WEAVING REALITY INTO FICTION: A STUDY OF THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN EASTERN KIRE’S A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY

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Abstract: Easterine kire’s work lays emphasis on the history, culture and tradition of her native people as well as addressing various social and political issues through her writings. In her novel A Terrible Matriarchy, she narrates the story of Dielieno or the errand girl. The novel does not only centers on the story of the protagonist, Dielieno but it also talks about the patriarchal setup of the Tenyimia society. A Terrible Matriarchy gives a glimpse of how the colonizers had left Nagas handicapped after ruling over them for so long. It also shows how the political conflict deteriorated the mind of the Nagas by leading many youths into consumption of alcohol. The result of the consumption was death for many. The novel is rooted in the history of stern Naga matriarchal attitudes and discrimination of the girl child, not by men of the family but by women themselves. She presents the case from Nagaland where women suffer under terrible matriarchy.

Index Terms - Matriarch, Patriarchy, gender inequality

I. INTRODUCTION

Easterine Kire’s A Terrible Matriarchy, a girl coming of age story, revolves around the three generations of Naga women which is comprised of grandmother, mother and Dielieno, the protagonist of the novel. The novel can be categorized under the bildungsroman for it tells the story of Dielieno from being a girl to a woman. Dielieno is the narrator in the novel and she interpreted things as she sees it but her experiences are epitome of a people undergoing transition and changes. The novel contains a lot of themes which is related to the Naga society. The most important theme in the novel is about being a woman in the tradition-loving patriarchal society of Tenyimia. The novel is set in the 1950’s and 1960’s and Kire finely weaves the story to suit the present day life wherein the characters in the novel finds real life parallel in the society. The novel also portrays how women can be the chief advocates of traditional status of male superiority over women. The matriarch in the novel is grandmother Vibano who believes that her principle purpose is to remind the younger generations that boys will be boys. The portrayal of the conflict between grandmother and Lieno is not just misunderstandings caused by generational gap but more of ideological.

The story in the novel is about how Dielieno fought against all odds and restrictions put up by her grandmother to stand up for herself. Dielieno is seen as the ‘little errand girl’ who has to toil hours doing household chores to impress the matriarch. In the course of the story being narrated, it is soon revealed that the male’s only inheritance system is the only reason behind Grandmother’s biased behavior. However, economic insecurity becomes probable for the causes behind the suppression of the Naga women. The study shows the treatment of women in the period between 1960s and 1970s. The battle of Kohima and the indo-Naga conflict can also be another cause which led the women more vulnerable to live in double jeopardy.
II. TREATMENT OF WOMEN INFLUENCED BY PATRIARCHY

Dielienuo in the novel is read to be a struggling figure. She had to stand up and fight alone to get education and to earn a place in the family. Also, it is important to note that in the Angami society, there is a Bano, an unmarried daughter whose fate is to look after aged parents. Dielieno or Lieno grows up at a time when the Naga society was undergoing changes both socially and politically after the World War II. The visible structure of the novel is patriarchal and seemed focused in bringing out the other picture of the patriarchal system in the Angami society. The less visible structure is matriarchy and how it abuses the patriarchal structure resulting in gender abuse by the same gender. The beginning of the novel itself started off with a negative statement by Lieno,

My Grandmother didn’t like me. I knew this when I was about four and a half. (Kire 1)

Lieno was never asked by her Grandmother upon serving meat as to which portion of the meat she would prefer to have but the Grandmother’s only attention was on Lieno’s brothers,

That portion is always for boys, girls must eat the other portion. (Kire 1)

Grandmother Vibano treating Lieno with a different attitude because of her being a girl is shown vividly even from the first chapter itself. Though Dielieno was the youngest, she was never the center of attention of her Grandmother. The parents of Dielienuo were also confused if they should let Dielieno wear girl’s clothing or boy’s clothing:

They never seemed to be sure whether to buy me girl’s clothing or let me wear leftover boys clothing. (Kire 2)

The narrator also talks about the expression of her mother, stating that there was always a constant anxious look on her face, which appeared as though she wanted to please and yet did not quite manage to please. Grandmother Vibano is in many ways a kind of tyrannical leader under the roof of the house.  She binds all the female characters in the novel with her rules.

Nino, you sent the older boy to fetch water, I hear? (Kire 3)

The above quoted line was a question asked by Grandmother when Lieno’s mother went visiting her. Grandmother Vibano was angry at Lieno’s mother for making the male members in the family to do the work of a woman. The question itself sounded more like a threat to Lieno’s ear instead of a casual query. Grandmother Vibano’s reply to Lieno’s mother excuse was,

Send the girl next time that is girl’s work. No man in my day has ever fetched water. (Kire 3)

Grandmother Vibano was totally against the notion of making the male members in the family to do the household work for she was terrible matriarch who was keen on drawing a line between the male members and the female members in the family.

Also Grandmother Vibano views and treatment of a girl child was very old fashioned and traditional. The age she was living in defy the methods she was using in the upbringing of a girl child. Grandmother Vibano also happened to make a remark on Dielieno saying,

That girl must start working at home. Don’t let her run about with her brothers anymore. That is not the way to bring up girl children. (Kire 4)

Grandmother Vibano often refers to Dielieno as ‘the girl’ and not by her name. This depicts the intensity of the Grandmother’s dislike for the protagonist.

Grandmother Vibano also never carried Lieno on her lap unlike the way she carried Leto on her lap. The jiggery which she gave to Leto was also not given to Lieno. In another instance, Lieno is read to be having fun with one of her uncle by name Ato. Lieno climbed on his back and was having the time of her life like all little kids do, but her Grandmother felt unhappy and thought that her behavior was improper for which she lands her stick on Dielieno’s back of her calf saying at the same time,

No decent girl climbs up a man’s shoulder. (Kire 5)

The treatment that was meted out to Lieno by her Grandmother was protested by none among the family members. There was none to take her side for they were rendered helpless and powerless against the matriarch Vibano.

Lieno was also given a bath with cold water on a cold morning at the command of Grandmother Vibano. Lieno also narrates about how nobody ever got second helpings of meat from the Grandmother except for the male members in the family like Bulie, Vini, and Leto. The fact that Lieno was made to stand out at night in the dark counting the chickens even if it was dark and she was just a little girl shows how cruel the matriarch was when it comes to treating a girl child.

You idiot girl, get back there and count them again. You are not to return until you can count
all the chickens. (Kire 19)

However, the bigger difficulty appeared when Dielieno’s mother talked to her Grandmother about sending her daughter to school for getting an education. Grandmother Vibano’s reply was,

In our day 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. (Kire 22)

Grandmother Vibano throughout the novel never really approve of girl’s education. She continued to stick to her old traditional practices and ideas.

The idea of sending off Lieno’s to Grandmother Vibano’s house to train her to become a woman simply shows just how insecure the parents of Lieno were in the upbringing of a girl child. Though Lieno’s mother hesitated to send her off, the father would not listen to her. The woman is thus rendered helpless in the face of the decision made by the man of the family. Little or no importance was given to the opinions or views of the women in the family.

As the story progresses, we read about how Uncle Ato gave Lieto a rupee to spent of herself upon which Grandmother Vibano commented

I wouldn’t have served you food if I knew you were going to spoil the girl with money. (Kire 27)

Grandmother Vibano’s notion about a girl was that they were a burden to the family for if she is not brought up well she could bring a bad name on the family and this was what Grandmother Vibano strived so hard in keeping the good reputation of the bloodline.

Grandmother Vibano’s disapproval of Lieno’s going to school did not stop at just a remark but she tried every means to make her life even more difficult by making her get up an hour early. Grandmother Vibano never appreciated the work that Dielieno does at school. When Lieno had learned to read a little, she tried telling her Grandmother about how those papers which Grandmother uses for covering the soybeans was precious to her. Schools or education for girls was considered to be wastage of time according to Grandmother Vibano. Her statement,

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. I was doing such a good job of teaching the girl to work about the house. It was difficult enough. (Kire 35)

Grandmother Vibano was very old fashioned and gave more of her attention and love to the male members. She was very particular and strict at maintaining the standard of the family life and avoiding the imprint of any bad name upon it. This is why she took Bano to stay with her to avoid a scandal for Bano’s father. In the novel, it is not the male mistreating the female characters rather it is the women themselves mistreating another women as in the case of Grandmother Vibano mistreating Lieno.

There is always the presence of the clash between the old ideas and traditions to the modern ideas. Grandmother Vibano’s inability to accept the changes that was sweeping over Kohima and her inability to accept the modern ideology led her to treat Lieno in such a way that she was despised and hated for being a girl.

It always angered Grandmother Vibano when anybody praises Dielieno in front of her. She only reminded Lieno of how clumsy she was and how she could never do a thing right. Lieno unlike the old fashioned Grandmother Vibano kept her mind opened like a parachute, for to learn things one has to keep one’s mind opened. Through Grandfather Sizo, she realized the possibilities she could do if she has had an education. She realized the value of how knowing to write just one application letter can help save the life of the villagers.

Grandmother Vibano also never gave up passing unpleasant remarks at Lieno. When Lieno and her mother returned to Grandmother Vibano house late because they were taking out hemlines from her old uniform skirt, the matriarch or Grandmother Vibano says,

Humph, all that trouble for a little girl. I really don’t understand why they have to send girls to school when it is so much a bother for everyone else. (Kire 48)
Grandmother Vibano kept trying to find fault in everything that Lieno does. For her, a woman was born only to serve the man, to perform all the household works. So much importance was given on how a girl should behave and she was denied freedom to do as she wants unlike the boys.

Lieno was not the only person to make Grandmother Vibano unhappy because of her going to school but as the story begins to unfold itself, we read Bano telling Lieno about how thankful she was to her Grandmother for sending her to school even if it was not much that she could learn. When Lieno ask her about why she had given up on her education, Bano narrates,

I often witnessed your Grandmother and Grandfather arguing over my going back to school. So, I took the decision to stop going to because I could see that it was the cause of all their arguments. Your Grandfather still wanted me to go. But I said I was tired of school. It was not true but I realized it was what I expected to do. There are times in life when you have to sacrifice some things you really liked in order to have peace in the family. (Kire 73)

Women were born to make compromises and sacrifices that is what it appears to be in the novel. Bano also gives her own assumption of Grandmother Vibano’s,

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 all go to hell. There is no way they can be saved. (Kire 75-76)

The way Bano let Grandmother Vibano decide which suitor would be her husband is also significant of how very little liberty she has in the patriarchal set up of the society. According to Grandmother Vibano, men hesitate to court woman who has too much education which according to Mary Wollstonecraft’s opinion would have been because men do not want to be challenged. For everything that anybody does Grandmother Vibano always comes with ‘girls’. The subject of using electricity in her house for Lieno to study at night was no good news for her.

Humph, in our days, young girls went to bed early so they could get up early and do the household work. (Kire 112)

Grandmother Vibano’s logic on girls who laugh too often or too loudly was that they end up becoming wine brewers who had nothing to do the whole day but brew wine and laugh a lot when the men comes. There are also references being made about women being raped by the Indian army as Kohima during the 1960s and 1970s had been undergoing political conflict. Grandmother Vibano was never an encouragement to Lieno’s going for higher education. It was her brother Leto who decided to look after her education and who encouraged her to pursue her studies as he himself was educated and broad minded, unlike the others.

III. GENDER DIVISION

Viemenuo was Lieno’s best friend. Her father was a drunkard who had lived throughout the war years and who cared less for his family, making his wife suffer and shoulder almost all of the responsibilities. We also get to know that the father of Vimenuo was angry because his wife had given birth only to daughters and he wanted a boy to carry on his name. We see here that the male members are only considered fit to carry on the name of the family for the women would be married and belong to somebody else. Girl children as said by Bano, was never considered to be the real members of the family. Their mission in life was to get married and have children and be able to cook and weave clothes and look after the household. If they were married, they would 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.

Lieno’s mother on the other hand was also expected by her husband to clean the house and wash all the clothes and have cooked food ready when he gets home. That was her duty as a mother and as a woman. The world of a woman in the old typical Angami society was confined to the four walls of her house.

Man were born to be wild and free, whereas a girl was born in chains and each step that she takes was bounded by heavy rules. We also get to know that it is the man social standing which defines his woman status. Grandmother Vibano though she was not educated had a husband who had a job in the DC office for which she could be proud of and boast about. When Grandmother Vibano rebuked Grandmother Neikuo about her not having money, Grandmother Neikuo in defense replies,
Nor would you, had you not married a man who had some education and a job in the DC office. (Kire 51)

Women in the Tenyimia society are seen here as totally being dependent on men. A man was considered to be the only being to define the identity of his wife and his family. A woman was given and shown respect according to the status of her husband. Vimenuo’s father being a drunkard was also the result of the family being despised and rejected by people like Grandmother Vibano.

The role or the action of Dieliebo’s mother is also another point to be taken notice of. She is always read to be making sacrifices for the male members in the family even if it means going to bed with an empty stomach. The narrator talks of her mother as,

I had often seen her scraping the pot and giving it to Leto, my eldest brother, or taking out the meat pieces from her own plate to slip it into Vini’s plate saying she was full. (Kire 2)

The mother of Dielieno or the narrator is always seen or read at her humblest. She was bound in chains and could not do things as she pleases.

She thought it was sinful to eat too much of the food one really liked or wear more than two new clothes in a year. (Kire 2-3)

Even when she went to church, she would throw an old shawl over her new blouse if she was wearing it for the first time. This was because,

She had to listen to Grandmother taunts if she bought anything for herself. (Kire 3)

From all of the above instances given from the novel, we see how the women in the novel had been mistreated by the matriarch. It is the women who kept making compromises and sacrifices to satisfy the need of the matriarch as well as the male members in the family.

IV. THE SYSTEM OF PATRIARCHY

Grandmother Vibano is the matriarch who binds her family in strict rules. She is the abuse of the patriarchal power resulting in gender abuse within the same gender, and in the process she ends up abusing herself. Apart from Dielieno, the other female characters in the novel who suffers under the patriarchal structure of the Tenyimia society are Neikuo, Bano and Nisano. The lives of these women are testaments to the presence and prevalence of patriarchy particularly in the Naga social fabric. Neikuo, the old unmarried sister of Sizo and Grandmother Vibano, has no property of her own. As it is a male-only heir system, Neikuo inherits nothing from her paternal wealth and remaining a spinster has only multiplied her woes. She lives at the mercy of her brother Sizo who has allowed her to live in his paternal house.

Bano, who has never met her own biological mother toils from dawn to dusk, running errands for Vibano who has no sympathy for girls. When Bano grows up to be a beautiful young woman, marriage proposal start coming in, but Vibano keeps rejecting the proposals, saying that Bano deserves better. However, it was because of Grandmother Vibano’s own selfish motive in wanting to keep Bano with her that she had remained a spinster too. Though Bano wanted to live in her house even after her death, she was turned out of the house immediately after Vibano’s death. Vibano’s son inherits the house instead and they plan to use the house for some other purpose. Even the last wish of the matriarch is not valued in the world of patriarchy, the fabric of which has always been strengthened by the matriarch herself throughout her life. (Roy 367-368)

V. IMPACT OF EXTERNAL CONFLICT

The situation during the 1970s and 1980s was very much disturbing for the Nagas as they had to deal with the Indian armed forces as well as some home grown factional groups and military oppression. Apparently an area of male concern, the Indo-Naga conflict has reinforced the non-status of women in society. Such unresolved political conflicts put the Naga women in double crisis and they had to suffer at the hands of their male counter parts, as well as bear the brunt of the armed forces.

Vini is an example of how Naga youths took refuge in alcohol, which they thought would save them from their social and economic problems. When the name members returned home from the drinking house, they indulged themselves in wife-beating which was thought to be manly. Grandmother Vibano’s preference for make was because she looks up to them as a kind of assurance and so showered on them all of her love and care. Dielieno also realizes,

After my talk with mother, I understood better the deep sense of insecurity that had led Grandmother to hold the world view
she had. (Kire 253)

VI. CONCLUSION

The novel recurring theme is the impact of the social upheavals on the individuals as well as social fabric of the society. Easterine Kire’s predominant concern is presented through the theme of gender inequality and the trials a girl child has to overcome to assert her stand in a society that privileges male dominated values. Elizabeth Vizovono in her book “Subaltern Voice in Iralu”’s A Terrible Matriarchy” (2014) states that the Nagas were faced with rapid social changes and both men and women were caught in the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the changing structure of the society in transition is reflected through three generation in the novel. (15-16)

The death of Grandmother Vibano at the end of the novel and her spirit haunting the house until it was inhabited by its rightful owners Bano and Vini’s wife and son may bring to the conclusion that A Terrible Matrarchy is a coming-of-age story of a girl as well as of her Grandmother in the Angami society which faced many socio-political struggles that have continuously strengthened the web of patriarchy in the fabric of Naga society.

REFERENCES
