



Clan Identity and Social Organisation in Easterine Kire's Selected Novels

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Abstract:

Easterine Kire, known as the first Naga novelist to write in English, has a long-standing interest in the social and cultural foundations of Naga life that she depicts in her fiction. Among these, the clan occupies a central position, shaping relationships, inheritance, marriage, gender roles, and collective identity. This paper examines *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* and *A Terrible Matriarchy* to investigate how Kire represents clan-based social organisation across two distinct historical and narrative settings. While *Sky Is My Father* presents the clan as the basis of collective resistance against British colonial expansion, highlighting its role in sustaining political solidarity and military cooperation, *A Terrible Matriarchy* shifts attention to the domestic sphere, where the same social structure governs everyday life through gendered expectations, family discipline, and the regulation of women's roles. Using tools from textual analysis alongside critical studies of the novels by reputed scholars, this study argues that the clan should not be understood as a static cultural institution but rather as a flexible social construct that retains its influence over Angami society while adapting to the dictates of changing historical contexts. By juxtaposing these two novels in this analysis, this study demonstrates that clan-based identity is both a wellspring of collective resilience and an instrument for preserving uneven social relations. The analysis also makes clear that Kire does not depict the clan system as idyllic or purely problematic; she depicts it instead as a complex institution that preserves culture but that requires considerable personal sacrifice from those who abide by its dictates, women in particular, under both colonial and postcolonial conditions.

Keywords: Easterine Kire, Clan Identity, Angami Naga Society, Gender and Kinship, Postcolonial literature, *Sky is My Father*, *A Terrible Matriarchy*.

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Introduction

Given the association of Kire with Naga history and culture, there is often a tendency to read her novels as ethnographies. Kire has stated that her work is based upon “the real history of my people” and that she considers the native individual to be her raw material because she has lived it (Patton 32). While these remarks certainly highlight the autobiographical and cultural foundations of her work, they do not fully explain the literary complexity of her novels. Kire does much more than document Naga life or preserve cultural memory, she also works to create a complex narrative within her novels about the ways that her culture and traditions respond to the upsurges in history, culture, and society. This is particularly evident in her representation of the clan, which emerges not as a static institution but as a living social force that continually adapts to new circumstances while retaining its influence over individual and collective life.

Angami Nagas, to whom both Kire and many of her characters belong, have a clan that is foundational to their society. Its significance transcends blood relations. Beyond determining the individuals with whom a young girl must form relationships, the clan also determines where a family lives within the village, whom she must marry, and even her responsibilities in matters of conflict, defence, and social obligation. The concept of honour, shame, and duty is understood by the girls through the lens of their clan. Kire foregrounds this reality from the opening pages of *Sky Is My Father*. Even before the narrative begins, she dedicates the novel to the warriors of the Semo, Thevo and Merhü clans of Khonoma, acknowledging them as the force behind the village's reputation as "a warrior village" (Kire, *Sky* viii).

Four years later in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the setting of the story changes to the home instead of the battlefield. Yet, the woman who dominates the home is committed to her clan in the same way that her grandmother was committed to hers. As Kharbe observes, her identity and sense of achievement are measured largely by what she has done for the menfolk of her clan

(Kharbe 12). Through these two stories, Kire demonstrates the ways in which even with the change in setting for the story, the influence of the clan upon the lives of those within it and the relationships between those family members is still present and active.

While this question may seem basic, the answer to the question of how the idea of clan changes when it is taken from the battlefield to the home is even more intricate. More specifically, what becomes of it when the narrative shifts from the nineteenth-century world of warfare and colonial resistance to a twentieth-century society shaped by Christianity, formal education, and changing social values? Instead of simply discussing how each of these novels incorporated the idea of clan into their stories of Naga society, this study intends to discuss how that idea of clan changes when moved from the context of the nineteenth century, with its focus upon war, to the twentieth century, with its focus upon the influences of Christianity, education, and social change. The novels that will be discussed in this paper, therefore, explore the idea of the clan within both battlefields and within the home.

In *Sky Is My Father*, the clan appears as a public and collective force, closely associated with warfare, political solidarity, and masculine identity. *A Terrible Matriarchy*, by contrast, relocates that authority to the domestic sphere. Here, women become the principal custodians of clan values, and its disciplinary power is exercised within the family rather than against an external enemy. Reading the novels together reveals that clan identity is neither static nor obsolete, indicating that the clan adapts to the changes in Naga society and continues to have a significant influence upon their society despite the changes that occur within it over time. Kire's fictions, therefore, present the clan not simply as an inherited tradition but as a flexible social structure that survives by constantly adjusting to new political realities and cultural transformations, often through the experiences and labour of Naga women.

Theoretical and Critical Framework

Before examining the novels themselves, it is important to consider the existing scholarship on Kire's work. Though there is little scholarship on Kire's novels overall, the existing scholarship has grown in recent years to provide different perspectives on the society within the novels and Kire's concerns regarding it. Much of this scholarship, however, approaches social organisation indirectly and from different critical standpoints. For instance, Mandal and Singh approached Kire's *Sky Is My Father* from a postcolonial lens, analysing the novel's focus on the history of the Naga people's displacement and erasure by the colonisers. The authors state that Kire's novel aims to retell the history of the Naga people that was ignored by the British (203). Drawing on theorists such as Bill Ashcroft and Frantz Fanon, their study is primarily concerned with the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Thus, the focus of their study is less on the social structures within Naga society that enabled their resistance to colonial rule. In moving forward in this research, therefore, this paper aims to examine those social structures within Naga society itself. Rather than studying how the people of Khonoma resisted the colonisers, this paper examines how the Angami clan system itself created the networks of solidarity, obligation, and leadership that made such resistance possible.

A larger body of criticism has been directed towards the story of *A Terrible Matriarchy*, most often from a feminist perspective. These studies examine the oppressive relationship between the grandmother, Vibano, and her granddaughter, Dielieno, as a reflection of the unequal gender dynamics embedded within patriarchal Naga society (Kharbe 10; Dhileep and Baisel 2591). One of the more significant analyses of the story was performed by Ambreen Kharbe. Kharbe examined how Vibano gained her authority as the matriarch through her lifelong service to the men of her clan. While this study helped to reveal the importance of the clan to the story, its focus was primarily upon the gender dynamic within that clan. A similar study was performed by T. S. Dhileep and Anu Baisel, who noted that the description of marriage as

a mixing of blood between clan members indicated to readers that exogamy was a necessary practice within the clan society, as such marriages were essential to the preservation of the family lineage and heirs of the clan. These studies provide valuable insights into the gendered dimensions of Kire's fiction, and they inform the present discussion in important ways. At the same time, the clan remains largely a contextual element within their analyses rather than the central object of inquiry. This paper therefore shifts the focus from gender alone to the social institution that shapes those gendered relationships in the first place, asking how clan identity structures power, authority, and belonging across Kire's fiction.

W. Meribeni Patton also offers a different entry into the work of Kire. Patton's reading does not focus on gender or even the elements of resistance within the story, but rather on Kire's efforts to detail the history and identity of the Naga people through her fiction. According to Patton, Kire's narrative voice functions mainly to show the position of who a Naga is, while her characters become a classic epitome of Naga people. (32) While this study shares some elements with Patton's, it examines a more specific aspect of Kire's stories. Whereas Patton examined identity in general, this study focuses specifically on the role of the clan in preserving the Naga people's identity. Margaret Ch. Zama's reflections on emerging literatures from Northeast India further illuminate the significance of this approach. She observes that writing from the region carries "the trauma of untold suffering and marginalisation" (qtd. in Shiv Kumar 8). Such suffering, however, is not always the result of colonial domination alone. While *Sky Is My Father* portrays the violence and upheaval brought about by British expansion, *A Terrible Matriarchy* reveals forms of pain that arise from within the community itself, particularly through the demands and expectations imposed by the clan. Considered together, these critical interventions point towards a more complex understanding of clan identity in Kire's fiction. It binds the community together, creating solidarity and continuity across generations, yet it also regulates behaviour, reinforces hierarchy, and disciplines those who fail

to conform. Tracing this dual role of the clan across both novels forms the central concern of the present study.

Clan as the Skeleton of the Village: Reading Sky is My Father

Kire's introduction of *Sky Is My Father* is significant in that it provides the historical context for the reader before the story itself begins. Rather than introducing the world of the novel through the plot, Kire provides information regarding the social organisation of the people of the village of Khonoma. In doing so, she identifies the clan structure that shapes the events of the novel. Referring to nineteenth-century Khonoma, Kire notes that although the village was rather average in size among Angami settlements, its reputation as a formidable warrior village rested on her warriors of the Semo, Thevo and Merhü clans, who hardly numbered over a thousand at any given time in her history (Kire, *Sky* viii). Thus, Kire helps to reveal to readers the social structure of the village in general, indicating that each individual belonged to a warrior clan; their first affiliation was with that clan, and their second with the village of Khonoma. Kire also suggests that the influence of these clans extended well beyond the village itself. For instance, she states that the village of Khonoma maintained a protectorate over regions outside of the village itself, such as the Maram and Anal villages near the Manipur kingdom, and even villages within the Kachar kingdom “right up to the forts of the Kachar kingdom” (Kire, *Sky* vii). This suggests that the clan was not simply a kinship group but a political and military institution capable of forging alliances and exercising authority across a much larger geographical landscape.

The narrative that follows transforms the historical outline presented into the reader's lived experience. Rather than presenting an outline of the clans that existed within the village, author Kire introduces readers to the individuals that embody those clans. Levi is one of the characters that help to illustrate the clans to which he belongs. Throughout the novel, readers encounter

Levi performing various tasks to fulfil his role within the village according to the clan and khel to which he belongs. For instance, after he has completed his training as a warrior, Levi begins to participate in the affairs of the village, and he begins to prepare for marriage, all actions that are dictated to him by the clan. Furthermore, the scene in which he is to marry another villager reveals the importance of the clans within the village. Levi's aunt approaches him and tells him that a young woman from the Semo clan (Riatso's sister) has approached his family with the proposal of marrying the two of them. Thus, the clans into which each of these individuals belong are referenced by the prospective bride's diligence and the reputation of the Semo clan (and not the relationship between the two individuals themselves).

"My son, there is a fine young woman of the Semo Clan, Riatso's sister. I have heard no ill of her from her age-mates. She is a good worker and her family is titled, so they are our equals. I want you to consider that matter carefully. It is good to marry- it tames a man so that he grows great in the village." (Kire, Sky 58).

Women's role in arranging these negotiations is equally significant. They serve as intermediaries between families, ensuring that marriages strengthen social ties while respecting clan boundaries. Individual choice, therefore, occupies only a limited place within this process. Marriage functions primarily as an alliance between two clan groups, and qualities such as family standing, industriousness, and clan affiliation carry greater weight than romantic inclination. Through scenes such as this, Kire demonstrates that kinship is not simply inherited; it is continually reinforced through everyday social practices that preserve the continuity of the community.

Kire's introductory account of the Anglo-Naga conflicts also draws attention to the wider political role of the clan. Because it is presented as a historical narrative, its observations carry a documentary weight that strengthens the novel's fictional representation of the past. One of

the most critical details about the Anglo-Naga conflicts is that the anti-British clans of Mezoma were allies of the anti-British clans of Khonoma, who supported each other in their attempts to limit the expansion of the British (Kire, Sky ix). These alliances were formed not through the connections of the nations but through the affiliations of these clans. These clans were able to form relationships and create partnerships with other clans in neighbouring villages. The British eventually recognised the importance of these relationships between clans. One of the methods that the British utilised to punish the clans that attempted to overthrow the British was the burning of the houses of rebel clans (Kire, Sky ix). Such a method demonstrates the Britishers' recognition of the fact that the resistance movements within Khonoma were rooted in the relationships between the clans that defined those villages. Such an action demonstrates the efforts of the British to dismantle the foundation of the resistance movements created by the clans of Khonoma. Thus, these clans had a much greater role in the foundation of the resistance movement for the clans of Khonoma than Kire made evident in her discussion of their roles in other contexts.

The Battle of Khonoma brings the political significance of the clan into its sharpest focus. Both the historical introduction and the novel portray the conflict as one sustained through networks of kinship rather than by a centralised military authority. Describing the assault on the British garrison, Kire writes that it was carried out by the men of Khonoma, men of the Tsütuonuomia clan, and warriors of Viswema, Chedema, Secüma, Jakhama, Jotsoma, Piphe and Tsiepaman (Kire, Sky xii).

The use of both village and clan names in this sentence highlights the way in which the clans and affiliations remained intact within the community as a whole, yet enabled the villagers to work together in their cooperative efforts and form a wider community of Naga tribes without the need to form a more generalised sense of identity beyond their clan-based affiliations. The same pattern is visible even in the aftermath of the battle. Kire discusses how the village was

burned, how the people of the village were scattered to the surrounding villages, and how the village sat abandoned for an extended period. It was only when the dispersed members returned that the village began to recover (Kire, Sky xiv). The village's recovery was not the result of the efforts of a village ruler, the village council, or even the colonial administration. The factor that is described as essential to the recovery of the village is the role of the kinship ties that bound the dispersed members of the village to their home village. Thus, the novel establishes the clan as a factor that is essential not just in the initiation of war, but also in the maintenance of the village after the war.

The nature of this system of collective action becomes even clearer when it is viewed alongside the political model that British colonial officers brought to the region. These officers were accustomed to centralised states with identifiable rulers and administrative centres.

For example, the British established many punitive expeditions as a means of eradicating the resistance that emerged from the Angami, based upon the assumption that destroying a settlement would eliminate the political power of those who lived within it (Kire, Sky ix). Each of these punitive expeditions failed, however, due to the fact that the military power of the Angami was not based upon any individual leader. Instead, the power of the Angami was based upon a series of clans and villages that were all connected to one another; the elimination of individuals from one of these groups did not eliminate the power of the others. Furthermore, there was no king or capital of the Angami; the power of the Angami was based upon the relationships between the clans and individuals that were created through their shared affiliation to those clans. Sanatan Mandal and Smriti Singh (204) recognise an important aspect of the land and cultural dispossession of the Nagas under colonial rule. However, they do not explore the social structure that enabled the Nagas to develop a resistance to the colonial government. The placement of the clan at the centre of the discussion of the novel reveals another important aspect of the anti-colonial resistance of the Nagas. Kire explains that the

decentralised, clan-based organisation of Angami society was itself a strategic advantage, enabling the community to withstand a colonial power whose military and political practices depended upon centralised command and control.

In *Sky Is My Father*, the influence of the clan extends beyond warfare and political organisation into the moral values that shape everyday life. The novel suggests that Angami masculinity is defined not only by physical courage but also by a shared ethical code nurtured within the community. Patton includes one of the proverbs that exists within the story: “a real man does not need to roar to show that he is a man” (Kire, *Sky* 25 ;qtd in Patton 32). Such proverbs are more than expressions of collective wisdom. They preserve cultural ideals and communicate expectations about proper conduct across generations. Growing up within a clan, young men inherit this moral education alongside their practical responsibilities. Lessons about courage, restraint, dignity, and accountability are learned through stories, conversations, communal memory, and the guidance of elders rather than through formal institutions. The clan thus functions as an important site of ethical formation. Seen in this light, Kire's portrayal of the Angami warrior challenges stereotypes that reduce warrior culture to violence alone. Her characters inhabit a society in which individual behaviour is constantly measured against shared values, and reputation is shaped as much by communal judgment as by success in battle. The clan, therefore, disciplines its members not only through obligation but also through an enduring moral tradition sustained by oral culture.

The relationship between the land and the clan is also significant in the novel, though it is established in a more subtle way than the relationships between the clan, marriage, and warfare. From the opening pages, the geography of Khonoma is described not merely as physical landscape but as social space. Kire portrays the village as “nestled amid mountains,” visible “only from one direction,” with its influence extending outward through a network of allied settlements (Kire, *Sky* vii). Beneath this geographical description lies an equally important

social reality. The village was divided into khels, and these residential quarters reflected patterns of clan settlement. Space, therefore, was never neutral, it carried the imprint of lineage and kinship. A family's place within the village also marked its place within the larger social order.

Additionally, the connection between the land and the clan creates a sense of emotional weight regarding the destruction of Khonoma after 1880. The clan and its people experienced the destruction of their land and the destruction of their ability to use that land to connect with their clan's identity. British restrictions on rebuilding the village, together with the reluctance of neighbouring communities to occupy the abandoned settlement, underscore the depth of this attachment (Kire, *Sky* xiv). Thus, moving to other villages indicates that these displaced clans were forced to separate themselves from the lands that defined their relationship to their clan. The destruction of the village has a similar impact to exile of its clans and their members, as it affects their relationship to the land as a result.

From Public Warfare to Private Authority: Clan Identity in A Terrible Matriarchy

While *Sky Is My Father* presents the clan in its most visible and collective form, *A Terrible Matriarchy* shifts attention to a very different social landscape. The novel is set in a period when warfare has largely receded, Christianity has reshaped many aspects of Naga life, and colonial rule has given way to the Indian nation-state. Yet these historical changes do not diminish the influence of the clan. Instead, Kire suggests that its authority has assumed a different form. The clan is most visible in the domestic homes of Naga families, and women like Vibano exert strong influence over their families and their members' beliefs. Vibano exhibits the power of the clan in that she is committed to maintaining the values and beliefs of the clan. Through this character, the reader gains an understanding of how the values of the clan are maintained even in the modern age by the women of these societies.

In several critical reviews of the story, it is noted that the novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire focuses on the lives of three generations of Angami women, from the grandmother Vibano to her daughter and granddaughter Dielieno, or Lieno. This generational structure allows Kire to examine how ideas about femininity, duty, and family responsibility are passed from one generation to the next, while also revealing the tensions that emerge as those values are questioned and reinterpreted (Kharbe 12). The novel introduces these tensions early through Lieno's move into her grandmother's household at the age of five. Vibano's authority over the child is never presented as a matter of personal temperament alone. Instead, it is rooted in the social position she has acquired within the clan. As Ambreen Kharbe observes, Vibano earns her status "by serving the menfolk of her clan,"(10) and that lifelong commitment becomes the basis of the authority she later exercises over her granddaughter. Thus, while Vibano may appear to be cruel to her granddaughter, the foundation of her actions emerges from her understanding that her own beliefs were established long before herself, and that which she is required to uphold due to her inherited position as a woman within the clan.

"Grandmother saw her own mother suffer hardship and poverty and exclusion from many aspects of life because she had no brothers. It hardened her and made her determined not to suffer as her mother had. I think your grandmother looks at her sons and grandsons as a kind of insurance." (Kire, *Matriarchy* 250).

One of the clearest expressions of this value system is the preference accorded to sons. Kire illustrates it through the striking contrast between Vibano's treatment of Dielieno and that of her grandsons. The grandmother seeks to prune the girl's confident and inquisitive nature into a hardworking and docile one, so that she can be a dutiful wife in the future, even as she reserves extra perks for the boys in the family. Such unequal treatment cannot be dismissed as the prejudice of a single individual. It reflects a much larger social logic in which the future of the clan is imagined primarily through its male members. "Well, you must see that no harm comes

to the child,” continued Grandmother, “a male child is to be brought up very carefully. When he is grown, he will take care of all of us.” (Kire, *Matriarchy* 238).

This same logic underpins *Sky Is My Father*, where young men are prepared for adulthood because they are expected to carry forward the clan's lineage, defend its territory, and uphold its honour. Although the historical setting of *A Terrible Matriarchy* is very different, the underlying principle remains remarkably consistent. The battlefield has disappeared, but the work of preserving the clan continues within the household. Here, however, continuity is secured through the regulation of women's lives. Dielieno is taught to value obedience over independence, labour over self-expression, and sacrifice over personal desire because these qualities are believed to make her a worthy representative of her family. Her future marriage is not simply a private milestone but part of a wider social process through which relationships between clans are maintained and reinforced. By relocating the mechanisms of clan preservation from the public sphere to the domestic one, Kire demonstrates that power can be exercised just as effectively through everyday routines as through acts of warfare.

Dhileep and Baisel's discussion of the grandmother's description of marriage as a mixing of blood offers an important point of comparison between Kire's two novels (2593). Despite the differences in the settings of the two novels, this description of marriage does remain the same throughout the stories. In *Sky Is My Father*, marriage allows for the relationship between the clans to become stronger and deeper, and to form additional alliances between those groups. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the same understanding of marriage is utilised, but within the domestic setting of the novel. In this case, the decisions regarding Dielieno's life are made based upon the understanding that she will eventually form a marriage for her clan, and that her life is to be structured to support that outcome. Thus, while the setting of the story has changed, the criteria for forming marriages between individuals is similar to that which was utilised by Levi when he formed his marriage many generations earlier. Putting them together, we can conclude

that within both novels, marriage plays a similar role in each story. In the first, it enabled the clans to expand their social and political relationships with other groups, while in the second, it was a means of ensuring that the clan remained intact and strong within their domestic setting. For these reasons, then, the description of marriage as “a mixing of blood” remains the same between the two novels, despite the changes to the setting in which the stories take place.

The most significant change across the two novels lies not in the principles governing the clan but in the way those principles are enforced. In *Sky Is My Father*, authority is dispersed throughout the community. Elders, village councils, customary practices, and shared moral codes collectively sustain the clan, so no single individual comes to embody its power. The social order depends on a network of responsibilities rather than on one dominant figure. In contrast, *A Terrible Matriarchy* presents a completely different dynamic to the structure of the clan and its requirements for each member. In this novel, power and authority are concentrated in the individual character of Vibano, and her influence is felt in every aspect of the life of her granddaughter, Dielieno. The introduction of this type of structure and authority is historically significant after the decline of warfare within the community, the introduction of colonial rule, and the growth of the Indian state itself. Each of these factors contributed to the decline of the importance of the clan’s public functions. However, the clan itself survived, but its influence was redirected towards the regulation of domestic life, particularly through marriage, inheritance, gender roles, and household labour. In such a setting, it is not surprising that the elderly female in the story became the guardian of the clan and its domestic life. Within the gendered space of the Angami household, she is in the position from which the values of that culture can be most effectively transmitted to the next generation of Angamis.

T. S. Dhileep and Anu Baisel's discussion of the quest for feministic identity in Angami culture provides another perspective on the position of women in Angami society. Dhileep and Baisel explains that Naga society incorporates elements of both patriarchal and matriarchal control

within its social structure.(2591). Vibano embodies these aspects of Naga culture. She holds significant power within the Angami household, but it is derived from the patriarchal structures of society. The power that Vibano holds within the household is based upon her dedication to the values of the clan. As noted by Kire, Vibano often enforces the values of the clan more rigorously than any of the male characters in the novel. The novel, therefore, complicates any simple opposition between male power and female victimhood. It shows how patriarchal structures can endure by being reproduced within the domestic sphere through women who have themselves been shaped by those very structures.

Much of the psychological complexity of the novel emerged from Vibano being portrayed as neither a villain nor a victim of the patriarchal society around her. It is this complexity that has made *A Terrible Matriarchy* a rich text for feminist analyses. Hoineikip Haolai approaches the novel through the concept of Matrescence, a term initially used to describe the psychological transition into motherhood but later expanded to include forms of identity shaped by the home, the wider community, and intergenerational memory (889). Vibano's behavioural issues toward her daughter can be explained, therefore, as the result of her having been conditioned within society since childhood to behave in such a way. Vibano was not an exception to the rules of the clan society, rather, she was one of its custodians. The values that govern her actions are inherited rather than self-created, and she enforces them because she believes they are essential to the continuity of the family and the clan. Kire further complicates the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter by gradually revealing the motivations behind Vibano's discriminatory behaviour. Upon gaining an understanding of Vibano's motivations, the resentment that Dielieno experienced toward her grandmother transforms into a newfound respect for her maternal figure

“After my talk with Mother, I understood better the deep sense of insecurity that had led Grandmother to hold the world view she had. I think I mellowed somewhat towards her.” (Kire, *Matriarchy*, 253).

While these changes do not indicate acceptance of the discriminatory behaviours of Vibano, they do indicate an understanding of the motivations behind such behaviour. The stories of both of these characters indicate the ways in which such discriminatory behaviours may be accepted within a society due to their relationship with other individuals within that same society.

Kire also extends the discussion of this narrative pattern beyond the relationship between Vibano and Dielieno. By including the stories of three generations of women, Kire makes clear that the discrimination the granddaughter faces is not unique to her. Dielieno discovers the discrimination that her mother faced when she was young. Vibano’s behaviours can be read as not isolated to herself and her household but as part of a process in which the women of these societies are subjected to the same expectations as the men themselves. Although these women are subjected to the same expectations as the men of these societies, the women are the individuals who are required to enforce such norms within the population of the society. As such, the mothers and grandmothers of these communities are the individuals who pass along these societal norms to their daughters and the women of the house. T. S. Dhileep and Anu Baisel’s comparative study of *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *Mari* reinforces this perspective. By identifying themes of social injustice, matriarchal oppression, and sexual molestation, Dhileep and Baisel are able to draw connections between these different themes within Kire’s text. Kire’s interest lies not in revealing the individual people who perpetrate against others within these categories, but in understanding the ways in which those social injustices are created and enabled over time. Within *A Terrible Matriarchy*, such oppression emerges from the relationships between the women of the story, who ensure the continued perpetuation of the

dominant patriarchal clan despite the lack of males within the story to enact such oppression themselves.

Comparative Analysis: The Changing Registers of Clan Identity

When reading the two novels together, it becomes possible to recognise several continuities between the stories that are not immediately apparent when reading the novels separately. One of these continuities is in the discussion of marriage as exogamous. Both novels indicate that marriages are made within the context of the clan itself; the individuals who make the decisions regarding the marriage belong to those clans and consider the individual suitability of the women who would enter into the marriage; and that marriage provides benefits to the clan through the mixing of blood.

Despite this shared cultural logic, the novels work to convey the institution of marriage in very different ways. In *Sky Is My Father*, the marriage depicted for Levi is characterised by a sense of hope regarding the future of the Angami tribe. This is made explicit in the ritual blessing pronounced over the new household- a wish for progeny “as numerous as the progeny of spiders and crabs” and for the couple to “live to be ancestors and grandparents and prosper in their life.” (Kire, *Sky* 61-62). As the novel is focused on the survival of the tribe in the face of colonial aggression, marriage is portrayed as another institution that contributes to the tribe’s resilience and ability to overcome the challenges that stand in the way of their survival. *A Terrible Matriarchy* depicts the same institution from an altogether different perspective. Prior to the age of Dielieno’s marriage, her grandmother begins to prepare her for her role as a wife. The domestic life of a wife is taught to Dielieno from a young age, indicating how marriage is another institution that shapes the childhood of Dielieno. Despite marriage’s focus on the continuity of the clan, Kire portrays the institution as also detrimental to the tribe due to the emotional toll it takes upon the young girls who must conform to the expectations of marriage.

Another of the points that reveals the similarities between the two novels is the relationship between gender and labour. While *Sky Is My Father* examines the role of the male gender within the Angami tribe, the role of the females and their contributions to the tribe are largely ignored. Such a subsistence society as the Angami tribe could not have functioned without the labour of its female inhabitants. *A Terrible Matriarchy*, however, brings to the forefront the importance of such contributions as Dielieno's childhood reveals the way in which she is taught to be diligent and hardworking to contribute to the tribe

Considered together, the two novels reveal the interdependence of these seemingly separate worlds. The ideas of martial ideals and the value of resistance to outside forces presented in *Sky Is My Father* work because of the labour that occurs outside of the story. *A Terrible Matriarchy* makes visible the labour upon which the novel's society rests. The household in which the women live is crucial to the survival of the clan, and Vibano's efforts to train her granddaughter reflect the importance of such labour. What seems like an ordinary task in one novel is vital to the survival of the clan in the other.

The two novels also differ in the way they imagine the relationship between individual choice and collective responsibility. In *Sky Is My Father*, Levi is allowed considerable agency. He trains as a warrior, falls in love, and participates in the defence of his village, yet none of these actions places him outside the expectations of the clan. His choices acquire meaning because they fulfil the obligations attached to his position within the community. Individual identity, therefore, is never separated from collective belonging, it is realised through it.

A Terrible Matriarchy instead explores the tension between these two concepts from a different angle altogether. Dielieno expresses her resentment toward the way she is treated differently from the other girls in her village, even if she behaves in the same way, and even if she hates her grandmother for the way in which her grandmother discriminates against girls like

Dielieno. Much of the novel's emotional force lies in this conflict between a young girl's sense of fairness and the social role Vibano is determined to prepare her for. After much consideration of her grandmother's experiences, Dielieno begins to understand them and develops a sense of empathy and respect for Vibano's true motives. While this resolution to their relationship is significant, it is by no means a complete reconciliation. Nevertheless, both novels showcase the compromises that people must make in the face of the much older and more permanent institutions of society. In both novels, the sense of clan and the sacrifices that come with it are crucial to the stories. In *Sky Is My Father*, the sacrifice required of the clan and its members is physical and defensive of the community. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the sacrifice comes at the cost of childhood, missed opportunities, and the loss of a sense of what life could have been for a young girl.

Christianity provides another revealing point of comparison between the two novels because each is situated at a different stage in the religious transformation of Angami society. In *Sky Is My Father*, conversion is still a recent and contested development. As Kire notes in her introduction, "one of the first Angami converts was Nisier of Khonoma," and these early Christians faced severe ostracism because Khonoma remained a warrior village deeply committed to Angami traditions (Kire, *Sky* xv). Religious conversion therefore appears as more than a matter of personal belief. It unsettles established relationships within the clan and raises difficult questions about loyalty to inherited customs and communal identity.

The social landscape of *A Terrible Matriarchy* is markedly different. Christianity has by then become an accepted part of everyday Angami life. Kire does not present this religious transformation as a complete break with the past. Vibano's family is Christian, but the values governing everyday life continue to be shaped by clan expectations. The discipline imposed on Dielieno, the emphasis on marriage, domestic labour, and female obedience all remain firmly rooted in older social traditions. Rather than replacing the clan system, Christianity exists

alongside it, adapting to structures that were already deeply embedded in Angami society. Kire's portrayal therefore resists any straightforward assumption that conversion either dismantled indigenous social institutions or left them entirely unchanged. Instead, the novels suggest a more gradual process in which a new religious identity was accommodated within an enduring framework of clan values.

Contrasting Modes of Clan Transmission: Oral Culture, Proverb and Domestic Instruction

Another aspect that deserves attention, although it has received relatively little critical discussion, is the way clan values are passed on to the younger generation in the two novels. The contrast is revealing because it highlights different modes of socialisation within Angami society. In *Sky Is My Father*, for instance, the young Levi learns of the values of the clan through interaction with the remainder of the community; he learns of the values through the proverbs that are shared with him, the stories that are shared around the hearth in the village home, the behaviours of the warriors in the village, and even the reprimands of his mother towards the drunken man who is dragging their clan name in the dust (Kire, *Sky* 29-30). Levi is therefore not shaped by any single mentor. His understanding of honour, responsibility, and clan membership emerges gradually through continuous interaction with the elders, customs, and collective values that surround him.

While *A Terrible Matriarchy* presents a different model of socialisation for Dielieno, her understanding of what it means to be an Angami woman is shaped almost entirely by Vibano. Vibano takes on the role of preparing Dielieno for adult life, teaching and disciplining her throughout the story. The values that were once reinforced by an entire community are now conveyed within the confines of a single relationship within the family.

This shift is historically significant. The village world depicted in *Sky Is My Father*, with its extensive networks of elders, relatives, and communal institutions, reflects a society in which responsibility for transmitting cultural values was widely shared. As colonial administration, missionary education, and later the modern Indian state reshaped Angami society, many of these collective structures gradually weakened or changed. Yet, the responsibility of preserving clan values did not disappear. Instead, it became increasingly concentrated within the family. In a social order where women exercised primary authority over the everyday upbringing of children, much of that responsibility came to rest with mothers and grandmothers. Seen from this perspective, Vibano's severity is not simply an expression of personal temperament. It also reflects the burden of preserving traditions that earlier generations had sustained collectively. What had once been reinforced through the everyday interactions of relatives, elders, neighbours, and peers is now entrusted to a single woman, whose uncompromising discipline reflects the weight of that responsibility as much as her own convictions.

Land, Inheritance and the Material Substrate of Clan Belonging:

The comparison between the two novels also highlights the material foundations of clan identity. While much of the existing scholarship on Kire focuses on questions of gender or postcolonial identity, both novels repeatedly show that the survival of the clan is tied to material concerns as much as to cultural values. In *Sky Is My Father*, the land upon which the clan lives and grows is featured as both important for defending the land in the past and as the basis of the clan's identity. *A Terrible Matriarchy* brings these concerns into the domestic sphere. Here, the material consequences of clan identity appear through patterns of inheritance, marriage, and the unequal distribution of opportunities within the family. Kharbe (12) observes that Vibano shows extra love, care and fondness towards her grandsons while preparing Dielieno for domestic responsibilities rather than encouraging her education or financial independence. Such differences are not merely expressions of personal preference. They reflect a system in

which sons and daughters are valued according to the different roles they are expected to play in preserving the family and the clan. Seen together, the novels suggest that clan continuity depends not only on shared customs or emotional attachment but also on the management of material resources. Questions of land, inheritance, lineage, and labour remain closely intertwined, determining both privilege and obligation within the community.

This perspective also allows for a clarification of the place of Christianity within Kire's fictional world. The Christian principles of missionary education and the expansion of the economy created new opportunities for the characters and their society that were not reliant upon the clan's land or marriage into another clan. *A Terrible Matriarchy* itself hints at these possibilities and changes to the society through its depiction of the younger characters in the novel who have had access to education and who are beginning to experience the modern world. Yet Christianity within the novel does not appear to displace the value of the clan or its traditions. Vibano's household is both Christian and deeply shaped by inherited clan expectations, particularly in its treatment of women. Kire therefore avoids presenting social change as a simple movement from tradition to modernity. Rather, she portrays a community in which new institutions coexist with older forms of authority, creating tensions that are lived most intensely within the family and that ultimately drive the novel's central conflict.

Kire's Broader Oeuvre as Corroborating Evidence

Although this study concentrates on *Sky Is My Father* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*, these concerns are by no means confined to the two novels. Kire returns repeatedly to questions of clan, kinship, and community across her fiction, indicating that they occupy a central place in her literary imagination. Patton, for instance, notes that *Mari* is set against the backdrop of the Japanese invasion of Nagaland and centres on an ethnic insurgent group, while *Bitter Wormwood* explores the realities of an insurgency-torn Naga society. He explored in *When the*

River Sleeps, how the story focused upon the tribal and communal aspects of the Naga society. Though each of these novels differs from the others in relation to its setting and plot, they each discuss the social aspects of the society in which they are set.

In a similar vein, T. S. Dhileep and Anu Baisel investigate *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *Mari*. Despite the historical distance between the two novels, Dhileep and Baisel identify similarities in their discussions of social injustice, the oppression of women within Angami society, and their positioning within the Angami as a whole (2591). These findings support the argument advanced in this paper. The concept of clan identity is not explored only in *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *Mari*, but is one of the organising principles of Kire's fiction altogether. From discussions of the nineteenth century's construction of the Nagaland region to the changes in domestic life in the twentieth century and into the challenges that emerged in Nagaland during the war, Kire's focus on the impact of these social relationships on the lives of individuals within the novel remains consistent across her work.

Conclusion

Taken in isolation, *Sky Is My Father* and *A Terrible Matriarchy* appear to be set in very different narrative traditions. The former is a historical novel focused on colonial conflict, collective resistance, and the experiences of men. The latter is an intensely personal coming-of-age story set in the domestic sphere and focused on the relationships between women. Considered in conjunction, though, they share a common thread. Despite their differences in scale, context, and focus, each of these novels is framed by the same social institution: the Angami clan. As this analysis has shown, Kire frames the clan as a malleable structure that can accommodate changing historical conditions while preserving its essential features of descent, kinship, exogamous marriage, and collective responsibility.

In *Sky Is My Father*, these features are manifested in the communal defence of Khonoma. Clan membership is the basis for collaboration, leadership, and resistance, enabling a decentralised community to hold out against a vastly more powerful colonial power for a surprisingly long time. A Terrible Matriarchy relocates those same values to the home. By the time of Dielieno's childhood, Angami society has been altered by Christianity, the colonial administration, and the beginnings of a modern social life. The clan's influence, however, is still very much in evidence. It operates not through warfare but through the everyday management of family life, determining how marriage, gender, work, and obligation are understood. For Dielieno, these expectations shape the emotional world of childhood, creating moments of discipline and deprivation, and eventually a complicated reckoning with the traditions that have defined her grandmother as well as herself.

Through placing these two novels in conversation with one another, it is possible to gain a more complete understanding of the Angami clan than either of these novels could provide on its own. The Angamis themselves are the foundation upon which the people of Khonoma were able to stand against the encroachments of the colonialists for many decades. Kire's continued engagement with these clans and their histories is itself an example of her commitment to the preservation of the culture. As she has explained, her decision to write grew from a concern that the decline of oral traditions would result in the loss of the histories, memories, and values they carried. (Easterine Kire, Wikipedia). Thus, Kire's novel can be understood as more than mere storytelling, but also as an act of cultural preservation and remembrance.

At the same time, Kire ensures that the inheritance of such a society is not celebrated uncritically. The novel draws attention to the way the clan imposes certain burdens upon the women and girls of the community. The girls are required to fulfil the conditions necessary to preserve the honour and order of the clan, and their lives are lived according to expectations that they have little control over. While the novel celebrates the importance of the clan and the

sense of belonging that it provides for its members, it also makes clear the sacrifices that the girls and women of the novel must make for the continuation of the community. In a way, it is this inclusion of such a discussion that lends the novel much of its complexity regarding the Angami society that it depicts.

Kire's achievement with these two novels is that she does not offer a simple judgment of the clan. Neither novel celebrates the clan, nor does either work to reject the clan as a societal institution. Instead, Kire examines some of the contradictions inherent to the Angami clan. The clan enables both the sisterhood that Vibano forms with her siblings and others in her village, as well as the discipline that Vibano employs with her granddaughter. In one novel the clan is a source of strength for the clan members, yet in the other it is a means of enforcing gender roles within the familial dynamic. Kire does not ask the reader to reject one of these aspects of the clan as compared to the other. Rather, she shows the clan as possessing both strengths and demands of the members that belong to the clan.

The characters inhabiting these novels do not stand outside of this social order. Instead, they negotiate with it in a variety of different ways. Each of these interactions with the social order is incomplete and comes at a cost to the individuals involved. When novels like *Sky Is My Father* and *A Terrible Matriarchy* are read together, their relationship to the clan social order becomes evident in ways that it may not be apparent when the novels are considered individually. Though each novel examines different settings and incorporates different literary elements and focuses on different aspects of the clan social order, both novels interact with the same social question: how does a clan preserve itself across generations while maintaining consideration of the lives of those clans themselves? This examination of the clan social order and its dynamics with empathy and understanding is what provides Kire's novels with their significance within the literature of Northeast India.

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