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**CULTURAL CONFRONTATIONS OF A TORN SELF: A TALE OF FEMALE
OPPRESSION AND SUFFERING IN EASTERINE KIRE'S A TERRIBLE
MATRIARCHY**

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Abstract

North-Eastern India is a unique geo-political space famous for its rich tribal culture, customs, and diverse society. It constitutes seven states, popularly called 'Seven sisters' because of their significant regional, cultural, and ethnic similarities. Easterine Kire, born in Kohima is an Angami Naga writer whose works offer us an insightful foray into the Naga culture, history, and also the rituals and beliefs of the Angami society. Kire's A Terrible Matriarchy is a bildungsroman novel that very beautifully delineates the story of the protagonist's coming of age and the problems she has to confront in her life. The protagonist, Dielieno, is the youngest daughter of Visa and Nino. At a young age, she is placed under the mentorship of her

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Grandmother Vibano, a highly traditional woman dedicated to preparing Dielieno to embody the qualities of a virtuous Naga woman. The proposed paper is a literary exegesis charting Dielieno's evolution from a youthful, naïve girl into a seasoned woman, highlighting her challenges at various stages of her life and her ultimate triumph in the novel's conclusion.

This paper thus is an endeavor to explore the complex interplay of tradition and gender in the Angami Naga society as depicted in the novel. It examines how the power dynamics within a matriarchy-dominated society too perpetuate patriarchal norms, subjugating women through social conditioning, differential treatment, and restricted access to education. The narrative of the protagonist, Dielieno, serves as a powerful illustration of the female struggle against these limitations. Through Dielieno's journey, the novel critiques the legacy of tradition and challenges the idea of a singular matriarchal power structure. The novel depicts Dielieno's journey of defying these conventions and fighting for her education and place in a society that tries its best to suppress her agency and aspirations in all ways possible.

Keywords: Naga tribal society, cultural subjugation, resilience, patriarchy, gender norm, subversion

Introduction

"With unflinching candor, Easterine Kire's 'A Terrible Matriarchy' delves into the dark recesses of gender-based oppression, illuminating the complex tapestry of female suffering and resilience that has long been obscured by the dominant patriarchal narrative."

Easterine Kire is a prominent writer, poet, and novelist from Nagaland known for her phenomenal contributions to literature, particularly in the realm of fiction and poetry. Her works often explore themes of identity, culture, history, and gender, offering a unique perspective on the experiences of the Naga people. Her creative writings beautifully portray the cultural consciousness and ethnic diversity between the mainland of India and the Northeast, specifically

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Nagaland. This way of looking at the human condition brings forth many aspects of her fiction in the form of cultural depiction, woman-woman relationships, gender discrimination, marginalization, rebellion, and protest. She has received numerous awards and accolades for her contributions to literature, including the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. Her works have been widely translated and anthologized, cementing her reputation as a significant literary figure in India and beyond.

Her book *A Terrible Matriarchy (ATM)* tells the moving story of Dielieno, a five-year-old girl who grows up in a traditional Naga family in northeastern India. The book is set in the northeastern Indian state of Nagaland in the 1970s and 1980s. The novel centers on its small protagonist, Dielieno, detailing her transformation from a young child to a woman who eventually gets married in the end. The narrative draws significant inspiration from the author's personal life, with characters largely reflecting real individuals and illustrating the patriarchal structure of Naga society. The novel delves into the lives of the women in a traditional Naga family, exposing the intricate web of relationships, traditions, and expectations that both bind and suffocate them. Through Kire's masterful narrative, the novel offers a poignant and thought-provoking exploration of female oppression, suffering, and resilience, set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

The Angami Naga community is founded on the principle that men are superior. Men are the masters of power; they rule household and property. Lineage and inheritance follow a strictly paternal line, ensuring these privileges are passed down through generations of sons. There are joyous celebrations when a male child is born. He's seen as an essential component of the continuation of a family line, ensuring its legacy and wealth. On the other hand, the birth of a daughter is met with a different attitude. Though not expressly inappropriate, the novel states that they are seen as temporary members who wish to become part of a different household through marriage. Their importance in their family unit is diminished by this perspective.

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In a scene, Vibano talks about marriage and says, "A woman's place is with her husband's family. She must bear sons and manage the household." This quote suggests the limitations placed on women's lives and their expected roles.

Dielieno, the youngest and the only female among the five children in the family felt unloved despite being her parents' favorite. She believed she was an unplanned child as she often wore her older brothers' leftover clothes. At the age of five, she was sent to live with her strict grandmother Vibano, who aimed to mold her into a traditional Naga wife and mother. The novel narrates the story from Dielieno's innocent perspective. The Angami name 'Dielieno' translates to errand girl," reflecting the societal position of a girl child in Angami culture, offering a detailed account of her life from age five to twenty-three. In traditional Naga society, girls are generally thought to be better at running errands and looking after household chores. However, the story of Dielieno is not the only one in this book. It describes the grandmother, the mother, and Dielieno, three generations of Naga women. It thus highlights the period of tremendous social change by presenting the lives of three generations of women. The narrative consists of multiple layers. Dielieno battles horrifying odds to obtain an education and a place in society, a story that is told in the first level. "I was youngest in my family of five children, I sometimes felt I was an afterthought and may be Father and Mother didn't quite know what to do with me. Also, because I was a girl after four boys, they never seemed to be sure whether to buy me girls' clothing or let me wear leftover boys clothing." (ATM, Pg- 2)

Despite all the challenges in her early life, she managed to maintain her spirit as a strong and sensitive woman. Easterine claims that Dielieno is a womanist as opposed to a feminist. She was a bright, inquisitive child who resisted her grandmother's attempts to control her or even break her spirit. There is tension between the grandma and the granddaughter throughout the entire book. "My grandmother didn't like me. I knew this when I was about four and a half." (Kire 1) The writer has realistically portrayed gender discrimination in a casteless society. The novel

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might have internal monologues from Dielieno where she reflects on the expectations placed upon her. She might think something like, "Why can't I go to school like my brothers? Why do I have to stay home and cook?" This internal frustration highlights the societal constraints she faces.

In a review, Kezhakielie Whiso (Eastern Mirror, Gujarat) expressed that the book fascinates the reader with its "storytelling within the story". The novel's background depicts patriarchy, but it also characterizes matriarchy as an understructure that abuses the patriarchal order. Additionally, it mistreats the patriarchal system, which results in discrimination against same-sex relationships based on gender. This was seen in several of the novel's women-to-women relationships, such as the ones between the grandmother and Dielieno, the grandmother and Bano, and the bano and Seno/Leno. The story explores the struggles of Dielieno, a woman trapped in a society that clings to old traditions. These traditions prioritize men and offer women very few choices or freedoms. This clash between Dielieno's desires and her grandmother's rigid expectations is the main source of tension in the novel. The story highlights the disadvantaged position of women in this culture, where they are denied basic rights like property inheritance and have little to no say in important matters.

Dielieno deeply resents her grandmother's favoritism towards her brothers and her strict views against female independence. The grandmother showers the boys with affection, even giving them more food, while Dielieno is expected to manage household chores. This clearly shows the different roles assigned to each gender. The grandmother, who enforces rigid rules as the family leader, uses her patriarchal power to discriminate and even harm others, including herself. Dielieno isn't alone in facing this oppression. Other women in the story, like Nisano, Bano, and Neikuo, all suffer under the weight of Nagaland's patriarchal traditions. Neikuo, for example, remains unmarried and owns nothing, reflecting the limited opportunities women have in this

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society. “I wasn’t asking you, silly girl,” she said, as she swiftly put the chicken leg into my brother’s plate, “that portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions.” (ATM, Pg-1)

In Nagaland, where only sons inherit, Neikuo receives nothing from her family's wealth. Being unmarried makes things even harder for her. She relies on her brother Sizo, who lets her stay in their old house even though he lives elsewhere. Dielieno admires Neikuo's kindness and supportiveness, contrasting her with their grandmother's harshness. The story also introduces Bano, Sizo's illegitimate daughter, who lives with her aunt Vibano. Bano receives no social acceptance and calls Vibano "Mother" despite never meeting her biological one. Vibano shows no sympathy for girls and makes Bano work tirelessly from sunrise to sunset. As Bano blossoms into a beautiful young woman, marriage proposals arrive. However, Vibano rejects them all, claiming Bano deserves better. This facade soon crumbles, revealing Vibano's true motive - to keep Bano as a free laborer during her old age. Bano devotes her life to caring for Vibano with the expectation of nothing in return. Ironically, even though Vibano wants Bano to stay in the house after her death, Bano is thrown out immediately after Vibano passes away. Vibano's sons, the inheritors due to the patriarchal system, have other plans for the house. This twist exposes the hypocrisy of the society. Despite Vibano upholding patriarchal power throughout her life, even her last wish is disregarded, highlighting how women, even those in positions of power, can be victims of the very system they enforce.

Despite taking place in the second half of the 20th century, A Terrible Matriarchy provides an insight into the horrors of the Battle of Kohima in the 1940s. Dielieno's mother, a young girl at the time, witnessed the Japanese invasion of southern Nagaland villages. The British response involved sending more troops to Kohima. One harrowing incident involved a British officer (later revealed to be a German spy) who forced his way into Dielieno's mother's house and attempted assault – “Suddenly the Officer pulled her into his arms and there was no doubt what his intention was.” (ATM, Pg-171) Although she was lucky to be spared, the passage suggests

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that many other women were not. They had to leave their homes due to the conflict to avoid bombs and gunshots, which left them open to abuse and brutality. The second half of the 20th century brought no respite for Naga women. After enduring the violence of foreign forces in the 1940s, the 1970s and 80s saw them face conflict with Indian armed forces and internal Naga factions. These seemingly "male" issues, focused on political control, only worsened the existing marginalization of women. The Naga women faced a double dilemma as a result of these unresolved political disputes: not only did they have to endure mistreatment at the hands of their male counterparts, but they also had to take the brunt of the military.

The unresolved political struggles and social issues in Nagaland during the latter half of the 20th century created a breeding ground for despair among the youth. Widespread unemployment, feelings of alienation, and powerlessness drove many young men to seek solace in alcohol. These poorly regulated drinking establishments served tainted liquor, leading to numerous premature deaths. Despite the danger, there seemed no escape for these young people who believed alcohol offered a temporary escape from their social and economic misery. This cycle of addiction had devastating consequences for women. When intoxicated men returned home, they often resorted to violence against their wives, viewing it as a display of masculinity and a way to release their frustrations. Tragically, when these men succumbed to alcoholism, the women were left to bear the brunt of the suffering. Nisano exemplifies this plight. After her husband Vini died from alcohol abuse, she became dependent on the harsh Grandmother Vibano. Even within her in-laws' house, she faced ostracization. The narrow-minded community couldn't accept a widow choosing to stay with her deceased husband's family. This incident highlights how women in this society were doubly burdened – first by the violence of their male counterparts, and then by the social stigma attached to them even within their own families.

The novel charts the transformation of Dielieno, our protagonist. As a five-year-old, she faces her grandmother's harsh treatment and rigid expectations, fueling a deep resentment. However,

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this anger evolves as Dielieno matures into a thoughtful young woman. She develops a "womanist" perspective, which suggests a deep understanding of the struggles faced by women within her culture. This newfound awareness allows her to see beyond the surface and delve into the root causes of the oppressive reality she experiences. A pivotal moment comes when Dielieno learns the true reasons behind her grandmother's seemingly sexist behavior. Her mother acts as a bridge, explaining the context that shaped her grandmother's worldview. This revelation chips away at Dielieno's hatred, and is replaced by a more nuanced understanding. The narrative suggests that Dielieno's journey isn't just about personal growth, but also about the possibility of empathy and reconciliation within the complex web of female experience. "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 Grandmother saw her mother suffer hardship and poverty and exclusion from many aspects of social life because he had no brothers. It hardened her and made her determined not to suffer as her mother had." (ATM, Pg-250) These lines reveal the reasons behind Grandmother's preference for boys. She loves her sons and grandsons so much that she views them as a form of insurance. Dielieno realises – "After my talk with Mother, I understood better the deep sense of insecurity that had led Grandmother to hold the world view she had." (ATM, Pg- 253)

Despite her high status as a matriarch, Dielieno's grandmother grapples with constant unease. This paradox arises from the socio-economic realities of her world. The uneven distribution of wealth and the lack of agency for women create a system of subjugation. However, the story suggests that women from post-colonial societies like Nagaland experience this oppression even more acutely. The roots of this double burden lie in the legacy of colonialism and its lingering effects. Yet, a glimmer of hope emerges. Dielieno's mother represents a generation pushing for change. Unlike her own missed opportunity, she adamantly prioritizes Dielieno's education. This act of defiance signifies a potential shift in the power dynamics. Dielieno embraces education

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and excels, demonstrating the transformative potential it holds for women. This pursuit of knowledge empowers her to challenge the status quo and potentially forge a new path for herself and future generations. The narrative suggests that while the weight of tradition and colonialism is heavy, change is brewing. Dielieno's journey reflects a society in flux, where the traditional power structures are being questioned. The education Dielieno receives becomes a weapon against the ingrained inequalities, paving the way for a future where women like her grandmother might not have to grapple with insecurity despite their high status. Though Mother was weak and lacked agency, she was the whistleblower. Her words of comfort and inspiration made Dielieno a courageous woman who values social justice and humanity: "You know that our people say we should love our sons because they are the ones who look after us in our old age but for your father and I, it is you, our daughter, who has brought us the greatest comfort. We love all of you equally. You must always know that." (ATM, Pg-250)

The story offers a glimpse of potential redemption even in the face of deep-rooted traditions. Despite her harshness, a flicker of change touched even the formidable Grandmother Vibano. On her deathbed, a chilling realization dawned on her – the cruelty she inflicted on Dielieno. Silent tears betrayed her remorse, hinting at a possible softening in her final moments. While peace ultimately returned to the remaining characters, it came at a cost. The "ghost of the matriarch" lingered, demanding appeasement. Vibano, the very embodiment of a patriarchal system that oppressed women, tragically became a victim of its constraints. Her insecurity and sense of lack overshadowed everything else, ultimately leading to her downfall. After Vibano's death, her spirit, a manifestation of her unresolved conflicts, begins to torment the house's paying guests. "My house is not for strangers. It is for my family members. How can I be at rest when they have thrown out of my house those who cared for me and tried to make money out of it?" (ATM, Pg-286) Vibano is upset and angry because her family kicked out the people who genuinely cared about her and are now trying to take advantage of her and her possessions for their own benefit.

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This spectral presence only finds solace once the rightful owners – Bano and Vini's widow and son – reclaim the house. This symbolic act suggests that true peace can only be achieved by dismantling the structures of oppression and ensuring justice for those who were wronged. Vibano's restless spirit serves as a final reminder of the human cost of clinging to a rigid past.

This literary work depicts an intricate circumstance where Dielieno faces constraints from both sides instead of encouragement. Her grandmother, who was viewed as an embodiment of matronly superiority, subjected her to rigid conservationist norms and curtailed her basic rights such as education and expression. Although, we witness a matriarchal figure in an authoritative place ironically this itself binds a woman in a vicious maw of helplessness. Inflicting the same wound of subjugation onto the next generations is all we observe through her grandmother's past and Dielieno's present which would ultimately impact her future. Apart from this foundational plight, poverty, and privation add another veneer to her misery. Treating women as inferior to their male counterparts paved the way for their marginalization on many levels, including the matter related to inheritance and freedom. In the end, Dielieno realized that Grandmother's 'terrible matriarchy' was not so terrible after all. It was simply a different way of expressing love and ensuring the survival and well-being of the family.

Thus, we may conclude, that the novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* presents a society led by women, it paints a gripping picture of female suffering. Dielieno, from a young age, experiences discrimination due to her gender. Trapped in a cycle perpetuated by her grandmother, Vibano, who enforces rigid gender roles, Dielieno is denied access to education and has limited control over her life. This pattern extends to Dielieno's mother, highlighting the generational nature of this oppression. Restricted by societal expectations in areas of work, education, and personal autonomy, the women in the novel struggle to find freedom and fulfillment. It provides a valuable exploration of the complex dynamics of gender, tradition, and culture. The portrayal of the socio-political struggles faced by the Angami society of Nagaland highlights the ongoing

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challenges that continuously strengthen the matrix of patriarchy in the fabric of Naga society. It serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the interconnectedness of societal norms, individual experiences, and the larger cultural milieu, making it a compelling and insightful read for those interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics at play in the Northeastern region of India. Through the depiction of matrilineal traditions, the novel offers readers a deeper perspective on cultural differences between the Northeast, specifically Nagaland, and the Indian mainland, where patrilineal customs are more common. By weaving the coming-of-age story of a girl and her grandmother into the narrative, the novel provides insight into the intergenerational experiences of women in a society marked by intricate gender dynamics.

The novel explores the matrilineal customs of the Nagas, where descent and inheritance are traced through the mother's lineage. This contrasts with the patrilineal norms found in much of the Indian mainland, where lineage and inheritance are passed through the father's side. The differences in kinship systems are a central theme of the book. The matrilineal society portrayed in the novel influences the roles of women within the community. Readers can observe how different societal roles and expectations compared women in Naga society often have to women in patrilineal societies. Various cultural practices and traditions specific to Naga society are depicted in the book, emphasizing the unique cultural identity of the Nagas. These practices can differ from those in the mainland due to the matrilineal framework. Kire's novels are powerful because they delve into the complexities of Naga culture and history. They can be seen as a form of activism, where she corrects misconceptions, re-examines traditions, and defends Naga's identity. She doesn't shy away from difficult topics and tackles social, political, economic, and cultural issues faced by Naga communities, offering a clear-eyed and insightful perspective. Ultimately, it exposes the dark side of a matriarchy where tradition trumps individual potential, leaving women to suffer under the weight of a power structure that should ostensibly empower

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them. In the end, Kire wants to give her community a strong voice and a solid basis for self-determination.

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