

## Subjugation of Women : A study of Easterine Kire's A Terrible Matriarchy

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### Abstract:

*The concept of power and gender stereotype is quite inseparable. Power corrupts the society everywhere and hegemony functions like the same. In the societies of North East India, some customs are still prevalent, which always represent some kinds of domination over the inferiors. The writers of North East India try to showcase some of the conventional norms of the society, where they live in. Easterine Kire's "A Terrible Matriarchy" is such an example. The society always considers male to be superior, who always impose their power over the females. But in the novel it is not the similar thing in some ways. Here, it is shown that a person who is inferior or powerless can be dominated by anyone who is powerful. Pramod K. Nayar states, " Sex is biological , but the values and the meanings associated with the female and male body are socially ascribed. Gender is this system of values and meanings. If sex and biology is nature, then gender is about the social and therefore, culture. 'Female' and 'male' refer to the biological characteristics , while 'feminine' and 'masculine' refers to the social values assigned to these." The females are in such a position in the society, where she cannot do anything like their counterparts due to their biological structure. Their wishes are very much limited along with little expectations. The novel represents the story of a young girl Delieno and of the Angami society she lives in. The writer also highlights the lifestyle , their bonding, cultural harmony of Naga People in general and Angami people in particular. The character of the young girl is humiliated and treated as inferior due to her biological construct along with another girl Bano. The paper puts its efforts to showcase the power structure of Angami society and how the matriarchy works throughout the novel. It also shows the status of women within the Angami society.*

**Keywords:** Northeast, Naga, Angami, power, gender, alcohol, Matriarchy, tradition, status.

### Objectives of the study:

- i) To analyse the gender stereotype of North East India.
- ii) To expose how matriarchy can operate power over the inferiors.
- iii) To show the traditional values of the Angami society.
- iv) To analyse how the females are disinherited to get the property throughout the life in the hands of the rule-makers.

### Review of Literature:

A few number of scholars have revealed the reflection of Angami society, their traditional customs by writing on the novel *A Terrible Matriarchy*. They also show their different perspective of the novel such like gender, status of female, human suffering, family, power conflict etc.

In *Naga Women's Perspective on Gender Roles : An Analysis of Literary Narratives*, I Watitula Longkumer has mentioned about the similar tradition of patriarchy and matriarchy. How matriarchy becomes corrupted among the human relationships , it is reflected in the novel. Watitula adds that the role of Naga woman is very much conventional and the space is also limited. Double marginalization of women can be widely applied here. The introduction of subservient grandmother shows the contrast with the concept of 'new women'.

In the journal of The Research Institute of Asian Women, Arenkala Ao has written about the problems occurred due to the generation gap between the grandmother and Delieno. Their different ideologies stand apart. In spite of having a name, the grandmother calls her ‘the girl’, which can be considered a form of domination. Ao has also stated that the grandmother is represented in such a way who has accepted the ground rules laid down by society including herself and believes that women are born to be subordinated to men.

In *National Herald*, it is said about Easterine Kire that she tries to impose her own personal history and experiences throughout the novel and she is still besieged by her experiences. She tries to express the covered customs of traditional Angami society specially which are there in women’s life. By writing the novel, Kire tries bring a revolution in her society.

In the article, *Patriarchal Hegemony in A Terrible Matriarchy*, Petekhrienuo Sorhie writes whether it is patriarchy or matriarchy, it is the problem of mind set and attitude. No society is static, change is mandatory. Kire also tries to exhibit a changing society and to some extent she is successful while representing her Angami society in the novel.

Sunita Kashyap states in the novel that “The subtle but principle theme of the book, however, is about being a woman in a society stepped in customary laws that provide only token gestures to the rights and desires of woman .... The gender divide and the rights of men as opposed to women run throughout the novel...Easterine Kire displays deep insight and writes from the perspective of one situated in the patriarchal world of the Angami society but who has also been exposed to the larger worlds outside both of which serve to influence her profoundly.” (Kire 310)

### **Analysis:**

In spite of the high position of women during the Vedic period, gender bias was entrenched deeply associated with India including the North Eastern parts. In many remote places, discrimination against girls actually starts in the womb. Female are aborted because society places a high emphasis on giving birth to male children. Another important reason for the discrimination against the girl child is the fear of heavy dowry that parents are expected to pay when their female children are married. Girls are also discriminated against in terms of their health and education. The infant mortality rate of girls is higher than that of boys in most parts of India. Girls are made to do more work than boys and parents prefer educating their sons rather than their daughters in the hope that the son will earn and support the family in the future but they overlook the old saying that —Educate a man and you educate an individual; educate a woman, and you educate a whole nation. Women have been treated substandard in the male dominated society. They have been subjected to numerous limitations and were exposed to violence and exploitation. Violence against women exists ubiquitously. It varies from time to time and place to place, in type, frequency, intensity and control. The term ‘feminism’ defines an unequal gender bias within the society between men and women. The society itself creates the concepts like patriarchy or matriarchy. All are social construct. Peter Barry states “In feminist criticism, the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural ‘mind set’ in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality.” (Barry 122)

The setting of the novel is Nagaland, along with the representation of Angamis. The novel portrays a story of young girl Delieno and her confrontation with the traditional Angami society to which she belongs to.

Angami is one of the major tribes who lives in Nagaland. Writers like Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire have brought their respective tradition in front of us through their write-up. Easterine Kire’s novel represents mainly the status of woman in the contemporary Naga society which was undergoing tremendous changes. The story of “A Terrible Matriarchy” is greatly inspired by the author’s own life and it is mostly based on real people. The book portrays the patriarchal set up of society. The book is

remarkable because it shows the lives of many women of three generations. The Angami society is patriarchal and patrilineal and the approach towards girls's education, inheritance of property, marriages and divorces are quite indifferent. The society does not give any importance towards these aspects.

It is important to say that the role of Angami women is imperative to the family and society as they are the main source of income. These women are engaged in weaving, crafting, agriculture along with the household works. Although the society is patriarchal, then also the women enjoy full freedom and liberty in the society. Easterine Kire analysis differently presents the real situation and shows a different image of how patriarchal society operates. The girl of the story, we can draw from the preface of the book. From outside, it can be seen that it is the patriarchy who operates but from the deeper sense, more or less, the matriarchy also contributes the misuse of the system along with the gender issues.

The protagonist Delineo was having a very caring loving family including her father, mother and brother but the trouble was occurred from her grandmother, who was representing the matriarch. Instead of his male identity, the father of Delineo, he never imposed his male power over the protagonist. The grandmother was a kind of person, who was cranky and did not have any tender emotion and affection for a girl child. Delieno's mother tries to explain her that grandmother Vibano's outlook towards girls and boys have been shaped due to the discrimination towards women in the society that she has seen. Again the mother comment on the position of men and women in the Angami society. It is said in the novel "Men don't like women who are aggressive and not tactful. They like their wives to be good workers. You are a good worker, Lieno, but you must try to be more docile." (Kire 249) Delineo was sent to her grandmother at the age of five to learn the household work. Delieno did not only face the physical hard labour but she had to abide by the rules set by the grandmother, who was a matriarch. According to her, girl child don't need education at all. The writer presents such kind of situation which shows women are the major caretakers and upper hand in the household and their decision is prime whether it is correct or wrong. These matriarchs are the one who manipulates the male of the family.

The author also highlights the conventional view of Angami society, whether giving of girls education in the society is good or bad. Till that time, the topic was very much controversial. The matriarch grandmother, Vibano was in the point that girls don't need education at all because it will not help to do the household works and becoming good wife in the Naga society. Grandmother has very clear concept about the fact and she states, "In our day ...girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learned all the fieldwork 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." (Kire 22) She used to measure up to it with her old days that refer to the orthodox mindset of the grandmother. But on the contrary, the view of Delieno's parents quite new or modern, they want to send their children to receive education. Delieno was good in her study and in order to not make her grandmother angry, she would wake up early to do all the household works because after finishing the household work, she was allowed to go school. Delieno was one of the little girls who completes her education and takes up a job as a teacher to support the family. The author depicts the changing Angami society which is evolved and this novel also showcases the notion of parents who think to get education for the girl is equally important like the boys. The mother of Delieno wants to send her to school and make her finish her education as she herself was not successful in this aspect. Delieno receive her education and comes out with flying colours. Though the mother was weak and lacked agency but even so she was one of the reasons of secret for every success. Her words of comfort and motivation made Delieno a audacious woman with a sense of compassion 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". (Kire 250)

The book also presents a kind of clash between modernity and traditional custom. The society is evolving due to the course of time and the Angami society which represents the modern ideas and

thoughts. The natural process of menstruation of girl child is considered as ‘the curse’. The young girls were frightened with such ‘grown up matters’. It is notified from that incident when Delieno and her friend felt uncomfortable to approach the shopkeepers to buy sanitary napkins, this shows the society’s way of thinking towards this situation. It can be considered as Bildungsroman, because though earlier it is uncomfortable to handle such situation but later she is finally able to deal with such situation in a practical way.

Being a patriarchal society, the practice of inheritance system is there in the Angami society and in the course of time, it passes to male members of the household specially the young members. This is one of the reason for what a kind of gender biased is created. Here the youngest son inherits the maximum amount of land and other properties. And this tradition was followed by the grandmother Vibano. She discriminate the girl children from the boys children but also reserves her property for Vini, the youngest boy of the family. Although Delieno do all the household works of her grandmother, the love of her for Delieno is not changed. After Vini’s death also, she was keeping her property not for Bano and Delieno but for Vini’s children. Delieno and Bano spend their entire life for the grandmother. For this kind of reason , there is a kind of obsessiveness for producing male children. The author takes up this issue further in the case of Neiko, grandmother Vibano’s younger sister, who was unmarried and so she loved her father’s house. It is well known to all that the actual owner of the house after the father’s death was Sizo, Neikuo’s brother. Sizo may have chosen to live in another town after his marriage and for the purpose of his job, but that is only because of his convenience. Delieno states clearly that even though Sizo lived separately, the house was his and would be passed on to him when Neikuo dies.

There is domination due to one more reason and that is addiction toward alcohol and it results to domestic violence. The writer mentions in the preface of the book that the problem portrayed in the novel is real life incident. She says, “After the 1950s frustration over the political suppression of Naga rights by Indian government led many men to abuse alcohol. Unemployment added to the frustration which many tried to deaden with drink. Alcoholism has other causes in the Naga situation , yet all are interrelated to the political climate of the state and the increasing sense of social and economic impotence. (Kire viii). Delieno’s brother Vini and his friends were attracted towards alcohol though they are representing the Angami youth on one side but on the other side they are the reason for becoming oppressed towards the ‘powerless’ . The Angami society is not so sympathetic towards the family left behind by a male member of the village who died due to alcoholism. The village gossip mongers do not spare widows like Nisano, Vini’s wife, who has to go through a lot of or deal everyday problems. The writer also draw the picture of frequent cases of domestic violence arising out of alcoholism for which women suffer. Nisano’s married life turns into a nightmare due to Vini’s drinking habit and physical abuse resulting from it. However, the author maintains a very authentic picture in depicting a society which had its positive sides too. If men like Vini exists, so do loving and caring husband like Lieno’s father and her eldest brother, Lito who are perfect husbands and fathers.

If we discuss the Angami society, then it is important to point out the practice of polygamy, which is a kind of oppression by husband by bringing more than one wife. The polygamy is practiced among many other tribes of India. Here , the freedom is given to men to marry more than one woman. In the novel, apart from Delieno ,there are some other female characters like Nisano, Vini’s wife, a long suffering young wife and widow. Bano , a unmarried spinster, Vimenuo’s mother, a dutiful wife and caring mother who suffers after the death of her alcoholic husband. Moreover , they are the ones who are marginalized at every steps of their lives. Bano is the illegitimate daughter of Sizo and lives with Vibano, her aunt and who doesn’t have any social recognition. She calls Vibano as the mother. Bano works so hard for Vibano but she doesn’t have any pity for her as she is a girl. When she is at her age of marriage but her aunt rejects all the proposals due to her selfishness. Vibano wants her to keep with till her old age. Bano dedicates her life in looking after Vibano but in return she gets nothing. After the death of Vibano, the last wish of the matriarch is to get the property by the male inheritors.

Through the novel, Kire devotes her attention in portraying the journey of a young girl Delieno to a matured lady. Through the story it is said that women are subjected to be marginalized. But in the last part, Delieno emerges with greater understanding of herself and the society to which she belongs comes across the conflict between modernity and tradition. Moreover, this novel showcases how Kire deals with the feminists concerns. With the help of this novel, she responded to the gender issues due to both patriarchal and matriarchal hegemony. The females are forcefully bound to be imprisoned socially, physically and emotionally. The novelist is representing the weaker section of the so called Angami Society.

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