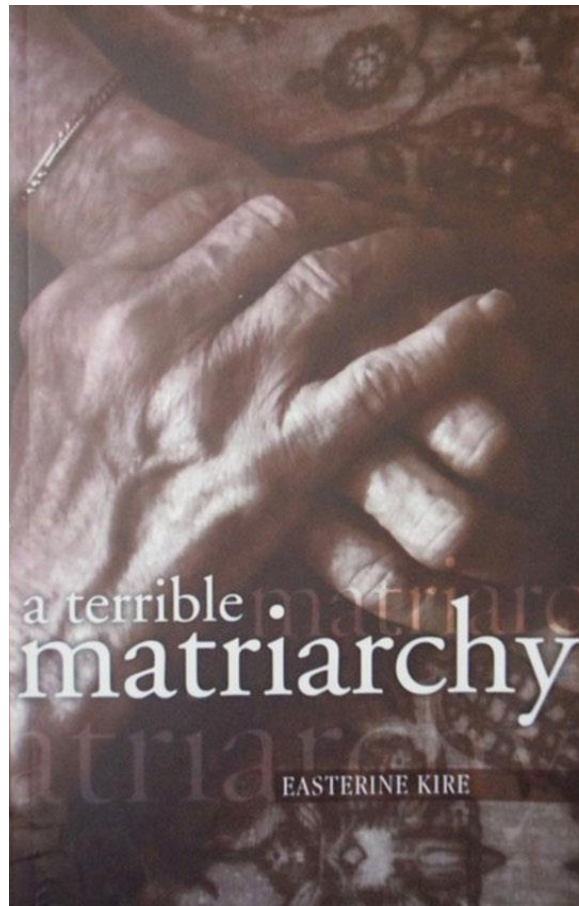


**Gender Politics & Discrimination in Post-Colonial
Nagaland with Special Reference to Easterine Kire's
*A Terrible Matriarchy***

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Abstract

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, a girl's coming of age story, revolves around three generations of Naga women : Grandmother, Mother and Dielieno the protagonist. Grandmother Vibano has gained a respectable status of a matriarch by serving the menfolk of her clan. She takes charge of her five-year old granddaughter Dielieno to prune her confident and inquisitive nature into a hardworking and docile one, so that she can be a dutiful wife in future. Grandmother continues to shower extra perks on her grandsons while Dielieno

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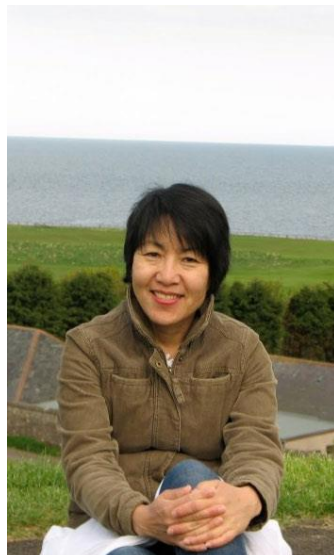
Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A., B.Ed., NET, SET

Gender Politics & Discrimination in Post-Colonial Nagaland with Special Reference to Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*

continues to remain the “little errand girl” who has to toil long hours doing household chores to impress the Granddame. In the course of the novel it gets revealed that the males-only inheritance system is the only reason behind Grandmother’s biased behaviour. However , economic insecurity is one of the factors and causes behind the suppression of the Naga women. There are other subtle socio-political factors as well. In this article I would try to fathom the mechanism of patriarchy which gets an impetus during the colonial and postcolonial era . The Battle of Kohima and the Indo-Naga conflict left the women of Nagaland more vulnerable than before. Naga women live in double jeopardy - they belong to the male-dominated Naga society which is trying hard to fit in the garb of Indian nationhood; post-colonial identity crisis is gnawing away its entire being. This article would highlight the socio-political conditions that strengthen the matrix of patriarchy and increase the sufferings of Naga women who, as the patriarchal matriarchs of the society, unwittingly contribute to their own exploitation.

Key Words: Matriarch, Matrix of patriarchy, Battle of Kohima, Indo-Naga conflict, Double jeopardy.

Easterine Kire Iralu



Courtesy: http://indpaedia.com/ind/index.php/Easterine_Kire_Angami

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Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A., B.Ed., NET, SET

Gender Politics & Discrimination in Post-Colonial Nagaland with Special Reference to Easterine Kire’s *A Terrible Matriarchy*

Easterine Kire Iralu is a prolific writer from Nagaland who has tried her hands in poetry and novels, and in children's books as well. Her works have been translated into various languages including German, Croatian, Uzbek, Norwegian and Nepali. She has to her credit four English novels in which the vibrant Naga culture with its fascinating folklores and traditions has been brought forth. Along with the rich culture of Nagaland there exist the unpleasant realities of Naga life and its complexities around the colonial atrocities and discrimination.

Kire's Novels

In her novels Kire has vividly etched out these realities which have brought catastrophic changes in the lives of Naga women who live in double jeopardy of being a woman in a male-centric society which itself is trying hard to deal with its post-colonial identity crisis.

The Battle of Kohima

If we go through the history of Nagaland, we will find that this beautiful state of North-eastern region in India has gone through many heart-wrenching sufferings; the lesser known Battle of Kohima which was fought from 4th of April to 22nd of June, 1944, stopped the Japanese march into India and it was the first British victory over the Japanese. The Battle of Kohima has been christened as 'the forgotten battle' and its veterans the 'forgotten heroes'. The Naga people became refugees in their own homeland; families were separated forever; women were ravaged and left to die; many starved to death; but these are not given substantial space in the Indian history.

The Shield of Patriarchy

Even I would have remained oblivious of this lesser known history if I didn't chance upon Easterine Kire's works. India's lack of interest in Naga history may be seen as the offshoot of Indo-Naga conflict which has witnessed the birth of AFSPA and its atrocities. All these conflicts and their socio-political aspects have only strengthened the shield of patriarchy which has spread its tentacles deep down the history and culture of mankind.

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Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A., B.Ed., NET, SET

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The Purpose of This Article

In this article , I would try to unmask patriarchy and its matrices with reference to Eaterine Kire Iralu's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, where a matriarch herself becomes the upholder of patriarchy.

“My grandmother didn't like me. I knew this when I was about four and a half. “ (*A Terrible Matriarchy* ,1) - thus begins the story of Dielieno ,the little Naga girl, who was sent off to live with her stern grandmother, Vibano. Vibano chose the name ‘Dielieno’ for her granddaughter as it means “little errand girl” and stands for servitude . She takes charge of Dielieno to prune her confident and inquisitive nature into a hardworking and docile one , so that she can be a dutiful wife in future. She believes girls don't need education -

“I really do not approve of girls getting educated. It only makes them get fancy notions about themselves and they forget their place in the family.” (*A Terrible Matriarchy*, 22)

Vibano and Her Male Heirs

Vibano's obsession with male heirs and her sexist views make Dielieno hate her with a vengeance. While Grandmother dotes on her grandsons, she detests female freedom in any form. She is the matriarch who binds her family in strict rules ; she is the abuser of the patriarchal power resulting in gender abuse within the same gender, and in the process she ends up abusing herself. Apart from Dielieno there are other female characters in the novel who suffer under the patriarchal structure of the Angami society of Nagaland. Neikuo, Bano, Nisano – the lives of these women are testaments to the presence and prevalence of patriarchy in the Naga social fabric. Neikuo , the old unmarried sister of Sizo and Grandmother Vibano , has no property of her own.

As it is a males-only heir system in Nagaland, Neikuo inherits nothing from her paternal wealth; and remaining a spinster has only multiplied her woes. She is living at the mercy of her brother Sizo who has allowed her to live in his paternal house, as he is living elsewhere with his family. Dielieno loves grandmother Neikuo

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Gender Politics & Discrimination in Post-Colonial Nagaland with Special Reference to Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*

for her understanding and helpful nature and wonders how two biological sisters can be so different. Then comes Bano, Sizo's illegitimate daughter who has no social recognition and lives with her aunt Vibano. She calls Vibano 'Mother' as she has never met her own biological mother. Bano toils from dawn to dusk, running errands for Vibano who has no sympathy for girls. When she grows up to be a beautiful young woman, marriage proposals start coming in, but Vibano keeps on rejecting the proposals saying that Bano deserves better. But soon we figure out the selfish motive; Vibano wants to keep Bano with her as she is of great help in her old age. Bano dedicates her life in looking after Vibano, and in return gets nothing. Though Vibano wanted Bano to live in her house even after her death, Bano is turned out of the house immediately after Vibano's death; Vibano's sons inherit the house and they plan to use the house for some other purposes. Even the last wish of the matriarch is not valued in the world of patriarchy, the fabric of which has always been strengthened by the matriarch herself throughout her life. Here the abuser gets abused in the power-play of gender politics.

A Glimpse of the Past

Though *A Terrible Matriarchy* is set in the second half of twentieth century, we get the glimpse of 40s when the Battle of Kohima was fought. Dielieno's mother was a young girl then; the Japanese soldiers were taking over the southern villages of Nagaland. More and more British soldiers were sent to Kohima to tackle them. One day a British officer got inside the house of Dielieno's mother and tried to molest her – “Suddenly the Officer pulled her into his arms and there was no doubt what his intention was.” (*A Terrible Matriarchy*, 171) She was saved somehow and later on it was proved that the soldier was a German spy masquerading as a British Officer. But many women were not as lucky as her; they were tortured and ravaged during the wartime as they had to leave their houses behind to save themselves from gunfire and bombings:

“Terrified of the Japanese, the local people fled to the fields and field huts. When they stole back to their houses by night to salvage grain, they found that it was impossible because their houses were occupied by Japanese soldiers”. (*A Terrible Matriarchy*, 172)

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The Situation Is No Different Now

Back to the second half of the twentieth century, the situation is no different. During 1940s the Naga people suffered in the hands of foreign armed forces, and in the 70s and 80s they had to deal with the Indian armed forces as well as some home-grown factional groups and military oppression. Apparently an area of male concern, the Indo-Naga conflict has reinforced the non-status of women in society. Such unresolved political conflicts put the Naga women in double crisis - they had to suffer in the hands of their male counterparts, and had to bear the brunt of the armed forces as well.

Spread of Alcoholism

Identity crisis, alienation, unemployment, insecurity and the political suppression of Naga rights led the frustrated Naga youths to the drinking houses which spawned in every nook and corner of Nagaland. These houses used to serve adulterated alcohol that caused many pre-mature deaths, but there was no escape from this. Naga youths took refuge in alcohol which, they thought, would save them from their social and economic impotence. When the male members returned home from the drinking houses, they indulged themselves in wife-battering which was thought to be manly and emotionally cathartic as well.

Ironically, when they died of alcoholism, the womenfolk of the family had to suffer the most. Nisano was at the mercy of Grandmother Vibano after the death of Vini who bled to death due to extreme alcoholism. Even when she was staying with her in-laws she found it tough to tackle the gossipmongers who were not ready to accept a widow living with her in-laws even after her husband's death.

The Protagonist Grows Up

In the story we find that the protagonist, who is a five year old girl at the beginning, grows up to be an intelligent young woman with a womanist point of view who has the ability to fathom the causes and reasons behind the apparent reality. Her hatred for her grandmother gets minimised when she learns the reason behind her sexist behaviour. Her mother helps her to understand her grandmother when she explains -

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“ When she was young she lived through a very hard age. In the village , widows without sons lost all their husband’s property to other male relatives. . . . Grandmother saw her own mother suffer hardship and poverty and exclusion from many aspects of social life because she had no brothers. It hardened her and made her determined not to suffer as her mother had.”(ATM, 250)

Preference for Boys - A Matriarch with a Sense of Lack and Insecurity

The above lines reveal the reasons behind Grandmother’s preference for boys. She looks at her sons and grandsons as a kind of insurance and so doted on them dearly. Dielieno realises - “After my talk with Mother , I understood better the deep sense of insecurity that had led Grandmother to hold the world view she had.” (ATM, 253)

She was a matriarch with a sense of lack and insecurity – insecurity caused by the lack of agency, insecurity caused by the lack of security and insecurity caused by the lack of power. And the causes for these insecurities are socio-economic in nature. Uneven balance of wealth and lack of agency have led to the subjugation of women in general. But women from the post-colonial milieus are the worst sufferers. The roots of all these lie in colonialism and its long lasting effects in the post-colonial setting.

Parallels

According to postcolonial feminists there are parallels between recently decolonised nations and the state of women within patriarchy. The British left India in a much chaotic state. Nagaland which was totally different from mainland India didn’t want to be a part of the country. The struggle for independence from India by the Naga people led to many incidents like mass raping and killing. The political chaos was never dissolved totally and its after-effects were visible in the formation of factional groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland with quarrels from within and without. Killing and bloodshed became very common.

. The Battle of Kohima and the Indo-Naga army conflicts along with the rise of factional groups pervade the collective memories of people and their daily life. Past turmoil would peep out every now and then -

“Mother baked a cake in the ammunition box that had been left behind during the war by British troops. Almost every house had one of these.”(ATM, 53)

The Gender Divide

The non-Christian Angami society became largely Christian. The transformation could not bring much changes in this society which continued to believe in spirit sightings and supernatural existence. But there was one noticeable change: on the day of Christmas the gender roles were reversed. At the Christmas feast organised annually by the Church, men did the job of cooking and serving. But, we should not forget that exception proves the rule; apparently what seems to be the reversal of gender role, further reinforces the gender divide. The Church gave importance to the patriarchal hierarchy as the Biblical texts advocated the supremacy of rule of the father.

Subjugation of Women in Every Culture

As postcolonial feminists would like to highlight, the imposition of Western cultural norms which might have aimed to improve the status of women, has the potential to lead to conflicts that can result in their further subjugation. The concept of colonization occupies many different spaces within postcolonial feminist theory; it can refer to various forms of social, political, and economic enslavement in a society.

Complex Layer of Gender Oppression

In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the complex layer of gender oppression is on three levels – social, economic and political, and ironically three generations of women are shown to bear its brunt - Grandmother, Mother and Dielieno. To top it all, Grandmother herself becomes the advocate for the male-centric society, as she strongly believes that it is the male heir who can give her security, and can earn respect for her in the society. She is the victim of sexual or gender politics.

In “*The State, Gender and Sexual Politics: Theory and Appraisal*”, R.W. Connell writes: “Sexuality is part of the domain of human practice organized (in part) by gender

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relations, and "sexual politics" is the contestation of issues of sexuality by the social interests constituted within gender relations. "Gender politics" is a broader term embracing the whole field of social struggle between such interests". (*Theory and Society*, 509)

Changes in the Offing

However, we find that the change is not far away; in fact it is the time for rapid social change. Mother was adamant to send Dielieno to school and make her finish her education as she herself was a failure in this respect. Dielieno gets her education and comes out with flying colours. Though Mother was weak and lacked agency, but nonetheless she was the whistleblower. Her words of comfort and inspiration made Dielieno a courageous woman with a sense of humanity and social justice:

"You know that our people say we should love our sons because they are the ones who look after us in our old age. . . . but for your father and I , it is you, our daughter , who has brought us the greatest comfort. We love all of you equally. You must always know that." (*A Terrible Matriarchy*, 250)

Grandmother's Role

The change reached out to Grandmother too, but it was too late. In her deathbed she could realise how cruel she had been towards her granddaughter ; silent tears ran down her cheeks . The story ends with a hope. At the end of the book, we find that peace was restored in the lives of the remaining characters , but not before the ghost of the matriarch got appeased. The matriarch who unwittingly became the upholder of patriarchy was herself its victim, and when this realisation dawned upon her it was already too late. It seems that her sense of lack overpowered her entire being. At the end of the novel Grandmother's crazed self reappears as the ghost.

Coming of Age Story

Even after her death Grandmother started haunting the paying guests of her house until the house was inhabited by its rightful owners – Bano, and, Vini's wife and son. Thus, we may conclude that *A Terrible Matriarchy*, is a coming-of-age story

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of a girl as well as of her Grandmother in the Angami society of Nagaland which has faced many socio-political struggles that have continuously strengthened the matrix of patriarchy in the fabric of Naga society.

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