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"I Am the Village": Deconstructing Phallogocentric Hegemony in Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights* through the lens of Post-structural feminism.

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to deconstruct Easterine Kire's Sahitya Academy-winning novel of 2025, *Spirit Nights* through the lens of Post-structural feminism. Set against the descent of an unnatural "great darkness" upon a Chang Naga village, the narrative exposes the fatal limitations of the community's phallogocentric symbolic order and patriarchal governance. When the male elders and their traditional logocentric warrior myths are paralyzed by an inexplicable void, an elderly woman named Tola emerges to navigate the metaphysical crisis. By employing a framework that integrates Julia Kristeva's semiotic *chora*, Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*, and Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity, this study examines how Tola actively subverts the rigid male-centric linguistic architecture of her community. The paper further investigates Tola's dynamic agency in contrast to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of "subaltern" silence and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the monolithic "third-world woman." Through her spiritual plurality, which echoes Luce Irigaray's concept of the "not-one," and her reclamation of pre-linguistic maternal resonance, Tola dismantles the internalized shadows of indigenous patriarchy. Ultimately, this paper argues that Kire's text transcends simple cultural preservation as it acts as a radical linguistic intervention where the marginalized indigenous woman reclaims the power to author her own reality, thereby charting a profound path toward cultural decolonization.

Keywords: Easterine Kire, Naga Literature, entre-deux, Subaltern, Post-Structural Feminism, Phallogocentrism,Écriture Féminine

Introduction

As a pioneer of contemporary Naga literature from Kohima (Nagaland, India), Easterine Kire occupies a unique position within the global literary landscape.

She is the first Naga poet and novelist to write in English who serves as a bridge between the ancient oral traditions of the Angami people and the indigenous, particularly Naga tribe of India. Most of the works she authored represent a significant milestone in the history of feminism, specifically the transition from Western-centric perspectives toward a primordial force of feminism that is exclusively centred around the marginalized indigenous woman. This shift is fundamentally linguistic as it involves the reclamation of a voice that has been historically marginalized by both colonial education and indigenous patriarchal structures. By utilizing English as a significant weapon of articulation of Naga identity, Kire engages in a form of linguistic subversion that transcends simple translation, keeping the essence of her own native voice intact. She performs a deconstruction of the man-made language that has governed her community's myths, allowing the feminine subject to emerge from the silence of folklore into the agency of written history. This intersection of indigenous identity, feminist reclamation, and linguistic importance provides the necessary foundation for a critical analysis of her novel *Spirit Nights*. In this novel, the descent of an unnatural, metaphysical darkness serves as a catalyst for a profound rupture in the symbolic order of a Naga village. The community's reality is structured by ancient phallogocentric myths that dictate the distribution of power and the legitimacy of speech, rooted in a history that prioritizes male technological mastery, specifically the control of fire, as the defining characteristic of civilization. However, when the unnatural "great darkness" descends, these traditional male-centric solutions and warrior narratives are rendered obsolete (Kire 39). This paralysis of the elders and their historical man-made laws exposes the fatal limitations of a society built on the exclusion of feminine difference. Into this void, an older woman named Tola steps forward with her immense wisdom and spiritual connection that bypasses the formalized and restrictive speech of the village hierarchy.

Phallogocentric Logic and the Construction of the Naga Subject

The social and linguistic architecture of the village in *Spirit Nights* is anchored in what Hélène Cixous identifies as a "phallogocentric tradition" (879). This tradition prioritizes the male voice as the primary source of truth and law. When the "great darkness" descends, the village elders attempt to resolve the crisis using the only tools they possess: historical narratives of male triumph and the rigid symbolic order of patriarchal governance. Dale Spender, in *Man Made Language*, highlights how this control of narrative serves to marginalize women:

Language is our means of classifying and ordering the world: our means of manipulating reality. In its structure and in its use, we bring our world into realization, and if it is inherently inaccurate, then we are misled. If the rules which underlie our language system, our symbolic order, are invalid, then we are daily deceived. (Spender 3)

In the novel, the origin of stories of the darkness are often attributed to the "enmity between Man and Tiger" (Kire 147). In the traditional Chang Naga account, as illustrated in the book, describes a contest between a Man and a Tiger to see who can make fire first. The loser is declared to live in the woods. Because the Man won, the Tiger was exiled, leading to a lasting hostility. This foundational myth, which centres on Namu, "the first man who made a fire," establishes a masculine genealogy of light and survival (Kire 148). The institutionalization of this phallogocentric logic is most evident in the village's strict gender demarcation of spiritual authority. While the ancestral narrative of Namu's mastery establishes an external, masculine fire as the primary source of communal survival, the true internal light of the village resides in Tola. As the daughter of the late Seer, she is the biological and spiritual heir to a lineage of prophecy. However, the patriarchal hierarchy of the village strictly forbids her from holding the official title "because she was a woman" (Kire 21-22). Instead, it is passed to her less capable cousin, Chongshen. This systemic erasure continues to be physically reified in the *Morung* or men's house, which serves as the architectural manifestation of the androcentric hierarchy. The *Morung* is the traditional Naga men's dormitory and community house. It is the centre of political and spiritual decision-making. The women are excluded from this place in order to ensure that masculine perspective remains as the only official way to interpret reality. Moreover, it functions as the site where the epistemological domain for organizing the community's fate is curated and maintained through the exclusive speech of men. By barring Tola from this space, the village makes sure that her prophetic knowledge remains unspoken within the formal assembly, effectively preventing her from participating in the collective classification of the crisis. Furthermore, the village's ultimate symbol of communication and protection, the log-drum is fiercely guarded as a male domain. Choba refers to it directly as the patriarchal anchor, stating, "'The log-drum is our father,'... 'It protects us against our enemies and wild animals" (Kire 47). Here too, the women are kept out from the sacred act of carving it. This omission underscores a deeper linguistic disenfranchisement. As Deborah Cameron observes, "It is men who decide what words will mean and who will have the right to use them.

That is why language enshrines a male (and misogynist) view of the world" (93). In this communal setting, the gender discrimination Tola faces proves that the only legitimate interpretation of the spirit world is one that passes through a male vessel, thereby enshrining a world-view where feminine spiritual insight is categorized as illegitimate or silent within the village's official symbolic order. Again, it reinforces an enforced subjugation by a linguistic and spiritual system that equates fatherhood with protection and womanhood with passive observation. Robin Lakoff notes that this lack of linguistic power translates into a perceived lack of social power: "Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings. Woman's language has as its foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are preempted by men" (Lakoff 100). When the elders gather to discuss the darkness, their speech is characterized by an authoritative, male-derived logic that demands adherence to ancient prohibitions. They speak of laws that forbade the young from questioning the darkness and simply obey the rules of the *genna* or taboo days. It can be seen as a directive that aims to maintain order through silence. However, this control fails when the darkness proves to be a force that cannot be named or categorized by traditional masculine wisdom. The crisis is so severe that the elders' old laws and Chongshen's false visions cannot solve it. The breakdown of their system of meaning allows Tola to finally come forward. This is the core arc of the novel. While her grandson, Namu, physically ventures into the void to confront the tiger, Tola performs a superior spiritual feat. She uses an astral projection to get out of her physical form, sending her spirit into the "Spirit Nights" to rescue Namu from the tiger's deception, proving her wisdom is superior to the failed official hierarchy (Kire).

The Semiotic Chora: Tola and the Great Darkness

The "great darkness" in the story functions as more than a physical absence of light. It represents the collapse of the "Symbolic" and a return to what Julia Kristeva calls the "Semiotic," which she defines as a realm of drives, rhythms, and maternal connection that precedes the structured, logical language of the father, further noting this space as the *chora*: "a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (24). As stated earlier, while the men of the village fear the darkness as an inexpressible void that threatens their wholeness, Tola perceives it as a receptacle of spiritual energy and ancestral memory that she too learned from her grandmother. Her navigation of the "Spirit Nights" is guided not by the logocentric maps of the elders, but by the mobility of her own intuition and spiritual exercise. In the *chora* of the darkness, the rigid

binaries of male and female, and light and dark begin to dissolve. Tola's journey is an act of rejection against the "Symbolic" status quo. Kristeva argues that such a rejection is a necessary precursor to new meaning: The "Semiotic" is "a precondition for the social and the symbolic" (293). The moment Tola steps into the darkness, she does not perform a mere heroic act, rather restores the maternal space that patriarchal language has tried to suppress.

This act of reinstatement constitutes a significant departure from the village's traditional naming rituals, which serve as "a father's way of establishing ownership over the child" (Kire 13). In the male-dominated Chang community, naming is a tool used by elders and fathers to solidify a child's place within the society. However, Tola deconstructs this in the novel's conclusion through her linguistic intervention regarding the "Night and Day" twins. When the second twin is born with translucent skin and "snow-white hair," Namu is terrified and considers abandoning the child in the forest to avert a curse (Kire 131). Tola immediately intercedes, identifying the first baby as "Night, summer-night haired" and the second as "Day" (Kire 131). By classifying them as physical marks of the "great darkness" they survived, Tola halts the village's patriarchal fear and anchors their identities in the corporeal witness of the crisis rather than the village's official patriarchal records. This act of naming functions as a final "Semiotic" victory, ensuring that the reclamation of the female voice and the community's shared survival are permanently inscribed onto the bodies of the next generation.

Nevertheless, a past incident from the novel can be recalled to elucidate that Tola's connection to the "Semiotic" is rooted in a history of silent and somatic communication. During her secret pregnancy, she would "laugh a soundless laugh to herself," guarding her condition as a "shared treasure" to avoid the "veiled ostracism" of those who labelled her barren (Kire 10-11). This laugh in the void represents a "Semiotic" rupture, constituting a joy and a communication that exists entirely outside the patriarchal language that defines a woman's worth solely through visible motherhood. This pre-linguistic resonance continues during the "great darkness" through the phenomenon of "spirit-grain-pounding" (Kire 90). When the village hears spirits pounding grain at night—a "big taboo" since "no mortal pounded grain at night," it signifies a temporal disruption where the supernatural mimics domestic labour to signal the village's impending spiritual exhaustion (Kire 74). Tola alone can decode this mimicry because she has always inhabited the spaces between sound and

silence. This is further articulated in the novel's inclusion of a traditional account regarding a female seer's rejection of proprietary logic: "Mark my words: he belongs to the womb that housed him, and to the breast that nursed him, but most of all, he belongs to himself. He is not anyone's property" (Kire 22). Within the Kristevan framework, this statement of a powerful female authority functions as a verbal manifestation of the *chora*. It prioritizes the primordial, maternal drives over the legalistic definitions of the androcentric hierarchy. By rooting the child's identity in relation to his mother and ultimately in the self, she surpasses the logocentric demand for the child to belong to the father or the community's narrative archive.

***Écriture Féminine*: Mapping the Spiritual Body**

In the vacuum of the "Spirit Nights," Tola's actions evolve into a visceral manifestation of Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*—the practice of writing the female body and experience into the historical record. Cixous famously exhorts:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies... Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (Cixous 875)

While the patriarchal law of the village has long sequestered women from the centre of Naga spiritual history, Tola reclaims this space by inserting her own movement into the void. This crucial manoeuvre, however, is not a physical journey across the landscape, but a somatic and spiritual transgression. Although she is of advanced age and faces physical frailty, she anchors herself at the threshold of the darkness, asserting her agency by stating, "'I won't go out, but I need my voice to carry and it will carry best when I am seated by the door'" (Kire 82). This vocalization is the first stage of her "writing." By intertwining ancestral songs with her own rhythms of breath, she produces a rhythmic, bodily expression that sustains the village's spirit where the solid fire of the men has failed. This act echoes Cixous's assertion that a woman's voice is never far from her "mother's milk" (881). It is a nourishing, maternal language that prioritizes life over the rigid transmission of law. However, to fully capture the specific cultural nuances of Tola's agency, it is essential to supplement these frameworks with a perspective that accounts for the unique position of the indigenous woman.

Deconstructing the "Third World Woman": Mohanty and Tola's Agency

While the village's internal patriarchal structure marginalizes Tola, a critical reading must also avoid the trap of "Western Eyes" that often homogenizes

indigenous women (Mohanty 333). Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, warns against the tendency of Western feminist discourse to produce the "third world woman" as a "monolithic" or "homogeneous category" (338). She argues that this analytical move "colonizes" the lived experiences of women by defining them solely through their "oppression" (Mohanty 335). In *Spirit Nights*, Tola is initially framed by the younger villagers and some elders as a vulnerable grandmother whose age and gender supposedly necessitate protection. Kire dismantles this monolithic categorization immediately upon the arrival of the "great darkness." While the men of the village become disabled by confusion, debating whether a simple storm is approaching, it is Tola who instantly reads the cosmic signs, exclaiming, "Tiger has eaten the sun!" (Kire 59). Furthermore, rather than retreating into the expected role of a frightened elder seeking protection, she becomes the pragmatic anchor for the community. When her grandson, Namu, and his wife, Thongdi, are overwhelmed by the darkness and ask for guidance, Tola commands the domestic space with authoritative clarity: "I am not the seer. It is his job to tell us what to do. But on our part, we will stay brave. That is our weapon. Stay courageous and wise. Do nothing foolish" (Kire 59). By taking charge of the psychological survival of her family, Tola shatters the "Western" trope of the passive, oppressed "third world woman," operating instead as an active, vital custodian of her community's resilience (Mohanty 336).

The "Subaltern" Speaks in *Spirits Nights*: Spivak's Silence vs. Kire's Resonance

The question of whether Tola can truly speak within the structures of her society brings us to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" where she argues that the "subaltern" is not merely a name for the oppressed but for those who are "removed from lines of social mobility" (Morris 110). Spivak famously concludes that "the subaltern cannot speak," meaning that even when a "subaltern" woman performs an act of resistance, it is often re-interpreted and silenced by the dominant patriarchal or colonial history (Morris 15).

In *Spirit Nights*, the "subaltern" status of women is encoded in the village's taboos and silent spaces. Kire describes the village's reaction to the encroaching darkness as a "tomb-like gloom" (Kire 82). It denotes a state where the community's inability to articulate the nature of the threat leads to a total collapse of communication: "Every sound was subdued. No children cried, no one spoke loudly, and it seemed as though the darkness was being perpetuated by the fearful silence of the people" (Kire 74). This linguistic immobility represents the ultimate "subaltern" condition; when the

village's existing traditional vocabulary is insufficient to describe a catastrophe, the subjects become literally speechless. It is within this ghost-silence that systemic silencing is explicitly dramatized through Tola's interactions with Chongshen, the official male seer. When Tola receives prophetic visitations warning of the darkness, she brings this crucial knowledge to him. Instead of validating her insight, he relies on her marginalized status to mute her, warning her not to tell anyone because "they may say you are getting a little crazy in your old age" (Kire 44). Chongshen's dismissal exemplifies Spivak's assertion about the position of the "subaltern" in the patriarchal domain. It is only much later, when the Seer of Mvüphri rebukes Chongshen: "You fool! You have let your jealousy thoroughly blind you... she is the seer of men's destinies!"—that the text officially exposes the patriarchal suppression of the feminine voice (Kire 68). Tola is forced to circumvent the village council entirely because the official channels refuse to hear her. By speaking to the spirits when the men are stone-silent, she demonstrates that the "subaltern" articulates best when the dominant discourse has completely exhausted itself. However, Kire provides a post-structuralist alternative to Spivak's silence. Tola's speech is not found in the symbolic debates of the council, but in the resonance of her spirit-travel. In the *Reflections on the History of an Idea* collection, Spivak clarifies that the inability to speak for the "subaltern" does not mean they are literally silent, but that their "Speech Act" is not completed by a response from the power structure (Morris 40). Tola knowingly escapes the need for a response from the elders. She enters a translingual communication with the spirits of the ancestors, a realm where the law of the father has no jurisdiction. This spirit-speech is a form of counter-narrative that allows the "subaltern" to speak to the cosmos even when she is unheard in the "village square" (Kire 125).

The Plurality of the "Not-One": Irigaray and the Fluidity of Naga Wisdom

Because Tola is denied a singular, official voice in the village council, she cultivates a fluid identity to communicate her wisdom. This multifaceted role as a mother, grandmother, healer, and spirit-walker aligns with Luce Irigaray's concept of feminine plurality. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray argues that patriarchal language is singular and unary, attempting to reduce everything to a oneness that reflects the phallus. She writes:

But woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its

differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined-in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness. (Irigaray 28)

This plurality is not just biological but discursive. The village elders seek a singular solution to the darkness, such as a warrior or a hero to restore the one light. Tola, however, embodies a plural wisdom. She does not approach the darkness with a unary weapon, but with a multiplicity of spiritual tools: incantations, prophetic dreams, and the diffuse materiality of her healing arts. Tola's plurality is most evident in her refusal to be categorized by a singular social or spiritual role. Her grandson, Namu, explicitly defines her through a myriad of identities, breaking down unary patriarchal definitions of kinship by stating: "She is my Abi nyu, my grandmother... But she is also my mother, and she is my father" (Kire 52). This domestic multiplicity extends seamlessly into her spiritual life. Rather than operating strictly in the physical world or the spiritual void, Tola occupies the Irigarayan *entre-deux* (in-between), simultaneously navigating the waking world and the realm of visions (Irigaray 11). Kire notes that Tola's consciousness is layered with "many dreams and waking dreams" (Kire 50). It illustrates an epistemological state that is, as Irigaray asserts, "always at least double" (28). Tola does not choose between the domestic reality and the spiritual void. She occupies both, using the syntax of her dreams to navigate a darkness that has blinded the linear eyes of the hunters. Her identity is not one because it is constantly fluid, shifting between the physical reality of the village and the metaphysical reality of the "Spirit Nights." Kire most powerfully articulates this feminine plurality when Tola sings her transgressive dirge to the terrified village. In a profound manifestation of Irigaray's discursive plurality, Tola's voice expands beyond the boundaries of a single, localized self. She sings:

Children of Shumang Laangnyu Sang, listen to my story for I am the village. You call me Kuneibü nyu, our mother. I am indeed your mother. I have carried your stories from the very beginning and will carry them long after you are gone. I am all the women whose husbands have died young. I am all the women who have buried their dead babies in the cold ground. And I am all the men and women and children that have wanted this village to live. I am every word that chooses life and refuses death. Listen to your mother Tola, listen to your mother, the village.' (Kire 83)

In this moment, Tola is literally not one. She embodies a multiplicity of identities—mother, widow, ancestor, and the village itself. Unlike the men who seek a singular, phallic weapon to pierce the darkness, Tola wields a fluid, communal

identity. This plurality is materialized in the "memory ball" Tola gives to Namu (Kire 96). It is a physical object that holds spiritual experiences. The ball serves as a post-structuralist "trace," a manifestation of a non-linear spiritual history that cannot be captured by the unary patriarchal oral tradition (Derrida 65). It allows Namu to access a multiplicity of "Spirit Nights" simultaneously. This fluidity reaches its climax in the deconstruction of the monster. The six-tailed tiger is revealed not as a mere predator, but as an ontological construct of the human shadow. Upon examining the severed appendages, Tola explicitly deconstructs the beast's physical terror by translating it into a lexicon of moral failure, stating: "Each tail stands for different forms of pride. Rebellion. Arrogance. Greed. Hatred of all that is good. Self-seeking. Envy" (Kire 104). By killing the tiger and naming its parts, Tola and Namu are not merely performing a heroic feat, they are dismantling the internalized shadows of the community's own linguistic and spiritual decay.

Performativity and the Subversion of the Grandmother Archetype

In disassembling these internalized shadows, Tola must also overthrow the physical expectations placed upon her. Her subsequent actions in the "Spirit Nights" constitute a radical re-performance of gender and age. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, reminds us that "the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself" (xv). In the village, the quiddity of a grandmother is performatively linked to domesticity, vulnerability, and the silence of the hearth. The community expects Tola to remain within the domestic enclosure, a victim of the darkness like everyone else. Tola's performative subversion reaches its apex through her polemical rejection of her own physical limitations. At ninety-four years old, relying on a walking cane, Tola's physical body embodies the archetype of the frail and dependent elder. Yet, when Namu is trapped by the spirit tiger, Tola performs an act of profound spiritual agency that defies her material reality. She lies on the floor, "relinquishing her flesh completely, and while in that state, she sent her spirit to find Namu" (Kire 99). Butler's assertion that gender (and by extension, identity) is a "repeated stylization of the body" is deliberately disrupted here (43). Tola completely detaches her consciousness from the "stylized" frail female body the village sees, performing the role of the active, rescuing warrior in the metaphysical realm. She single-handedly commands Namu to "Kill the tiger!" (Kire 99). It proves that her power is not anchored in the solid mechanics of physical strength, but in the boundless, fluid potential of her spiritual mastery. The way she unsettles her grandmother archetype, it finds similarity in Butler's definition that "Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given

juncture in time" (22). Hence, Tola's journey into the darkness represents a break from the village's legible social codes. As she moves beyond the roles of mother or widow, she enters a space where traditional representation fails. Diane Elam captures this theoretical abyss, noting that "women may be represented, but the attempt to represent them exhaustively only makes us more aware of the failure of such attempts. Hence the infinite regression that I specifically call the 'ms. en abyme'" (Elam 28). In *Spirit Nights*, Tola becomes this *ms. en abyme*. She personifies power that simultaneously signals the failure of the village elders to comprehensively define or contain her within their phallogocentric argument. Her identity becomes ultimately incalculable, a shifting presence that refuses to be frozen into a singular, repeatable response.

Conclusion

The resolution of *Spirit Nights* marks a fundamental collapse of the logocentric frameworks that previously dictated communal life. In navigating an existential crisis ignored by traditional leadership, Tola proves that survival is found not in stagnant hierarchies, but in a polyvocal, multifaceted intelligence. Having reclaimed her spiritual authority, she resists the narrow identities enforced by both indigenous patriarchy and the colonial gaze. Ultimately, Kire centres maternal resonance as the driving force behind cultural decolonization. This directly aligns with Kire's own literary philosophy: "I write about women who are able to meet challenges in life and overcome them and carve a worthy life for themselves" (Tell Me Your Story). By positioning the Naga woman as a guiding torchbearer, Kire transmutes oral folklore into a revolutionary written history, proving that true sovereignty resides in the linguistic agency to author and define one's own reality.

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