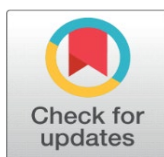


WOMEN AT THE CENTRE: A READING OF EASTERINE KIRE'S A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY

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ABSTRACT

Women of different ages, of different roles as daughters, mothers and wives; of different geographical, social and familial backgrounds; and of different emotional, psychological dispositions inhabit the fictional world of Easterine Kire, a well-known North-East Indian Naga writer. It can be well noticed that all the actions of her fictional world revolve around her land, women and men of Nagaland. The present paper focusses on the three generations of Naga women: Grandmother, mother and Dielieno, the protagonist of the novel.

Keywords: Nagaland, Women, Psychology

1. INTRODUCTION

Matriarchy is a hypothetical social system in which positions of dominance and authority are primarily held by women. It is also the public formation in which the mother or an elder woman holds the ruling position in a family. Unlike patriarchy, which is based on male dominance, matriarchy emphasizes female authority, often with lineage and property passed through the female line. Although true matriarchal societies are rare and debated among scholars, the concept highlights an alternative model of societal organisation where women play a central and influential role in shaping community life. Most households have a key figure, usually a woman, whose influence and authority help preserve harmony and cohesion within the family.

Women play a vital role in shaping the socio-economic life of the tribal communities in Nagaland. The dedication shown by tribal women to their families starts from childhood and continues unabated until their death. These women run errands, manage household chores, or work in fields and fetch water from riverside with independence and resilience. Their tireless efforts not only sustain their families but also support the broader community, making them indispensable to the functioning and survival of tribal life.

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) is a powerful exploration of gender, tradition, and identity in Nagaland, a region often overlooked in mainstream Indian literature. Through the coming-of-age story of Dielieno (Lieno), the novel places women, their roles, struggles, and internalized hierarchies at the centre of the narrative. While the title paradoxically suggests a world where women wield power, Kire complicates this notion by showcasing how such power is often entangled in systems that ultimately reinforce patriarchy. This essay analyzes how Kire re-centers women not only as subjects of suffering but also as agents of cultural continuity and resistance, situating the novel as a critique of both patriarchal and oppressive matriarchal norms.

The story revolves around the protagonist Dielieno and her paternal grandmother Vibano. Grandmother has dedicated her life in supporting and serving the men of her community. She fulfilled her life by serving and pleasing her husband. The women who served their husbands are traditionally seen as the silent strength behind successful men. The grandmother, as the matriarch of her clan, with her husband's pension settled on her, holds authority over men and women alike. Paul Pimomo, in her review on *A Terrible Matriarchy*, has praised the grandmother as, "She's the grand dame among women and, had she known, would have fancied herself the Golda Meir, the Indira Gandhi or the Margaret Thatcher of Naga Patriarchy". (291)

Dielieno is the youngest and only daughter of five children and she feels very special as the little darling of her parents and brothers. The happiness did not last long because when she was about four and a half, she was taken away by her paternal grandmother, aspiring to train her to become a devoted wife and mother. Dielieno resents leaving and refuses to stay with the clan's notorious enabler of male ego and suppressor of female confidence and modern education. But as the youngest female of the clan, she is left with no option but to obey the wishes of the elders.

The grandmother's unfair attitude towards the female child can be seen from the opening pages of the novel. When Lieno offered the leg piece, grandmother denied, saying, "that portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions" (1). The male child gets the better share of the food. Lieno was burdened to perform more domestic chores in her childhood. It is her duty to fetch water from the water spot very early in the morning and she must be the first before any others. The grandmother doesn't encourage boys to fetch water. When she came to know that her grandson went to fetch water, she rebuked Lieno's mother saying, "Send the girl next time, that is a girl's work. No man in my day has ever fetched water" (3).

Education is the most powerful weapon that helps women to be independent in society. But for the Naga women, the concept of education appears irrelevant because of their social structure. Dielieno in the novel fights against the "... terrifying odds" (viii) to get education and to attain a better place in society. Her grandmother opposed Lieno being educated, saying, "In our day, girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learned the housework. Then we went to the fields and learned all the fieldwork as well. That way one never has a problem with girl children" (22).

Despite grandmother's denial, Lieno, with the support of her father, mother and brother Leto, completed her collegiate education successfully and came out with flying colours. Grandmother is strictly against having an educated daughter in her own home. She resists saying, "... a woman's role is to marry and bear children, remember that. That is her most important role. Men don't like to marry educated wives. And if you find no one to marry you, you will be alone in your old age and have no one to bury you" (190).

Bano, the niece of grandmother, is another victim in the novel. She has no memory of her biological mother. Since Bano's mother is an illegal wife, grandmother separated Bano from her father. Bano bears the burden of all domestic responsibilities. She accepts her grandmother as her mother and endures the hardships with acceptance. On the other side, she is happy to find a home for herself. The selfish motive of the grandmother towards Bano becomes evident when she deliberately rejects the marriage proposals saying, "Why should we take the first offer that comes? ...She will get other offers" (91). Bano, being uneducated and unmarried, has little prospects of owning property and choosing an independent career option.

Easterine Kire, in most of her novels, highlights the presence and struggles of women characters who attain widowhood at their early age and the sufferings they face for no fault of their own. In this novel as well, Grandmother Vibano often used to say, "A male child is to be brought up very carefully. When he is grown, he will take care of all of us" (238). She firmly believes that only a male heir can bring dignity and safeguard the family's position in society. But in the novel, two families suffer because of this so-called 'males' who are addicted to alcohol. One is Dielieno's brother Vini and the other is her friend Vimenuo's father. Nisano, Vini's wife, is widowed at her 20's with a child. Lieno's mother also faces psychological issues and on seeing the sufferings of his mother, Leto angrily shouts, "At this rate (Vini) will be the death

of mother" (202). Lieno's concern towards her mother is also witnessed when she says, "Mother was not getting better. She would not get better as long as Vini was the way he was. It was not just grief over Pete's loss that had reduced her to this. She could foresee that Vini would die soon if he went on drinking" (203).

Death of Pete had saddened his mother, but the way Vini was ruining his life made her more depressed. Nino could soothe her agonizing heart with the death of Pete as he died of sickness, which is not within human control. But she could not appease her soul about Vini because he was solely responsible for his own destruction. This bitter truth pained her enormously and she could hardly recover from ill-health, as she was afflicted with mental and emotional pain more than physical illness.

"Marriages are made in Heaven" is a well-known saying. But in the novel, it is decided by the grandmother. When her grandson Leto expressed his love towards Vimenuo, she was outraged and referred to Vimenuo as the "dead drunk's daughter" (193). She refuses to acknowledge her own flesh and blood to be associated with a family that is known for drunkenness and immorality. According to the grandmother, marrying a good girl from a good family would bring honour to her family's name. She also takes this as a chance to blame the system of education for girls, "It is all these modern ideas to blame. Educating girls indeed! Education can't rid you of bad blood, I say!" (193).

The Naga women in this novel not only have suffered matriarchy but also have suffered the tortures of the army men. Kire, through her fictional works, exposes the brutal treatment of women by army personnel deployed to resist counterinsurgency issues in Nagaland. In the 1940s, when the Japanese soldiers were taking over the southern villages of Nagaland, the British soldiers were sent to Kohima to tackle them. One day, it happened that a British officer got inside the house of Nino, Dielieno's mother and tried to molest her. She shouted and struggled to save herself. "The man cursed and flung mother from him and left abruptly" (171). It was later discovered that the soldier was actually a German spy masquerading as a British officer. Unlike Nino, numerous women were subjected to brutal torture and violation amidst the horrors of war.

Girls coming of age are referred to as a 'curse' by the grandmother. She says so because "boys don't bleed...If a girl has started to bleed, then she should be very careful because she could get pregnant if she sleeps with a man" (125). The girls who get pregnant before marriage will be a bad example to other young girls in the community. Grandmother also hate girls who are too pretty because she is of the opinion that "they would do something wrong sooner or later" (76).

Mother is the only human with whom the daughters feel free to share their innermost thoughts. Lieno shared with her mother about the hardships she experienced in her childhood days under her grandmother's care. She cried, "I used to feel I was being punished for being born a girl. For many years, I hated it so much I wished that I was not a girl" (249). Nino reveals the reason behind the grandmother's rude behaviour towards girls. "In the village, widows without sons lost all their husband's property to other male relatives. So, she understood that it was very important for a married woman to produce as many male offspring as she could" (250).

Kire also refers to instances where Dielieno's parents guided her, saying, she should not dislike her grandmother because her intention was not wrong, as she wished that her granddaughter would become a "good woman" (249). On hearing the past life of the grandmother, the cloud that hid Lieno's eyes slowly began to disappear. She understood the deep sense of insecurity that had led the grandmother to behave so. Her fear towards the grandmother changed to pity. She could see a better light and felt that, "I was not unfortunate to have been born a girl" (253).

The service rendered by Dielieno to her family is innumerable. Nino was amazed at the strength when Lieno took over her mother's role when she was just eleven and a half. "You know that our people say we should love our sons because they are the ones who look after us in old age. That may be true, but for your father and I, it is you, our daughter, who has brought us the greatest comfort. We love all of you equally" (292). All the women characters who suffered in the first half are given recognition at the end of the novel. While the grandmother was in her death bed her tears proved her love towards Lieno. After her death, she showed herself as a spirit. She did not allow any outsiders to enter her house to live until it was inhabited by its rightful owners, Vini's wife Nisano, their child, Lieno and Bano. Dielieno's intelligence and hard work, coupled with her humanity and sense of social justice, which in the end assured her personal victory. Vimenuo and her dutiful mother, whom the grandmother referred to as with "bad blood" also came up with a successful life after her alcoholic father's death. Nino, even though she has lost two of her sons, is now happy with her grandchildren.

Vibano's oppressive control is not born of malice but rather from a belief in the necessity of preserving traditional values. However, these traditions are gendered and regressive. The preference for male children, the unequal division of work, and the emphasis on female obedience all emerge through Vibano's actions. Through her, Kire presents a form of

matriarchy that is deeply rooted in patriarchal systems, making it "terrible" not because of women rule, but because they uphold structures that harm other women.

Easterine Kire, through her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy*, has proved that the tribal women are paying an exceptionally high price for the dreams, customs and decisions of their forefathers. The past that determined their culture is, in a way, threatening the peace and growth of women in the present, and is also obstructing their future prospects. Hence, it is mandatory for these tribal women to put their trust in a world that is built with unconditional love for mankind. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* has mentioned that true transformation must begin with women themselves. She must step forward and assert her rights, for though these rights may be protected by law, they risk being suppressed by deeply rooted traditions and societal expectations. It is only when women begin to believe in their own strength and capabilities that they can break free from these constraints. Empowerment, Beauvoir suggests, is not given - it must be claimed through self-awareness and action. Thus, through the character Dielieno, it is evident that if the women in the society turn out to be catalysts despite the challenges, the Naga society and nature will get rejuvenated.

One of the novel's most striking features is its narrative voice. Told in first-person, *A Terrible Matriarchy* allows Lieno to speak for herself, offering an intimate perspective into the psychological effects of familial control. This storytelling mode contrasts sharply with the silencing of women's voices within the family and broader community. Kire thus uses narrative structure as a feminist tool, reclaiming the right to self-expression for her protagonist.

Moreover, the novel weaves oral history, local idioms, and cultural references into its narrative, anchoring the story in Naga tradition while subverting its more oppressive elements. In doing so, Kire resists homogenising notions of Indian womanhood and emphasizes the specificity of North-Eastern female experience. Lieno's voice becomes not just personal but representative, a call for broader recognition of marginalised women's stories.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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