

Decoding the Strands of Women Oppression in Fiction of North Eastern Women Writers: A Study of Temsula Ao's *the Night* (2005), Easterine Kire's *a Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) and Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth* (2010)

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Abstract:

India had long come out of the shadows of otherisation by the West, but ironically, it had constructed its own facets of misinterpretation and otherisation of its diverse indigenous groups within the subcontinent. Northeast India is one such geographical region that have always been viewed as exotic, backward owing to the distinct cultural and traditional patterns of its numerous tribes, castes and groups, of which very little is explored by the mainstream society and hence deemed as rooted in backwardness. The region has always been entangled in the web of national, ethnic, regional identities as it seems to exist in isolation from mainland India and grapples with insurgency and the inability to accommodate long term cultural and indigenous diversity. Additionally, the cultural, ethnic ethos and norms of each indigenous group acts as an influential factor in shaping the identities of the North East Indian people. In such contexts, the women question becomes a case of double marginalisation owing to unbalanced power relations as well as patriarchal customs and rules of various indigenous groups and the perpetual militarisation and regional identity crisis in the area. The research aims to investigate the factors moulding the identity of north eastern woman from the lens of gendered subalternity, through some strong, vivid narratives with passive-strong female characters. It is an attempt to understand how the multiple social ideologies of region, ethnicity, race, gender, nation, identity overlap to delineate to hierarchal disparities in the society contributing to victimisation of women.

Keywords: Otherisation, Ethnic ethos, Double marginalisation, Gendered subalternity, Identity crisis

Introduction

North Eastern literature, over the years, had tried to entail in detail the ensuing identity crisis, tug-off war between ethnic, regional and national identities and the consequent insurgency and military activities, the ignorant attitude of mainstream India towards this region and gendered marginalisation and discrimination imposed by the authoritative nation state agents as well as customary social rules and how they disintegrate the intersectional and subjective identities of indigenous women. Women writers have been very instrumental in delineating the twofold oppression of north eastern women by viewing their female characters through the prism of gendered subalternity. Fiction of North East Women authors have

considerably focused on the various challenges for indigenous women in the forms of patriarchal oppression and persistent tussle between the state and militancy. Women writers like Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Uddipana Goswami, Jahnvi Barua and others have time and again portrayed strong and determined women who make a mark for themselves in the family, community and the larger society.

Methodology

Qualitative approach with first hand analysis of primary texts as primary sources have been utilised as methodology. Data collection was also being done from secondary sources- authors' articles on customs of indigenous communities, personal interactions with individuals of Ao, Meitei, Angami, Khasi communities. Comparative approach is also adopted as the common theme running across the three novels is compared and a cohesive foundation is being established for further research and conclusive findings.

Discussion

The grande dame of Naga literature, Temsula Ao's first collection of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone*, published in 2005 is a pioneer work explicating women's quandary in a politically volatile and violence ridden society. Uninhibited and laced with the brutal might of the Indian state presenting the oppressive nature of arbitrary military laws, the stories are ghastly and replete with appalling elements of torture and oppression. Ao has craftily portrayed the resistance and resilience in the midst of the harrowing incidents, limning people's struggle against the state and militant oppression in their own little ways.

The short story *The Night* is one such story from the collection that limns the patriarchal nature of these traditional tribal customs, laws which inhibit women to break free from the gendered oppression apart from the persecution arising from state-militant conflict and regional identity crisis. The story is spun around a young Naga woman named Imnala, the promising daughter of Tekatoba, patriarch of an important clan in a particular village, who is rendered an unwed child bearer woman twice, her struggles in bearing two illegitimate children, the fate of her children, the consequent shame and ridicule it brings to her family and her firm resilience in the face of this socially derided situation. The young unmarried mother is ridiculed and stigmatized for having an affair with a married man and is the butt of jokes but her predicament is to ensure her unborn child is not labelled with illegitimacy, being firm in her decision to ensure her and her children's survival anyhow.

Imnala was wooed by a junior engineer during her eighth standard, who also happened to be an important member of a major clan due to which her parents did not object to the liaison, thinking that it would culminate into an early marriage. But the man vanished from sight for months and the only news that came was that he had joined the Naga underground army and had taken a wife from amongst the female recruits there. When the news of Imnala's pregnancy came out in the open, he refused to send a name for his daughter as was the custom, and even refused to acknowledge the child as his own. This is an exemplary instance of how militarisation can create disruptions and havoc in women's lives. The second man, Repalemba, a school dropout turned contractor was her father's business partner who took advantage of the situation when Imnala was sick and lonely. As the story progresses and Imnala becomes pregnant for the second time out of wedlock, Imnala's mother rues the decision of spurning the widower's proposal recalling what her mother had told her long ago, "Remember, in our society a woman must have the protection of a man even if he happens to be blind or lame. A woman alone will always be in danger."

(Ao 53) Innala's grandmother's saying explicates how women are made dependent on men throughout their lives, despite them doing ninety percent of the life-sustaining work in Ao households/community. Though the village people empathised with Innala and her family during the first pregnancy for they knew what transpired in reality, when Innala became pregnant for the second time, the village's sympathy was not on her side, for it is the grieving party who is given the leeway in such cases, in this instance, Alemba's wife. Keeping in tandem with village and tribe customs, Innala was summoned by the village council as per the complaint of the first wife. Innala was somehow prepared to bear the abuse, derision, scorn of stealing a married man from his wife and the "censure of society whose balance of justice tended to tilt against the woman. The married man was equally guilty, but today she would be the sole accused" (Ao 54). Tekatoba pitifully requested Innala's maternal uncle to save her from the disgrace of getting her hair chopped off and her clothes being stripped off by the begrieved party, as was the custom. These kinds of cruel practices are imposed only on the female gender of the community exerting their patriarchal power over them. Though both the genders were involved in the illegitimate action, it is only the female which is subjected to blame.

Thus, the story aptly exemplifies how the process of customary laws imposes more indictment on the unwed mother which seems to impress that it was basically her fault, leaving the man who was responsible go almost scot-free, thereby proving to be patriarchal and intersectional in nature, rendering women helpless and oppressed in its effect. The indigenous clan/tribe laws, customs that are being followed in all spheres of daily lives of the Aos restrain women and isolate them from their own subjectivity and potential, pushing them to a sphere of immanence and putting a question mark on their subjective identity

One of the greatest literary voices to have arisen from North East India, Easterine Kire aptly delineates how the Nagas had struggled to traverse between ostensibly contradictory worlds: tribal traditions and contemporary rationalism, patriarchal customs, and female emancipation, in her works. Leaving an indelible mark, her writings scrupulously limn the realities that shape and change the course of lives of Naga women. Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) adroitly portrays the patriarchal nature of the tribal Angami Naga society through the coming-of-age story of a young girl, Dielieno (Lieno), and her confrontation with the traditional Angami society. The novel narrates the lives of three Angami women, delineating three generations of the same family- Lieno, her mother and her grandmother Vibano. In the preface, Kire states in her preface, "while the visible structure of the novel is patriarchal and seems focused on bringing out the misuse of the patriarchal system, the less visible under-structure is matriarchy and how it abuses the patriarchal structure resulting in gender abuse within the same gender." (Kire ix) The essential patriarchal and patrilineal nature of Angami society is visible in the society's approach towards girl education, inheritance of property, marriages and divorces, and their way of life depicted throughout the narrative.

The youngest in a five children family, Dielieno was the only girl child. Though she was not outrightly neglected by her parents, she always felt her subservient position in the family as she was made to wear left over clothing of her elder brothers. Seeing her roam freely with her brothers, her father thought it best to send her to her paternal grandmother Vibano to be properly brought up to be a good Naga woman and mother. Grandmother Vibano, prejudiced and caricatured by patriarchy, was a skin deep, ostensible matriarch who had gained a respectable status by dutifully serving the men of her clan. She was adamant to pare down Lieno's inquisitive free spirit into a docile one so that she can also carry on the matriarch tradition superficially by being a dutiful Naga woman.

Dielieno' literally meant 'errand girl' in Angami, thus symbolising the status of girl child in Angami soci-

ety. True to her name, Lieno was made to do all types of errands- fetching water, firewood etc. Lieno finds the intensity of discrimination against her amplifying as she grows, while also realising that her mother faces the same course at the hands of her grandmother and tribal customs. She has often seen her mother taking out meat pieces from her own plate and sharing it with her sons, and sometimes when there is a scarcity of food at home, she will sleep empty stomach after feeding her children. Lieno develops a vengeance against her grandmother early on as she observes that nothing that her mother does ever pleases the old woman and she had to live according to her dictates. The gender divide prescribed by tribal customs is evident in Vibano's refusal to give any leg piece to Lieno – "That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions" (Kire) and other remarks like – "Don't let her run about with her brothers any more. That is not the way to bring up girl-children." (Kire) Intriguingly, Angami women are considered indispensable to the family and society for they not only lead the household chores but also manage the income sources, mostly. Though believed to be enjoying considerable freedom, Kire presents a real understanding of the multitudinal patriarchal workings of an Angami society through her women in the novel.

Kire reflects the Angami society's approach towards education for girls, with customary tribal rules leaning in favour of not educating and not prioritising girls' education. Grandmother Vibano has very clear ideas about the fact that girls do not need education as it does not help them in any way to attain their most important goal, that of becoming a good Naga wife and mother. She states, "In our day...girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learned all the fieldwork as well. That way one never has a problem with girl-children. They will always be busy at some work or other, too busy to get into trouble." (Kire 22). Though Lieno's parents were able to persuade Vibano for her education and she grows up to be a diligent and hardworking student, consequently supporting the family with her income as a teacher, we see Lieno was initially crippled with indigenous superstitions like – "men don't like it if their wives are too educated" (Kire 104) and educated women were considered fatal for their husbands. The cultural and customary set up of the tribal society do not have space for women empowerment, and if a woman is empowered through education, and thus being empowered, she becomes vocal about her rights, such women are outrightly rejected by the society. Vini, Lieno's brother, rebukes her, "Grandmother was right. Girls should never be educated. They always forget their station in life." (Kire 249)

"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." (Kire 249) Much alike to her mother's statement, Lieno's grandmother's words also portray a society which is quite difficult for the women and clearly partial to men: "In my father's day, boys never did any work because they had to look after the village and engage enemy warriors in warfare. The household that did not have a male heir was considered barren. They were always in constant danger if there was a war. The women would have only one man to protect them. That is why we love our male children so much and we give them the best of food. And we should." (Kire 35-36)

The most apparent working of the gender divide and the rights of Angami men as opposed to women is evident in the Angami inheritance laws. In addition to that, another facet of women oppression is being observed in the novel- the institutionalized patriarchy propagated furthermore by the grandmother Vibano. Both these factors- the patriarchal inheritance system and the patriarchy imposed by Vibano in the hide of superficial matriarchy, would be discussed in detail in further research.

Thus, we observe that behind the illusion of considerable freedom of surface level matriarchal society, the Angami society is deeply rooted in patriarchal customs and indigenous tribal laws that is still hesitant

towards girls' education, equal inheritance of property. The subjugation of women is double edged, perpetuated not only by stringent tribal laws but also propagated and institutionalized by women themselves, like Vibano, who feed the patriarchal nature of these laws over decades. The Angami society is portrayed as moving towards a subtle change, but nevertheless, a great number of efforts still need to be put and work to be done for monumental positive change to occur for women.

Jahnvi Baruah reiterates the dominant figure of resilient strong women of North East in her first novel *Rebirth* (2010) through the portrayal of Kaberi, the protagonist, who is at the crossroads of her life and how she vehemently strode out of her passive existence leaving her abusive husband in the journey towards curation of her self-identity. We will focus on a different strand of North Eastern women oppression- the patriarchal nature of marriage and motherhood, distortion of subjective woman identity through displacement and the rebirth of feminine consciousness and identity through motherhood and memory through an extensive study of Barua's novel *Rebirth* (2010).

The novel begins at an abrupt juncture as we see Ron leaving Kaberi for another woman and simultaneously, Kaberi discovers that she is pregnant after the long wait. The writer opening the novel with Kaberi's life at a crossroad point towards the rebirth that would be happening in her life and also suggestive of the title. As the story moves into flashbacks and we encounter Kaberi's childhood, we are presented with a soft-spoken, reserved and timid girl who grows up to be a woman marrying according to her parents' choice. By portraying Kaberi as an obedient daughter and wife with incredible passiveness and acceptance of the roles that are expected of her, the author had portrayed her oppressive upbringing that stifled her subjectivity and voice. For most part of the novel, Ron is shown to be the centre and circumference of Kaberi's life and she has constructed her identity around the identity of being his wife, and nothing more. Kaberi remains passive, silently tolerating Ron's verbal and physical abuses. This annoyingly pacifist nature can be perceived as a "conditioning" that Kate Millet talks about in her *Sexual Politics* (1970) where she illuminates on how "the socialisation of the sexes in patriarchal politics allows the conditioning of "passivity, ignorance, docility and ineffectuality ..." into women (Millet 26). This conditioning had suppressed Kaberi's inherent individuality and allowed others to step over her. As the novel traces Kaberi's life from childhood to post-marriage, we observe that she has hardly ever recognized her wishes, and the same trend follows after her marriage. Her passive and inward-looking character is laid bare in the opening paragraph of the book: "Before her husband left her for another woman, she "had been partial to the large soft sofa in front of the television, from where I had a good view of the screen, but from where I also looked inwards, into the heart of the house. I did not see much of the sky or the buildings clustered around our own, but all that, anyway, did not cross my mind very often, so focused was I on your father and myself and the home we had fashioned together." (Barua 1). These lines hold testament to how she had constructed her existence around Ron only, with no subjective views.

When Kaberi discovers that she has conceived at last, after all the taunts and tribulations, after Ron had left her, she decides not to divulge this news to anyone, not even to Ron. For Kaberi, Ron's return should be based on his real love towards her, and not the child and she clearly states her mind to her unborn child: "I wanted him back, more urgently than I admitted even to myself, yet at the same time, I wanted him to come back to me, for me....I want to be assured of his old love for me before he comes back, that same love I have grown accustomed to these seven years." (Baruah 8). Ron, however, is the archetype of the patriarchal Indian man with a misguided sense of masculinity, and quite opposite to Kaberi's expectations, makes a selfish return on knowing about her pregnancy and has no shame in openly parading his extra-marital affair. Baruah lays bare the psyche of selfish men in the society, such as Ron, who on the pretext

of the wife's infertility leaves her, but comes back without any sense of repentance.

Kaberi, on her visit to Assam, is astounded to find the reality behind the seemingly normal appearing marital life of her parents. Her mother, another silent woman conditioned by society, discloses for the first time how her father wanted to marry some other woman from a different religious background, and showed his frustration on her as his family did not allow him to follow his mind. "He took to drinking regularly and "would throw things, break things....shout and yell" (Barua 163) and died a morose and sad man. Kaberi is dumbfounded at this revelation, but it helps her to get a better glimpse and understanding of reality. In another instance towards the end of the novel, we see Preetha in her urge to make Kaberi understand that every "child deserves to have a father" (Barua 200), reveals how her mother "found out accidentally" (Barua 200) of her father's second wife and children. But instead of separating from him, the woman decided to stay on as she did not want her children to be deprived of their father. This is another example of the detrimental effects of a marriage and society rooted in patriarchy. Barua also shows how the dependency and powerlessness of Kaberi is a blueprint of her parents' fraught relationship. The complex and difficult relationship that Kaberi has with her mother reveals the conditioning that she has imbibed into her own marriage by subconsciously mirroring and emulating behaviors she had seen in her mother.

Thus, the novel lays bare the patriarchal strands of marriage and how societal predispositions disable a woman from breaking away from such marriages. Nevertheless, we see a woman's brave journey from initial docility to empowerment, carving out a self-identity through motherhood, relegating the patriarchal nature and illusion of blissful marital life of her marriage and abusive husband to the periphery, to a sphere of immanence and thus giving us a realistic protagonist to relate to.

Conclusion

Reiterating our main argument, we can say that although women in India's North-Eastern region appear to be enjoying a superior status of freedom socially, economically and in other spheres as compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country, in actuality traditional and customary practices discriminate the women in so many ways. On a superficial glance, the discriminatory social practices seem to be absent, yet in reality there is strong discrimination against women mainly in the name of tradition and customary practices as evident through the analysis of representative works of Kire, Ao and Barua.

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