

Tradition and Gender Discrimination with reference to Easterine Kire's A *Terrible Matriarchy*

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Abstract:

Nagaland is a mountainous state in the northeast India. The region is known for its rich tribal culture, custom and patriarchal society. It is a small state in India. Nagaland is bounded by Arunachal Pradesh to the northeast, Manipur to the south and Assam to the west and northwest to Myanmar. The state capital is Kohima. Easterine Kire was born in Kohima. She is an Angami Naga writer. Her works delineates the Naga tribal culture, history, the customs and traditions of the Angami society. Her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a bildungsroman novel. 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. Vibano wants to bring Dielieno to as a good Naga woman. Dielieno has been struggling a lot throughout the novel due to Patriarchal subjugation. Her Grandmother forces her to do all the household works. But Dielieno is an intellectual little girl among the Naga tribal girls and she does not lose her feminine power to her society at any circumstances. She bravely confronts against the abusive orthodox Grandmother's discrimination to get education and a place in her family and society.

Keywords: Naga tribal society, domination, patriarchy, struggle, victory

Introduction

Nagaland is known for its rich tribal culture, custom and patriarchal society. The Angami Nagas are one of the ethnic groups in the North east states of Nagaland. They settled in the districts of Kohima, Chumoukedima and few other districts. Easterine Kire is a poet, a storyteller and novelist. She is the first Naga novelist in English. She was born in March 1959 to an Angami Naga family in Kohima. She currently lives in Northern Norway. Most of her writings delineate the lived realities of Naga people.

In 2011, Kire was awarded the Governor's Medal for excellence in Naga Literature. She was also awarded Bal Sahitya Puraskar for her novel "*Son of the Thundercloud*" in 2018 by Sahitya Academy. Her writing style always expresses a strong historical and political awareness by highlighting the issues like identity and ethnicity.

Gender Discrimination

The novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* exposes the theme of women's oppression or patriarchy. More obviously it looks into the double-standard oppression that brings the attention of the readers. The story revolves around the young girl Dielieno. The girl is not only suppressed by the patriarchal society but also by the grandmother Vibano's biased behavior. The narrative explores the sufferings of an innocent girl Dielieno. It describes her confrontation with the traditional Angami society to which she belongs. In the very first line of the novel, the girl says that her grandmother dislikes her due to her gender. Kire writes, "My grandmother didn't like me, I knew this when I was about four and half" (1).

In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Kire deals with the issue of gender discrimination faced by the Naga women at every step of their life. Even when the grandmother distributes food, she shows her biased behavior towards Dielieno. When the girl eats food along with her brothers, she asks for chicken's leg. Her grandmother says that particular portion is only for boys. Kire states, "That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portion"(1). In this novel, Dielieno, the protagonist becomes the object of suppression under her own Grandmother. The novel revolves around the central character Dielieno and how she has been fighting to get the education. The novel highlights her growth from a young innocent girl to a matured woman.

Dielieno is the youngest one among the children and was the only girl child. At the age of five, she was sent to live with her disciplinarian grandmother Vibano. She wants her to grow as a good Naga wife and mother. 'Dielieno' the Angami name actually means errand girl. The name itself tells the status of the girl in Angami society. The novel deals with much of her life from five to twenty three years.

The novel is written in first person narrative through the young innocent voice of Dielieno. According to the Naga society, a girl child is considered as a good running errand and looking after household chores. The novel narrates the three generations of Naga women: grandmother, mother, Dielieno. Thus the novel highlights the lives of the three generations.

The novel tells how Dielieno has been fighting to get education against the terrifying odds. The Naga women are not allowed to get education. They have to do only household chores and learn to be a good wife. When all her age mates are going to school, Dielieno's mother informs the grandmother that they want to send Dielieno to school. The orthodox grandmother starts saying:

In our day, Grandmother began, Girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learned the housework. Then we went to the fields and learned all the fieldworks as well. That way one never has a problem with girl-children. They will always be busy at some work or other, too

busy to get into trouble. It is okay if boys have a spot of trouble now and then, but with girls, it is different (22)

She is struggling to get place both in the family as well in the society. Dielieno says: I was the youngest in a family of five children and Father and mother made it seven. I sometimes felt I was an afterthought, and maybe Father and mother didn't quite know what to do with me. Also, because I was a girl after four boys, they never seemed to be sure whether to buy me girl's clothing or let me wear leftover boys' clothing. (2).

She is young and a quite sensitive girl who does not lose her fighting spirit against the terrifying odds in her early life. Easterine Kire asserts that Dielieno is not a feminist character rather she is a womanist. She is a brilliant and curious girl who fights against her grandmother's effort to tame her. Kire clearly portrays the tension between the grandmother and granddaughter throughout the novel.

The Grandmother is of the opinion that Dielieno is a girl and she needs to be trained for household chores. In her view, girls should be taught the household chores and boys will be boys, they should not engage in household chores. Grandmother never calls her by her name rather she called her as 'The Girl' or 'The Errand Girl'. Being a woman herself, the Grandmother discriminates the little Dielieno from her brothers the most. In her opinion only boys need good food and need not give good food to girls.

Bano, Grandmother's niece was living with Grandmother to help her in looking the household works. In her Grandmother's house, Dielieno has to bathe with cold water. After bathe she had to fetch water. At water spot, women used to talk about other people's personal life. A woman feels pity for Dielieno's condition at her grandmother's house. Dielieno has to help Bano in cooking. Basically, Bano is a kindhearted woman to Dielieno and she works very hard in that house. Grandmother always has good food at her house but she does not serve much to Dielieno.

Kire vividly portrays the patriarchal society in the novel. They have to struggle a lot for a seat at the table whereas boys are privileged over girls from birth. Women in the Naga family suppress their desires even from having new clothes to a filling meal. The effects of old traditions that trample the rights of women which reflect the discrimination exercised against women are explicitly described in the novel through the protagonist Dielieno's struggle.

Moreover, grandmother's obsession with male heirs and her sexist views make Dielieno hate her with vengeance. She is the matriarchy who binds her family in strict rules. She is also an abuser of the patriarchal power resulting in gender abuse with the same gender. Apart from Dielieno, there are several women in the novel who suffer under the patriarchal structure of the Angami society of Nagaland. Women like Neikuo, Bano, Nisano are the testaments to the presence and prevalence of patriarchy in the Naga social fabric.

According to the Naga society, people hate women laughing. Once grandmother warned Dielieno and Bano that, girls who laughed frequently ended up becoming wine - brewers and no respectable persons. Both Bano and Dielieno were afraid to cross the drinking houses to get to the shop. Women in the drinking houses teased Dielieno and Bano very often. They ignored what they said. The men could be raucous when they were drunk. Both Bano and Dielieno had so many restrictions in Grandmother's house similar to the struggles and restrictions faced by several women in the society. In this connection, Shirin Ebadi states, "Women are the victims of this Patriarchal culture, but they are also its carriers. Let us keep in the mind that every oppressive man was raised in the confines of his mother's home" (Shirin Ebadi)

The expressions such as ‘The household that did not have a male heir was considered barren’, ‘a woman’s role is to marry and bear children’, ‘men don’t like to marry educated women’ because, they strongly express the gender discrimination in the society. The readers could understand the dominating nature of male in Angami families from the beginning of the novel.

The Grandmother plays a pivotal role in *A Terrible Matriarchy*. The grandmother holds a tight leash on all her family members and the nearest clan. The compartmentalization of the gender that she enforces reflects her own childhood and the torments she faced in the male-centric colonial India. As Dielieno comes of age, she understands that her oppression might not have been a direct by-product of the ‘terrible’ matriarch. Vibano, the grandmother’s thoughts on empowering a female child lead to her beliefs of not giving them proper education and freedom. For her, empowering female child was to make them learn the chores of the houses that would lead them becoming dutiful wives and mothers. Dielieno who is against these beliefs comes to term with her grandmother when Vibano, on her deathbed, asks her not to hold any grudges.

Summation

Kire’s *A Terrible Matriarchy* brings about the tradition of gender discrimination in Nagaland with a powerful and engrossing depiction. Kire describes various female character suppressed by the society’s belief and traditions are also vividly dealt with in the novel. She has showcased the issues faced by Naga women; one such character is Dielieno’s mother herself. She is afraid of Vibano. She is always very careful about her actions and behavior in front of her. She tried to be a good wife and a mother, so that Vibano would not question her.

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