoscopic spectrum of the lives and experiences of people belonging to different social strata. A happy childhood in her ancestral village and schooling in Shillong and Guwahati could not shake off the shadow of fear and misery that haunted her from a young age. She candidly admits, in the early pages of her autobiography *Adhalekha Dostabez* (1988), (*An Unfinished Autobiography*), that she was obsessed with thoughts of suicide and a deep fear of losing her father whom she adored. This fear created a sense of anguish and thoughts of his dying and leaving her filled her with dread and a morbid fascination for self-destruction from her childhood. Her father's death from cancer triggered several suicide attempts which she survived but the family had to endure the scandal created by these attempts. These fear-filled melancholic phases did not entirely leave her even as she grew older but they created an understanding of and a deep sensitivity to the dark fears a person suffers from inexplicably. A brief marriage to an engineer from Mysore brought marital bliss which tragically ended with his unfortunate death in an accident in Kashmir. Plunged into a dark, desolate, gnawing grief, she retained her sanity by pouring the misery and heartache of early widowhood into her writing. From her personal experience of losing her husband, she ably translates this pain into her novels and short stories creating protagonists and characters who like her, are widows but whose suffering has not found articulation. Her writings closely mirror

her lived experiences as an upper class Brahmin widow bringing out the oppressive and discriminatory practices against widows who are subject to various forms of deprivations, restrictions, dependence and exploitation which have an enormous impact on a woman's sense of self and identity.

In the core of her being, Indira Goswami was a humanist who had studied the suffering of humanity and the suffering of women. Her works are therefore, a testimony to her humanist and feminist vision. A prolific writer, the distinctive train of her oeuvre in a writing career spanning almost five decades, is a quest for justice for those who have been dealt life's blows. Her characters - male and female in their individual struggles, detail the physical, mental and psychological oppressions they encounter in their struggle for survival in a cruel unjust world. In her early works, she addresses the fears, pain and sorrow of widows, brings out the exploitation and suffering of lower class workers, protests the cruelty of ritual animal sacrifice in the name of religion and draws out the mindless killings of innocent people during riots. Following her husband to work sites for the construction of aqueducts and bridges provided her the material for her early novels *Chenabar Sot* (1972), (*The Stream of Chenab*) set against the construction site for a bridge on the river Chenab in Jammu and Kashmir involving workers, both men and women of a construction company. *Nilkanthi Braja* (1976), (*The Blue-Necked God*) set in Vrindaban from her experiences as a widow and researcher, revolves around the exploitation and the miserable plight of Brahmin widows who spend their widowhood in the holy city hoping to attain 'mukti' and salvation. *Ahiron* (1980) and *Mamare Dhara Tarowal* (1980) (*The Rusted Sword*) deals with the hard lives of migrant low-caste labourers

in private construction companies, underscoring her empathy for the marginalized, the underclass. *Dantal Haatir Une Khowa Howda* (1980) (*The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*) addresses multiple themes and brings out her concern for the oppression of women, particularly widows in orthodox Brahminical society. *Chinnamastar Manuhtu* (2001) (*The Man from Chinnamasta*) raises questions over animal cruelty and animal sacrifice at the Kamakhya Temple, Guwahati. Her last novel *Thengphakhri Tahsildaror Tamor Tarowal* (2006), (*The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*) is based on the life story of a Boro freedom-fighter who worked as a *tehsildar* (revenue collector) for the British during the late nineteenth century. Malashri Lal states:

The common thread in Indira Goswami's immensely diverse and rich oeuvre is the concern for women. In her person and in her work, this is echoed multifariously. Despite the complex interstices, I see no contradictions – only a holistic expression of India's many challenges to women's empowerment and a gifted writer moulding them into creative forms. (78)

Tilottoma Misra comments: “Mamoni Raisom's writing is marked by what Julia Kristeva calls the ‘flow of *jouissance* (physical or intellectual pleasure) into language’. . . her writings can be easily interpreted as a variety of *écriture féminine* (women's writings)” (65).

The novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* has been chosen for the present study as it highlights Goswami's favourite theme of exploitation and repression. Her major novels that dwell on a similar theme are set in other parts of

India while the selected novel, set in her native *Sattrra* in Assam gives a vivid account of the pain and miserable condition of widows residing in a traditional monastic institution. The *Sattras* are centres of religious and socio-cultural activities with a long and rich history. Though many have declined or been shut down, the existing ones continue to function and protect and preserve traditional Assamese culture. The setting and the theme are appropriate for the present study as it presents a picture of women's predicament under an orthodox religiosity which is not visible to the lay eye. The female characters in the novel trapped in a rigid environment have little scope for emancipating themselves from its dehumanizing hold over their lives. Indira Goswami interrogates several aspects of women's predicament in the novel – attitudes to girl-children, child-marriage, women's subjugation under religious structures and conventions, discriminations based on caste and class and the privations brought on by widowhood. Goswami's background of childhood in her ancestral *Sattrra* lends authenticity to her portrayals and her personal experience of widowhood allows her to bring out the deep sense of loss, helplessness and anguish of young widows with a rare honesty, sensitivity and poignancy. Her own life maps crucial transitions in her work as she seeks to empower and liberate women from the stranglehold of orthodoxy.

1(a) Widows in a *Sattrra*

The novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, for which she was awarded India's highest literary award, the Bharatiya Jnanpith, depicts the declining power of a religious institution, the *Sattras*, whose influence prevailed in Assam for centuries. Set during a crucial historical mid-twentieth century crossroad in 1948 in Goswami's

ancestral Amranga *Sattrra* in South Kamrup, the novel highlights the powerful religious and feudal customs which exercises restrictions on the lives of women, particularly widows. Centred on the female figure, the novel juxtaposes several paradoxes and contradictions in the complicated relationship between caste, religious norms, socio-cultural traditions and gender. The overarching connecting thread in these structures is the institution of patriarchy which grants men superiority over women. Jasbir Jain in her Introduction to *Women in Patriarchy* says, “The roots of patriarchy lie in the myths of creation and the religious worlds based on them. The initial relationship between the creator and the created world has located itself in the power of man and the subordination of woman” (13). Elaborating on this feminist assertion, Jain adds that, “The patriarch stands for Father Right, the right of ownership over the seed. He is not a person but an institution, a mind set, a practice, a hegemony and thus an oppressor” (*ibid*). With power vested in the male in almost all areas of life, the male-centred view of human life has privileged one gender over another.

The main focus of the novel revolves around three Brahmin widows of the Gossain family. It is a stark depiction and indictment of the oppression and victimization of widows belonging to a conservative Brahmin family in a traditional *Sattrra*. The title symbolically represents the waning grandeur of these institutions in the symbol of an elaborately carved decorative howdah. The howdah stands as a symbol of power of the *Sattrraadhikar*, outwardly maintained and perpetuated through feudal customs and practices which were gradually eroding through inward decline symbolised by the white ants that are slowly destroying the once grand howdah. The

novel presents a panoramic saga of the decline of a once powerful religious institution under wealthy powerful Gossains. The Gossains with their vast lands and forests, gifted to them by various kings, their elephants and elephant depots, the timber business and the produce from their lands amassed great wealth. But the times were changing. During mid-twentieth century Assam, the independence of India from British rule touched the *Sattras* of South Kamrup in ushering new laws and regulations such as the Land Ceiling Act which limited the land holdings of the *Sattraadhikars*. The opium trade during this period encouraged addiction and brought poverty in its wake. Under the scourge of opium addiction, those who owned lands neglected their farming or business and sold their land and cattle to opportunistic *mahajans* or traders who exploited the situation. The Government issued restricted permits for opium sale, instituted the Assam Opium Prohibition Act 1947, but opium smuggling became a profitable business. This aspect of the complex causes and the effects of social change in custom-bound society is brought out in well-wrought detail. Against a background of rapid political, social and economic developments juxtaposed with ultra-conservative Brahmanical practices, superstitions and age-old customs, Goswami reveals how Brahmin girls are married off before the age of puberty, are widowed at a young age and are subjected to harsh religious rigours. The Gossains and their families struggle against the loss of power and deterioration of service from their tenant share-croppers who are slowly being influenced by the Marxist ideas of communists and resist paying revenue to their feudal landlords. The Land Ceiling Act altered ownership practices and reduced the hegemonic power through hereditary control of lands by the priestly Gossains. Women characters from

the Gossain family are etched in fine detail as Goswami presents widows belonging to different age groups, from different economic circumstances with varied degrees of adherence to prescribed religio-cultural practices for Brahmin widows.

A notable and significant aspect of Goswami's novel is her treatment of widows and the oppressive privations they suffer under caste and religion. From her empathy for widows, what is drawn in her portrayal is women's limited, subordinate role in the socio-cultural and religious life in a *Sattrā*, the relationship between caste and gender, the way caste impinges on women's lives, on their role particularly in marriage, sexuality and widowhood. In her essay "Caste and Women", Leela Dube's explorations of caste and gender which situates women as "conscious acting subjects of social relationships and processes that constitute, reproduce and modify the social system characterised by the institution of caste", is pertinent in the context of the novel (466).

The narrative, the unfolding of events is brought out through the eyes of Indranath, the son of the Gossain but it is in Giribala, the young widowed daughter of the family in D. K. Baruah's assessment that, "the novelist finds her subjective correlative" (33). Giribala whose husband died not long after their marriage, returns to her father's house having suffered a miscarriage resulting from the severe rituals she was forced to undergo in her in-laws' house. Widowed at the age of sixteen, she is subject to the strict religious practices a high caste Brahmin widow is expected to perform and abide by. A spirited young girl, she struggles under the strictures imposed on her and the dramatic painful changes the status of a widow thrusts on her young life. Bound by caste, religion and gender, she is subject to oppressive customs

that suppress her womanly instincts. With Indranath's encouragement, she assists Mark, a young British missionary researcher in his study of the history of their *Sattrā* from old Assamese manuscripts as requested by Indranath's father. Though Mark, a foreigner is considered *mlecha* 'unclean' by Brahmins, yet his gentle humanism, his endearing demeanour draws Giribala towards this earnest and pious Christian. Giribala's desire to be freed from the chains of religious and cultural orthodoxy drives her to Mark's hut one stormy night and on being discovered in his room by their ancestral priest Purshottam Bhagwati, Giribala is found guilty of serious transgression. She has gravely polluted her widowed status, has disgraced her self, and by extension her caste, her family and community. Forced by widowhood to conform to artificial notions of piety, purity and chastity, to uphold family honour, Giribala is made to feel ashamed for her fondness for Mark.

She has also transgressed earlier by giving in to the temptation of eating mutton curry cooked in black dal. Eating flesh is taboo for Gossains and having polluted herself by eating meat, she is forced to undergo purification leaving her despairing in her predicament which in her eyes, is no better than a living death. Ultimately, forced to undergo another excruciating purification ritual by fire for her sin of close association with Mark, she prefers to end her life - rather than continue with the cycle of endless self-privation, emotional and psychological suffering.

Durga, the widowed sister of the *Sattrādhikar*, is a forlorn, lonely, childless, querulous character unwanted by her in-laws, eventually feeling alienated in her brother's house where she had found shelter. Given to ultra-conservative adherence to rituals, Durga is a pathetic figure trapped in the narrow confines of the status of a

poor widow who survives on the largesse of her brother though not necessarily the charity of her sister in law.

A prickly relationship with Indranath's mother makes her miserable and she spends her days carrying out the traditional ascetic rituals expected of her. Her overwhelming desire is to go with the *pandas* (religious agents) to perform the last rites of her dead husband and to go on a pilgrimage to the Jagannath Puri and Prayag. She hopes to fulfil her dream by selling her ornaments which were kept in a box under Saru Gossainee's (junior Gossain's wife) bed. However, the ornaments are stolen and her dreams are shattered. Long years of adhering to ascetic practices take their toll on her health. Struck by tuberculosis, she returns in an abject condition to die in her rightful place - her husband's house, a sad pathetic figure of the tragedy of widowhood. Saru Gossainee, hailing from Pathaldia, the widow of Indranath's paternal uncle lives alone near Matia Pahar, a mountain and ably carries out her duties towards her disciples with panache. She is the only widow from her *Sattr*a to have gone with *pandas* on a pilgrimage to Jagannath Puri. Like the male Gossains, she makes annual visits to her disciples in the *Sattr*a, collecting the gifts and donations due to her, to maintain her household. But with the changing times, she too is being affected. From her share of cultivated land given to tenant farmers called *adhiars*, the revenue of half paddy that was paid to the late Gossain is not being given regularly to her now that she is a widow. From her position, alone, she finds it difficult to collect her due from her tenant farmers who take advantage of her widowed status. She is put in an insecure position as her resources are dwindling. She finds a valuable helper in Mahidhar Sharma Pathak, a jajman¹ Brahmin who like a caretaker and

estate officer, collects rent and supervises her scattered property. She develops a fondness for him and weaves romantic dreams and fantasies of herself and Mahidhar. His services become indispensable as she relies on and trusts him implicitly. Unfortunately, the object of her affections and trust is a slippery customer who, it is eventually discovered, has tried to cheat Saru Gossainee of her lands through forgery, has stolen Durga's ornaments and proved to be an utter scoundrel. When the truth of his deception and fraud is uncovered, Saru Gossainee is completely shattered and devastated.

Several other women characters dot the landscape of the saga of oppressed womanhood. Some like Indranath's mother, the Gossainee, remain rooted to the past, zealously protecting and upholding the Brahmanical traditions, customs and rituals of the *Sattrā*. To ensure the continuity and purity of their caste, Gossain girls and women are subject to strict rituals and sacraments which exercises tight control over diet and sexuality to distinguish them from the impure lower castes. In the Gossainee's eyes, Giribala's proximity and association with Mark, an 'unclean' white European, a Christian, is reprehensible while Indranath's affection and desire for Eliman is totally unacceptable as she belongs to a class of lower Brahmins. Eliman, the girl whom Indranath loves, is the daughter of Bahinram Bhagawati, priest of Rajapukhuri. Sprightly and vivacious, she is on the verge of reaching puberty. But in the life of a Brahmin's daughter, the stage of reaching puberty is considered unclean; it is a girl's entry into sin as menstruation makes women impure.

1(b) Women and Caste

In orthodox Hindu religious tradition, to preserve and protect her purity, it is vital for young Brahmin girls to be betrothed and married off before the onset of menstruation/puberty for once she reaches this state, the resultant impurity taints her family too and they – the girl and family are rendered outcast. Eliman's foster-mother, the old hunchbacked woman with prominent goitre, is anxious for her to be suitably married off but not to the Brahmin from Cooch Behar, an opium smuggler her father conducts clandestine business with. The Brahmin has his lascivious eyes on Eliman and is willing to accept the young girl even if she has already reached puberty. He plies her father with lavish gifts who appears to be willing to barter his young daughter in settlement of his debts to the smuggler and to save the family honour. Another female character is the hunchback Guimeni, the Gossainee's confidant and informer who, with her sharp, roving eyes and ear to the ground, plays the role of gossip and social commentator.

From the portrayal of the woman characters, their travails, worries, concerns or dilemmas, Goswami skilfully, with profound insight presents the life of women who lived in conformity with suffocating customs. A high class Brahmin Gossain woman lived a cloistered life, which women like the Gossainee and Durga embraced. Giribala puts up a resistance but she is unable to bear the burden of continuous expiation which eats away the core of her sense of self, despite Indranath's sympathy and support to ease her predicament. In articulating women's predicament in a patriarchal society, Goswami demonstrates the struggle of women against the shackles of religious tradition, the rigid hierarchy of caste and social pressures which

oppressed women. Pandita Ramabai in examining women's place in religion and society, refers to the laws of Manu which repeatedly stresses women's inferiority to and dependence on men. She says, according to the laws of Manu:

“Day and night, women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families, and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control.”

“Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence” - *Manu*, ix., 2, 3 (32)

A woman is directed to abide by religious laws, sacraments and rituals, and rules concerning her conduct, duties and status towards her father and husband. A married woman, Ramabai states, must “look upon her husband as a god, to hope for salvation only through him, to be obedient to him in all things, never to covet independence, never to do anything but that which is approved by law and custom” (33). Goswami portrays her women characters having to obey the laws and rules for dutiful Hindu women. In thought, word and deed, women are required to be virtuous. That these laws can be repressive on women is brought out in the portrayal of Giribala, the young widowed daughter of the Gossain, who resists the oppressive practices for widows. In the historicity of the times, Goswami's women exist in a world of strict religious rules under Hindu law. She reveals with candour, the myriad challenges, trials and troubles that govern the individual woman's sense of self. In the novel, young Brahmin girls are hounded or spied upon with sadistic anticipation by

village crones: “These women would prowl in the night, haunting the spacious backyards of houses to poke and probe the washed dirty cloth pieces hanging out there, for the tell-tale marks of menstruation, hoping to find some signs so that they could get their vicious pleasure in denouncing the girls as outcasts. . .” (25). The families of young girls faced the task of child marriage – a custom that was detrimental to girls who had no voice in consenting or refusing.

2(a) Saga of Oppressed Widowhood: Durga's Miseries

In the world of the novel, to be a woman, a widow is to be an unfortunate creature subject through customary practices and religious precepts to various forms of discrimination at different stages of life. The women in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, particularly the widows, belong to a privileged Brahmin caste yet paradoxically, their higher status does not grant them fulfilment or contentment in the trajectory of their lives. They remain strictly bound, if not trapped, by a conservative religious orthodoxy that appears to make a woman's life a miserable one. The portrait of Durga, the forty year old childless widow is of a sad, pathetic, frustrated member of a Gossain family who has returned to her ancestral home. She is trapped in an agonising predicament. Having lost her husband many years ago, she is assailed by anxieties, is restless and frustrated at her desire to perform the last rites of her late husband and to go on pilgrimage remaining unfulfilled. She passes her days waiting for her in-laws to take her back and to get her share of her husband's property, performing the regular cycle of rituals of expiation, purification and fasting hoping that her wishes will be fulfilled. But in the tragic plight that is hers, she is a passive

victim, enjoined by caste to perform her role of a faithful wife whether her husband is dead or alive. She is painfully aware of being unwanted by her in-laws:

Her mother-in-law always thought she, Durga, had brought the shadow of death to the house and killed her son. She accused Durga's father, the Gossain of Amranga, of manipulating his daughter's horoscope to get her married to her son. She suspected that Durga's real horoscope had three *papagrahas*². Durga was never invited for any auspicious occasions in her family or elsewhere. She was considered inauspicious because of her so-called *papagrahas* – not one but three of them! Gradually, these accusations and pointing fingers seeped into her mind and she really began to believe it herself (11).

Regular fasting, a frugal diet, frequent bathing to cleanse and purify herself, taken to levels of absurdity - when the shadow of a low caste falls on her, she rushes off to bathe again; has weakened her health drastically.

Goswami reveals how superstition-guided prejudice can be extremely harmful depicting with insightful perceptiveness the grave damage to women like Durga whose sense of self-worth is seriously eroded by the accusations and pointing fingers. She begins to believe in them, to believe her widowhood is a misfortune brought upon herself by her evil stars. Her nephew Indranath had declared that leaving her husbands' house at Chikarhati was a serious mistake, that her in-laws would not come to take her back, that part of her share of the property had been sold off. These words serve to fill her mind with anguish. She feels helpless at the callous treatment by her in-laws and her days pass, waiting by the fireside, hoping against

hope, becoming a ghostly shrunken figure, her skin and clothes turning grey and ash-coloured. In Durga, the insecurities and fears that constantly haunt a widow are magnified by what in Baruah's words, describes her as "neurotic and unconsciously perverse because of crushed sexuality, . . . an abject image of pity." (37). Her withered body is figurative of the dissipation of her dreams and unfulfilled desires. Her emaciated skeletal figure, reflective of the disease that is eating and destroying both body and spirit. Trapped in the ultra-conservative milieu of *Sattrā* life, inhibited by caste consciousness, she cannot envisage herself acting independently. She is completely socialized into her subordinate role. It is unthinkable from her perspective for a Brahmin, a Gossain woman, to step beyond the boundaries of the role her caste entails. It is unheard of for a high-caste woman to step out and expose herself or as suggested by Indranath, to go to Gauhati to fight land litigation cases. Durga shuddered. "The very thought was repugnant to her. As far as her memory went, she had never heard of a lady from a Gossain household stepping across the threshold of a court. Could she go to Gauhati to demand her share of property? Impossible! Impossible!" (13–14). It is imperative for women like Durga, Saru Gossainee, the Gossainee or Giribala to keep the dignity and honour of the family. It is a joyless exercise. To fulfil her duties, the woman's desires are subverted or become frozen. Indranath, the male protagonist observes that even his grandmother had lived and died in the ancestral house without ever stepping outside into the decorative gate, the *batghar*. She could not fulfil her desire to visit Jagannath Puri and would peep through the curtains to catch a glimpse of the annual theatrical performance, the *Sabha*.

Durga, his aunt, remains a prisoner of the role she is enjoined to perform. Saru Gossainee, his paternal uncle's widow, despite her capable management of her landed property and tactful handling of her disciples, does not set foot on the land but get things done through her disciples. The women remain bound indoors to their homes which are shelters as much as prisons as high caste women are required to uphold their purity by remaining unexposed to the polluted outside world. The widows' degenerative plight is brought out in Durga's existential predicament. Sleepless, assailed by constant angst: "Her mind has become a graveyard. Day after day, it is a tortuous task for her to find something tangible to hold on to, to hold on to her sanity" (11). As days and months drag on, waiting to be taken back by her in-laws, the ritual observances of widows performed with religious regularity, her misery deepens. Now, "An intense abhorrence for life had cast a shadow of melancholy. . . Her nature always had a tinge of pessimism, which had now become darker, more frightening" (12). Haunted by insecurities, Durga reflects the vulnerability of women who submit to the dictates of caste hierarchy, caste prejudices, who accept their fate making little effort to transcend the religiously ordained role under widowhood. Subsumed to the privileges of her caste and simultaneously victimized by its restrictive role, she continues in mute compliance to the patriarchal authority having internalized its norms that keeps women like her in a form of voluntary victimhood.

An insecure, superstitious fear-driven woman, her financially and socially reduced status leaves her dependent on others. That her in-laws prospered after her departure stings her deeply:

After her departure, her father-in-law's elephant had captured a wild tusker of high value. He made a huge profit out of it. Then a disciple from Mayang had come and built a temple in Chikarhati with donations of abundant gold and jewellery. He had given away seven *bighas* of land too! Rumours floated. . . Now that the inauspicious woman had gone, good luck and prosperity flooded the *Sattrā* to enrich its soil. All this she heard in silence. (13)

In her brother's household, the Gossainee becomes unsympathetic and insensitive, denying her the money she wanted to borrow to pay for her pilgrimage. Friction develops between them which grows into petty quarrels. Her repeated appeals being met with silence, she demands the gold earrings her mother had left her for her marriage which has not been given to her. During a particularly bitter quarrel, the Gossainee having locked herself, replies spitefully behind closed doors: "You slut! Who has given you those gold earrings? Did your wretched husband give you anything? Why did you leave your house and come here?" (96). Their quarrel draws a crowd of women who remind Durga that living under the "umbrella of the Gossainee", she should listen to her and try to live in peace. They advice her to arrange for a lawyer and claim her rightful share of property from her wealthy in-laws. This inflames her and she shouts at the speaker:

"Don't poke your nose into my affairs! Can a daughter of this house go to the *kacheri* at Gauhati? You wait and see! They'll come one day and take me back to Chikarhati with honour and respect."

Overcome by emotion, her voice trembled. She ran to the far side of the verandah and crouched there covering her face with her *gatala*. (97)

Durga's angst is not mitigated when an old woman advises her - to get back her property, she should go back and stay in her husband's village. Having internalized the traditional notions of honour and respect for widows which is gained through performance of ascetic rituals, Durga dreams of attaining salvation through fulfilment of the last rites of immersion of her husband's bones after years of dutifully worshipping and paying obeisance to his wooden sandals. She suffers from an acute sense of helplessness and loneliness as no one appears to understand her pain. In a fit of impotent rage, she drags out her wooden box which contains the last of her gold jewellery and has it removed to Saru Gossainee's hut. Saru Gossainee remonstrates with Durga telling her the box would be safer in the Gossain's manor. But Durga insists. As she slumps down in front of Saru Gossainee's feet, the group of women avidly watch commenting:

"My, my! Nowadays even Gossainee ladies fight like cats and dogs!"

"It does happen. When one falls into the pit of unhappiness, everyone behaves in the same manner"

"There was a time when the Gossainee of Pathaldia and Bamundi never raised their voices. Now one can hear them right up to the *batghar* of their houses." (98-99)

As Durga sobs in distress, Saru Gossainee tries to calm her: “Durga, it is our fate that we are born as women. We should learn to lead our lives with patience and tolerance. As it is, our lives have been shattered by the death of our husbands” (99).

2(b) Defeated by Her Demons

Her words encapsulate the tragedy of Durga. Born a woman, she is fated to suffer the painful slings and sharp arrows of her outrageously cruel fortune. She is distressed by the sea of debasing and dehumanising troubles that have made her life a saga of misfortunes and sorrows. In her depiction of Durga, Goswami emphasizes the miseries of widowhood. Loneliness, rejection and feelings of humiliation compound her sufferings. Despite the strength her name, after the goddess stands for, Durga is not a strong woman. She is tortured by multiple fears and becomes a psychological wreck. When an owl, an inauspicious bird, perches itself on the roof of the *batghar*, her apprehension increases. She becomes remorseful over her hysterical conduct and returns with Indranath who admonishes her and takes her back to the manor house. However, her neurotic nature gives her little peace. She is disturbed further by a dull dry cough that racks her chest with a sharp pain. Looking at her arms and legs, she is aware of her wasting body but her one great desire constantly preys on her mind refusing to let go. As the strongest adherent and upholder of caste practices, Durga is ironically its most tragic victim. Indoctrinated to the orthodoxy of her faith, alienated from her in-laws, dependent on the charity of her brother and his wife, she is a character with the least personhood - suffering from loss on multiple fronts. From her reduced, impure status, she is painfully aware that in the eyes of the world, as a childless widow, she has little social standing, much less an identity. She is in other

words a 'non-person', a prisoner of social, cultural and religious oppression complicit in these various oppressions that contribute to her predicament.

The final straw in her sad predicament is the theft of her gold ornaments, the ornaments she hoped to sell to pay for her pilgrimage. When the theft is discovered, Durga is shocked and becomes distraught. She becomes hysterical. Her reaction is frenzied:

Tearing her hair and beating her breasts in anguish, Durga wept loudly and bitterly. Within a moment, there was chaos in the courtyard and quite a big crowd built up. Saru Gossainee was having a bath at the well. She came running and tried to take Durga, who was rolling on the mud floor and crying loudly, in her arms. . . But Durga pushed her away with inhuman strength and she lost her balance and fell down a few feet away against the old *rabab tenga* tree! (177)

The ensuing chaos in Saru Gossainee's courtyard produces a crowd of curious onlookers. Mahidhar Bapu, a Brahmin, is the prime suspect, being a frequent guest of Saru Gossainee. Saru Gossainee denies knowledge of the contents of Durga's box. Despite her distress, she lashes out at the younger woman: "Durga roared like a wounded tigress. That's not true! Look! How her blood's burning to save the skin of that son of a Brahmin bitch!" Only two days back, I opened the box. Everything was intact. Only two days back! Oh! I am eaten up. *Hai re!* I am eaten up" (179). Saru Gossainee filled with despair is reduced to tears with Durga's screaming curses and the hunchback Guimeni's excited shouts: "*Hai! Hai!* Who is the witch who has eaten up her wealth?" (*ibid*). It is Indranath's intervention that once again removes Durga

from an unpleasant situation. Scolding Durga for keeping her box in an insecure place, he gives vent to the frustrations of the times: “Ever since opium has eaten up this *Sattrā*, robbery has increased everywhere. Even from our attic, elephant’s tusks have been stolen” (181). Before being led away, she showers a few poisonous barbs and curses: “Gods above are my witness! I am a widow of Chikarhati’s Gossain who will now die from the sorrow of not offering her husband's funeral bones to the holy river. Let my curse fall on those who have done this harm to me!” (*ibid*).

The hunchbacked Guimeni’s lamentation aptly captures the pathos of Durga’s predicament: “*Hai! Hai!* When her husband was alive. . . she lived on the thick cream at the top of the curd pot. Who has made this deep wound in her heart?” (*ibid*). A wounded, sad figure, Durga’s internal world disintegrates - - her dream of pilgrimage is trampled, cruelly crushed. Significantly, the Gossain's prize elephant Jaganath is in *musht* (heat) rampaging around the countryside creating havoc in the real world. Durga’s tragedy, one of several in the novel, underscores the degrading predicament of widows. She has obediently upheld the duties prescribed for widows in the code of Manu. In *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* by Pandita Ramabai, the duties of a widow are thus described in the code of Manu:

“At her pleasure let her emaciate her body by living on pure flowers, roots and fruits; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband has died.”

“Until death, let her be patient of hardships, self-controlled, and chaste, and strive to fulfil that most excellent duty which is prescribed for wives who have one husband only”. - *Manu* v., 157-58

“A virtuous wife who after the death of her husband constantly remains chaste, reaches heaven,. . .” - *Manu* v., 160

“In reward of such conduct, a female who control her thoughts, speech, and actions, gains in this life highest renown, and in the next world a place near her husband.” - *Manu* v., 166 (37)

The novel brings out Durga's deteriorating condition. Years of self-mortification having taken their toll, a persistent cough signals the onset of the dreaded *khenh* (tuberculosis). In the eyes of others, she is “looking like an old vulture”, “thin like a skeleton”, “a living corpse” (253). Arrangements are made for her return to Chikarhati. An emotional, poignant parting of ways makes her reflect on the inevitable. Guimeni voices what the others silently understand. “If she had to die, everybody thought she had better die in her dead husband's house. It is a woman's religious duty”. . . “It's written in the holy books. This way her soul would gain much merit” (255). In her departure from her ancestral *Sattra*, Durga knows she will not return. The bullock cart that carries her moves inexorably like her fate towards oblivion. It is Giribala's heart-rending grief that gives her some consolation knowing that at least her young niece has genuine affection for her and is pained at her departure. Indranath promises that after she has recovered, he would take her back for Grandfather's *shradha* ‘memorial service’.

Unlike the goddess, Durga has not been able to defeat her demons. She is like a tigress ferociously defending in upholding traditional religion but the same religion has led to her physical and mental degradation offering her no panacea. In her

depiction, Goswami reveals the starkest picture of miserable widowhood, its effects on an individual who has patiently obeyed the duties required of a high-caste Gossain widow. Durga's grotesque tragedy is in her internalization of, her mute acceptance of the trials and deprivations of her lot so that she may attain heavenly bliss.

3(a) Saru Gossainee: Desire and Frustration

The next prominent widow is Saru Gossainee whose story is intricately woven into the larger tapestry of unfortunate widowhood. An exceptionally good-looking woman of thirty, she is the widow of Rama Kanta Dev Goswami, younger brother of Krishna Kanta Dev Goswami, the Gossain *Mahaprabhu (Sattraadhikar)*, Indranath and Giribala's father. Described as a high-born lady hailing from a place called Pathaldia, she is the daughter of the Gossain of Dakhala who from the age of five or six, had been chosen by the *teen* (three) Sattra Gossain of Amranga as a future daughter-in-law. Her father had been given traditional gifts of *endi* silk cloth, curd, paddy, jars of mustard oil among other gifts to confirm the betrothal. She enters Amranga *Sattra* on a palanquin with magnificent silver handles in keeping with her high status. Unfortunately, her marital bliss is cut short when her husband is killed in a firework display during one of the annual festivals of the *Sattra*. Widowed early, Saru Gossainee oversees her share of land with the disciple-inhabitants, is respected and admired for the adroit management of her household and capably carrying out her religious duties towards her disciples. Like Durga, she too is conservative, orthodox, adhering to rituals faithfully. Unlike Durga, she is appreciated and admired as much for her beauty as for her administrative skills and enjoys the position of a junior spiritual head in her in-laws' *Sattra*. In Saru Gossainee, Goswami presents the

portrait of a beautiful young widow, childless but unlike Durga not branded or ill-treated for such a condition, who appears to run her life with courage and fortitude. However, behind her brave front, she too is a young woman obedient to the strictures of Brahmanical widowhood who suffers privately from her own insecurities and frustrations.

Contemporaneous to the socio-historical conditions of the times, it is a matter of concern for Gossain households the change in the attitude of their tenant share-cropper farmers who have readily embraced Marxist ideology under the influence of communists and are becoming critical of their feudal lords who live in comfort from the sweat and labour of their lower caste disciple farmers. With the workers realising their exploitation and the communists gaining strength, the share-cropper farmers are raising voices of resistance, even calling for the Gossains to till their own lands. This is unimaginable in the eyes of the high-caste Gossains for whom to touch a plough is polluting. It is a job usually carried out by low service-castes. In these bad times, the Gossain household has to face some harsh realities. Saru Gossainee is therefore worried for her future. “But now she was gradually being thwarted and buffeted by the winds of change blowing over the *Sattra*” (9).

From her position of a respectable Gossain widow attending to the spiritual needs of her disciples, she also faces a dilemma - overseeing and collecting revenue from her allotted share of land. When her husband was alive, carts laden with paddy would be delivered in great abundance. There was no dearth of revenue. But with the air of uncertainty over the defiance of tenant farmers, she is filled with a sense of foreboding over her fate as the tide of changes may alter the feudal hierarchy. The

advent of communism coinciding with land reforms is causing tremors in the *Sattras* scattered throughout South Kamrup. Gifts of paddy have become erratic and she has apprehensions over her future upkeep. Faced with these concerns, aware of her vulnerability, she welcomes the services offered by Mahidhar Sharma Pathak, a handsome widower who was at Datara before coming to Haramdo. With his help, she hopes the uncertainty over her current predicament will clear up as she needs a Brahmin to collect taxes from her land in Marabitha, Pathaldia and Garal to clear land taxes owed to the Government. She hopes that her dilapidated residence will be repaired with fine timber and the roof of her house replaced with corrugated iron sheets. Pragmatic in her outlook, Saru Gossainee's intelligence deserts her as she develops a growing physical attraction for the handsome Mahidhar.

She allows him to sleep next to the *dekhal*, or rice-pounding room, cooks and prepares his food becoming deeply concerned for his well being since his services ensures her material comfort. Goswami deftly reveals Saru Gossainee's repressed passion for Mahidhar. There is a nuanced sensuality in her portrayal of the beautiful widow's sexual attraction towards Mahidhar. "She has observed for some time that this ripple of excitement would pass through her body whenever he came near her. She turned around and saw Mahidhar wearing the same *dhoti* that she had got for him when she had gone to Pathaldia to meet her disciples" (77). Mahidhar serves Saru Gossainee becoming her right-hand man who through thick and thin, during crisis or otherwise becomes an essential part of her life. When he is struck down by cholera, she personally nurses him back to health. At times when she espies him through the chinks and gaps in his room, sleeping soundly after a full day's work, she

is mesmerized by and tempted by the glow of his skin and his robust physique. Through the years, she has restrained herself from any familiarity with him, she has not indulged in ‘impure’ desires. His glances towards her bed when she puts money on his palm for various purchases; her eyes drawn frequently to his body starts to fill her mind with questions. Her concern leads her to wait in pouring rain one late evening worried for Mahidhar’s safety with a rampaging elephant on the loose. Caught between her attraction towards the handsome widower and her status as a respected Gossainee widow, her conscience would prick her filling her with frustration. In moments of reflection and introspection, she wondered at the propriety of her thoughts and actions. “She felt like a wounded prey. Self-reproach mixed with sorrow overwhelm her whole being, mentally and physically. It is a grave sin! It will plunge her into the fires of hell and burn her completely! Oh God, forgive me! Forgive me!” (105). Guilt and the pain of denial of physical sexual needs haunts the young widow for whom remarriage seems out of reckoning.

Moreover, Mahidhar Bapu’s stay in Saru Gossainee’s residence gives rise to gossip and speculation. “Only the other day, Durga had told her that people were gossiping about her and Mahidhar *bapu* even in Haramdo and Medhipara. They whispered that *Bapu* drew water from the well for her evening bath and that he even held a kerosene lamp when she went out in the night for her nature’s call!” (77). Durga praises her courage but at the same time, hints at the doubtful nature of the man who is now an entrenched figure in the young widow’s house:

“You are really courageous, Saru Gossainee! No other Damodariya Gossainee has dared to stay alone like you after becoming a widow!

Everyone knows that wild wolves come and sit on your verandah during the night”, Durga had exclaimed (*ibid*).

3(b) Conflict between Strisvabhava and Stridharma

In Saru Gossainee, Goswami sketches the internal strife of a woman who is torn between her natural desires on the one hand and her duty as a widow to remain faithful to the memory of her husband on the other. This results in feelings of guilt as she tries to guard herself from betraying her Pativrata dharma of chastity and wifely fidelity. Uma Chakravarti’s explanation throws light on this aspect of women's nature:

An interesting facet of women’s innate nature called *strisvabhava*. . . was the representation of conflict between the innate nature of women and their dharma. . . The strisvabhava of women – their innate nature as sexual beings - was in conflict with their stridharma of fidelity to the husband. In sum, their strisvabhava was constantly enticing them away from their stridharma. . . Stridharma was necessary to tame women’s sexuality and transport women from the realm of wild untamed nature to that of an orderly world of culture. (72-73)

Saru Gossainee’s strisvabhava desires Mahidhar but her stridharma holds her back. In spite of the internal conflict, she becomes enamoured of Mahidhar, blind to his cunning designs. She trusts him implicitly never realising that he was taking advantage of her trust. When the theft of Durga’s jewellery is discovered, Mahidhar is the prime suspect. It is clear that he is not held in high esteem by others. Guimeni

even questions her: “Gossaini, how can you trust this race of rotten men? These bastards! They live double lives. They sometimes look like heavenly saints. . . but they are actually devils from the darkest hell! How could you believe them?” (182).

As she agonizes and wrestles with her feelings for her right-hand man, she is filled with foreboding looking at Durga’s black box which resembles a big black hole “like a pit dug out in a graveyard” (*ibid*). Her concern for Mahidhar, of some impending disaster about to take place disturbs her. The conflict has been raging in her mind constantly:

Perhaps in a dark corner of her mind, some immoral thoughts had crept in and had taken root? Was it possible? Had she fallen so low? This Gossainee, who gave *mantras* to her disciples, who proudly wore the crown of religious rectitude on her head, had she become such a sinner? Was it possible? And today. . . this book of sin was wide open for all to read. Oh! Lord forbid! Lord forbid!. . . For many days, this conflict has been raging in her mind. It went on and on, like a wounded horse running away from the battlefield, never stopping! (184)

Saru Gossainee’s private cogitations, described with delicate finesse by Goswami reveals the inner turmoil of a woman caught in a painful emotional dilemma. Her interior monologues reflects the frustration of a woman longing for sexual fulfilment. Years of faithfulness to her dharma has created this silent battle which has trapped her like a bird in a cage. Despite the gossip, she remains dignified, scrupulously maintaining a respectable distance from Mahidhar who is deferential in his demeanour towards her. From the portrayal of Saru Gossainee, Goswami

dramatizes the tragedy of unfulfilled female sexuality repressed under religious laws of what recent feminist scholarship calls ‘Brahmanical patriarchy’. Uma Chakravarti notes that Brahmanical patriarchy is a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes. It implies a model of patriarchy in brahmanical prescriptive text which assign duties to women but rights for women are largely absent in the Brahmanical code³.

That these structures which uphold the ideology of chaste wives and pativrata women can be oppressive is clearly illustrated in Saru Gossainee who appears to be invisibly chained and bound to these codes. Her predicament places her in a situation described by Ramabai in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* in the chapter on “Widowhood”. Women like Saru Gossainee under the laws of Manu are bound by caste to strive to fulfil her “most excellent duty”. She knows she has to “control her thoughts, speech and actions”. By doing so, she “gains in this life highest renown, and in the next world a place near her husband” *Manu* v., (37).

Her self-recriminations brought out in poignant evocative language, show a woman suffering from sexual repression. Underneath her private misery and frustration, she too, like Durga, has internalized the codes of her religion, the particular commandments and duties for high caste women, wives and widows. By repressing her natural desires and denial of her physical needs, she ensures that she remains bound to the stringent control required of her. But there are other concerns for Saru Gossainee. Mahidhar’s services have ensured a regular payment of paddy and taxes which he collects from her tenants scattered about in her lands. He has,

over time, become indispensable to her. The thought of losing him is like cutting off a part of her body. She is deeply concerned about her lands being converted by her tenants from *riyati patta*⁴ to *miyadi*⁵.

With the Land Ceiling Act, there would be a limit on possession of land. Her status and economic position stops here from stooping to bribe greedy land surveyors. The children of her disciples are sent off to study in schools and colleges in Gauhati, growing up to become inspectors and policemen. These changing times and her dwindling fortunes make her worried for her future. For a long period after her husband's death, her disciples would take her ceremonially in a palanquin accompanied by drums and trumpets to their villages, to their prayer halls, seeking her blessings and counsel. The older devotees who honoured and respected the Gossain family are no more. Cholera and black death have taken many of them. The newer generation of devotees is different. The country has gained independence but for people like Saru Gossainee, the old order was no more. Even her husband's assurances that life would become better, that the disciples would continue to uphold and respect her are belied by the uncertain future that confronts her. This uncertainty fills her with apprehensions about her predicament. The reality facing her is entirely different: "But now, what was happening? What was going on? All these problems with her lands! Harassment, disputes! It looked as if the disciples would drag her to the courts of Gauhati: she, the Gossainee, who has not even looked at the open sky above her head!" (211).

Her predicament illustrates the dilemma on several fronts for Gossainee widowhood. In her depiction, it is clear that high-caste Brahmin widows experience

oppression different from their low-caste counterparts. Ironically, their privileged position does not grant them greater freedom. The politics of caste privilege, caste dominance and power hierarchy have created an ideological structure where women, by accepting and internalizing their role as dutiful wives, mothers and widows, are complicit in their subordination. Women submit themselves to the obligations and duties prescribed for them in the brahmanical texts to ensure purity of caste, of the social order. Chakravarti points out, “If the women erred, then law and custom must ensure that women were kept under the control of the patriarchal kinship network” (76).

3(c) Religious Sanctity versus Sanctimony

An important point to consider in Saru Gossainee’s predicament is that the Vaishnavite *Sattrra* in which she resides is a monastery for dispersal of religious ideas and teachings. After the death of her husband, she continued to live in the *Sattrra* earning respect among the Damodariya *Sattras* of the South Bank. Unlike Durga whose piety and rigid adherence to rituals led to her physical and psychological decline and eventual death from extreme asceticism, Saru Gossainee has managed to strike a balance in her socio-religious activities even in a conservative milieu such as the *Sattrra* under the religious authority of its male *Sattrraadhikar* or religious head of the *Sattrra*. She is able to perform religious activities in tune with the role played by women. In understanding the role of women in religious institutions, Kakoti and Mahanta contend that: “Religiously, women are better performers than men; they connect individuals in the community. This is in attunement to the role portrayed by the women folks in the socio-cultural and religious life of the Vaishnavite community

in Assam in general and the *Sattras* in particular” (19). However, it should be noted that though women contributed in a significant way, the patriarchal hierarchy of the *Sattras* limited them to a subordinate role.

An interesting feature of how religion is interpreted and used by men and women is the way the Brahmin priests in the novel quote the holy texts when they are caught for committing a crime. When Jokram Bhagwati and his brother, the priest of Rajapukhuri are apprehended for smuggling opium, they resort to quoting the holy scriptures to save themselves. Goswami brings out the irony of Brahmin priests guilty of a crime invoking the Vedas to escape imminent arrest. V. Padma commenting on the way religion is used to serve the interests of the Brahmin male, says: “The centrality of religious sanction and the use of scriptures for vindication of certain practices is important as the *Sattras* acted also as monasteries and the *Sattraadhikar* as the religious head who could interpret the scriptures for the people of his *Sattra*” (221). In other words, Goswami reveals the hypocrisy of male religious leaders for their double standards. The Gossain has been changing the rules of the scriptures for his own convenience while Purshottam Bhagwati, the family priest was “manipulating the holy scriptures for his own selfish ends” (212). Whereas, unlike the male religious leaders, Saru Gossainee makes changes, not for selfish gain but for true humane service. “She herself was not averse to a slight change that served some beneficial human purpose” (*ibid*). This aspect of her service is illustrated in the manner in which she pronounces judgement in the case of the Mahout of Bhikaru Gossain who sought her advice about taking a second woman leaving his wife with a

young infant. She gives her response without hesitation, without consulting the religious texts thereby giving her judgement on the practice of polygamy:

“A woman who deliberately destroys the happiness of another man's wife, deserves contempt and I will give her a curse that will destroy her lineage. . .”

“After hearing these words, the mahout dared not take the other woman into his house and all ended well, though in the scriptures, having more than one wife was allowed and many men in the villages had more than one wife. So many unpleasant things were going on all around the *Sattrā*! While one woman was being received by the man of the house at the front door with open arms, the other woman, the spouse was kicked out by the rear door.” (*ibid*)

In the context of the times, Saru Gossainee is aware such discriminatory practices victimise women. From her position of spiritual authority, she is able to be an agent of good for an unfortunate woman, a testament to her integrity unlike the sanctimonious hypocrisy of the male religious heads. The text highlights instances of chilling gender bias and cruelty to women in referring to an old unused well near Matia Pahar that was considered haunted: “When the volunteers of the opium prohibition committee cleaned the well and removed the age-old muck inside, they hauled out many skeletons of women” (213). The sensational story of Bamdeo *Maujadar*’s young and beautiful wife who ‘accidentally’ drowned in a well when her husband was having an affair with a nurse illustrates this odious evil. Other

unfortunate women bear the brunt of beatings from their opium-addicted men while some fall victim to its addiction.

3(d) Shattered Dreams

The socio-economic climate of the uncertain times, the diminishment of respect for Gossains by the rebellious tenants, the scanty gifts of paddy and mustard oil, of traditional cloths fills Saru Gossainee with pain. Recollecting the happy days when her husband was alive moves her to tears. He had been faithful and unlike many other married Gossain men, had never seduced or exploited young low-caste girls. In the many years of widowhood, she had never succumbed to the “pull of the flesh” (226). With the faith in the moral force inherited from her ancestors, and her will power, she had an unblemished reputation. Her husband had been victimized by his father for criticizing his father's affair with a low-caste woman. When the wealth was divided according to the old Gossain's will, Indranath's father was given the lion's share of land, cash and other possessions like elephants, horses, cows, buffaloes, the store of rice in the granaries and the family deity's ornaments of gold and silver and assorted valuables. Whereas, the younger son, having spoken out against his father's immoral conduct was denied his full share. Durga too had at one time beaten her own father's pregnant mistress who made no secret of her affair basking in the old Gossain's protection, flaunting the gold jewellery he had given her while their wives or women were powerless to stop them. From this history of the Gossain family, it is clear that men, the upper caste Brahmins and the Gossains sexually exploited the low-caste women who were powerless in the face of the authority of these men. Goswami deftly captures and conveys the imbalance in

gender relations, the attitude and treatment towards women and low castes who from their subordinate position, culturally, socially and from religious attitudes remain under patriarchal domination.

A victim of her father-in-law's vindictiveness towards his son, Saru Gossainee's worries for her future are grounded on the unequal distribution of wealth that left her with very little. It is clear from the account of past family friction that her brother-in-law and his household though far wealthier, leave Saru Gossainee to struggle alone. Before his death, her late husband had entreated her, "They have deprived me of my share of land. Don't go running to them and make yourself small in their eyes. Keep your dignity!" (241). She managed her land affairs alone and avoided becoming obligated to her powerful in-laws.

But the socio-cultural and religious climate of a *Sattrā* makes it difficult for women like her to become independent. With the old social order being eroded, she personally experiences the difficulties and challenges for lonely widows who do not have a support system. Being left to fend for herself, feeling the wretchedness of her condition – her dilapidated house, the faded and tattered clothes, the dwindling gifts of paddy, mustard oil, fruit and woven cloths, her increasing penury is clearly evident. Her disciples are not giving her the expected amount of revenue. It is during the dark moment of her predicament that Mahidhar came like a light and stood by her side when she was going through a bad phase. It is with his help that she could pay up the revenue taxes and meet the daily expenses of her household.

He becomes a trusted steward in her modest household. Even then, her fidelity and honour to her late husband remained in her daily practice of worshipping

his wooden sandals. But slowly, an inexplicable attraction for Mahidhar grows which she is unable to overcome. Though Mahidhar's help eases the burden of collecting taxes and he becomes a large presence in her life, she did not forget her husband: "Even now when she offers flowers to the late Gossain's wooden sandals, her eyes fill up with tears" (244). But she is unable to fathom the inexplicable, strange attraction for Mahidhar which she could not overcome. Her desire to visit the banks of the Tarsa to see the image of Lord Krishna with the handsome Brahmin, her dreams of herself and Mahidhar with its sublimated sexual longings indicates how deeply she had become enamoured with the man. Mahidhar, having won her trust, takes the details of the list of lands in her possession. Ostensibly to save her the trouble of the complicated procedure of identifying and matching the reference numbers to a particular site, of sorting the messy account of taxable land in Ukium, he takes her signature on several blank pieces of paper. Not long after, she is visited by a *bhagat* (holy man) of Pathaldia and a Home Guard from the opium de-addiction camp. They have come on behalf of her tenant-disciples who want some clarification on some story being spread by Mahidhar. She learns that Mahidhar has been spreading misinformation to her tenant-disciples who are facing difficulties. Disease and death stalk them. Many are in the grip of the evil of opium addiction losing what little they possess. Hopes of owning a piece of land is something they dream of. Mahidhar has informed them that Saru Gossainee was planning to take advance payment or *baina* on her land. This piece of news is disturbing for her as she did not have inherited land and her husband had not been given any taxable land by his father.

With this piece of information and more questions from the duo, her apprehensions grows. She had started feeling a sense of security in her financial and material condition. She had been weaving romantic fantasies and dreams of herself and Mahidhar. Unknown to her, he had discovered several plots of land belonging to her which could be leased on payment of tax. As details emerge of some of his activities, her unease grows. Gradually, it dawns on her that Mahidhar's earnestness in serving her was a pretence. He is actually an opportunist waiting for the right time to make a handsome profit. With this growing realisation, her world starts crumbling as the full import of Mahidhar's duplicity sinks in. When the *bhagat* and the Home Guard take leave, she ponders over the information. She is torn between faith and doubt. Soon, a dramatic chain of events would seal her fate.

During the night, Saru Gossainee is woken up from an elaborate dream she is having, to a persistent knocking at her door. On opening the door, a group of people with flaming torches in their hands, has brought a man tied in a fishing net. The Home Guard, who had visited her earlier, holds several pieces of paper in his hand. These turn out to be appeals Mahidhar would make:

“About the wretched condition of the daughter-in-law of the Gossains of three *Sattras*. About how she is not getting taxes from her tenant farmers. About how she is not getting her share of paddy. The tax collector has already threatened that he will take away her clothes, utensils and other things if she did not pay the taxes in time”. (250)

Saru Gossainee had given her consent for these appeals to alleviate her predicament. In her naivete, she believed in Mahidhar's sincerity. The extent of his

treachery is understood when the Home Guard read the details of how Mahidhar fraudulently collected tax and advance payments for land sale using the papers she had signed. The Home Guard's words pierce her as he explains:

“He was caught when he was trying to cross the river and run away with the money he had collected from *baina*. Everybody knew that you trusted him completely. That you had a soft corner for him in your heart. But we were suspicious and our boys followed him” (251)

In a daze, she sees Mahidhar, the man she hoped to spend her new life with: “That man lying on the ground now looked like a python caught in a net. Ah me! Wretched me! Only a short time ago, she was walking with him along the path bordered with yellow mustard flowers, to the temple of *Neel Madhava*” (*ibid*). It is a painful crushing finale which Goswami builds up through dreams which indicates Saru Gossainee's desire for sexual fulfilment. Baruah maintains that this desire is, “No other than the expression of a woman's desire to be free in a gender-dominated world” (35). But the recurring images of thorny cactus plants, fire, the frenzied elephant Jagannath, Mahidhar holding out his hand cautioning her not to go along a path where the flesh of her body would be cut by thorny bushes – all build up to a shocking unexpected crescendo. Her dreams presage the dangers of sexual passion, the forbidden desire that burns in her which like a juggernaut is sweeping her towards an inevitable catastrophe. When she wakes from her nightmare, she realises to her horror that it has come true. The object of her desire like a treacherous snake, is trapped in the net of his own deceit. She is completely devastated. For her, it is all destroyed - love, religion, sacrifice. The world she created for herself and Mahidhar

disappears and as she collapses, it is from the realisation of her unknown fate towards possible destitution. For Saru Gossainee, it is, in Baruah's critique: "A shattering end to her dream. It is a splendid episode bringing together a revelation of character, action and idea, inherent in the novel through the mode of fantasy" (37).

4(a) Giribala: The Rebel

Giribala, the youngest of the three widows is the endearing self-willed daughter of the Gossain, Indranath's sixteen year old sister. According to the tradition of her caste, Giribala had been married off at a young age to the dissolute Latu Gossain. Her husband, a womanizing wastrel, spent his time with a *jatra* (travelling theatre) party entertaining crowds and indulging in an affair with a low-caste opium-selling woman. With the onset of puberty being imminent, her parents had arranged for her to be married off much against her will. This was a step taken to save her from being branded impure, as the onset of menstruation meant, having entered sin, women are considered unclean, their presence polluting. To control the sexuality of women of the upper castes and to preserve their purity, Chakravarti says,

The pre-pubertal marriage of upper caste girls so that the unpolluted womb of the wife was the sexual property of the husband before she began to menstruate, immediately after which the *garbadhanam* or consummation ceremony would be completed, were necessary elements in the notion of caste purity. (81)

Giribala's marriage is not a happy one. Though married with high ceremony to a high-caste Brahmin, she learns in the course of her brief marriage, the low

morals and promiscuity of her reprobate husband. Not only his immorality but she suffered the taunts of a man who found her sexually less appealing than his mistress. But, dictated by the duties required of a Hindu wife, she is forced to submit to her husband. Fortunately for her, his way of life leads to an early demise and she is left pregnant and widowed within a few years. Unfortunately, the harsh rigours of widowhood prove too much for her young body in the early stages of pregnancy. Forced by a callous mother-in-law to strictly follow the rituals for a widow, she suffers a miscarriage leaving her in a perilous condition. Her parents are moved by her suffering and she returns to her ancestral home. As the young daughter of the house, she was the centre of her parents' affection but widowhood changes her status completely. In the eyes of the community, she is now impure. She cannot indulge in activities with other married women, she is excluded from other family or ceremonial gatherings. As a spirited young woman, aware of the discrimination and exclusions she will be made to suffer, she refuses to be submissive and does not take things lying down.

On the day of her return to her natal home, her shoulders covered with a white veil, a *chaddar*. Durga reminds her of her changed circumstances. She stops Giribala from going towards the kitchen. The stove for cooking fish should not be tainted by the shadow or touch of a widow. Her mother is unable to look at her, pained to look at what she is now. The women who have come to welcome Giribala ask her mother:

“You have brought her back from Chikarhati. What will be her fate?

She'll be like another Durga. . . .”

“What will happen to her share of the property?”

“Haven’t you seen the example of other Gossainees of South Bank?

How those wolves snatched away their properties?” (28)

The full import of what it is to be a widow has yet to sink in. She is aware of the crowd of curious women who in sympathy with her suffering, have gathered to witness her return. They are also there to gossip about the misfortunes of others as they wonder whether Giribala’s fate will be like that of Durga’s. Durga, not her mother, eases her return to the ancestral home. The Gossainee is advised by one of the women to send Giribala back to her husband's place which is “like heaven for a woman. If she runs away from her husband’s house, she is like a naked woman loitering on the streets” (29). There is social stigma on a woman who does not stay in her husband’s house. The women are curious to hear the details of her recent widowhood and miscarriage. But she refuses to indulge them and on her arrival, darts quickly into the sacred sandal room locking herself in. The voices of the women audibly discussing her unhappy marriage to a dissipated Brahmin, recounting in detail his brazen affair with his mistress who became pregnant but died in a recent cholera epidemic, her death interpreted as divine wrath for daring to enter into a Brahmin's room enrages Giribala who violently kicks at the door startling the women. Her mother accuses the women of snooping on her daughter when she went for her baths to the nearby pond to look out for the first signs of her menstruation, of goading her to get Giribala married off soon, of declaring to other Gossains that the daughter of the Amranga Gossain had become an ‘outcaste’. An old hunchbacked

woman questions the Gossainee whether Giribala had already menstruated when she got married. Durga scornfully retorts “Have you ever heard of any Damodariya Gossain’s daughter being married off after their menstruation? Such things never happened in our lineage and it won't ever happen in the future!” (33). The attempts to humiliate, to embarrass, to rub salt into Giribala’s pain is apparent in the calculated barbs from Bhoomichampa, daughter of a *jajman* Brahmin who seemed to get a malicious pleasure in hurting Giribala. The avid curiosity, the desire to dissect someone's misfortune, to derive a sort of perverse satisfaction from such an exercise, is evident in the exchange between the women who have gathered ostensibly to commiserate with the widow’s family but also to extract a certain spiteful pleasure in someone's pain. The oppressive nature of their conservative society, the bias women hold against another woman, Brahmin or non-Brahmin, unfolds as the women's conversation reveals the picture of women's predicament in a suffocatingly conservative, religiously orthodox milieu exacerbated by neighbourly queries carrying a hint of malice.

What becomes clear is that in spite of the status of belonging to a high-caste Gossain family possessing beauty, intelligence or an independent streak does not protect Giribala from adherence to the demands of caste, tradition and practice. Her early marriage to a fellow Brahmin of the same caste status brazenly indulging his scandalous affairs and pleasures with scant regard or respect for a young bride is a rude and cruel introduction to a loveless marital life. With the open discussion of her misfortune, neither her mother nor her aunt can buffer her against the malice of some of the assembled women.

4(b) A Loveless Marriage

Giribala's predicament arises from being married in a hurry - to pre-empt the possibility of her family being excommunicated if she has started menstruating. Her young life is traded for the sake of family honour. The cruelty of marrying a girl-child to an older man, her fate in the hands of in-laws who turn out to be callous, reveals the personal terror and horror for young girls sent off to an unknown fate away from the comfort and security of the parental home and care. Having left home on marriage as the cherished young daughter, she returns to a greatly-reduced status as a widow. In the eyes of the *Sattr*a world, she is now an impure, inauspicious presence whose touch or shadow is to be avoided. She remembers long ago a voice saying: "Don't touch her! Don't touch her! You women with *sindoor*⁶. She's a widow now!" (27). Durga reminds her of this reality. "Now things have changed. You are a widow. Come, wash your face and hands. There are so many people waiting to see you" (*ibid*). The assembled women wonder how the daughter of the Gossain would pass the 'mountain of days' ahead having grown up without learning to weave or do household work from the sheltered cocooned life she has lived. Even as a very young widow, women are expected to uphold family honour and respectability. In commenting on Giribala's departure from her husband's house, the women reveal themselves to be believers and upholders of the very traditions that oppress them. In effect, their firm belief in wifely obedience, in upholding the traditions that deny them individuality and choice.

The avid interest in Giribala's predicament highlight certain aspects of culture and religion in the *Sattras* which victimise women in diverse ways. The virtue, purity

and chasteness of girls is a must. She should not have started menstruating. Her pre-menstrual condition ensured not only hers but also her family's purity in the caste hierarchy, particularly with Gossain families who belong to a higher Brahmin order. This strict requirement of purity and chastity in the case of girls or women is seen to not apply to the men. There are stark double standards for men and women which operate in the application of socio-cultural rules, food habits, rituals and cultural traditions in a *Sattrā*. While Giribala's purity or impurity is questioned, the same yardstick is absent in the case of the Brahmin groom chosen for her.

The women have gathered out of concern for the young daughter of the house. But with a lack of sensitivity, they begin to dissect Giribala's tragedy. Bhoomichampa who has never matched Giribala in beauty and accomplishment, maliciously refers to the painful and awkward incidents her rival has faced in her marriage and in her in-law's house. From her injured vanity, she seeks to rub salt on Giribala's tragedy with perverse delight. Giribala reacts with fury and screams at the group of women:

“You came here to see me, didn't you? You have seen me now. I am still alive! I will live and have a better life than all of you. . . .”

The words were abruptly cut off and hung in the air. She fell like a severed branch of a tree on the breast of her mother. . . .(34)

This image of Giribala in Jayashree Borah's critique on the novel “anticipates her fate” (3).

From her fiery outburst, Giribala shows a spirit different from her aunts who have in their own way accepted their greatly reduced status. Rather than meekly submit to the 'social death' widowhood forces on her, Giribala defiantly refuses to be a passive victim of cruel and superstitious beliefs like Durga. She shows a desire to be alive than to destroy herself through the austere privations her aunt embraces. In the feudal patriarchal world of a *Sattr* where ancient moral laws operate, her status as a member of a high caste Brahmin family occupying a privileged position, however does not protect her from the laws which impose inhuman suffering on widows. In Giribala's experience in her predicament, the tragedy of young widowhood under the religious customs systematically eroding and degrading a person's individuality, dignity and self-esteem is brought out with poignant empathy for a young life being stamped out with harsh and cruel rules and rituals.

It is Indranath, the progressive-minded hero of the novel, who astutely assesses his widowed sister's predicament. Having seen his aunt Durga denied her share of property by her callous in-laws, treated with disdain and left penurious clinging to self-mortifying religious piety, faithfully worshipping her dead husband's sandals in the hope of attaining salvation; Saru Gossainee struggling alone with her fears and problems, Indranath realises Giribala's pain. He is not blind to the oppressive nature of the feudal world which discriminates against women and the lower castes. He therefore encourages Giribala to help Mark, the young British missionary scholar in his search for ancient manuscripts to research the history of their *Sattr* so that she will be fruitfully occupied.

4(c) Passion and Pains of Young Widowhood

In the caste-conscious *Sattrā*, Mark, a *firingi* (white foreigner), is considered unclean whose shadow or proximity is to be avoided. The extreme views on purity or impurity of one's caste is brought out in Durga's comical reaction when Mark's shadow falls on her. Fearing contamination, she rushes off to bathe again. Like the lower castes, Mark is the 'other' to the self of the upper caste. Aware of this view about white foreigners, he observes and pays due obeisance to the Gossainee, placing coins respectfully at her feet who welcomes him as a guest. In his quest for material on the history of the *Sattrā*, Indranath proposes Giribala as assistant to Mark in translating old Assamese manuscripts. Indranath confides to Mark that he had thought of putting Giribala in school but his parents disagreed with him over this: "Here girls from Gossain households still don't go out in public, let alone to school! And she lost her husband only a few months back. Now she has all the time in the world!" (66). In a marked departure from the conservative mores of his society, Indranath does not want Giribala to remain a prisoner to the religious laws of their *Sattrā*. With his encouragement, she helps Mark in his research. This exercise takes her to various parts of their vast *Sattrā* giving her the much needed diversion from the gloom over her young widowhood. Her mother and aunt however are critical at Giribala's traipsing about the countryside which in their eyes is unbecoming of a high caste widow.

In one of her forays while searching for old manuscripts in the attic of a Brahmin's store room, she is bitten by a snake. The hysterical reaction of her mother and Durga indicates their inability to cope with such emergencies. In the din and fuss

raised by the two older women who call for a priest to come and chant appropriate verses from the holy scriptures as a remedy to remove the snake venom, who bemoan the inability of the doctor from Barihat to save the victim, it is Mark who quietly enters the scene to administer emergency first aid by cutting open the bite area and sucking out the blood from Giribala's leg. The Gossainee peeps through the windows to watch Mark touching Giribala's leg and this sight - of an unclean *mlecha* touching her daughter evokes a shiver of horror at the 'contamination'. In the Gossainee's reaction, Goswami illustrates the deeply caste-based notions of purity versus impurity. The belief in their purity, the reliance on superstition, on recitation of appropriate verses as a gesture to save themselves from poison or pollution, indicates the Gossainee's deeply entrenched belief in their superiority. In the depiction, it is a 'low caste' white European's intervention which saves Giribala. But in the Gossainee's ultra-orthodox eyes, it is a loathsome sight that fills her with revulsion. From her deep-rooted caste-consciousness, she bewails: "Oh! What a fate! What a fate that a Damodariya Gossainee had to tolerate a Christian inside her house! Will she have to go through the rituals for atonement for this sin? . . ." (85). It is Mark's educated treatment which saves Giribala while her mother and aunt guided by superstition and illogical beliefs can do little.

During the *Shradha* 'memorial ceremony' for her late Grandfather, a grand feast is prepared. In the bustle of the community cooking and the large crowd, Giribala is tempted by the aroma of the variety of food particularly the mutton curry with black beans. On discovering a pot of the meat curry hidden in the palanquin room, she is sorely tempted. She knows, "it was an unpardonable sin for a

Damodariya Gossain widow to eat flesh!” (139 – 140). Aware of the religious taboo, the tempting aroma brings to her mind how her late husband relished this preparation with its mixture of ghee, pepper, ginger and spices. He had declared early in their marriage:

“I love women. I like their company. When I roamed with the *jatra* party. . . , I had taken tea from the hands of low-caste women. And that woman of Maniari Chowk not only does she make pigeon curry with papaya for me but she also cooks *ou* fruit with deer flesh. But listen! You daughter of Gossain! I have done *prayaschit* every time I ate those forbidden things. Sometimes by calling a Brahmin priest and other times by reciting the *gayatri mantra*. . . .” (141)

Not just words, she remembers his infidelity and his numerous affairs, “He had gradually reached the lowest rung of debauchery possible for a dissolute son of a Gossain family” (*ibid*). By contrast, for a Gossain widow, “it was a great sin even to smell the aroma of forbidden food as written in the scriptures”. (*ibid*). With these bitter memories of her husband who got away with his sins, Giribala gives in and in an act of defiance, “She forgot everything. . . . religion and rituals, wisdom or restraint. . . . She started gulping it down in great haste” (144). After widowhood, her diet consisted only of rice and pulses boiled with vegetables and a pinch of salt and a little *ghee*. Her tongue had become dull and dry and she was sick of the bland food.

4(d) Giribala's 'Heinous' Defiance

Unlike Durga and Saru Gossainee who obediently observed the restrictions on food, Giribala is not prepared to condemn herself to a similar fate. Left with unpleasant memories of a reprobate husband, the delicious aroma and taste of the mutton curry fills her mind with a swirl of thoughts. The woman of Maniari Kiniari must have cooked the same curry. Her husband must have taken the curry and sucked the fingers of his mistress as she fed him with her hand. With each of these thoughts, Giribala takes large helpings of the curry almost emptying the pot. She is aware: "For the first time, a Gossain's daughter, in the manor of a *Sattrā*, had committed this heinous act!" (*ibid*). But she was beyond caring since her husband had indulged in more serious offences while she had obediently adhered to the rules for women.

It is Durga's horrified shriek on seeing Giribala that alerts everyone around creating an uproar. Her mother reacts with fury pulling her braids, kicking and punching and clawing at the daughter who had committed a grave transgression. Indranath stops his mother from beating Giribala further reasoning that rituals for atonement, for purification were available in the sacred books, shouting "Do you want to kill her? Come to your senses. These are the ways to purify her! Rituals for atonement! Why beat her so much?" (145). The purification and ritualistic atonement is carried out accompanied by admonitions, stern warnings and moral lectures from family members and Giribala is locked up in the palanquin room with a box of her personal belongings dumped with her. The small claustrophobic room, with the sound of wood weevils inexorably boring into the wood, strikes terror in her heart mirroring the predicament she is trapped in - suffocated by rigid religious rituals

which tighten and bind filling her with despair. The rogue elephant rampaging the countryside evokes comments of “a widow who has eaten what she shouldn't have eaten! These are evil omens” (149).

What compounds her misery is over and above the indignity of her punishment becoming a public spectacle, it is far more severe on a woman than on a man. For his innumerable sins, her husband had got away performing non-violent penance. She pays a higher price for her ‘sin’ which is seen as an evil omen, a grave offence. In Giribala’s painful predicament, Goswami reveals the ways women are made to suffer for transgressing caste or disobeying rules. In the paranoid obsession and pride over the purity of their higher caste status, Giribala’s punishment reflects a denial of humane feelings. The torture she endures is doublefold because firstly, she is a widow. Secondly, she has committed a ‘heinous sin’. The dark coffin-like room heightens her bleak inner turmoil as the thought of suicide crosses her mind. Even Mark’s commiserations fail to alleviate her despair. Looking around the assorted objects, she sees a large colourful ceremonial umbrella in a corner which reminds her of the day her husband came for the feast for newly-weds escorted under its large canopy. “But this memory did not evoke any sensation of love or respect for her husband. The man who had tied himself in a disgusting relationship with that notorious woman, the opium seller. How could it?” (152).

Instead her sexual longings is evident in her actions as she caresses its satiny surface thinking of Mark’s soft smooth skin. “She rubbed the silk on her cheeks, her neck, her breasts . . . all over her body in a soft, languid movement of her hand. . . as if she desired to pull all the silk on to her, wrap herself in its softness. . .” (152). To

her frustration, Mark is restrained which is of little consolation to her. He cannot give in to Giribala's allure. There can be serious repercussions if he did so. Giribala's whispered plea is poignant in its desperation. "Oh! Please! Take me out of this wooden coffin! Please! I beg you!" (153). Despite the drama over the mutton curry incident, refusing to be restrained by gender norms or caste conventions of her society, Giribala continues to help Mark, traversing about the countryside collecting old manuscripts, reading and translating them for his study. Her growing attraction towards him leads her to reveal her personal pain during their visit to the abandoned and ruined estate of a once prosperous Mahajan. Her close association with the missionary scholar is scandalous in the eyes of the cart driver who took Giribala about.

Her reading and study has led to her gaining knowledge and a growing fondness for the golden-haired foreigner. It is interesting to note that by depicting Giribala's search for historical manuscripts, Goswami is highlighting the role of women in being repositories of history and tradition. Durga had been helping Mark earlier. Giribala takes over with Indranath's encouragement. She is prepared to become a Christian to be with him. But with this confession of hers, he controls himself knowing that such a likelihood would be unthinkable. She pours her heart out, revealing the depth of her frustration at the endless cycle of rituals widowhood has forced on her. Durga has been critical of her for neglecting to perform the regular prayers to her late husband's wooden sandals - her fidelity in question and having eaten meat, her aunt calls her a sinner. Giribala tells Mark: "She doesn't even take water from my hands and she cannot tolerate my presence while she is praying in the

sandal room. . .” (198). She declares that she feels no guilt for any sin even after eating goat’s meat and that unlike her widowed aunts:

I cannot just exist, just for the sake of remaining alive, like Durga and Saru Gossainee. My father, the *adhikar*, said: Your future and Durga’s future are now linked together. Durga has found her path and you must follow her! You must observe all the rituals. You must offer flowers, *tulsi* and water daily to your dead husband’s wooden sandals. You know that her husband is like life’s blood for a Hindu woman. (198)

Her confession is a telling revelation of the angst she suffers. Her young body has not found fulfilment with an unfaithful husband. Widowhood releases her from the bond of marriage but the bonds of even tighter religious laws now shackle her. Her father advises her to follow Durga who epitomizes the ideal widowhood. But the rigours of daily rituals has taken its toll and Durga is now a ghostly shadow who moves about spectre-like. At least, Durga had enjoyed a happy conjugal life of sixteen years and faithfully worships the sandals of her late husband. Saru Gossainee too had a blissful marriage before her husband died in the firecracker accident. With only bitter memories of her marriage, her in-laws and husband, Giribala has little devotion to his memory and does not observe the daily worship as faithfully as Durga and Saru Gossainee. Her husband had found sexual fulfilment in the company of a low caste woman and on the first night, he tells his child-bride: “There cannot be any enjoyment in bed with the woman one brings in marriage! Absolutely none!” (199). In *Latu Gossain*, Goswami exposes the hypocrisy of upper caste Brahmin men who flout the norms of caste purity with impunity, who carry on adulterous affairs

and appear to suffer little ostracism. The rules on the other hand are strictly enforced on women. Giribala reveals how often, after widowhood, her father had ordered her bed to be next to Durga's, for her to be Durga's shadow. She had often observed her aunt get up in the dead of night to hug her dead husband's wooden sandals. But with the loss of her ornaments, Durga loses hope in being able to immerse her husband's ashes in holy water. When Giribala offers her her own ornaments having little desire to put her husband's ashes in sacred waters, her aunt reacts with contempt telling her scornfully "It would be a sin to take anything from a person whose tongue utters such words. . . !" (200).

In Durga's response, Goswami points out how women internalize and accept caste-bound roles and rules expecting their younger counterparts to follow in their footsteps. By being votaries of repressive practices, they contribute to their victimized predicament and appear to aid in perpetuating women-on-women oppression. Giribala's confession and revelations is the deep angst of a young woman whose emotional needs and sexual desires remain unfulfilled. Her growing fondness for Mark conveyed through looks, gestures and words embarrass him as he awkwardly tries to reassure and console her. But they are abruptly disturbed by the rampaging elephant which charges at and destroys the cart used by Giribala for travelling while leaving Mark's cycle untouched. In terror, Giribala clings to Mark and in the face of great danger, she manages to whisper to the elephant:

"Kill me! Kill me now! When I am holding this Sahib in my arms.
Kill me now! At once! I'll be most happy. Don't you remember? Me
riding on your back to the river side! That girl who sat in the auspicious

howda of the *adhikar mahaprabhu*, now lies in the arms of an unclean,
low caste man. Kill her! Kill her!” (201)

Being in the arms of a low-caste man is in violation of caste purity which is a reprehensible and punishable sin. For Giribala, her death-wish is out of a sense of utter frustration and if she dies while in Mark's arms, polluting her ritual status in defiance, it would give fulfilment and solace to her restless body and spirit. Their narrow escape from the mad elephant anticipates more trouble and danger for both of them as news of their intimacy has reached the ears of her in-laws who are concerned about any scandal arising that could damage their family name. Word is out that they have sent two men to take Giribala back to Bangara.

4(e) Victimization from 'Sin of Puberty'

Goswami depicts in detail how Giribala's marriage was arranged by her parents to save themselves from losing caste. According to the priest, Purshottam Bhagwati, her horoscope was not favourable for her marriage to the Gossain of Bangara. But time was running out for her parents as “Her puberty was drawing near and the sin of puberty had to be averted by marrying her off quickly. . . The Gossain was extremely agitated and worried about this sin of puberty. The Gossainee almost lost her wits” (285). The priest tells a motley group of listeners in the de-addiction camp that while the horoscope of the Gossain of Bangara was horrible, that he was a lecherous rascal whose goings-on was widely known and Giribala's father was aware of these facts yet, “He was in a hurry to get rid of her. Or else the sin of puberty would have disgraced the family” (286). Goswami reveals how the burden of getting

a pre-pubertal daughter married off makes parents give away young girls in child marriage to older men. Girl-children are treated like commodities that are quickly married off to save the parents from stigma. However it appears that despite her parents' conservative outlook, it did not stop them from letting Giribala be educated, though at home. She was not sent to school. Giribala was a bright child who had been taught by a reputed tutor who had learnt classical works by heart. However, the priest asks those around him. "But what's the use of such intelligence in a girl? It will bring nothing but blemish on the family's name. Women's education is of no use" (286). The priest's words encapsulate the cultural attitude towards girls and young women whose intelligence and abilities are undervalued in their orthodox world.

Bhagwati tells the group of curious listeners that: "When the Gossain of Bangara heard that daughter-in-law was preparing to run away with a Christian, he was mad with rage. He told them (two men) not to come back without her and if she didn't come readily, to drag her by her hair right up to Bangara!" (286 – 7). What this throws light on is that while Giribala's in-laws are enraged at her hobnobbing with Mark, an 'unclean' foreigner, at the 'dishonour' her conduct brings on their respectable family, yet they appear to have had no qualms while their son lived a debauched life, sexually exploiting low caste women. Goswami illustrates further examples of this double-standards of Gossains in her representation of Indranath's grandfather who also kept a mistress from the lower caste and had an illegitimate son. It appears that while the onus of protecting family honour, upholding religious traditions and living in moral rectitude falls on women, the men, particularly the Gossains, allow themselves no restriction or repression in their social interactions or

sexual conduct. Women suffer various punishments, undergo severe penances, eat a very restricted diet, have controls over their dress, behaviour, actions, in effect in almost all aspects of her life, woman's existence under patriarchal control appears to be restrictive, miserable and unfulfilling. By contrast, men give themselves far greater freedom, powers and privileges to transgress and they get away by undergoing light penances for wrong doings or recite a few scriptural verses to expiate themselves from sin. Goswami depicts through these stark contrasts that in an unequal, unfair, discriminatory world, women's predicament makes living a continuous torment.

The last straw for Giribala occurs when one violent stormy night, sick and tired of her miserable life, she makes her way to Mark's humble hut in pouring rain. It was a modest room which was provided by Indranath's parents for the scholar-missionary to conduct his research in private. He sympathized and empathized with Giribala's pain, with her predicament. But in the eyes of the *Sattrā* world, with the wide difference in their status, Mark knows that their affection for one another could not materialize into something more concrete. It would be difficult to surmount the caste-barrier which separated them. Moreover, the two men sent by her in-laws were loitering about the *Sattrā* waiting to take her back. Though filled with deep tender feelings for Giribala, Mark feels an inexplicable dilemma which disturbs his mind and heart. When Giribala enters his hut, she stubbornly refuses to return to her parent's house despite Mark's plea. "Giribala, you are breaking the traditional code of Gossain families. Go back! Right now! Go back!" (294). Unperturbed by Mark's discomfiture, Giribala removes her chemise, squeezes out the water and removes the

water from her rain-soaked hair. The howling storm outside mirrors the inner state of her emotions but outwardly she appears calm and composed telling Mark determinedly: “I will not go back to that graveyard! I don't want to be buried alive. I'd rather die” (295). Mark understands what Giribala means. He has learnt in the course of his stay that the predicament of widows, young or old, can be extremely wretched and pathetic. Goswami presents a dismal picture of Gossain widowhood:

Scores of images of Gossain widows pass before Mark's eyes. Widows who have stretched out their existence within four walls, who have never seen the road outside, widows wracked by deprivation and unknown diseases brought on by harsh and cruel rituals, widows who had died without fulfilling their craving to learn the rudiments of reading and writing, without drinking in the nectar of written words, out of fear of social censure. Oh! There are hundreds, thousands of such women on the banks of rivers like Jagalia! (*ibid*)

By coming to Mark, Giribala rejects this wretched predicament of widowhood. Her refusal to go back to her in-laws lies in the deeply unhappy, unwanted marriage forced on her by her parents to save themselves from social disgrace. They were more concerned about family honour than her happiness or wellbeing. Marriage to a dissolute older man proved to be a disillusionment. She tells Mark that her husband had kept an opium thief as a mistress. He would taunt her saying:

‘What's so great about your beautiful body? That lady of Kiniari!

Even though she is a low-caste opium seller, her body glows with

exciting sexuality. . . You are nothing in comparison. . . They say she always goes about sniffing at men like a bitch in heat but where is that lustful current of blood flowing in the veins of Gossain girls like you?' (295–6)

Unlike his mistress, in his eyes, a pure woman like her did not excite him sexually. With a husband who belittled her, whose words and action caused mental and psychological cruelty, emotional trauma and feelings of worthlessness, Giribala suffered from a sense of inadequacy. She alternates between being critical of her husband's follies and her inability, despite her beauty, to satisfy her husband which is brought out in her tear-filled disclosure to Mark:

She said. "I couldn't bind him to me with either my body or my mind. But the flesh of that woman! Was it so powerful that before it, virtue and decency, all things worthwhile in life, became futile like mere dust on the roadside? All the treasures of mind become as meaningless as dust only because of that flesh! (296)

Throwing restraint to the winds, she pleads with Mark to touch her just once. Though filled with desire for her, the religious scholar is restrained by his moral scruples knowing that the invisible barriers of caste could not be swept away by a touch. It was an ordeal to hold himself back. He wonders: "How deep must be this well of unhappiness, which forces a woman to self-destruction, when barriers of modesty collapsed. What a terrible test this is!. . . How can he, a person who has

never come close to a woman, know about the mystery of a woman's mind?" (*ibid*).

Years of restraint keep Mark paralysed in spite of Giribala's open declaration.

Unfortunately, Giribala's boldness in going to Mark has not gone unnoticed. The priest Purushottam Bhagwati, accompanied by several well-built men burst into Mark's hut and with sanctimonious rage, roars at them:

"Pull out that girl from his den! Pull her out! This *mlecha* has taken advantage of her innocence!. . . Bind him! Bind him tight with a rope! Don't let him escape!. . . Be quick. Go and bind him! Drag her out! Look at her *gatala*, her *mekhala*. She's ruined! Utterly ruined!. . . (298)

From this depiction, Goswami presents the rational-minded humanist view of a woman's pain from Mark's observation. It disturbs him to see Giribala's misery, the risks she has taken to disclose her feelings for him. He realises he is not equipped to understand the unfathomable mystery, the passion and pains of her heart and mind. Unfortunately, in the benighted eyes of the priest, they are two who have committed mortal sins that require, particularly in Giribala's case, a stringent ritual to purify her. Having polluted and defiled herself, she has violated the sexual norms of her caste and she will not be allowed entry into the family manor until she has been completely cleansed. Thus, an elaborate ritual is set about which will require Giribala to go through a rite by fire.

What is clearly brought out is that Giribala is given no allowance to voice her opinion, to make it clear that she went to Mark's hut of her own will. Instead, the priest makes a hue and cry. In his caste-coloured view of the young couple's association, a serious outrage had taken place, Giribala has violated the moral order,

the sexual norms and defiled the honour and purity of her caste, family and lineage. She has to be suitably punished. The elaborate purification ceremony requires her to enter a hut made of dry, inflammable straw, firewood and thatch. Accompanied by ritual incantations, Giribala has to step out while the hut is set on fire. But she refuses to come out and is engulfed by the raging fire thus preferring to end her life in a horrific, gruesome way shocking everyone around.

In Giribala's dramatic, fiery, tragic death, Goswami presents two opposing aspects of a widow's predicament. On the one hand, Giribala through her various acts of defiance towards the strict policing of her individuality, appears to rebel against the forces that seek to oppress women under the name of religion, tradition and culture. On the other hand, by choosing to end her life, she appears to finally surrender, to submit without fulfilling her desires, to the very forces that seek to crush women. It is significant, that at the same time, Jagannath, the mad elephant, has become more dangerous and destructive killing even the expert elephant catcher Jamaluddin. Eventually, Indranath, the future Gossain is compelled by official government order to destroy his favourite elephant. While Giribala is crushed by the inhuman forces of Brahmanical patriarchy, so too the elephant, in destroying the once magnificent howdah in its rampage symbolises the erosion and decline of a feudal institution which has started rotting from the inside. What becomes clear from the narrative is that the social, religious, economic and political currents flowing and touching the lives of everyone reveals the exploitative and oppressive nature of this orthodox, grim unedifying world. Completely frustrated by the situation she is forced into, Giribala prefers to end her life in the ritual fire that is prepared for her, choosing

death rather than to continue in a form of 'living death' with endless privations, emotional churning and physical and mental suffering. Giribala sees no redemption in following Durga's life of asceticism and denial. She has no desire to emulate her aunt who is no better than a, "ghost pretending to be human beings" (10). In her final act of defiance against the miseries of widowhood being heaped on her young head, she prefers a 'Sati' ⁷ of a different kind. Not out of wifely devotion to her dead husband but to send a message of the inhumanity of Brahmin widowhood which if it did not kill the body, destroyed the spirit of the woman.

Through the suffering of Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala, Goswami reveals the multiple ways women suffer in individual predicaments. Each woman undergoes her private sorrows, fears and frustrations. Each widow encounters one aspect or the other of patriarchal structures which works against her interests. The three Gossain widows occupy the highest caste position yet their status offers little protection against the forces of tradition of their world which inflict immense cruelties on widows. Young and old, of low caste or high, women appear to suffer oppression by virtue of their sex and gender. The *Sattrā* world in its culture, religious practices and social order, is organised in favour of the Gossain males where women's ritual status according to the ideology of the caste system, has to be protected and maintained by strict conformity to Brahmanical injunctions. In land ownership, in the supervision and control of women, the honour and respectability of the *Sattrādhikar* is determined by how one's property and women are protected and preserved. In this claustrophobic world, the three childless widows find their lives severely regulated, their feelings and emotions having to be repressed, their sexuality

suppressed. Each woman suffers the pain of having her hopes and dreams destroyed, the burden of various repressions revealing the acute oppression of women chained by society and tradition to an inhuman predicament.

5 Eliman's Calamitous Dilemma

Young girls like Eliman, who is on the verge of reaching puberty faces an uncertain future. On their first meeting, Indranath is completely captivated by her radiant beauty. "The girl's image rose before his eyes. Her body, her soft flesh! It was like the soft, silky and sticky pulp of the *ou* fruit. Her body was as fresh as the saturated, wet ground around the newly-dug well. . . ." (25). Daughter of Bahinram Bhagawati, the priest of Rajapukhuri, she is in a delicate situation. Being on the verge of puberty, her old nurse is deeply concerned. On a moonlit night when Indranath is returning home after an evening of card games in Boloram's gambling den, he encounters Eliman's old nurse who tells him that the young girl has started menstruating. Indranath knows that as the future *adhikar* of the *Sattrā*, he should not listen to her. He has to be cautious, discreet, preserve his dignity. But the old woman's concern is for the predicament of her young ward whose status changes abruptly once she reaches puberty. Indranath grasps the urgency of her anxiety when she tells him:

"Listen, Saru Gossain! There are certain loathsome, malicious women who visit the backyard secretly at night, just to find out whether the young girl of the house has reached puberty. I am afraid the same thing has happened with this girl here. I have brought her here because I am afraid of them. They'll spread the news. Yes, they'll certainly do so and

this girl will not get married. Those old Brahmins will declare her and her father social outcastes. But I know! I know how many girls there are in South Bank who have already reached puberty. But it's all hushed up! They have some strong protection. This girl is like a frail creeper! Who will protect her?" (50)

Indranath understands the gravity of Eliman's dilemma and the odd situation he finds himself wondering whether other Gossains had had a similar experience and whether Gossain daughters ever faced such circumstances. The old woman tells him: "Her father once said that the Brahmin from Cooch Behar, that wretched, opium-eating rascal, would take her even if she reaches puberty and thus save the family honour. . . ." (51). It is an open secret that Eliman's father conducted opium trade with the smuggler. Indranath is concerned when she tells him that the opium dealer would act quickly with betrothal arrangements if he learnt about the young girl's condition. There is a mutual attraction between Indranath and Eliman and the old woman hopes for a possible marriage between the two. But for all his keen interest in Eliman, Indranath cannot break the power of his caste status. He too is confronted with a difficult dilemma. In this unusual night time meeting between the bachelor Junior Gossain and the old woman, Goswami draws out the gradual changes, the developments accruing around the *Sattras*. The old woman is aware that no Gossains in Indranath's family had married ordinary Brahmin girls. But she has heard of marriages between Damodariya Gossains of the South Bank and North Bank Brahmin girls. She tells him times are changing and even Gossains and Gossainees are venturing beyond their front halls to go to Gauhati to fight in the courts for their

lands. She therefore presses Indranath with the marriage offer so that he will “rescue her (Eliman) from this torment” (52). She knows their *gotras* ‘lineage’ are different. Indranath is of the Chandilya *gotra* and Eliman is from the Bhardwaj *gotra*. She hopes for an assurance from Indranath inspite of knowing that Eliman’s family is lower in status to Indranath’s. The old woman’s bold suggestion born of desperation, indicates how marriage arrangements made between a girl’s father and prospective groom decides the fate of young girls who have no say in choosing a husband. However, Indranath remains silent for he realises he is unable to violate the caste creed for the sake of saving a young girl from an unwanted marriage.

Goswami address several concerns which affect women’s lives adversely. The practice of child marriage, the absence of choice for girls and women, the calamitous dilemma for the families and for young Brahmin girls reaching puberty before marriage, the corruptive influence of opium trade, opium smuggling and addiction which devastated and degraded both individuals and society with particular effect on women’s lives is brought out in Eliman’s predicament, in her father’s clandestine trade and the old woman’s desperate concern for her young ward. An important point that Goswami makes is in reference to a darker connection between opium use and custom of *Sati*. The opium trade operated with permits for licence holders. But addiction became widespread with large scale opium smuggling. Indranath had heard horrifying stories of how, “In Dhaka, most of the *sati* women were fed opium before they were burnt on the funeral pyre” (56). He knows of historical records which point to a gruesome past exposing the link between the demand for opium and a cruel practice where: “Between 1815 and 1828, within a thirteen-year time span, 710

women in Dhaka and 5100 women in Calcutta were burnt in this inhuman manner as *sati!*” (57).

In the current of their times, Indranath knows that if the report of illegal opium dealers reached the excise police, Eliman’s father as an accomplice and his partner would be arrested. It would be a major scandal for a Brahmin priest to be arrested, to be imprisoned if found guilty. Besides the dark history of opium and the fate of widows, what Goswami highlights is the two-faced attitude of opium-addicted Brahmin priests who out of a sense of false prestige, were reluctant to seek treatment and carried on with their habit, wrecking their lives and that of their family members. The old woman’s unusual proposition arouses Indranath’s curiosity and he asks their ancestral priest “Did any *adhikar* of our *Sattr*a ever marry a girl from an ordinary Brahmin family?” (61). The priest tells of a case long ago when a Brahmin girl of Dakhala was courted by a Gossain who presented her with a pair of gold earrings. Unfortunately, the strong objection from the disciples stopped the marriage. The girl got married in Bamundi but there was “a rumour that even after her marriage, the Gossain had an affair with the girl! There are so many girls in Dakhala and Samaria, of low caste, who were abandoned by these Gossains, after giving them gold and having had relationships with them” (62).

It is clear from the priest’s account that upper caste Gossain men, being in a position of power and economic dominance exploit the women who belong to the lower castes with little scruples. In their opposition to the Gossain’s marriage, it is clear that the followers expected their feudal lords to maintain the sanctity and purity of caste. Low caste women, sexually used and abandoned, would have faced a dire

future considering their socially, economically and culturally weak position. In such a predicament, women would remain disempowered, oppressed, voiceless and powerless. The irony on the other hand, is the Gossainees, the women, would be expected by their men to uphold the purity of their caste by obedience to their dharma of fidelity while the men ignored their dharma of faithfulness when it suited their immoral convenience.

Indranath's dilemma leaves him with deep indecision as he hesitates to give a clear answer to Eliman's nursemaid. Despite his liberal views, card games and social drinking with various castes in Boloram's den, he is aware that as a future *adhiakar*, he has to uphold the dignity of his Brahmin status. With the changing social and economic demographics, the tenant-farmers, under the influence of socialist ideology were opening their eyes to the age-old exploitation under their wealthy feudal lords. The communist wave was sweeping across and Gossain men started feeling threatened over the erosion of their hegemony in the *Sattras*. In these 'bad times', when her father and his brother are arrested with the opium smuggler, Eliman's world comes crashing down. Bahinram Bhagwati and Jokram Bhagwati's arrest by the home guards creates a sensation. They are led away to the police station and Eliman is left alone with her old nurse. From the gossip going round, it is learnt that the crafty opium smuggler had left a woman behind in Cooch Behar and drew Eliman's father into his web so that he could marry her. As the neighbouring women congregate to sympathize with the completely dejected young girl, their gossip reveals further instances of male deceit and debauchery: "Dakhala's Gossain has kept two Gossainees and doesn't feel anything shame. . . - I have heard that when one

Gossainee is in the Gossain's bed, the other sits on the verandah before a fire to wait for her turn. Her hands and feet have become black due to sitting constantly before the wood fire" (121).

Lower caste women are sexually exploited and discarded by the Gossains and Gossainees are shown to suffer various indignities in silence from husbands who bring their mistresses to the home. Eliman has to endure the shame of her father's scandalous arrest. Being in a hand-to-mouth condition, her opium-addicted priest-father has made her predicament more wretched as now who would marry her? Inquisitive questions about whether she has started her menses is an additional torture. Her bodily functions become a trap for girls like Eliman who also faces the prospect of ostracism. She knows her father and uncle would return soon and she is relieved the obnoxious Brahmin smuggler had been put behind bars. She remembers with revulsion the look in his eyes when he would follow her into the garden. "She had never imagined that a man's gaze could make her feel stark naked, as if he was tearing off her clothes! That a man's eyes could cut her flesh into small pieces" (128). Under the male gaze, Eliman felt excoriated by the lust in the eyes of the Brahmin who tried to trap her by exploiting her father's weakness and drawing him into debt. Goswami allows us to see how women belonging to both the upper and lower spectrum of caste hierarchy are victimized by patriarchal exploitation of women's bodies and sexuality. Male control by Gossains over their wives and mistresses and fathers using their daughters as commodities to settle debts reflects the discrimination against women who are treated as objects to be used and abused with callous disregard for a woman's individual feelings, perceptions and opinions.

In Eliman's story, Goswami exposes a narrative of exploitation and callousness. The old woman out of a sense of maternal protectiveness approaches Indranath with a bold proposal. Her father had different ideas knowing that from their impoverished condition, chances of Eliman getting proposals were slim. He had hoped by letting her marry the Brahmin smuggler, her life would be better. But the old woman rebukes him by saying: "Shame on you! What kind of father are you? Giving your daughter to a dirty, rotten thief! Casting greedy eyes on his money!" (133). Her father's desperation is clear when he cries out: "What shall I do to then? She'll become mature any day now. If I don't get her married off, we'll be made outcastes" (134). Aware of and helpless against the squalid plans of her father, Indranath's silence and inaction add to Eliman's anxiety and restlessness. From her position as the daughter of an ordinary Brahmin, it would be almost impossible that Indranath would marry her.

Impatiently, she wonders: "Status, dignity, self-respect, are they so important? Could he not set them aside and come? No, no!. . . He was the future *adhikar*. How foolish of her to think like this! An explicable pain pierced her heart, somewhere deep inside. Her very soul shivered with an elusive apprehension. . . ." (134). In Eliman's turmoil, the worries for young pubertal girls facing the risk of social disgrace is brought out with touching sensitivity. Her predicament reflects the inner anxiety of young girls whose love transcends caste barriers but who face obstacles such as poverty, exploitation, greed, sin and the biggest barrier, a rigid caste system. Her only hope of freedom or escape lies in marriage to Indranath. But the burden of

the narrow code of social and religious mores is a barrier he fails to overcome and though he loves her, he fails Eliman leaving her helpless and deeply disappointed.

Women like Indranath's mother, rooted to tradition, are unable to overcome their caste-coloured bias and discriminations even when these hurt others. Her rigid adherence in upholding caste purity is revealed in her thoughts about Mark as an 'unclean' foreigner. She is hard with Giribala, unsympathetic to Durga and becomes addicted to smoking tobacco in a traditional hookah after Giribala's horrifying death. Other nameless women – Latu Gossain's mistress, the old Gossain's mistress, the ordinary gossip women of the *Sattrā*, these in various ways illustrate the denial of dignity, respect and subjectivity for the low caste who suffer exploitation by upper caste men, their sexuality making them vulnerable – the men use them while the upper caste women look on them with disdain. They are victims in multiple ways. In their stories, Goswami reveals the oppressive aspects of the caste system experienced by the marginalised, the powerless. In economic and cultural terms, the *adhikar*'s ownership of vast lands gives them immense clout. Discrimination which is underwritten in the religious laws and exploitation of the lower castes by upper castes makes it difficult for the oppressed to resist as resistance would bring a brutal backlash.

6 Struggling Against Odds

Goswami's depiction of the decline of feudal structures during a historical period in Amranga *Sattrā* offers a picture of the changing scenario in the socio-cultural, politico-historical reality of post-independence India. The Marxist ideology of equality of class under communism has spread in the countryside and the tenant-

farmers of the Gossains are revolting against their wealthy landlords who live in wealth and comfort from their labour while they wallow in want. The novel provides a grim picture of the oppressed lower castes, their condition made worse by the widespread opium addiction which was slowly poisoning and destroying a traditional culture.

The female characters depicted in the novel represents the ways women struggle in a male-dominated world, a world coloured by deeply-entrenched caste codes, orthodox religious laws, under a patriarchal structure defined by its Brahmanical moorings which maintains a strict hierarchy of power and status that rests in the hands of the upper castes. The women who inhabit this world are a subordinated group. The plight of upper caste widows, prisoners of tyrannical and dehumanizing practices find themselves suffering from various oppressions - Durga's financial deprivation, Saru Gossainee's suppressed sexuality and for Giribala, an excruciating denial of humanity. The lower caste women, preyed upon by upper caste men, cannot expect to live with dignity once they are discarded as they are looked upon as innately impure, sinful while the men appear to suffer little from their own promiscuous conduct.

With the mad elephant serving as a *leitmotif* and the moth-eaten howdah as a metaphor for inward decay, the recurrent images of sickness, disease and death, the wretched condition of the outcast leper is indicative of the diseased condition of life in the *Sattras*. The leprous effect of opium addiction eating away the physical and social life of the addicts, is mirrored in the moral decadence afflicting traditional *Sattri* life. The new winds are bringing unrest and rebellion against the Gossain

families. The red flag of communism being raised in several areas of the *Sattrra* anticipates the blood that will be shed.

Goswami uses sharp and stark contrasts in the depiction of the external world and the inner world of her characters. She uses a language redolent with the aroma of rain-soaked earth, the fragrance of flowers, the pervasive scent of fruits, plants and animals which lend a distinctive character to the setting brought alive in her painting of the changes taking place in the *Sattrra*. The visible beauty of the landscape and that of the bewitching allure of young girls with skin as “smooth as the silky soft mud of Jagalia, the colour of white mushrooms and breasts like tender white melons” (22) does not hide the ugliness, the squalor, wretched poverty, cruelty and suffering brought on by disease, illiteracy, superstition and the poisonous effects of opium.

In this unremitting picture of pain and suffering, the female figures appear to be oppressed by the culture of male superiority and female inferiority. Traditions within the *Sattrra* have strict rules for women giving them little choice to live with dignity or agency. Encompassing the culture and traditions in a *Sattrra* is the all-pervasive ideology of Brahmanical patriarchy which has strict control over the inhabitants. In the face of such forces, while men and women of both upper and lower castes cope with their predicaments, the novel illustrates how women and men’s resistance can be overcome by oppressive forces. Hiren Gohain insightfully observes:

The claustrophobic world of the *Sattrra* with its volcanic burden of repressed passion, cruel but mute suffering, lacerating pain of betrayed hopes and dreams, finds an apt final symbol in the domestic elephant in

musht, driven wild and running amok, threatening devastation and ruin as he trumpets in uncontrollable rage and pain. (17)

Leela Dube points out that,

(T)he cultural schemes which underwrite the caste system are based upon a fundamental difference between male and female bodies in respect of their vulnerability to incur impurity through sexual intercourse. Sexual involvement is a much more serious matter for a woman since the act affects her internally while it affects a man externally (470-1)

Goswami allows us to see how women suffer in various ways under Brahmanical patriarchy that controls and subordinates them through their caste and class. A Vaishnava *Sattr* which has been an institution for preserving the religious and cultural traditions of the Assamese is also the setting for institutional oppression of widows. The experiences of the women present a harsh picture of women's lives in a male-dominated, ritual-conscious world undergoing change. As the main thread of the novel is woven through the words, actions and eyes of Indranath, Goswami allows the reader to get a clear picture of women swept by the current of social structures that bind, subordinate and oppress women under the fixed gender roles and positions that operate within these structures. In Jayashree Borah's observation:

The author does not give any hint of female solidarity in the face of oppressive patriarchy . . . There is no picture of happy women in her novel except the women playing Golokdham in Bolo's house. But they are only heard and not seen. Goswami's novel has not shown any

common cause that women collectively can take up and individual protests are bound to end tragically . . . The novel captures the weakening of feudal structures . . . However, this changing historical scenario of the world outside does not find a parallel in the position of the women. Indira Goswami has not shown any collective voice of resistance coming from the women. (5)

In the final dramatic events, Indranath, the heir apparent of the *Sattrā*, is entrusted by his father to try to subdue the resistance by their tenants in the fertile Marabitha land. He sets out on his mission sitting on the ancient howdah, placed on the back of an older elephant accompanied by a retinue of followers hoping to inspire awe and respect in the rebellious peasants for the spiritual lord of the *Sattrā*. Unfortunately, like the inwardly damaged howdah, neither the *Sattrā* nor its spiritual perceptor commands reverence from the tenants as in earlier times. Indranath's intention is to grant ownership of the land to the tenants but misreading his intention, they attack and kill him. In Indranath's tragic death, the dreams and aspirations of a progressive mind who desired to see changes that would uplift the lives of the workers and peasants, the lower castes, is extinguished by a cruel misunderstanding.

In detailing the conditions of her women characters, of high caste widows, low caste women, the strict adherents of ritual and tradition, in varying states and circumstances, the writer presents a world of harsh social and sexual repression which chains women in a form of physical and psychological bondage. This deprives the women of personal fulfilment and instead renders them to an emotional, physical and psychical wasteland. The larger traditional *Sattrā* with its various customs,

superstitions and rituals, is interwoven with the desires, the dreams, the suffering and pain of the many characters with particular attention to the struggle which shapes the lives of the individual women who are unable to overcome the bonds of orthodoxy, religious austerity and conformity to social roles prescribed for women. The predicament of the three childless widows is a vivid portrayal of the cruelties inflicted on women. The women are shown to have their aspirations frustrated at every turn particularly in the case of Giribala. To free herself from the shackles of a suffocating existence, she prefers death than to live in a form of living death.

In the epilogue after a passage of thirty years, slow changes have come to the *Sattrra*. The condition of the peasants has not improved appreciably. It is informed that marriages between girls from Gossain and Brahmin families and boys from the lower castes takes place. Now, both girls and boys study together in the college that has come up at Mirza, near the *Sattrra*. While opium addiction has waned, low caste girls are still vulnerable to exploitation, particularly to sex traffickers. The communist leader who had instigated the peasant attack on Indranath is the illegitimate son of his grandfather, the old Gossain, whose mother has been discarded after being showered with gold ornaments.

Though the novel cannot be considered to have a feminist tone, through the passion and the painful torment of her women characters, Indira Goswami protests the treatment of women, challenges social religious attitudes about women and exposes the Hindu patriarchal traditions that oppress women. The theme of women's exploitation, of their struggles represents the author's interrogation of various forms of repressions. In detailing the historical decline of a once-grand institution, the

novel takes the reader into the conservative world of a monastery. It also takes us into the inner consciousness of women who suffer because 'fate' or 'destiny' has brought the 'curse' of widowhood. Her widowhood is her 'fault' and is a punishment for some crime committed by her in her former existence. The three widows Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala present the ways women exist in this predicament and how different women respond in different ways. While Durga is destroyed, Saru Gossainee struggles valiantly and most tragically, though she initially rebels, Giribala eventually finding the cruelties of widowhood too inhuman, gives up the fight. Though her female characters display little feminist impulses, in bringing focus to the plight of widows Goswami furthers the feminist agenda to call for an end to the oppression of women and to allow women to live with dignity.

Works Cited

- Baruah, D. K. "Mamoni Raisom Goswami: The Insistent Pattern." *Indira Goswami & Her Fictional World – The Search for the Sea*. Comp. Kaikous Burjor Satarawala. Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 2002. 19-43. Print.
- Borah, Jayashree. "A Picture of Desolation: Women in Indira Goswami's A Saga of South Kamrup". Web. 23 Oct 2016. <<http://jborah.blogspot.in/2007/04/picture-of-desolation-women-in-indira.html>>.
- Chakravarti, Uma. *Theorizing Feminism Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. 2003. Calcutta: Stree, 2013. Print.
- Dube, Leela. "Caste and Women." *Women's Studies in India: A Reader*. Ed. Mary E. John. New Delhi: Penguin, 2008. 466-475. Print.
- Gohain, Hiren. "Some Remarks on the Major Fiction of Indira Goswami" *Indira Goswami & Her Fictional World – The Search for the Sea*. Comp. Kaikous Burjor Satarawala. Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 2002. 13-18. Print.
- Goswami, Mamoni. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. Trans. Indira Goswami. New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2004. Print.
- Jain, Jasbir, ed. Introduction *Women in Patriarchy: Cross-Cultural Readings*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2011. 13-22. Print.
- Kakoti, Padmakshi and Mahanta, Pradip Jyoti. "Understanding Women in the Religious Institutions: With Reference to the *Sattras* of Assam". IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSRJHSS), ISSN: 2279-0845 Volume 1, Issue 5 (Sep–Oct, 2012). pp 19-22. Web. 10 Oct 2016. <<http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/vol1-issue5/D0151922.pdf?id=5620>>.
- Lal, Malashri. "Indira Goswami and Women's Empowerment". *Indira Goswami: Passion and the Pain*. Ed. Uddipana Goswami. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2012. 72-78. Print.
- Misra, Tilottoma. "Indira Goswami: Brave, Gentle and Bold". *Indira Goswami: Passion and the Pain*. Ed. Uddipana Goswami. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2012. 64-71. Print.
- Padma, V. "Developments and its Discontents: The State and Programmes of Development". *Fiction as Window: Critiquing the Indian Literary Cultural Ethos since the 1980s*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009. 154-227. Print.

Ramabai, Pandita. *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. with an Introduction by Rachel Bodley. Philadelphia 1888. Rep. Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture. Bombay: Government Central Press, 1981. Print.

Endnotes

- 1 Brahmin who earns his livelihood carrying out religious ceremonies and rituals for other people. The people who employ the Brahmin are known as jajmans.
- 2 Evil stars.
- 3 Chakravarti, Uma, *Theorizing Feminism Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Stree: Calcutta. 2013. 34-35. Print.
- 4 Tenant farmer's land deed.
- 5 Land lease given on periodic basis.
- 6 Vermilion.
- 7 Widow immolation.

Chapter V

Patterns of Predicaments: Mitra Phukan's Fictional Art

Introduction

Mitra Phukan is a writer, translator, columnist and trained Hindustani classical music vocalist from Guwahati, Assam. She has authored a number of children's books, a biography and has translated and edited collections of Assamese short stories. She is a founding member of the North East Writers Forum and served as an editor of the forum's journal *New Frontiers*. A regular columnist, she has come out with a collection of fifty of her newspaper columns titled *Guwahati Gaze* (2013). She has won the UNICEF-CBT award for children's writing for her book *Mamoni's Adventure* (1986) and has gone on to produce more works in the genre which include *Chungki Posts a Letter* (1989), *The Biratpur Adventure* (1994) and *Terrorist Camp Adventure* (2003). She has two novels to her credit - *The Collector's Wife* (2005) and *A Monsoon of Music* (2011). Her works have been translated into several Indian and European languages and some of her stories are widely anthologized. As a translator, she has brought the works of some of the well-known contemporary Assamese fiction writers into English. She has a widely read fortnightly column "All Things Considered" in *The Assam Tribune* and is an active member of Aradhana, an organisation that takes music to the underprivileged, poorer sections of society. She has recently published two books *A Full Night's Thievery* (2016), a collection of her

short stories and *Blossoms in the Graveyard* (2016), her translation of Jnanpith Awardee Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's book "Kobor Aru Phool".

A childhood interest in literature nurtured her interest in creative writing. She tells K. K. Gopalakrishnan in an interview in *The Hindu*: "My father was posted to various places around the globe, so I had to change schools often. Books were my constant companions and friends and I must have been inspired to write by them" <<http://www.thehindu.com/books/I-love-interacting-with-people/article15676943.ece>>.

As a prominent name in Northeast Indian writing in English, Mitra Phukan in her short stories and in her two novels adds a nuanced, gender-sensitive rendering to the personal fears and dilemmas of her protagonists who are situated in an unstable socio-political climate overshadowed by constant uncertainty. *The Collector's Wife* set in Assam during the violent anti-foreigner student agitation movement of the 1970s and 1980s presents the married life of Rukmini Bezboruah, wife of Siddharth, the District Collector posted in the small town of Parbatpuri in the eastern most tip of Assam.

Assam, unlike the other Northeastern states has a longer recorded history from ancient to medieval to modern times. Some of these are preserved in historical texts from the times of the Ahom kings called *Buranjis*. Yet, clubbed with the other states, Assam is also bracketed as a peripheral margin in its dichotomous relation to the centre. Tilottoma Misra in her Introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India* notes that the process of cultural intermixing had begun in Assam, Manipur and Tripura long before the advent of colonialism. The Shaiva, Shakta and Vaishnava forms of Hinduism together with Buddhism and Islam, the entry of the Tai Ahoms who ruled the region almost 600 years before the advent of

the British, contributed immensely to the creation of a syncretic culture. She notes, “It is significant that the literature of the precolonial period in the three kingdoms was deeply rooted in the wonderfully mixed cultural life of their respective societies” (xiv). However, during the long period of colonial rule, the freedom movement and nationalist sentiments in Assam were as strong as those of the main country. Partition, the colossal human tragedy during the violent, bloody and traumatic process of cross-migration of millions of people from both sides of newly demarcated borders led to the influx of great hordes into the newly-formed countries on the subcontinent. The Northeast, particularly Assam, witnessed a large number of immigrants coming from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, into its verdant and fertile plains along the length and breadth of the Brahmaputra river valley. The wave of immigrants has continued unabated leading to tensions over fears of the indigenous Assamese communities being swamped and becoming minorities in their own land. These fears among the disaffected ethnic groups fed into the anti-foreigner or anti-immigrant movement that started spreading over Assam from the late 1970s onwards which was spearheaded mainly by student leaders of the prominent student unions. From peaceful street protests, demonstrations and bandhs, the movement slowly gathered momentum until it flared into more violent and bloody forms of agitations. These agitations gave rise to the formation of various groups which, within a few years became dreaded insurgent outfits.

The novel, *The Collector's Wife*, has been chosen to examine how Phukan has created the character of a married woman who, from her childless predicament, feeling the weight of social expectations and hurt by the stigma of infertility, gives in to the unfulfilled desires of her body by having sex with another man. She has been

under the impression that her chances of natural conception are low, from the false diagnosis her doctor gave her. This has left her with heightened feelings of failure which have haunted her for some time. Phukan brings out the psychological aspect of a woman's inner consciousness, haunted by her inability to bear children and how a callous doctor and an insensitive husband can mentally torture a woman leaving her in the kind of predicament she is in. Her personal and societal frustrations colour her attitude to life and work. The sense of frustration extends to her teaching job and her half-hearted involvement in Parbatpuri's social affairs. She is lonely, sensitive and suffers from insecurities. In her predicament, she is caught in a conflict between her personal aspirations and social expectations, torn between desire for an independent identity and trying to live up to her wifely role. She suffers from a sense of inertia till she reaches a point when she makes a conscious decision to free herself from the invisible chains which shackle her and seek self-fulfillment. The novel exposes a number of significant issues in the marital relationship of a husband and wife. Their relationship involves issues like marriage, sex, wifehood, motherhood, infertility, childbearing, adultery and mental and emotional cruelty which are crucial points of interest for a feminist critique in the ways women are psychologically oppressed under a patriarchal system. Rukmini's external circumstances and internal dilemma, her efforts to tackle the situation she finds herself in, to conform to the stereotyped image of a married woman, the pressure to produce a son and the insensitivity of her husband, the prejudices an infertile woman experiences leaving her with a sense of failure and the tensions from her situation which mentally oppress her – these aspects of her experience offer themselves to a feminist interpretation of a woman's predicament.

Phukan offers an observer's view of the violent agitations that rocked Assam during the late 1970s and 1980s. Her protagonist, the wife of a bureaucrat, is the narrator. Events that affect her and the developments going on in the environment around her are told from a neutral stand. The inner dilemma and agony of a woman who has been childless for a decade is brought out with nuanced sensitivity. What Phukan does is to parallel her disturbed internal agony with the external insurgency raging around her. As both these conditions move forward, Phukan weaves the personal agonies of Rukmini to the socio-political realities around her and takes the narrative to a shocking and unexpected denouement.

Rukmini's experiences and predicaments, both internal and external, will be analysed under the following headings.

1(a) Friction between Social Responsibility and Inner Hopes

Against a background of insurgency and violent protests, the novel *The Collector's Wife* is narrated from Rukmini Bezboruah's perspective. Phukan creates a multi-layered protagonist who is positioned in a situation as the District Collector's wife, District Collector or Deputy Commissioner as they are known in the Northeast. She fulfils the requirements that make her the ideal wife for a high-ranking bureaucrat. Convent-educated in an English medium school, she has a postgraduate degree in English literature. Her marriage is arranged soon after the completion of her studies to Siddharth, "a prized catch, . . . the only son of parents of 'respectable lineage' - what could be better in the marriage market?" (53). He was the most eligible bachelor at the time, having successfully cleared the civil services examination in his first attempt at joining the Indian Administrative Service. They have been married now for more than ten years. In the intervening period, Rukmini

has gradually become the genteel, elegant, refined and respected wife of a bureaucrat who conducts herself with dignity and poise. She is controlled and tactful befitting the image expected of her. She teaches as a part-time lecturer in English in a private college, the Deenanath Saikia College, one of five in the town. It is a respectable career option for someone in her situation whose husband serves short stints in various towns as part of his transferable job. Her salary is understandably lower than that of her full-time regular colleagues. However, as the wife of the administrative head of the district, money is not a primary concern for her. For her, it is an opportunity to leave the confines of the spacious but lonely bungalow, the DC's official residence, and mingle with her colleagues in the teachers common room to break the monotony of her life.

Under the veneer of gentility and quiet poise, Rukmini is not a fulfilled or contented woman. What nags her is the fact that she and Siddharth are still childless. Siddharth – ascetic, duty-conscious, taciturn and a workaholic, devotes the major part of his time to his official engagements and is constantly on tour. Rukmini spends and has done so over the ten years they have been married, lonely days, seeking ways to fill the empty hours that stretch day in and day out. Even the nights are frustrating as their initial ardour for each other in the early years have given way to recurrent nights without intimacy. She has now reached a stage where as a respectable married woman, she feels she has not fulfilled her side of the marriage bargain - she has not become a mother. Rukmini feels that marriage has given her an identity only in relation to her husband's status and identity as an IAS officer. While his career has moved upwards, bringing with it attendant benefits and comforts – a well-appointed spacious bungalow, a chauffeur-driven official vehicle with security guards and

escorts, plenty of helper staff, cooks, cleaners, and *maalis*, Rukmini feels as if her individual identity has been subsumed under that of her husband's. She is Mrs Rukmini Bezboruah, not Rukmini, a woman with an independent identity or status of her own. In Rukmini, Phukan presents a woman who has upheld the respectability and dignity of her husband's position. She has dutifully accompanied him on his various postings and has played her part well, giving priority to his needs and requirements while hers have taken a secondary position. What Phukan brings out in Rukmini's situation is that a woman's education, the qualifications she possesses seem to have been wasted, her own ambitions subverted so her husband may continue to climb professionally without domestic impediments coming in the way. Confined to the domestic domain, the woman feels devalued and her role in the marriage gives rise to a realisation that she has remained undervalued far too long. In examining her role, Phukan suggests that marriage appears to impede the individual growth of the woman who is more or less a trophy wife. The narrow confines of her role have kept her playing second fiddle to the husband.

Her predicament illustrates a clear division of the higher male status of the husband and the subordinate one of the wife. Siddharth is placed in a superior position, he is the traditional breadwinner, the head of the household and the administrative head of the district. In both the home and outside, the private and the public worlds, he is invested with power. Rukmini, the spouse who is under the protection of the husband, economically dependent on him by virtue of the gender role expected of her, has to defer to his authority. In this picture, it becomes clear that the traditional role for the male and the female operates in Rukmini and Siddharth's marriage. Siddharth represents power and authority, Rukmini's position is placed

under this power which is associated with patriarchy. Patriarchy allows for male dominance and female subordination which is clearly evident in Rukmini and Siddharth's relationship where, because of the privileges of his position, traditional gender roles are in play. The professional image of Siddharth is as someone intelligent, rational, strong and decisive but on the personal front, he is self-absorbed, cold and indifferent to Rukmini.

There are several observations to be drawn from Rukmini's predicament. The respectability she enjoys in marriage does not remove the feeling of loss in having sacrificed her dreams. While putting up with this frustration, she has to put up with a husband who is oblivious to his wife's needs. Siddharth seems unconcerned with his wife's problems. While immersed in work, he does not seem concerned about her comings and goings. This of course as later developments bear out, may be perhaps his illicit affair with Priyam which makes him even more distant from Rukmini. While he has the status, the power and the authority that goes with his position, she appears to have everything and nothing at the same time. In their marriage, the woman has made the sacrifices while the husband has sacrificed nothing. Her desire for companionship, for intimacy and sex remain unfulfilled. His denial of her needs, specially his indifference, leave her with a sense of dissatisfaction. From examining Rukmini's situation, it is clear that she is a victim of denials. She has experienced denial of her dreams and denial of affection from her husband. What becomes clear from this picture is the way women are controlled by the institution of marriage to accept these denials. Rukmini has conformed to the domestic role expected of a dutiful wife in her society and has been compelled by the bounds of marriage into giving up her desires and wants. She has remained in stasis and there is little room

for personal growth or individual advancement as her status will be elevated only when she becomes a mother. In the meantime, her childlessness is looked upon as a failure, a curse. She feels she has not been able to live up to the ideal of being a good wife and mother. This produces an anxiety as in the eyes of her world, failing to become a mother translates into failing one's bounden duty and destiny as a married woman.

This view about childless married women is driven home when she attends her colleague, Rita's wedding with Priyam Deka and Animesh Dutta, her colleagues from the English literature department. Among the swirl of people, three elderly female guests come to wish the bridal couple. They are introduced to the bride's friends. Once they learn Rukmini is married, they look for signs of it on her forehead but find no vermilion powder. When they learn she is childless even after ten years of marriage, the looks turn disapproving. As they move away from the decorated dais where Rita, Rukmini and Priyam are sitting, they hear a low censorious voice tinged with suppressed outrage saying: "What times are we living through! In my days, even the shadow of a barren woman wasn't allowed to fall on a bride" (15). From the comments, what is clear is that in traditional Hindu marriage beliefs, a barren woman's shadow is considered inauspicious and Rukmini is rudely reminded of her infertility. Rita is aghast and distressed. As Rukmini stands up to leave, she is careful not to touch the bride. Though she puts up a brave front in the presence of other wedding guests, it is clear that her status does not protect her from insensitive remarks and she swallows the hurt silently.

Having obediently upheld the tradition of a dutiful, upper-caste Brahmin wife in compliance and submission to what a patriarchal society expects of women, the

strain is beginning to tell. The socially-designed, male-ordered role for women has brought on her the realisation that in spite of the economic, social and class parity between her and Siddharth, theirs has not been an equal relationship. Over the years, she has come to understand Siddharth. He was not passionate about food. He was not an atheist neither was he interested in religion. He did not indulge in informal chatter and gave the air of someone who always had something occupying in his mind - usually work. He also did not understand her situation, her silent pain, her sensitive nature and the sorrows she suffers from her predicament. From her situation, it is brought out that she is also not very comfortable with the pettiness of small-town women, the ways sometimes her words can be misinterpreted or some false information put out as coming from the mouth of the DC's wife. The bickering and friction between faculty members of the college, the power-play that is conducted in the teachers common room, the various causes some of the teachers support with a sense of mission as if to affirm one's importance in a town in like Parbatpuri. To beat one's drum or blow one's trumpet, these factors teach Rukmini lessons in small-town mentality. Her marriage and working in a job she did not enjoy slowly deepens her feeling of disappointment as she is filled with a sense that she has not lived up to her potential.

With its colonial history, the District Collector in post-independence India is a legacy of the British rule where class barriers seem to have survived. In the novel, Phukan weaves in several dichotomies which distinguish and define the class divide. The privileged officials occupy in both the literal and non-literal sense an elevated position higher than the lower classes:

The DC's bungalow at Parbatpuri was a legacy of the days when the British had administered the district from residences-cum-offices perched on hillocks that lifted them, symbolically as well as literally, high above the 'native' masses below. The town of Parbatpuri was liberally strewn with several of these hillocks. . . Each major functionary of the town lived atop his own little eminence, . . . The Chief of Police of the district lived on the hillock nearest the DC's residence. Beyond him lived the Civil Surgeon and on a slightly lower elevation, was the District Forest Officer. (18)

The divide is carried over between the living and the dead. The town of Parbatpuri was a sprawling untidy heap below these hills. At the base of the DC's bungalow hill lay the cremation ground with a large image of the Goddess Kali standing on one side. A park lay next to the cremation ground. The smoke from the funeral pyres, the ordinary citizenry of Parbatpuri hoped, reached the top of the DC's hill to remind him of his responsibility for their welfare especially during calamities and bad times. With this divide between the privileged and the ordinary, Rukmini is insulated from the heat, the bustle and the grime of the town. Hers is a safe existence, cocooned in the secure environs of the geographically aloof DC bungalow far above the town. But, under the surface, disturbing currents are flowing within Rukmini and within the streets and heart of the town. The local papers carry reports of abductions, extortion demands, murder and killings when the demands are not fulfilled. The season of discontent is rising in Rukmini's heart and in the world beyond. Rukmini's inner life is one of growing frustration, unfulfilled expectations and longings echoed in the frustration against illegal immigrants manifested through the student's

agitations and demonstrations that is increasing with every passing day. The undercurrents flowing under the deceptively calm, quiet surface anticipates the turmoil that is slowly churning towards a full-blown insurgency. The signs portending future upheaval and confusion are already there. Nityananda Patanayak writes of how the upheavals in Assam gave impetus to a group of creative writers in the state to capture the volatile experiences in words. That *The Collector's Wife* densely interweaves the cultural and moral issues confronted by an individual:

her condition in the vortex of events, her emotional make-up as conditioned by these and the question of relationship between man/woman and husband/wife. By putting her female protagonist in the context of her domestic environment conditioned by traditional values and contemporary situations, the novelist subjects her to explore her identity. (203)

1(b) Complexity of Frustrations

Rukmini is not only frustrated in marriage. Phukan emphasizes the dissatisfaction and disappointment she experiences in her teaching job trying to make her students comprehend the nuances and intricacies of English literature and language. Rukmini realised some years ago that teaching was not the vocation for her. Her love of literature cannot overcome the difficulty and challenge she encounters in the classroom: “The gap between Parbatpuri and the world of the English dramatists, poets and novelists that she taught was too great for her to bridge with her lukewarm enthusiasm for the activity of teaching” (27).

Her work is an escape from the loneliness, giving her “Something to do and also an identity, however frail, of her own. . . In any case, teaching was one of the few avenues open to women in her situation” (28). She knows she cannot operate a business, work in a travel agency or some such place for the uppermost concern she had to keep in mind was that there was, “no getting round what had become the central fact of her existence in this district town, the DC's wife” (*ibid*). While the wives of Siddharth's colleagues found fulfilment busying themselves with social causes wherever they found themselves, out of personal frustrations, Rukmini has lost interest in the idea of doing social work and this colours even her attitude to teaching.

It is her dramatic and fateful encounter with the interesting Manoj Mahanta, a tyre salesman, director of sorts for a tyre manufacturing company which will change the uninspiring, monotonous tenor of her life. Having met him in Rita's wedding, Rukmini collides into him while shopping the next day. His indelible and unforgettable impact on her presages the profound effect he will have on her life and marriage thereafter. Rukmini has reached a stage in her life where, at the age of thirty four, with her biological clock ticking, the pressure to have a child keeps increasing. The feeling is sharpened by the words of the three women which echoed in her mind long into the night. More angry than hurt that they, “should dare to even assume that she, childless, was inferior. Flawed. Inauspicious, her very identity dependent on her ability or otherwise to contribute a brood of children to a waiting world” (41). Ranjit, Rita's brother is apologetic but Rukmini reassures him that she should have remembered the old custom. The old custom in Hindu society decrees childless women, barren women and widows should remain unseen or out of sight on

auspicious occasions. Their presence is considered impure and the shadow of a childless woman on a new bride could bring the same curse on her.

While the social and political developments are taking place and the pressure of Siddharth's work keeps increasing, Rukmini too feels the pressure to come to a decision about taking fertility treatment afresh. Over the years, it has become clear that they would need medical help to become biological parents. Phukan makes it clear that it is the woman who shoulders the greater burden to prove her fertility. At Rukmini's insistence, they have consulted doctors and visited the fertility clinic in Guwahati. The tests and medical reports give a fairer prognosis for Siddharth's chances for fathering a child than hers. But Rukmini has come to realise a reluctance in Siddharth to embrace fatherhood. She is thus at a crossroad as her efforts to become a mother remains thwarted for the onus to produce a child is greater on the woman. When they married:

Since theirs was a dowerless society, she had brought with her no suitcases bulging with cash, no Maruti cars, not even posh houses and prime land but just the unspoken promise that she would be a highly-educated, presentable, trophy wife, one who would be an asset to Siddharth as he began his climb up the rung of his career. And also, of course, that she would be a devoted mother to any children that he might choose to father. (53)

Though they mingle with the cream of Parbatpuri society in the town's Planter's Club where Siddharth seems more relaxed and at ease from the air of officialdom that keeps him aloof from the ordinary citizenry and Rukmini passes such evenings making polite conversation with the colourfully dressed ladies sipping

their 'juices', what haunts her constantly is the societal expectation on her to prove the productivity of womb.

Phukan illustrates the multiple ways married women face the pressures of society. The woman's personal desires have to conform to what society expects of her. In her protagonist, Phukan reveals the psychology of a woman who enjoys a lot of material advantages but whose sensitive nature hides her own complexities and insecurities. As the District Collector's wife, she comes under constant scrutiny. Her in-laws are understanding and supportive, her mother-in-law even encouraging her to go ahead with the fertility treatment options available reminding her of the ticking of her biological clock. In fact, her mother-in-law is not averse to surrogate motherhood or adoption though the choice is up to them. But Rukmini has her own ideas and wants to become a biological mother whereas Siddharth's priority seems to be his career rather than becoming a father. As the District Collector's wife, she is under unrelenting scrutiny where her actions and words have the potential to be misconstrued. Living in Parbatpuri, every small event, every minor incident is exaggerated and commented upon. There is also a difference in the way Parbatpuri treats the DC and the DC's wife. For Siddharth, "His position and his masculinity protected him from the barbs whereas she, being a woman in a small town, was sometimes fair game for veiled, caustic references to her childlessness, especially if the people who made them were unaware that she was the wife of the DC" (52). She has arrived at a certain point in her life where she wonders if she is prepared to subject herself further to the indignity of all those internal examinations, to use fertility-enhancing drugs, "if she hadn't seen such premium being placed on motherhood?" (*ibid*).

She is ambivalent over newborn babies who terrify her never having handled one yet. But she feels the pressure and is unable to shake off or dismiss the barbs of the three women. The train of Rukmini's thoughts reveals the workings of a woman's mind and Phukan brings out the internal strife a woman goes through in the predicament she finds herself in: "She was sensitive to these comments, these significant glances which she knew were exchanged every time talk veered round to babies in her presence. She tried not to show her feelings, disguised them rather well in fact, with a veneer of gaiety and indifference. She knew that her sensitivity made her imagine a barb in an innocent remark. But motherhood was the only cure for this condition." (53)

1(c) Women and the Curse of Childlessness

Through the years, she has been burdened with the expectation to produce babies. What dogs her is also that:

Siddharth was an only son and the burden of producing heirs rested on her shoulders. Or rather, in her dysfunctional womb. Looking at her, of course, nobody could say that this vital organ was flawed. But her waist-hip ratio, as promising, visually, as some fecund, prehistoric mother goddess's, hid the fact, as revealed by the tests, probes and scans taken by the white-coated bespectacled, Dr Rabha, that it would be difficult for her to produce *any* heir, male or female. These days, Rukmini was always burdened with the feeling that she had been unable to fulfil her part of a social contract. That she had not kept a bargain. That she had reneged on a promise of vital importance. (53-54)

What is characteristic of Rukmini's predicament is the social pressures women are put through, particularly a married woman. Women's character, body are scrutinized constantly, they are expected to prove themselves worthy in the judgemental eyes of society. Moreover, social and cultural norms in most societies give primacy to a woman's biological and reproductive roles. Rukmini feels her biological and reproductive capability, the narrow role she is bracketed under, is used to define her identity and role in society. This kind of pressure can become an oppression as traditional patriarchal codes restrict women into prescribed roles that hinder her self-realization and self-definition. Under the weight of the pressure to achieve an elusive motherhood, Rukmini's predicament reveals the subtle and varied ways women suffer mental, emotional and psychological tensions in silence. A feeling of guilt haunts her but outwardly, she reveals none of these internal cogitations particularly when meeting with the ladies of the Parbatpuri Club. Siddharth frequents the club to relax from the tensions of his job and Rukmini invariably accompanies him dutifully.

The club was a centre for picking local news and gossip and Rukmini has learnt over the years of marriage to a bureaucrat to be careful with her words and facial expressions - one never knew what exaggerated gossip could be manufactured out of innocuous remarks! One consolation for Rukmini is that she enjoys good relations with her in-laws who lived in Guwahati. Prabhat Bezboruah, her father-in-law is a retired college professor while Renu Bezboruah, her mother-in-law is a retired school teacher. They spend their time involving themselves in various local committees and events in the neighbourhood and are highly respected pillars of the community. Her initial awe of her parents-in-law has, over the years, changed to

fondness and there is mutual affection between the parents, their son and daughter-in-law. The old couple keep themselves occupied with their political work and social service and Rukmini always welcomed their visits. In the verdant lawns of the DC's bungalow with its line of large flowering trees, the beauty and tranquillity of the garden were a constant delight for Rukmini who spent many hours alone. It is her mother-in-law who astutely senses Rukmini's feeling of isolation and loneliness. During one of their short visits, her light chatter about her job and Parbatpuri society does not fool the older woman who gently advises her, "You need children now. Women in your situation need to have children to call their own. You're thirty four. It's time now. You have to weigh all the options that you have and decide. Including, if you like, adoption. . . Middle age is not the time for the responsibilities of parenthood. You know" (71). The older woman's words provide the cue for Rukmini to open up and it is a relief for her to talk with a sympathetic woman about the latest fertility treatment she and Siddharth have been contemplating. So far, her medical consultation and discussions had been only with men – Siddharth, Dr. Rabha and a couple of other doctors - all male and it was a different feeling to discuss personal issues with a woman who understood her predicament. In the sharing that takes place between the two women, it is Renu Bezboruah who suggests that Rukmini could consider newer options besides artificial insemination or test tube conception such as ovum donorship or surrogate motherhood or even adoption. It surprises Rukmini who had not thought about adoption but her mother-in-law's concern is not so much about preserving their gene pool. She says "We do want to see both of you with children. Raise a family. It adds to the richness of life" (74).

Sitting on the lawn amidst the softly-falling purple jacaranda and scarlet blooms of the krishnasura trees, Rukmini's feelings for her mother-in-law undergo a major change after their long discussion. She feels, "Some kind of emotional barrier had been breached. It must have been difficult for Renu Bezboruah to broach the subject. Being a mother-in-law wasn't always easy" (*ibid*). She is also surprised when her mother-in-law takes out a tiny cylindrical object from her leather handbag and proffers it to Rukmini. The cylinder made of greyish material is closed at the two ends with copper and has a minuscule hoop at its centre. It is an amulet she got from the Mahamaya Temple and had it specially blessed with the blessings of Mahamaya which are very potent. She requests Rukmini to wear it, who knows that the deity of the Mahamaya Temple granted people's wishes -- especially babies. It is a significant moment between the two women. The compassion of the older woman and her investment in a good luck charm that will hopefully answer Rukmini's desire to achieve motherhood, reveals her faith not only in the scientific methods towards having babies but also the religious and superstitious.

In Phukan's depiction Renu Bezboruah and Rukmini are shown to have a mature relationship and do not fall into the stereotype of the harridan mother-in-law torturing her young and timid daughter-in-law into producing sons to preserve the male lineage. She does not stand in moral judgement or criticism of Rukmini but with a maternal concern, offers her the encouragement and support which Rukmini's own mother cannot give since her parents live in Trinidad. Rukmini wears the amulet knowing that would make Renu Bezboruah happy. She is hopeful and reasons that "in this battle to conceive, every little bit of help whether medical, religious or merely superstitious, was welcome" (79).

Though she knows Siddharth is agnostic and partook of religious pujas and darshans in a token way, she is eager to talk to him about his mother and the amulet. But as usual, she sits up waiting while he remains working at his desk. It is a familiar scene which points to the growing fissure between them. Siddharth's preoccupation with work leaves Rukmini again with a sense of disappointment. "Her body longed for the reassuring warmth of the male body beside her, for a voice to tell her that it wasn't her fault that she was still childless" (76). It should be noted here that with Siddharth's odd hours, they have taken to sleeping in separate beds with a night table in between which is reflective of the gulf between them though they reside under one roof.

In Phukan's narrative strategy, the novel unfolds through the eyes of the protagonist who informs the reader about the personal pains and disappointment that she suffers. The years of Siddharth's neglect and apathy have brought her to a stage where she seeks resolution to her predicament. Rukmini's predicament highlights the common perception of marital relationships, whether unhappy or abusive as 'private matters' which are outside the purview of the law and are thus not given importance neither by the society in general or by the law. Her observant eye also describes the social disquiet around, the students' agitation spreading around. Reports of incidences of extortion, looting and killing of unarmed civilians come out with increasing regularity in the papers. As the movement gathered momentum, it degenerated into violence, creating chaos and tension, filling the atmosphere with fear and confusion. The situation on the ground prevailing during that period is a fitting metaphor for the inner turmoil, tension and agony that Rukmini experiences in her personal life. The political upheavals taking place, the general atmosphere of

disquiet and sense of insecurity is mirrored in the personal angst that she was undergoing.

The atmosphere is heating up with the fiery days of May and the heat of the unrest which is spreading a climate of fear. Groups of terrorists or pseudo-terrorists euphemistically called “anti-socials” take credit for the various crimes. The most prominent of these groups is the MOFEH, the Movement for an Exclusive Homeland. The gangs of dacoits thinly disguised as insurgents have all “discovered the value of a little bit of pseudo-patriotism to silver over their antisocial intent” (81). In their cause for a “Golden Homeland” kidnapping, extortion, murder and armed robbery become a regular feature in and around Parbatpuri. Frequent and often exaggerated accounts of the kidnapping, looting, extortion and killing of ordinary citizens would be reported in the teachers common room. Narendra Tiwary says: “Rukmini, the protagonist of the novel, is affected both ways – directly and indirectly – in her personal and social life. Her husband Siddharth remains busy in maintenance of law and order in Parbatpuri. For both of them, social responsibility has been more important than the personal one” (188). In the midst of these developments, Rukmini observes:

Siddharth, in the very vortex of it all, seemed to live in his offices. The worry lines on his forehead had deepened perceptibly . . . Never a talkative person, he grew almost taciturn now, at least when he was with Rukmini. Sometimes thinking that it would help if he talked about his work, Rukmini tried to draw him into a conversation about his day, on the occasionally evenings together. But he never opened up. Perhaps he was unable to. (82)

The only place Siddharth seemed to relax is the Parbatpuri club. Rukmini wonders whether it is the banal jokes or the trite conversation that refreshed his mind or maybe because it was one of the few places where he could “shed his official persona” (83).

1(d) A Woman’s Silent Pain and Anxieties

As the world in Parbatpuri is going through its upheavals, Rukmini is experiencing her own. Dr Rabha, the fertility specialist wants to know whether she has made up her mind to take the course of drugs discussed about earlier. Her mother-in-law has been encouraging her but Siddharth’s attitude leaves her in a dilemma. The irony between them is that the busy husband has little time for the wife and has shown even less inclination to become a father. On the other hand, Rukmini too, for all her desire for a child, wants one, not out of maternal sentiment but to feel normal in Parbatpuri. In finely-chiselled narrative, Phukan draws attention to the internal workings of a woman's mind, on the various dimensions of her psychological make-up, her feelings of insecurity, throwing light on her situation, a woman, a silent victim suffering in her marital predicament.

Rukmini wonders over the reasons for Siddharth’s reticence. He has never been demonstrative even in the early years of their marriage. She senses the rift growing between them and longs to bridge their differences. But her fateful meeting with Manoj Mahanta would take her life in a new direction. The doctor informs her of the number of new options available to couples with problems. She is made aware of the lesser chances of conception as women grow older, the higher risks for women after thirty five and greater chances of having a child with a handicap or being born with Down’s syndrome. She has to come to a decision over taking fertility enhancing

drugs. She has so far sought the more conventional methods where both she and Siddharth have undergone several tests. The experience has been unpleasant. She remembers how:

She had suffered silently through all the prying and prodding and the probing as male gynaecologists - her doctors had all been male - had studied her womb, her vagina and her ovaries. She had tried to be as impersonal as the doctors and the technicians themselves when she lay on the hard tables, being examined by humans or by machines. But she had always felt a sense of violation after each examination, each test. It was irrational, she knew, yet she could do nothing to prevent these feelings from crowding her mind as she pulled up her panties and rearranged the pleats of her sari after each examination. (83 - 84)

In Rukmini's case, over and above her feeling of violation, is the way a woman who is subjected to invasive examination by male doctors and technicians, is made an object of male voyeurism. She understands from her reading that the womb matured faster than the brain and wondered over the way different organs within the same human body had such widely differing life cycles. Rukmini has been subscribing to fertility magazines and comes across an advertisement for a female ovum donor. In her mind, she imagines Siddharth and herself advertising for a female ovum donor in case that was the only chance for Siddharth to father a child that would be legitimately, legally his. But her reverie only makes her more aware of what is missing in her life.

Apart from her personal agonies from the sense of the dissatisfaction that hurts and haunts her, Rukmini is aware of the developments that are going on in the

wider world beyond her ken. The part-time teaching job, however unsatisfying, is a welcome diversion and an opportunity for her to descend to the town and meet with the teachers who are only too happy to give exaggerated reports of the various crimes and incidents occurring regularly. She notes how her students have been drawn to the movement against illegal immigrants. But wonders whether this issue is the root of all the problems engulfing Parbatpuri. She notes too the unconcern of the teachers for the concerns of the students or for making them understand the underlying cause for the unrest over the unabated influx of foreign nationals. The foreign nationals issue has become in her eyes, “a convenient bogeyman, the visible foreign hand that figured as the scapegoat” (89). There are questions that come to her mind about the prevailing situation. Her reflections makes her wonder whether the illegal immigrants are to be blamed for the ills - the poor quality of education in schools and colleges, the recurring floods that wreak havoc on the land, the lack of visible developmental activities, the horrendous condition of the roads everywhere, the pervasive and corrosive corruption to the lack of basic governance in the state. Her thoughts indicate the severity of the problems. With the passage of the years, many young people are drawn into the various organisations to eventually follow the path of insurgency. From her position, the DC's wife, Rukmini observes what is happening to the youth, what the educated, represented by the teachers think and how the administration responds to the developments. She is an apolitical observer of the students politics that draws her students into frequent protests, agitations and demonstrations. She also sees the petty politicking and attempts at one-upmanship among her colleagues, the degeneration of law and order and the way of life slowly changing under the activities of the MOFEH. Tension has slowly spread around and

made life restrictive in Parbatpuri for the sake of what the MOFEH calls “the People’s Movement” (96).

In her conversation with Nabish Alam, Phukan describes Rukmini as a very human person. She is a humanist who empathises with the student leaders who are involved with agitations and the anti-foreigner movement. She is a kind-hearted woman. At the same time, Phukan says Rukmini's problems – her inability to conceive, her barrenness, this predicament she is in, can be seen as metaphorical or allegorical reflected in the barrenness in Assam. In her opinion, there has been no fruiting. There is a crisis in the state. After the crisis finally, there is hope when she conceives, which signifies hope for Assam.

In the novel, Rukmini is the omniscient narrator of the developments which impinge on her personally and observer of the political currents which is gradually driving the main characters into a vortex. Rebecca Sultana, in her review says “The novel reveals how the private space can be appropriated by the public as we discover the personal enmeshing into the political with tragic consequences” (1). She further points out as the political climate becomes increasingly volatile with various groups demanding Assam’s freedom from foreign infiltrators and street protests becoming more strident, it becomes “difficult to distinguish the innocent bystander from the perpetrators of violent chaos” (*ibid*). Rukmini’s world is being slowly invaded by the spreading violence. It is her husband's duty to ensure the security of property and life for the common citizen. On another level, her staid, meaningless existence will also be dramatically altered when Manoj Mahanta reappears.

In her protagonist’s character, Phukan illustrates the slogan “the personal is political”. She allows us to understand how the individual choices Rukmini makes

and the conditions of her life, will ultimately have broader meaning and consequences for the life and world she creates for herself. While Siddharth is completely preoccupied with discharging his administrative duties in the backdrop of the unstable atmosphere prevailing around, Rukmini finds her days following a “predictable groove” (43). Her husband is more devoted to his duties than to the wife. The feeling of neglect, of the growing distance that Siddharth maintains, pains her. It is at this juncture when she is emotionally insecure from Siddharth’s continuing insensitivity that her attraction for Manoj Mahanta finds fertile ground to grow. Her frustrations are manifold - childless, no job satisfaction, lonely, insecure and having no family or friends, Manoj is a bright and interesting intrusion in her thus far unfulfilled, monotonous existence. As the distance grows with her husband, she is drawn in a new direction towards another man. Drawn by their mutual attraction towards each other, Rukmini finds her life taking new meaning with the excitement of Manoj’s company. Her routine placid life is brightened by the attention of a man in whom she recognises a kindred soul.

1(e) Towards Feminist Analysis of Rukmini

In reading Rukmini as the subject and object of feminist analysis, Phukan draws out how for the last ten years of being a married woman, Rukmini has been defined in relation to her husband. She is cut off from her family since her parents are settled in a foreign country. Though family ties are there, she is essentially alone. She is on her own and has to face her battles single-handedly. Playing the role of a dutiful wife, being respected, enjoying protection under the authority and power of her husband, it becomes clear however that enjoying material advantages is no guarantee to making one happy.

In all these years, she has ensured that her marriage to Siddharth has remained intact. Having played her role perfectly in the social contract between herself and her husband, the result is that Rukmini finds her life hollow, meaningless and as mentioned, unfulfilled. The apparent success of her marriage does not coincide with personal happiness. From Rukmini's point of view, she has reached a critical stage in her life. The insensitive remarks of the wedding guests, the sense of failure over her childless state and her sensitive nature which magnifies her feelings of neglect and rejection from husband who is married to his work – these factors coupled with the choice of when to start her fertility treatment, bring her to a point where she needs to make up her mind to take charge of her life, particularly her body which in her eyes, has failed her and thus represented her as a failure in the small-town conservative eyes of Parbatpuri society which sees motherhood as a vindication and completeness of a woman's worth. From her introspective reflections, Rukmini undergoes silent agonies of myriad fears and self-doubt which are corrosive to her self-belief. In *Theorizing Feminism: Gender*, V. Geetha in her analysis on the complex intensely personal experience of motherhood states that this experience touches individual woman's most intimate sense of herself and failing to achieve motherhood has several implications. According to her, “If a woman cannot be a mother, she feels guilty, as if it is her fault, as if her body has betrayed itself and her. Women also imagine that whatever else they are or may do, their ultimate destiny is linked with motherhood” (123).

To illustrate, Phukan presents the experience of a woman from a woman's point of view. In the novel, the authorial eye and the protagonist's eye are a crucial process of representing women as subjects for feminist interpretation. As we follow

the narrative from Rukmini's point of view, we uncover the story of her pain, we get the female perspective as she presents the complex and multi-layered range of her experience. When Manoj turns up at the tyre shop where she has been consulting the salesman over purchase of new tyres for their old car, his casual invitation for a cold drink is accepted after some initial hesitation. She is in two minds and wonders whether it was okay just to have a drink to wash away the giddiness and nauseating smell of rubber from her nose and throat or whether it was going with a practically strange man without her husband knowing about it and if that was alright. Since she uses their private car more than her husband, the tyres have worn out. Manoj comments that most bureaucrats in Siddharth's position do not even keep a car for private use.

As the two of them walk towards a small eatery, she informs him that Siddharth is particular about maintaining the demarcation between government property and private ownership. Manoj finds it commendable as too many people seem unaware that such exists. Privately, "She experiences a sense of pride as she said it which somehow blunted the edge of the creeping feeling of disloyalty to him (Siddharth) which was growing in her mind" (104). In comparing the two men, she finds Manoj has a frank open face while Siddharth's facial features were more classically shaped which in her mind give him a forbidding air. There was something about Manoj's face that "invited trust" (104). She finds the controlled manner she has cultivated for the last decade is slowly softening in Manoj's company. She feels at ease with him and does not feel awkward to mention about her lack of childbearing abilities as the tyre shop assistant had mistakenly attributed her giddiness to pregnancy. She has been reticent about her problem and except for a few people –

Siddharth, her mother-in-law and the doctors and specialists, it is a subject that she never discussed with others. Indeed, after all these years of childlessness, “She had become so adept at fielding questions and hiding her feelings and putting on a cheerful face that the mask had almost moulded itself to the skin of her cheeks” (*ibid*). Somehow in his company, her mask is slowly coming off and she is curious to know whether he is married. He was married but it was over now. She finds they share a common academic background. He is also a graduate of English literature and is able to spout literary quotations with the best of them. As they exchange pleasantries over plates of Kabiraji Chicken Cutlet, Rukmini reflects on herself: “The quintessential small-town house wife, with a part-time teaching job to justify her expensive education. Well, that was probably an accurate portrait of her. Only the towns kept changing, everything else in her life was the same, had been the same, for the past ten years” (107).

She is introduced to Pronob Bishaya or Bhaiti, Manoj’s good friend who is a tea garden owner, a poor one. Manoj regales her with stories of Bhaiti’s close encounters with the MOFEH when he was abducted by them and his eventual release without paying them any ransom when they learnt of his penury. Rukmini feels carefree in his presence joking and laughing easily. As Manoj grins back at her, she notices that “His brown eyes looked carefree and young, unlike, Rukmini couldn't help thinking, Siddharth's, which always gave the impression that he was burdened with weighty matters even while watching a sitcom on TV which admittedly, he rarely had time for” (111).

Bhaiti invites them to his tea garden and they agree to visit him the next day which is a Saturday. As they walk down the Mahatma Gandhi Road in the middle of

Parbatpuri, “she felt quite at ease with this man. She hadn't felt this carefree in a long while. She felt as reckless as she had as a young girl, when life hadn't yet settled into its predictable grooves of small-town, middle-class living” (112). Rukmini glances at the man beside her - “He looked as though it was perfectly normal in his world to ask out other men's wives to visit a third person whom the lady had just barely met” (113). She feels unsure but when he turns and looks at her saying that the trip would take just half a day, “His gaze was disconcerting. Looking up at him, Rukmini felt some barrier crumble. ‘Okay - what time?’ She asked recklessly” (*ibid*).

From Rukmini's response to Manoj, it is clear that a mutual attraction is at play, an attraction she does not fight. She finds some relief that he is a free agent, not someone with a wife. Her mind is crowded with a flurry of excited thoughts at the prospect of going out with a new man. She cannot stop the questions that pop into her mind - “What will people say? Who cares what they say? Nobody will find out, and even if they do, it's just a visit to a tea garden. Quite innocent, really, though Parbatpuri might not think so. Or Siddharth. . .” (116). When Manoj comes to pick her up from the official residence, she tries to see herself from his eyes, “a lady . . . about to betray her husband of over a decade?” (116). She questions herself wondering whether going out with a man constitutes infidelity. “In the eyes of Parbatpuri's moral brigade, it probably did. Indeed, merely talking to a man who was not a relative for more than the strictly “correct” amount of time, would reek of some kind of betrayal in their eyes” (117).

In Phukan's adept portrayal, she draws out the mental and psychological workings of a woman's mind when she is in the kind of predicament Rukmini finds herself in. Rukmini is in a vulnerable state of mind. Emotionally, she is disturbed,

filled with questions and doubts about her attractiveness and depressed as Siddharth has not touched her for some time. Her desire for intimacy and companionship draws her towards Manoj. As her reservations over a social visit to Manoj's friend melts away, she wonders at the propriety of her actions. She does not want to be considered prudish or provincial like a small-town house wife with a narrow outlook. She can relate with him easily which is reflected in their easy banter and laughter: "She had felt surprisingly at ease with Manoj even after their embarrassing collision on MG Road. She found him engaging, easy to talk to, with a frankness that was rare in the kind of people that surrounded her in Parbatpuri" (117). She has taken care to dress in a peach-coloured embroidered salwar kameez with its wispy dupatta. She has not worn trousers or jeans for more than a decade which indicates that her choice of attire has also become as staid as the conservative circles she moves in.

Their drive to Pronob Bishaya's Hatibagan Tea Estate which takes a few hours is a voyage of discovery for Rukmini and Manoj. In the confines of Manoj's red maruti car, Rukmini learns that Manoj had been educated in the same kind of school as she had. She is able to tell him of her social role in presiding as a judge or as the chief guest for various functions for fruit, flower and vegetable shows or judging dance recitals giving speeches self-consciously and laboriously in Asomiya. Having had an elite education, speaking in English comes more naturally to her than the mother tongue and she does not want to be seen as some "linguistic snob" (119). She is able to confide in Manoj about things she has never talked about with Siddharth. As he listens to her and responds in understanding, Rukmini is struck by the comfort level between them. She wonders, "Was this why she was finding it so easy to open up to him? Was affinity, then just a simple matter of two people having

the same first language in a multilingual society, of having had the same kind of people as teachers during one's childhood? Did things such as temperament and character not count at all?" (*ibid*). She is able to tell him honestly of her attempts to be extra nice to people to make up for any mistaken 'snobbishness' over her speaking English and adds plaintively, "I want people to like me" (120). She discovers their mutual delight in the hilariously funny slogans and sign boards in faulty English which they have noticed around the town. She learns the reasons leading to Manoj's wife, Maya, leaving him. His itinerant job had them moving every few years and it fell on Maya to do much on her own. She missed having a career and most of all, missed having friends. Manoj tells Rukmini that Maya had married again and she had a child. She also runs a successful boutique. He concedes that his former wife has prospered after their divorce and is glad for her, relieved that he did not have to shoulder any guilt for her unhappiness any more.

As they drive through the countryside with easy silences punctuating their conversation, Rukmini notices the women folk who live their quiet lives in small settlements scattered about. She admires these rural women, their proud carriage and their sense of the important place they occupied in the home. These women performed multiple tasks and "were indispensable for sowing, transplanting the young paddy seedlings, for weaving the family supply of dhutis, sadors, mekhlās and gamosas, for child-rearing, for making the hut a home. Their gait showed their self assertion. Their fathers had had to pay no dowry to get them married. They had been their own dower" (123). Seen through Rukmini's eyes, these women represent another picture of Assam, fertile and productive, which is often not seen in the larger discourse of violent politics and identity consciousness. The fields give way to tea

gardens and the aroma of tea leaves fills the air. With the cool breeze wafting into the car, Rukmini inhaled the fragrance that was unique to tea gardens. She notices Manoj's practical-looking clean hands and wonders whether the touch of his hands would be rough, tender or delicate. Her fantasizing is interrupted by a stop at a security check post where the car is searched - a new experience for her since Siddharth's official car ensured a cloak of security and they were not subjected to these searches. As they resume their journey, she notices the sky becoming overcast with black clouds. Quite suddenly and unexpectedly, they are caught in a storm of driving rain and wind. Manoj decides to sit it out in a nearby garden club rather than risk their lives driving on in ferocious wind and rain. Despite the condition of the weather, Rukmini feels nervous but is filled with a strange exhilaration. She would not mind going right to the storm till she reached its still, calm centre and find a sense of meaningful existence.

1(f) Social Expectations versus Authentic Identity

The Ranijan Tea club is an oasis of calm while the roaring goes on outside. As she looks at her situation, she wonders at her actions - has she been rash, impulsive or foolish? Who would have thought that, she, "Rukmini Bezboruah, who was so charming, so malleable, so proper, who always agreed with everything that other people said, could actually go off for the day with a man, a tyre salesman who was not even 'one of us' to some vague destination for a morning jaunt" (134).

Her conscience does not approve of her going off with another man without telling her husband but in her heart, when Manoj takes her hand and leads her into the Tea Club house, she finds his gesture perfectly natural and is comforted by it. Flashes of lightning, the crash of thunder, the howling wind and pouring rain do not

disturb Rukmini. Manoj's calm and cool demeanour fills her with a sense of trust, security and a feeling of liberation which allows Rukmini to confide in him and share her long-held dream and desire to become a writer or perhaps a copywriter in an ad agency – a dream she has nurtured from her college days and Manoj's encouragement is just the balm she needs for her bruised sensibilities. While they wait for lunch, they know involuntarily, without words what will happen next. She finds in Manoj's brown eyes a reassuring warmth and softness. This is mirrored in the protectiveness of the thickly carpeted curtained, womb-like room they are shown into. The mutual attraction that has brought them together does not need words to tell each other what their bodies communicate. It is a natural progression in the order of events and now that the moment was actually upon her, "Rukmini realised how inevitable it had been that she would find herself alone in a shadowy bedroom with this man. She had known, since she had come out with him this morning, that it would lead to this" (141). As she surrenders and responds eagerly to Manoj's touch, she feels, "as though their bodies had known each other for a long time. . . It was a long time since she had felt anything like this, even with Siddharth" (*ibid*). It is a moment which fills her with a feeling of wonder: "She felt that he had given her something infinitely precious: a glimpse into his innermost soul" (142). She is surprised by her passionate response because even with Siddharth, "she had never given in to the kind of abandon that she had experienced today" (143). Her uncharacteristic behaviour makes her interrogate herself mentally. Even in the private moment of intimacy, Rukmini questions herself wondering whether the hidden surreptitious nature of their tryst had given it an extra edge, knowing that she had always considered herself calm and cool, not the ardent and passionate women in

that room. In what can be seen as a presage to the outcome of their lovemaking, while she showers, the sight of large, green jackfruit hanging outside the bathroom window looks, to her eyes, like the oversized breast of a middle-aged woman. As she touches her own small ones, it strikes her - “Weren’t heavy pendulant breasts a sign of fertility?” (144).

In a few hours, Rukmini and Manoj return to the Parbatpuri reality. Their time together, the lunch which had been full of reminiscences and the delight over their shared interests become a cherished memory. As routine matters take her attention, she realises that she did not have Manoj’s address or phone number after he had brought her back. Siddharth has been unavoidably delayed for a few more days in Guwahati and her mother-in-law enquires:

“Have you decided yet about going in for the fertility pills?”. . .

Rukmini unconsciously fingered the amulet that she wore around her neck. “No, Ma, not yet. Actually, Siddharth and I haven’t really talked. I mean, discussed the whole issue properly. But don’t worry – we’ll come to a decision soon. . .” (148)

Her mother-in-law is clearly interested in their effort to have a child, a grandchild for them. But Rukmini is too preoccupied with the day’s events. In her mind, “Those moments of intimacy were rapidly being blanketed with layers of concern from the real world” (149). Though she goes about her life as calmly as she can, Rukmini's emotions are in turmoil and she seeks Priyam in the teachers common room on the Monday when classes resume. But her colleague has not come since Saturday. She wants to talk with somebody about the events on Saturday, especially another woman who can lend a sympathetic ear without judgement but the opportunity does not

arise. In the days following her rendezvous with Manoj, she looks at Siddharth with new eyes. After his return from Guwahati, she notices he continues to be as undemonstrative as before. He neither touches her with a hug nor with a kiss - even in private after an absence of a few days. When they were newly married, he would give a token hug when she snuggled up to him after his frequent absences. What she observes is that - “She had always craved his touch much more than he had hers. It was, she knew, his way. He wasn't physically demonstrative, even with his parents” (159). His cool, distracted, distant manner is annoying and is dampening their relationship. He is also becoming increasingly unenthusiastic about the idea of taking medical help for treating infertility. Rukmini's feeling of guilt over her infidelity is replaced by anger over Siddharth's indifference. She reasons:

“After all, the child would be his heir, a consolation to his parents in their old age, that their family tree was alive and flourishing. . . As for her, she didn't particularly care for babies. She only wanted one - so that she could feel normal in places like Parbatpuri, where to be married for a decade without having any children to show for it was one of the worst things that could happen to a woman. Even worse, probably, than remaining unmarried for life.” (159-60)

Rukmini admits honestly to herself, the truth that has been at the back of her mind. The last ten years of being a barren woman/wife has eroded the sense of self. The absence of fulfilment in marriage to an indifferent husband has soured other areas of her female consciousness. This perhaps can be read as a reason for leading to her lack of interest in teaching, to her boredom with Parbatpuri's small-world outlook and to a feeling of not being a complete woman. Through Rukmini's ruminations,

Phukan addresses the concerns of a middle-class, high-caste Brahmin woman whose education has not brought benefits for her and have instead left her feeling like an actor performing a prescribed role wearing the mask of polite dignity in the midst of other actors where each one tries not to reveal their true faces. She has compromised her ambitions to keep her marriage intact. Over time, her dream of becoming a copywriter has been shelved. She has instead quietly submitted to making a career of her marriage. Though she possesses admirable qualities such as dignity, humanity and compassion, these have failed to draw her husband to her and she feels trapped in her role as the Collector's wife. Her desire to be normal, to become a mother, is her desire to be free of the stigma of barrenness. In her eyes, Siddharth's distance is inexplicable. His reticence now annoys her and with growing resentment she sees "Men dashing around, doing the world's work while she waited in, of all the places on the globe, Parbatpuri, for them to spare a look or some time for her" (*ibid*).

But in the stuffy world of Parbatpuri, it is not becoming for someone of her class and status to be seen to be needy or clingy. There is a certain recklessness in her as emotionally and physically, she desires intimacy and longs for companionship. It is when she is placed in a delicate predicament - hurt by insensitive comments, wanting confirmation of the fruitfulness of her womb, that her fateful collision with Manoj in front of Radha Stores makes a deep impression that would lead to unexpected twists and turns in the trajectory of her life in Parbatpuri. Disoriented by the collision and flat on the pavement with Manoj lying on top of her, she is aware of the weight of his body on hers. "She seemed to be spread-eagled on her back, her legs apart. The man, horrifyingly, was lying between them" (34). To her acute embarrassment, her sari had climbed up to her knees but Manoj quickly gets up and

pulls down the folds of her sari. Manoj's concern to save her from the avid, greedy eyes of the curious onlookers and his ability to ease her embarrassment remain embedded in her memory. Even in the tyre shop curiously called V. D. Enterprises when she is overcome by the overpowering and nauseating stench of rubber, just when she is about to give in to the waves of nausea, he appears by her side to support her before she loses her balance. On these two occasions, Manoj is a refreshing breath of fresh air in the dull, stultifying atmosphere that characterizes her current predicament. Unlike with Siddharth, Rukmini connects with him on many levels. Their similar educational background, their love and appreciation of English literature, a shared sense of humour and Manoj's ability to put her at ease so that she feels alive and womanly, with the warmth of his brown eyes, the strength his hands represent and in other subtle ways, Rukmini is drawn to him just as Siddharth's reserve and restraint give an impression of wanting to keep a distance from her, to close the lines of communication thus pushing her away and shutting her out.

A curious element that contrasts Siddharth from Manoj is the indifference of one and the encouragement of the latter for Rukmini's quest for a career. The high-ranking career bureaucrat, aloof and wrapped up in his officialdom, ironically sees no reason to let his wife have a career of her own. From Rukmini's narrative, Siddharth appears to have neither encouraged nor supported her nor made a conscious effort to help her fulfil her dream. Just as he shows reluctance to become a father so too is he reluctant to give affection to the person who wants it from him. In this sense he, the husband of over ten years, is the cause for letting Rukmini suffer denials that have led to a predicament that fills her with deep angst. On the other hand, Manoj, tyre company sales manager, ironically someone she has known only briefly, whose

position is far lower to Siddharth's, suffers no bias in spurring Rukmini to strive for better things. He gives her a list of advertising agencies that operate in Guwahati and a few based in Calcutta encouraging her to give them her resume. After all, he tells her: "Women do have careers, you know, in this day and age. I mean real careers, not the kind of half-hearted thing you are doing" (161). Manoj encourages her to freelance for some papers for a start giving her options to take up later. Interestingly, in the contrast between the husband and the friend, Manoj possesses greater empathy and understanding of Rukmini than her husband. Phukan draws out these contrasts and differences between the two men with skillful irony. The dispassionate husband and considerate friend present stark differences in their temperament and character. It can be seen that Manoj advises and gives suggestions for new direction in her staid life. His words conjure a tantalizing vision of something she had dreamt about which now seems within her grasp. At that moment, with Manoj's words echoing in her mind – the realisation of her full predicament, the years that have gone by with little accomplishment to show, the frustration of having suppressed her dreams for so long, hits her with glaring force. With the impact of this realisation, she is overcome with a strong urge brought out in the following passage:

Suddenly she wanted to leave Parbatpuri, and all the various mofussil towns that she could see stretching drearily ahead of her till Siddharth got his seniority and was able to work in the State Secretariat in Guwahati. Which in itself would be no big jump, anyway. She wanted the excitement that leaping into a new life would bring. To bus it to work, to rub shoulders cheerfully with fellow humans, instead of travelling always in a cocoon of isolation. To fashion, if not immortal poesy, then at least a

few lines of attention-grabbing copy that would launch a new produce. So what if the product was only a mediocre washing powder? Without her inspired lines, the product would have sunk without a trace in the Great Indian Marketplace. Or to be a journalist, with, perhaps, her own column, for which her readers would wait impatiently, so that they could then say to others with an air of authority, “But Rukmini Bezboruah says. . . .” To be able to influence the thinking of so many people, to make her readers sit up and take note of her point of view. . . She wanted the thrill of a faster-paced life. Most of all, she wanted to get away from the endless rounds of shooting, kidnapping, extortion, activities that were slowly draining away the life blood of all who lived here. She wanted to wake up every morning in a place that was vibrant with energy. So what if it was polluted and overcrowded? She was fed up anyway with sylvan greenery behind which bristled acres of AK-47s. She wanted to talk of something new and different, more than the gossip about fellow teachers, or fellow club-members, or about the latest killing or the latest extortion demand. She was tired of all this, tired also of trying to have a baby with a husband who, in the past so many weeks, had not even touched her, let alone slept with her. (162-3)

Rukmini’s words encapsulate the personal agonies that have been holding her back from achieving her aspirations. In a form of wish-fulfilment, she projects a vision of herself where she can finally realise her dreams, where she can claim her individuality and work towards redefining and reshaping the contours of her so far suppressed and thwarted ambitions.

Rukmini reaches a stage where she wants finally to have the things she has aspired for but which have been denied to her because of her submission to social expectations. Her obedience to the performance of a submissive role has worked against her interests since she chose the line of least resistance and did not defy the dutiful wife/daughter-in-law role. This has led to her lacking an independent identity, her identity being shaped by marriage relations to Siddharth. Her thoughts, her mind, her ego, her conscious and feeling self, her wishes and desires have not been wholly her own. She has not allowed herself to be who she wants to be. In this sense, having played the subordinate role, she has not been able to be an individual who values herself, as a woman with agency, to shape her destiny.

2(a) Resolving the Angst and Anxieties

Manoj's voice and words serve to revitalize her as if catalysing her into taking charge of her life and doing the things that will put her in the direction towards living on her terms. He succeeds in awakening her from the socially-induced narrow parameters of the gender role she has performed so far. The first step towards this new self would be to learn to use the typewriter with a self help manual and join a computer centre later to learn word processing. Rukmini is filled with a new lease of life, an optimism brought out in the following:

Thinking about it made her feel quite upbeat. It was more than the phone call from Manoj. It was her decision to try something that was completely new that made her feel this way. She realised that she had not done anything new for a long time. Except of course, she smiled to herself, slept with a man whom she barely knew. Without realising it, she had sunk into an intellect-deadening rut". (163)

After her uplifting exchange with Manoj, Rukmini realises that she had allowed herself to be trapped in a rut. Feeling out of place in Parbatpuri and harbouring her angst for so long, she has no desire to be another Nandini Deuri, the efficient, eminently-enterprising, constantly busy wife of Hrishikesh Deuri, the Superintendent of Police in Parbatpuri. In Rukmini's eyes, Nandini Deuri represents a particular type of woman who belong to a particular social set that is common in the districts. For all her hard-working initiative, the brisk and efficient manner in which the SP's wife carried out her domestic and social responsibilities, becoming noted for her zeal, she is a part of the set in which Rukmini feels ill at ease.

Nandini also represents the class and status consciousness in small towns evident in the membership to the Ladies Club that consisted only of wives of gazetted government officers who found themselves in a new place every few years following their husbands in their transferable jobs and found such clubs an outlet for contributing towards social welfare. Rukmini is not comfortable in the company of such ladies who would be silently competing amongst themselves when providing snacks for the club meetings by turns which reeked of one-upmanship. Above all, sharing little in common with them, she senses the bias and prejudices of her own club members with whom she has to guard her words while trying to be pleasant; she knows words can be easily misconstrued:

A comment on the attractiveness of a sari could get the wearer into a huff because of a perceived patronising tone, polite enquiries about children could be cause for alarm. Because, after all, Rukmini was a barren woman and everyone knew, when a childless female took an undue interest in one's offspring, it was time to ward off the evil eye by

going home as soon as possible, roasting mustard seeds over an open fire and murmuring mantras over the head of the child whose name was taken by the barren woman. (167)

Their banal exchanges revolved around the prices of items in the market and their glee in buying a fish for five rupees less or thwarting the vegetable vendor's attempts to "foist a rotten snake-gourd on them" (*ibid*).

But Rukmini realises how she has misjudged Nandini when the latter loses her husband to the murderous bullets of the MOFEH which creates a sensation in Parbatpuri. The Deuris and their three children had gone to a Chinese restaurant to celebrate their fifteenth wedding anniversary when an unseen gunman shoots the SP from the doorway just as they were beginning to eat. The recent gunning down of an elderly Gandhian in broad daylight, a vocal critic of the outfit and its methods, have frightened the town into silence. In this atmosphere of fear and terror, the killers do not even hide their faces. Siddharth and Rukmini are among the first to arrive at the scene. Rukmini is the first woman Nandini meets after her sudden widowhood. In that moment of tragedy, to Rukmini's eyes:

She did not look efficient any more, just shell shocked. Her eyes were glazed, her hands fidgeted nervously on her lap. . . Impulsively, Rukmini went forward and held Nandini's hands. At her touch, Nandini's eyes filled with tears. She began to sob. . . With the tears came the words. Broken, disoriented, still uncomprehending of the full magnitude of what had happened. Death was all around them in Parbatpuri but until it struck home, it remained a distant thing, something that would never enter their lives, at least in the foreseeable future. Rukmini stroking Nandini's

anguished hands tried to calm her. But the words came out in tumbling gasps. She had to talk, so that she could begin to understand, so that she could try to make sense of the senseless thing that had happened right there, in front of her. (171)

Nandini's tragedy, seen so close, drives home the incomprehensibility of violent insurgency that shatters the lives of women and children, of death which cruelly destroys a family. Rukmini wonders if the top ranking police officer could be killed so brazenly despite his circle of security men, what chance did the ordinary citizen have against the MOFEH. The civil administration also comes in for criticism in the local papers, some of which give lurid accounts of the incident. The ineptitude of the district administration in failing to contain the terrorist problem is a question Rukmini cannot answer when some of her colleagues ask her about it. On the other hand, the student community has been submitting numerous petitions to the government for a clear plan of action in tackling the foreigner issue which seems to continue unabatedly putting more pressure on the administration. In their young idealistic minds, they consider their movement worthwhile to ensure their survival. The apprehension she feels is when peaceful methods fail and disillusionment steps in, these young students would be drawn to join the MOFEH and take up the gun for their cause.

After the customary mourning period, Rukmini visits Nandini. The memory of the incident, the blood stains, the white-sheeted body of the SP on the floor, had made her sick with horror in both the literal and figurative sense. Tragedies which impact women in traumatic, deeply personal ways, is brought out in Phukan's treatment of Nandini Deuri's tragic predicament. Nandini is grateful to Rukmini for

coming and comforting her, for being there soon after the incident. That is what matters, according to her, because nobody comes when there's a shootout. For a while, she had felt they had been abandoned by everybody in the town. Nobody came to help just after her husband was shot and he lay dying. Her children are cause for concern. At thirteen, eleven and seven years, witnessing their father's murder, she is concerned how they will cope as they are not old enough to sort out their disturbed feelings and the shock over losing a father so violently.

Rukmini comes to know the real Nandini Deuri and understand the true strength of her character in her time of trial. She is amazed at Nandini's positive outlook, her brave plans to take up a house for herself and her children and start a business, perhaps a bakery for speciality cakes and pastries, a dream she has always harboured. It is in the aftermath, when Nandini has been widowed that Rukmini comes to understand her. It strikes her that she had not taken that trouble to find out what kind of person lay behind Nandini's bustling housewifely exterior;

She would have liked to have been friends, really friends with the Nandini who stood revealed before her now. She could have talked to her from her heart. But of course it was too late now. Nandini would leave in a short while and they would probably never meet again. (192)

Nandini admits that she had always wanted to be an entrepreneur but with marriage, it was not possible. Now widowed and with three children to bring up, under drastically-changed circumstances, her predicament has compelled her to take steps since she will need an income. Divested of the heavy gold jewellery she sported earlier, Rukmini sees a new Nandini who has not allowed tragedy to bow her down. Reflecting on Nandini, she realises that whether she succeeds or fails, the older

woman endowed with physical strength possess even greater moral courage. It induces her to reflect on her predicament, to question herself: “What would happen to her? Where would she be ten, twenty years from now? What would she be doing? Still teaching desultorily in colleges in backward districts and trying to get Siddharth to agree to let her begin to take fertility drugs” (193).

What Phukan works into the novel is the ways women respond to personal trauma. In Nandini’s predicament, she demonstrates how a woman picks up the pieces of her shattered family life and bravely carries on to work towards securing her children’s future and ensure their survival. She embodies the strength of women who respond to personal tragedy by emerging stronger. It is from Nandini that Rukmini is impelled to fuel what Manoj has lit some weeks ago.

2(b) Getting Out of a Rut

Inspired by Nandini’s fortitude and Manoj’s encouragement, Rukmini comes to a decision to do something positive. She decides to learn to type, with a guide book. Even the aged toothless bookkeeper tells her that typing had gone out with his generation and she needed to learn using computers instead. She hopes to teach herself using the heavy typewriter in Siddharth’s office after the staff leave by evening. Within a few weeks, she is happy with her progress, not daring to dream about the goal that Manoj has set before her. Manoj, being a travelling salesman, visits Parbatpuri once a month. On his next visit, she invites him to their bungalow. From their mutual sense of aesthetics is the appreciation of nature’s beauty and she finds Manoj appreciative of the view of the craggy hills beyond the Red river, a view she constantly admired. Curiously, Siddharth and she have never discussed the breathtaking view from their window while on first looking, Manoj finds the view of

the river and mountains a magical combination. What strikes Rukmini is the change in Siddharth, the painter of a large impressionistic canvas, in black and white, of three magnificent horses galloping across a landscape: “The wind-tossed manes and the slim yet strong and sinewy legs at full stretch and the delicately angled hooves evoked a feeling of joyous freedom, of harmony” (200). This piece of art had been treasured by Rukmini who gave it pride of place in the best spot in every new home. But the pressures and responsibilities of work appear to have occluded his creative and artistic impulses and even his wife from his formerly imaginative vitality. Rukmini had always thought that this one painting of galloping steeds revealed more of her husband's nature to her than had all their years together, yoked in marital: “What? Certainly not harmony. Indifference, perhaps?” (201).

It is Rukmini who provides the insight to the nature and character of Siddharth. A man who strangely had possessed the sensitivity to paint horses running in joyous abandon against the crushing wind was now, so blind to the beauty outside and to his wife's sensibilities and sensitivities. But by shutting Rukmini out, in her insecure, unsettled frame of mind, Siddharth has pushed her closer to Manoj. With Manoj, there is companionship and also, “the warmth of reminiscing over a common background that drew them into a cocoon of closeness” (203). Manoj is able to draw Rukmini out of the defensive shell she has built around herself. His natural warmth enables her to talk freely with him in ways she is unable to with Siddharth. As always insecure about her looks, Manoj's compliments boost her self confidence, “reflected in Manoj's eyes, she saw that she was indeed beautiful that evening. There was no lust in his eyes, only the good wishes of a friend” (204). And for once, she resisted the urge to give an automatic self-deprecatory response.

As the plot progresses with Rukmini becoming progressively comfortable and happy in Manoj's company, events in the background are building up. Rukmini's life in the various town they had lived in, had been limited to a small circle and had revolved around home, official functions, clubs, officers and attending functions in the local higher secondary schools. Going out with Manoj on that Saturday afternoon caught in her happy mood, without the security escort, without guns, relieved with the anonymity, Rukmini's mood is light, having slipped out of her DC's wife persona as they drive down MG Road. The quirky shop sign boards have them laughing. She feels good to laugh again: "She realised suddenly, that till Manoj had come up to the house that afternoon, she hadn't laughed for weeks. How wonderful to feel the joy come bursting out of her mouth in a spontaneous bubble" (206).

2(c) Predicament in Joy

Caught in the middle of two forces while spending a carefree weekend outing with Manoj, events bring Rukmini to hospital where the doctor's examination detects her pregnancy. This piece of information leaves her wordless as questions whirl about inside her head. Her initial amazement gives way to doubts but the nurse on duty confirms the fact. It is an amazing, startling discovery which has her confused and thrilled at the same time.

As she gently touches her belly, she is struck by how it has become the most important part of her body and, "She smiled and fingered Renu Bezboruah's amulet that still did duty on the chain around her neck" (224). She hesitates to disclose the information to Manoj who is unaware as he was asked to leave the room when the doctor gave her the information. She wants to be absolutely sure before sharing the news with Manoj. She returns to the bungalow to be greeted by the sight of Siddharth

and an all-male group concerned for her. There is concern and sympathy for her but Rukmini realises she is quite alone: “She wished there was a woman in the room. Who would hold her in her arms and comfort her with her touch, like a mother, with no gender tensions coming into play between them” (229). Rukmini has not had female company at all in the bungalow except for the occasional visits by her parents-in-law. When Manoj, who escorts her back, is finally introduced to Siddharth, Rukmini is struck by a strong emotion: “Suddenly it was all too much. She felt she had to get away from the questions that would inevitably follow, the impersonal talk, the overwhelming male and official atmosphere of the place” (230).

The next few days, as she recovers from her injury, there is a deluge of visitors – her colleagues from college, members from the Ladies Club, the Planters club, who she knows, have come more out of curiosity than fellow-feeling. In the flurry of visitors, who intrude on her privacy, it is Renu Bezboruah’s telephone call that fills Rukmini with the need for female company. The maternal circle of women who provide women-to-women sharing and companionship. Her urge to confide in her mother-in-law is because:

Her need for the warmth of a caring woman was overwhelming. She wanted to tell her that she might be pregnant. She wanted the cossetting that was due to her now, the coddling by older, experienced women, the rites and rituals performed by them that formed a primeval bond between the newly-pregnant and those who had already gone through the experience. She wanted to be the centre of a ring of concerned women.
(239)

As the impact of the news of her pregnancy slowly seeps in, Rukmini's emotions and thoughts are those of a woman who has long been shadowed by a curse which has been suddenly lifted. In Rukmini, Phukan traces the mind of a woman who finally receives the validation or stamp of entry into motherhood after a decade of living under a cloud of sterility. It is a moment to savour and she longs to share and revel in it. The stigma of barrenness that has haunted her for a decade, the label "childless woman" which defined her as a failure in some way, the guilt recede to the background. She knows once women are with a child, they become the centre of a protective, close ring of other women where men are excluded. It is women's business where information and advice is shared, where there are jokes and endless ribbing. In her case, "Rukmini had always stood on the fringes on these occasions, excluded" (240). Now, there is a "sudden sense of exultation that refused to listen to the cautionary voice within her" (*ibid*). She longs for a sympathetic woman for a sister-to-sister talk about the events in her life in the past few months.

As Phukan stitches the complicated strands that are woven into Rukmini's predicament – her personal agonies with the socio-political realities that bear on her existential dilemma, she takes the narrative to another level once her protagonist's pregnancy is confirmed. For the major part of the novel, Rukmini's sense of inadequacy, being unfulfilled, being made to feel less of a woman has coloured the way she views her immediate world. Though marriage took place to a most eligible bachelor, yet having failed to attain motherhood, Rukmini's lived experience has not been edifying.

It is her chance meeting with Manoj Mahanta that brings colour into her colourless, dreary life. He fills the vacuum and their mutual attraction leading to an

inevitable moment of intimacy brings its consequences. With the discovery of her pregnancy, her view of the world undergoes a transformation. Feelings of guilt constantly lurk under the surface but there is a joy that she cannot suppress. She will need confirmation of the pregnancy: “The feeling of happiness, of triumph, however persisted. And it wasn't even, she mused, that she was a particularly maternal type” (244). Her visit to Dr Nobis, the gynaecologist confirms her pregnancy. The affirmation of her functional womb tells her: “So, I’ve been unbarren for the past three months and I never knew” (255). She knows the consequences, the complications that will come, the decisions that will have to be made. She had known all along that it was not Siddharth. They had not slept together for much more than three months. She is aware and anticipates what will come:

Her life would change, had changed irrevocably. There was nothing but uncertainty and, yes of course, scandal ahead of her. And all she felt now was joy. And strangely, triumph, an unmaternal feeling of vindication, that all those women who had nudged and looked significantly at each other whenever a reference to her childless state has been made, would now be deprived. She would not now be excluded from all those ceremonies where it was inauspicious for even the shadow of a barren woman to fall on the site of a Puja. She would no longer be steered tactfully away from brides as they waited, surrounded by symbols of fertility, for the bridegrooms. And she had achieved her pregnancy, after all, without the help of Dr Rabha’s fertility pills. (*ibid*)

Phukan shows Rukmini preparing herself mentally for what will come. Curiously, Rukmini admits to being unmaternal, that joy she experiences is the joy of

becoming free from the damaging prejudices that surrounded her throughout her issueless marriage. The years of swallowing the hurt, the humiliation of suffering exclusions, of being looked upon as a harbinger of evil - these griefs which had caused her so much agony are replaced by an exultant joy. Her joy is also from realising that she was not infertile after all. She had been led to believe that with her lower chances of conceiving, she would need to take fertility drugs to boost ovulation. She had proved Dr Rabha's diagnosis wrong. As the weight of her agony over her 'curse' is lifted, she is faced with a fresh challenge. How would she face Siddharth with this latest development. After the pregnancy is confirmed, Rukmini is faced with the dilemma of telling Siddharth about it. Returning to the bungalow, she finds none of the security guards outside nor the house boys. There is an eerie quietness around the large residence when she hears a slight sound from the direction of the bedroom which "made the back of her neck prickle" (257). On finding the door shut, she makes her way outside to the narrow path below the bedroom window expecting some terrorist planting explosives under the bed. What greets her eyes instead is a shocking discovery - "on the bed furthest away from the window, was a man with a Lincolnesque profile, smooth, fair-skinned chest and sinewy arms. Below him, supine, a bony woman with long, gaunt arms and legs" (258). As she looks in, the man turns towards the window: "She saw the sudden shock of awareness drive away the passion from his eyes" (259). For a moment they stare at each other, then Rukmini turns and bolts from the scene with a confusion of thoughts churning inside, an anger slowly rising. Anger at how foolishly she had attributed his indifference to the pressure of work, the unsettled situation, the regular instances of violent, unnatural deaths and how she had been understanding, allowing the wool to be

pulled over her eyes. The shame and humiliation compound the feeling of betrayal at Siddharth and Priyam's deception. As she pieces together the clues, which she feels she should have caught on long ago, the realisation strikes her how her adulterous husband and the colleague she thought a friend, have made a complete fool of her. In the angry swirl of thoughts, a voice inside her reminds her of her own unfaithfulness. But unlike Siddharth, she had not brought Manoj into her bedroom, into the marital bed under the noses of their house staff. She has been discreet and now Rukmini finds herself in a bitter-sweet world.

Phukan allows Rukmini the time to collect her thoughts, to ponder upon her predicament as she runs out of the precincts of the DC's bungalow into the thick woods on the hill slope. Her private reflections over the two pivotal revelations of the day take her into the maze of the forest with its soothing streams, water bodies and the sound of birds. It is in her solitary hours reflecting over the day's development that Rukmini comes to an understanding of how life has brought her to that point. What strikes her is her own blindness to the clues that she should have picked up – Siddharth's work trips out of town and Priyam's absence from college, Priyam's sharp questioning looks whenever Siddharth and his work were mentioned, Priyam's unusually possessive or defensive air over Siddharth's actions. In Rukmini's thoughts, Phukan makes the argument over questions of fidelity, virtue and honour for men and women, particularly in marriage. What she presents in Rukmini's actions is that a woman too has physical desires and urges just as a man. When her physical needs are ignored, when she is treated with indifference by a husband, a woman like Rukmini seeks affection and affirmation outside marriage. This distance, the void between spouses can be bridged through sharing and discussion. What becomes clear

is that in the breakdown of marital ties between Rukmini and Siddharth is the lack of communication, of sharing that led to each one misreading the other. While Rukmini interpreted Siddharth's distance to his natural reserve and preoccupation with the pressures of work, he thinks she is not interested in intimacy as she would be asleep by the time he came to bed.

Never demonstrative with his affections, Siddharth would ignore Rukmini's desire for a hug or a cuddle till she eventually stopped expecting these gestures. So too with any query or concern for her emotional and physical wellbeing. These would not be shown at all which only served to widen the fault lines between them. Rukmini's desire for love and affection being ignored, her own for Siddharth has dampened with time. In the forest, walking around under a canopy of trees soothed by the sounds of birds, insects and the gentle stirring of the forest leaves, Rukmini starts viewing her predicament from a changed perspective.

The sordidness of the scene she has witnessed just over an hour ago, the muddle that her own life was in, shrank into insignificance. The complications and complexities of their lives, the hatred, the violence, the suspicion and pettiness that coloured Parbatpuri, were dwarfed in the face of this marvellous, all encompassing melody all around her. And all she had done was to leave her house, take just a few steps down the road in order to see things with such sudden clarity. (262)

Without realising the time or the direction of her rambling, she finds herself in the cremation ground - an area associated with death and nearby, oddly, children playing in the park next to the Samsan or cremation ground. Through Rukmini's eyes, Phukan presents the complexities of human emotions and relations and the

intricate web of social and political situations that is becoming increasingly complicated.

The student agitation has turned violent and chaotic, the security forces unable to contain the lawlessness, take it out on the unarmed and innocent. The insurgents become bolder and more violent with each passing day. The atmosphere of fear and insecurity pervades the environs of Parbatpuri and infects everyday life. There is a corresponding disturbance and alarming developments occurring in Rukmini's married life. The cremation ground in recent times is a busy site. With the increasing number of deaths in the town, the funeral pyres do not stop burning and the mourning does not cease. Rukmini's inner state, her emotions and thoughts are constantly unsettled. Joy over her pregnancy is replaced with shock and anger over her husband and colleague's duplicity. But she realises she cannot take on the role of the 'wronged wife'. Having caught her husband and Priyam in such a definite manner where there was no space for face-saving half-lies or half-truths, she feels more regret than anger over his betrayal. Both of them having broken the vows of marriage, she wondered if, "She would have felt the same if she hadn't felt a sense of guilt herself for carrying another man's child" (275).

When Rukmini returns to the house, driven back by Anil the driver who had followed her, having noted her distress and obvious agitation, she knows the inevitable interview with Siddharth has to be faced. On the drive back, she is astonished to find that Anil is a MOFEH man planted in the DC's bungalow as a bodyguard to Rukmini to protect her from being kidnapped by some group posing as the MOFEH. The time has come for him to disappear after disclosing his identity. He tells her also: "Because you found out today what the rest of us have known for a

while, Because you are going to be a mother. In our tribe, it means that the Spirit is now with you. And Truth will always reveal itself to the Spirit” (273).

The truth that has been revealed to her a few hours earlier was that both Siddharth and she were guilty of betraying the other. The realisation of the emotional distance between them leading to loss of intimacy and seeking it in someone else's arms has resulted in this awkward predicament for both of them. It is one of their own making and can be resolved only between the two of them. In her mind, she feels her wrong has been greater though her encounter with Manoj had taken place only once:

The attraction had been friendly rather than sexual. Both of them had been lonely. Whereas, for all she knew, Siddharth and Priyam may have tumbled into various beds, . . . dozens, scores, hundreds of times. It was perhaps her conventional upbringing but she couldn't help feeling that her own betrayal had been greater. After all, a wife's chastity was the foundation stone on which the entire edifice of their patriarchal society rested. What right then did she have to judge Siddharth? (275)

Women burden themselves with guilt when they feel they have not lived up to social expectations, particularly in the case of married women who, while enjoying respectability are also burdened with upholding that respectability more than their husbands. Rukmini's thoughts reveal the ways a woman's mind in the predicament that she is in, interprets the betrayal of a spouse. Siddharth has probably cheated her more than once, the guilt over her one meeting with Manoj makes her sin appear greater in her eyes.

Uma Chakravarti, a distinguished feminist historian, in *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* discusses the place of ideology in maintaining structures of reproduction. Her study analyses the mechanisms of controls which operated on women at the ideological level:

Schooling of women in stridharma or pativrata-dharma, wifely codes were internalized by women who attempted to live up to the idealized notions of pativrata constructed by the ideologues of society. In the case of upper caste Hindu society, the design of the patriarchal class-caste structure was mapped out by the brahmanas. Pativrata, the specific dharma of the Hindu wife then became the ideology which women accepted and even aspired to, chastity and fidelity as the highest expression of their selfhood. (73-74)

Phukan's Rukmini, by considering her infidelity as the greater wrong appears to feel she has failed to uphold the notion of pativrata as she has broken the wifely codes of chastity and fidelity and has thus disobeyed what patriarchal society upholds. In Rukmini's conflict, Phukan interrogates the accepted norms of wifely conduct which is challenged by Rukmini. Having been a passive agent for the ten years of married life, she quietly subverts the secondary role she has played and goes ahead to befriend Manoj and have sex with him. Chastity and fidelity that defined her conduct in marriage did not bring fulfilment until by disobeying these codes, she finds what she sought - motherhood. But in the process, she tragically pays a heavy price.

When she reveals she is pregnant, Siddharth is surprised but to her relief, shows equanimity when he realises it is from Manoj. What she cannot answer easily is whether she loves him. After mentally debating with herself, her mind and

emotions in a tangle over questions on love and morality, on her affections and loyalty to two very different men, there is tension and inner conflict in her predicament.

2(d) Ironies of Life and Death

In Rukmini's internal self-questioning, Phukan reveals the deeply personal, psychological dilemma a woman experiences when she is caught in a conflicted predicament. She finds herself between Manoj's irresistible, intriguing, attractive appeal and Siddharth's intelligence, competence and quiet strength. In examining her feelings towards the two men, her dilemma seems unsolvable. This becomes a graver and deeper predicament when it is learnt that Manoj has been abducted with his friend Pronob Bishaya. Like the unceasing flow of the Red river, the Luit, beyond Parbatpuri which would turn into a vast, brown sea; brown with the with silt that it carried on its long relentless journey to the sea, Rukmini's fate takes dramatic turns as her path intertwines with Manoj and she allows herself to move with the flow of events. What had started in Rukmini's life during the spring season has gradually developed and like the monsoon which brings the deluge of constant rain, floods, damp, mildew, worms, snakes and ants crawling around, infesting houses, so also the succession of incidents, episodes, occurrences in her personal sphere and the constant deluge of reports of violence, killings, kidnappings, murders and death in the public, political sphere is infesting their lives pervasively, insidiously and dangerously.

Siddharth has ironically become more solicitous with Rukmini ever since the disclosure of her pregnancy and Manoj's abduction. While dwelling on her predicament, she often thinks about the situation between them. Apart from Siddharth, nobody else knows about her pregnancy, especially not Manoj. She

wonders whether his ex-wife Maya had any concern for Manoj. They were in the same situation - neither of them could “don the mantle of grief in public. Even though Maya had once been his wife and Rukmini now carried his child. They were two women who were united both in grief, as well as having to hide grief” (287). In reflecting on Manoj and herself, she has a deep concern rather than love and passion for a man she looked upon as a wonderful companion than a love interest. A deep regret assails her for not telling Manoj. She makes up her mind to go ahead with the pregnancy. Abortion is not thought of at all. Questions crowd her mind about the future - with Manoj or Siddharth.

She informs her mother-in-law of the pregnancy without mentioning the paternity of the child but adding that she still wore the amulet given by her. While she revels in her pregnancy, an awkwardness hangs between her and Siddharth. He assures her that all effort will be made to bring back Manoj and Pronob. Rukmini's identity has shifted from barren woman to woman-with-child. From her earlier predicament of inauspicious womanhood, she embraces her new standing of mother-to-be. In Rukmini, Phukan allows us to see how a woman in her individual situation of infertility encounters social prejudices that can cause psychological pain and emotional suffering. It is during her pregnancy that Rukmini experiences the special bonds that grow between women through motherhood, established and affirmed through the process of pregnancy and childbirth - the exclusive women's domain. From her mother's long letters and phone calls, in spite of living on opposite sides of the globe, what Phukan emphasises is the maternal concern that envelopes mothers and mothers-to-be can cross the continents. It is a special experience for Rukmini as she understands:

It was an age-old ritual, this bonding of generations of women. Rukmini had seen it happening to others. Now she revelled in being, at last, at the centre of the circle of female protectiveness. It was a time for celebration. . . and tokens of care to the mother-to-be was to make sure that no worries, no concerns from the world outside the cocoon of protectiveness would upset her peace of mind. The growing baby should be bathed in the glow of love, focussed from outside through the mind of the mother. For aeons, pregnancy and childbirth has been the domain of women as women nurtured each other through this period of heightened awareness of life. (308)

Rukmini's journey towards motherhood raises questions for her - to have the baby or remain married to Siddharth. As both of them disclose to the other, the reasons for their infidelities, it is as if they are getting to know each other through the other's confessions which removes the wall that each had built up around themselves. Rukmini makes up her mind to have the baby even if it costs her the marriage. To her surprise, Siddharth supports her as he is also opposed to abortion. She makes it clear whatever decision they arrived at - divorce or bringing up the child together would be according to Siddharth's wish. It is a quiet and revelatory time, lying on their beds, talking finally to each other. What strikes Rukmini is, "How easy it was for two people to live side by side in the same house, the same room, even, and yet know nothing about one another" (316). Rukmini's concern for Manoj deepens as the days pass interminably and anxiety is constant. She cannot shake off her worry and an unexpected letter from him quietly delivered by an elusive Anil tells her of the despair in his situation which only fills her with more pain. Given to introspection

quite often, she admits, “He had given her a gift that was worth untold riches” (219). With the baby growing in her womb reminding her constantly of Manoj, she longs to share her experience, of the changes taking place in her body. Her mother-in-law after a short visit leaves leaving her feeling quite alone. Though Siddharth and she have left their defences down, they are unable to retrieve the lost habit of communicating with each other because “the emotional distance that had grown between them over the years was so great. And also, in spite of all that he had told her that rain-swept night weeks ago, because it wasn't his child” (325).

Though the experience of pregnancy and impending motherhood occupies Rukmini completely, Manoj's captivity reminds her of the ever-present threat of violence and death. The days pass with little information or development on the ground over the abduction though Siddharth make all out efforts to unearth their whereabouts. And Rukmini takes the time to contemplate over her condition, over what if Manoj had been there what she could have told him. But now alone, she like other women were essentially alone during their pregnancy as they nurtured the life within them. She touches her growing belly constantly and tenderly hoping to transmit that tenderness to the child within. And during this period - with Manoj in the hands of the MOFEH, Siddharth working assiduously to find the father of the child growing in his wife's womb, Rukmini expecting having weathered ten years of unproductivity - she comes to a realisation of the power within women. A power that, “mightier than anything on earth, as delicate as a newborn's fingernails, surged through women at these times, making all other factors and circumstances in their lives superfluous and redundant” (325).

Rukmini's predicament reaches a critical point towards the end of the novel. Events have moved in unexpected twists and turns. Cocooned in security above the town, the ordeals and sufferings of the ordinary folk of Parbatpuri has now invaded and touched her own life. Like the dark river flowing beside the town, the violent insurgency now pervades the atmosphere, the stink of death hangs everywhere. And as described in the back cover to the novel: "The meaninglessness of it all, the complexities that divide 'them' and 'us' and the point at which the two merge, are all explored" (*blurb*).

Two recurrent symbols that stand out in the novel are the Red river and the cremation ground. According to Patanayak, "the cremation ground is a *leitmotif* in the text that informs about the death and destruction to follow. The unusual detail and various types in which it is mentioned - cremation ground, Samsan, Samsan – warns of something horrendous would likely to follow" (216). Phukan describes a large image of Kali at the entrance to the cremation ground and little children playing under the watchful eye of the fearful goddess, unperturbed by the procession carrying dead men and women.

Behind the statue of Kali looming on the hill was the bungalow of the Chief Administrator of Parbatpuri district. In the novel, represented as the Goddess of Death, Kali's presence ominously portends the chaos, death and destruction, the darkness that will envelop the lives of the main characters. The cremation ground with a 'Welcome' sign where the dead are consigned to flames under Kali's watch is where the souls of the dead will find release. Rukmini always found the cremation ground and the corpses being carried there a disturbing sight which could not be avoided as it lay on the way to the town. The funeral processions never have women.

Women were forbidden to witness the cremation. From her observation there is a clear dichotomy: “Birth belonged to women but death in Parbatpuri had been appropriated by men. The dead, if they were female were consigned to flames amidst a crowd of men” (50). She knows that even in death, women face denial – denied the company of other women to watch the soul entering another world. But the most cruel fate was of those women who, if they had had the misfortune of not bearing a son probably, “Her mouth would be fed flames by a male relative of her husband's, probably somebody she had not even liked” (*ibid*).

The Red river or the Luit as it was known locally, snakes its way in lazy curves and loops past the town. The monsoon brought with it frequent downpours that turned the river into a vast sea. Once the river was in full spate, the brown silt swept down from the hills and mountains would turn it red brown. Its foamy, tumultuous waters swept away anything that got in the way of its relentless flood. The violent insurgency that has gripped the state flows like the Red River wreaking havoc in the lives of those that are touched by its destructive sweep. The shadow of death that hangs pervasively does not let Rukmini remain out of its reach. Newspaper reports are filled with the increasing incidences of murder and mayhem. Rukmini has also discovered in the course of her part-time job that Animesh Dutta, her colleague, is the well-known reporter who writes under the pseudonym Mukul Madhav. He is a sympathizer of the MOFEH. His accounts are by far the most accurate for the way facts are presented. Rukmini has also learnt to type and dreams of a future career in advertising or journalism. Unknown to her, events and incidents start converging which is leading to the final denouement. Siddharth leading a rescue party to the probable location of Manoj’s abductors, hopes to rescue the hostages. However the

chain of events takes an unexpected turn when the group of MOFEH men, actually callow youths, find themselves challenged by security men as they attempt to cross the swollen Red River. Reacting reflexively, they fire at the men on the river bank. Their small frail boat rocks and Manoj stands opposite the gunman trying like them to keep his balance. At that moment, one of them fires at point blank range at the hostage. Manoj, jerked by the impact topples over into the swirling waters out of sight. The blood forms a red wreath for an instant and the next moment it disappears. Suddenly unbalanced, the small boat flips over and all its occupants amidst screams disappear into the dark water. Those that have fallen on the riverbank, of the three dead, one of them is Siddharth. Mukul Madhav gives Rukmini the report. Mentally, she tries to deny Siddharth's death but Abhishek Basumatari, the new SP confirms the tragic news. She is reminded of another evening when Nandini Deuri has stared death in the face in its stark cruel finality. Now it stares in her face.

All she knew was that the monster had suddenly entered her very home. She had seen its macabre dance all around her these past two years, seen the imprint of its heavy feet on lives all around her. Foolishly, she had thought herself and her life to be outside the pale of the monster's attention. As if for some reason she would escape being flicked by its poison-tipped tail, being scared by its fetid, fiery breath. Suddenly when she had been least expecting it, with a mocking laugh that echoed all around the hills of the town, the monster had pirouetted straight into her life. (337)

The Goddess of Death claims a few more victims as her dance of destruction wreaks havoc around. In losing Siddharth and Manoj, she grieves for them and is

grieved for her unborn child: “Poor baby. Deprived of not one but two fathers in one go, biological and adoptive, killed at almost the same instant” (348). As the survivor, with the growing baby in her womb, numbed by the dimensions of her loss, with her hands on her bulge, she tells herself: “She had been a fool, to have imagined that she could get away with it, that she could carry one man’s child and expect another to be the father. Her audacity must have tempted Fate who, in a fit of irritation, had decided to destroy both men” (*ibid*). The spectre of death that hovered over Parbatpuri finally strikes with dread and horror taking the chief administrative officer within its fold while Goddess Kali welcomes another soul on the cremation ground. Also the Red river flowed on, “Red with the tumultuous volume of water that rushed through the cleft between two hill ranges. Red with fury at being thus confined. Red with the violence that raged on its banks” (342). In Manoj’s violent death, the river claims one more victim: “Blood mingled with the dust of the Himalayas” (345). As he sank in his watery grave, the current flowed on, “entirely indifferent to the enormity of what it had wrought. Showing up, by its indifference, the pettiness of the struggles that filled the lives of those who dwelt on its shores” (345-6).

Finally Rukmini’s tears flow: “Tears for two men, one who had died, not knowing that he was going to be a father. And another who had been prepared to be a father to an unborn child, not his. Tears for her child, who would never know either of them” (348-9). With her tears joining the river of sorrow, she joins many other mourners, “all coalescing into a single figure of the tear-shrouded grief, as they looked down at the slain bodies of their husbands, their brothers, their sons, wrapped in blood-blotched sheets” (349). In the horrifying end that Rukmini suffers, her

personal tragedy is densely and darkly interwoven with the violently political where neither side is the winner.

2(e) Denouement

In Rukmini's tragedy, Phukan presents the painful predicament of a woman who is caught in an intricate web where her personal pains and angst is closely enmeshed with the socio-political movements that shook the state of Assam during the anti-foreigner movement. Presenting a rather passive, submissive protagonist in the initial stages, what the novel unfolds is the nuances of a person's psychology from the eyes of the narrator and her view of her immediate world. Through the record of her observations, emotions, sensations and thoughts, Phukan allows the reader to understand the mind and heart of a woman who is sensitive, suffering from insecurities and feelings of being a failure. From her perspective of a genteel, reserved and private individual, she views the world through non-judgemental eyes.

This image of Rukmini makes her appear in Sultana's assessment as "conspicuously devoid of agency. It is, . . . somewhat incongruous for a person so passive, and at times demure, to embark on an intimate excursion with a person she comes to know for only a day" (2). However, it can be argued that, when Rukmini sees the change in Nandini Deuri and her courage in widowhood, she takes a lesson from her. So too in Mitali Bora, a member of the Parbatpuri Planters Club who holds a Ph.D. in biotechnology is considered overqualified but is happy to teach the basics of science to high school students as long as the students learn her subject well. Nandini's changed status has only strengthened her. The stamina and strength she displayed in her various assignments as the SP's wife, give her the ability to cope with tragedy, to pick up the pieces after hers and her children's lives are shattered by

Neuri's murder. Rukmini also learnt that apart from coping with tragedy, she has finally opened a bakery, a small outlet near her house. She saw "the glow on Nandini's face, the pride that came from having accomplished something" (299). In marvelling at her transformation, Rukmini finds that Nandini has gone from "dedicated, super efficient housewife, to courageous entrepreneur" (299). What she sees is Nandini going ahead, doing things she always dreamt of. From her predicament of sudden widowhood, Nandini is a woman who has emerged from the cocoon of domesticity to build her future. The lesson that Rukmini learns is how widowhood has strengthened Nandini to make plans and wise investments, who does not surrender to the cruel blows of life and who takes her predicament as a challenge for growth in personal courage. In Nandini's story, Phukan makes a comment on women for being or becoming mistresses of one's fate, for taking decisions to realise their ambitions or dreams and balancing it with their role or duties as mothers. In Nandini's words to Rukmini, Phukan makes the case that, "every woman at some point in her life, is faced with having to make decisions of this kind" (301). She has been able to look beyond being someone's wife, beyond being a mother to her children and has carved a new identity for herself. She explains her reasons clearly: "Now, with his death, . . . without this new me that I am trying to create, I would have been known forever as that poor lady, the widow of that police officer who was killed in front of her eyes while they were celebrating their wedding anniversary. That label would have clung to me for ever. And through me to the children" (302).

In Mitali Bora, Rukmini sees a highly-educated woman who grew up in cosmopolitan Bombay following her husband through his stints from one tea town to another now vegetating in Parbatpuri. For Mitali, though "embarrassingly

overqualified” for her job, she takes it in her stride hoping that her school teaching will become a valuable experience. As she tells Rukmini: “In any case, I was brought up in the belief that a woman's career is secondary to her husband's. . I wouldn't have felt easy if Partha had to languish in some unsatisfactory job while I work in some research institute or other” (116). Rukmini admits to her that on her part, she did not like teaching at all. She had to take what she could get. Besides, she cannot be a total housewife and a part-time lecturing job was better than doing nothing. Moreover with Siddharth away quite often, having well-trained house staff and having no children, she needed to do something. She needed to: “Keep a little busy as they say. Time-pass” (*ibid*).

From the perspective of the three women, what emerges is that despite education and knowledge, socio-political realities of small town, conservative, insurgency-ridden backward region values and mores can stifle even the strong. Besides the society Phukan depicts, the environment in which the women characters are placed is male-centred and coloured by patriarchal value systems. The three women belong to the upper middle class and their ideologies, attitudes, experiences and expectations reflect their middle class mores which puts them in some conflict and tension over differing outlooks in the Parbatpuri world. Nandini eventually leaves Parbatpuri to start a new life while Mitali Bora moves west to be closer to her children who are studying in boarding school where she has decided to take a job in her son's school teaching science to senior students. With such a move, hers will be a long-distance marriage as the pay and opportunities are better and she would be near her children. Phukan represents in Nandini's transformation and Mitali's decision, a feminist consciousness in women who work to establish an identity of their own.

Nandini had her dreams, her yearnings in spite of being immersed in the various domestic and social responsibilities she shouldered. After losing her husband, setting up her little shop near her parents and putting the children in a new school, she is proud to be the owner of her modest enterprise. In her words, Phukan allows the woman's voice to speak her story, the story of her struggle to overcome huge obstacles and emerge stronger, to be the victor in her personal battle for self-realization. Nandini while expressing her satisfaction over her business says she is proud of: "The way it's beginning to create a niche for itself in the town. The money it's beginning to bring in. The fact that I'm gradually being known as the lady who owns that place where they have those heavenly pastries. I'm thankful that the bakery is slowly but definitely, beginning to erase my other identity" (302). She, in effect, has come up with the recipe for her success. As the three women share their stories, Phukan puts across the message clearly about: "Women's talk, full of empathy and in spite of the tangles in their lives, full of laughter" (303).

In "*The Collector's Wife*", Phukan presents women's predicament from Rukmini's feminine sensibility and consciousness as a married woman, in her frustrated childless lonely situation. She experiences personal agonies in her struggle with the social, emotional and psychological bonds that hold her down. Rukmini is not a traditionalist willing to sacrifice her life at the altar of wifely dharma. She belongs to a cast of women who have aspirations for an autonomous life and career. The tension arises when she is expected to fulfil the wifely role without consideration for her personal wishes. Marriage and family life put the burden on women but some women are shown to resist this imposition which comes from the patriarchally organised social structure. Under patriarchy, women are expected to abide by the

rules of wifely conduct. In her portrayal, Phukan reveals a woman's perception of her world, her experiences within the narrow domestic space and the psychological suffering of a woman who is deeply unsatisfied and unfulfilled under the frustration that dogs her.

From her unfulfilled situation, Phukan presents her protagonist steering herself through the unstable social and political currents that impinge on people's material lives. In Rukmini, she delves into the woman's psychology, especially that of a childless woman who suffers the stigma of barrenness which is damaging and demoralizing. The woman's suppressed sexuality and longing for intimacy is explored in Rukmini's sterile marriage with an indifferent husband and affirmation of her needs in her one-time sexual encounter with Manoj. Rukmini is shown emerging from her cocoon of protectiveness, removing the invisible restrictions on wifely conduct and embarking on a personal journey towards fulfilling her needs. That she had remained hostage under the doctor's wrong diagnosis which causes her years of pain is finally cured when her romance with Manoj and their intimate moment results in her pregnancy. Phukan explores the internal working of a woman's mind who is put in a conflicted predicament when her husband and the doctor seem to conspire to let the woman suffer for no reason but that of the husband's disinterest in fatherhood and children. The husband exploits the woman's vulnerability and also cheats on her. But Phukan gives Rukmini the strength to introspect and the quiet resilience to subvert the socially sanctioned, patriarchal prescription for womanly behaviour. Rukmini slowly emerges out of the shadows of her marital identity with slow steps in her personal effort to work towards becoming the author and director of her own life. Manoj, the companion, helps open her eyes to the world of opportunities that lay

beyond the blood-scarred, insurgency-ridden world of Parbatpuri to give a gift beyond measure by pointing her towards a future of dreams that she can finally pursue and fulfil. Phukan's Rukmini survives the various obstacles that put her in her predicament. Biologically, her womb is proven fecund, socially her subordinate, secondary role as the wife dissolves as she is widowed but most important of all, when she makes up her mind to have the baby, to seek a career and eventually become economically stable, it is then that her personal choices ultimately lead to her emancipation from the politics of male domination and subordination and to claiming, in the feminist tradition, her freedom from patriarchal control.

Works Cited

- Chakravarti, Uma. *Theorizing Feminism Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Calcutta: Stree, 2013. Print.
- Geetha, V. *Theorizing Feminism Gender*. Kolkatta: Stree, 2012. Print.
- Misra, Tilottoma, ed. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi: OUP, 2011 xiv. Print.
- Patanayak, Nityananda. "Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*: A Study in Technique." in *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. Ed. Nigamananda Das. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011. 204-218. Print.
- Phukan, Mitra. *The Collector's Wife*. New Delhi: Zubaan Penguin Books. 2005. Print.
- Phukan, Mitra. Interview by K. K. Gopalakrishnan. "I love Interacting with People". *The Hindu*. Nov 06, 2010. Web. 26 Jan 2016.
<<http://www.thehindu.com/books/I-love-interacting-with-people/article15676943.ece>>
- Phukan, Mitra. In Conversation with Nabish Alam. *Youtube*, Jan 16, 2012. Web. 26 Jan 2016. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIIRqXcjJE>>
- Sultana, Rebecca. "The Personal Enmeshed with the Political". Excerpted from the Daily Star. Web. Edition Vol. 5 Num 328 <<http://archive.thedailystar.net/2005/04/30/d504302102129.htm>> pp 1-2
- Tiwary, Narendra. "Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* vis-a-vis Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: A Comparative Study." in *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. Ed. Nigamananda Das. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011. 187-203. Print.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

The Woman's Story Continues

The woman's story which remained untold for centuries started emerging in the works of women writers from across the continents and continues to grow. The ongoing project of feminism seeks the telling of the narratives of girls, mothers, wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law and widows across racial, religious, class and caste divides. The study of the various female characters in the novels and short stories reveals the women's predicament in a male-dominated world that suppresses and keeps women in a position of dependency and inferiority to men. Women's lower position is a result of deep rooted socio-cultural patriarchal practices. These practices become deeply encoded in the society and women from their position as the weaker sex are socialized into accepting their lower status as a norm. Through this process, women are taught to defer to their men and play their assigned domestic role even in cases when the woman is better-educated or earns more than the man. Men, under the belief of their superiority, devalue women, women's work and the woman's voice. The large and colourful canvas of women's writing allows for the diversity and multiplicity of themes, the polyvocality of women's voices which address the differences of women's experiences determined by the local, micro-condition or concern that is addressed. The female figures portrayed in the works are illustrative of the themes addressed by the writers – the sexual, cultural, socio-political, ethnic, linguistic and national identities of the women; the institution

of marriage and motherhood, woman's body and sexuality, patriarchy and subalternity and the close link between women and spirituality.

The thesis provides some insight into the Northeast part of India, a region rich in culture, in the diversity of ethnicities with a variety of customary practices and traditions which have been misunderstood and misinterpreted. The women particularly have suffered from serious stereotyping. It looks into how a woman's identity is shaped and influenced by her material conditions, the disparate cultural, social and political institutions which control their daily existence from which they learn to constantly negotiate the pressure of living in male-dominated societies. A significant factor that has to be kept in mind is that the region to which the writers belong is a highly militarized zone that has witnessed decades of conflict. The effects of violence on the lives of ordinary people, the trauma that is too severe and has no words to express, the victims whose stories from a war zone were silent for years, find articulation in the selected narratives that brings out this aspect of life for women. Within this strife-torn environment, women's predicament, women's victimization from multiple fronts, occurs when she becomes the victim of violence – from within her own house, from state forces and from militants. The women's predicament from her physical, emotional, mental and psychological situation is explored in the works of the four authors.

While war and conflict damages and devastates society at all levels – socially, economically, politically and more critically at the personal level of its victims, women's experience can be devastating on a wholly different level when women's bodies become the soft target for reprisals from armed personnel during conflicts. To translate the experience of the victims, the trauma of their suffering, the

writer through the literary medium, can represent violent events through creative imagery, metaphors and tropes which allow readers to know and understand the past.

In “Women Writing in Times of Violence”, Tilottoma Misra comments:

The literary writer mixes her own memory with those of the victims while she tries to recreate the events at the time when they were experienced. The process of sifting the memories in order to select the images which convey a violent event more powerfully, is one of the important parts of a writer’s work. (250)

In the stories of Tamsula Ao, women’s victimization during violent conflicts brings out the horror, brutality, the cruel and bloody dimensions of war. In Easterine Kire’s novels, the lower position of the woman, the unequal treatment between the genders, the exploitation of young women by older women and gender-on-gender abuse which suppresses the individuality of the female, are themes that are explored in the predicament of her characters. Sometimes when the oppression becomes acute, it can impinge on the female character’s psyche so deeply that her actions and decisions lead to self-negation as in the case of the character Bano who is helpless to change her situation and whose identity as an illegitimate child has coloured her existential predicament. The suffering of widows who face loss on many fronts is brought out in Goswami’s novel which captures the degradation of women whose widow status renders them as non-persons. The exploration of a woman’s psyche is brought out in nuanced detail in Phukan’s novel. Kire, Tamsula Ao, Goswami and Phukan offers pictures of women in a multiplicity of experiences, in their various predicaments coloured by the injustices and inequalities women face over and above the differences of community, class, caste, place, family and the

individual's character. The women characters depicted in the works represent what Antonia Navarro-Tejero states: "the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal." <<http://www.literature-study-online.com/essays/indian-women-book.html>>.

The works discussed in this study look at women in their diversity, from the diverse cultures the characters belong to. Issues that affect women, the struggle for education, family, marriage, motherhood, widowhood, childlessness, adultery, rape, exploitation, illegitimate children are touched upon by the writers. Their works address these issues which reveal the women's predicament of tribal and non-tribal societies and their treatment of women.

The personal identity of the female figures is shaped by issues other than those that can be considered female or feminine. From a feminist perspective, it has to be kept in mind that the experience of the characters in the family and the socio-economic system in which they exist is influenced by their gender identity. The men in both the societies depicted occupy the more powerful position. This position of power is associated with patriarchy. In the patriarchal society of the female characters, women occupy a lower position and from this position, the issues that affect women can become, for some women, a source of suffering. The female by virtue of her sex and gender, is expected to conform to the role designed by patriarchy. As patriarchy allows female subordination, the women's individuality, her level of agency and her sexuality which is closely interrelated with marriage, can become areas of conflict for those women who desire freedom from male-designed norms and structures. Women become conflicted as they are caught between conforming to social dictates or seeking their individual identity. In the texts that

have been analysed, the female characters are depicted as negotiators who do not fall into the traditional stereotype of the sacrificing women. The chosen texts portray women characters who redefine the image of Naga and Assamese women, who, from their individual predicament, act in ways that subvert their subordinate status.

Women in traditional patriarchal societies have not had their intelligence and abilities respected and recognised. They have not been allowed the space to have their voices heard. In those worlds that are deeply patriarchal, male domination have the effect of silencing the female voice from male-only political bodies which makes decisions that can affect women in matters pertaining to family or marriage. One of the areas that this study examines is how the ethnicity and gender of the characters presents feminists with a different set of concerns regarding the position of women. There is an erroneous assumption that tribal customary laws grant women a high status and autonomy to make her choices. But this assumption has been contested as most male-bodies among Naga tribes have either no women representation nor give women decision-making powers in the traditional tribal councils. Women's exclusion from these bodies still prevail. It becomes clear that under the patriarchal nature of tribal councils, customary law places power in the hands of men effectively silencing the woman's voice.

From exploring the politics of patriarchy, the gender power-relationships in the cultures of the Northeast, it is an enormous challenge for women to overcome their subordination. In almost all the major areas of structures in society, the male prerogative takes precedence. Women have experienced the inferiorizing and devaluation of their work and it lies in the hands of creative writers to give articulation to the woman's voice, her pain and anguish, her anger, aspirations,

dreams and ambitions. Women's writing provides an avenue for women to be heard. Literature produced by women reveals the woman's point of view, her ideas and emotions, her identity and her predicaments in different aspects and conditions of existence. With a deep concern for women's plight, the works of the chosen writers become vehicles for addressing and bringing attention to women's situation and the way women deal with their predicament. This impulse towards women's emancipation is feminist in nature, in scope and in its objective. Women, in whatever role she is represented and presented in, bring focus on their problems and the need to work towards a fairer and just social order where women's subordination can become a thing of the past.

In the narratives on women produced by women writers, female protagonists are depicted trying to reshape the contours of their subaltern status, to adjust to the changing and evolving needs of women. Bringing a greater sensitivity to the gendered inequities they portray, the works of Easterine Kire, Tamsula Ao, Indira Goswami and Mitra Phukan stand as critiques of the unequal world men and women inhabit and through their literary articulation ask for women's predicament to change for the better.

The stories of Naga women situated in a form of geographical, linguistic and ethnic stereotyping has found articulation in Easterine Kire and Tamsula Ao's telling. Grasping the historical dialectics of their tribal homeland which is undergoing momentous transition from ancient animist beliefs and practices to acceptance of modern developments, their novels and short stories detail these changes. The lives of women, controlled and structured under the social and political institutions of patriarchy influences their daily existence in which they have to learn

to constantly negotiate the pressure of living in male-dominated society, culture and politics.

Indira Goswami and Mitra Phukan in their novels address pressing concerns of women in a culture that worships goddesses, reveres mothers but forces women to undergo harsh privations from the time they reach puberty, marry, become mothers and widows. The woman's psyche which grapples with the religious doctrine of women's innate impurity and inferiority to men colours their entire outlook when it is constantly reinforced through tradition with religious sanction. From Brahmanical patriarchy practiced on the banks of the Brahmaputra to the internal turmoil in the hearts of women who are governed by a larger patriarchy, Indira Goswami and Mitra Phukan draw out the hopes, aspirations and desires of ordinary women moving about in their sanctioned space. The women's predicament in two completely different cultures from the North-eastern states of Nagaland and Assam, is enunciated with a clarity and sensitivity that brings out the constant struggle where women have yet to enjoy equality when there are ideological, social and cultural objections to women's equal rights.

The long history of feminism in advocating equal rights for women faces its most stubborn resistance in the pillars of patriarchy that still stand in Naga tribal society. In a free democratic country where an individual cannot be deprived of their rights, patriarchal cultures are yet to give women a political space. The ordinary woman who accepts and lives under what Temsula Ao calls “benevolent subordination” suffers from a reticence in not publicly airing her grievances. Ellen Phamnei's experiences narrated in *The Peripheral Centre*, illustrates with stark clarity, her struggles in a rigid social hierarchy. Her personal and tough battle to get

an education frequently thwarted by the prevailing patriarchal attitude, living in an environment where the shadow of the gun, the widespread, unstable conditions which placed a society under constant attack, reinforced the patriarchal tradition which became more dominant muting the woman's voice even further. Her empathy for the layers of subservience that a Naga girl in a village faces and the true predicament of Naga women is brought out in her story. It is in their literary articulations that Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao portray the realities where women's individuality gets subsumed. Their message for women to not remain silent but claim their equal share, to seek justice, to make a stand in spite of various forces that work to dilute or negate a woman's individual rights, is a message in the ongoing Naga woman's struggle for an identity since her voice has been muted for far too long.

In *A Naga Village Remembered* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Easterine Kire posits a vision for women to take charge of their own destinies – from girlhood, to womanhood, marriage, motherhood and widowhood, women attempt to liberate themselves from the belief in their inferiority, to challenge the gender bias and equip themselves with the conviction of their self-worth. Temsula Ao's short stories tell of individual women's lives in *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for my Head*. In her understanding for people's plight, she poignantly draws out the bewildering experiences of people trapped in a spiral of violence. Her women – the ordinary housewife, the unmarried mother, the young woman raped for her defiant last song, the wife of a menacing Boss, the three women bonded through a common kinship, are characters who represent the predicaments of women existing in a world fraught with myriad problems and dangers.

Indira Goswami in her numerous works written with a passion from the pain she suffered, makes it difficult to separate the writer from the subject of her writings and her life from her fiction. In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, the intensity of pain and tragedy of early widowhood is drawn out with a fine pen which delineates the concerns, the dilemmas, the little joys, sorrows and griefs of her women characters who are yet to be liberated from the stranglehold of orthodoxy. From their predicaments, Goswami allows a greater understanding of the women's pain and anguish told from the concerned eye of the woman writer and crusader for women's empowerment.

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* is a nuanced evocation of the lives that intersect in small towns in the plains of Assam, along the banks of the Red river under monsoon skies that bring both rain and sunshine. Detailed and finely sketched, she weaves a complicated symphony of human dramas where her characters, caught in complex and unpredictable situations come to a deeper understanding of themselves even as their lives change forever.

Women's writing which presents the woman's point of view, takes us into different realms of woman's consciousness. As the struggles, sorrows and victories of women emerge under the writers' explorations of women's position in societies characterized by patriarchal dominance, what becomes clear is that the four writers demonstrate a feminist approach in the very act of creating their works – Writing and asserting a woman's agency. Situated as they are within a heterogeneity of communities, the retrieval and reconstruction of cultural and national histories like the Subaltern Studies project, is mirrored in the recovery and retelling of the woman's experience. In the narratives of each of the writers, it is the individual and

the communal voice, representing the self and the tribe or community telling the stories of a gender whose existence marginalized, erased and silenced is now, in the feminist tradition, giving visibility and identity to women.

Works Cited

- Gill, Preeti, ed. "Mosaic: Four Interviews" 3. Ellen Phamnei. *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*. New Delhi: Zubaan. 331-391. Print.
- Misra, Tilottoma. "Women Writing in Times of Violence". *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*. Ed. Preeti Gill. New Delhi: Zubaan. 2010. 249-272. Print.
- Navarro-Tejero, Antonia. "Modern Indian Women Writers in English". *The Essentials of Literature in English Post-1914*. Ed. Ian Mackean. Web. 3 June. 2014.
<<http://www.literature-study-online.com/essays/indian-women-book.html>>

Select Bibliography

A) Primary Sources

Ao, Temsula. *Songs that Tell*. Calcutta: Writer's Workshop, 1988. Print.

---. *Songs that Try to Say*. Calcutta: Writer's Workshop, 1992. Print.

---. *Songs of Many Moods*. New Delhi: Har Anand Publications, 1995. Print.

---. *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*. Baroda: Bhasha Publication, 1999. Print.

---. *Songs from Here and There*. Shillong: NEHU Publications, 2003. Print.

---. *These Hills Called Home*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006. Print.

---. *Songs from the Other Life*. Pune: Grasswork Books. 2007. Print.

---. *Laburnum for my Head*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2009. Print.

---. *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2013. Print.

---. *Once Upon A Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags A Memoir*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013. Print.

---. *On Being A Naga: Essays*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014. Print.

---. "Benevolent Subordination: Social Status of Naga Women". *On Being A Naga: Essays*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014. 45-53. Print.

---. "Gender and Power: Women-Centred Narratives from Ao-Naga Folklore". *On Being a Naga: Essays*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014. 71-83. Print.

---. "Articulate and Inarticulate Exclusion". *On Being a Naga: Essays*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014. 93-100. Print.

Goswami, Indira. *The Shadow of the Dark God and the Sin*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1986. Print.

---. *Select Works of Indira Goswami*. New Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1988. Print.

---. *The Shadow of Kamakhya*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2001. Print.

---. *Pages Stained With Blood*. Trans. Pradip Acharya. New Delhi: Katha, 2002. Print.

---. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. Trans. Indira Goswami. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004. Print.

---. *The Man from Chinnamasta*. Trans. Prashant Goswami. New Delhi: Katha, 2006. Print.

---. *Pain and Flesh*. New Delhi: B. R. Publishers, 2007. Print.

---. *The Blue-Necked God*. Trans. Gayatri Bhattacharya. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013. Print.

---. *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*. Trans. Aruni Kashyap. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013. Print.

Kire, Easterine Iralu. *Kelhoukevira*. Calcutta, J. B. Lama, 1982. Print.

---. *The Windhover Collection*. New Delhi: Steven Karlekar, 2001. Print.

---. *A Naga Village Remembered*. Kohima: Ura Academy, 2003. Print.

---. *A Terrible Matriarchy*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008. Print.

---. *Mari*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2010. Print.

---. *Forest Song*. Kohima: Barkweaver and Ura Academy, 2011. Print.

---. *Bitter Wormwood*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011. Print.

---. *Life on Hold*, Kohima: Barkweaver and Ura Academy, 2011. Print.

---. *When the River Sleeps*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2014. Print.

---. *Son of the Thunder Cloud*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2016. Print.

---. "A Note from the Author". *A Terrible Matriarchy*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008. vii-x. Print.

---. "Should Writers Stay in Prison?". *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. Ed. Tilottoma Misra. New Delhi: OUP, 2011. 272-275. Print.

---. "Red is the Colour of Blood". *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*. Ed. Preeti Gill. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010. Print.

Phukan, Mitra. *The Collector's Wife*, New Delhi: Zubaan-Penguin, 2005. Print.

- . Spring Song. <http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/id_1-issue_05_21-section_3-index_pos_2-inlingua_t.html> n.pag. Web. 24 May 2012.
- . "The Homecoming." *Pratilipi*. <<http://pratilipi.in/2008/10/the-homecoming-mitra-phukan>> Nov. 2011. n.pag. Web. 24 May 2012.
- . "The Reckoning." *Pratilipi*. <<http://pratilipi.in/2009/03/the-reckoning-mitra-phukan>> Nov. 2011. n. pag. Web. 24 May 2012.
- . "Colours." *Pratilipi*. <<http://pratilipi.in/2011/11/colours-mitra-phukan>> Nov. 2011. n.pag. Web. 24 May 2012.
- . *A Monsoon of Music*. New Delhi: Zubaan-Penguin, 2011. Print.
- . *A Full Night's Thievery*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2016. Print.
- . *Blossoms in the Graveyard*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2016. Print.
- . Interview by K. K. Gopalakrishnan. "I love Interacting with People". *The Hindu*. Nov 06, 2010. Web. 26 Jan 2016. <<http://www.thehindu.com/books/I-love-interacting-with-people/article15676943.ece>>
- . Interview by Nabish Alam. *Rendezvous*. youtube, Jan 16, 2012. Web. 26 Jan 2016. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIIRRqXcjJE>>

B) Secondary Sources

- Aier, Anungla. "Folklore, Folk Ideas and Gender Among Nagas". *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. Ed. Tilottoma Misra. New Delhi: OUP, 2011. 301-308. Print.
- Baral, K. C. "Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India". *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity*. Ed. Margaret Ch. Zama. New Delhi: Sage, 2013. 3-13. Print.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010. Print.
- Baruah, D. K. "Mamoni Raisom Goswami: The Insistent Pattern." *Indira Goswami & Her Fictional World – The Search for the Sea*. Comp. Kaikous Burjor Satarawala. Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 2002. 19-43. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parhsley. 1949. London: Vintage Books, 1997. Print.

- Bhattacharjee, Sukalpa. *Post Colonial Literature: Essays on Gender, Theory and Genres*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishers, 2004. Print.
- Bhelande, Anjali and Mala Pandurang, eds. *Articulating Gender*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2000. Print.
- Borah, Jayashree. "A Picture of Desolation: Women in Indira Goswami's *A Saga of South Kamrup*". Web. 23 Oct 2016. <<http://jborah.blogspot.in/2007/04/picture-of-desolation-women-in-indira.html>>.
- Chakravarti, Uma. *Theorizing Feminism Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. 2003. Calcutta: Stree, 2013. Print.
- Chasie, Charles. "Nagaland in Transition". *Where the Sun Rises when Shadows Fall: The North-east*. Ed. Geeti Sen. New Delhi: OUP, 2006. 253-264. Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha and Pradeep Jeganathan, eds. *Subaltern Studies XI: Community, Gender and Violence*. 2000. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010. Print.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978. Print.
- Cuddon, J. A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin, 1999. Print.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP, 1997. Print.
- Danta, Bijay K. "Mapping Contemporary NEIWE: The Road Not Taken." *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. Ed. Nigamananda Das. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011. 1-13. Print.
- Das, Nigamananda, ed. *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011. Print.
- . "Ethnoecology, Woman's Predicaments and the Idea of Evil in Selected Works of Mamang Dai and Indira Goswami." *Exploring North- East Indian Writings in English. Vol II*. Ed. Indu Swami. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2012. 144-162. Print.
- Davidson, Cathy N. and E. M. Broner. *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. New York: Fredrick Ungar, 1980. Print.
- Dube, Leela. "Caste and Women." *Women's Studies in India: A Reader*. Ed. Mary E. John. New Delhi: Penguin, 2008. 466-475. Print.

Eagleton, Mary, ed. *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. Print.

Geetha, V. *Theorizing Feminism Gender*. Kolkata: Stree, 2012. Print.

---. *Theorizing Feminism Patriarchy*. 2007. Kolkata: Stree, Rpt. 2015. Print.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar, eds. *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader*. New York: Norton, 2007. Print.

Gill, Preeti, ed. Introduction. *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010. 1-23. Print.

---, ed. "Mosaic: Four Interviews" 3. Ellen Phamnei. *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*. New Delhi: Zubaan. 331-391. Print.

Gogoi, Hridayananda. *Dr. Indira Goswami: In Search of Modernity*. New Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 2010. Print.

Gogoi, Rupam. "Outliving Turbulence: An Analysis of *These Hills Called Home*." *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. Ed. Nigamananda Das. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011, 289-306. Print.

Gohain, Hiren. "Some Remarks on the Major Fiction of Indira Goswami" in *Indira Goswami & Her Fictional World – The Search for the Sea*. Comp. Kaikous Burjor Satarawala. Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 2002. 13-18. Print.

Gomez, Christine. "New Horizons: Exploring the Possibilities of Feminist Literary Criticism in Indian Writing in English." *Indian Women Novelists Vol-I*. Ed. R. K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991. 84-103. Print.

Goswami, Uddipana. *Indira Goswami: Passion and the Pain*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2012. Print.

Guerin, Wilfred, et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. New Delhi: OUP, 2006. Print.

Hazarika, Sanjoy. *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast. 1994*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011. Print.

Hirsch, Mariane. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington; Indiana UP, 1989. Print.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 1984. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000. Print.

- Hümtsoe-Nienü, Eyingbeni, Paul Pimomo, Venüsa Tünyi. *Nagas: Essays for Responsible Change*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2012. Print.
- Irigary, Luce. "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother." *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed David Lodge and Nigel Wood. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2010. 431-441. Print.
- Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985. Print.
- Jain, Jasbir, ed. Introduction *Women in Patriarchy: Cross-Cultural Readings*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2011. 13-22. Print.
- . *Indigenous Root of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*. New Delhi: Sage, 2011. Print.
- John, Mary E., ed. *Women's Studies in India: A Reader*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2008. Print.
- Kakoti, Padmakshi and Mahanta, Pradip Jyoti. "Understanding Women in the Religious Institutions: With Reference to the *Sattras* of Assam". IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSRJHSS), ISSN: 2279-0845 Volume 1, Issue 5 (Sep–Oct, 2012). pp 19-22. Web. 10 Oct 2016. <[http:// www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/vol1-issue5/ D0151922.pdf?id=5620](http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/vol1-issue5/D0151922.pdf?id=5620)>.
- Lal, Malashri. "Indira Goswami and Women's Empowerment". *Indira Goswami: Passion and the Pain*. Ed. Uddipana Goswami. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2012. 72-78. Print.
- Lodge, David and Nigel Wood, eds. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2010. Print.
- Kanitha, S. "Reading Mitra Phukan more as a Humanist than a Feminist." *Exploring North East Indian Writings in English. Vol-II*. Ed. Indu Swami. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2012. 77-88. Print.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. 1970. Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 2000. Print.
- Misra, Tilottoma. "Feminist Scholarship in North-East India: Retrieving and Reconstructing the Woman". IAWS Newsletter Dec 2007. 26-29. Print.
- . "Women Writing in Times of Violence". *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*. Ed. Preeti Gill. New Delhi: Zubaan. 2010. 249-272. Print.
- . Introduction. ed. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi: OUP, 2011. xiii-xxxii. Print.

---, ed. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Fiction*. New Delhi: OUP, 2011. Print.

---. "Indira Goswami: Brave, Gentle and Bold". *Indira Goswami: Passion and the Pain*. Ed. Uddipana Goswami. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2012. 64-71. Print.

Mohanty, C. T., Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, eds. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. Print.

Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Mukhim, Patricia. "Where is this North-east?". *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-east*. Ed. Geeti Sen. New Delhi: OUP, 177-188. Print.

Naik, M. K. and Shyamala A. Narayan. *Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2011. Print.

Navarro-Tejero, Antonia. "Modern Indian Women Writers in English". *The Essentials of Literature in English Post-1914*. Ed. Ian Mackean. Web. 3 June. 2014.
<<http://www.literature-study-online.com/essays/indian-women-book.html>>

Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2008. Print.

---. "Gender". *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2008. 116-157. Print.

---. *Contemporary Literary and cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*, New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2010. Print.

Ortner, Sheryl B. "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture". *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader*. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. New York: Norton & Company, 2007. 350-367. Print.

Padma, V. "Developments and its Discontents: The State and Programmes of Development". *Fiction as Window: Critiquing the Indian Literary Cultural Ethos since the 1980s*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009. 154-227. Print.

Pattanayak, Nityananda. "Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* A Study in Technique." *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. Ed. Nigamananda Das. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011. 204-218. Print.

- Paul, Amar Krishna. *The Humanist: A Short Life Sketch of Dr. Indira Goswami*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing, 2002. Print.
- Pimomo, Paul. Rev. of *Bitter Wormwood* by Easterine Kire. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011. Print.
- . Rev. of Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy. Nagas: Essays for Responsible Change*. Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienü, Paul Pimomo and Venüsa Tünyi. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2012. 186-192. Print.
- Prasad, Amar Nath, ed. *Women Empowerment in Indian Writers in English*. Sarup Book Publishers, 2009. Print.
- Prasad, Amar Nath and Rajiv K. Mallik, eds. *Indian English Poetry and Fiction: Critical Elucidations Vol 1*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2006. Print.
- Ramabai, Pandita. *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. with an Introduction by Rachel Bodley. Philadelphia 1888. Rep. Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture. Bombay: Government Central Press, 1981. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1986. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995. Print.
- . "The Kingdom of the Fathers". *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1986. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995. 56-83. Print.
- . "Motherhood and Daughterhood". *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1986. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995. 218-255. Print.
- Rubin, Gayle. From "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex". *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader*. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. New York: Norton & Company, 2007. 392-413. Print.
- Sah, Binda. "Ethnic Representation in Easterine Iralu and Nilakshi Borgohain: A Study of their Select Stories." *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. Ed. Nigamananda Das. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011. 307-313. Print.
- Satarawala, Kaikous Burjor. *Indira Goswami & Her Fictional World – The Search for the Sea*. Comp. Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 2002. Print.
- Sebastian, A. J. *Quest for Identity in Contemporary Indian English Fiction and Poetry*. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011. Print.

- . "Feminist Voices in Poetry from Nagaland." *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. Ed. Nigamananda Das. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011. 37-48. Print.
- . "Gender Discrimination in Easterine Iralu's *A Terrible Matriarchy* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror*." *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. Ed. Nigamananda Das. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011. 219-232. Print.
- Selden, Raman, et al. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2006. Print.
- Sen, Geeti, ed. *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-east*. New Delhi: OUP, 2006. Print.
- Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*. 1977. London: Virago, 2009. Print.
- . "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2010. 325-348. Print.
- Singh, B. N. "Coping with Gender and Man-Made Language: An Approach Toward Feminism(s)". *Feminist Mode in Commonwealth Literature*. Ed. R. A. Singh. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 2001. 1-18. Print.
- Singh, Sushila. *Feminism: Theory, Criticism, Analysis*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2009. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourses and Post-colonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. 66-111. Print.
- . "Feminism and Critical Theory." *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2010. 493-511. Print.
- Sree, Prasanna. S. "An Introduction to Women and Women Writing in English". in *Indian English Poetry and Fiction: Critical Elucidations Volume I*. Ed. Amar Nath Prasad and Rajiv K. Mallik. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2006. 121-143. Print.
- Sujata, K. R. and S. Gokilavani. "Introduction." *Feminine Aesthetics of Indian Women Writers*. New Delhi: Regal Publications, 2011. 1-35. Print.
- Sultana, Rebecca. "The Personal Enmeshed with the Political". Excerpted from the Daily Star. Web. Edition Vol. 5 Num 328. Web 8 May 2014
<<http://archive.thedailystar.net/2005/04/30/d504302102129.htm>> pp 1-2

- Swami, Indu. "The Changing Face of Woman as Reflected in their Writings." *The Woman Question in Selected Novels of Nayantara Sahgal, Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy*. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2009. 1-24. Print.
- Tiwari, Narendra. "Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* vis-a-vis Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: A Comparative Study." *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. Ed. Nigamananda Das. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2011. 187-203. Print.
- Tolan, Fiona. "Feminisms." *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. New Delhi: OUP, 2006. 319-339. Print.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt, 1983. Print.
- Wallace, Elizabeth Kowaleski, ed. *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*. 1996. London: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Walters, Margaret. Introduction. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP, 2005. 1-5. Print.
- Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: OUP, 2006. Print.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Ed. Deidre Shauna Lynch. 3rd ed. New York: Norton and Company, 2009. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Reprinted Penguin Classics. London: Penguin, 2000. Print.
- Zama, Margaret Ch., ed. *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage, 2013. Print.