Chapter Five

Oppression and Discrimination in the Fiction of Women Writers of North-East India

5.1 Introduction

In Simone de Beauvoir’s analysis of the discriminatory social attitudes against women in her seminal text *The Second Sex* (1949), she outlined the central difference between sex and gender – ‘sex’ pertaining to the biological factor and ‘gender’ as a cultural construct. A woman’s position in society and her definition of the ‘self’ has been and continues to be constructed according to the traditions of the patriarchal system. Traditional and conventional models of moral and social behaviours and expectations for a woman have been created by male power structures and as such a woman’s definition of the self has been centred primarily on kinship, marriage and reproduction. The patriarchal system accords greater importance to men and consequently women suffer gender discrimination and oppression which curtail and denies her equal rights as men.

To discriminate and oppress based on a person’s gender is to unfairly treat and use restrictions or prohibit a person from actualizing their wants or needs simply on the premise that a person is a male or a female. Nigerian novelist Chimammanda Ngozi Adichie in her book *We Should All be Feminists* (2014) writes that human societies have evolved, “But our ideas of gender have not evolved very much (18).” In an age where technological advancements can nullify the privileges afforded to men as the superior sex due to their greater physical strength which gave them the power to dominate and protect in the past; the reality is that even today, most positions of power and prestige are still occupied by men (17). Despite the fact that resources and means of production that once denied to women are now
accessible, the system of oppression and discrimination against women continues. And as literature mirrors society, these issues are reflected in women’s writing.

Oppression and discrimination that surface as a result of a woman’s subordinated position in a patriarchal society is a major concern in women’s writing. Subordinated by male power structures, a woman becomes defined by her parental and personal relationships and this concern is explored by women’s writing that aims to change the definitions set by patriarchal societies. Their writings question the tyranny of patriarchal societies, the monopoly of family and religion by men, challenge age-old practices that deter women’s progress, explore gender relations and also forge a way forward for self-assertion and redefining the set parameters of female conduct and behaviour.

Establishing that women do occupy a subordinate position in a patriarchal world means that as the ‘second sex’, women face discrimination and oppression as a result of it. This chapter examines this aspect by using the theoretical frameworks put forward by Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex* and Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* and others to examine the select fiction of the following women writers: *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire, *Rebirth* by Jahnavi Barua and “The Night” (*These Hills*) by Temsula Ao.

### 5.2 Women and Oppression

In the history of the oppression of women, patriarchy is identified as a system that is responsible for perpetuating the discriminatory attitudes towards women. In a patriarchal system, gender differences become a central feature that allows discrimination and bias against women. Gender discrimination against women is facilitated in this system by “material conditions” (societies are organized around the necessity to meet the material needs for food and shelter) and by patriarchal constructs of marriage and family (Holmes 2-3).
In a patriarchal system, privileges and rights that are given to men as a matter of birthright are denied to women. Women have little or no claims to material, intellectual and sexual resources available in society – restricted from getting education; have limited rights to property; and the freedom to choose regarding marriage and in other aspects of life. In this system, the ‘self’ is defined for a woman – she has no say in her sexuality or reproductive rights; is denied the right to education and means of production thus a livelihood; and is restricted from having the freedom to be an individual.

Ironically, even though women have been denied equal rights and status in patriarchal societies and had to fulfil defined social roles as mothers and wives, they have also been treated as custodians of culture through the acts of procreation and traditions. The social roles set out for them, motherhood and wifehood are glorified. The depiction of women who faithfully follow these roles and fulfil these set social roles in narratives and myths are admired and put on a pedestal thus facilitating the continuance of the system.

For feminists who theorize on the position of women in society, patriarchy is a central concept in explaining the gender discrimination and bias against women.

According to Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, a radical conceptualization of the history of women’s oppression under patriarchy, the gender dominance of men over women was due to a historical development that can be traced to the system of organizing society that began in the cultures of the earliest civilizations in the ancient world of the Near East, the ideas and concepts of which were later adapted into Western Civilization and formed the basis of patriarchal gender relations that we witness today. Historically, this particular mode of patriarchal relations according to Lerner contributed to the subordinated position of females which was born out of “voluntary acceptance of subordinate status in exchange for protection
and privilege” and suggests the possibility of “collusion” and cooperation between the dominant and the subordinate (“Definitions”).

Other theorists claim that women’s oppression is caused by her biology. A woman’s weakened state during pregnancy and childbirth allowed men to dominate while others claim that a man’s physical strength and use of violence gave them the leverage to dominate. Theories have been speculative at best with very little evidence to back them up, and this has led some feminist theorists like Dale Spender and Kate Millett to argue that the theory of origins of the system of patriarchy is not as important as identifying the “structures and institutions” that continue to maintain the patriarchal system today (Bryson 169).

Kate Millet focused on the structures that continue to perpetuate male domination and oppression of women by providing a theoretical framework in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970). Millett articulated the concept of patriarchy as a power based relationship of the sexes (male dominance and female subordination) in feminist thought. This structure where the “essence” of its politics is “power,” Millet argued is a system which is ingrained in all known societies so rigidly and universally and has endured for so long that it appears to be ‘natural’ and has been achieved through an “ingenious form of “interior colonization”” (25). Millett argued that the patriarchal power of men over women is achieved through a systematic conditioning in early socialisation in the family and maintained by reinforcing it through the educational system, through literature and religion, economic exploitation and use of force (violence and aggression) and psychological guilt in female sexuality resulting in an internalization of values by both men and women (Bryson 166; *Sexual Politics* 26-58).

While Lerner and Millett have explained patriarchy as a “one worldwide system” and have interpreted it as the “original social hierarchy” from which different forms of exploitation like
racism and slavery have developed from, non-western feminists have declined to accept the concept of patriarchy as a single “monolith” but to interpret it in different forms that analyses and takes into consideration the unique social and cultural norms of their societies (Wilson).

Beauvoir’s argument in *The Second Sex* on the oppression of women came from her existential views on how women are always identified and defined in relation to men; while man is the “subject/self” and the “absolute,” a woman is the “other” (26). These two opposing groups unlike other opposing groups in history have a shared past, tradition, religion and culture (27). Beauvoir reasoned that because of this ‘shared history’ the oppression of women as the ‘other’ most likely occurred not because of one event that took place but because of the historical development in the evolution of human society. Rather, Beauvoir concludes that it is the mythical representations of the feminine mystery, the “eternal feminine,” that has been imprinted into the consciousness of humanity that continues to preserve the system of male domination and women’s subordination (32). The expectations to fulfil the mythical representations of femininity, the eternal feminine, in a patriarchal society makes women complicit in their own subordination and active participants in a system that continues to oppress women. Beauvoir calls for women to see themselves as men do, as the ‘self’ and the ‘absolute’. Only through the breaking of this imposed femininity on her consciousness can a woman be truly free of oppression.

In feminist criticism, academics and theorists deem it more essential to identifying the structures that continue to perpetuate and maintain the system of patriarchy in order to work towards the end of the oppression of their gender than in attempting to find out the origins of this system of oppression. In identifying these structures, be it the institutions created in our societies that constrict women or constructed meanings of what it is to be of the inferior sex and the ‘other’, feminists can work towards emancipation and ending oppression.
5.3 Gender Discrimination and Oppression in Easterine Kire’s *A Terrible Matriarchy*

Easterine (Iralu) Kire is a major literary voice from Nagaland who has authored several collections of poems, novels and children’s books. She has won national awards for excellence in literature and her novel *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) was the first English novel published in the state. Her works have been translated into several foreign languages and she continues to write prolifically.

*A Terrible Matriarchy* (hereafter *Terr. Matriarchy*) is the story of a girl, the youngest in a family of five children with four brothers, who is determined to get an education despite the attempts of her strict disciplinarian grandmother who staunchly upholds the traditional way of life and patriarchal customs of the Nagas. The novel gives a realistic depiction of traditional Naga society, particularly the Angami tribe and its customs. It gives an insight into the dynamics of gender roles and exposes the discrimination faced by women and the girl-child. The novel’s primary concern is on gender discrimination and oppression that the narrator faces in a Naga patriarchal society.

To understand how the dynamics of gender relations play out and the nature of gender discrimination discussed, it is necessary to have knowledge on how patriarchy as a system is interpreted and constructed in Naga society. The Nagas live in a patriarchal society in which tribal customs and traditional gender roles are strictly observed. Due to this, Naga women experience lack of representation and are at a disadvantage politically, culturally and economically. Women are traditionally restricted from assuming seats of power in matters of policy-making or to make decisions that involves the welfare of the community, village, or clan (Ao, “Benevolent Subordination” 125). Women also do not inherit parental property i.e., ancestral property that has been passed down for generations from the male side (John Butler...
And there are certain taboos observed that forbid females from participating in certain sports and activities, or touch tools or arms which was considered as bad luck in the past.

Even though education and rapid modernization has helped in bringing changes and empowering Naga women, it still gives an idea of how the female identity is perceived in Naga culture and the space that women occupy in the ‘hierarchy of gender’. The intense pressure both on men and women, more so for women, to show unquestioning deference to customs and traditions means that Naga women are conditioned to “concede to male superiority” even when they are highly educated or have acquired high positions in their workplaces through their own efforts still “suffer from the remnants of this psychological ‘trauma’ of subordination” (Ao, “Benevolent Subordination” 130).

A Naga woman is considered to be good if she is obedient, humble, and submissive. She is expected to “perform the role of wife, mother, child bearer, food producer and household manager” (“Gender Equality”). Her identity is one that is constructed by dutiful conformity to a culture and tradition of where the male is the figure-head wielding absolute authority over his house hold and its matters.

The coming of Christianity and its absorption into Naga society has brought benefits of education in helping to eradicate certain taboos and restrictions on women, but it also reinforced a ‘double-patriarchy’ on women by subjecting them to the patriarchal myths that is present in the religion (Yano and Pande 83). The idea of the ‘good’ Naga woman that existed pre-Christianity in the traditional patriarchy of Naga society was reinforced by the Christian concept of the female identity. The Church brought benefits in elevating the status of women and empowering them as it allowed Naga women to assume some positions of authority by creating auxiliary groups such as women’s welfare groups and departments which was a
progressive move considering women were not allowed to participate in decision-making as was customary in Naga society. However, it still failed to bring equality of the sexes as women were “barred from ordained ministry or priestly function” (Yano and Pande 87).

What Millett points out in Sexual Politics that “Patriarchy has God on its side” affirms that any interpretation of religion and myths in a patriarchy will posit man as the subject and a woman to assume her “otherness” (46-51). Any so called benefit that comes from the Church in the status of Naga women is tempered by the fact that in any patriarchal myth a women’s status is “typically auxiliary in character …. They rarely operate without recourse to male authority, church or religious groups appealing to the superior authority of a cleric, political groups to male legislators, etc” (Millett 48).

The core of the power structure in the relation of the sexes in Naga society is based on a tradition of warrior values where men have always played the role of the protector and defender of the village and its inhabitants. This role originates from a culture that harkens to the practices of the past where women and children were especially vulnerable during periodic raids that happened between hostile neighbouring villages. Hostilities between different clans, villages and tribes known as ‘blood feuds’ were a constant threat in the past and this led to women acquiescing to allow men to “assume superior status in the male-female dichotomy” (Mills 302; Johnstone 313; Ao, “Benevolent Subordination” 126). Thus, the division of the roles evolved in which women had to make considerations for practical reasons. The need to put practical considerations as a priority for Naga women evolved into a situation where they became excluded from the position to have the power of decision-making both in private and public matters (Ao, “Benevolent Subordination” 125-26).
Such traditions and customs of exclusion of women from institutions of power has become an integral part of Naga culture and to break deeply rooted notions of cultural traditions is no easy task. Legalized by customs and traditions, the idea of the ‘self’ for Naga women is constructed with man as the absolute and woman as the other; it is achieved through a process of “interior colonization” that Millett identified as a marker of patriarchy (25). Temsula Ao notes that: “The socially constructed self of the [Naga] woman in the past was so thoroughly subordinated to the male that in time she too accepted it as the definition of her ontological selfhood” (“Benevolent Subordination” 129; my emphasis).

Even though Terr. Matriarchy is a reflection of the Kire’s own experiences in the socio-cultural life of the Angami tribal society, the narrative can be read as a representative of the oppressive discrimination and gender inequality that Naga women, irrespective of the tribe, experience in Naga society.

The central theme of Terr. Matriarchy is that of gender discrimination, oppression and inequality. When the protagonist of the novel, Dielieno (hereafter Lieno), is sent to live as a helper with her biased and stern grandmother, she encounters severe and harsh discipline from her grandmother who is determined to raise her granddaughter according to the traditions and customs of the Naga culture.

In Terr. Matriarchy, gender discrimination and inequality occurs due to the superior status that men have in Naga society which is perpetuated by maintaining a rigid traditional way of life. The most striking of discriminations that happens in the novel is the gender disparity that is perpetuated by a woman, Lieno’s grandmother. The grandmother is empowered by the auxiliary power given by patriarchy to women as a reward for fulfilling the roles of motherhood and the ‘eternal feminine’ and uses it to oppress Lieno and other women in her
family. Also in *Terr. Matriarchy*, gender oppression is committed and perpetuated when the constructed ideas of masculinity works in the disfavour of men as seen in the novel where Lieno’s father has to show strict deference to his mother and consult her in all his decisions regarding his family. Men are victimized by the need to uphold society’s expectations and their family’s expectations to marry according to the family’s choice and this consequently affects their freedom of expression leading to frustration and failure.

The theme of gender discrimination is set early on in the novel with the poignant opening lines:

> My Grandmother didn’t like me. I knew this when I was about four and half. I was sitting in her kitchen with my brother, Bulie, older to me by two years, when she served us food. Hot rice and chicken broth.

> “What meat do you want?” she simpered sweetly, as she ladled out gravy and meat. I quickly piped up, “I want the leg, Grandmother, give me the leg.”

> “I wasn’t asking you, silly girl,” she said, as she swiftly put the chicken leg into my brother’s plate, “That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions.”

That the male child gets the better portions of food and in this case the meatier parts may seem insignificant but is a common occurrence at meal times in Naga families drives home the fact that the male child has a higher status in the family. In gender discrimination, food and its distribution becomes a site where the politics of power in gender dichotomy is played out.

Even though the girl child like Lieno is burdened to perform more domestic chores than her brothers, and she is by far a more productive member in the family, as a female she is still subjected to unequal treatment by the grandmother. In a research conducted by the Asia
Development Bank on “Gender Equality and Food Security”, it states that gender is a deciding factor in discrimination when it comes to food, its production, and distribution. It highlights that: “The intra-household allocation of food may well disfavour them [women] due to beliefs about the value of females as compared to males. In many regions of South Asia, women tend to eat the least, or the leftovers after other family members have eaten – often the result of gender-role internalization” (13).

The opening lines signal the author’s preoccupation for the novel from the outset – that the female is of less value than the male and that she is his subordinate and his inferior.

The literal translation of the protagonist’s name ‘Dielieno’ in Tenyidie is “errand girl” (Sebastian 89). The name given to her in the family by the grandmother who designates Lieno’s status as someone who is only good for running errands, performing domestic chores and doing menial work. Lieno is often referred to by her grandmother as “the girl” implying that she is denied any individual identity simply for being a female (Kire 4; Sebastian 91).

The gender roles that are expected from the sexes are clearly demarcated by the grandmother who sees herself as the custodian of the cultural traditions of the Angami Nagas. The grandmother would insist that Lieno should do all the domestic chores at home and on one occasion when she finds out that one of Lieno’s brothers had been sent to fetch water, she rebukes Lieno’s mother saying, “Send the girl next, that is girls’ work. No man in my day has ever fetched water” (3). Another example of her discriminatory attitude towards Lieno is seen when she tells Nino that: “The girl must be made to work at home. Don’t let her run about with her brothers anymore. That is not the way to bring up girl-children” (4). The grandmother’s attitude towards the girl child and the role she is expected to carry out reflects the interior colonization and conditioning that happens in patriarchal societies where
everything pertaining to domestic affairs including labour and chores is considered to be the job of women.

Remarking on the demarcations of gender roles inculcated from a young age in Naga society, Rosemary Dzuwichü, a Naga women’s rights activist recollects of her childhood that even though there was freedom experienced in home life, she was expected to “… tow the line and play second fiddle to men.” This meant doing all household chores including washing her brother’s clothes, cooking, weaving and showing extreme deference to all elders (Hanghal).

The grandmother’s discrimination is not only seen in her expectation of adhering to strict gender roles but also in her biased treatment of men and women in her family. While the grandmother enthusiastically indulges her grandsons, Lieno is often admonished. She would often give treats of jaggery and sweet potatoes to Lieno’s brothers when they visited her while ordering Lieno to finish her chores (4-5). Seeing the biased treatment, Lieno remarks to herself that: “With some revulsion I recollected that she was going on like a young girl with him, vying for his attention and bribing him with good food. The meat that hung on the spiked bamboo was not for us. It was for Leto and all my brothers” (18). Even at a young age, Lieno shows resignation and is very aware of the unfair treatment that is meted out on her (34-35).

The grandmother’s preferential treatment of Lieno’s brothers in *Terr. Matriarchy* is a result of the systematic conditioning that occurs in a patriarchy (Millett 33). Through systematic conditioning in the socialization of the young, the family inculcates the patriarchal ideology and its “prescribed attitudes towards the categories of role, temperament, and status” (Millett 35). The grandmother has undergone this conditioning and carries it out on Lieno, trying to mould her into a ‘good woman’ according to the prescribed Naga patriarchal standards. This
conditioning legitimizes inequality in the power imbalance of the sexes and the roles they have to perform in the family unit and in society as a whole.

Education for girls, specifically for Lieno is also a point of contention in the grandmother’s discrimination. She did not see any value in girls getting school education when learning the skills of running a house was in her opinion much more beneficial. Lieno is allowed to go to school only because her father persuades the grandmother by asking her permission thus acknowledging her authority. Even though she allows Lieno to attend school, her opinion on education for girls is unchanged as she remarks: “I really don’t know what it is your generation sees in school …. I was doing such a good job of teaching the girl to work …. She will completely forget all I have taught her now” (37).

The discriminatory attitude is even more glaring because none of Lieno’s brothers had to seek the grandmother’s permission to attend school. The grandmother even defends their poor performance at school by saying:

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. They were always in constant danger if there was a war. The women would only have one man to protect them. That is why we love our male children so much and we give them the best of food. And we should. (37)

Temsula Ao’s perspective in “Benevolent Subordination” also attests to the preferential treatment that was given to male members in the family in the past due to the need for male protection and this tradition continued with giving preferential opportunities even in the area of education. Ao states that:
For centuries Naga society existed on the strength of male superiority and male prerogatives. When book-learning became an option, it was the male child who got the first opportunity, and if, in a family, a female child was allowed to go to school it was only to study up to the stage where she could read the Bible and the song sheet. That was considered ‘enough’ for a female…. The girls had to stay back to help the parents in farm work in order to support the brothers studying in towns. It was never considered a ‘sacrifice’ but the ‘duty’ of girls to do so, even if they happened to be better students. Merit was never the decider, being male was. (125; my emphasis)

Even when Lieno proves herself to be the brightest in her family by securing a good division in her Matriculation and her brother Leto offers to support her college education, when her father brings up the subject of Lieno pursuing further studies to Grandmother, she obstinately continued to prescribe to the idea that a woman’s place is in the home. The grandmother is unable to see the use of having a college educated daughter as she considers it as foolishness and she resists the idea by arguing, “A woman’s role is to marry and bear children, remember that. That is her most important role. Men don’t like educated wives. Then, if you find no one to marry you, you will be alone in your old age and have no one to bury you …. I hope you will think of my words and reconsider your foolishness” (206).

Kire poignantly addresses the issue of gender disparity in *Terr. Matriarchy* by leading her readers to see gender discrimination and oppression in Naga society through the narrative voice of Lieno. Though Lieno’s upbringing is very tough for a young girl and she endures much suffering under her authoritative grandmother, but with her headstrong attitude she is able to conquer hardships thrown her way and emerges as an educated and smart young lady. That Lieno triumphs in the end is Kire’s own feminist consciousness that champions and
roots for the girl-child to succeed no matter the obstacles even though the general attitude of society is to denigrate a female child.

Discrimination and oppression in *Terr. Matriarchy* is chiefly perpetuated by Grandmother. The deference for customs and traditions in Naga society means that the elderly (being the custodians of culture) holds supreme authority, and with the passing of Lieno’s grandfather, Grandmother became the matriarch of the family which meant that even her sons had to obey and abide by her rules; She also used this authority to maintain the patriarchal system by favouring her grandsons and mistreating Lieno and other dependents.

When Lieno’s grandfather passed away, the privileged status that he enjoyed as a government servant and as an elder of the community is automatically passed on to his wife. This was a reward for being the wife of a respected person as the custom was such that Naga women did not have an independent identity but was always defined in relation to the men (Pimomo). The glory of their men is transferred to the women, and if a woman enjoyed a higher status in society, it was due to her husband’s social standing in their society. Having served her husband well by fulfilling the role expected of her, Grandmother had acquired the power to be the matriarch of her family after her husband’s demise.

Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* asserts that women are as complicit as men for her role as the ‘other’; she readily accepts her ‘otherness’ by accepting the auxiliary power and advantages that patriarchy confers to them for “their alliance with the superior caste.” The material protection that is received through the man is also the reason that “woman has always been man’s dependant, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality” (30). Grandmother accepts her ‘otherness’ completely and given the auxiliary power by this system uses it to oppress the women in her family and wields influential power over the
younger males in her matriarch. What is important to note is that the grandmother’s matriarch position is derived from the auxiliary power given by patriarchy.

How does the auxiliary power of the matriarch in a patriarchy develop? The source of the auxiliary power lies in the patriarchal constructions of myth, in particular – the myth of the woman. Beauvoir’s understanding of myth in The Second Sex comes from Lévi-Strauss’ approach of myth as “deeply rooted patterns in cultural beliefs”; the individual myths from many cultures generate a “universal pattern” for defining femininity. This Straussian approach was crucial in the development of Beauvoir’s identification of the functioning of patriarchy as a system that creates myths of femininity and asserting the concept of femininity in The Second Sex a cultural product. She also adopted the Marxist approach of myth as an ideology that created cultural beliefs which is used as a tool to sustain patriarchy. Myths of the ‘woman’ created in cultural beliefs simultaneously working with economic and social factors strengthen the grip of patriarchy in the oppression of women (Fallaize 88; Beauvoir 315-25). In patriarchy, myths of womanhood are created, especially motherhood. For Beauvoir, the patriarchal construction of the maternal instinct is an institution and “cultural fiction” (Judith Butler 42). The myths of the good mother and good wife are glorified and eulogized “in local folklore, in literature, and in religion,” and women are conditioned to aspire for these defined roles and fulfil them, and in complying with it are duly rewarded with the auxiliary power that is bestowed upon them (“Basic Concepts”).

Elizabeth Fallaize in “Beauvoir and the Demystification of Woman,” writes that Beauvoir recognized that through the use of myth, “patriarchal society imposes its law on individuals in a particularly effective mode, working through the intermediary of ‘religions, traditions, language, tales, songs, movies’ to insinuate itself into everyone’s consciousness” (91).
Since the grandmother’s matriarchal power in *Terr. Matriarchy* is a projection of patriarchy’s own oppression of women; the authority that she exercises is extremely prejudiced towards females. Although Lieno gets the brunt of the grandmother’s ire, the other women in the novel, Nino, Lieno’s mother, Bano, grandmother’s niece, and Nisano, Vini’s wife, who live under her roof are also completely under her authority and fear her.

The grandmother’s prejudicial disdain for anything female stems out of her own experience growing up in a society that dynamically orients towards patriarchal values. The discrimination that girls face is deeply ingrained into her consciousness that she thinks from within the consciousness of men as he is “the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (Beauvoir 26).

The grandmother’s exercise of her auxiliary power to oppress originates from a place of insecurity because of the discriminations that she herself had experienced being female. She is aware of the privileged place that a man has which is the advantage of economic and social independence. Since her identity and status comes her husband’s legacy of being a respected community member, she learns the value of the male consciously aware of the privileges that can come with performing the roles expected of her. Since experience had taught her that widows without sons lost their husband’s property to other male relatives; that married women without male offspring were mocked at and that males in the family were more valuable as “insurance” for the future, having seen her own mother endure such hardships helped form her preference for showing more affection for Lieno’s brothers (272-73).

The grandmother’s attitude is reflective of the status of women in traditional Naga society, though Naga women are given respect as a wife and a mother, it is set early on from childhood that women are not the equal of men and that female identity is built around
performing the duties required of the sex. Performing her duties well meant that Grandmother took it as her moral duty to teach Lieno to become a “good woman” as generations of mothers had done before her (Pimomo). To be a good woman meant that a girl should not be “aggressive and outspoken,” a wife who is a good worker and docile, qualities that men like in women which Nino points out to her daughter Lieno (271-72). Seen in this light, the grandmother is just an unfortunate construct of the Naga patriarchal system.

In Terr. Matriarchy, it is not only the females that face gender discrimination and oppression but also the males experience it. The tradition of extreme deference that is shown to the elderly in Naga society means that even Lieno’s father and his siblings, though being the head of his family, constantly seeks out the grandmother’s approval for every major decision that is taken in his family.

Lieno’s father is oppressed by his deference for the elderly authority that is wielded by his mother. On one occasion when Lieno tells her father and mother that Grandmother had disciplined her with a stick for climbing on her uncle Atu’s shoulders, her father shows a fleeting expression of anger but quickly adds that his mother had done so for Lieno’s “own good” and her “welfare” and sticks up for Grandmother asking Lieno to be more respectful (6). When the decision is made for Lieno to go live with Grandmother, even though Nino shows concern at the idea considering her daughter’s young age, the father replies in a decisive tone that: “Yes, but that us how Mother wants it to be and we can’t possibly say no to her” (9).

Lieno who is aware of the deferential obedience shown for the grandmother’s views is bewildered and amused by it. She remarks: “I had myself never learnt to feel anything of the sort and always wondered how Father and his siblings could be so devoted to her. They tried
to fulfil her every wish. They quoted her constantly and it irked me that they would expect their spouses to be awed by her wisdom and her philosophy of life and try to abide by it” (271).

The deference shown to the grandmother also meant that the men in her family were not free to make choices. When her favoured grandson Leto expresses his desire to marry Vimenuo, Lieno’s childhood friend, Grandmother is outraged and refers to Vimenuo as the “dead drunk’s daughter” (210). Grandmother could not accept that her own flesh and blood would be associated with a family who according to town gossip was known for drunkenness and scandalous debauchery. The grandmother oppresses her grandsons from choosing freely and continues to interfere in their personal matters because she held a view that marrying a good girl from a good family would bring honour to her family’s name (210-11). She puts the blame of this misfortune on girls getting educated, who according to her, aspire for marriage that is “above their station” once they get an education. She angrily declares: “It is all these modern ideas to blame. Educating girls indeed! Education can’t rid you of bad blood I say!” (210).

Feminist Chimamanda Adichie writes that in most societies (patriarchal) the definitions of masculinity and femininity are so constrictive and narrow that it causes numerous pressures for both men and women to fulfil the roles that are defined for them. While feminists have spoken out and taken up the cause of fighting against the restrictions that society’s narrow views of femininity have imposed on women, the same cannot be said for men. Many are still slow in speaking about how the narrow definition of masculinity for men severely impedes them. Men are taught to be tough, emotionally distant and even aggressive, and are looked down on if they show fear or vulnerability, and the “great disservice” done to them is the “pressure of proving their masculinity by material means.” This, Adichie observes, leaves
men with very “fragile egos” and in turn we raise girls to “cater to the fragile egos of males” (26-27).

What Adichie points out is a vicious cycle of conditioning and interior colonization of males and females. Adichie’s sentiments are remindful of Beauvoir’s use of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic where she posited that the ‘consciousness of being’ have bifurcated the sexes into man as the subject and woman as the other in relation to him (33).

This narrow definition of masculinity has its manifestations in the *Terr. Matriarchy* when Lieno’s brother, Vini, becomes oppressed by societal expectations to fit the definition of what was a ‘successful’ Naga man which meant getting a college education and a government job. Although in the novel Vini is presented as a trouble-maker because of his alcohol addiction which causes problems in the family, scratching away at the surface of his dependency on alcohol reveals his deep insecurity and the “fragile ego” which stems from his own lack of self-worth.

Though Kire situates the peculiarity of alcohol addiction in Naga men as a result of the political conflict in the region; the reality of this problem is much more complex. This is revealed when Vini mockingly calls Leto “the educated government officer” and sarcastically remarks: “I must apologize that we are not all of us, educated and able to behave in a civilized manner. Some of us will cater to our lower selves …” (216). It is evident that Vini considers himself to be a failure when compared to his brother Leto. Vini who worked at a store selling women’s clothes must have felt inadequate when he could not fulfil what he and others must have thought was a man’s duty to secure a high paying job and this further fuelled his alcohol addiction. Adichie’s statement that “Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage …. We teach them to mask their true selves,” is a poignant point to consider – what if we raise boys without the pressure of proving their masculinity by
material means? Maybe then Vini would not have been pressured to fulfil a role and become an alcoholic (26-27).

Vini is however not only a victim of oppression by a system where expectations to fulfil a man’s role are high, but also becomes an oppressor when he harasses his father for not building a bigger house, or buy a car, or have a better job. He imposes the same societal expectations of what masculinity is on his father. He even taunts his younger brother Bulie for not being able to study further and for being a mechanic in a garage and often called him a “buffoon” (217).

It is not only the narrow definition of masculinity constructed by a patriarchal society that moulds Vini into who he is. The motivator of Vini’s ‘fragile ego’ is none other than the grandmother who right from a young age had spoilt him which made him acquire a sense of entitlement. The grandmother’s fondness for Vini is such that she even defends his drinking habit even though she had hypocritically slated Vimenuo’s father for his drunkenness. She supports his alcoholism by remarking that it is just “the natural appetites of all young men” and proudly declares that she is giving him the best portion of her land as his inheritance; a privilege that is denied Leto for disobeying her in marrying Vimenuo (226).

Vini’s marriage which they had hoped would fix his problem of drinking does not dissuade him from his former habits. Even after his marriage, the grandmother encourages Vini’s habits by giving him money regularly and refuses to see that she was in part to blame for his addiction (Kire 244). In the end, Vini succumbs to his addiction but not before leaving a fatherless child whose primary care is taken up by the grandmother who is still determined to raise the boys in her family with overindulgence and in the former ways without learning anything from the mistakes made in the past.
Terr. Matriarchy highlights the issue of how gender discrimination and oppression is perpetuated in patriarchy. According to Millett, the gender conditioning that occurs in childhood determines the roles that men and women are expected to fulfil as adults and the system of patriarchy is continued through the ingenious strength of socialization. Conditioning in early childhood is decisive in “assuring the maintenance of temperamental differences between the sexes” and it is a “self-perpetuation and self-fulfilling prophecy” (31).

The discrimination and oppression that Lieno and others face in the novel is not because of an oppressor like Grandmother but the actual oppressor is the system of conditioning that occurs in patriarchy where “male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different,” and this is fostered by gender identity that is developed through a system of conditioning that decides “what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression” (Millett 31).

Kire’s own experiences of growing up in a traditional patriarchal Angami society gave her the inspiration to create Lieno as a representative figure of the challenges and discriminations that females face in Naga society. Terr. Matriarchy captures the essence of what it means to be a born as a subordinate gender in Angami society, she writes:

The patriarchal structure of my society was underlined by a very strong matriarchy.

I saw it as a negative female energy manifestation when the little girl who is the central character of the book is suppressed by her grandmother when she goes to live with her. Her grandmother calls it cultural education. But for the girl it is a denial of things that were permitted to her brothers.
The struggle of the girl to get educated, the sacrifices she makes and the position she creates for herself in later life is also true of what is happening to women in my society today. I think that she discovers a positive female energy inside of her and uses it to shape her social reality for the better. 

(www.windhoverlive.blog.in; my emphasis)

In reading *Terr. Matriarchy* from a feminist stand point, the interpretation of patriarchy in individual societies and cultures specifically in Naga society which rigidly conforms to customs and traditions opens up a world of complexities. Patriarchy is established as a system that perpetuates gender discrimination and oppression achieved through ‘conditioning’ and ‘internal colonization’ which are used as indispensable tools in sustaining its durability and pervasiveness. The auxiliary power granted to the matriarch for her complicit participation in perpetuating patriarchy as an institution causes the extreme gender discrimination and disparity of the girl-child and also causes other female dependants of the matriarch to become oppressed. Even though prejudicial preference is given to males by the matriarch, an important aspect to note is that the exercise of this auxiliary power also allows the matriarch to oppress younger males who are forced to show deference.

The perpetrator of gender discrimination and oppression in the novel is the matriarch, a female, but she is also a victim of the very system that accords her the auxiliary power. Her gender discrimination and oppression is carried out from the fear of experiencing the powerlessness of being the subordinate and inferior sex upon seeing that females have no privilege and economic security in a patriarchal Naga society. This fear creates the need to be complicit with the system in order to have social and economic security that comes from the men, in this case, the status that her husband had. Thus the real perpetrator of gender discrimination and oppression is the institution of patriarchy and though it is primarily an
institution of oppression towards women, its interpretation causes disfavour for men too as it rigidly conforms to narrow ideas of what masculinity and femininity should be.

5.4 Oppressive Patterns in Jahnavi Barua’s *Rebirth*

Jahnavi Barua is an Assamese writer who has authored the critically acclaimed collection of short stories *Next Door* (2008). Her second creative literary venture is the novel *Rebirth* (2010) which was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2011.

*Rebirth* is the story of Kaberi, a young woman from Assam who has settled in Bangalore after her marriage to her husband of seven years, Ranjit (Ron). Kaberi’s days are spent housekeeping and reminiscing about her life in Assam. She has difficulty assimilating into the corporate culture that her husband thrives in. The novel begins at a critical juncture when Kaberi’s husband is leaving her for another woman and at the same time she also discovers that she is pregnant. This crisis situation is where the novel picks off and the life that Kaberi has led so far is gradually revealed as also is her relationship with her husband and her relationships with different people who are present in her life. This crisis is the driving force behind the plot of Kaberi’s story and it eventually leads to a ‘rebirth’ as the title of the novel suggests. *Rebirth* is presented through a “mother’s monologue” with the unusual narrative premise of a mother talking to her unborn child (Nazareth).

In *Rebirth*, Kaberi follows her husband to Bangalore, where his job is located and lives a rather monotonous life in the concrete jungle of Richmond town. As the novel progresses, the reader learns that they have been married for seven years and the yearning for a child has caused conflicts in the marriage causing him to become emotionally distant from her. But conflicts have also arisen due to Kaberi’s inability to assimilate with the lifestyle that Ron expects her to follow after their marriage.
In *Rebirth*, Kaberi is an oppressed character. The oppression that Kaberi experiences is twofold. First, she is emotionally and physically oppressed by her husband Ron who alienates her and leaves her when she is unable to conceive. He also does not shy away from using physical force to intimidate Kaberi. Second, Kaberi is oppressed by the prescribed gender roles for men and women in a patriarchal society. She convinces herself that she should endure the mistreatment that Ron subjects her to in their marriage. She chooses to remain submissive and passive, playing the part of the obedient and quite wife. Oppression also occurs due to her economic dependence on Ron that makes her vulnerable and susceptible to physical and emotional abuse.

The Kaberi that we encounter in *Rebirth* is a soft-spoken, reserved and timid woman who has married according to her parents’ choice. She has been an obedient daughter and wife who display an incredible passiveness and acceptance of the roles that are expected of her. Kaberi’s life so far has revolved entirely on Ron, his likings and wishes, she says: “so focused was I on your father and myself and the home we has fashioned together” (1). In her marriage so far, Kaberi’s identity is fused with Ron’s. She does not appear to have an identity beyond being Ron’s wife. This is due to her unassertive personality and also to a greater degree to appease Ron’s expectations from her as a wife.

From Kaberi monologue with her unborn child, we learn that Ron is a fastidious man who is “impatient and full of vitriol when anything went wrong.” This makes Kaberi especially careful in paying attention to details in laying out his clothes or dusting the house – everything is done the way he requires it. Ron’s expectations from Kaberi also extend to entertaining his wide social circle even though it is difficult for her to fit in with them (14). When Kaberi mentions that Ron’s “public manners were always nice,” it is suggestive of
what his manners might be like in private (34). These small and unassuming details that Kaberi tells her unborn child reveal the unpleasantness of Ron’s oppressive personality.

There is a tangible sense in *Rebirth* that Kaberi is oppressed by her husband who has high demands and expectations to perform her role as the wife of someone who Kaberi describes as “careful about the superficial things,” implying that the image he projected to others was of great importance (6). Kaberi, being the submissive ‘Kaberi’ that she always had been since her childhood quietly accepts her duties even when the demands made of her by her husband are unreasonable. She even willingly takes on the submissive role and defends her passivity as her belief was that she did not see “conflict as obligatory in every situation,” even when it meant mistreatment from her husband (28-29).

Kaberi’s pacifistic approach to Ron’s oppressive personality can be explained by Millett’s view that “conditioning” to the patriarchal ideology means that there is a “socialisation” of the sexes to the prescribed “patriarchal polities” which means there are certain traits in temperament and behaviour that are deemed as convenient for the superior status of the male. These traits that are “conditioned” in females are: “Passivity, ignorance, docility, “virtue,” and ineffectuality …” (26).

In patriarchy, there is a “highly elaborate code of conduct, gesture and attitude for each sex,” and oppression occurs through sex roles. Millett asserts that: “Sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition of the male. The limited role allotted the female tends to arrest her at the level of biological experience” (26). For Kaberi, her sense of identity is achieved through this role that is expected of her as a woman even though it is oppressive in nature. As a female and a wife, she is pressurized and required to fulfil her roles. She tries to conform to Ron’s lifestyle and his expectations by assimilating with the social lifestyle that her husband maintains even
though she’s averse to it by trying to “acclimatize” to his lifestyle (14). She mentions that cooking for Ron made her feel “desirable” (3). Kaberi’s self-worth and identity comes from her performance of the role that is expected of her; she does not aspire for her own life but sees herself only as an extension of Ron. Kaberi naively believes that fulfilling these expectations would make Ron love her, but when she is unable to fulfil her primary role as a woman which is to reproduce, she is abandoned by Ron. The sex roles which are assigned for each sex in a patriarchy is clearly only beneficial for men and is oppressive towards women.

A central concern of Rebirth is the subject of marriage and the dynamics of superior and subordinate roles played out between the husband and wife in a marriage. In Rebirth, the marriage of Kaberi and Ron is an oppressive institution for many reasons – It is a marriage that was arranged for her; Kaberi is not an equal partner of Ron in their marriage; she suffers physical and emotional abuse in the marriage; the burden of producing a child is placed on her and when she fails to do so, her husband abandons her without even considering that their inability to conceive maybe from his side too; and her economic dependence on her husband makes her vulnerable which binds her to the marriage and limits her chances of liberating herself from Ron’s oppression.

In the study of gender discrimination and oppression, an analysis of marriage as an institution is necessary. From a feminist viewpoint, marriage is an institution created by patriarchy that oppresses and exploits women. According to Marxist materialist feminist Christine Delphy, marriage is conceptualized as, “a labour contract in which the husband’s appropriation of unpaid labour from his wife constitutes a domestic mode of production and a patriarchal mode of exploitation” (Barrett 14; Bryson 177). Beauvoir in The Second Sex has a critical view of marriage and the magnitude of influence the institution has on a woman’s social status and on motherhood. In a patriarchal society, Beauvoir stated that a woman only gets
the dignity of a person when she is married; a woman is, “a socially incomplete being, even if she earns her living; she needs a ring on her finger to achieve the total dignity of a person and her full rights” (508). What Beauvoir establishes is that just as men and women experience different cultures due to gender constructs in a patriarchy, so is the institution of marriage “radically very different” in its experience for both men and women.

Historically speaking, marriage is made a necessity for the sexes, but the reciprocity is not. What Beauvoir meant was that there is no “equal dignity” in marriage for women because a man is still a “socially autonomous and complete individual” recognised for his part as a “producer” whereas a woman has no guarantee of an equal footing even with her contribution in reproduction and domestic role (502). The historicity of marriage shows that a woman is treated as property given in marriage to males by other males; usually she is passed on from the family group she belongs to which is dominated by the father and brothers and then to be dominated by her husband (503). This traditional form of marriage that Beauvoir points out is still retained in societies today (507).

Kaberi does not have a say in her marriage choice, it is decided for her. Her feelings on the matter are not taken into consideration. Kaberi’s marriage is one that has been arranged by the families concerned, especially arranged with the thought of economic advantage on the bride’s side. Ron’s mother, who had grown up in the same neighbourhood as Kaberi’s mother had married very well and she is the one who decides on Kaberi as her future daughter-in-law. Kaberi merely ends up as a passive participant even in the decision of her marriage and during the marriage ceremony on what is usually a very important event in a person’s life, the “blur” with which the marriage happens implies that the bride and groom did not have sufficient time to get acquainted and Kaberi describes “feeling uncomfortable all the time” throughout the whole ceremony which betrays the misgivings she has (70-71).
Kaberi’s hasty marriage reflects that the traditional form of marriage that Beauvoir points out is still in existence today. It is a marriage that is a contractual agreement which is mutually beneficial for consenting groups where the woman is merely property passed on from one dominant male (father) to another (husband).

In Kaberi’s marriage, the reader can deduce that it is an unequal relationship. Her economic dependence on Ron puts her in a vulnerable state. He can walk out on her anytime and he takes advantage of her dependency by having an affair with the excuse that she had failed to produce a child. But when he learns of her pregnancy, he decides to move back into the house. When Kaberi demands that he ends the ongoing affair, he mocks her economic dependence on him. The exchange of words in the following excerpt reveals the vulnerability of Kaberi:

‘Are you going to leave her?’ …. 

‘No,’ Ron says, ‘I will not. I will move back here, but I will come and go.’

‘That won’t do,’ I say, my voice stiff.

‘What do you mean, won’t do?’ Ron raises an eyebrow but the sarcasm rolls easily over me.

‘And what will you do, what *can* you do, if I don’t leave her? Ron is mocking now.

‘I will divorce you then,’ I say calmly.

Ron is incredulous. ‘Divorce! *Divorce!* And how will you survive? Haven’t you grown used to all this?’ He points around the room …. 

…. I have grown accustomed to all the comforts he had provided me …. 

…. ‘And the baby? Who will give you custody when you cannot even support it?’
Beauvoir attests that the traditional form of marriage even though it is undergoing through modifications, there is still oppression involved that the man and woman experiences in different ways. In terms of theoretical rights, spouses appear equal today, “…. But as long as the man retains economic responsibility for the couple, this is only an illusion” (589).

In other words, the notion of equality even in today’s marriages is only an illusion even with the theoretical manifestations in the form of legal rights for the woman. The remnants of the traditional form of marriage are impossible to completely remove because the very institution has been created for the benefit of men. This is shown in the way Ron confidently retorts to Kaberi’s threats of divorce because he is acutely aware of the economic advantage that he has over her.

Oppression is also expressed in marriage with the attempt to assert dominance by the man that takes the form of emotional and physical abuse. For many feminists, the occurrence of domestic violence in the home was an expression of male power in its crudest and most aggressive form and considered it the ultimate assertion of patriarchal oppression (Bryson 177-78). Millett in her analysis of the use of force as a fundamental aspect of patriarchal oppression reasons that the physical strength of the male that in the past had been used to forcibly subjugate a woman into submission has become “immaterial” in contemporary patriarchies due to the availability of other objects that can be used in place of mere physical strength or used as a means of defence, for example the use of arms. So why is physical violence against women still prevalent in contemporary societies? Given patriarchy’s system of socialisation, especially in the institutionalization of force that, “… the female is rendered innocuous by her socialisation. Before assault she is almost universally defenceless both by her physical and emotional training” (43-44).
In *Rebirth*, Kaberi is also subjected to emotional and physical abuse. This is first implied when after coming back home from an outing, she is confronted by Ron for not telling him sooner about her pregnancy. He angrily drags her into the bedroom and when Kaberi says, “I know what is coming next as he tenses his arm” is suggestive that incidences like this has happened before in the past and that Kaberi had grown accustomed to it to be able to predict when it was going to happen by observing the changes in his stance and expressions (79,132). Emotional abuse also takes place with Ron’s passive-aggressive attitude towards Kaberi in the comments that he makes. He would make remarks about her body and at times he would refer to her as “provincial” deriding her small-town background (75).

Marriage in this case for Kaberi becomes an oppressive contract of obligations as she is pressured to reproduce and fulfil her maternal destiny, failing to do so, immediately makes her less desirable for Ron. He only has regard for her when she becomes the bearer of his child. Even in marriage, a woman’s security is not guaranteed if she is unable to demonstrate the fertility of her womb. A woman in a marriage set on the foundations of the ideology of patriarchy is simply a ‘walking womb’ that can be discarded when she does not fulfil her role. Women’s reproduction is controlled by men and the consequences of the inability to reproduce are also controlled by men. The characteristic of reproduction in patriarchy is the control of women by men – especially their sexuality and fertility (Barrett 27).

Though Kaberi is the most disadvantaged in this institution of oppression; there are indications that Ron is also in a state of feeling trapped in the marriage and the reader is able to empathize with his situation too as certain revelations reveal the frustrations that he has in his marriage. The main cause of Ron’s lack of affections for Kaberi is their incompatibility. That two very different individuals from very different backgrounds and personalities are thrown together to play house seems to put enormous pressure on Ron and ultimately causes
his dissatisfaction with his married life. Ron is also a victim to a lesser degree than Kaberi because he gave into his parents’ choice in the matter of his bride; he had to perform his part for the collective happiness and convenience of others around him. He reveals this to Kaberi by saying that: “‘It was Mama who had fallen in love with you,’” indicating that he had no choice but to marry her in order to please his family (132).

Beauvoir establishes that in the institution of marriage, a woman will remain oppressed and unequal to the man. She forfeits her identity and becomes integrated into the life that he leads, and follows him and becomes the other half (506). Even when she is an economically independent woman and some marriages have displayed the conditions of equality, it is all illusory according to Beauvoir because, “dependence is interiorized; she is a slave even when conducts herself with apparent freedom, while the husband is essentially autonomous and enchained from the outside” (591).

There are oppressive patterns that emerge as the story of Kaberi unfolds. Her oppressed state, as the reader discovers, comes from internalizing her own mother’s passivity in an abusive marriage. She is oppressed by her husband who despite all her attempts to love him, leaves her for another woman only to return to her when he learns that she is carrying his child. This unequal, unhappy and abusive relationship that she shares with her husband is a pattern that has been repeated before in the marriage of Kaberi’s parents. The relationship that Kaberi has with her mother is fraught with complexities and reveals the relationship that exist between a mother and a daughter at the conscious and subconscious level; since the daughter is conditioned into how to be a woman by emulating her mother, she also subconsciously lives out the same life that her mother has led even mirroring the same oppressive marriage that her mother had experienced.
The complexity of mother-daughter relationships is often explored through literary representations. In *Rebirth*, Barua dwells on this aspect of the relationship to give the reader a possible explanation for Kaberi’s passivity. It sheds light on how much the relationship between mother and daughter influences the outcome of the daughter’s own life.

Adrienne Rich calls it the most formative relationship in the life of every woman; she describes the mother-daughter relationship as:

> The cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which had lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other.” (qtd. in Hirsch 200-201; my emphasis)

Rich establishes that the time spent in the mother’s womb is a “unifying” and “incontrovertible” experience that has been shared by all men and women, an experience that exposes us to the varied emotions that the mother goes through. Since this experience of motherhood happens within the confines of the institution of patriarchy, it becomes a “female experience that is shaped by male expectations and structures” (Hirsch 201).

The child inherits the mother’s experience within this structure and internalizes it at a conscious and subconscious level. This internalization is more prominent in the female infant because mothers identify more strongly “seeing them more as an extension of themselves.” The male infant is encouraged to be “separate and autonomous” while the female infant is encouraged to be less autonomous but at the same time receives less nurturing because “the mother projects upon her daughter her own ambivalence about being female in patriarchal culture.” This creates “continuity” and a “lack of separation and differentiation between the
mother and daughter” which adds complex layers in the mother-daughter relationship (Hirsch 206-07).

The lack of autonomy in the mother-daughter relationship means the female experience of Kaberi’s mother who found herself in a loveless and abusive marriage, and the passivity with which she put up with it is transferred to her daughter and is manifested in her daughter’s marriage too. When Kaberi confronts her mother, a few days after her father’s funeral, if her father had been abusive, her mother categorically denies it even though it appears to be otherwise. When Kaberi asks her mother if her father had loved her, her mother replies, “What is love, Kaberi? He looked after me, in a way, and gave me respect in public” (163). Her mother’s words echoes Kaberi’s own remark on Ron’s impeccable public manners. Kaberi’s mother explains to her that she had put up with the marriage as she blamed herself for her husband’s unhappiness and alcoholism. It was also because she had no option of leaving being economically dependent on her husband.

When Kaberi reveals to her mother that Ron is physically violent, her mother still persuades her to stay in the marriage because of the impending birth of the baby reasoning that her child needed a father’s name. When Kaberi confronts her for not telling her that her father also had been physically abusive, her mother chastises her for being insolent. The internal conditioning is entrenched so deeply in patriarchy that her mother even though she is aware that her daughter is suffering and yet orders her to go back to her oppressor (183).

Kaberi’s mother conditions her daughter to interiorize the prescribed behaviour, conduct, and demeanour expected from the female in a patriarchal culture. She subconsciously projects on to her daughter to adopt the oppressive patterns that she herself had experienced, just as
generations of mothers before would have. Judith Arcana articulates the culture of oppression that mothers and daughters find themselves in:

All our mothers teach us is what they have learned in the crucible of sexism. They cannot give us a sense of self-esteem which they do not possess. We must learn to interpret anew the experience our mothers have passed on to us, to see these lives in terms of struggle, often unconscious, to find and maintain some peace, beauty and respect for themselves as women. (qtd. in Hirsch 213; my emphasis)

Till this point, Kaberi is a character that is oppressed and displays a lack of will to free herself from her oppressors. The breaking of oppressive patterns in the Rebirth occurs when Kaberi is empowered through her impending motherhood. This aspect of empowerment through motherhood forms the crux of Rebirth and by exploring the dialectical nature of motherhood; Barua establishes that though a woman is at her most vulnerable in this state, she is also paradoxically empowered with the realization that she is carrying life within her. In Rebirth, the empowering aspect of motherhood is made to triumph.

Initially, Kaberi is timid and is happy to play the subservient role, but as the realization of impending motherhood dawns on her, there is a slow and gradual change in her demeanour. She undergoes an emotional transformation gaining courage gradually to stand up to Ron and confront things in her life which otherwise the old Kaberi would have shied away from.

The vulnerability of her changing body leads to a radical transformation when Kaberi’s discovers a strength which is realized through the act of carrying life within her. When Ron comes back to their marital home after learning of her pregnancy, Kaberi is determined to be no longer passive but pro-actively begins to revolt against Ron’s mistreatment of her. She
demands for him to end his affair and even stands up to him when he attempts to hit her, the courage of which even takes her by surprise and she affirms to herself poignantly this new found bravery by saying, “I find more courage now” (85-86). When she discovers that Ron is still continuing his affair at a party that they attend together and this results in a violent confrontation, she fights back for the first time, allowing all her bottled up emotions to surface; emotions that she had stoically held on for so long (132).

The dialectic of motherhood is that even when it puts Kaberi in a vulnerable state, the acute awareness that she is protecting a life within her activates a protective mode in Kaberi that ultimately leads to emancipating herself from all the oppressive patterns that has confined and limited her for so long. The paradox is that, in her most vulnerable moment when a woman needs to be loved most, Kaberi finds an inner strength and courage that had been dormant all her life which is finally triggered with the realization that she was carrying a miracle of life within her.

Another aspect that brings Kaberi empowerment to break oppressive patterns in her life is the strength that she derives from relationships, especially female friendships. In Rebirth, female friendships are an important aspect of the narrative that brings comfort and strength in Kaberi’s life and a lot of emphasis is placed on it by Barua.

The focus on relationships is evocative of Elaine Showalter emphasis in “Towards a Feminist Poetics” of the necessity to “construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature” to study female experience divorced from male models and theories. This meant focusing on a “female culture” that examined the “internalized constructs of femininity, but also the occupations, interactions, and consciousness of women” (131). In literary representations, applying Showalter’s paradigm of analyzing female culture includes studying relationships between women – as mothers, daughters, sisters and friends.
Morwenna Griffiths writes in *Feminisms and the Self* (1995) that a woman’s most significant definition of self is based in her relationships with others, either as individuals or groups (Waldron 5). This thought is reflected in *Rebirth* where the narrative is centered on relationships – the relationship between mother and child; wife and husband; mother and daughter and between friends. Kaberi’s character is central to all these relationships that play out in the novel. Some relationships in Kaberi’s life are oppressive in nature and some empower her.

A huge part of Kaberi’s consciousness is dominated by her friend Joya, her childhood friend from Assam. Even though Joya’s participation in political protests in Assam leads to her tragic death, her presence indelibly lives on in Kaberi’s thoughts. Joya’s character is revealed to the reader through Kaberi’s thoughts. Joya and the life she led influence Kaberi to find the inner strength that leads to her empowerment.

Kaberi’s frequently reminisces about Joya’s strong will and opinionated personality. The intimate friendship that they forged in childhood is described by Kaberi: “Joya and my closeness was different – it was the intimacy siblings shared where one did not worry about the deficiencies of the other; indeed, often did not see them at all (73). Close as they may be, Kaberi and Joya, however, are anything but alike. Joya is everything that Kaberi is not. Joya lived life on her own terms by passionately following her inner convictions and even married a man who was “deemed unsuitable” for her. Kaberi describes Joya as someone who “believed in free speech, free love, free everything” (65). Joya’s life even though a short and unfortunate one, is greatly admired by Kaberi. She had married for love, had been happy in her marriage and had pursued her purpose in life even though it ended in her death. As the novel progresses, Kaberi’s introspective moments dwells more and more on Joya as she begins to question things about herself, and it serves as a guiding light for Kaberi to find the
courage to life according to her terms too. Joya’s influence on Kaberi’s psyche is apparent when she says:

Maybe I should have been a different person; maybe I should have been more assertive, more argumentative, less willing to acquiesce, but that has never been my way. Even when Joya would work herself into a lather over my submissiveness I never gave in – I did not see conflict as obligatory in every situation. Things could be worked around. Or could they? I don’t know these days, I am not sure of my convictions any more. All I know is that things are never what they seem to be, that nothing is permanent the way I knew it. (28-29)

It is not only Joya’s presence that gives strength to Kaberi but the friendships that she forges with other women that provide a support system through her emotional pain – Preetha, the “subversive” friend as Ron called her; Sonia, the wife of Ron’s boss; and Mary, the domestic house help. Her friendships with these women play a part in transforming her from a timid housewife to an independent woman who awaits the birth of her child.

The focus on female friendships reveals how vital it is for a woman to gain a sense of ‘self’ through the relationships that she builds around her; the strength and courage she gains from these relationships.

The ending of Rebirth is an open end exposed to the reader’s own interpretation. It is not conclusive whether Kaberi leaves Ron or not, however, the story ends with Kaberi getting ready to go to the hospital to give birth. The Kaberi that we see at the close of the story is a confident and assured woman. Rebirth is a novel that narrates a woman’s journey to empowerment which is realized through her impending motherhood and through the strength gained from female friendships. Kaberi’s transformative change is not a dramatic event but
happens through a gradual period of reflective moments and confrontations with herself. By going through this refining stage, she is able to break the bonds of oppressive patterns in her life to emerge with a realization of her true self.

5.5 Discrimination Against Women in Temsula Ao’s “The Night”

In a patriarchy, a woman’s status and subordinate position to man is established by the cultural construct of gender (Beauvoir 26). Being female in a patriarchy means a woman is, irrespective of the economic class she belongs to, considered as lesser than a man and her morality and sexuality subjected to higher degrees of censure whereas a man’s sexuality is given concessions as it is attributed to masculine behaviour. The female is burdened with “impossible virtues” and given “the function of serving as the male’s conscience,” which failing to do so subjects her to discrimination (Millett 36-37).

Temsula Ao’s “The Night” (These Hills), is the story of a woman called Imnala who is judged by a village council for having children out of wedlock. Because of this she is subjected to humiliation and her moral character is questioned. Both her children had been conceived outside of marriage, once with a man who abandoned her and the next with a married man. As it was customary for a village council to determine the fate of children born outside of marriage on matters which included whether they should be given the father’s name and whether they were entitled to the father’s property; a council made up of elders summons Imnala to a meeting to decide on these matters. The story is an insightful look into the discriminatory attitude towards women and how those who are branded as the ‘other woman’ are ostracized in patriarchal societies and marginalized along with their children. It also reveals how men even though complicit in the act are pardoned and not judged as harshly by society.
The stigma associated with women who have children out of wedlock is immense and it veritably affects a child’s acceptability and status in society. In most patriarchal societies, the name of the mother holds no value and weight; it is only through the man that status or social acceptance is passed on. On the immanence of a woman within the domain of the men, Beauvoir writes that: “He is economically the head of the community, and thus he embodies it in society’s eyes. She takes his name, she joins his religion, integrates into his class, his world…” (506; my emphasis).

Imnala’s first child is the daughter of a man who had ardently pursued her with pledges of love and marriage, and then swiftly discarded her when he went to join the Naga underground army. The match was encouraged by her parents who thought it would result in an early marriage. Insult is added to injury when the “renegade father” refuses to acknowledge Imnala’s daughter as his own thus “casting aspersions on the mother’s character” (Ao 45). The father’s refusal to accept the daughter as his own is looked upon as a social death sentence and smears the character of the mother.

When Imnala falls pregnant for the second time with the child of a married man named Alemba, she and her family are faced with the same dilemma whether the child would be rejected by the man’s family. Alemba, a young contractor had sought out to do contract work with Imnala’s father for supervisory work on building roads. He had taken pity on the unfortunate luck that had befallen Imnala when her lover and the father of her child had abandoned her and so Alemba would visit her family often to regale them with stories and gifts, however, as time passed, the close proximity led to them being lovers. When Imnala’s pregnancy is made public, the censure that falls upon her is swift; the villagers react with vitriolic comments:

The village was agog with the news and tongues began to wag:
‘What can you expect from a girl like that?
The old man’s greed has landed him a second bastard grandchild’.
The wicked ones joked, ‘She is too greedy, you know what I mean?’ and they would burst out laughing at their own ribald wit. (50)

Imnala is summoned to a meeting by the village elders. The meeting is called to decide whether a fine would be imposed on Imnala and decide the fate of the unborn child. The meeting would see if Alemba would claim the child as his own, and if he did, would decide whether child support could be claimed and if the child turns out to be male, if he would be entitled to some inheritance.

The meeting is a kangaroo court as it can allow the ‘immoral’ woman to be harm by the “aggrieved wife” and as Ao writes: “On such occasions, village custom gave the aggrieved party a lot of leeway: to hurl abuses, including physical assault, within a reasonable limit…” (46). On the day of the meeting, when Imnala is to be escorted to the place by her uncle, her father pleads with the uncle to protect his daughter from physical abuse as he was aware that there had been instances “where under similar circumstances a girl’s hair was chopped off and her clothes stripped off ‘to shame her’” (55).

The married man in the concerned matter escapes almost unscathed unlike the woman who is subjected to humiliation and even permissible violence in lieu of compensation for causing emotional trauma for the wife. Millett in articulating the different aspects of patriarchy mentions how in interiorizing its ideology has huge psychological ramifications and grave implications for each sex. She writes: “The large quantity of guilt attached to sexuality in patriarchy is overwhelmingly placed upon the female, who is, culturally speaking, held to be culpable or the more culpable party in nearly any sexual liaison, whatever the extenuating circumstances” (54).
The disgrace associated with the ‘fallen woman’ is not only shown towards her or her children but the shame and scorn is also placed on her family. Imnala’s father thinks to himself saying, “My family has once again become the object of ridicule. I have lost face not only among my clansmen but in the entire village” (51). Her mother is also deeply affected by the shame that has tainted the family name; she weeps openly for her family and sorrowfully recollects her mother’s own words that: “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” (53).

The story ends with Imnala coming home safely after the council meeting having obtained the assurance of the acknowledged paternity of her unborn child but the reality is still that “She would bear the stigma of being an unwed mother all her life” (56). Imnala’s situation as an unmarried mother and woman is remindful of Beauvoir’s analysis of motherhood that a woman does not attain the full dignity or status of a person or to be called a person unless she is married. Her statement on motherhood sums up what it means to be an unmarried mother in a patriarchal society, she says: Motherhood in particular is respected only in the married woman; the unwed mother remains an object of scandal…” (507-08).

Imnala’s story is also a revelation into how some unscrupulous men can take advantage of vulnerable women with the promise of love and marriage. The myth created of the ‘feminine mystery’ can enamour the masculine heart at first, but when the mystery of the image is unravelled, the man satiated, abandons the wronged woman (Beauvoir 317-18). Imnala’s guilt is only that she wanted to be loved and feel secure. Her parents only wanted her future security. Millett lays bare in Sexual Politics how romantic love obscures the patriarchal character of the culture we find ourselves in. The concept of romantic love according to her
allows emotional manipulation to take place in which the male is free to exploit and it “obscures the realities of female status and the burden of economic dependency” (37).

5.6 Conclusion

Based on the discussion above of the select fiction of Easterine Kire, Jahnavi Barua and Temsula Ao, an articulation of the different aspects of gender oppression and discrimination that occurs in patriarchy has been attempted. The subject of gender discrimination and oppression in patriarchy has always occupied a contentious position in feminist critical theory, and applying it to the fiction of an emerging tribe of women writers from the North-East enlightens and exposes the concerns and issues of what it means to be female from a part of India that is often under-represented.

Beauvoir and Millett’s criticism of the patriarchal institution and their insightful deconstruction into the oppression of women remains relevant even today in dissecting and analysing the writings of women from diverse backgrounds. It is premature to label the fiction of these writers as feminist; but what is important to note is that their writings can be considered as genesis texts that begin to probe and question the meaning of being a woman in a patriarchal society and to be able to transmute that female experience into fiction.

Oppression and discrimination of women is an indelible marker of patriarchy, having established that, it is essential to work towards critically examining the current constructs of masculinity and femininity and on how gender role ‘socialization’ and ‘conditioning’ perpetuates inequality of the sexes. Gender is not a biological reality, it is a cultural construct and achieved through a process of acculturation and since “culture does not make people. People make culture,” the oppression of women can be done away with and the “full humanity” of women restored (Adichie 46).
Notes

1. I have chosen to use the maiden name of the author ‘Kire’ in my discussion of the novel even though the 2007 edition of the novel used here has ‘Easterine Iralu’ as the published name of the author. The author has since then reverted to using her maiden name in later publications.

2. Christianity in the Naga Hills is synonymous with Western education because it was the American and British missionaries that first set up schools and educational institutions in the region.

3. Among the Naga hill tribes, early anthropologists and administrators noted that blood feuds were common and the system carried out in excess; where the rule was a “life for a life,” for a more in-depth reading on the subject see Johnstone 313.

4. A dialect that belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages and is spoken by the Angami tribe in the Naga Hills.

5. G.W.F. Hegel’s master-slave dialectic which appeared in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) is the influential description of the branching of consciousness into two, the Master consciousness which is the ‘one’, and the Slave consciousness which is the ‘other’ with respect to the ‘one’. This concept of the otherness is utilized by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* to argue that woman is the ‘other’ with respect to the man who is the ‘one’ or the subject. To better understand Beauvoir’s utilization of the concept, see Judith Butler 43-44.
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