

The Portrayal of Angami Women in *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire

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Abstract

In the last one decade North-east India has witnessed a lot of developments in the field of literature. For a long time, North-east Literature was limited to only folk literature of folklores passed on by word of mouth. In the recent times it has taken a new turn at the hands of the emerging writers who use English as the medium for writing. English language has given a wider audience to the writers of this region. The literature from the north-east is a claim of one's identity, one's voice and one's existence. It is a way of forming a new space in another culture, another world other than the culture from which they have emerged. There is still a skewed view of literature that comes from North-east of India. It is given a monolithic identity and, is considered to have leaped from the political turmoil, marginalization, and identity assertion. This happens due to the huge geographical disconnect from the mainstream India. North-east Literature is in fact an umbrella term which includes the eight states located in the eastern most region of India, which consists of different socio-political and cultural frameworks.

Keywords: North-East Literature, society, culture, patriarchy

The objective of this paper is to study the cultural influence in the status of women in the novel, to understand the impact of patriarchal society and the changing paradigm in the tribal society in the status of women.

In the introduction of *Emerging Literature from North-East, India*, Margaret Ch. Zama writes, "They usher in a different brand of literary repertoire in ways that depict their various communities, their unique linguistic registers, and the world view that they project in an

endeavor to preserve their cultural and ethnic identities”(Chama 10). *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), written by Easterine Kire is a story of a little girl Dielieno(Leino), who is burdened by her grandmother, Vibano to take the load of the Angami, Naga customs and traditions. Kire hails from Nagaland, currently living in Norway. She is a poet and a novelist. Her works include *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), etc. *A Terrible Matriarchy* revolves around three generation of Angami women set on the second half of the 20th century Nagaland, at the face of the Christianization and the Naga struggle. The Naga Nationalism is presented through the wounded pride and hopelessness in personal lives of men trying to drink away their frustration and disappointments. Kire tells us the untold story of every tribal girl of the region, growing up with the demands of a patriarchal society that shape their lives. She also counters it with the transitions that take place in the mindset of the society as a whole. The novel starts with the words, “My grandmother did not like me. I knew this when I was about four and a half.” (Kire 24) Grandmother Vibano is a tyrant, the matriarch of the house; she is the torch bearer of the values and morals of the Angami society, a society where sons are given preference over daughters. The novel takes us to a personal space in the lives of many other women characters who have accepted their fate as the care taker, and the child barer.

Cultural Influence in the status of women

Angami Nagas are a tribe living in the present state of Nagaland. They are one of the major Naga tribes living in Nagaland, dominating the central and southern parts of Kohima and Dimapur districts. The Angami society is essentially patriarchal and patrilineal like most of the tribal groups of the region. Traditionally, men are the head of the family and sons take over when they grow up. The novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* is set on the second half of the 20th Century, 90% of the tribe is converted to Christianity, but there are still remnants of the old religion or the animist practices. People still believe in dreams, spirits and omens, even the Sunday church services, Christmas celebrations and funerals are infused with the older traditions. While the men are the bread winners, women are mostly engaged in weaving handicrafts, agricultural activities besides their household works. Lieno, the protagonist gets tangled in the folds of teaching and learning of the values and morals of the society. Grandmother Vibano, doesn't believe in educating girls,

she states, “In our days...girls did not go to school. We stayed at home, learned all the field works as well. That way one never has a problem with girl-children. They will be busy at some work or the other, too busy to get into trouble”. (Kire 45) At the tender age of five Lieno is sent to her Grandmother’s house and she is put into rigorous tasks for a five year old, just to learn the craft to be a good wife in the future. After the day’s work she was served a single piece of meat, which according to her grandmother is what a girl deserves.

IMPACT OF THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL STRUCTURE

In any tribal society the matriarch usually has an important role in the house. Although, they hold considerable power over the matters of the household, and with age they gain a special position and respect as the elder of the house. As the Angami , Naga society is patrilineal, women did not have too many privileges. The gender divide and the rights of men as opposed to women operate all through Kire’s novel. The grandmother, Vibano, is obsessed with her male heirs; such sexist views makes Lieno detest her with a vengeance. Grandmother hates female freedom in any form and dots on her grandsons. She is the matriarch who binds her family in strict rules; she is the abuser of the patriarchal power resulting in gender abuse within the same gender, and in the process ends up abusing herself. Apart from Lieno, there are other female characters in the novel who suffer at the hands of the social structure of the society. Neikuo, Nisano, Bano-these women’s’ lives are the testaments to the prevalence of patriarchy in the Angami social fabric. Neikuo, the old unmarried sister of Vibano doesn’t inherit any property. As the male heir inherits all the paternal property, she did not inherit anything, being a spinster adds to her woes.

“It was her father’s house and she stayed on because she had never married while Sizo had married and chosen to settle in another town. Otherwise, it would have been Sizo’s house. It would still be Sizo’s house when Neikuo died someday” (Kire 61)

Neikuo lives at the mercy of her brother, as he lives elsewhere with his family. Then we have Nisano, lieno’s sister in law by her second brother Vini. Vini represents the problem of alcoholism of men at a very tender age, which incur the issue of women in the form of domestic violence. The widowed Nisano is not even spared by the gossip mongers of the villagers, who

has to suffer a lot. We also have, Bano, who is the illegitimate daughter of Sizo. Bano does not have any social recognition, and she lives with Vibano. Bano was taken in by Vibano as a child and she addresses her as ‘Mother’. Bano works day and night, running errands and taking care of every need of Vibano without any kind of love and care being reciprocated. When Vibano dies, Bano is turned out of the house, even though Vibano wanted her to continue living there. It was inherited by her sons who wanted to use it for other purposes. Finally, the abuser gets abused in the power play of gender politics.

At the surface level the matriarch seems to have the upper hand over patriarchy in the discrimination of girls in the novel. But Lieno’s mother explains to her that her grandmother’s values and ideals regarding boys and girls have actually been formed as a result of the being a victim of such kind of discrimination in the past.

“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. They would devote the rest of their lives trying to produce a male heir.” (Kire 102)

Unfortunately, Grandmother Vibano had gone through such an experience in her life, which turned her in to a terrible matriarch.

THE CHANGING PARADIGM IN THE TRIBAL SOCIETY IN THE STATUS OF WOMEN

A Terrible Matriarch presents a very clear picture of the discriminations in the life of a tribal woman in different settings. The social and traditional boundaries set by the patriarchal society were the stumbling blocks in the past as well as it remains so in the present. The awareness and understanding of the status of the women and the social strata pushes open new possibilities to pave way to find a voice of their own. What we see in Lieno is the incredible strength and confidence in her, which set her apart from the other female characters. Lieno possesses an indomitable spirit. She is unapologetic of her questions regarding the conventions that were

imposed on her. Her grandmother wants to deprive her of independence, freedom, and education to raise her right, which basically means to train her to be a good wife. Her parents support her education and love her as much as her brothers. Lieno goes to college by the financial support and encouragement of her brother Leto. At the end of the novel, when Grandmother, Vibano, is on her death bed, a conversation with Leino's mother compels her to forgive Vibano. Her bitterness is transformed into an understanding of the socio-cultural dilemma she had gone through in her past.

Conclusion

English writing in Northeast Literature has given a space for writer like Easterine Kire to represent the voiceless women of the region through their stories. She writes from their experiences and first hand awareness of the condition of the tribal women. The conventional accepted norms have been questioned and challenged. The out play of gender politics in the lives of the tribal women in the guise of culture and traditions has suppressed them since time immemorial. Lieno embody the grit and determination the women of her society have. She proves herself to be more than just a count of mithun heads or a specimen of a good wife. She breaks the stereotype of a tribal woman who is traditionally a care giver and child bearer. Lieno not only represented a daughter or wife but an individual who hhs deterred the social and cultural constructs of her identity and existence. The undeterred ambition of Lieno is symbolic to the changes brought about in the society. Thus, we can conclude that seeds of revolution have been sown, if watered properly it will take a shape of a beautiful tree.

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