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Gendered Sovereignty and The Politics of Decision-Making in Easterine Kire's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to describe the representation of gendered decision-making in Easterine Kire's Mari, A Terrible Matriarchy, and A Respectable Woman. Rather than focusing on sovereignty as a state-centred concept, it focuses on decision-making as a crucial site where the recognition or denial of political subjecthood takes place. Based on the theoretical perspectives of Sylvia Walby, Pierre Bourdieu, Deniz Kandiyoti, and Nancy Fraser, this paper will differentiate between influence, authority, and sovereign legitimacy. It also elaborates on how decisions about food, education, marriage, wartime negotiation, and community governance are allocated between the domestic and political domains. Through the exploration of the connection between recognition and authority, this study outlines how the literary narrative discloses the stratified and gendered structure of decision-making.

Keywords: *Decision-Making, Sovereignty, Authority, Legitimacy, Influence.*

I. Introduction

Traditionally, sovereignty is understood to be the authority of the state, but feminist theories have suggested that there are other sources and sites of power that go beyond the state. Decision-making can be considered to be one of the most basic expressions of power. To be considered a decision-maker is to be considered a political subject. The absence of participation in decision-making can be considered not only a form of social marginalisation but also a form of limitation or restriction. As Nancy Fraser argues, participation in recognised public spheres determines whose interests and interpretations gain legitimacy within collective life (Fraser 123). The sovereignty that results from accessing such unevenly distributed spheres can be considered to be gendered.

Political power cannot be conceived as being limited to the domain of the state. In fact, Sylvia Walby's structural theory of patriarchy points to the reality that power is exercised in multiple sites, including the household, culture, and the state (Walby 20-21). The dichotomy between public and private domains may obscure the political character of the household. Decisions regarding education, employment, marriage, inheritance, and movement, which are often seen as 'private' issues, may in fact represent the most elemental form of politics. The household can thus be conceived as a micro-political space in which power is exercised, recognised, and challenged.

In societies where customary law and clan-based politics have dominated, such as the societies depicted in the Naga literature, the locus of decision-making power has traditionally been vested in these groups. Though women have played a major role in the maintenance of economic and social stability, their

representation in political entities has traditionally been limited. In the framework of Deniz Kandiyoti's "patriarchal bargain," women have been known to exercise some level of influence in patriarchal societies without being vested with any level of ultimate decision-making power (Kandiyoti 275). In Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic theory of power, it has been asserted that the exercise of influence is dependent on the level of recognition; not all forms of authority have been institutionalised, and not all forms of recognition have been accessible (Bourdieu). These frameworks invite closer examination of the distinction between formal decision-making power and informal influence.

In this paper, the representation of decision-making at various scales in *Mari*, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, and *A Respectable Woman* is discussed. It avoids the assumption of an essential binary between oppression and decision-making, instead focusing on the representation of authority within wartime governance and communal leadership, households, and marriage. It also explores the representation of sovereignty, which is manifest in the narratives, and the circumstances under which certain individuals are enabled to make decisions during critical political moments, household governance, and marital relocation. It also tries to differentiate between influence and authority to better understand the representation of power beyond command. It describes how literary representation reveals the complexity of gendered decision-making.

II. Authority, Recognition, and Gendered Decision-Making

If decision-making can be seen as the operative core of sovereignty, then the real question is no longer where sovereignty is located, but rather how authority is recognised, distributed, and legitimised. Thus, sovereignty cannot simply be seen in terms of territorial rule; rather, it can be seen in terms of the socially sanctioned authority to authorise decisions that bind others. The real question is therefore one of legitimacy—who is recognised to have the right to decide.

Sylvia Walby's structural theory of patriarchy offers a framework to place decision-making in a larger framework of power. According to Walby, patriarchy is a system that operates through interconnected structures such as the family and the state (Walby 20-21). Rather than viewing the family and the state as separate entities, structural theory situates them within a framework of interdependence. According to her theory, the exercise of power in one area does not remain localised; instead, it is expressed through a pattern of interconnected structures. This offers a framework to examine the exclusion of decision-making as a pattern rather than a single event.

While Walby helps to clarify the concept of structural location, Pierre Bourdieu helps to clarify the mechanism of legitimacy. In Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, domination is exercised when it is wrongly recognised as the norm or the natural order (Bourdieu). Power does not require coercion; rather, it requires acknowledgement. When individuals recognise and acknowledge certain individuals or groups as the proper decision-makers, then hierarchy is established and maintained. The denial of the right to decision-making power is not simply a matter of procedure; it is a matter of access to symbolic capital, and thus, influence cannot crystallise into sovereignty without recognition.

The concept of "patriarchal bargain", as proposed by Deniz Kandiyoti, brings yet another layer of complexity. Kandiyoti argues that women may exercise situational forms of influence within patriarchal

structures without necessarily changing the overall balance of acknowledged power (Kandiyoti 275). The distinction between exercising influence and exercising sovereignty becomes an important analytical point.

This approach makes it possible to differentiate among similar but not identical concepts:

- **Power:** the capacity to affect outcomes.
- **Influence:** indirect participation in shaping decisions.
- **Authority:** recognised legitimacy to decide.
- **Sovereignty:** ultimate and binding decision-making legitimacy.

By foregrounding legitimacy rather than capacity alone, the analysis shifts from asking whether women exercise agency to examining whether their agency is institutionally recognised as authoritative. Decision-making thus becomes the operative site through which sovereignty is structured, distributed, or denied.

III. Domestic Decision-Making and the Architecture of Exclusion

If sovereignty is conceptualised in terms of acknowledged decision-making authority, the domestic sphere is the first site wherein such authority is apportioned, denied, or reproduced. Before encountering clan councils, insurgent leadership, or state institutions, women are situated in households with internal hierarchies of age, gender, and kinship. The apportioning of decision-making authority within the domestic sphere provides insight into the reproduction of legitimacy at its most basic level.

In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the power of decision-making in the family is formally gendered even when women are not the decision-makers. The patriarchal control of Grandmother Vibano over the daily activities of the family, such as food allocation, labour allocation, and discipline, indicates the existence of power in the family. However, a critical analysis of the power exercised by Grandmother Vibano indicates that it does not involve change but is exercised within already established gendered frameworks. For example, in the allocation of food privileges, male children are given priority, as when Lieno is cautioned that some parts of the food are "always for boys" (Kire, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 1). The issue at stake is not just food but legitimacy, who qualifies for priority.

The young narrator's desire to be a male in order to get affection and resources shows that recognition is embedded in domestic decision-making. The entitlement to food, affection, and touch becomes gendered. Lieno does not challenge the rule; she accepts its logic. The authority of such decisions is not maintained through overt coercion but through repetition and normalisation. In Bourdieu's terms, domination persists through misrecognition—when hierarchical arrangements are accepted as natural rather than constructed (Bourdieu).

Education is another example of the exclusion of structured decision-making. Grandmother Vibano's objection to girls' education— "I really do not approve of girls getting educated" (Kire, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 22)—locates the advancement of intellect as a challenge to the already existing order. The decision about education is not presented as a matter of personal choice but as a matter of moral conviction. The underlying message is that the decision-making power regarding a girl's future is not with

the girl herself. Even when Lieno finds school to be an affirmative experience— "School was the best thing that could have ever happened to me" (30)—the validity of her educational experience is still dependent on the approval of the elders.

Economic decision-making also manifests patterned exclusion. The denial of pocket money—"Grandmother did not believe that I should be given a little pocket money" (39)—is an index of control over economic autonomy. Money in this context symbolises not only economic resources but also freedom. The freedom to make independent decisions remains limited without sufficient economic resources. Control over expenses, therefore, is another site of sovereignty denial.

In *A Respectable Woman*, domestic decision-making takes on a different shape but retains its gendered character. Marriage is conceptualised as a transfer of control. Kevi's mother declares categorically: "Once she is married, we regard her as the property of her husband" (Kire, *A Respectable Woman* 103). The discourse of property signifies that decision-making about the woman's life is transferred to another site. Sovereignty over movement, work, and residence is transferred to the husband's domain. The married woman is not the maker of decisions but their subject.

This is evident in the case of Beinuo. Her life course is disrupted by marriage. Before marriage, she was a Lower Division Clerk and intends to construct her own house. Marriage alters this course. Her subsequent adjustment, in which she continually changes her ways to accommodate her mother-in-law's wishes, is a case of negotiation within limits. Influence can be exercised through compliance, but the acknowledged locus of authority is elsewhere. The decision-making locus is outside her.

In these texts, the locus of domestic authority is neither completely absent nor simply empowering. Women like Grandmother Vibano wield disciplinary power; mothers negotiate domestic roles; wives adjust to marital roles. However, the distribution of the recognition of the final locus of decision-making legitimacy remains irregular. Domestic presence does not necessarily imply sovereignty. Rather, authority is exercised within the limits set by lineage, gender, and tradition.

Through these patterns, the family emerges not only as a domestic space but also as a constitutive site where entitlement, legitimacy, and exclusion are enacted. The power of decision-making is organised through recognition, and recognition itself is gendered. The question that follows, then, is whether these domestic hierarchies remain confined to the household—or whether they extend into clan and political domains, shaping women's access to collective sovereignty beyond the domestic sphere.

IV. Influence Without Sovereignty: Communal and Political Decision-Making

Whereas the distribution of decision-making power is uneven in the household, the next level of analysis is to investigate whether this pattern is also reflected in broader social and political spheres. The clan council, custom, and insurgent leadership structures are examples of recognised social spaces of collective power. Access to these spaces is not only a question of influence but also of authority of binding decisions. The question is, therefore, whether women are present in these spaces as decision-makers or as subjects of decisions made by others.

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According to Nancy Fraser, political marginalisation is the exclusion of groups from the arenas where collective interpretations and binding decisions are made (Fraser 123). This exclusion is not just a matter of representation but also the ability to appear as a legitimate participant in the assertion of communal authority. If women are not represented in the deliberative forums, whether clan-based or in wartime, then their political subjecthood is structurally constrained.

In *Mari*, set against the backdrop of World War II and the Japanese advance into the Naga Hills, sovereignty is visibly destabilised. The colonial power, the military invasion, and the fluidity of loyalties reshape the landscape of political power. The choices of collaboration, resistance, protection, and survival become immediately pressing. However, even in this instance of geopolitical disruption, the power to engage with the invading army or to plan communal strategy remains vested in Naga men. The elders, the village headmen, and the male mediators interact with the invading army; their roles situate them as acknowledged negotiators of communal destiny.

The women of *Mari* are forced to live with the consequences of war—displacement, fear, deprivation, and vulnerability—but their representation in the decision-making processes that shape the group strategy is minimal. The gendered allocation of decision-making power remains the same even in the face of extraordinary historical circumstances. War disrupts the territorial allocation of sovereignty but does not necessarily reallocate gendered sovereignty.

The situation of war also heightens surveillance and vulnerability. The military occupation of the land makes the female body vulnerable to violence and surveillance, but the process of protecting, moving, or negotiating with the military is channelled through the male leadership. The group copes with the situation of war through the existing structures of authority rather than through a redefinition of the same.

Even in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Grandmother wields considerable domestic power; the larger customary system is still patriarchally organised. Grandmother Vibano upholds gender roles but does not hold a formalised communal decision-making role. The substance of her authority remains circumscribed by inherited patriarchal norms. Her decisions reinforce the privileging of male children and the preparation of girls for subordination. She governs, but she governs within a pre-existing gendered order. Her influence sustains the structure rather than reconstituting it. Her power is circumscribed to the domestic realm and upholds lineage-based roles. The difference between enforcement and authority becomes important here: she upholds the system but does not reconstitute the sovereign logic.

Nisano's character supports the concept of "patriarchal bargain" developed by Deniz Kandiyoti is helpful. Women can bargain for themselves some degree of security or power within the patriarchal structure without changing the overall balance of recognised power (Kandiyoti 275). This bargain may result in a survival strategy, psychological power, or a stable home life. But it does not necessarily mean that the power will be institutionalised.

V. Conclusion

Throughout the concerned novels of Kire, the transition from the household to the community does not seem to disturb gendered hierarchies of legitimacy. Whether in times of war or in customary systems,

decision-making authority is still unequally distributed. Women's labour, resilience, and sociality uphold communal life, but formal sovereignty—as recognised authority of determinative collective decisions—is still structurally concentrated in male-dominated spaces.

The analytical distinction established earlier becomes visible here:

- Women possess power in relational contexts.
- They exercise influence through negotiation and adaptation.
- Yet recognised authority remains unevenly distributed.
- Sovereignty, defined as binding decision-making legitimacy, appears structurally gendered.

The lack of recognised authority does not preclude agency, but it does circumscribe the scope of its institutionalisation. The kind of moral leverage that domestic authority can offer may, in turn, consolidate the household through emotional labour; negotiation may establish a degree of autonomy. Yet these agencies coexist with, rather than challenge, the underlying structure of gendered sovereignty.

The relationship between influence and sovereignty thus introduces a complexity to the binary opposition of empowerment and oppression. Women are neither simply passive subjects nor fully sovereign agents. Their agency is situated in a hierarchy of influence that conditions the very terms of recognition. The question that arises is whether the narrative consciousness of reflection, discomfort, or critique indicates a potential for the renegotiation of these hierarchies or whether the underlying continuity will reassert itself.

In emphasising decision-making as the essence of sovereignty, this research implies that the politics of recognition is already underway well before the state. The question that follows, however, is not merely one of whether women are active within these frameworks, but whether the terms of recognition can themselves be reconstructed. If sovereignty is socially constructed, then its architecture is neither random nor fixed. Kire's novels invite further exploration into how the terms of legitimacy are assigned, withheld, and potentially reimagined within the realms where gendered power is first exercised.

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