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Women, War and Tradition: Interrogating Power and Memory in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *Mari*

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Abstract
Easterine Kire has emerged as a defining literary voice from Northeast India, intricately documenting Naga history, culture and the gendered dynamics of social structures. This paper critically examines her novels *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *Mari*, interrogating the complex interplay of patriarchy, matriarchy, memory, war and resistance through multi-generational narratives. By drawing on feminist and postcolonial theorists, comparative references and oral history, this study situates Kire's fiction in the broader landscape of global indigenous storytelling and explores how her work reclaims marginalized female experience. The novels, rooted in the lived realities of Naga women, offer profound insights into the cycles of subjugation and empowerment, the psychological legacy of war and the potential for transformation within traditional societies.

Keywords: Northeast India, Matriarchy, War, Feminist, Postcolonial, Tradition

Introduction

Easterine Kire's literary oeuvre stands at the intersection of gender, memory and identity in the marginalized space of Northeast India. Her novels, particularly *The Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) and *Mari* (2010), have been acclaimed for their nuanced portrayal of Naga society, the embedded patterns of patriarchy and matriarchal power and the indelible scars of historical trauma. Kire, writing in English as an Angami Naga, harnesses fiction not only as a record of fading oral traditions but as an act of resistance and reclamation for Naga women whose lives have routinely been overlooked or misrepresented in official histories.

This paper contextualizes Kire's novels within the discourse of postcolonial feminism, exploring the multifaceted forms of female oppression and resilience against the backdrop of both tradition and conflict. By invoking the voices of theorists ranging from Simone de Beauvoir to Adrienne Rich and by drawing comparisons with global women's writing, the paper illuminates the relevance of Kire's work for questions of gender, indigenous identity and collective memory

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today. As Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in her book *The Second Sex,* "The girl will be wife, mother, grandmother; she will take care of her house exactly as her mother does, she will take care of her children as she was taken care of…" (Beauvoir 323).

Narrative Structure and the Locus of Memory

Both *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *Mari* employ first-person narration to foreground the intimate psychology of their protagonists Dielieno and Mari and, by extension, the collective consciousness of Naga women. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Dielieno's coming-of-age unfolds across the terrain of her grandmother Vibano's household a space saturated by both matriarchal rigor and the invisible but omnipresent structures of patriarchy. The narrative dwells as much on personal recollection as on community storytelling, echoing the "layered" temporality of oral history.

Similarly, *Mari* reanimates the memory of trauma by focusing on the Japanese invasion of Kohima in 1944, as experienced and retold by the titular character and her family. Through these narrative choices, Kire constructs her fiction as "counter-archives" repositories for experience, tradition and affect otherwise lost to institutional history.

Patriarchy, Matriarchy and Gendered Power

Kire's primary intervention in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is her critique of "veiled patriarchy" within a seemingly matriarchal household. Lieno's, short for Dielieno, journey is marked by the severe, often discriminatory governance of her grandmother Vibano, who, in turn, is a product of the same oppressive socialization she perpetuates. The systemic devaluation of the girl child reflected in Dielieno's unequal inheritance, restricted freedom and double workload is justified as tradition but has its origins in both colonial patriarchy and the traumas of Vibano's own life. Her grandmother always said, "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 fieldworks as well. That way one never has a problem with girl-children" (22).

A deeply problematic tradition required that, in the absence of a male successor, the ancestral property would pass to the father's closest male relative. Kire addressed this issue in detail, "She understood that it was very important for a married woman to produce as many male offspring as she could. Her mother did not have brothers and they lost all their lands and fields when her father died" (250).

Kire thus demonstrates, in the spirit of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex,* that gender inequality is not merely imposed by men but can be sustained by women invested in upholding tradition to secure their own and others' survival. Vibano's actions become comprehensible, if not excusable, through the lens of historical pain and the internalization of subordination. This double-bind is apparent in the fates of other women in the novel: Dielieno's mother's passivity, Bano's dependence and Dielieno's struggle for autonomy all speak to the pervasive weight of "institutionalized" gender roles.

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Resistance and Transformation

Alongside her depiction of systemic oppression, Kire presents Dielieno as a figure of resilience. Despite her grandmother's restrictions and the unequal burden of labor, Dielieno secures her education, forges meaningful relationships and ultimately achieves economic and social independence. Her journey from obedience to quiet subversion and finally to personal achievement models the feminist dictum of "the personal as political." Grandfather Sizo, her brother Leto and, later, her mother all provide moments of unexpected solidarity, foregrounding the possibility of more equitable kinship.

Kire's narrative never advocates simple rejection of tradition. Rather, her protagonist's eventual empathy for her grandmother tempered by a belated understanding of historical trauma signals a "reparative reading" of the past that accommodates forgiveness and the hope of change. For example, Vibano, Lieno's grandmother, favours the boys and frequently criticises Lieno for minor mistakes, showing how one woman suppresses another due to her own experience of social dominance. Lieno's mother Nino intervenes:

> You mustn't so harsh on your Grandmother. I know you were unhappy in her house but she was trying to teach you to become a good woman. Men don't like women who are aggressive and outspoken. They like their wives to be good workers. You are a good worker, Lieno, but you must try to be more docile. (249)

Dielieno's story, like those of protagonists in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* or Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, exemplifies individual and communal evolution within a postcolonial, patriarchal society.

Intergenerational Trauma and Historical Context

A Terrible Matriarchy is also a record of intergenerational trauma. The social instability, wartime violence and loss described in the novel resonate with the larger history of Nagaland, where conflict and colonialism have left psychic as well as material scars. The gendered cost of these crises is evident in Vibano's worldview, but it is also subverted by Dielieno's refusal to be defined solely by suffering. The transmission of both trauma and resilience across generations aligns Kire's work with feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich and global fiction from similarly marginalized contexts.

War, Displacement and the Female Gaze

Set during World War II, *Mari* chronicles the Japanese invasion of Kohima and its aftermath from the perspective of Mari, a young Naga woman. By making a conscious choice to anchor the narrative in her aunt's real journal, Kire inscribes the female gaze onto the traditionally male-dominated narrative of war. Mari's experiences her forced migrations, hunger, fear and eventual loss expose the everyday costs of "big history," focusing on the suffering and endurance that never enter official chronicles.

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The use of personal memory and subjective narration transforms war from a spectacle of heroism or defeat into a landscape of intimate anguish and everyday survival. Like Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Kire's novel repurposes the wartime narrative to highlight women's unique but universal vulnerability.

Memory, Identity and Survival

Memory functions as both wound and salve in *Mari*. The process of storytelling whether through journals, oral history, or communal remembrance constitutes a survival strategy and an act of self-definition for the Naga people. Mari's reflections on movement, loss and kinship illuminate the connections between war, displacement and the forging of collective identity. The reader witnesses not only the destruction wrought by violence but the endurance and adaptation that women, especially, employ to nurture family and rebuild community. The novel underscores the futility of defining war in terms of victory or defeat, a reality particularly evident for the Nagas, whose land at Kohima was transformed into a battlefield between April and June 1944. Mari remarks, "Carefree and innocent and oblivious to the way in which the war would change my life forever. I am drawn once again, irresistibly, back into that mad whirl of living, loving and dying. That was the war I knew" (18).

As with Dielieno in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Mari's story ultimately resists victimhood. Through love, memory and the reaffirmation of community, she persists in ways reminiscent of Toni Morrison's Sethe (*Beloved*) or Yaa Gyasi's Esi (*Homegoing*), for whom survival and self-narration become radical acts.

Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives

Easterine Kire's novels exemplify the intersections of postcolonial, feminist and indigenous storytelling. Her portrayal of matriarchal and patriarchal power structures finds echoes in the work of writers such as Bapsi Sidhwa (*The Pakistani Bride*), Tsitsi Dangarembga and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie women chronicling the particular but broadly relatable costs of gendered oppression. The novels also resonate with feminist theorists from Beauvoir and Rich to Elaine Showalter, who argue that women's experience, especially in traditional societies, must be understood through both personal and cultural history.

Kire's strategic use of first-person narration, her invocation of oral tradition and her focus on intergenerational experience position her fiction as "counter-history" a mode of reclaiming agency and reinforcing the sovereignty of indigenous storytelling. This aligns her with other global writers invested in harnessing literature as a means of "talking back," to borrow bell hooks's term, to dominant, exclusionary narratives.

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Conclusion

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *Mari* are landmarks in Northeast Indian literature. They offer complex, layered explorations of power, gender and survival within Naga society, using the specifics of place and history to illuminate universal questions of justice, memory and agency. The novels reveal the deep connection between society and trauma, showing how cultural norms shape both suffering and recovery. Lieno, constrained by rigid gender expectations, struggles with identity and self-worth yet resists through her pursuit of education and quiet defiance. In contrast, Mari benefits from strong family support, which allows her to study nursing and achieve professional success, giving voice to silenced women harmed by social neglect. Together, the narratives emphasise how oppression, resilience and communal care define women's responses to trauma. Kire's fiction challenges binary readings: matriarchy is both a refuge and a site of wounding; tradition is both oppressive and generative; survival depends on both resistance and empathy.

By reclaiming the lived experiences of Naga women across periods of personal and collective upheaval, Kire's novels invite readers to imagine new possibilities for healing, understanding and transformation not only within Angami culture but across all communities negotiating the legacies of patriarchy and war. Through Dielieno and Mari, Kire testifies that storytelling itself is an act of freedom.

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