

**DUAL JEOPARDY OF NAGA WOMEN IN EASTERINE KIRE' S A
*TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY***

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Abstract

Naga writers contemplate on roles and responsibilities as writers, as intellectuals and as leaders of thoughts and ideas. As writers are incomplete without readers thus it becomes very important for them to ponder on whether they are working towards creating a more inclusive democratic ethos and environment for their society or making them more open-minded and open-hearted, more tolerant and progressive in thinking and action. Eminent Naga Poetess and Novelist, Easterine Kire (Iralu), in one of the conference keynote address said that colonization of Naga people by the British and then by the Indian forces have affected the mentality of the Nagas, causing them to compare themselves to others and perceive a victimized identity.

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, is a story of Naga women revolving around three generations: Grandmother, Mother and Dielieno the protagonist. Grandmother Vibano influenced by patriarchy has gained a respectable status of a matriarch by serving the men folk 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 too can be a dutiful wife in future and carry on matriarch tradition with honor. On the other hand Grandmother showers her extra love, care and fondness towards her grandsons.

As the novel progresses it gets revealed that the society is male's inheritance and this is the only reason behind Grandmother's biased behavior. However, economic insecurity is another important factor behind the suppression of the Naga women. Further there are also other subtle socio-political related to the male dominance.

The paper will focus on the above issues and try to fathom the mechanism of patriarchy which gets an impetus during the colonial and postcolonial era, 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, Patriarchy, Identity, Oppression, Double Jeopardy

Naga writers contemplate on roles and responsibilities as writers, as intellectuals and as leaders of thoughts and ideas. As writers are incomplete without readers thus it becomes very important for them to ponder on whether they are working towards creating a more inclusive democratic ethos and environment for their society or making them more open-minded and open-hearted, more tolerant and progressive in thinking and action. Eminent Naga Poetess and Novelist, Easterine Kire (Iralu), in one of the conference keynote address said that colonization of Naga people by the British and then by the Indian forces have affected the mentality of the Nagas, causing them to compare themselves to others and perceive a victimized identity.

It is said that the best literature ever produced is nothing but the story or event that happened in the life of the writer or of someone whom they knew well. Easterine Kire's narrations are the microcosm of the near actual events that may possibly take place within the realistic environment that is portrayed based on the in depth understanding of the region, its people and their culture. Her writings are the messages conveyed directly or indirectly through action, reaction or interaction of the characters with one another or through their thought of articulation.

Easterine Kire Iralu's short essay published in the oxford anthology seems like a rejoinder to the mainland discourse from a disgruntled writer who has been denied enough space, but the observation that she makes there is worth mentioning: "We have always lived on the periphery. This is my experience, I have been marginalized simply because I am a Naga, twice-marginalised because I am a woman and thrice marginalized because I am a tribal, a member of an indigenous community" (Aier 273).

Most of the Naga folk tales are centered round the male dominance, be it exploration of new territories or war or creation. Naga women's experience of repression and exploitation set in the backdrop of patriarchy, customs and exploitation is the root of both their historiography and feminist discourse. The theoretical structure of creative literature of Naga women writers stems from this erased and hidden historical experience of their existence.

Naga women writers like Temsula Ao, Easterine Iralu, Monalisa Changkija, Nini Lungalung, Tenyidie or Kekhrievöü Yhome are trying to locate a space for expression to the repressed speech and through their literary work they have defined a new mode of expressivity of Naga women, while emphasizing a speaker voice within the text. These writers have attempted to reconstruct Naga feminist ideology in terms of their creative work whether through fiction or poetry.

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. So movements of feminism articulating women's rights has gained momentum only from the late fifties, born out of violent conflicts and the aftermath of the relentless killings of men and innocent women and children by the Indian army. This movement for women's rights, though late, is similar to the African American women's movement for civil and political rights that brought women like Zora Hurston to the fore and deeply inspired Alice Walker and younger writers. The difference one needs to understand is while Black American women were fighting for their rights and against discrimination, in a supposedly peaceful country, Naga women's movements 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. Protesting voices emerging from rape and the violence of Indian army atrocities is replete in many creative writings of women in Nagaland.

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, is a story of Naga women revolving around three generations: Grandmother, Mother and Dielieno the protagonist. Grandmother Vibano influenced by patriarchy has gained a respectable status of a matriarch by serving the men folk 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 too can be a dutiful wife in future and carry on matriarch tradition with honor. On the other hand Grandmother showers her extra love, care and fondness towards her grandsons.

Easterine Iralu's *A Terrible Matriarchy* is rooted in the history of stern Naga matriarchal attitudes and discrimination of the girl child, not by the men of the family but by women themselves. *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a challenge to the feminist ideology. It is not only the patriarchal dominance which oppresses the womankind, but the matriarchy in the matriarchal society or even in the patriarchal society makes women suffer. In her novel she presented cases from Nagaland where women suffer for terrible matriarchy.

Dielieno, briefly called Lieno feels unwanted in the family as her parents often makes her wear the leftover dresses of her brothers. At such tender age she knew that her grandmother did not love her, when she refused to give her a much desired chicken leg. The granny said, "That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions"(1). Lieno also observed how her mother lived a very unhappy life, in the dread of the granny who never appreciated her mother. The brothers were not allowed to do any work and the child Lieno was sent to do works like fetching water, etc. The granny advised her mother, "Don't let her run about with her brothers any more. That is not the way to bring up girl-children"(4). Lieno had no identity. The granny never called her by her name. She called her 'girl' all the time. The granny did not like the schooling of Lieno. She told Lieno's mother, "I really don't know what it is your generation sees in school. Your children are not being taught the skills of life because they are too busy studying....She will completely forget all I have taught her now" (37). Lieno suffered all through her life, but she finally forgave her granny in her deathbed. One's suffering at the stages of growth handicaps and keeps one aggrieved throughout life. Lieno suffered like that.

Though the title of the novel is *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the traditional Angami society is not a matriarchal society. It is a patriarchal society like other tribes of Nagaland where women are considered as subordinate to the men. The grandmother earns the position of a matriarch after the death of her husband as her husband was a 'big' and wealthy man in the community who worked for the government. The consummation of the life of the grandmother, like all other married women, is realized in serving her husband always. In a traditional Angami society, a wife is always expected to fulfill her husband's needs and desires and the young girls are ordained in this tradition since their childhood. A Naga woman considers herself fortunate to live as a supplement to her successful husband. The grandmother is also like that and over time, she acquires a privileged status in the family circle after the death of her husband. As the matriarch of her clan, with her husband's pension, she controls her family members with strict discipline. As the mother/grandmother, she should have been sympathetic towards other female members of her family and she should have changed their lives. But instead of this, she pours her unduly love on her grandsons and makes life miserable for her young granddaughter in order to train her as a perfect 'wife material'. She says that some men don't like it if their wives are too educated (205).

Thus all the other female members of her family are subjugated and oppressed. There are numerous instances in the novel where one can see the unequal power equation between the male and the female. And it is not the male who subjugates the women always; rather the structure is as such that women accept their subordinate status spontaneously and very often female members impose those structures to keep the tradition going. As Lois Tyson in her book 'Critical Theory Today' cites Helen Cixous:

Women will not learn to resist patriarchal thinking by becoming part of the patriarchal power structure that is by obtaining equal status and equal opportunity in current patriarchal society. For women's acquisition of power within the existing socio-political system would not adequately change the system. Indeed the result would be that woman would become more like the patriarchal men because they would learn to think as the patriarchal men have been trained to think. (Tyson 100).

As Lieno grows up, the discrimination intensifies against her and she becomes used to it. She starts pitying her mother as well because she feels that this discrimination is not directed only against herself, but also towards her mother. She has often seen her mother taking out meat pieces from her own plate and sharing it with his sons, and sometimes when there is a scarcity of food at home, she will sleep empty stomach after feeding her children. Seeing her mother suffering constantly because of the dictates of her grandmother, she starts hating her gradually- "The person she feared most was Grandmother and I hated Grandmother with a vengeance because nothing my mother ever did seemed to please her." (3). The Grandmother not only dictates the female in the house, she also decides the nature of works to be performed by the family members as she says Lieno's mother that fetching water from the well is not a man's job but a girl's errand. Not only the tribal societies, the non-tribal societies have gender classified jobs. The women are taken as fragile and weak and so they are assigned with less laborious jobs. The women are constituted not only as physically weak, but also as intellectually inferior to the males. For the grandmother, going to the schools means ruining the girl child. "In our day," Grandmother began, "girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learnt the housework. Then we went to the fields and learnt all the fieldwork as well." (23). The grandmother wants to continue the tradition of not sending the girl-child to the school because girls are supposed to be married off. Such superstitious ideas prevailed in the past that the education for female has been considered fatal for the husband. When Dalhousie has considered introducing female education in India, "Adam pointed out that a feeling allegedly existed in the majority of Hindu females, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to read and write would become a widow soon after marriage and the idea was also generally entertained that intrigue was facilitated by a knowledge of letters on the part of females." (Ghosh 69).

What appears to be a matriarchal domination is in fact a disguised patriarchal domination endorsed by a female. When Lieno's father justifies the Grandmother's harshness, he is actually promoting the patriarchal structure: "It is for your own good, your Grandmother would never do anything to you that is not for your welfare... You know she has a hard life. She only wants to raise you to be a good woman." (6). A good woman is one who does her duty towards the husband unquestioningly. Later on, after the death of the Grandmother, when the dispute regarding the utility of the property is being discussed, the readers are made aware of the patriarchal nature of the society. The will of the male is pushed through the female so as to

appear that the women are behind the decision making. On one hand, Lieno's father says, "Men are not men when they have wives (303)," on the other hand, he again says,

Your grandfather left the house to all three of us and our male heirs. Technically speaking, it belongs to all of us men in the family. Whatever decision we make, it will have to be done in full agreement of all the male members. We should also listen to the womenfolk and what they have to say on this. (302)

Lieno's mother is taking the footsteps of Lieno's grandmother. The older generation has accepted the subservient and secondary position of women in the society for granted. Under such circumstances, the question for women empowerment remains suspended. The cultural and customary set up of the tribal society do not have space for women empowerment, and if a woman is empowered through education, and thus being empowered, she becomes vocal about her rights, such women are out rightly rejected by the society. Vini, Lieno's brother, rebukes her, "Grandmother was right. Girls should never be educated. They always forget their station in life." (249) It has been shocking for Lieno to learn that three of the marriage proposals for her have been turned down because her aunts have rebuffed the prospective bridegrooms by citing the outspoken nature of Lieno which does not make her a good wife. On the other hand Lieno tries to prove that despite of being educated and upfront, she has to fulfill her role as a wife. The novelist fails to give a strong position to Lieno in a patriarchal society. She has to imbibe the values of a woman which is appropriate for the tribal society.

The novel brings to light the marginalization of women in a tribal society. However, the economy plays an important role in such subjugation. The subservient position of a female is further aggravated when the society progresses towards an industrial society. Although it is not appropriate to classify the Naga tribal communities as industrial society, yet the inception of modernization and introduction of education system has no longer left it to be primitive hunting and horticulture societies. The spread of education and the availability of jobs have significantly changed the economic front of these tribes. Since economy determines the role of the family members, the change in the occupation has also changed the roles of these people. Thus with the change in its social structure, there has also been a change in the condition of the women in these societies as will be evident from the novel under consideration. Although many critics are of the opinion that women enjoy a better position in a tribal society, Tiplut Nongbri is of the opinion that...

tribal women are not absolutely subordinated and possess greater economic and freedom of movement than their counterparts in non-tribal cannot be disputed. But it would be naïve to regard this as a indicator of their superior social status. Evidence suggests that even hunting societies women were mostly treated as "second sex" with greater lesser subordination to men. (Nongbri)

In the Naga society, as to be seen in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the insecurity suffered by Lieno's grandmother has made her change her position from a lenient daughter to a terrible grandmother. Lieno's mother narrates the story of the Grandmother that being the eldest among the three daughters; she has gone through a very difficult phase of her life- "In the village, widows without sons lost their entire husband's property to other male relatives. So she understood that it was very important for a married woman to produce as many male off springs as she could. Her mother did not have brothers and they lost all their lands and fields when her father died." (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 272-273) Since the grandmother has seen her own mother laboring

through hardship and her deprivation from many social privileges, she in turn decides to harden in order to avoid the hardships of life. Without right to property, women are left to fend for themselves and end up suffering. In case of Bano, her fate hangs in uncertainty because neither she has a proper education to support her livelihood nor a husband to take care for her. It is only her father who eventually comes to her rescue as he assures that a part of his pension will go to her after his death. Bano has to live in the mercy of others, and obviously she has no space for voicing her opinion. She is the true subaltern who is the topic of discussion, but she herself can never participate in that discussion. No one has ever asked her once, what she wants. In all respect the women are made dependent on the male, so that they can be coerced to subjugation by the male. One cannot deny the importance of education in the current scenario and when the tribal land ownership is restricted to the males. Such discrimination has social sanctions validated by taboos in the societies. Tiplut Nongbri cites an example in this relation that “among the Ho and Oraon tribes, women’s access to land is constricted by the taboo which forbids them to use the plough- a practice which is rooted in the belief that if a woman uses the plough, it would result in economic and social calamities” (Nongbri 200). Such reasons make the family desire for a male heir than a female one. The desire for a male child is so integral to the tribal and non-tribal societies in India that we see this desire being voiced in all the narratives under consideration.

The novel critiques the idea of conflict and violence occupying the realm of the outside world that is distant from the world the female protagonist inhabits. Modern analysis of political conflict has always presented such conflict as belonging to a male domain where solutions are brought about through military might or political dialogues. During the formative years of the protagonist, everyone around her try to shield her from being privy to any information belonging to the ‘outside’ male domain. In fact, her first encounter with such a world was presented in chapter seventeen where she eavesdrop a private conversation between her father and her brother Leto, who were discussing a particular incident that occurred that afternoon regarding the fate of sixteen ‘underground’ recruits that were captured and tortured by the Indian army. This took her back to her memory of Vechoi, her father’s friend who lost both his father and brother to another army atrocity some years back. However, the novel soon points to the fact that the disruption of normal life to the point that it disrupts routine activities, from the simple task of getting up in the morning and going about simple everyday business, is itself the most damaging of such conflicts. Apart from explicit acts of bodily violation, and psychological damage, violence also resides in the interruptions and reversals of the expected and predictable proceedings of daily lives inflicting terror in the ontological security of the subjects’ lives. The gendered structure of a patriarchal society like the Angamis, implicates, in an ironic yet hegemonic way, that the womenfolk becomes responsible for the smooth functioning of the society. Apart from the task of earning for their livelihood, almost everything else from starting the kitchen fire in the morning, cooking, cleaning, fetching water, nurturing the children, looking after older parents, etc. becomes more or less a sole responsibility of the female/s in the house illustrated evidently by Kire in *A Terrible Matriarchy*. Hence, the disruption of these normal proceedings had strenuous impact on the female self. All the women characters including Lieno, her mother, Nisano, etc. have all had to bear that brunt. Peter’s death and the subsequent dismantling of life in Lieno’s house is one of many such examples. The novel does demarcate the existence of two spatial worlds— an internal domestic and psychological space that Lieno, the narrator and the

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other female characters inhabit and understand. The outer space, on the other hand, is marked by its relative absence throughout the novel. This demarcation is both a psychological and sociological reality. This absence, in many ways, characterizes the gender biases prevalent in the Naga society and how political reality further acerbates patriarchal values.

Lieno's bitterness is changed into absolution for her grandmother realizing her social dilemma during a period of Naga history when a man was deemed to be the soldier of the family. Such convictions of the older generation are to be known in the backdrop of socio-cultural advancement of a society in transition. *A Terrible Matriarchy* stops scrutinizing questions to all and sundry to look after kids, irrespective of their gender individualities, accepting their valuableness as presents of God. The novel is a clarions voice to male and female to frolics their unmatched part in introducing in social change, doing away with all shapes of gender inequality and tries to pour consciousness in the veins of the society.

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