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CRAFTING KEVINUO - HARMONIZING THE GENDER DEMUR IN EASTERINE KIRE'S A RESPECTABLE WOMEN

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Abstract

Gender, is a boiling cauldron of debate. Being a patriarchal nation, India is nowhere far from it with defining women. Though matrilineal by custom, the tribes of Nagaland practice patriarchy and set stones such a marriage, motherhood with a prick on decent disposition on women that would ratify the institution. The plight of being a 'respectable woman' according to the social norms is inquired in depth by the protagonist Kevinuo and the equation is rewritten giving a new formula for 'respect'. Easterine Kire from the Angami tribe of the Nagas films, the negotiation of women and provides solution to the long trouble of fitting into a society and its defined values that mostly demeans the loyal individuality for the sake of community, even in its sickening phases. The characterization receives foliage from the protagonist Dielieno of a Terrible Matriarchy, where most of the gender norms are sowed and differed. The protagonists rupture the noxious layers of gender and fashions themselves for a contented life.

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Introduction

Dr. Easterine Kire is a Nagamese author currently living in Norway. As a winner of 'The Governor's Medal for Excellence' in Naga literature, 'Bal Sahitya Puraskar' and other eminent awards for her contribution to literature, she collects the Naga oratures and publishes them through her company 'Barkweaver'. Her works, mostly fiction voices the culture of the Naga community and their struggles for Naga nationalism from the native eye. She writes for children and has a band 'Jazzposei'. Her works are translated into many European languages and her novel A Terrible Matriarchy has the honour of getting translated into six UNESCO languages. In her interview to Namratha Kolachalam for Helter Skelter, regarding the novel A Respectable woman, Kire vocalizes the importance of giving the insider perspective. She says that her works are "living books of history". She asks the readers to investigate the title, "as it is such an arrogant, self-righteous concept... right thinking people should repudiate them". (Kolachalam, 2020) This paper aims to do this- trace Kevi's journey of fashioning herself to become respectable women.

Discussion and Analysis

Kire's characters are real with reasoning and humane kindness. They understand, accept and always evolve with the passage of time. Irrespective of gender, they show love and concern to fellow beings and are respectably duty bound. They confront reality but not before digging the deeper wisdom behind transition. Marriage and motherhood at the right age is always the highest obligation for women. Most of the communities, till date instill this to young girls while growing up- honing their skills to become 'wife material'. The grandmother Vibano in A Terrible Matriarchy (ATM) repeatedly tries to prove this.

Young Lieno is literally harassed by Vibano to do tough household chores from childhood to make her fit into the domestic female domain. "I was probably too outspoken a girl to be considered as good wife material. ... They did not dare to marry a girl whose paternal aunt did not hesitate to speak ill of her" (Kire, 2018, p. 287). Lieno feels when three families rejected to take her in marriage after the preliminary enquiry with the paternal aunt as is their custom. Girls' education is frowned upon by older females in a family and it is mirrored in the novel Mari too. Still, the progressive parents seeing the fruits of education supported their girls to get empowered with education. Lieno in ATM shatters all the norms of becoming a good woman and springs as a self-molded individual helping her widowed sister-in-law to remarry one of her brothers. At the tender age of six when morally tortured by Vibano, Lieno asserts that "Well I don't care to be a good woman. I shan't ever be a good woman, whatever that is" (ibid, p.37).

Similarly, the protagonist Kevinuo (aka Kevi) upholds the choice of an individual by breaking the irrational social norms. At the end of the novel, Kevi as a spinster adopts Uvi, her best friend Beinu's daughter and reasons that,



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I could say that Uvi is my daughter. If they asked about her father, I could say we were never married. I would be seen as one of the disrespecktable women in society but it wouldn't matter so long as we could be safe from her father. (Kire, 2019, p. 152)

She crushes the prescription of gender and blooms as new woman paving way with sheer love and affection. The novel *A Respectable Women (ARW)* traces the evolution of Kevi from her childhood to adult life, where she negotiates various instances from her life and matures with self-respect. The novel that is divided into three parts has native tradition of storytelling in the first part that has Kevi's mother Khonuo's (aka Azuo) reminiscence on war days and her growing up years. The second part is dedicated to the progress of Kevi where she absorbs the teachings of the elders and tunes herself in her own way. The third part reflects her way of maneuvering life to fit the circumstances to her suits. The novel can be seen as a *Buildungsroman* as it shows the life of Kevi from childhood to adult in a crisp way.

Like every adolescent girl, Kevi sees Azuo, as a hurdle for her happiness and rebels in the initial stage. The novel opens up with Kevi befriending Azuo as Kevi started seeing her as a friend more than a mother. The plot set during 1960-1996 in the fast-urbanizing Kohima depicts the imminent changes in socio cultural practices with the Naga nationalistic struggle at its backdrop. Education became a key to empowerment particularly of women. Azuo is single parent to Kevi and her brother Ato as their father has passed away young. She works as a teacher and supports Kevi in all her decisions. In the course of narration, Kevi recollects that as a child she has blamed Azuo for depriving the children of fatherly love as Azuo has married her husband knowing well about his sickness and his inevitable death.

I blamed her for not marrying another man instead of my sickly dad, a man who could not be with us through our growing up years. I blamed her for the loneliness that would overwhelm me- though I couldn't understand why, every time I looked for him in his study and found only his empty chair. (ibid, p.18)

Even as a child, Kevi has deciphered her father's last look as if seeking her to take good care of Ato. Gradually Kevi comes in terms with her mother, when at the age of 16 Kevi and Azuo's relationship transforms as more of a friendship. Kevi understands that her mother too has come across the same phase of life. In her novels, Kire celebrates women being contributing member of the family which makes them individualistic and creditably inclusive as well. All the women characters of Kire- Mari, Azuo, Kevi, Beinuo, Lieno and Sabunuo take pride in being educated and financially assisting the household. Importantly, they are elated to take their own decision without adult supervision.

Azuo says "Becoming a working girl was one of the greatest joys of my life. For the first time, I was earning money and making a living for myself." (ibid, p.27) The same temper is reflected by Kevi when she gets her first stipend, she notes that, "I felt that I was beginning to support myself and it was great to feel independent. Beinuo said she had bought four bags of charcoal as her contribution to the family expense." (ibid, p.113) The development in the status of women being a part of community is nothing new to the Nagas as their women are active participants in most of the communal activities except in the political arena even from the early ages. When the institution changes from rural agriculturalists to urban employment, women shined with education and progressive ideas from the society.

The toddler phase of Kevi is etched in her mind only through recollection from her aunts and Azuo. Literally it is narrated to her. The first memory she has on her own is when her brother Ato is born and she is asked to name him. Kevi as a child helps her mom in her post-natal times and feels happy about it. "I felt proud when she said that (to help her) and I stayed by her side as much as possible instead of running to play." (ibid, p.77) The children in the novels of Kire are mature enough to help the adults, especially their mothers in running the house when they are sick or in a misfortune such as death. Lieno at the age of 11 fully runs the home when her brother Pete died young and her mother is mentally feeble to do any activity. She feels young and strong to help her mother. At 16 she takes up the job of part time teacher at her school with the support of her brother and also joins for graduation. Thus, they grow with self-conscience and distingue disposition. The women are not against the roles that have to be played by them, but are questioning the irrational insistence of it all the times and depriving of modern ways of life in the name of gender.

At school Kevi and Beinuo help their younger siblings to settle down. These are times in their life where they are expected to the role of responsible elders. "Beinuo had turned twelve and I had my birthday coming up this week. We wanted to show that we could take our responsibilities seriously." (ibid, p. 95) During the communal festivals too the kids prove their might by rendering their service. The protagonists of Kire grow along with the transforming environment of Kohima with electrification, roads and other amenities seeping into the city. With Naga nationalism taking different turns, many have turned to alcoholism and other anti-social activities in frustration over the hostile atmosphere. As Kevi grows, she learns the treatment meted out to the girls who go away from norms. It is



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etched in her mind that a girl who bears a child out of wedlock will be expelled from the church and is considered as a burden to the family. "...no one would consider them respectable anymore." (ibid, p .96)

She listens to the ideas of marriage by her aunts. They inform her that a woman need not survive in an abusive marriage. She can opt out and her family should intervene and support her. They explain the duty of a man is to protect his family and be a responsible citizen who is honored by the people. This had huge impact on Kevi's young mind.

And that is so wrong--- that kind of thinking. The husband thinks he can do anything he wants with his wife, that he has the right to mistreat her and no one should say anything ... if you should ever marry such a man, remember that you are not his property... (ibid, p .103)

Kevi and Beinuo upon discussing their fear on future decided that, "It's almost as though we enter into a life of slavery for the honour of being someone's wife." (ibid, p .105) Beinuo who assured Kevi that she will fight back if at all she gets abusive husband becomes victim at the end of the novel that turns Kevi to take high decision of her life- not to marry and to take care of Uvi, Beinuo's daughter.

Kevi helps Ato to overcome adolescence by understanding his needs. In a short while after Beinuo's marriage, Kevi started noticing unusual behavior from her best friend. She feels distanced and left out. She eventually finds out that Beinuo is been tormented by her alcoholic husband for birthing a girl. Beinuo has lost all her sheen and is adjusting with her new family. Kevi ruminates that, "If I wanted to get married at all if it entailed so many adjustments." (ibid, p .121) Kevi though tired hard to help her friend, couldn't really offer much solace as Beinuo has voluntarily distanced herself in the fear of breaking down upon her. "She was very changed from the old Beinuo that I used to know" (ibid, p .125) Kevi wonders.

At the age of 25, Kevi remains unmarried as she is pulled between being loved and ending up in an abusive marriage. "It was hard decision on marriage. I did not want to be alone all my life. At the same time, to become trapped like Beinuo in a marriage with a controlling partner was not I wanted at all." (ibid, p .128) Her mother respects her thoughts and they wait for a perfect man. Life and time move with Kevi working as a teacher and taking care of Azuo in her growing years. Beinuo dies due the cruelty of her husband and only in the death bed she confronts the truth to Kevi. Beinuo is trapped cunningly in marriage by her husband and is killed.

Kevi wants to protect Uvi who is so young to get the thread of events going around her. The little kid is tormented by her father and has lost both her baby brother and her mother in a week's time. Kevi pours unconditional love on her and decides to adopt her when Beinuo's husband dies shortly after. As is their custom, they should be related by blood to ask for Uvi. Fortunately, Azuo finds three ancestors and Ato as a male member can establish cultural obligation to protect the child as none from Beinuo's family has bothered to save her. Thus Kevi, spinster at the age of 35 adopts Uvi and spends her life with her.

The decision by Kevi defends the title of the novel. Kevi rebels against the threats by Beinuo's husband and takes efforts to bring Uvi to safety. Azuo and Ato stood with her decision. Kevi admires Uvi, meaning the brave hearted one, as the little one has painfully chosen life over all her loss. Azuo comforts her saying that, "You live your best and your best is about doing the thing that gives others peace, because that is the very thing that will give you peace." (ibid, p .161)

Conclusion

Through this work Kire breaks institution of marriage that is forced on women. In the review of the novel titled, "'A Respectable Woman' Waves a Tragic Tale of Rebellion." to The Wire, Veewon Thokchom concludes that, "The message is clear as water: if you want to be a "respectable woman" in society, get an education, and if you want to live a life without sorrow and grief as well, think twice before you become somebody's wife." (Thokchom, 2020) Kevi and her mother prove this. Azuo as a single parent and Kevi as a spinster live their life well due to education and progressive family support. Hence, they show that the social respect is not more important than individual esteem. Though such things are discoursed from childhood, Kevi clearly points a way to look inward and also pitches it perfectly by her genuine act.

Kevi grows into a self-made woman and becomes the model for many to follow. Kire gives a strong and message through her women characterizations. With simple and eloquent language Kire achieves the emotive embellishments of her narrative that touches the soul of the readers directly. She just didn't lament the existing rules and point patriarchy for women's misfortunes. Rather she empowers women by shaping their ideas from the risks given to them. The women of Kire shine on their own as they sculpt themselves with futuristic goals. The question of gender and its oppositions are equalized when one sees that Kevi and Ato are seen same by Azuo



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and Lieno's brother supporting her education and stands for her life more than her father. This hints the view of younger generation is inclusive of genders and has a big way to move forward.

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