

# Gendered Power and Resistance: Negotiating the Self in Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*

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## Abstract

*The North-Eastern frontier zone is a very distinct region due to its indigenous customs, consisting of seven states with diverse languages and cultures. Easterine Kire, an Angami Naga writer from Kohima, offers profound insight into the Naga culture and gender dynamics through her fiction. Her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* often challenges idealised assumptions about matriarchy, which represents a household governed by a powerful grandmother who imposes strict, often repressive control over her granddaughter, Dielieno. The text highlights how female authority can also turn into an oppressive force and shows how women themselves can engage in patriarchal violence, which silences younger female voices. Through Lieno's experience of denial of education, exclusion of freedom, and emotional neglect, it exposes the deep-seated prejudices against daughters within tribal culture. Kire dismantles the traditional image of matriarchy and reveals the embedded patriarchal structures within domestic spaces. The study seeks to probe the situation of a silenced daughter under a powerful matriarchy. Furthermore, the proposed paper utilizes feminist literary criticism to examine how Kire's text interrogation patriarchal structures operating in matrilineal societies, and also explicates the complexities of gender and power in her text.*

**Keywords:** Easterine Kire, Naga Women, Gender Inequality, Patrilineal Inheritance, Intergenerational Conflict

## Introduction

Acclaimed author Easterine Kire is a Northeast Indian writer from the state of Nagaland. The major themes in her fiction include woman-woman relationships, gender discrimination, marginalisation, rebellion, and protest. Her works offer fresh insight into her homeland, particularly highlighting the arduous journeys faced by Naga women, and her writings analyse the power dynamics, patriarchy, and gender identities imposed by women on other women. Her novel, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, is one such evocative tale depicting a young five-year-old girl, Dielieno, growing up in a traditional Naga society in India's Northeast. The story is set in the northeastern Indian state of Nagaland in the 1970s or 1980s. It explores the silencing of Dielieno, representing a symbolic outlook that her voicelessness is not merely the absence of speech but a symbol

of powerlessness, emotional dominance, and gendered control. The protagonist, Dielieno, grows up in an environment where a powerful matriarchy within the household neglects her voice, identity, and autonomy. The relationship between Dielieno and her authoritarian grandmother, who is rigid with rules and enforcement, leads her to become a victim of psychological and emotional subjugation. Kire's writing is marked by an intuitive understanding and a sensitive appraisal of women's issues, shedding light on the complexities of gender and power within Naga society. The novel revolves around its young protagonist, Dielieno, and describes her journey from a little child to a young woman and the household governed by an aged widow, Vibano. The writer's own life inspired the narrative, and the characters are mostly based on real people. Further, this research investigates Kire's reinterpretation of matriarchy by depicting its entanglement with patriarchal structure, while also examining how women navigate and resist within the social and cultural spaces they inhabit.

### Literature Review

As part of the literature review, this research has analysed essential articles and books about the text, *A Terrible Matriarchy*. This paper focuses on the Angami women in Nagaland and the northeastern women battling for equality in all aspects of life. The concept of the power struggle between matriarchy and patriarchy, is dealt with in the article titled "The Metamorphosis of a Female Subject into a Gendered Subject: A Study of Easterine Iralu's *A Terrible Matriarchy*". The study shows how the grandmother favours the male children over the female, reinforcing the male child's privileged position within the household. At the same time, the protagonist, Dieleino, experiences prejudice and mistreatment from her own grandmother, representing a form of matriarchal oppression. In contrast, the same Naga society exemplifies patriarchal authority that upholds male privilege (Riba & Nyori, 2021). Kire portrays women like Vibano, who, while exercising control over others, reinforce patriarchal values and reflect internalized patriarchy within a matriarchal framework.

*A Terrible Matriarchy* is a vivid representation of three generations of Angami-Naga women in the same family. Kire's portrayal of the lived realities and inner struggles of Naga women is explicated through the character of Dieleino. Similarly, Jain & Bhatnagar, in their article titled, "Shadow Power of Matriarchy in Easterine Kire's

*A Terrible Matriarchy*," states that many Naga women like Temsula Ao, Monalisa Chankija, Kekhrievoli, and others, including Eastern Kire, have voiced women's repression and subjugation in the backdrop of patriarchy. Through their works, they provide a solid platform for the Naga women to voice their resistance (Jain & Bhatnagar, 2023). The protagonists, Kire's Dieleino and Mamang Dai's Gimur, represent the complexities faced by women in the region. Northeastern women in Indian English fiction serve to capture both the silent suffering and voices of resistance within the tribal community of women and also depict their unique socio-cultural, political, and gendered experiences.

### Methodology

This study employs both primary and secondary data to explore the attributes of the Naga women, with a particular focus on the matrilineal kinship. The primary data for the analysis is derived from *A Terrible Matriarchy*, a literary work that offers insights into the Naga women's traditions, beliefs, and way of life. It also uses secondary sources from academic journals, books, and research papers to provide a broader context for the interpretation and understanding of the text. This research employs a qualitative research method through a theoretical approach, specifically applying the theory of Simone de Beauvoir, whose notion of 'the Other' argues that women are socially constructed as the subordinate 'Other' in relation to men as the dominant 'Subject.' The protagonist, Dieleino, happens to be a victim of matrilineal kinship that exemplifies authority and power. Through means of systemic inequalities, gendered subjection is perpetuated within a female-centric lineage, reflecting the same dynamics that Beauvoir critiques in patriarchal contexts.

### **Silencing and the Gendered Self**

The opening line of the text suggests that Dielieno's silence is not merely verbal but also the result of emotional deprivation and resistance she experiences throughout her life. At a young age, she experiences emotional rejection, and she says, "My grandmother didn't like me. I knew this when I was about four and a half" (Kire 2). It projects the pain she faces in the early years, and Dielieno is the only girl child in a family of four brothers. "But if the boy seems at first to be less favoured than his sisters" (Beauvoir, 276). Since she is the only girl, she wears the clothes that the boys had left over; instead of receiving new clothes of her own, she wears what her brothers had worn. This highlights the wilful rejection of her status as a granddaughter and socially identifies her as undesirable. Her parents are supposed to protect and care for her, but they don't even meet her basic needs, like clothes. It demonstrates the view of girls as invisible in the family and illustrates how she loses all value in her own home. Here, Kire explicates intersectional theory through the voices of women who are suppressed by overlapping systems of sexism, classism, and cultural norms; the act of silencing is a tool of power, shaping the marginalised identities to reclaim their own agency.

On the other hand, Lieno's acceptance of tiny portions of chicken, while the boys get the most appetizing parts of flesh, demonstrates the wilful neglect even during the meal, which is clear from the statement, "chicken leg always went into my brother's plate. That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions" (Kire 1), depicting the established gender hierarchy in the home in a subtle way. The chicken leg is a symbol of preference and privilege. Dielieno's passive acceptance illustrates how girls are compelled to remain silent and submissive, as is customary when they are given to sons. Despite being raised by a female authority in the household, she is denied not only love and independence but also symbolic access to privilege, even in something as basic as food. This illustrates the notion of negligence as discussed by Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex*, "He is the subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other" (de Beauvoir 16), wherein man is the default human being, with roles and desires seen as essential and universal. While she becomes "the Other", that denotes secondary status for women, lacking an identity of their own. Men function as the universal Subject, the inheritors, decision makers, and are placed in the central role in the family. On the other hand, a woman is defined only in relation to a man as the Other, passive and denied all privileges like inheritance, education and their identity as well. She is not born with the identity of a woman but is formed into one just because they are biologically female, and society teaches women to play a different gender role. The Naga culture, being patriarchal, reflects the ideas propounded by Beauvoir.

Thus, in traditional customs, women are raised in such a way as to exhibit feminine attributes. Dielieno's father also does the same and reproves her mother for failing to raise their daughter in a traditionally feminine manner and for her poor parenting. He dismisses his wife's argument, saying, "Mother was right then. You are not raising her properly. She will leave tomorrow for Mother's house, and I don't want to hear any more arguments about this" (Kire 10). He criticises Dielieno for playing outdoor games rather than indoor games and for participating in activities that are usually associated with boys, like making cars out of wet clay and playing games. Dielieno is positioned as the other and excluded from this ideal. When Dielieno arrives to stay at her grandmother's house for intense training, Kire demonstrates the emotional depression that she undergoes while performing everyday chores like cleaning the house, storing groceries, feeding the chickens, fetching water, and washing clothes. If she misses a number when counting the chickens, her grandmother gives her a harsh reprimand, by saying, "You idiot girl, get back there and count them again. You are not to return until you can count all the chickens! I didn't understand. If two were missing, how would they reappear" (Kire 19), demonstrating the subordination of the little girl who is terrified of the dark while being made to count the chickens in the nest. When two chickens disappeared, the fear of her grandmother's chiding makes her sad. Her overbearing grandmother, who constantly gives her tasks, orders and punishes any neglect or disobedience with severe consequences like being beaten, makes her feel psychologically oppressed. Silent perseverance and unrelenting struggles characterise every moment of her life.

The deprivation of autonomy is evident through the harsh treatment, that makes her feel inferior and constantly reminds Dielieno of her “place” as a girl. Her freedom of life is systematically suppressed by the hand of her grandmother. Her situation is that of a woman’s world, yet one that did not favour other women. It encapsulates the contradiction at the core of the text and its criticism of grandmother Vibano, who controls the younger women instead of empowering them by upholding patriarchal standards within a matrilineal framework.

### **Matriarchal Authority and Patrilineal Privilege**

The matriarchal power, ironically, becomes the enforcer of patriarchy, yet she does not challenge the men. Instead, she reinforces the patrilineal privilege that favours sons over daughters. The roles and expectations imposed by a patriarchal society reinforce the norms, which women absorb and adopt. Women’s authority is not genuinely free. The term “patriarchy” describes how women subconsciously adopt patriarchal ideals as a means of surviving in societies in which men predominate. As a matriarchal woman, Grandmother Vibano affirms sexist standards whose authority functions in a patriarchal culture that discourages women from expressing themselves, values them less, and punishes them more. Vibano’s favouring of male descendants embodies a paradoxical form of power; one that is not liberating but rather a preparation and continuation of a male-dominated structure of deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs in Naga society. The grandmother says, “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” (Kire 250), which deeply suggests how sons are considered more valuable because they are expected to care for their parents in old age. This idea often justifies emotional and material investment in male children. Kire presents the lived experiences of Grandmother Vibano as follows:

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 husbands’ 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. (Kire 250)

Her obsession with the production of male heirs is deeply rooted in a social reality where a woman’s security and status depends on having sons. In Naga culture, women do not have the right to inherit property. Simone de Beauvoir is of the view that, “property being inherited from father to son and no longer from woman to her clan” (Second Sex 80), finds expression in caste-based Indian societies, property rights are central to male dominance. Women endured being economically and socially dependent because they had no right to inherit. In some respects, Grandmother also believed that a man should be the head of the household. A wife should submit to her husband because her sole duty is to maintain the home. She expects her daughters and granddaughters to follow the same.

### **Education as Resistance**

The practical use of girls’ knowledge is limited to domestic duties, Lieno has a profound understanding of her school subjects and picks things up quickly, but her space is limited which is evident in the statement, “girls did not go to school. We stayed home and learned the house work. Then we went to the fields and learnt all the fieldwork as well. That way, one never had a problem with the girl children” (Kire 22), it promotes the notion that a girl belongs in her home, so her grandmother denies her desire to go to school since she believes it would go against gender expectations. Girls who receive education are exposed to idealistic concepts that could cause them to completely lose sight of their familial duties. However, Grandmother Vibano completely disagrees with the notion of sending a girl child to school, saying that she really doesn’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” (Kire 35), which shows her clear plans for Dielieno, insisting that she remain at home and learn domestic chores. Vibano thinks that education will harm their thoughts, and they will forget their place

in the family. Her father remarks, “No, Mother, it will not be like that. I think Lieno is quite capable of remembering all that you have taught her as well as what she is being taught at school” (Kire 35), her father suggesting the value of educating girl children, and he says that Lieno is very intelligent and might do better in school than the boys. Her grandmother finally agreed to send her to school after a lot of conflict. It shows that after a long struggle, her grandmother permitted her to go to school, but only after she fulfills all her duties at home. The protagonist Dielieno’s pursuit of education represents resistance against these gendered limitations; through learning, they negotiate identity across intersecting lines of race, gender, and class.

The primary agents of oppression and abuse toward women are, notably, women themselves rather than men. Vibano, Dielieno’s grandmother, is particularly opposed to girls going to school while being compelled into rigid traditional roles. Her father, grandfather, and Uncle Sizo provide her with more support for her education and personal growth, demonstrating that patriarchal even in matrilineal aspects exist. However, in the end, her grandmother’s treatment of her differs from that of her brothers. She is taught not to question. She is just a six-year-old girl, but she is not allowed to go to school until she has completed all her household chores. Her oppression is double: firstly, the patriarchal thought that her grandmother manifests, and secondly, the socio-economic discrimination. Vibano becomes both a victim and an agent of patriarchy, leading to the denial of emotional freedom and personal development of the granddaughter. The matriarch of the household believes that the role of women is to “marry and bear children, remember that... Men don’t like to marry educated wives. And if you find no one to marry you, you will be alone in your old age and have no one to bury you” (Kire 190), echoes the social standards of on men shape women. It reinforces the assumption that parenting and marriage are a woman’s ultimate goals by limiting her emotional requirements and intellectual capabilities, as well as denying her individuality and ambition. By illustrating how unmarried women are viewed as inadequate and unwanted by society, it also highlights the societal shame associated with a woman’s solitary status. The protagonist Dielieno’s pursuit of education represents resistance against these gendered limitations; through learning, they negotiate identity across intersecting lines of race, gender, and class.

### **Forgiveness and Self-Realisation**

In A Terrible Matriarchy, matrilineal figures such as Vibano represent patriarchal oppression by disciplining other women, particularly the younger generations. Vibano enforces rigid gender roles, holding Dielieno to strict norms of femininity, obedience, and domesticity. This demonstrates how patriarchy operates within matrilineal structures, silences autonomy and reinforces normative gender ideologies through the use of tradition and maternal authority. Kire portrays various female characters who are suppressed by society’s beliefs and cultural expectations. Dielieno’s mother also experiences oppression; she was conscientious about her actions in front of her grandmother. She tried to be a good wife and a mother so that her grandmother would not question her. Dielieno’s character helps one to get a clear understanding of the dominating nature of males in Angami families throughout the narrative. The state of silent oppression, ironically enforced by a patriarchal figure, her grandmother, and gendered discrimination imposed by the rigidly traditional and patriarchal society, reflects a young girl’s status of being subjugated within her own family. Dielieno had an intense feeling of exclusion; she was silenced and undervalued for being female. In the text, Vibano, the grandmother, exerts control over Dielieno not just physically, but psychologically and ideologically. Dielieno confronts the deep emotional scars left by her grandmother, Vibano, and her cruelty is not purely personal but deeply rooted in inherited trauma and societal expectations. She confronts it clearly, as follows:

Mother’s words made me cry. I had no idea she understood so well all the bitterness I had felt for grandmother all these years. She made me want to forgive and that was something I had never felt before. How do you forgive someone who has borne a grudge against you for bring born a girl? Yet if I didn’t forgive, I would probably end up as embittered as her, I certainly did not want to be like that. (Kire 251)

This moment of understanding shows how misogyny is built into family and cultural structures, even in a society where women are in charge. Kire shows that healing and resistance aren't just about fighting back; they also involve making choices inside oneself to break cycles of pain and anger that have been passed down through the generations. Dielieno's decision to forgive, even if it hurt to be hated for being a girl, demonstrates considerable emotional strength. By deciding not to pass on the same bitterness that shaped her grandmother's life, Dielieno takes back control of her own identity. She wants to let go of all the regrets that happened in the past and make way for shaping her future.

### Discussion

Carol Gilligan, the American feminist psychologist, argues in her book *In a Different Voice*, about the moral development in women and men based on care and companion. She terms that aesthetics of care and also highlights the caregiving roles of women and how their relational responsibilities shape their identities and moral reasoning. This idea can further be explained through Sara Ruddick, the American feminist philosopher's theory of maternal thinking. Ruddick's notion of maternal thinking is an ethical, nurturing practice that can resist violence and oppression. In this context Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* showing how matriarchal power internalizes and perpetuates patriarchal norms. The internalized patriarchy in postcolonial matrilineal societies demonstrate how women in a changing Naga society both challenge and adopt oppressive structures. Vibano, a grandmother who undergoes oppression under a patriarchal colonial past, perpetuates the same to younger generations of women. This explicates how patriarchal and oppressive systems are often internalized and replicated through female-dominated power. The protagonist Lieno's resistance is rooted in her conscious self that is empowered by her education. Moreover, she inherently exhibits qualities of moral reasoning and maternal thinking in her decision to forgive her grandmother thereby resisting violence and oppression at the same time refusing to perpetrate the dominant system.

### Conclusion

Dielieno, the protagonist, undergoes a powerful transformation, fulfilling her desire through education against her stereotypical society by challenging all sorts of patriarchal customs, beliefs, and canons of Angami society. Dielieno's transformation from silence to self-awareness serves as a potent protest against her grandmother's control state. Vibano's characterisation is a reiteration of patriarchal norms that serve as a mechanism of control, monitoring, and emotional repression, particularly highlighting the helplessness of the young protagonist. As Dielieno begins to comprehend the suffering that underlies her maternal grandmother's actions, which opens out as passive suffering, and gradually she achieves self-realisation. Her choice to forgive is a deliberate act of resistance, a refusal to absorb the same resentment, rather than a surrender. As a result, the daughter starts to defy the very matriarchal control that seeks to silence her. Once a victim of generational control, the silenced daughter is the first to envision and lead a life that is shaped by her own decisions rather than her family. Dielieno's journey represents not only an individual's struggles and growth but also the prevailing condition in Angami society. Kire's portrayal of a powerful matriarchy, which imposes patriarchal norms by enforcing strict gender roles and traditional expectations on women. The dynamics of matriarchal power are deeply seated patriarchal values endure the matrilineal oppression.

As scope for future research, a comparative study of North-Eastern Women writers such as Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai and Mitra Phukan and so on can be undertaken to explore the themes of gender, identity, indigenous tradition and culture, socio-political relations and the displacement of tribes. Such a study will enhance the perspective of tribal feminism in Northeast India.

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