



Gender Diversity and Women Power in Angami Society: A Study of Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*

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Abstract:

North-Eastern frontier zone is very apparent region for its rich tribal culture, custom and patriarchal society as well. North-Eastern frontier area consists of seven states, so called 'Seven sisters' by their own dialectic languages. Easterine Kire, born in Kohima is an Angami Naga writer. Her works are an insight into the Naga culture, history and also the customs and traditions of the Angami society. Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a Bildungsroman meaning it is about the protagonist coming of age. The protagonist, Dielieno is the youngest daughter of Visa and Nino. From an early age, she is put under the tutelage of her Grandmother Vibano who is a very conservative woman and whose sole purpose is to groom Dielieno to be a good Naga woman. Dielieno suffers from double oppression; first her Grandmother's dictates and her Patriarchal subjugation and secondly the socio-economic diversity in the Naga society. But Dielieno, being an intellectual little girl among the Naga tribal girls, she does not lose her feminine power to her society anymore; rather she bravely struggles against abusive orthodox Grandmother's discrimination "to get education and a place in her family and society". The one thing remarkable about her character is her fearlessness. The proposed paper traces the growth of Dielieno from a young, innocent girl to a mature woman; her struggles at myriad junctions in her life and her victory at the end of the novel.

Keywords: Naga tribal society, culture, domination, patriarchy, terrible, struggle, victory.

North-Eastern frontier zone is a very apparent region for its rich tribal culture, custom and patriarchal society as well. North-Eastern frontier area consists of seven states, so called 'Seven sisters' by their own dialectic languages. Nagaland is considered as one among the seven sisters of India that is known for the rich culture

and diversity. The Angami Nagas are one of the ethnic groups in the North east states of Nagaland, settled in the districts of Kohima, Chumoukedima and few other districts.

Easterine Kire Iralu, a poet, a storyteller and the first Naga novelist in English, was born in March 1959 to an Angami Naga family in Kohima, Nagaland, currently lives in Northern Norway. The Majority of her writings are based on the live realities of Nagaland People. The immense love for her native land and culture is clearly depicted in her writings. In a conversation with *Babli Mallick*, once she revealed her responsibility as a writer from Nagaland

“I am inspired not influenced to write my life and the people who I meet in life... I feel responsible only to a certain extent”. (Easterine kire: *In Conversation with Babli Mallick*)

Kire became an acclaimed writer through her writings. She is the first Naga tribal woman from Nagaland to win *Bal Sahitya Puraskar* for her *“Song of the Thundercloud”* in 2018 awarded by *Sahitya Academy*. She is well-known in North-East literature and her writing style always expresses a strong historical and political awareness by addressing issues such as identity and ethnicity.

In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Kire deals with the issue of gender discrimination faced by the Naga women at every step of their life even in the distribution of food. In this novel, Dielieno the protagonist as well as the narrator becomes the object of suppression under her own Grandmother. The novel revolves around the central character Dielieno and how she fought for getting the Education and her growth from a young innocent girl to a mature woman. The reader can get to know how women themselves are actually responsible for the suppression of the same gender and why matriarchy happened to be terrible. The North East is one such part of India where apparently, it is believed that the position of women is better than the rest of the country. This novel is filled with Naga woman's experiences and the prevalent Patriarchy there. Kire has observed and tried to translate these minute details of a woman's life in the Naga society.

“My grandmother didn't like me. I knew this when I was about four and half” (*A Terrible Matriarchy*, 1)

The Novel opens up with the line clearly indicated by the narrator that Grandmother didn't like her. Dielieno, the protagonist was the youngest sibling of the four elder brothers. She lived a happy life with her family, though they didn't have enough food to eat. At the age of five with the motive of making her 'A good woman', Dielieno was shifted to her Grandmother's house.

“The girl must start working at home, don't let her run about with her brothers any more. That is not the way to bring up girl-children” (*A Terrible Matriarchy*, 4)

The Grandmother took the charge of her upbringing claiming that she is a girl and she needs to be trained for household chores. In her view, girls should be taught the household chores and boys will be boys, they should not engage in household chores. Grandmother never used to call her by her name rather she called her as 'The Girl' or 'The Errand Girl'. Being a woman herself, the Grandmother discriminates the little Lieno from her

brothers the most. The Grandmother is always pampering by offering all they need and looking down upon Lieno. In her opinion only boys need good food and no need to give good food to girls.

“Bano, get up and make the fire, and while you are about it, wake up the girl” (A Terrible Matriarchy, 11)

Bano, Grandmother's niece was living with Grandmother to help her in cooking. In her Grandmother's house, Lieno had to bathe with cold water. After bathe she had to fetch water. At water spot, women were talking about other people's personal life. One woman felt pity for Lieno's condition at her Grandmother's house. Lieno had to help Bano in Cooking. Bano was kind to Lieno and she worked very hard in that house. Grandmother always had good food at her house but she hadn't served much to Lieno.

“In a Patriarchal society like ours, women have to fight hard for a seat at the table. Boys are privileged over girls from birth. Equal opportunity and access for both girls and boys must become the norm” (Shabana Azmi)

The Novel presents a picture of women of three generations-the Grandmother, the mother and Lieno, in which the mindsets of all these three women are different from each other. Women in the Naga family suppress their desires even from having new clothes to a filling meal. Moreover the Grandmother is strongly against the decision of sending Lieno to school.

We can get the glimpses that show the life among the Angami society, religion, education and politics. The effects of old traditions that trample the rights of women which reflect the discrimination exercised against women are elaboratively described in the novel through the protagonist Lieno's struggle. For Lieno, it is heart wrenching to witness her mother's sorrow and suffering; her brother's illness and pain; mainly her Grandmother's harsh treatment.

“In our day, girls did not go to school. We stayed home and learned the house work. Then we went to the fields and learned all the fieldwork as well. That way one never had a problem with the girl - children” (A Terrible Matriarchy, 22)

The Grand Mother strongly disagrees with the opinion of Lieno getting educated. She only believes that girl should be skillful in household work and no need to get educated. But Lieno is very interested to go to school. After several attempts to convince the Grand Mother, she agreed on the condition that Lieno to complete all household work assigned to her before going to school. School was the best thing for Lieno. So Lieno completed all her works- fetching water alone and making the fire then she went to school. There was a story about the water spot. There were folks of ghosts sighting around the water spot. So Lieno got afraid to fetch water so early in the dark.

“Grandmother had rules for others which she would never apply to herself. We were not to laugh too often or too loudly”. (A Terrible Matriarchy, 113)

Grandmother warned Lieno and Bano that, girls who laughed frequently ended up becoming wine - brewers and no respectable persons. Bano and Lieno were terrified to cross the drinking houses to get to the Shop. The drinking houses women teased Lieno and Bano now and then. They ignored what they say. The men could be raucous when they were drunk. Both Bano and Lieno had so many restrictions in Grandmother's house similar to the struggles and restrictions faced by several women in our society .

“ Women are the victims of this Patriarchal culture, but they are also its carriers. Let us keep in the mind that every oppressive man was raised in the confines of his mother's home “ (Shirin Ebadi)

The expressions such as ‘ *The household that did not have a male heir was considered barren*’, ‘*a woman's role is to marry and bear children*’, ‘*men don't like to marry educated women*’ strongly expresses the gender diversity in the society. The readers get clear understanding of dominating nature of male in Angami families from the beginning line of the story. These are familiar prejudices even today that are witnessed every state in India not only among the Nagas irrespective of however modern they assume themselves to be.

Though Dielieno remains the protagonist in the novel, various female characters that were suppressed by the society's belief and tradition are also presented in the novel. Kire highlights the issues faced by Naga women; one such character is Dielieno's mother herself, who very much feared Grandmother. She was always very careful about her actions and behavior in front of Grandmother. She tried to be a good wife and a mother, so that Grandmother would not question her. Another minor character like Bano too suffers greatly in the narrative. Bano is the illegitimate daughter of Grandfather Sizo, Grandmother Vibano's younger brother. But Bano calls Vibano as ‘mother’. Sizo has already married someone else and has three children with his present wife. Bano is neither educated nor she is married, which implies that economically she is the weakest. She has to depend on others for her survival.

At the end of the novel, the Naga protagonist Dielieno is able to fulfill the desire of getting her education against her stereotype society by evacuating all sort of patriarchal customs, beliefs and canons of Angami society while on the other hand, uneducated and spinster woman Bano has reoccupied her ancestral house-property. Throughout the novel, Dielieno's struggle for success against the restrictions imposed by her Grandmother's discrimination for her education and social status in the society Kire represents the world of Naga and its restrictive society which rests on its cultural belief and tradition. After unending suffering and oppression in every step of her life, Dielieno achieves a great victory and appreciation in education and other social activities and also proves herself no less than her brothers. Through her success , she serves as a great inspiration to the people around the world.

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