



**LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE 'ANGAMI'
SOCIETY: A STUDY OF EASTERINE KIRE'S A TERRIBLE
MATRIARCHY**

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary writers from North-East India have showcased their desire in coming out of the stereotypical writings which were prevalent from the region at one point of time, portraying the troubled political climate, violence, backwardness, underdevelopment, poverty, and the ever-present image of the gun. These writers have instead taken it upon themselves to highlight the under-represented issues of the region and thus bring to light the rich culture and tradition of the North-East India. Easterine Kire, a noteworthy author from Nagaland, is in the same league. Her novel A Terrible Matriarchy portrays the coming-of-age story of a young girl, Delieno, and her confrontation with the traditional Angami society to which she belongs to. This paper is an attempt to study the several facets of the Naga society, especially that of the Angami culture and way of life, as represented in Kire's book in order to analyze the status of women in the contemporary Naga society which was undergoing tremendous changes.

Keywords Patriarchal, patrilineal, matriarchal, Angami tribe, Nagaland, alcoholism, gender-discrimination

Nagaland, one of the seven sister states of India, is a place rich in culture, myths, and beliefs. Angami is the major tribe in the state and is mainly divided into five major types based on religion – Seventh Day Adventist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Christian Revival and Roman Catholic. Writers from Nagaland like Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire have brought out the rich traditions of the state live through their writings. Joining the league of many contemporary North East Indian writers like Mamang Dai, Harekrishna Deka, Dhruba Hazarika, Jahnvi Baruah and others, Ao and Kire too have expressed their discomfort with the terms 'North-East literature' and 'North-East writers' as they relate those with the colonial legacy. Senior Editor of Zubaan, Preeti Gill rightly states "To say that the Northeastern states are different from the rest of India in almost every way is to state the obvious, but it is important to recognize that these 'differences' have created rifts, giving rise to insurgencies, demands for secession from the Indian state and years of internal conflict and discontent. To the people of the Northeast their world is central to themselves; to 'mainland



India' it is a borderland." (Tehelka 2009) The strong political awareness, issues related to identity and ethnicity, violence in different forms, and above all the shadow of the gun are some of the common realities of North-East India which hardly any writer of that region can ignore in their works. The present day writers, however, have shown a growing tendency to break free from the traditional stereotypical tales of the troubled political climate, violence, backwardness, underdevelopment, poverty, and the ever-present image of the gun.

Contemporary writers have shown a great desire in portraying various under-represented and remarkable features of the region. It has been pointed out correctly: "It is tragic that the long-running unrest, violence and terrorism in the North-East has remained a mere digression in the mainstream of the Indian nation-state....The poems by Uddipana Goswami....stories by Mitra Phukan, Srutimala Duara and Aruni Kashyap, serve as a reminder that the "North-East" is not a geographical, political unit, but a place of many languages and cultures." (Pratilipi 2010) In this context a thorough study of the novels of noted Naga author, Easterine Kire is important to understand her portrayal of the culture and lifestyle of the Angami tribal society. Kire's greatly acclaimed book *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) brings to light several facets of the Naga society, especially that of the Angami culture and way of life. Kire's novel, among other themes, concentrates mainly on the representation of the status of women in the contemporary Naga society which was undergoing tremendous changes.

A Terrible Matriarchy is the coming-of-age story of a young girl, Dielieno (Lieno), and her confrontation with the traditional Angami society to which she belongs to. Greatly inspired by the author's own life and mostly based on real people, the book portrays the patriarchal set-up of the society, albeit amidst many changes. Kire's book is remarkable in bringing out the lives of many women of three generations. The Angami society is essentially patriarchal and patrilineal and the same is visible in the society's approach towards girl education, inheritance of property, marriages and divorces, and their way of life. Interestingly, however, the role of Angami women is imperative to the family and society as they are the main source of income. Women are mostly engaged in weaving, handicrafts, agricultural activities, besides their household work. Even though Naga society is patriarchal, women enjoy considerable freedom and play important roles in the family and community. Kire, in her book, makes a deeper analysis of the real situation and presents quite a different picture from an ordinary understanding of how a patriarchal society operates. In the preface, Kire states, "(w)hile the visible structure of the novel is patriarchal and seems focused on bringing out the misuse of the patriarchal system, the less visible under-structure is matriarchy and how it abuses the patriarchal structure resulting in gender abuse within the same gender." (ATM, ix) This statement more or less summarizes the very base of Kire's book. Lieno is fortunate to have loving parents and brothers, but her troubles stem from the matriarch of the house, her grandmother, a strict disciplinarian and clearly one without any sympathy for a girl child. Sent at the tender age of five to live with her grandmother, Lieno not only undergoes physical



hardships at her new home, but also has to abide by the impossible rules set by the matriarch who firmly believes that girls do not need education, love or affection. Kire presents a situation where some women have upper hand in their households and community and also have the ability to manipulate men into thinking that they are the decision makers whereas in reality the strings are drawn by the women in a subtle manner.

Kire highlights the traditional view versus the modern one in her reflection of the Angami society's approach towards education for girls. Lieno is shown to be growing up at a time when the importance of education for Angami girls was still being debated and not prioritized. Grandmother Vibano has very clear ideas about the fact that girls do not need education as it does not help them in any way to attain their most important goal, that of becoming a good Naga wife and mother. 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." (ATM, 22) Lieno's parents, however, have quite modern views and are of the opinion that Lieno should receive education as much as her brothers had the rights to. For Lieno, her entire life seemed to be centered on going to school and do well in her studies. In order to not make her grandmother angry, she would wake up earlier than usual, finish all her household work, so that she would be allowed to go to school. Once permitted to go to school, she puts her heart and soul in learning and achieving the most out of her education. She proves to be a good student, also a hardworking one and over time is able to gain the admiration of her teachers as well. Lieno is one of those few girls who completes her education and takes up a job as a teacher to support her family. Kire depicts the evolving Angami society amidst tremendous changes and that is mainly showcased by the modern ideas of parents who consider it important for their daughters to get an education and take an avid interest in the girls' careers as well.

A noteworthy aspect of Kire's book is her delineation of the constant tug of war between tradition and modernity. In the evolving Angami society where modern ideas and thoughts are dawning in, it is interesting to see how a natural process such as menstruation is referred to as 'the curse'. Young girls like Lieno feel terrified of such 'grown up matters'. Kire's portrayal of how Lieno and her friend hesitate to approach shopkeepers to buy sanitary napkins conveys much idea of the society's perspective of such situations. However, true to the genre of a Bildungsroman, Lieno too sheds her cocoon and is finally able to deal with such situations in a practical way.

The gender divide and the rights of Angami men as opposed to women operate all throughout Kire's book. Being a patrilineal society, the Angamis practice an inheritance system where the property is passed on to the male heir of the household. It is usually seen that the "youngest son inherits the maximum amount of land and other properties and other male



children are given a share in the property required for their living.” (IndiaNetzone) Grandmother Vibano, following the traditional practice, not only showers her maximum love and affection to Vini, but also reserves her property to him. Even though Lieno stays with her, does all her work and takes care of her household, she is not to get anything from the matriarch. Even after Vini’s death, grandmother’s share of affection and her property shift to Vini’s child, but not to Lieno or Bano, who regards the old lady as her mother and had spent her entire life looking after her. Explaining this partiality in grandmother Vibano, Lieno’s mother says that it sprang from a society which believed in a males-only inheritance system. It meant “...widows without sons lost all their husband’s property to their male relatives”, (ATM, 250) leaving them with no choice but to try marry men with personal property and be obsessed with bearing male children. Kire takes up this issue further in the case of Neiko, grandmother Vibano’s younger sister, who is unmarried and so has lived on in her father’s house. It is common knowledge that the actual owner of the house after the father’s death is Sizo, Neiko’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. Lieno states clearly that even though Sizo lived separately, the house was his and would be passed on to him when Neiko dies.

The Angami men’s domination in the society is further showcased in the story through the problems women incur due to men’s alcoholism and the resultant domestic violence. Lieno’s brother Vini and his friends represent the Angami youth who are drawn towards alcoholism at a very tender age to overcome various existing problems peculiar to the Naga situation. Many Naga men take to drinking to suppress their helplessness and anger against their existing social conditions. As Kire remarks in the preface to the book, this problem portrayed in the story is drawn from her real life experiences. Quoting various reasons for this social problem, she says, “After the 1950s, frustration over the political suppression of Naga rights by the 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. (ATM, viii) Kire touches upon this issue through Vini’s drunken outburst against the Army and the fake encounters: “Do you want to know why I drink? Why all of us drink and brawl? It’s because life here in Kohima is so meaningless....Do you know how frustrating it is to be a Naga and live with the fear of being shot all the time? Do you know what it does to your insides when you hear about the people tortured and killed by the army and you can’t do anything about it?” (ATM, 226) The drinking houses by the side of the village road become terrifying places for young girls as well as married women who not only have to face the drunken men and their tantrums every night but also go through lots of trouble in crossing these bars while on the way to buy things from nearby shops. The Angami society is not so sympathetic towards the family left behind by a male member of the village who has died due to alcoholism. The village gossip-mongers



do not spare widows like Nisano, Vini's wife, who have to go through a lot of ordeal every day. Kire also portrays 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 abuses resulting from it. However, the author maintains a very authentic picture in depicting a society which has its positive sides too. If men like Vini exist, so do loving and caring husbands like Lieno's father and her eldest brother, Leto who are perfect husbands and caring fathers.

An understanding of the married lives of Angami men and women and the practices related to marriage are required to study the literary representation of the position of women in the Angami society. Angamis, like many other Indian tribes, practiced polygamy at one point of time. However, nowadays the society is more inclined towards monogamous marriages even though "the males are free to marry more than one woman." (IndiaNetzone) The customary laws of the society provide mere token gestures to the rights and desires of married women. Kire's story features three generations of women and thus, portray a vivid picture of women's position in the society. Lieno's mother explains to 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 her mother facing. Lieno's mother's comment on men in general is important to understand traditional position of Angami women in their families and society: "Men don't like women who are aggressive and outspoken. They like their wives to be good workers. You are a good worker, Lieno, but you must try to be more docile." (ATM, 249) Much alike to her mother's statement, Lieno's grandmother's words also portray a society which is quite difficult for the women and clearly partial to men: "In my father's day, boys never did any work because they had to look after the village and engage enemy warriors in warfare. The household that did not have a male heir was considered barren. They were always in constant danger if there was a war. The women would have only one man to protect them. That is why we love our male children so much and we give them the best of food. And we should." (ATM, 35-36) The stories of the other major women characters in the novel, Nisano, Vini's wife, a long suffering young wife and widow; Bano, an unmarried spinster; Vimenuo's mother, a dutiful wife and caring mother who suffers to no end after her alcoholic husband dies, represent "the Naga girls and women who rise daily at dawn to fetch water, cook, clean, and care for family; who give birth, raise the kids, and mourn the dead and serve the mourners at funerals" (Pimomo) and are yet greatly marginalized at various levels. At the same time Kire is intent on showcasing an authentic picture by portraying women like the neighbourhood gossips at the water spot, the women in the drinking houses, and the cunning daughters-in-law, Sino and Leno, who present the other side of the society.

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* brings alive various features of the Angami tribal society, usually kept in the periphery, and is able to prove wrong the "assumption that literature from North-East should capture the blood, violence and terror that ravages this part



of India.” (Kashyap) Kire’s book, instead, captures the traditions, culture and beliefs, and lifestyle of the people of the Naga society. She devotes much of her attention in portraying the journey of the young girl, Lieno to a matured woman, and in the process brings out the various problems rampant in the society to which women like her are subjected to. No doubt, the narrative abounds in tales of various issues dominating women in the society, but as a coming-of-age novel, the protagonist is finally able to emerge with greater understanding of herself and the society to which she belongs to. Ultimately, A Terrible Matriarchy paves the path in understanding the Angami society portrayed authentically by someone who has known and experienced it and is thus, able to bring out the tug-of-war between tradition and modernity in a changing community.

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