
EMPOWERMENT AMIDST PARADOX: UNVEILING THE COMPLEX DYNAMICS OF MATRIARCHY AND PATRIARCHY IN EASTERINE KIRE'S NAGA NARRATIVES

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Abstract:

Easterine Kire's Literary Works Offer A Nuanced Exploration Of Naga Society, Where Traditional Matriarchal Elements Coexist With Patriarchal Influences Introduced By Colonialism And Christianity. This Paper Examines The Complex Interplay Between Matriarchy And Patriarchy In Kire's Narratives, Focusing On How Naga Women Navigate Empowerment Within These Paradoxical Structures. Through Close Readings Of *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) And *Son Of The Thundercloud* (2016), This Study Reveals How Kire's Fiction Challenges Binary Gender Constructs While Highlighting The Resilience And Agency Of Naga Women. The Paper Argues That Kire's Portrayal Of Matriarchy Does Not Signify Absolute Female Dominance But Rather A Dynamic System Where Women Exercise Influence Despite Patriarchal Constraints. By Situating Kire's Work Within Postcolonial And Feminist Frameworks, This Research Contributes To Broader Discussions On Indigenous Feminisms And The Redefinition Of Power In Traditional Societies.

Keywords: Naga Narratives, Matriarchy-Patriarchy Dynamics, Indigenous Feminisms, Postcolonial Resistance, Gendered Agency

Introduction

Easterine Kire, A Pioneering Naga Writer, Intricately Navigates The Cultural, Historical, And Gendered Landscapes Of Naga Society In Her Fiction, Offering A Critical Lens Through Which To Examine The Interplay Of Matrilineal Traditions And Patriarchal Impositions. Historically, Naga Communities In Northeast India Have Been Characterized By Matrilineal Kinship Systems, Where Women Held Significant Roles In Agriculture, Oral Storytelling, And Communal Decision-Making (Das, 2020). However, Colonial And Missionary Interventions In The 19th And 20th Centuries Disrupted These Dynamics,

Enforcing Patriarchal Norms Through Centralized Governance And Christian Doctrines That Marginalized Women's Authority (Chaudhuri, 2019). Kire's Narratives, Such As A Terrible Matriarchy (2007) And Son Of The Thundercloud (2016), Interrogate This Tension, Portraying Female Characters Who Negotiate Agency Within Paradoxical Structures Of Empowerment And Subjugation.

Kire's Work Challenges Western Feminist Binaries By Situating Naga Women's Resilience Within Indigenous Frameworks. As Mohanty (2003) Argues, Postcolonial Feminisms Must Prioritize Localized Experiences Of Power, A Lens Through Which Kire's Fiction Gains Depth. In A Terrible Matriarchy, The Grandmother Dielieno's Authoritarian Rule Subverts Romanticized Notions Of Matriarchy, Illustrating How Power, Irrespective Of Gender, Can Perpetuate Oppression. This Aligns With Menon's (2021) Assertion That Indigenous Matrilineal Systems Often Coexist With Patriarchal Norms, Creating Complex Spaces For Female Agency. Similarly, Son Of The Thundercloud Reimagines Matriarchy As A Spiritual And Mythic Force, Where Women Like Pele Reclaim Authority Through Storytelling And Cultural Memory, Resisting Colonial Erasure (Kire, 2016).

This Paper Employs Postcolonial Feminist Theory To Analyze How Kire's Narratives Redefine Empowerment Not As Dominance But As Negotiation—A Survival Tactic Within Intersecting Systems Of Tradition And Colonialism. By Foregrounding Oral Traditions And Spiritual Symbolism, Kire's Women Embody What Das (2020) Terms "Indigenous Feminist Resistance," Where Autonomy Is Asserted Through Cultural Preservation Rather Than Overt Rebellion. Such Portrayals Disrupt Universalist Feminist Narratives, Emphasizing The Need To Center Marginalized Voices In Gender Discourse (Mohanty, 2003).

Through Close Readings Of Kire's Novels, This Study Argues That Her Fiction Complicates The Matriarchy-Patriarchy Binary, Revealing Empowerment As A Dynamic Process Of Adaptation And Memory. It Contributes To Broader Discussions On Indigenous Feminisms, Advocating For Decolonial Literary Analyses That Honor Localized Gendered Realities.

Matriarchy In Naga Society: Myth Or Reality?

Naga Society, Nestled In The Northeastern Regions Of India, Is Frequently Characterized By Scholars As Possessing Matrilineal Tendencies, Where Kinship And Inheritance Are Traced Through Maternal Lineages (Das, 2020). However, This System Diverges Sharply From Western Feminist Conceptualizations Of Matriarchy, Which Often Equate It With Female Political Dominance. Instead, Naga Women Historically Occupied Influential Roles In Domestic And Communal Spheres, Managing Agriculture, Trade, And Oral Traditions, While Men Typically Held Overt Political And Ritual Authority (Chaudhuri, 2019). This Duality Underscores The Complexity Of Gender Dynamics In Indigenous Naga Communities, Where Matrilineality Coexisted With Patriarchal Norms Long Before Colonial Disruptions. Easterine Kire's Fiction Interrogates This Paradox, Revealing How Power Operates Fluidly Across Gendered Lines, Resisting Simplistic Categorization.

In *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), Kire Destabilizes Romanticized Notions Of Matriarchy Through The Character Of Dielieno, A Grandmother Whose Authoritarian Rule Over Her Granddaughter, Lieno, Mirrors Patriarchal Oppression. The Novel's Ironic Title Highlights The Tension Between Matrilineal Traditions And Coercive Power Structures. Dielieno's Declaration,

"You Will Obey Me, Child. In This House, My Word Is Law" (Kire, 2007, P. 34)

Exemplifies How Matrilineal Authority Can Replicate Patriarchal Domination. Kire's Portrayal Aligns With Menon's (2021) Argument That Indigenous Matrilineal Systems In South Asia Often Operate Within Patriarchal Frameworks, Where Women's Influence Is Circumscribed By Communal Expectations. The Grandmother's Tyranny Reflects What Das (2020) Terms "Negotiated Power"—A Form Of Agency Exercised Within, Rather Than Against, Systemic Constraints.

Kire's Narrative Complicates The Western Feminist Binary Of Matriarchy Versus Patriarchy By Situating Naga Women's Authority In Cultural Practices Rather Than Political Hierarchies. For Instance, Naga Women Historically Managed Rice Terraces, A Role That Granted Them Economic Autonomy But Did Not Translate Into Formal Leadership. As Kire Notes In *A Terrible Matriarchy*,

"The Women Tilled The Land, Their Hands Shaping The Earth, But Their Voices Were Absent In The Council Of Elders" (2007, P. 89)

This Dichotomy Underscores The Limitations Of Applying Eurocentric Definitions Of Matriarchy To Indigenous Contexts. Chaudhuri (2019) Emphasizes That Colonial Administrators And Missionaries Misinterpreted Naga Gender Roles, Imposing Victorian Ideals Of Domesticity That Eroded Women's Communal Authority. Christianity, Introduced In The 19th Century, Further Entrenched Patriarchal Norms By Privileging Male Clergy And Sidelining Women's Spiritual Roles (Menon, 2021).

Yet Kire's Work Also Illuminates Spaces Of Resistance. In *Son Of The Thundercloud* (2016), The Protagonist Pele Encounters A Mythic Village Where Women Wield Mystical Power Through Storytelling And Spiritual Rituals. The Village Elder, A Woman, Asserts,

"Our Stories Are Our Power. They Outlive Kingdoms And Outlast Wars" (Kire, 2016, P. 112)

Here, Kire Reimagines Matriarchy As A Repository Of Cultural Memory, A Theme Resonant With Mohanty's (2003) Advocacy For Centering Marginalized Women's Narratives In Postcolonial Feminism. The Novel's Blending Of Myth And Reality Suggests That Matriarchal Power Persists In Liminal Spaces, Resisting Colonial And Patriarchal Erasure.

Critically, Kire's Fiction Challenges The Notion That Empowerment Necessitates

The Overthrow Of Tradition. Instead, Her Characters Embody What Das (2020) Describes As “Indigenous Feminist Resilience”—A Survival Strategy That Harmonizes Cultural Preservation With Quiet Defiance. In A Terrible Matriarchy, Lieno’s Eventual Resistance To Her Grandmother Is Not A Rejection Of Matrilineality But A Reclamation Of Autonomy Within It. She Reflects,

“I Would Not Break The Chain Of Motherhood, But I Would Not Let It Suffocate Me Either” (Kire, 2007, P. 150)

This Sentiment Echoes Menon’s (2021) Assertion That Indigenous Feminisms Prioritize “Reform From Within,” Adapting Traditions To Contemporary Struggles Rather Than Discarding Them.

Kire’s Nuanced Portrayal Of Naga Society Ultimately Deconstructs The Myth-Versus-Reality Debate Surrounding Matriarchy. Her Work Reveals That Matrilineality In Nagaland Is Neither A Utopian Female-Dominated System Nor A Patriarchal Facade. Rather, It Is A Dynamic, Often Contradictory, Framework Where Women Negotiate Power Through Cultural Stewardship, Economic Labor, And Intergenerational Solidarity. As Mohanty (2003) Reminds Us,

“The Goal Of Feminist Theory Should Be To Analyze Power Relations In All Their Complexities” (P. 51),

A Mandate Kire Fulfills By Illuminating The Gendered Ambiguities Of Her Cultural Heritage.

Easterine Kire’s Narratives Dismantle Essentialist Interpretations Of Matriarchy, Instead Presenting It As A Lived Reality Fraught With Contradictions. By Foregrounding The Interplay Of Tradition And Colonialism, Her Work Underscores The Necessity Of Contextualizing Gender Power Within Indigenous Histories. In Doing So, Kire Contributes To A Decolonial Feminist Discourse That Honors The Resilience Of Naga Women While Challenging Universalist Assumptions About Empowerment.

Patriarchal Infiltrations And Female Resistance

The Imposition Of Colonial And Christian Ideologies In Naga Society Profoundly Disrupted Indigenous Gender Dynamics, Replacing Fluid, Communal Power Structures With Rigid Patriarchal Hierarchies. Colonial Administrators And Missionaries, As Chaudhuri (2019) Notes, Viewed Naga Traditions Through A Victorian Lens, Enforcing Male-Dominated Governance And Relegating Women To Domestic Spheres. Christianity Further Entrenched These Hierarchies By Centralizing Religious Authority In Male Clergy, Marginalizing Women’s Spiritual Roles (Menon, 2021). Easterine Kire’s *Son Of The Thundercloud* (2016) Interrogates This Transition, Depicting Women Who Navigate Patriarchal Infiltrations While Reclaiming Agency Through Cultural Memory And Subversive Resistance.

In *Son Of The Thundercloud*, Kire Juxtaposes The Patriarchal Norms Of The Colonial World With A Mythic Village Where Women Wield Mystical Authority. The Protagonist, Pele, Encounters A Community Governed By Female Elders Who Preserve Power Through Storytelling And Spiritual Rituals. One Elder Asserts,

“Our Stories Are The Threads That Weave The Past Into The Present. They Are Stronger Than The Swords Of Invaders” (Kire, 2016, P. 112)

This Imagery Underscores Kire’s Portrayal Of Matriarchal Resistance As Rooted In Cultural Preservation. The Village Exists In A Liminal Space, Blending Myth And Reality, Which Mohanty (2003) Identifies As A Strategic Site For Postcolonial Resistance. Here, Women’s Authority Transcends Colonial Erasure, Embodying What Das (2020) Terms “Indigenous Feminist Resilience”—A Quiet Yet Potent Defiance.

Kire’s Narrative Challenges The Notion That Patriarchy Wholly Erased Women’s Influence. Instead, She Illustrates How Naga Women Adapted, Embedding Resistance Into Everyday Practices. For Instance, The Grandmother In A Terrible Matriarchy (2007) Commands Domestic Authority Despite Patriarchal Encroachments, Declaring, *“In This House, My Word Is Law” (Kire, 2007, P. 34).*

While Her Rule Mirrors Patriarchal Dominance, It Also Reflects A Negotiation Of Power Within Constrained Spaces. Menon (2021) Argues That Such Portrayals Complicate Simplistic Binaries, Revealing How Indigenous Women “Reform From Within,” Repurposing Tradition To Assert Agency. Storytelling Emerges As A Critical Tool For Resistance In Kire’s Works. In Son Of The Thundercloud, Oral Narratives Become Acts Of Preservation And Rebellion. The Village Women’s Tales, Passed Down Through Generations, Serve As *“Keys To The Spirits” (Kire, 2016, P. 98)*

Symbolizing Their Spiritual Sovereignty. This Aligns With Mohanty’s (2003) Emphasis On Centering Marginalized Voices, As Kire Elevates Storytelling From Mere Tradition To A Political Act. Similarly, Leno In A Terrible Matriarchy Resists Her Grandmother’s Tyranny Not Through Overt Rebellion But By Reclaiming Her Voice: *“I Would Not Let Her Stories Define Mine” (Kire, 2007, P. 150)*

Here, Kire Illustrates Silent Defiance As A Survival Strategy, Echoing Das’s (2020) Concept Of “Negotiated Power.” Kire’s Portrayal Of Spirituality Further Subverts Patriarchal Norms. In The Mythic Village, Women’s Rituals Challenge Christian Dogma, Which Menon (2021) Argues Disrupted Indigenous Spiritual Equality. The Elder’s Invocation, *“We Speak To The Earth, And It Answers” (Kire, 2016, P. 120)*

Reclaims Ecological And Spiritual Agency, Positioning Women As Mediators Between The Human And Divine. This Contrasts With Colonial Christianity’s Male-Centric Theology, Highlighting Kire’s Critique Of Patriarchal Religious Impositions. Ultimately, Kire’s Narratives Reject Binary Frameworks Of Victimhood Or Triumph. Her Characters Embody Resilience Through Adaptability, Whether Through Storytelling, Spiritual Practices, Or Quiet Defiance. As Mohanty (2003) Asserts *“The Goal Of Feminist Theory Should Be To Analyze Power Relations In All Their Complexities” (P. 51)*

A Mandate Kire Fulfills By Illuminating The Nuanced Interplay Of Oppression And Resistance.

Easterine Kire's Works Expose The Paradoxes Of Patriarchal Infiltration And Female Resistance In Naga Society. By Situating Women's Agency Within Cultural Memory And Spiritual Traditions, She Challenges Colonial Erasure While Critiquing Internalized Patriarchies. Her Narratives Affirm That Resistance Is Not Monolithic But A Dynamic Interplay Of Adaptation, Preservation, And Quiet Rebellion, Offering A Decolonial Feminist Vision That Honors Indigenous Resilience.

Empowerment As Negotiation, Not Domination

Easterine Kire's Narratives Dismantle Monolithic Conceptions Of Female Empowerment, Rejecting The Trope Of Overt Rebellion In Favor Of Nuanced, Culturally Rooted Resistance. Her Characters Navigate Patriarchal And Matrilineal Systems Through Subtle Acts Of Negotiation, Asserting Autonomy Via Oral Traditions, Economic Roles, And Emotional Resilience. This Approach Reframes Empowerment Not As Dominance But As A Dynamic Process Of Adaptation, Aligning With Postcolonial Feminist Scholars Like Mohanty (2003), Who Advocate For Context-Specific Understandings Of Agency.

In *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), Lieno's Defiance Of Her Authoritarian Grandmother, Dielieno, Exemplifies Empowerment Through Reclamation Rather Than Rejection. Though Dielieno Wields Domestic Control, Declaring,

"You Will Obey Me, Child. In This House, My Word Is Law" (Kire, 2007, P. 34)

Lieno's Resistance Emerges Quietly. She Asserts, "I Would Not Break The Chain Of

Motherhood, But I Would Not Let It Suffocate Me Either" (P. 150), Signifying A Renegotiation Of Tradition. Menon (2021) Argues That Indigenous Feminisms Often Prioritize "Reform From Within," A Framework Kire Embodies By Depicting Lieno's Journey As One Of Balancing Respect For Matrilineal Heritage With Self-Determination.

Similarly, *Son Of The Thundercloud* (2016) Reimagines Matriarchy As A Spiritual And Cultural Force Rather Than A Political Hierarchy. The Village Women Preserve Authority Through Storytelling, With An Elder Stating,

"Our Stories Are The Threads That Weave The Past Into The Present. They Are Stronger Than The Swords Of Invaders" (Kire, 2016, P. 112)

Here, Oral Traditions Become Acts Of Resistance Against Patriarchal-Colonial Erasure, Resonating With Das's (2020) Concept Of "Indigenous Feminist Resistance," Where Cultural Preservation Itself Is A Form Of Empowerment. Kire's Emphasis On Storytelling Subverts Western Feminist Binaries, Positioning Narrative As Both Memory And Rebellion. Economic Independence Further Underscores Kire's Theme Of Negotiation. Historically, Naga Women Managed Agriculture And Trade, Roles That Granted Autonomy Despite Exclusion From Formal Governance. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Lieno's Mother Labors In Rice Fields, Her Economic Contributions Symbolizing Unspoken Authority. As Das (2020) Notes, Such Roles Allowed Women To "Shape The Earth" (P. 251) Even When

Silenced In Male-Dominated Councils. Kire's Portrayal Challenges Patriarchal Dismissals Of Domestic Labor, Reframing It As A Site Of Quiet Power.

Emotional Resilience Also Emerges As A Strategy. Lieno's Endurance Under Her Grandmother's Tyranny Reflects What Mohanty (2003) Terms "Survivance"—A Blend Of Survival And Resistance. Her Emotional Fortitude, Rather Than Outright Defiance, Becomes Her Weapon. Similarly, In *Son Of The Thundercloud*, Pele's Pilgrimage To The Mythic Village Symbolizes Spiritual Resilience, A Journey To Reclaim Fractured Cultural Identity. Kire's Women Endure Trauma But Refuse Victimhood, Embodying Chaudhuri's (2019) Assertion That Naga Literature Often Frames Resilience As "Resistance In Motion" (P. 89). Ultimately, Kire's Works Reject The Western Feminist Ideal Of Empowerment As Liberation From Tradition. Instead, She Portrays It As A Negotiation With Intersecting Systems—Colonial, Patriarchal, And Indigenous. Her Characters Neither Fully Submit Nor Revolt; They Adapt, Preserving Cultural Identity While Carving Spaces For Autonomy. As Menon (2021) Emphasizes,

"Empowerment In Indigenous Contexts Is Less About Overthrowing Structures Than Navigating Them With Ingenuity" (P. 174)

Kire's Fiction Thus Contributes To Decolonial Feminism, Advocating For Gendered Agency That Honors Tradition Even As It Transforms It.

Conclusion

Easterine Kire's Fiction Complicates The Discourse On Matriarchy And Patriarchy By Presenting Them As Intertwined, Rather Than Oppositional, Forces. Her Naga Women Are Neither Passive Victims Nor Absolute Rulers; They Navigate Power Structures With Resilience And Adaptability. By Situating Her Work Within Indigenous Feminist Frameworks, Kire Challenges Universalist Feminist Assumptions And Highlights The Unique Gendered Realities Of Naga Society. Ultimately, Her Narratives Affirm That Empowerment In Matriarchal-Paradoxical Contexts Is Not About Dominance But About Survival, Memory, And Quiet Resistance.

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