

Gender and Patriarchy in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*

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Abstract

The socially constructed traits that are to be possessed by women, men, girls and boys living in a society are what we understand as the key elements of the term gender. But deleterious effect of gender norms to the human society left many people in trauma. As we all are aware that gendered language is something that creates biasness towards a specific sex. This biasness continues for generations and generations and becomes as irrefutable evidence to the traditional customs and beliefs. The medium of communication and instructions given by grandmother to the five years old Dielieno in *A Terrible Matriarchy* was that of patriarchy. Again, the command over the other members of the family by the grandmother was also in the tone of patriarchy. The social constructions of gender regulate the roles of genders present in the society. We all know that, socialization also helps to foster gender inequality. Again, patriarchy is a sex-based practice that aggravates mental, social and spiritual well-being of the second gender. As Friedrich Engels, the critic, referred to it as the earliest system of domination establishing that patriarchy is “the world historical defeat of the female sex” (Engels 2). It is again the social system that contradicts the power to an individual through cultural and traditional norms. The present paper analyzes the traditions of patriarchy and their limitations in Naga society, India. It will also analyze the ignorance of the society and the members present in it to attenuate the atrocities done to the affected group with reference to the novel *A Terrible Matriarchy*.

Keywords: Culture, Discrimination, Gender, Ignorance, Inequality, Patriarchy

Introduction

Nagaland, a northeast state of India is known for its various tribes and languages. It is also considered as one among the Seven Sisters of India that is known for the rich culture and diversity. The Angami Nagas are one of the ethnic groups in the Northeastern state of Nagaland in India. They generally settle in the districts of Kohima, Chumoukedima and are also scattered to few other districts as well. The tribe has four regions namely Northern Angami, Southern Angami, Western Angami and Chakhro Angami. The common language spoken by the Angami Nagas is Tenyidie. Dance and folk songs are considered as essential part of the tribe. The tribe has been following a patrilineal system in the past but this is debatable now as the system is not strictly followed as women gradually became educated and literate. In the past, on the basis of the nature of authority, The Angami society is patriarchal, patrilineal in the sense that the descent is traced through the male line and patrilocal in residence as in sons continue to stay in their father's house even after getting married. Due to the societal structure that has been followed from generations to generations, birth of male child is warmly welcomed with fun and

laughter. Although people talk a lot about gender equality, many families want a son. One of the rationales behind favoring the male child could be that women are considered as goods or someone else's property after marriage, and it is the man who will continue the family lineage and take care of the family and clan property. It is a known fact that the status of women in the society is only confined to the four walls of the house doing everything and anything. Their voice in decision making is truncated because of the standards of the society. In the Angami tradition, the clan owns the land and the right to inheritance and the line of descent are considered a male prerogative. Women can use their ancestral land for agriculture but do not inherit it. The right of inheritance allows the Angami men to trace their ancestors up to fourteen generations; however, they keep trace of their mother's lineages only up to four generations (Hutton, 1921). The Angami Customary law bars women from inheriting ancestral land and property; but there is no bar on a widow or a divorcee purchasing land for oneself. However, the Angami traditional law gives rights to the individual owners to use their land according to their wish, to sell, mortgage, rent it to others, or give it to their daughters during marriage or upon the parents' death. These are referred to as Pozephü land (Das, 1994). Pozephü land is the land bequeathed to the Angami daughters during marriage or upon parents' death. It is the land owned by the parents and not the ancestral land. This practice is followed by Viswema and Kedima of the Southern Angami villages. Siephru (ancestral property like land, house etc of the Angami's) can be owned only by the male child. In the absence of the male child, the ancestral property is handed over to the immediate male relatives. The possession of such ancestral property by the next of kin is called Kayie (refers to the ancestral property i.e., Siephru handed over to the next kin (male) in the absence of male child in the family) (Kelhou, 1988). This is observed even today. The novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* is based on Angami Naga Tribe where the male lines are traced through father and property is expected to pass down to the male heirs of the family. The roles and responsibilities of gender are also expected according to the norms of the society. People learn gender roles right from the birth from society and parents.

From birth, in the course of gender socialization, children learn gender stereotypes and roles from their parents and environment. Traditionally, boys learn to manipulate their physical and social environment through physical strength or dexterity, while girls learn to present themselves as objects to be viewed. (S.E 295-31)

Gender and Society

Gender roles not only shape the mindsets and behavior of the members but also help in communication in the sense that how children especially girls behave with boys, uncles and elders of the family. In *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire, we can see Dielieno's happiness when Uncle Atu came to visit the grandmother. She stays with grandmother doing all the household chores every time. She was not allowed to go even once to her home.

"I hate grandmother Vibano." Father was shocked. (Kire 5)

One of the reasons for Dielieno hating grandmother was when Uncle Atu came to visit, he swung around and plays with her. She enjoyed the company and she began to climb up his right shoulder. But when grandmother saw all these things, she hit her on the calf with her stick and even called her a monkey and told in front of Uncle Atu that she is a badly behaved girl.

"No decent girl climbs up a man's shoulder" (Kire 5)

She has to live up to the expectations of the society. Grandmother Vibano taught her from a very young age the roles of gender. Family remains an inescapable component in protecting and empowering girls

child. It solely depends on how families encourages or curb the girl child to accept the challenges or go with the set norms of the society. The society that is reflected in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is patriarchal society but a matriarch runs the family. Vibano controlled her family, children and grandchildren up to the extent of even controlling the future even after she died. Eventhough patriarchal societies are mainly patrilineal yet the property of Vibano was handed over to Bano only. The set of ideas that the patriarchal ideology holds give hard times to Dielieno. From the tender age of five she was taught how to behave and what to do in order to fit in the culture of the society. Dielieno as a kid doesn't understand the gendered words even for eating or distributing chicken pieces to the family members. Everything is so structured along the gender lines. Her grandmother way of thinking is limited only on household chores and producing offsprings. Dielieno's mother is also a victim of patriarchy who is living under the shadow of her mother-in-law, who is very harsh while dealing with any women in the house; she never appreciates anything good done by others. She was always ready to criticize and give feedbacks. Dielieno's mother is always has that worried expression because situation made her so. That constant anxiousness on her face ruined her beautiful pretty face too. She was the prettiest girl in her village before she got married. Nino is always in anxious and confusing mode, she wanted to please Vibano but Vibano is someone who is difficult to be deal with, by anybody. Dielieno hates her grandmother because whatever her mother did, nothing seemed to please her. She didn't have any voice when grandmother said something that is not appropriate, Dielieno always hurts when her parents remained silent in many matters that were not suitable with the situation. When grandmother says, "send the girl next time, that is girl's work. No man in my day has ever fetched water." (Kire 3)

The above lines are said by Vibano to Dielieno's mother. The girl here referred to the five years old Dielieno. Nino just said "yes". She ignored the utter dismayed shown by her five years old daughter. She was so small to carry even the water-pot that is as big as Dielieno. She is the one who constantly instructed her daughter-in-laws to follow the footprints of her whether it is right or wrong. She has given advise on how to raise child especially girl child. To her only male child occupies a very important place in the family and the society. They should give good pieces of meat while eating as well as have to give all the care. It has been reflected in the novel that the 'male' plays a very important role in the society because they fought against the enemy. If the family has more male members one can assume that they are saved from enemies and dangers. The society that we live in belief that women are weaker sex so their place is in the kitchen, their duty is to cook and feed the family and this evidence are found in the novel *A Terrible matriarchy*.

When it comes to girl's education, it is lined up with gender inequality. Formal education has leveled up towards progression in every sector. It also helps in eliminating domestic violence, provided more awareness in female health issues, and more economic dependence leading to gender equity. After six months in grandmother's house Dielieno's parent came one evening. It was a happy moment for Dielieno before her grandmother opened her mouth regarding girls going to school. Her parents want to send her to school because she will be six soon. She was the only one in the family who was not in the school. All her brothers and age mates started going to school . Regarding the matter, the grandmother says,

"In our day, " Grandmother began, "girls do 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 got 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. (Kire 22)

After persuaded by her father, the grandmother finally agrees the idea of Dielieno sending to school but in one condition saying that she will continue living with her and helping in household chores because the grandmother didn't want her to forget the things she taught to Dielieno. Indian society prefers sons over daughters for various reasons. Some important factor is huge amount of dowry, inheritance to sons, name will forward to sons etc. Vimenuo father is also not less than the grandmother in terms of gender. He has a scary look. He used to stay away for long periods from home, sitting and drinking in the local vendors. He was always angry to his wife for giving birth only to daughters. He wants a son who can carry his name. Bano explained to Dielieno the girl child are never considered real members of the family. Their sole aim in life is to marry, to have offsprings, to be in kitchen, weave cloths and look after the household. She further added, "If they got married, they would always be known as somebody's wife or somebody's mother and never somebody's daughter. that way they could not carry on their father's name." (Kire 24-25)

She couldn't digest the idea that Bano was indicating something about women in the society. Society looks down upon women as something as well as women also looks down upon women and it together helped to block the way towards progression. From the understanding of Dielieno, Vimenuo's mother was a good woman. She maintained and managed her house very well eventhough the husband is a drunkard. But from the perspective of Vibano, grandmother of Dielieno, she didn't like at all because they were not respectable. That means people should avoid their family. This is how society treated others and is well reflected in the novel.

"Bad blood, she muttered beneath her breath whenever somebody mentioned them." (Kire 6)
She can't get rid of the idea from her mind when somebody's mentioned her mother name.

Patriarchy and Women

Patriarchy affects in various way in one's life. The effect of patriarchy is so strong that women are discriminated internally and physically. Internally in the sense, the emotions are always crushed down, they always have to listen what elders or male has to say. Even if there is opinion, it is always better to hushed up. It directly or indirectly influenced women's subordination. It deters the growth of women to stand up for their rights. Despite the bondage of patriarchy, the role of being a mother and daughter in a family and the society are in manifolds. The bond that mother and daughter shared is special bond. Words cannot describe the relationship. It is filled with warmth, love, care and affection. It may look like the cold mother syndrome in front of Dielieno because of her sending Dielieno from the age of five to grandmother house for helping in household chores. Not only that she was coldly treated by her grandmother even not allowing her to take bath with hot water in cold wintry mornings. She would have to stand in the dark, letting her to count the chicken. If she counted wrong, she has to go and to do the counting again. Dielieno knows that the grandmother loves her but she feel everytime she was being punished for being born as a girl. She always used to call her 'girl' not by her name. She even narrated how her experienced in grandmother's house was so bitter. She always has the notion that girls were weak and boys were strong. Women should never be independent was the thing that their generations taught to the people.

"For many years, I hated it so much. I wished that I was not a girl." (Kire 249)

Grandmother makes her miserable by letting her do all the works in a perfect manner except her studies, she should not do or show interest in any activities related to studies. She was progressing well in school, even the teachers promoted her to higher class soon after learning her abilities but grandmother was not happy at all. It's the terrible matriarch that runs in the family that had given Dielieno's mother to act in that way her mother in laws wants. She also wants to take care of Dielieno but she was voiceless. When her mother-in-law wants Dielieno continue to stay with her, it pained her and asked her mother. "Don't you miss me?".....Instead of saying I miss you she replies with a tears running down her left eye, "its not for a long while that you will be gone, dear." (Kire 48)

Bano's condition in the house is same as Dielieno who is staying under the same roof. Bano's life is also dictated by grandmother. She is not allowed to call the real mother 'mother'. The reason is her mother never married her father. Bano with pained said

"Father never married my mother and I have seen her just three or four times. I was not allowed to call her 'mother' and I could not call my father 'father' when your grandfather was alive"... (Kire 41)

These are the conditions of Bano under the shadow of patriarchy and terrible matriarch, everyone in the house or siblings have to tolerate grandmother's views.

she thinks that there are only two kinds of people in the world. In the first group are those who are upright and go to church regularly and come to all the community gatherings. The others are those who do not go to church and are fond of drinking and whose daughters sometimes get pregnant before they can get married. She is convinced that only those in the first group will go to heaven and the rest will go to the hell. There is no way they can be saved. (Kire 76)

The role that women played in a family is a significant one. Their duty is not only to feed, to cook, to do household chores. They are the primary caretakers of everything. The realities and challenges faced by women are in manifold but education has helped women to be more independent and can also take their own decisions. Society has a notion that the girl child has no place anywhere but the female character in the novel i.e. Dielieno proves that she can do something as a female in the society by excelling in education. In addition to that, the moral of the women doesn't depend to the partner who committed the same mistake. People decide the morals of women in society by just looking at their behavior. Ms. Sobu, Dielieno's schoolteacher marries outside the church. She got pregnant before they got married. Society raised finger on her only, not to the partner who also committed the same mistake. Only Ms. Sobu's name was mentioned and her name was the epitome of corrupt morals. People like Vibano remarked that Miss Sobu had corrupted the morals of the younger generation for being the teacher at Dielieno School. Innocent Dielieno understands morals are something to do with honesty and not pilfering and telling lies. Ms. Sobu also taught them about morals but it is not aligning with Grandmother's knowledge. But she as a kid also understands that what grandmother perceives about the notion was very unfair but if she opens her mouth she understands the consequences so she just become a mute spectator to avoid the unnecessary behavior. The incident of Ms. Sobu directly affects Dielieno's education; she started questioning about the education. Grandmother dictates everything even whom she has to make friendship. The friendship between Dielieno and Vimenuo is not happy by Vibano because Vimenuo is not from a well to do family and considered them as something descended from 'bad blood'. They assumed that they were cursed because of the sin committed by their forefathers.

Antonio Gramsci's the concept of Cultural Hegemony, which he states the relation between culture and power under capitalism. The patriarchal set norms and the culture of the given society manipulate the

weaker sex and always kept in the margins and those who tries to come out from the space provided by cultural hegemony becomes the one who misrepresents the socially constructed norms.

“In Political Science, hegemony is the geopolitical dominance exercised by an empire, the hegemon (leader state) that rules the subordinate states of the empire by the threat of intervention, an implied means of power, rather than by threat of direct rule military invasion, occupation and territorial annexation “(Hassig 22-23)

So, the grandmother is the hegemon, the one who stand in the centre and the other members of the house are the subordinate states, the grandmother exercised the whole members of the house by intervening in all the affairs even Dielieno’s routine works and also all the daily affairs, to Nino she instructed even regarding the household chores, to Vini and Leto telling whom should marry, to Sijo who didn’t allow her real daughter to call him father.

Culture does affect gender inequality in India. Culture of a society refers to the codes and conduct, beliefs, language and other traits common to the members of group of a society. The people of Nagaland preserve their old age culture and tradition. They work very hard. Generally the Angami Nagas are on cultivation and livestock rearing. In case of inheritance, it was divided equally to sons and daughters. It is still continuing that the youngest son in the Angami family has to take care of the elders until they pass away and he will inherit the parental home. Jamir argues that men and women in Naga Society have always worked side by side in agricultural production despite the marginalization from institutions of decision making. Jhum cultivation was the traditional mode of agriculture except in some areas where terrace farming was practiced. She mentioned that in Jhum cultivation, apart from the clearing and burning of jungle which was considered predominantly a male function; other functions such as sowing, weeding, harvesting etc were carried out mainly by the women. Thus, women played a major role in the production process. (Jamir 25-26)

The culture of the society shapes an individual in terms of attitudes and beliefs. Vibano, the grandmother was also brought up in a society where lots of restrictions were there on females. She herself also experienced how society looked down on her for not having any male siblings. Her mother had to hear the mockery done by the society. So, she from the very beginning understood the importance of male in the family and society. The very thing she experienced or learned in her life journey, same thing she was imposing to Dielieno. It was the culture that made her to be hard hearted. One main reason in the Naga Society for preferring male child is during that time there were wars. Men fought for the clan and community. They were the one who safeguard the territories. So, their role in the society is very huge. Grandmother never asked the females who together stay in the same roof, about their ambitions and purpose in life but molded in a way that society will accept or upto the expectations of the society. The expectations and importance of female child, if we see the difference from before, then the society that we see might be different. Because of all these traditions and expectations, Dielieno’s expectations and grandmother’s expectations were poles apart. It’s because of social structure that enabled her and gave power to her to disseminate the same hardships to Dielieno. It’s the transferred resentment that passed from generations to generations. To clarify the air, Nino explains that

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. But people were unkind and

mocked those who could not produce male children. The understanding was that a woman without a male heir would be given shelter by her in-laws but her daughters 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 would devote the rest of their lives to trying to produce a male heir. (Kire 250)

It clearly indicates that a woman's fate and property depends entirely on their husband. Grandmother has shown overtly love and caring towards the grandsons. She ruined the grandsons by giving extra money and by her over pampered nature. In case of Dielieno's brother Vini, she tried to buy love from Vini who was drunkard and in bad company and as a result of his drinking habit he died. Actually, grandmother was the sole responsibility of his death for providing money. The hatred she receives from her grandmother, she never rebel but deep inside she was subsiding the emotions but sometimes she used to flush out to Bano and her mother only. But at the end, she forgives her grandmother after she learned the past experience of her grandmother. Grandmother after seeing her own mother suffered the hardships physically and emotionally, it stiffened her emotions. Her determination was so high that she should not suffer the same like her mother. That's why grandmother looks at her son and grandsons as insurance and she is inclined to take a very conservative attitude toward the brothers by pampering them as she saw other boys being pampered in her childhood. (Kire 250)

Grandmother Vibano is the one who used to give instructions and command to the family members in all the affairs. After she died, the son doesn't listen to her will at all. They do what is good according to them suppressing the desire of the deceased matriarch who runs the family before. The one who used to take care of grandmother and taking care of the household chores was told to vacate the house after grandmother died. It was Bano who managed and maintained the grandmother house very well. Sons appeared after grandmother died to snatch the house for some profitable purpose. The grandsons who witnessed everything were astonished of the idea of their two uncles who rented out after grandmother died to get monthly income. They were shocked of what they heard but because of the societal norms, the younger generation should not air their views when the elders are around. Father also understood but asked at least the opinions of other,

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. (Kire 277)

Bano cannot fight for her rights. She was emotionally and physically shattered. All the decisions should be entirely taken by male members i.e. the three sons of Vibano. Grandmother from before thought of giving the house after she died to Salhou, son of Vini and Nissano because of the tradition that property should pass to the male heir; father who understood all these things kept mum because he thought people might misinterpret. With the approval from all the brothers they rented the house. Four different families come one after another to stay but the grandmother spirit roamed in and around the house scaring all of them. The tenant cannot tolerate the damage done to them by the spirit. The idea of renting out didn't last long for them. When the day Bano returned to Grandmother's house, none of the strange sounds and happenings was heard again. The grandmother spirit was no more roaming in the house. It was all settled after the house was in the hand of Bano. Actually when she was alive, she wanted to give the house to Vini's son Salhou. At the end, what terrible matriarch wants comes to reality. Even after the grandmother died her will to give the house to Salhou and Bano came to reality.

Conclusion

Dr Koseno in the article, *Changing Roles and Status of Angami Naga Women* states that, “An individual’s role and position in the society are determined by the social structure, the existing cultural norms and the value system of the society.” (Koseno 2-3). But today the trend has changed. With the emergence of Christianity and Education, things are changing towards progression in every field. As compared with the past, Naga women occupy respectable status in the society. The restrictions that were imposed on women are declining. Of course, the culture made the female folks ignorant of the dark aspects of patriarchy. We can see many Naga women who are being suppressed by culture come out from that zone with the full support from their partners and the family members. The vista of women has impacted a lot in the second gender especially those who are in the remote villages. Easterine Kire’s various character in the novel *ATerribleMatriarchy* like the grandmother Vibano, Dielieno, Nino, Nissano, Bano taught us that woman should not feel inferior whatever the circumstances, they should have patience and perseverance to attain what they dream of without affecting the other party.

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