

Haunted Presence: Trauma, Memory, and Spectral Testimonies in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy**

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Abstract

In A Terrible Matriarchy, Easterine Kire takes us on an evocative journey of the Angami community's struggle to heal in the traumatic mid-20th century Nagaland. This paper examines the novel through the lens of trauma studies, focusing on how intergenerational trauma, silence, and memory shape the lived experiences of the Naga people. The novel exposes the embedded trauma of political conflict, gendered violence, and historical silencing in family structures and communal life. Fascinating to the portrayal of the trauma in the novel is the presence of ghosts and spirits. By giving us realistic portrayals of the spirits of the dead that inhabit the quiet hills and valleys of Nagaland, Kire establishes that ghosts are more than literary anthropomorphism or theoretical metaphor but rather serve as culturally meaningful mechanisms of witnessing and healing. The paper argues that the text through the portrayal of ghosts and spirits functions both as a testimony to collective suffering and as a literary site for recuperative memory and emotional reconstitution.

Keywords: Trauma Studies, Nagaland, Easterine Kire, Intergenerational Trauma, Cultural Memory, Silence, Witnessing

Introduction: Trauma, Memory, and Silencing in the Margins

He is no longer a man, don't you see? He is a spirit, and that is the way to speak to the spirits of the dead who are not at rest but try to return to the world of the living. They haunt the places they always frequented when they were alive, and they seek out the people that were their constant companions (Kire 85).

The dead in *A Terrible Matriarchy* do not quietly disappear into history – they return, unsettled and unsettling. Their presence is not merely spectral but deeply symbolic, representing unresolved histories and intergenerational wounds that linger in both memory and space. The ghost, in this context, becomes more than a literary device: it functions as a bearer of history, a manifestation of trauma that has not yet found articulation. These hauntings – half-seen, half-felt – bridge the private and the public, the past and the present, and the seen and the unspeakable. In Nagaland, where violent histories are often erased from dominant narratives, the return of the dead serves as a powerful reminder of what refuses to be buried.

The presence of the ghost or the 'haunting' serves as an analogue for traces and memories of the traumatic past, and the supernatural becomes a mode of cultural narration. It stresses the contestations for control of the meaning of history as minority voices foreground the exclusion and invisibility of their history. The belief in ghosts/spirits is also a way of correlating to or remembering the past. The spectrum of the supernatural is a complex phenomenon through

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which suppressed, erased, and unvoiced perspectives of the traumatic past either reappear or are explicitly reconfigured. It brings home the fact that the past still lingers somewhere in the periphery of their memory, somewhere between real and unreal, past and present.

A Terrible Matriarchy, the writing of which began as a ‘therapeutic exercise’, tries to bring to light the repressed and the silenced experiences of the Naga people in twentieth-century Nagaland. The history of Nagaland is deep-rooted in the traumatic memories of violent experiences that its inhabitants have gone through for most of the post-independence period. Drawing on the psychological scars of a society characterised by violent insurgency, governmental persecution, and family turmoil, Kire demonstrates the scale of conflict in Nagaland where the boundaries of the private and public were erased, with violence invading the personal and assumed safe spaces of the unarmed citizens. Reflecting on the novel, Easterine Kire realises that arguably one of the major reasons that countless Naga men died prematurely from alcoholism stemmed from the unsolved political turmoil that followed the 1950s. Following the Indian Army’s coercive takeover, unemployment, dissatisfaction, and a feeling of social and economic helplessness grew pervasive in the region. She describes how a “pervasive feeling of powerlessness” led to societal breakdown, factionalism, and violence that permeated every aspect of people’s lives (Kire vii-x).

Easterine Iralu states that “the story of Nagaland is the story of the Naga soul on a long, lonely journey of pain, loss and bereavement, a silent Holocaust in which words seldom were enough to carry the burden of being a Naga” (“The Conflict”). It was a time when many such boundaries were broken, one being the visible boundary of life and death.

Trauma is a confrontation of the living with death. This confrontation, however, is not a literal death but a way of expressing a terrific event(s) that induces a rupture in one’s ability to make sense of the violence around her/him (Caruth 4). One is disoriented from all the familiar ways of operating within it. Life becomes a fundamentally altered meaning where the transient and imperilled aspect of life is always intertwined with death.

Violence in the novel is not isolated to singular events; it is experienced collectively and inherited structurally. The Indo-Naga conflict, with its militarisation, surveillance, and public silencing, infiltrates the most intimate spaces of home and family. In such a world, trauma is not located in the original event but in its “belatedness” and the way it “returns to haunt the survivor later on” in fragmented recollection, often through silence or inexplicable fear (Caruth 4). The disorientation caused by such experiences – the inability to name, frame, or narrate the violence – marks not only individuals but whole communities. The home, once a site of safety, becomes overrun by state violence, secrecy, and grief. In this way, the novel reveals how trauma blurs the boundary between life and death, past and present.

Against the backdrop of intricate emotional and traumatic landscape, this paper examines *A Terrible Matriarchy* in the light of concepts of prominent thinkers about trauma studies. Cathy Caruth’s description of trauma as a delayed and fragmented experience sheds light on how the novel’s violent memories and flashbacks reappear throughout the story, although not as standalone narratives, but as interruptions to the present. By using Dori Laub’s theory of testimony and internal witnessing, we may make sense of characters like Vini and Dilieno, whose emotional breakdowns and silences are signs of a hidden, familial tragedy. Further, the novel’s progression from recurrent misery to the prospect of narrative and emotional closure may be better understood via Dominick LaCapra’s notion of “acting out”. Taken as a whole, these theoretical frameworks allow us to see Kire’s work through the lens of a trauma narrative with its roots in cultural and historical uniqueness. In this view, healing is never complete, but rather incomplete, negotiated, and impacted by the silences and remnants of a violent past.

Narrated through the eyes of Dilieno, a young girl growing up in a rigid and conservative Angami household, the story unfolds through partial glimpses, overheard stories, and fragmented understandings. Her voice captures the subtle ways in which violence seeps into

daily life: through broken conversations, inherited silences, and half-told truths. Although Dilieno is the central character, the novel explores the experiences of three generations of women – her grandmother, her mother, and herself – illustrating how trauma transcends time and influences both memory and behaviour. The conflict that forms the backdrop of the narrative is left intentionally vague. Instead of detailing specific historical events, the novel focuses on their aftermath: how political violence persists not as a documented history but as a lived reality that pervades bodies, relationships, and language. Trauma is thus never confined to a single moment; it is cumulative, transmitted, and often unnamed.

The novel's investment in the supernatural – the recurring appearance of ghosts, uncanny memories, and presences – can be understood as a cultural response to this ongoing trauma. These ghostly figures become mnemonic agents that carry repressed memories and demand attention. In the absence of official archives or public recognition, they become witnesses, forcing the community to engage with a history it cannot entirely narrate. The grandmother's ghost, for instance, catalyses emotional reconciliation, allowing Dilieno to mourn, forgive, and recover meaning from a fractured familial past. Through such moments, the novel stages the difference between being caught in the repetitive cycle of unprocessed pain and the slow, uneven work of confronting and transforming memory (LaCapra 70).

What emerges in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a narrative of trauma that is not only psychological but also cultural, not only personal but also political. In this world, silence is not passive; it is teeming with unspoken realities that persistently shape the everyday. Testimonies do not always take the form of confession or dialogue; they appear in gestures, hauntings, and ruptures of ordinary time. The ghosts, the alcoholic rants, and the hidden memories all serve as forms of witnessing. The trauma depicted here is inherited through proximity and repetition, what some scholars have termed “postmemory” – the transfer of traumatic knowledge across generations in the absence of direct experience (Hirsch 22). In this way, the novel becomes not just a story of personal growth or familial conflict but a layered and collective narrative of survival. Rather than offering catharsis or resolution, it provides glimpses into how trauma lives on: in memory, in the body, and in the spaces between words.

Ghosts of Violence and the Repetition of the Unspoken

Throughout the novel, ghosts emerge as powerful figures through which repressed trauma finds a form of expression. Their appearances are irregular, ambiguous, and unsettling – not because they terrify the living, but because they carry fragments of a past that remains unresolved. For instance, there are reports of the white man's spirit appearing near the village pond at dawn. The untimely deaths of young women are associated with his presence, yet the silence that envelops it lingers more than the violence. “Sometimes I heard breathing... another time, I was sure someone had tugged at my basket. But I never told anyone about it” (Kire 33). Although these spectral encounters remain unsaid, they profoundly influence the living's consciousness. The past – layered with colonial intrusion, sexual violence, and fear – returns not in narrative form, but as atmosphere, sensation, and dread. The ghost's repetition of presence mirrors the traumatic return of what cannot be fully known or narrated (Caruth 4).

Importantly, these ghosts are not treated merely as metaphor or psychological projections. While some trauma theorists consider ghosts to be constructed “from the inside out” (McDonald 101), Kire challenges that notion by asserting that the ghosts in her novel are based on actual sightings recounted within the community. Their presence is embedded in belief, practice, and memory, handed down across generations. They function as more than literary devices – they are culturally legitimate witnesses to violence, bound to the land and to the people who remember. The spirits of the white man, of two young men gazing eastward, and of a Bangladeshi man all mark historical traumas – colonial violence, military repression, and forced migration – that continue to shape the communal psyche. Their “ontological status”, as

one theorist notes, is never fully fixed, “inviting and defying identification”, because “knowledge of the past, not just any past, but a particular type of past experience, can never be known or remain forever unclaimed” (Bataille et al. 4). These ghosts are therefore not simply remnants of grief but complex embodiments of a past that refuses to settle.

Vini’s drunken outburst is another form of haunting – one that arises not from the dead but from the living who carry the burden of the unspeakable.

Do you want to know why I drink? Why do all of us drink and brawl? It’s because life here in Kohima is so meaningless... Do you know how frustrating it is to be a Naga and live with the fear of being shot all the time? Do you know what it does to your insides when you hear about the people tortured and killed by the army and you can’t do anything about it? (Kire 226).

Vini embodies what Dominick LaCapra describes as “acting out”, a state in which the traumatised subject remains trapped in repetitive behaviours and emotional eruptions, unable to transform memory into meaning (70). Vini’s dependence on alcohol and aggression are not merely personal shortcomings, but rather manifestations of a historically silenced and brutalised community. His outburst, which is uncontrolled and emotionally charged, serves as a desperate form of testimony that erupts in the absence of formal narrative or political recognition.

What Vini articulates is not just individual suffering but the structural trauma of growing up Naga under military occupation and cultural erasure. Vini’s experience is one of endemic, normalised violence – fake encounters, rape, humiliation, and intergenerational rage. Yet his testimony remains unofficial and unarchived, known only through whispered stories and local knowledge. The failure of the state to listen transforms testimony into isolation and frustration into cyclical despair. In Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman’s terms, trauma remains “unwitnessed” and thus continues to fester (78).

His breakdown is not a moment of personal weakness but a spontaneous rupture in a landscape dominated by silencing. As trauma resists linear narration, it often emerges through such compulsive, fragmented speech – testimonies that reveal more in their raw form than a formal recounting ever could (Laub and Felman 78). Similar to the ghosts, Vini’s rage disrupts, disorients, and demands attention. When the social world offers no space for structured mourning, these outbursts and apparitions become surrogate forms of testimony.

This tension between visibility and silence, embodiment and absence, recurs in the figure of Zekuo’s ghost. After his sudden death from alcoholism, Zekuo is repeatedly seen by villagers in familiar places – by the stream, seated at a hearth, occupying his usual space as though death had not occurred. His reappearance suggests that something remains unresolved, both for him and for the community. “His longing for us and wanting to come back” (Kire 85) signals a spirit still tethered to the living. Zekuo’s ghost is not simply a grieving echo; it becomes a visible symptom of collective wounds left unattended. Through him, the narrative stages a moment where memory, denial, and recognition collide. In all their ambiguity, these ghosts map trauma onto the geography of daily life, refusing closure and demanding presence.

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For some days after Vimenuo’s father’s death, people could speak of noting else. There were stories of people who saw him on their way back from the field in the late evening. They said he appeared near the stream on their way back from the fields in the late evening. They said he appeared near the stream on my way home... The old woman, whose drinking house he used to frequent, found him seated by her hearth. At first, she forgot that he had been dead two weeks because he was sitting in the same spot that he used to sit when he came to drink, and looking the same as before (Kire 84-85).

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community. “His longing for us and wanting to come back” (Kire 85) signals a spirit still tethered to the living. Zekuo’s ghost is not simply a grieving echo; it becomes a visible symptom of collective wounds left unattended. Zekuo’s spirit makes visible the discrete and intersectional wounds of the community, thereby fostering a firm link between the human and the non-human. The ghost ruptures the imagined wholeness of the present and becomes a geography that compels the living to think of lived experience, time, and history.

Among these spectral returns, it is the grandmother’s ghost that carries the most intimate and transformative weight. Unlike the anonymous or disruptive spirits that haunt public space, her reappearance unfolds within the domestic sphere, bridging generational conflict and offering a rare possibility of reconciliation. Her ghost becomes not just a reminder of pain but a figure through which the buried emotions of family and memory can finally begin to shift.

The Grandmother’s Ghost: Witnessing, Memory, and Intergenerational Healing

Three days later, Grandmother came back to us... I was the first person she showed herself to... I was walking into the kitchen in the afternoon, having cleared a trunk in her room. When I was at the entrance, I saw her sitting at her chair as before. I did not think anything was odd about that because my mind was distracted by the work I had been doing. It took a few seconds for me to register that she should not be here at all. In those few seconds, I saw her face was turned from me so that I saw her only in profile. I think I stood there for many minutes trying to grasp that I had actually seen her; by then she had completely disappeared from my view... It was incredible that I did not feel any fear. All around the dark kitchen, I felt her presence. I sat for a long time in the semi-darkness taking it all in (Kire 267).

The reappearance of Dilieno’s grandmother near the end of the novel is one of the most intimate and transformative moments in the novel. Unlike other ghostly visitations, her spectral return does not evoke fear or confusion. It initiates a quiet and unexpected process of reconciliation, allowing the past – personal, familial, and historical – to resurface in a form that can be felt, acknowledged, and partially healed. The ghost becomes a presence through which Dilieno can process her grief and resentment, not by confronting a living adversary but by encountering a memory that has returned with new emotional clarity.

The novel carefully builds this encounter as a shift from emotional repression to quiet transformation. Her grandmother, once a stern and emotionally distant matriarch, returns in an ordinary domestic moment. The absence of fear signals something important: the transformation of the ghost into a companion. In moments like this, healing becomes possible not through rational understanding or speech, but through presence. A companion is not always a person – it can be a memory, a vision, or a ghost that stays long enough for the pain to be acknowledged (Laub and Felman 78).

This return enables Dilieno to move from being a passive recipient of intergenerational pain to someone capable of forgiveness. It is not her grandmother’s death that initiates this shift, but her presence after death. The spirit does not return with authority or judgement but as someone still tied to the family, the house, and the community. The house, in turn, becomes a reservoir of memory – one that has contained silence, emotional discipline, and generational conflict. Her return disrupts this space but also reshapes it, transforming the home into a place where emotional truth can surface. With the matriarch now occupying the house in spectral form, the unease of the past softens into something more tender. “If the living ones are very grieved over their going, the dead show themselves to them to comfort them and assure them that they are happy where they are” (Kire 270). This belief grounds the supernatural in cultural legitimacy, not superstition.

The grandmother’s ghost stays within the domestic world, unlike others who haunt public spaces – the pond, the lake, the hearth. This marks her as a figure of continuity rather than rupture. Her presence suggests that even after death, the work of holding together fractured emotional worlds continues. Her role as a memory-bearer and moral centre of the family

remains intact but is now softened by time and distance. What once seemed rigid and oppressive now becomes a link to the past that is capable of tenderness. The ghost offers Dilieno not answers but recognition – of pain, of inheritance, and of the right to move forward. This process mirrors the way trauma lingers: through repetition, through returns, and through moments that do not make immediate sense. The house becomes a metaphor for stored grief, and the ghost becomes the only one who can unlock it. The experience is not rationalised; it is felt. The past does not arrive fully formed – it appears in glimpses, sensations, and presences. In this way, the ghost embodies what remains unsaid but deeply known. Her return is less about closure and more about continuation – an invitation to live with the past differently.

Conclusion: Witnessing, Memory, and Literary Healing

In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, ghosts are more than literary anthropomorphisms or theoretical metaphors. A particular culture connects the belief in ghosts to the recognition of history's constant fragmentation and perspectival nature. The unspeakable trauma of past events is always spoken through and in the presence of the ghosts. They return not to frighten but to insist. They surface in spaces where speech fails, where silence becomes unbearable, and where the past resists containment. Through these spectral presences, the novel articulates a form of trauma that is culturally specific, emotionally persistent, and ethically charged.

The ghosts in the novel – whether the white man near the pond, Zekuo wandering familiar places, or the grandmother seated at home – refuse to be forgotten. Their appearances disrupt daily life but also restore fragments of a memory that the living cannot access on their own. In doing so, they challenge the neat separation of past and present, reminding us that history does not remain behind us; it reappears, often uninvited, when it has not been acknowledged.

The grandmother's return, in particular, signals that healing does not always require words. Occasionally, it only needs presence. Her ghost transforms not only the emotional landscape of her granddaughter but also the narrative's moral texture. In a world structured by silence, her quiet reappearance becomes an act of love, memory, and unfinished care.

Ultimately, the text opens up a space where trauma can be reimagined – not as a pathology to be cured, but as a wound to be witnessed, carried, and shared. The novel offers not resolution but recognition: that the pain of the past is not over, but it is not unreachable. Through ghosts, memory, and storytelling, the novel gestures toward a form of healing that is communal, layered, and never entirely complete – but always in motion.

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