



Gender Roles and Patrilineal System in the Naga Society: A Study of Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*

Bunty Pangambam

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Dhanamanjuri University.
pangambambunty6@gmail.com

Dr. Khundrakpam Nirupama

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
D.M. College of Arts,
Dhanamanjuri University.

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Abstract:

The paper examines Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* through the lens of socially constructed gender roles assigned to males and females in Naga society. The novel is a coming-of-age story about the protagonist, Dielieno. From an early age, she lived under the guardianship of her grandmother Vibano, an orthodox woman whose only purpose is to groom Dielieno to be a good Naga woman. Utilising a feminist framework, this study analyses how Kire's story disrupts traditional gender roles and patriarchal constraints within Naga society. The paper attempts to analyse social disparity and injustice meted out to the women's community of the Angami tribes. It also investigates the patrilineal system in Naga society, which places women in a deprived position, leaving widows and unmarried women economically and socially insecure.

Keywords: gender roles, patrilineal, social disparity, patriarchy, injustice.

Introduction:

Easterine Kire is a prominent writer celebrated as the first Naga woman to publish a novel in English. The lives of people in Nagaland and India's Northeastern states inspire her works. Through her storytelling, she throws light on the customs, challenges and socio-political conditions of Nagaland.

In Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the protagonist Dielieno represents a quintessential Naga girl who, without openly fighting male-centric privileges, gently poses the quietest, yet most profound, interrogations that act as an eye-opener regarding the rising status of women in contemporary Naga society. By portraying the experiences of a young girl who grows up in a male-dominated society, the author reveals the limitations imposed on women by rigid gender roles. Through the character of the grandmother Vibano, Kire demonstrates how women themselves may internalise and perpetuate gender roles. Within traditional Angami tribes in Naga society, a strict patrilineal system prevails, in which lineage, family, and ancestral property are passed through the male line. In the novel, Kire presents a detailed critique of this system. This paper argues that the novel exposes the mechanisms of a male-dominated hierarchy, demonstrating how it operates through family structures, gender socialisation, and internalised oppression.

Internalised Patriarchy and Construction of Women as "Other":

Gender operates as a hierarchical system closely linked to power. In the novel, the authoritative nature of grandmother Vibano represents a complicated example of internalised patriarchy. She exercised her power to impose patriarchal values rather than challenge them. She gives priority to the needs and interests of the male members of the family while imposing strict rules on female members. Her deeds indicate the internalisation of social

customs and traditions that place men above women in the social hierarchy. The compartmentalisation of the gender that she enforces mirrors her own childhood and the difficulties she faced in a male-dominated society. Kire presents the world of Naga and its restrictive society, which rests on cultural belief and tradition, through the character of Vibano.

In the opening of the novel, when Dielieno chooses a leg piece of chicken, her grandmother denied her, saying, “I was not 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 portion” (1). Grandmother instructs Dielieno that there are different portions of meat for boys and girls, and she ladles Dielieno’s most desired piece of meat to her brother. This instance shows how human dignity is compromised when unequal norms restrict girls from freely sharing in something as basic as food in the Naga society. Such practices deny the fundamental equality and autonomy of all people, regardless of gender. The novel, therefore, foregrounds these concerns by drawing attention to the unequal position of women and girls within the family, where their access to food, property and decision-making as well as the distribution of household responsibilities, is shaped by entrenched inequalities rather than by shared human values of fairness and respect. This incident clearly highlights Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of men being regarded as the norm or subject. At the same time, women are treated as the “other”, marginalised and valued only in relation to men (Beauvoir 26). Kire depicts Dielino’s difficulty in opposing her orthodox grandmother on many issues, particularly when the grandmother lays down rules for girl’s behaviour and role within the family. To her grandmother, a girl’s place is inside the house with the primary aim of getting married, being a good wife and taking care of her family. In the patriarchal society, many restrictions and expectations are placed on women; however, these social rules are not applied to men. Vibano strongly opposes the idea of allowing the boy child to perform

household chores or assist women with domestic work. To her, a male child holds a central place in the family and, rather than being assigned household chores, is expected to be well nourished and cared for. This reveals that Beauvoir's concept of woman as the second sex arises because women are treated as secondary to men (Beauvoir 267).

Dielieno's marginalisation within her own family reflects how deeply internalised notions of inferiority can shape a woman's sense of self from childhood. Denied affection, subjected to restrictions and treated as less significant only because she is a girl, her experience reflects a failure to recognise her inherent human worth. Her grandmother's refusal to acknowledge her by name, instead reducing her identity to "girl", further erases her individuality, highlighting a denial of dignity and personhood that stands in contrast to humanist ideals of equality, respect and recognition of every individual. In Dielieno's childhood, she is trained in domestic labour and told her by her grandmother to remain submissive and obedient. This clearly makes visible Beauvoir's argument that gender roles are imposed through upbringing and social expectations (Beauvoir 297-299). Her family forces Dielieno into rigid, restrictive feminine roles, and this shows that social construction shape gender identity rather than biological determination.

Gender Performativity and the Imposition of Femininity:

In the novel, the author portrays a clear gender binary, where masculinity is associated with physical strength and technical labour, and men strengthen this identity by performing physically and technically demanding labour. In contrast, women are socialised from an early age to become proficient in household labour, guided and trained by mothers, grandmothers, or other female figures within the family. They are indoctrinated into the believe that their primary purpose in life is obedience and good at taking care of their family. Through the institution of family, a hierarchical chain of command and duties is established within the

household for women. According to Judith Butler, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted through a stylised repetition of acts (191). Social norms that impose acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity regulate these. She argues that gender is performatively instituted and also challenges the notion of gender as a stable identity. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the protagonist grows up in a patriarchal society that enforces strict gender. She is trained to become a “proper girl”, thereby showing Butler’s notion that gender identity is imposed through repeated social performance rather than determined by biology (Butler 191). In the novel, the female characters accept the discrimination they face as normal, and internalise feelings of inferiority. In the Naga society, boys are privileged without question and enjoy every opportunity. The systematic structure that prioritises male over female reflects Butler’s idea that people come to believe in the naturalness of gender roles and repeated performances create the illusion of a fixed, “natural” gender hierarchy (Butler 190-192). In support of this concept, the work of Pelhoueinuo Kiewhuo can also be mentioned, which points out that Naga society as patriarchal, where men have always been at the forefront of every privilege both at home and outside since ancient times (Kiewhuo 103). Girls are trained in domestic labour, while boys are enjoying advantages, authority and freedom. Society does not present these roles as natural, but rather, individuals learn these behaviours and strengthen them through daily routines. Societal norms compel Dielieno to perform femininity through tasks such as cleaning, cooking and demonstrating obedience. These repeated actions exemplify Butler’s notion of performativity, wherein identity is constructed through practice rather than rooted in an inherent essence (Butler 25). The normalisation of these roles in Naga society shows how gender becomes naturalised through repetition. Femininity appears inherent, but it is the result of continuous social conditioning.

The gender disparities and marginalisation of women run throughout the novel. The novelist clearly shows that men always cooked and served at the Christmas feast organised annually by the church, whereas on other days women were responsible for all the household chores, including cooking, cleaning and serving. Men have always taken the central role in important occasions, while women have remained ostracized even though they have dedicated their entire lives to support their families. Men work outside their homes to earn a livelihood for their families, while women mostly stay at home to care of their families and manage the household-roles that are no less important than those performed by men. Considering the position of women in Naga society, it is appropriate to connect the work of Naga Women's Union (NWU), International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) and Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) which state that women are traditionally regarded as being more specialised in domestic and reproductive work, as well as in caring for children and the elderly (NWU et al. 4). The union exposes through their work the traditional cultures of Naga society which requires women to be humble, submissive and perform the roles of a wife, mother, child bearer, farmer and household manager, all of which are unpaid for (NWU et al. 5). Even if there were opportunities of paid outside home, an unwritten yet widely followed code in the Naga society is that a woman's duty was to work and not to earn (NWU et al. 4).

Education as Defiance of Patriarchal Authority:

The delicate yet central theme of the novel, however, is experience of being a woman in a society shaped by customary laws that give little approval to the rights and desires of women. Kire raises many questions in her book about identity and culture. Her approach, however, is not hostile or bitter. It is a thoughtful reflection of a rich community life that has survived through suppression. Kire uses education as a weapon to resist the societal norms

through the character of Dielieno. Vibano believes that educating girls is unnecessary, as it does not contribute to preparing them to become good Naga wives and mothers.

“In our day,” Grandmother began, “girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learned the housework. Then we went to the fields and did all the fieldwork as well. That way, one never has a problem with girl children. They will always be busy at some work or other, too busy to get into trouble.” (22)

In this context, one can refer to Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*:

The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honoured by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to make life sweet and agreeable to them-these are duties of women at all times, and what should teach them from their infancy. (74)

Millett’s argument seems to echo the views of many people in the contemporary tribal society, according to which girls should stay at home and learn household duties to avoid getting into trouble. The injustice Dielieno faced as a girl child within her own family reflects Millett’s idea that patriarchy survives through early socialisation (Millett 26). What Dielieno experienced in her childhood supports Millett’s claim that the family functions as a training ground for gender hierarchy, where gender roles are taught early and ensure the continuation of patriarchy (Millett 33-35).

In the novel, the author portrays the juxtaposition of two women from different generations who have different perspectives on life in a very lucid manner. Vibano’s mind is deeply rooted in the traditional patriarchal system of the Naga society. Because of her conservative views on women and girls, she becomes an agent of the structural inequality

prevalent in the Naga society. However, the protagonist Dielieno, a girl who is striving between her present life and her little dreams, says, “I could not fall asleep for a long time. I thought about school and how nice it would be to learn, to write and sing and draw as my brother did” (22). Her enthusiasm makes her overcome the obstacles. She proved herself to be a bright student among her classmates and defied her grandmother’s traditional belief by excelling academically. The restrictions imposed on her by her grandmother due to societal norms did not stop her from pursuing her aspirations. Through these differences, the author shows her desire for readers to recognise how often women negotiate between these two worlds in a patriarchal society where they are taught how to behave.

Inheritance and Female Subordination in Patrilineal Naga Society:

The structural inequality in Naga society is a driving force behind the grandmother’s biased nature. In Naga society, a male child is considered the one who protects his family. They are the heir or inheritors of their kin. Women are considered passive within the family structure of traditional society. In the hierarchical social structure, man enjoys privilege over the submissive nature of woman. Social norms in Naga society are such that families without male heir lose their property to other paternal relatives, causing significant insecurity for families in their old age. J.H. Hutton asserts in his book *The Angami Nagas* that, in Angami culture, men cannot leave real property to his daughter (Hutton 137). The grandmother observed her widowed mother’s predicament, as her mother had no sons and she herself had no male siblings. Her mother suffered when her father died, and her relatives took over all their property. Because of her own experience, it is deeply rooted in the psyche of the grandmother that only a male child can make their family safe.

The novel reveals a deeply embedded patrilineal system in Naga society, even though it appears to depict a matriarchal dominance within the domestic sphere. Property inheritance is a significant domain of gendered grievances. Vibano's partiality towards her grandson, Vini, exemplifies the traditional norms "...widows without sons lost all their husband's property to their male relatives" (250). These societal rules prevailing in Naga society sustain women's economic dependency. Patrilineal convention systematically favours male descendants. Vibano's firm imposition of gendered constraints, which deprives Dielieno of love and support, reflects a pervasive societal rationale that associates female value with compliance. Her tyranny is not just personal but is also grounded in her terrifying experiences as a woman in a patriarchal society. Dielieno's mother explains that Vibano's mindset was influenced by a system in which "a woman without a male heir would receive shelter from her in-laws, yet her daughter was ineligible to inherit the father's property" (102). The consequences of this system are clearly reflected in the experiences of female characters in the novel.

The characters of Neiko and Bano reflect the disadvantages women face under the patrilineal system in Naga society. Neiko never married and stayed on at her parents' house after her father's death. Nevertheless, since Sizo, her brother, had married and settled with his family in another town, Neiko lived there alone. However, Dielieno asserts undoubtedly that the house remains Sizo's property, regardless of whether Neiko lives there for her entire life. Father's house does not belong to the daughters in the Naga society. Her precarious survival depends on the goodwill of her brother, highlighting the underprivileged condition of women within a patrilineal inheritance system. As the patrilineal system shapes Naga society, she is excluded from inheriting paternal property and her status as an unmarried woman further intensifies her hardships.

Bano, the illegitimate daughter of Sizo, has no social recognition. She continues to live in Vibano's house even after the death of the old lady, not out of choice but because she has known no other way of life. Being uneducated and unmarried, she has few prospects of owning property or choosing an independent life of her own. She works from morning till night, following grandmother's order. She dedicates her life to take care of the old lady, and in return, she gets nothing. The old lady refuses the marriage proposal brought to her, driven by self-interest, as Bano serves as an essential support in her old age. The grandmother ultimately leaves her in a vulnerable state, dependent on others for her survival. For Dielieno as well, even though her parents and brothers love her and support her education, she has no prospect of inheriting her father's property. "I felt it was not my place to sit in on a family meeting where the discussion was about family property. I was automatically excluded..." (277). Here, one can connect the works of NWU, IWGIA and HMI, as they highlight the problems of inheritance in Naga society. In their work, the unions assert that the most common reason for denying inheritance rights to women in Naga society is the belief that women are basically other households' resources once they are married (NWU et al. 3). The author displays the disadvantages of women in the Naga society when it comes to inheritance of property. Daughters usually do not take part in family discussions regarding their father's property. A father's property naturally belongs to his son in the male-dominated Naga society. Kire's narrative illustrates the socio-economic disadvantage faced by women, even though they care for their families and live their lives supporting others above their own happiness.

Conclusion:

A Terrible Matriarchy is a simple representation of primitive civilisations. Through a feminist lens, the novel critiques the illusion of female dominance and exposes the persistence of patriarchal logic. Kire depicts a traditional society in which women reinforce restrictive norms, while the younger generations begin to question these roles, indicating the

possibility of transforming the societal belief. The novel ultimately emphasises that genuine gender equality requires deconstructing deeply internalised beliefs and institutional structures, rather than simply reversing gendered authority. Through this layered feminist perspective, *A Terrible Matriarchy* appears as an intense exploration of power, gender, and resistance within a culturally specific yet universally resonant context. Moreover, the novel blends local idioms, oral history and cultural references into its narrative, presenting the story within the Naga tradition.

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