



# Shadow Power of Matriarchy in Eastern Kire's A Terrible Matriarchy

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## ABSTRACT

*Eastern Kire, born in Kohima is an Angami Naga writer. Her works are an insight into the Naga culture, history and also the customs and traditions of the Angami society. Kire's A Terrible Matriarchy is a Bildungsroman; meaning it is about the protagonist coming of age. The protagonist, Dielieno is the youngest daughter of Visa and Nino. From an early age she is put under the tutelage of her grandmother Vibano who's very conservative woman and whose sole purpose is to groom Dielieno to be a good Naga wife and mother. Dielieno suffers from double oppression; first her grandmother's dictates and her Patriarchal subjugation and secondly the socio-economic discrimination evident in the Naga society.*

*But Dielieno does not feel dejected and lost because of her conditions. She bravely struggles against all odds. The one thing remarkable about her character is her fearlessness. The proposed paper traces the growth of Dielieno from a young, innocent girl to a mature woman; her struggles at myriad junctions in her life and her victory at the end of the novel.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Naga culture, patriarchy, oppression, struggle, victory.*

Nagaland is a male dominated society where man is the head of the family. It is the man who takes important decisions in the society. Inequalities and discrimination faced by women because of the age-old traditions are still prevalent in the society. This novel "A Terrible Matriarchy" by Easterine Kire, talks about the Naga society and how a girl child was given less importance than the male child. The protagonist, Dielieno is being treated differently than her brother by her grandmother. Only because she is a girl child, she is given less love and more restrictions by her grandmother. One might question as to why a woman is ill behaving to the same gender? Or why grandmother is treating Dielieno differently in spite of being women herself? Also, it talks of how the protagonist, in spite of a prejudiced treatment meted by another female, her own grandmother is able to succeed in life by getting good education for herself facing all odds.

Easterine Kire Iralu, the first English- Naga writer was born on 29th March 1959 in Nagaland, India. Her literary works are an insight into the Naga culture and history. Most of the readers of fiction are not acquainted with the land (Nagaland) nor its customs and traditions. Kire's novels open the windows into the culture of her land, which she feels is losing its sheen with the passage of time. Easterine Kire's works reflect the unpleasant realities of life of Nagaland and the complexities around the colonial atrocities and discrimination. It also reflects the Naga's fighting for their freedom. She herself had

a difficult life growing up in Nagaland due to the constant fights that were going on. Many innocent lives were being lost; it got worse as the years went by. Most of her writings reflect those incidents; discrimination, loss of innocent lives, torturing, fighting for freedom. She brings life to the Naga history which was long lost due to the oral narration and less writing.

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, is the story of a girl called Dielieno who undergoes a hard life because of her grandmother's perspective on girl child. She was the only girl child in the family followed by four brothers named Leto, Vini, Bulie and Pete. This story revolves around three generations; which is grandmother, mother and the grand daughter, Dielieno. There is patriarchy prevalent in this novel and a male child was highly favoured in the family. At the end it all comes to the conclusion that it is the culture and beliefs and the customs associated with it that has made people, who they are. Despite the hard times she had encountered, Dielieno came up triumphantly. Though her grandmother was against her education, she completed her studies. Not only did she excel in her studies but she even got a job which secured her future. Grandmother always had a belief that if a girl is educated, she will not have good marriage proposals; as boys consider marrying girls who were good in cooking and household chores. Dielieno proved it wrong as she got several marriage proposals despite of her good education. A



girl child was inferior to boy child according to grandmother but Dielieno proved herself that a girl child is also capable of great things. All the rules that were imposed on Dielieno by the grandmother did not go in vain as well. She began to do the household chores along with her studies. Also she learned a lot from grandmother though she was treated in a different manner than her brothers. She was always obedient to what her grandmother asked her to do, hence it produced a good result for her. She reaped good harvest at the end and also proved that a girl child is capable of great things.

Nagaland is a land of exquisite culture and traditions. Naga writings have never been very popular or to say it in a refined way, there were hardly any writers till 1963. The literary scenario was "a condition of drought", and it is only around 1964 that few writers started penning down their thoughts on subjects which were non-political and non-controversial. Religion and history as subjects were added to the style a little later.

"For contemporary Naga writer/poet, besides the creative urge to write and express, there is an over-powering urgency and need to write so that people understand them for who they are and not for how they have been misbranded. They also write to respond to past representations/misrepresentations and to tell their side of the story. To rewrite history or to offer recourse to written/established history. In addition, they write to reclaim dignity and assert identity and, most importantly, inscribe it to written Posterity". (Patton, 2)

Many Naga women like Ternsulao, Monalisa Chankija, Kekhrievoli and others including Eastern Kire have voiced women's repression and subjugation in the backdrop of patriarchy. Through their works they have provided a solid platform of expression to the Naga women. Rangam in his work wrote about *A Terrible Matriarchy* as how realistic the book has described about the Naga society. The novel is in a first person narrative which makes the novel an elegant part. Dielieno, despite of how differently she was treated compared to her brothers never fight back but gradually manages to pose the quietest interrogations which is to be an eye opener for the rising status of women in Naga society. Dielieno is questioned at every step that she takes in her life, from the very young age. Dielieno hated the grandmother and so the title of the novel is relevant to it. Easterine Kire's work talks about the Naga society and their culture. How people had certain customs and traditions to be followed which continued on for generation to generation. To know the culture of Naga society this book can be read as it mostly talks about the Naga culture and traditions whose voice would have been lost "somewhere in the hills".

Assertion of women's rights is only after late fifties.

Gender sensitization and equity is linked with education and the fact is that most Naga mothers and grandmothers of the older generation were uneducated and unaware of women's rights. (www.indianscholar.com)

The freedom movement of Naga women is often compared to the struggle of black American women.

While black American women were fighting for their rights and against discrimination in a supposedly peaceful country, Naga women's freedom movement have sprung up in the midst of more than half a century of armed political violence and movement for self-determination, which has compounded the violence faced by Naga women. (www.sch.com)

Eastern Kire's novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* revolves around a young girl Dielieno and through her the oppression that women face and the role of patriarchy. Dielieno is a young girl as the story begins, who notices the discrimination meted out to her by her grandmother, Vibano.

My grandmother didn't like me....i knew this when I was about four and half .....

What meat do you want...i want the leg.....i wasn't asking you, silly girl (ATM, 1)

The novel opens up with the line clearly indicating by the narrator that grandmother did not like her. Dielieno, the protagonist was the youngest sibling of four elder brothers. She lived a happy life with her family, though they did not have enough food to eat. Until, one night Dielieno heard her father and mother talking about her to be sent to grandmother's house. Dielieno wishes never to wake up from her sleep, but naturally she wakes up and is eventually sent to her grandmother's house. It was the idea of grandmother which her parents could not refuse.

The conversation speaks in itself. Her grandmother prevails and pervades over the entire household. It's difficult for Dielieno to counter her grandmother who is conservative on many accounts and especially when it comes to laying down the rules for a girl. To her, a girl's place is in her house with the prime aim of getting married, being a good wife and rearing children. She is supposed to live life at others terms and conditions and has to go by the dictates of the male and the society. Grandmother was very much against the idea of letting the boy child do the household chores or give a helping hand in doing some hard work. Also, the grandmother explained how a male child is very important in the family. Instead of being asked to do household chores they should be fed properly and taken care of. Grandmother advised Dielieno to be sent rather her brothers to fetch the water and do the household chores. The male in the family play a very important role, because it was the male who fights during the war and looks after the safety of the family. They are considered as the one who play a very important role in the family, in protecting the family against the enemy or any harmful things.

Since childhood, Dielieno had strong reservations against her grandmother. The most obvious one being called "the girl", by her Grandmother, while her brothers are addressed

by their names. The distinction that the grandmother keeps between the sons and Dielieno is quite obvious. The dialogue of her grandmother in a week's time since Dielieno lands up at her place to stay, is something that perturbs the young girl. The episode concerns the coming of her brother.

Go bring the potatoes inside girl. Come to me my dear boy, why haven't you come herefor so long? Don't you know I have kept sweet potatoes for you aside? Didn't you say? My potatoes were the sweetest? (ATM, 16)

Vibano has clear plans for Dielieno. She has to stay with her to be groomed to be a good woman. Six months after her stay with grandmother, Dielieno's parents come to visit her. They tell grandmother that Dielieno is six years old and needs to go to school. Grandmother was completely against the idea of a girl child being sent to school. She completely disagrees on the idea of Dielieno being sent to school and instead she tells her mother that she should be taught household work. She thinks that education will only harm their thinking or they will get fancy notions about themselves and forget their place in the family. Instead, grandmother begins to say about what the girl child did in her days. She would proudly say:

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

"They will always be busy at some work or other, too busy to get into trouble. It is all right if boys have a spot of trouble now and then, but with girls, it is different. You would never be able to get rid of her once she had caused trouble. 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." (23)

Finally, after Dielieno's father spoke to grandmother about the importance of her being sent to school, she agreed. Dielieno is being treated by her grandmother differently than her brothers in every way possible; she saves the best portion of meat for her brothers. She is taught not to question but only to obey everything that the grandmother tells her to do. A girl child is never considered the real member of the family. A girl child was expected to marry, have children, and be able to cook, weave cloth and look after the household. Grandmother makes her feel miserable, though she is just a small child she is expected to do every work in perfect way possible. She is asked to wake up on time and finish her work on time. Grandmother agrees to send Dielieno to school but on one condition, which is to continue staying with her. Grandmother asked her to finish her chores then only go to school, upon which Dielieno finished all her daily work on time.

Dielieno's enthusiasm makes her overcome the obstacles presented to her by grandmother. After school Dielieno was excited to show what she had done in school to her grandmother, but she wasn't interested to take a proper

look. Dielieno proved herself to be a bright student among her classmates. Later on she was promoted to higher class without the sessions ending because of her Excellency. Dielieno father came to talk to grandmother about the good performance of Dielieno in the school, but grandmother's response was rude. She again questions the education of the girl child, instead of praising her conduct.

Dielieno's oppression is double, the patriarchal thought that her grandmother manifests and secondly the socio-economic discrimination. Women, in a Naga culture do not have rights on inheriting land or property. Later, in the novel we find Dielieno's hatred for her grandmother is diminished, when she comes to know the reason behind her sexist behavior through her mother.

When she was young she lived through a very hard age... in the village, widows without son's lost all their husbands property to other male relatives. (ATM, 250)

Grandmother always had the kind of belief that man should be the head of the family and the wife should do whatever the husband asks her to do. She must obey her husband and maintain the family well. It was the job of the man to bring food to the family and the only duty a wife has to do is the household work. Grandmother herself was taught in this way and she expects the same from her daughters and granddaughters. Supposedly, if the society did not have an inferior thinking between man and women, the world would have been a better place or more peaceful place. Dielieno was saddened at the treatment she receives from her grandmother and would question it. Dielieno was allowed to visit her parents only with valid reasons. Her mother feels her absence in the house and is saddened that at the very young age she had to stay away from her family, but she never verbalizes her feelings.

Dielieno is the only girl child in the family but is treated very differently by her grandmother. Her father too is compelled to ignore because he thinks that grandmother is right in training Dielieno from the very young age. Dielieno was asked to fetch water, clean the house, and feed the chicken and count them at night. She was asked not to miss even one chicken and if she did so, she was asked to redo it over and over again.

Dielieno's mother explains her more about her grandmother's life, which really opened Dielieno's eyes and she realizes the reason behind the acrid behavior of her grandmother.

Grandmother saw her own mother suffer hardships, 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...try to see her as weak, old woman who had lost her husband and therefore, she has to make sure one or more of her grandson and sons will look after her. She tries to secure their loyalty by giving them food and Money or the fields. (ATM, 251)

Many incidents happened after the New Year started. Her best friend's father died. Along with it her brother called Pete died due to lung congestion which drastically affected her family. The most that was affected by the death of her brother was her older brother Vini; he was behaving differently and also neglected schools. Dielieno too was affected in her studies but she regained from it soon after she realised that it was not good. During those years the situation was not good in the states, as Indian army was picking young boys and beating them mercilessly. Vini was asked not to stay up late night as the situation was getting worse, Dielieno's mother was also worried of Vini. After the death of Pete, Dielieno's mother's health had deteriorated and was taking time to heal. The Indian army was against Naga Nationalist Patriots and captured everyone that was involved in it. Some days they even captured innocent civilians if they had an instinct that they too were involved in it. The women were brutally raped and then killed by the Indian army, which created more hatred in the minds of the Naga people towards the Indian army.

The political instability in Nagaland was growing at a very high rate at that time and it affected a lot of people. Vini and his friends for example were drawn to drinking and violence because of the political and social unrest. They began to draw comfort in getting drunk and speaking up their heart out for the freedom their people deserved. Grandmother thinks that men does not prefer woman who were highly educated but instead prefer woman who knows household works well. Though grandmother was against it, her brother Leto supported her to study in college.

Critics have rightly analyzed grandmother's character. To them, "she is a victim of her own spinning; the compartmentalization of the gender that sheenforces reflects her own childhood and the torments she faced in a male centric colonial India".

Her mother's words moved Dielieno to tears. For the first time in the entire narrative she felt sorry for her grandmother. She Says:

"Mother's words made me cry. I had no idea she understood so well all the bitterness I had felt for grandmother all these years. She made me want to forgive and that was something I had never felt before. How do you forgive someone who has borne a grudge against you for being a girl?" (ATM, 251)

Dielieno becomes a little soft towards her grandmother at the time of her death. It seems as if all the enmity and grudges she was holding against her grandma seems to dissolve. Her unreal service was a lengthy affair and at the end everyone in the family believed that she lived a full life. Her death had finally brought her at peace with herself. With grandmother's death a generation ended. According to a critic:

The novel is a saga of three generation of Naga women; grandmother, mother, Dielieno. This novel is rooted in the history of stern Naga matriarchal attitudes and discrimination

of the girl child, not by men of the family but by women them Selves..... it is not only the patriarchal dominance which oppresses the womankind, but the matriarchy in the patriarchal society or even the patriarchal society which makes women suffer.(www.indianscholar.co.in)

Grandmother's attitude towards Dielieno can be blamed on the cultural belief that the people practise. It was passed on from generation to generation and people respected the decision that the elders made. There was no question as to why they should go against that or break the traditional rules that were made long time back. Grandmother herself was the victim to the societal norms and traditions. So, it made her into a person that she has become now. She had grown into in and it is difficult for anybody to remove that traditional mind-set from her.

The attitude of grandmother towards Dielieno can be understood because the culture brought her up in that thinking. Grandmother lived in a society where lots of restrictions were laid on girl child. Grandmother saw how the women in the society without the male child underwent. The society looked down on them and considered them as lowly, they were mocked. Grandmother herself went through terrible experiences because her mother did not bore any male child and as a result they were looked down by the society. So, with pain that she went through she made up her mind into believing how the male child played a very important role in the family. With the passing of the generation people's thinking began to change, like the same way Dielieno's parents realized how she played a major role in the family when it was falling apart.

However, despite of all that she went through in the hands of her grandmother she rose up triumphantly. She excelled in her studies and proved herself more than what people expected her to become. The society thought that the girl child did not play an important role but Dielieno proved herself to be very helpful even when her family was in deep crisis. She was the one who was taking care of the family when her mother fell ill. Though her grandmother let her finish multiple works before she went to school, it did not affect her studies but rather she did so well that she was promoted to higher class. The restrictions that were set on her did not stop her from pursuing what she wanted. She is a great example to the young girls not to give up. The lessons that she learned through her grandmother did not go in vain. Along with her studies she learned to do the household work from her grandmother which proved to be very helpful in the coming days.

However, despite of grandmother always disappointing her, she has her love one's who encouraged her to do better. For instance grandfather Sizo who is the brother of grandmother encouraged her by saying. As mentioned in the text; "I knew you were a bright girl, I always knew. Now you just keep studying hard this year too and when you have been to school for ten years then you can be a teacher and you will get lots of money and you can build your own house."(94)

Though, at the first reading of the novel it appears that Dielieno's plight is the result of her subjugation at her grandmother's hands but a deep and layered understanding of the novel reveals that matriarchal domination in the novel is in reality a veiled patriarchal domination. The first part of the novel where Dielieno's father justifies the harshness of his mother's towards Dielieno is actually a dominance of patriarchy. He says, "it is for your own good, your grandmother would never do anything for your welfare....you know she has a hard life. She only wants to raise you to be a good woman". (ATM, 6)

In the novel we see various female characters that were suppressed by the society's belief and tradition. One such character is Dielieno's mother herself, who very much feared grandmother. She was very careful about her actions and behaviour in front of grandmother. She tried to be a good wife and a mother, so that grandmother would not question her.

Though Dielieno remains the central figure in the novel, through whom the novelist highlights the issues faced by Naga women, yet other minor characters like Bano too suffer greatly in the narrative. Bano is the illegitimate daughter of grandfather Sizo, grandmother Vibano's younger brother. But Bano calls Vibano as 'mother'. Sizo has already married someone else and has three children with his present wife. Bano's original i.e. her biological mother is not talked of in the novel. Bano is neither educated nor she is married, which implies that economically she is the weakest. She has to depend on others for her survival. If one compares the characters of Bano and Dielieno, one can notice glaring facts. Both are economically dependent and single, still their life trajectories are different.

So, with the culture practices that grandmother was brought in, she imparted the same towards Dielieno. It was the culture that made her who she has become and her outlook on life was also affected by the culture that she was taught in. The writer from the very beginning explained how harsh the grandmother's attitude towards Dielieno was, but during the end she lightens our hatred towards grandmother by explaining how the culture have made her do what she did. All the way it was culture that moulded the behaviour and attitude of the people towards life.

Grandmother lived during the age where there were multiple wars that were taking place between the clans. As a result the man was the one who took active part in keeping the family safe and sound. They were the one who fought for the safety of their villages and also in capturing new territories. The men were considered very strong in comparison to women.

Everyone in the society is directly or indirectly affected by the culture and traditions. No man is free of culture or the traditions that the particular society follow. The cultural practices may differ from one region to the other, but we see that most people are affected by the cultural

practices and they follow them. In the end Dielieno comes to understand why her grandmother treated her differently than her brothers. However, through it all Dielieno rose up triumphantly by excelling in her life and also proved herself no less than her brothers. She serves as a great inspiration to the people around the world.

#### **According to a critic**

Kier's work brings about conflict and gender in Nagaland with a powerful and engrossing tale. The history and culture of the Angami society that has through years of belief that men are superior to women bring about a soul-touching story of women of three generations that are not only stuck in the vicious circle of patriarchy but also in some way internalize it, making them victims of their own doings. (www.purplepencilproject.com)

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