



African Journal of Biological Sciences



Tradition and modernity in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*: A Gender Perspective

Dr Rousonara Begum*

Dept. Of English

Furkating College (Autonomous),

P. O. Furkating,

Q. Dist. Golaghat,

Pin. 785610

Assam

Contact no: 7002537561

MailID: rousonarab@gmail.com

Affiliated to Dibrugarh University

and

Ms. Gayatree Boruah

Librarian,

Furkating College

Abstract: *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a story of an unpleasant grandmother and a girl child. The protagonist, Dielieno, the youngest in a five-child family was only five years old when she's sent to live with her grandmother, Vibano, who wanted her to "be a good worker". The little girl Dielieno undergoes a hard life mainly because of her grandmother's perspective on girl child. The protagonist, Dielieno, experiences a double bind: societal expectations for women enforced by her domineering grandmother, and the emerging influences of modernization. The paper analyzes how the novel critiques the limitations placed on women under the guise of tradition, particularly the grandmother's role in perpetuating gendered oppression. It further explores how Dielieno navigates this tension, potentially seeking agency and empowerment through embracing aspects of modernity. By examining the characters' struggles and choices, the paper aims to shed light on the challenges faced by women in a society grappling with change, while also considering the importance of cultural heritage.

Keywords: Tradition, Modernity, Gender, Angami Naga Society

Introduction:

Easterine Kire is one of the well known writers from Nagaland who has received both national and international acclaims. Her novel, *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a story of an unpleasant grandmother and a girl child. The protagonist, Dielieno, the youngest in a five-child family was only five years old when she's sent to live with her grandmother, Vibano, who wanted her to "be a good worker". The little girl Dielieno undergoes a hard life mainly because of her grandmother's perspective on girl child. She is the only girl child in the family among four boys namely Leto, Vini, Bulie and Pete. The story of this novel revolves around three generations: Dielieno, her grandmother and mother. The important point of the novel is that the patriarchy is prevalent in the story and the male child is favored in the family. It is because of the culture, beliefs and the customs associated to society. Meanwhile, Dielieno triumphantly overcome the odd times she has encountered in her life. Despite of her grandmother's opposition, she completed her studies. In addition to it, she has got a good job for an economically secured life. It was the belief of her grandmother that an educated girl could not get good marriage proposal as good cooking is considered the first condition of marrying girls. For her grandmother a girl child is inferior to boy child but Dielieno proved it false by establishing herself capable of great things.

Objectives of the study:

- To analyze how Kire portrays the conflict between tradition and modernity in the context of a matriarchal society.
- To examine the role of gender roles and expectations in Kire's work.
- To evaluate the novel's contribution to our understanding of gender, tradition, and modernity in contemporary society.

Methodology: Descriptive and analytical method is used in preparing this paper.

Discussion:

Nagaland is a land of exquisite culture and traditions but its literary scenario has been glowing up only around 1964. A few Naga writer like Temsula Ao, Monalisha Chankija and others including Eastern Kire raised their voice about women exploitation in the backdrop of patriarchy in their writings. Their works provided the Naga women a solid platform of expressing their repression as well as their feelings. Eastern Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a realistic description of Naga society and an elegant part of the novel is that it a first person narrative. The protagonist, Dielieno, is a courageous girl whose quietest interrogations reflect the rising status of women in Naga society. At the very young age, Dielieno started questioning at every step of her age that helped her standing as a strong and courageous girl.

Eastern Kire's novel talks about Naga culture and society. Her works also says about some of the customs and traditions followed by generation to generation. Education plays an important role in gender sensitization and equity. But the older generation like grandmother in the novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* is uneducated as well as unaware about women's rights. Dielieno's oppression reflects the role of patriarchy that has been facing the women for ages. She noticed the discrimination between male and female child in a very young age. As the story begins, she says: *My grandmother didn't like me. I knew this when I was about four and a half. I was sitting in her kitchen with my brother, Buli, older to me by two years, when she served us food. Hot rice and chicken broth.*¹ As she knew very well that her grandmother

didn't like her, she doesn't want to live with her (grandmother). The only important thing is her grandmother's wish, others are meaningless.

Although they didn't have enough food for eating, she lived a happy life among other siblings in her family. It is only after her departure from her home to grandmother's house that made her life unhappy one. Even her parents didn't want to send her but they could not refuse the proposal raised by their mother. Grandmother's power pervades over the entire household, even their distant relatives. Therefore it is difficult for Dielieno to overcome her grandmother's conservative ideology especially regarding the rules for a girl. According to her (grandmother) the prime aim of getting married, being a good wife and procuring children is the place of a girl in the society. She has to live a life of other's terms and conditions or dictates of society. She opposed on letting the boy do household activities as well as 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. According to the grandmother man should be the chief of the family and the wife should follow whatever the husband asks her to do. Woman's duty is to look after her children as well as her family members by ignoring her own identity. 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 safety and security of the family as well as the society.

From her very childhood, Dielieno has no good relation with her grandmother and most reasonable cause of it was being called "the girl" by her grandmother while her brothers are addressed by their own names. Dielieno is also severely disturbed by the difference of her grandmother's treatment to herself and her brothers. For example, it is about the first few days of her staying in her grandmother's place that distressed the young girl. *After I had been with Grandmother a week, Leto came in the morning. I ran to him and clung to his arm. "Go bring the potatoes inside, girl," Grandmother said to me looking very displeased. I went out to do as she bid. At the door I stopped and tried to eavesdrop because I was sure she was going to say something harsh to Leto. Her face had that look. But she began to coo,*

*Come to me, my dear boy, why haven't you come here for so long? Don't you know I have kept sweet potatoes aside for you? Didn't you say that my potatoes were the sweetest?"*²

The grandmother of Dielieno wanted to make her a good woman without giving school education. But her parents' plan was different. After Dielieno's six month's staying with her grandmother, her parents came and tell her grandmother that as Dielieno is six years of age, she should go to school now. Obviously, grandmother was in against of her schooling and she tells her mother to teach her household activities instead. She even proudly says: *In our days girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learned the housework. Then we went to the fields 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. It is okay 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 has gotten into 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.*³ Meanwhile, after Dielieno's father convinced her mother about the importance of her being sent to school in the condition that she would stay with her till then.

She was so harsh that Dielieno was allowed to visit her parents only with valid reasons. The feeling of grandmother is that the highly educated women have not been preferred by men as wife but instead prefers those women having the knowledge of household activity. Positively Dielieno's brother Leto supported her regarding the study in college.

Dielieno is treated by her grandmother differently that her brothers in every matter. She saves the best portion of meat for her brothers. She has been instructed not to ask question but obey everything that her grandmother tells her to do. 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 it then she was compelled to count them over and over again. According to Dielieno's grandmother a girl child was expected to marry, have children and doing other household activities. It is only because of this reason that she has been expected to do every work herself even in her very young age. Various restrictions of her grandmother make her feel miserable. She is instructed to wake up early in the morning and finish her work on time. She even permits Dielieno's schooling on the condition that she has to finish her household activities before going to school. But Dielieno was an enthusiastic and courageous girl as well as bright student too. Such qualities of her character helped her overcoming the obstacles raised by her grandmother.

It is pathetic to see that though Dielieno was excited to show her daily activities in the school to her grandmother, but she was not interested to take a look to that. But, in spite of all these odds, Dielieno proved herself to be a bright student. She even have promoted to higher class earlier to the end of sessions only because of her excellent performance. It is also touching to see when Dielieno's father wanted to talk her good performance in school, but her grandmother's response was very rude. She (grandmother) always takes the chance to oppose the schooling of Dielieno and this time too she again questions the school education of the girl child in place of praising her conduct in school.

In this novel Dielieno is doubly oppressed: one is patriarchal rules imposed by her grandmother's side and another is the socioeconomic discrimination. But in later part of the novel Dielieno's disliking towards her grandmother diminishes as she has been informed her mother the reason behind her behavior. Her mother explains in detail about her grandmother's life; *Your grandmother was the eldest of three children. She grew up in the village and moved to the town only when she married. When she was young she lived through a very hard age. In the village, widows without sons lost all their husband's property to other male relatives. So she understood that it was very important for a married woman to produce as many male offspring as she could. Her mother did not have brothers and they lost all their lands and fields when her father died. I think she said that her grandfather had given them a small field to cultivate as long as he was alive. But people were unkind and mocked those who could not produce male children...*⁴

Insurgency and extremism also presented in the novel. Situation of the state was unhealthy for the common people during those years. The Indian army was in against of the nationalist activities of Naga Nationalist Patriots and captured everyone that was considered involved in it. Sometimes they even captured innocent civilians depending upon their instinct. The women were brutally raped and killed by Indian army. The political and social unrest made people's life unhappy in Nagaland. Vini, brother of Dielieno, and his friends addicted to drinking and violence for this unrest. They hoped for bringing liberty to their motherland but being unable to do that they began to draw comfort in getting drunk.

By analyzing the character of grandmother, the novelist analyzed those women who are the victims of patriarchy. The grandmother herself was the victim of the societal norms and traditions. The attitude of grandmother can be well understood the culture brought her up such thinking. The mind-set with which she had grown is not so easy to be removed. She lived in a society where women have been chained with lots of restrictions. The society considered those families as inferior without the male child, they were mocked. The grandmother herself went through terrible experiences as her mother could not give birth to a male child. This is the reason of her belief that male child played a very important role in the family.

Though the superficial reading of the novel shows that Dielieno's subjugation is matriarchal subjugation in the hands of her grandmother but the deep observation of the novel reveals that this matriarchal domination is actually a veiled patriarchal domination. In the first part of the novel, Dielieno's father's justification of his mother's harshness towards Dielieno is actually a domination of patriarchy. He says: *Lieno, that is not respectful to your Grandmother. She had a hard life. She only wants to make sure you turn out to be a good woman.*⁵ We encounter various female characters which have been oppressed by different types of belief and tradition of the society. Dielieno's mother is among them. She is afraid of her mother-in-law. She is always conscious about her actions in front of her. She always tries to be a good wife and mother to satisfy her.

Bano is another oppressed character in the novel who was the illegitimate daughter of grandfather Sizo, grandmother's brother. Bano's biological father was absent in the novel, instead she called grandmother as "mother". Sizo has already married another woman from whom he has three children. Bano is neither educated nor married; therefore she is completely dependent upon grandmother even for her survival. It is the cultural practices that affected the outlook of the grandmother. From the very beginning of the book it is noticed that grandmother's attitude was so harsh towards Dielieno. But it is found in the later part of the book that it is only the culture that made her do what she did. From her life experience she explained that she lived during the age where there were multiple wars among the clans. So the male members of the house have to fight for the safety and the security of the family and the villages as the males are physically strong in comparison to women. Every member of the society is affected by the tradition and culture more or less.

Esterine Kire very realistically/beautifully portrays the culture and lifestyle of Angami Naga society. One important theme the writer concentrates in the novel is the representation of women in contemporary Naga society that is undergoing tremendous changes. Angami Naga society is basically patriarchal and patrilineal and this is visible in the society's approach towards female education, inheritance of property, marriage relations and their ways of life. At the same time it is also interesting to see the imperative role of Angami women as they are the main source of income for the family. They do all sorts of activities such as agricultural activities, weaving, handicrafts, other household activities etc. It means that even though Naga society is patriarchal, women enjoy considerable freedom and play an important role both in the family and the community. In the novel, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Esterine Kire makes a keen analysis of the real situation that patriarchal society operates. In the preface she points out, *While 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.*⁶ In other

words, it summarizes the very base of her book. Fortunately Dielieno have loving parents and brothers but at the same time her life became bitter from her grandmother, the matriarch of the house, who gave her a harsh treatment only because she is a girl child. Being lived with grandmother at a very tender age of five, Dielieno not only live through physical hardships with her but also has to comply with the terrible roles set by the matriarch as girl do not need education and love. The novelist presents in the novel that some women have upper hand in their households as well as the community. Beside that they have the ability to make men believe that they are the decision makers in both the places.

Esterine Kire, in her novel highlights both traditional and modern view regarding Angami Naga society's approach towards education. The time that Dielieno is growing up was a complex one as education for Angami girls was still matter of debate. The grandmother is very clear for not allowing girl child to be educated because education does not help them becoming a good wife and mother. Though education was not prioritized during this period, Dielieno's parents were quite modern in their views and they wanted that Dielieno should receive education as well as her brothers had the right to. Dielieno's entire life (in the novel) is centered on school going and doing good performance in her studies. Education was her goal of life and in order to attain this goal she had done as much as she can. She always wakes up earlier than usual to finish her household activity in order to beware of her grandmother's anger and can go to school. It is only because of her hard work that she was able to attain love and good wishes from her teachers. Like other few girls, Dielieno wanted to complete her study to support her family. Thus, Kire depicts the evolving Angami society in the midst of tremendous changes.

One important aspect of Esterine Kire's book is her presentation of constant confrontation between tradition and modernity. In one hand the modern ideas and thoughts are dawning in the Angami Naga society but on the other hand a natural process such as menstruation is considered as 'the curse'. The girls like Dielieno feel terrified of such 'grown up matters'. The presentation of Dielieno and her friend's hesitation to approach shopkeeper for buying sanitary napkins conveys the perspective of such matters.

The gender discrimination and rights of Angami men and women are presented throughout the book. Being a patrilineal society, the Angami Nagas practice the inheritance system in which property is passed on to male heir of the family. Following the traditional inheritance system, the grandmother not only showers her maximum love for Vini but also put aside her property to him. After Vini's death, grandmother's affection and her property shift to Vini's child but not to Dielieno or Bano who stays with her and pays mother's respect and also spent her entire life looking after her. Angami Naga society believes in male inheritance system only: *The understanding was that a woman without a male heir would be given shelter by her in-laws but her daughter could not inherit the father's property. Their best bet would be to marry a man rich enough to have property of his own. Then they have to devote the rest of their lives to trying to produce a male heir.*⁷ It is because of this reason that females have no choice but to marry with personal property and bearing male children. Esterine Kire initiates this issue through Neiko, grandmother's younger sister, who is unmarried and lived in her father's house.

In the novel, the novelist showed the oppression of Angami Naga men upon women and the problems incur due to their alcoholism. Vini and his friends represent alcohol addiction among the Angami youth in a very tender age. The frustration of suppressed helplessness and

anger against their social condition and wish to overcome this situation lead them to this addiction. The novelist, Esterine Kire, points out in the preface that the story is drawn from her real life experiences. 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.*⁸

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 why Rocky was hitting the other guy? Well they were arguing about politics and the other chap said that it was no use fighting for independence because, in any case, the Naga cause was a dead cause...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?*⁹ Kire present frequent cases of domestic violence emanated from alcoholism for which women have to suffer a lot in their lives. However she is able to maintain the balance of this picture by presenting the positive side too. If there is man like Vini, there is caring and loving father like Dielieno's father and her brother Leto.

Conclusion: Tradition and modernity serves as a central theme in Esterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* by illuminating the complexities of societal structure and their impact on gender dynamics. Through the narrative, Kire explores how tradition and modernity intersect, forming the lives of individuals within the patriarchal framework of Naga society. Kire challenges the traditional gender norms by depicting women who defy societal expectations, assert agency and challenge patriarchal constraints. Moreover, the modernity brings about a clash with traditional values, challenging established gender roles. The advent of modern education and technology exposes individuals to alternative perspectives and opportunities beyond traditional confines. Ultimately *A Terrible Matriarchy* serves as a poignant commentary on the interplay between tradition, modernity and gender.

End Notes:

1. Kire, Esterine(2007) . *A Terrible Matriarchy*, p.1
2. *ibid*, p.16
3. *ibid*, p. 22
4. *ibid*, p.250
5. *ibid*, p.5
6. *ibid*, ATM, ix
7. *ibid*, p. 250
8. ATM, viii
9. *ibid*, p. 226

Reference:

1. Beauvoir, Simone de.(1997). *The Second Sex* trans. H.M. Parshley,London, Vintage,
2. Deshpande, Shashi.(1980). *The Dark Holds No Terror*. New Delhi. Vikash Publishing House.
3. Foucault, Michel. (1997). *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, New York.
4. Iralu, Easterine. (2007). *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Zubaan.
5. Rich, Adrienne. (2003). *The Kingdom of the Fathers “Feminism”*: *Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Vol 4, Routledge, London and New York.