

ANGLOPHONE FICTION FROM NORTH EAST: THE WOMAN QUESTION

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Abstract

The measures to protect the status of women and the women empowerment policies of the Indian government are incompatible with the social construct that exist in Northeast India because such societies have defined gender roles. The dynamics of the cultural practices in such societies tend to relegate women to a secondary status, despite their active participation in many affairs, offering men to take the centre. In order to understand this dichotomy, the Marxist concept of base and superstructure is being employed to inquire into the role of women as depicted in the texts in English from Northeast India. The literature produced in this region are replete with instances of patriarchal dominance as part of cultural practice and the matriarchal subsistence to it. Any attempt to eradicate the repressive tendencies towards women will fail unless the value on which the base is formed is completely altered. This paper shall analyze the role assigned to women in a patriarchal society as reflected in select fictions and short stories in English, which shall lead to the conclusion that the present social structure can offer no scope for gender equality despite of efforts by social institutions and government agencies.

Keywords- *subaltern, authority, patriarchy, society.*

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The existing social structure we have in Northeast India tends to relegate women to a secondary status, despite their active participation in many affairs, offering men to take the centre. This subordinate position assigned to women is not a new phenomenon, but it has come down as a tradition from generation to generation percolating into the collective consciousness of a large section of people thereby pushing the women to a subaltern position. One may point out the female deities in Hindu faith, who are revered and worshipped, but that is seen only in theory and not in practice. Again one may point towards the feminists and women activists like Emmeline Pankhurst, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva or Gayatri Chakraborty; but their efforts have not changed the social structure where women live. Such women have feebly and at times stridently empowered themselves at different phases of women's movement, but this did not change the overall structure of the society which is evident from the oppression meted out to women in the recent times as well.¹ The annual report of 2012-2013 published by UN Women states that

Over 600 million women still live in countries where domestic violence is not a crime. Gender gaps in employment have grown in many regions since the 2008 financial crisis. Inequality, discrimination, violence, deprivations of rights— these are daily realities for far too many women and girls. (UN Women Annual Report 2012-2013, 2013)

It is only a section of women who have been empowered by their individual effort of radical feminism; and which do not assure the universal emancipation of women. In the past, in India and also elsewhere, women and slaves as well were not even considered as citizens and were kept out of the social discourse and voting rights, not to talk about the important decision making matters. This paper proposes (i) an introspection into the social structure that will help us understand how women are relegated to this inferior position; (ii) how women have accepted and internalized this position, (iii) and that the emancipation of women is in no way possible within the existing social structure. The last statement is crucial because the value on which the society is built is itself the problematic, and any attempt to reverse the process would come into direct conflict with the age old

¹ It is estimated that up to seven in ten women globally will be beaten, raped, abused, or mutilated in their lifetimes – and most of this violence takes place in intimate relationships. (Commission on the Status of Women 2013)

tradition. Based on this hypothesis, an introspection into the roles played by women in the society as depicted in the short stories and novels in English from Northeast India will be made. This will help us to understand the social structure which has led women to internalize their inferior roles.

The character of Khatila in *The Jungle Major*, the first story in the collection *These Hills Called Home* by Temsula Ao, reminds one of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. She is *tall, fair, slim and possessed of the most charming smile* (Ao, *These Hills Called Home*, 2006, p. 1). She is a sharp contrast to her husband who is short, dark and buck teeth and amid much protest from her family and clan she goes on to live happily with Punaba as a housewife. In the due course of time Punaba leaves his job as a driver and joins the underground forces and thereafter starts living in the forest hideouts to avoid arrest by the Indian Army. On one occasion when he has come to visit his wife in the village, the army getting a hint of it cordons off the area to trap Punaba. It is then that the onus of saving her husband automatically falls on Khatila:

Khatila was in quandary, what should she do? How could she save her husband, herself and the entire village from the approaching soldiers? (Ao, *These Hills Called Home*, 2006, p. 5)

With her ingenuity and presence of mind she takes control of the situation.

She fished out some of her husband's old cloths and ordered him to get into them, then she smeared his face, hands and feet with ash from the hearth, hid his sandals, ruffled his hair and began shouting at him, 'you no good loafer, what were you doing all day yesterday? There is no water in the house even to wash my face. Run to the well immediately or you will rue the day you were born'. (Ao, *These Hills Called Home*, 2006, p. 6)

Saying thus she poses her husband as a servant, ignoring the presence of the army captain, and helps him to sneak out of the situation thereby saving his life. Her captivating beauty and charm, relaxed disposition and intelligence do not make her arrogant, nor does she claim any recognition in respect to the tremendous job she has accomplished. Rather her cool demeanor and charm is fortified by her humility to her husband. Her courage seems to be mightier than the 'mighty Indian army' and her momentary ingenuity is more effective than the 'planned operation' of the army. The writer describes thus:

The young and inexperienced army officer did not realize that the beautiful but simple village woman had thus foiled a meticulously planned 'operation' of the mighty Indian army and that a prized quarry had simply walked away to freedom. (Ao, *These Hills Called Home*, 2006, p. 7)

Later in the story the heroic exploits of Punaba becomes a favorite subject of discussion among his friends. The writer states that *the escape of Punaba and his party that*

day was, however, construed differently by the underground bosses and the credit was attributed to his shrewd planning. (Ao, *These Hills Called Home*, 2006, p. 8) At the end of the story the true story is revealed to the friends and the husband says playfully, 'Aren't you glad that your jungle major is so ugly?' (Ao, *These Hills Called Home*, 2006, p. 8) The story reveals the prejudice that society holds against women because whatever qualities a woman might possess, she is always seen as inferior to her male counterpart. It is beyond the imagination of such patriarchal society to conceive of a woman who could be more intelligent than her husband. However Khatila doesn't seem to mind about the appreciation as long as her husband is safe and sound. But the question still remains, why Khatila does not oppose it? Why is the society structured in such a way that the best feat is assumed to be performed only by the male, and the female silently takes her secondary role? We shall explore this further in the paper.

In another short story 'A Simple Question' from the collection Laburnum for My Head, the narrator comments thus:

The petty thievery which would normally have been ignored, once again reminded him how a coarse and illiterate village woman had managed to unsettle his military confidence by challenging the validity of his own presence in this alien terrain. (Ao, *Laburnum For My Head*, 2009, p. 87)

The context of this situation is like Khatila's; Imdongla the wife of Tekaba is a simple but *worldly-wise* woman who comes to the rescue of her husband, a *gaonburah*,² when he has been arrested by the Indian Army. She manages to convince the army officer by evoking pity and mercy in him leading to the subsequent release of her husband. The writer extols the virtue and strength of the formidable Naga woman who despite of her beauty, intelligence and strength readily accepts the authority of her husband out of humility and as a requirement of the social structure of subordination.

Women like Khatila and Imdongla are the products of a system where they are, right from their childhood, taught to be subservient to the husbands and their world begins and ends with them. They are capable, physically and intellectually to be independent, nevertheless they accept the superiority of their husbands and submit themselves to the patriarchal structure of the society. However, there is also a strong desire that they nurse in their heart. That desire is to be free. The last story, *Flight*, in the collection Laburnum for my Head is an allegory that sees the true freedom of women in a flight away from bondage. The protection offered by the husband or the family is no doubt a boon for the female, but her true happiness is only realized in her freedom from that bondage of protection because the four walls of protection at times seem to be suffocating. It is because while accepting the protection she also accepts her own subordinate status as a dependent. At times even her economic security cannot guarantee her an independent life. She is free and yet she is chained by the customs of the society where she is brought up and which has trained her

² A Village head.

mind to submit her 'self' always to the husband. One such character is Nivedita, in Anjum Hasan's novel *Lunatic in My Head*. Nivedita is a teacher, who despite of her husband's infidelity and her own economic independence cannot divorce the husband and accepts him the way he is. Divorce in some societies is unthinkable despite of all atrocities committed by men against their wives. Flossie says about Nibedita,

She lies alone in bed from six to eight in the morning – just lies there, mind you, she's not sleeping, while her husband is running around like a maniac on the Don Bosco basketball court, teaching kids how to throw a ball into a ring. She lies there thinking her life is wasted- no children, a husband who is not repentful enough, a mother who blames her for letting her husband go astray, a mother-in-law about whom the less said the less better, and then college, which bores her she says. By the time her husband gets back home, she's already left for work. When she gets home, her husband is out there coaching people in some other sport, track running or something, and she cooks dinner and watches TV. Then her husband comes home, they eat and sleep. This is the life of Nibedita Sen. She keeps complaining about it and you can't blame her. (Hasan, 2007, p. 215)

Then who is to be blamed? The social structure of our society? It is the patriarchal power structure in the form of the social structure that governs the society and hence any attempt to eradicate the repressive tendencies towards the women will fail unless the value on which this structure is built is completely altered.

The 'values' are created by the relationships shared by individuals based on the forces of production as identified and determined by the base, and those gradually become the norms of the society until further changes brought forth by some revolution (be sudden or gradual) to usurp the established ones by the radical interlude (which in due course of time becomes the norms again), or else it happens as a process of evolution that the changes are so slow that it becomes imperceptible but only when compared with a distant past, the change becomes prominent. To understand the 'values' one can bank on the Marxist theory. To understand the value one must investigate into human existence and the society created as a necessity of it.

The question starts with human being's survival and the formation of a society.

We must begin by stating the first real premise of human existence, and therefore of all human history, the premise that men must be able to live in order to 'make history'. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. .

[This is] a fundamental condition of all human history which today as thousands of years ago must be daily and hourly fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. (Harman, Summar 1986, pp. 7-54)

Therefore it can be said that the act of survival is a precondition to everything else. *And the act of survival is the activity of work on the material world in order to get food shelter*

and clothing (Harman, Summar 1986). The manner the material production takes place always determines the social relations. And therefore, changes in the way material production takes place lead changes in the relations of society in general (Harman, Summar 1986). For instance, a nomadic way of life for hunters and food gatherers will allow the women to bear fewer children; and a subsistent living on agriculture will allow women to produce more children. And a surplus production and storage of crops will give an opportunity to rival bands to seize it and therefore a new chapter of warfare will begin in history.

Similarly when a family is constituted the relation among the family members is determined by their respective roles in the material production. That is why in the novel *Bitter Wormwood* one can see the father rejoicing to have a male child:

Vilau's husband, Luo-o, was very pleased their first child was a boy. He happily took over the task of harvesting the field so his wife did not have to return to fieldwork in the next month (Kire, 2011, p. 17)

No doubt, Vilau is also a part of the forces of production and works in the field; however, Luo-o's position is more significant as a male member of the family because he not only works in the field, but also performs task which only the male members of the clan could accomplish. For instance, the village has been planning a festival to celebrate a new gate for the clan, and only the male members can participate in the ritual of cutting and bringing down the tree from the jungle to the village. Hunting is another task which is performed only by the male members. The division of labor according to the nature and importance of work ascribes value and importance to the members of the family and this is why their respective social existence determines their consciousness in a relative manner. To quote Marx in this connection:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx, 1859)

Once the structure is created on the basis of this, it is difficult to change the values existing in the society without altering the base. This creates an unequal relationship like master-slave, employer-worker (subordinates), husband-wife, where the value becomes integral to the relation in the long run and the norms are build up in a hierarchy in the line of

subordination like that of the 'falcon' and the 'falconer' where the inevitability of a Savior is assigned to the male always.

Therefore, it is an inherent structure of the society, when living in groups or communities, to create a hierarchy in order of power and status. The very foundation (the base) on which the society is built up seems to be problematic and questionable. How do we discuss about women emancipation within the existing structure which cannot accommodate an alternate status to the women; and moreover, in such a society women internalizes patriarchal thinking there by promoting it instead of opposing it. And even when the opposition comes, it comes by placing women within that very structure. Women as such are never outside the patriarchal structure of the society.

In this context it will be pertinent to cite an example from the novel A Terrible Matriarchy by Easterine Kire Iralu which depicts the internalization of patriarchy in the Naga Society.

Suggesting the transformation from patriarchy to matriarchy by way of internalization, A Terrible Matriarchy shows us the family and social structure of the Angami community where women are considered as subordinate to the men. The matriarchal head, the grandmother, is elevated to the position of a matriarch after the death of her husband. The purpose of the life of the grandmother has been to serve and please her husband because a wife is always expected to fulfill her husband's needs and desires. A Naga woman is considered to be fortunate if she can live as a supplement to her husband. The grandmother following the tradition lives like that. Eventually after the death of her husband, she acquires the privileged status in the family circle as a substitute of her husband. As the matriarch of her clan, and having economic independence by getting her husband's pension, she controls her family members with strict discipline. She is not sympathetic towards other female members of her family but she pampers her grandsons but makes life miserable for her young granddaughter in order to train her as a perfect 'wife material'. She says *some men don't like it if their wives are too educated* (Iralu, 2007, p. 205). There are numerous instances in the novel where one can see the unequal power equation between the male and the female. And it is not the male who subjugates the women always; rather the structure is as such that women accept their subordinate status spontaneously and very often female members impose those structures to keep the tradition going.

In this similar line of argument, Lois Tyson cites Helen Cixous:

Women will not learn to resist patriarchal thinking by becoming part of the patriarchal power structure, that is by obtaining equal status and equal opportunity in current patriarchal society. For women's acquisition of power within the existing socio-political system would not adequately change the system. Indeed the result would be that woman would become more like the patriarchal men because they would learn to think as the patriarchal men have been trained to think. (Tyson, 2008, p. 100).

Therefore, under the existing structure, it will not be possible to create gender equality unless we undo the past on which our present is build up. It will not be an easy task to undo the past, which has oozed out of the customs practiced by our forefathers and have in turn become traditions. But at the same time, we cannot live with it and talk about social change to eradicate discrimination against women. On one hand we are talking about dignity, equality and liberty; on the other hand we are leaving little scope to promote or implement them. The difficulty to bring change into the existing social structure without undoing the base (which effects the superstructure) can be better understood in the line of thought advanced by the Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci-

He divided Marx's superstructure into two elements: political society and civil society. Political society consists of the organized force of society (such as the police and military) while civil society refers to the consensus-creating elements of society that contribute to hegemony. Both elements of society are still informed by the values of the base (the value which is already problematic, my addition), and serve to establish these values in society and enforce them. (Morera, 1990, pp. 23-37)

Of the two elements, let us consider the 'Civil Society': the consensus-creating elements of the society. How the consensus is created? Does it come from the individual to the group, or the group to the individual? It comes from the individual (Patriarchy) to the group (Group of male) and then back to the individual again (male and female; matriarchy acting as patriarchy).

This consensus-creating element of the society passes from the individual to the collective consciousness gradually. How does this happen?

The society at large thinks of the welfare of human beings, but this is controlled by like-minded individuals who cannot think over individual benefit. Therefore the advantage offered by the society in general is suppressed by another 'advantageous advantage' (although detrimental) which is nothing but individual's personal advantage.

The ramification of this supplanting the collective advantage by individual's advantage is coercive and detrimental for the female living the society (existing social structure). It is therefore the 'advantageous advantage' of a few individuals which takes the form of consensus of the civil society and thereby is enforced by the political society.

Once it takes gains currency keeping in mind the values of the base (which itself is based on unequal relationship, as I stated earlier), the oppressed also starts participating in it by becoming the oppressor. Therefore, women like Khatila and Imdongla has no qualms about their social status because their minds have been fashioned to think themselves as a

supplement to the males in their family; and woman like Nibedita cannot free herself because she feels that there can be no world outside the conjugal walls, the key to which is alone controlled by the husband; lastly and women like the grandmother who have well internalized the patriarchal thinking continue to live and inspire posterity in the tradition of Patriarchal Society. The women have no voice, and their thinking is only a reflection and ordering of male thought.

Now contextualizing this one may well assert that any attempt to eradicate the repressive tendencies towards the women will fail unless the value on which the base is formed is completely altered as revealed from understanding of the short stories and the novels. By imposing the psychological working of the human mind in relation to this society in interpreting the texts mentioned above, we can actually see how the structures are created which relegates women to an inferior position. Conspicuously without altering the base (the forces of production), the superstructure cannot be changed because by way of internalization women and the men alike will never know how to resist patriarchal thinking; rather they become a part of it in due course of time consciously or unconsciously.

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