



DISCOURSES ON
CULTURAL
HERITAGE
IN CONTEMPORARY NAGALAND



← EDITED BY →
SENTINARO
SEYIESILIE VÜPRÜ
SÜVILÜ VENUH
ASOLA C. JAMIR



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PenThrill Publication House
Billy Graham Road
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penthrill@gmail.com
<https://www.facebook.com/PenThrillPublicationHouse>

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Q CONTENTS Q

Contributors	7		
Acknowledgements	9		
Preface	12		
Introduction	15		
Keynote Address	22		
Plenary Lectures	29-49		
Morung, the Identity of the Nagas: A Paradigm Shift from a Cultural Institution to a Cultural Heritage <i>Henshu Aeihly</i>	51		
Traditional Social Institutions and the Roots of Naga Social Capital <i>Tiatula Ozukum</i>	63		
The Vanishing Cultural Educational System in Nagaland <i>Akala Longkumer</i>	89		
Naga Folklore in the Modern Times <i>Kekhriengulieü Tachü</i>	105		
Re-reading History through Folksong: A Study on the Sümi Nagas <i>Inakali Assumi</i>	124		
Expressions that Matter: Reading Sümi Naga Social Proverbs <i>Aketoli S. Sümi</i>	136		
Matrimonial System: Indigenous Rites and Rituals with Special Reference to Khonoma and Jotsoma Villages <i>Vivolhuno Punyü</i>	160		
		Traditional Marriage Practices Among the Angami Nagas: The Case of Chiechama Village <i>Khriekesanuo Metha & Tiatula Ozukum</i>	173
		Deconstructing the Fallacy on the Sümi Bride Price <i>Ngutoli Y. Swu</i>	192
		Representing the Environment: Ecological Concern and Human Values in Temsula Ao's Selected Works <i>Sentinaro</i>	214
		A Study of the Feminist Consciousness in Select Stories of Avinuo Kire's <i>The Power to Forgive and Other Stories</i> <i>Adenuo Shirat Luikham</i>	226
		Dynamics of Women's Predicament: A Comparative Study of Mahasweta Devi's <i>Dhouli</i> and Temsula Ao's <i>The Night</i> <i>K. S. Mariam</i>	246
		Women Narratives in Naga Society with Special Reference to Customary Laws and Culture <i>Keneiseno Chase</i>	266
		Re-Examining the Women Narratives in the Naga Literary World <i>Pinky Sagolsem</i>	282
		Naga Pottery Making: Reliving and Preserving the Authentic Craftsmanship <i>E. Emilo Yanthan</i>	297
		Practice of Headhunting as Cultural Identity of the Nagas <i>Bendangzenla Longkumer</i>	310

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RE-EXAMINING THE WOMEN NARRATIVES IN THE NAGA LITERARY WORLD

Pinky Sagolsem

Introduction

In the Naga society the total acceptance of women in the literary mainstream is a blurred reality. Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire and Nini Lungalang, are the prominent names in Naga literary realm, who through their works are propounding their slogans to be accepted and to be acknowledged. Their writings are laden with feminist perspectives. The literary world actually becomes a platform which binds them together by giving strength, help and support to one another. The literary texts act as a catalyst in bringing forth their quest for identity in the patriarchal society. Their texts talk about two types of

detachment. One is detachment from the patriarchy and the other one is from the self (womenfolk).

This paper will re-examine the works of Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Nini Lungalang and highlight the feminist perspectives in their texts. The texts chosen for this paper are "The Jungle Major" and "The Pot Maker" from Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, Easterine Kire's novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* and Nini Lungalang's poem "Mirror". When the texts of these women writers are examined certain common themes can be identified from their works.

The Detachment of Self from the Self (Womenfolk) and the Detachment of Self from the Stereotypes Constructed by the Society.

Nini Lungalang's poem "Mirror" depicts two types of detachment. One is detachment from the stereotypes constructed by the patriarchal society and one from the self, that is, the womenfolk. Patriarchy has created certain norms for a female to follow in a society. The females are not given any choice. They have to dwell inside the domain which is constructed by the patriarchs. The womenfolk are passing on the stereotypes through generations. They are chained to the model of life as set up by men folk. In the poem, "Mirror" the speaker is trying to defy the system created by the menfolk and the system which is heightened by the womenfolk.

The speaker in the poem is angry being a replica of her mother. She does not want to be a mirror image of her mother. Her angst is presented in the following lines:

*"They say I look a lot like mother.
I do not think this pleases her.
It cannot please her.
I do not blame her,
But we've learnt, she and I,
To live with our mirror" (Nini 26).*

The mother represents the women folk in the society. The speaker is not given a choice to live the life she wants to live.

*"So you see, I look a lot like my mother.
She's stamped herself soul deep in me" (Nini 26).*

The mother imprints her personality on the speaker. She is expected to follow in her mother's footprint and live a life as decided by her mother. The speaker is tormented by her own folk, that is, womenfolk. She wants to detach herself from the path set up by the womenfolk. She does not want to live a life under someone's shadow. She wants to create her own identity.

But then when she herself becomes a mother she is afraid if she will continue the old age tradition of imprisoning her daughter in the circle of male dominated society.

*"Sometimes I'd see that phantom child
And it would anger me to unreasoning hatred"
(Nini 26).
"Yes, I look a lot like my mother
And my daughter looks
A lot like me" (Nini 26).*

Despite the speaker's struggle in "Mirror", she is caught up in the labyrinth of male dominated society. Same is the case of the protagonist, Dielieno in the novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire. The grandmother Vibano symbolizes the womenfolk. And the protagonist Dielieno is the representative of the female soul who wants to escape from the clutches of the norms dictated by the male governed society. She is the head of the family after the demise of her husband. If she wants then she can also give freedom to Dielieno. But that was not the case. The grandmother makes it a point to follow what has been set by the male dominated society. The grandmother also catches up on the trail of favoritism of boy child over girl child.

"What meat do you want?" she simpered sweetly, as she ladled out gravy and meat. I quickly piped up, "I want the leg, Grandmother, give me the leg" (Kire 1).

"I wasn't asking you, silly girl," she said, as she swiftly put the chicken leg into my brother's plate, "that portion

is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions"
(Kire 1).

Life for a male is easy without many restrictions. But it is just the opposite for the female. There are so many dos and don'ts for a girl child. Moreover, the girl child has to be confined to the domestic works.

"The girl must start working at home. Don't let her run about with her brothers anymore. That is not the way to bring up girl-children" (Kire 2).

Dielieno is very young but she can feel the partiality shown to her. Her inner soul urges her to revolt the impositions of the society and her grandmother. Her mother who represents the collective consciousness of the female who wants to go open against the laws formed by patriarchy could not do anything.

"I think I know even then, young as I was, that Mother would have that terribly hurt look on her face and she would go dumb and come back with many questions"
(Kire 1).

The power of the system is so strong that she has to submit to the system. Her mother can be seen as the awakening consciousness of the womenfolk.

Dielieno is forced to live in her grandmother's house under her strict surveillances. Her mother is paralyzed

to support her daughter's rebel against her grandmother who as mentioned earlier is a representative of the womenfolk in general.

"Send the girl next time that is girls' work... "Yes Mother," said my Mother timidly, ignoring altogether the look of utter dismay I threw at her... Mother didn't have any excuses anymore" (Kire 3).

Dielieno's mother is swallowed by the matriarchy which is represented by the grandmother that she could not raise her voice in favour of her daughter. She is a victim of matriarchy in patriarchal society.

"Oh well, that was Mother, in later years, she still would not indulge herself. She thought it was sinful to eat too much of the food one really liked or wear more than two new clothes in a year.

May be it was because she had to listen to Grandmother's taunts if she bought anything for herself" (Kire 2-3).

"The person she feared most was Grandmother and I hated Grandmother with vengeance because nothing my mother ever did seemed to please her" (Kire 3).

In the novel, the three women, that is, the grandmother, the mother and Dielieno represents the three generations which signifies the change coming over in the mentality of the Naga women. These three generations can also

be classified as adherence to the norms of patriarchy, the pre-awakening stage and the awakening stage of the consciousness of the Naga women in the male dominated society. The first generation which is symbolized by the grandmother is a generation in which Naga women are entwined with the norms of patriarchy. The second generation symbolized by the mother is the pre-awakening stage of the Naga women about their liberation and a quest for individual identity. The third generation represented by Dielieno is the stage of awakening where patriarchal system is questioned and thus, leading to the initiation of the battle for their liberation from the stereotypes build up by patriarchy.

The novel presents a big challenge to feminist ideology. It clearly shows that the patriarchal dominance is not the only thing that oppresses the womankind but also the matriarchy in the matriarchal society makes women suffer because the womenfolk themselves have a strong bearing in strengthening patriarchal holds and add to their suffering. And thus, the protagonist Dielieno is trying to break free from both these factors responsible for the exploitation of women in Naga society.

Despite her struggle to detach herself from the self as well as patriarchal society, Dielieno succumbs to the patriarchal world. However, the urge to rebel against the two spheres of society, represented by the male

dominated system and the other by the womenfolk, cannot be denied. But the case is a bit different in the story "The Pot Maker" by Temsula Ao. The female protagonist, Sentila, is successful in detaching herself from the two spheres mentioned before and thereby creating a niche for herself in the field of pottery. Sentila in the story has a passion for pottery. She tries all means to learn the art of pottery.

"On the days when she managed to stay at home while her parents and other elders went to the fields, she sought out the woman who were expert potters and asked to be taught the skill" (Ao 57).

"So the little girl, whose name is Sentila, started going to these old women in another part of the village to watch them at work" (Ao 59).

"When Sentila visited the old women, the baby, who was ten months old, would be strapped to her back with cloth and she would labour up steep hill to reach their work shed" (Ao 60). "Learning that the lead singer was a handsome man with many other young men in his group, every girl from the dormitory eagerly sought permission from 'Onula' or Auntie to go and listen to them sing. Only Sentila said that she would stay back for an opportunity to practice her art alone and had smuggled some clay from her mother's work shed for this purpose." (Ao 64).

She is wise enough not to let her parents know about her dream after she hears the conversation of her parents which clearly indicates their objection of her taking up pottery.

"So be warned, our daughter shall not learn this thankless craft from me during my lifetime. I shall not pass on this burden to her." (Ao 59).

In the story, Sentilas's mother represents the womenfolk. Sentila is seen fighting a silent battle against her mother. She is adamant to pursue her dream even though her mother strongly voices against her will to teach pottery. This fight can be seen as her fight against her womenfolk. Her mother's refusal to teach her pottery indicates to a certain extent the act of not giving a choice to her own folk.

"They chatted late into the night and decided that from now on, Sentila would not be left in the village to babysit her brother but would accompany them to the fields" (Ao 62).

Onula, who is the warden of the girl's morung, takes the role of a female who acts as a support system for those (female) who wants to break away from the conservative female ideology. She knows that Sentila cannot be incarcerated into the system by force. Therefore she

helps Sentila in her quest for making a place in the art of pottery.

"The older woman took to this serious young girl immediately and resolved to help her in every possible way so that the girl could fulfill her dream of becoming a good pot maker" (Ao 63).

Sentila at the end comes out victorious in slashing the string that has been attached by the womenfolk. She is successful in her mission to be a potter.

"... because she believed that she had just witnessed a profound revelation in the two batches of still moist pots, standing side by side in perfect symmetry inside the shed.

A new pot maker was born" (Ao 68).

Discrimination of Girl Child in Naga Society

Discrimination of girl child is very evident in Naga society. Women writers by highlighting it in their works are influencing the society to change their outlook. In the novel, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Easterine Kire presents visibly the prejudices against the girl child. The unfairness of the girl child in a family is evident as depicted in Dielieno's childhood.

"I was a girl after four boys, they never seemed to be sure whether to buy me girls' clothing or let me wear leftover boys' clothing. So I have vivid memories of alternating

between wearing new girls' dresses which were tight and uncomfortable and short in the leg or old, torn-at-the-knees boys' trousers and stained T-shirts which were immensely comfortable" (Kire 2).

Being a girl child Dielieno has to compromise so many things in her life. She is treated so low that the grandmother does not even address her by her name.

"She only referred to me as the girl.

Why doesn't Grandmother call me by my name, mother? Why does she call me 'the girl'? Doesn't she like my name?" (Kire 4).

The society has imposed so many restrictions on the girl child that their life is akin to a life living in a cage. Every simple act of the girl child is monitored for instance; Dielieno cannot even play freely with her uncle, Atu.

"The stick caught me on my calf before I reached the floor.

Girl, what do you think you are? A monkey?

No girl, she spluttered, no decent girl climbs up a man's shoulder" (Kire 5).

Her emotions are not considered worth paying attention to. It seems as if a girl child has no feelings at all. Dielieno is only a girl of four and a half but grandmother Vibano

makes Bano give her a bath with cold water in the early morning.

"But, Mother, it is very cold this morning, Bano said looking surprised that Grandmother should suggest that I bathed in cold water" (Kire 12).

"I was so cold my teeth were chattering and I thought I would fall sick and die of pneumonia" (Kire 13).

Thus the texts of the women writers reflect the gender discrimination of the girl child. The women writers are trying to portray the soul which is longing to be accepted and be given equal respect and love in the family.

A Sense of Acknowledgement of their Role Demanded by the Naga Women in the Society.

When the narratives by Naga women writers are examined their longing for the acknowledgement of their role in the society emerges vividly. In the story, "The Jungle Major", the protagonist Khatila stands for those Naga women who played momentous role in Naga National Movement. One of the prominent themes in the story is about how Khatila's wit saves her husband, herself and most importantly her entire village from the clutches of the Indian army.

"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 7).

The entire village would have faced disastrous impact from the Indian army if they were able to catch Punaba, a member of the Naga underground army.

"As had happened to the other villages, their barracks would have been set on fire, their houses destroyed and the people would have been taken to the 'grouping' area. But thanks to the audacity of Khatila's ploy, the entire village was saved from such a fate" (Ao 7).

But what happens later is very ironical. The credit for the entire act is given to Punaba but not Khatila.

"The escape of Punaba and his party that day was, however, constructed differently by the underground bosses and the credit was attributed to his shrewd planning" (Ao 8).

The same is the case in the story "The Pot Maker". Like Khatila, Arenla who is Sentila's mother also plays a significant role in saving her village during head-hunting days in Naga society.

"Didn't Arenla know that in the days of head-hunting, this village was spared many a times because of their skilled pot makers?" (Ao 60).

The stories show that Naga women do not take a back seat when it comes to contribution towards their society. However, their contributions are not brought to the surface. Their roles are kept hidden and not being acknowledged properly. Therefore, the female characters in their stories become their mouthpiece to express what they expect from the society.

Conclusion

The re-examining of the women narratives in the Naga literary world gives a picture of certain common themes which are heavily women centric. The women writers like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire who are aware of their rights are representing the collective Naga women and expressing their feminist concerns on Naga women through their literary works. Their literary works become their testimony to liberate themselves from the Naga patriarchal society. Apart from their struggle to emancipate from the clutches of the domain of patriarchy, their work also emphasize on liberation from the grasps of the womenfolk itself. Womenfolk who are supposed to support and encourage women to deviate from the stereotypes established by the society does the opposite. The womenfolk are so ingrained with the societal norms set up by the patriarchy that many a times they end up upholding the norms more strictly than the menfolk itself. Therefore, these writers felt the need to highlight the restraint provided by their same folk and seek the

support from them to join hands to liberate the Naga women fully from the Naga patriarchal society. The women narratives in the Naga literary world actually become a voice for quest of identity, liberation from the patriarchal norms and liberation from the captivity from the womenfolk itself.

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NAGA POTTERY MAKING: RELIVING AND PRESERVING THE AUTHENTIC CRAFTSMANSHIP

E. Emilo Yanthan

Nagas in Brief and Life Before and After Modernization

Nagas are the indigenous group of people belonging to the Mongoloid race nestled in the beautiful mountain terrain, blessed with rich natural resources and green vegetations, covering an area of 16,579 sq.km, approx. (Aye 6), with a population of 19,80,602 approx., according to 2011 census (Ibid). It is situated in the far east of the Indian sub-continent. They are brownish in colour with broad shoulder, high cheekbones and overall flat features. What distinguishes Nagas from the Indians is not only because of their looks and skin colour, but it is their rich oral tradition and their gifts in crafts and skills. Nagas are by nature independent and athletic, chiefly known for their simplicity, honesty, hardworking nature and most importantly their bravery.

Cultural heritage, which encompasses both the tangible and intangible aspects of culture, is a living resource for societies, and it can contribute to building peace and understanding amongst people. UNESCO has impressed upon the need for preserving the entire range of 'cultural heritage' as it is a cornerstone of any cultural policy.

Moreover, as the world is witnessing increased and varied cultural interactions between peoples, all tribal and oral societies are undergoing similar challenges globally. Therefore, there is a need to create spaces within the academe for cross-cultural and inter-cultural exchanges and debates. The seminar was thus organised with the purpose of providing a platform for fruitful exchanges and better understanding of cultural diversities, and to explore ways of preventing conflict issues. It is expected that best practices can be shared and disseminated so that it will enable the preservation and promotion of Naga cultural heritage.

This book is an outcome of the National Seminar organised by the Culture Study Centre, Baptist College, Kohima on the theme *Kelhou Zho-Cultural Heritage Among the Tribes of Nagaland: Balancing Tradition and Modernity*, on 24th and 25th September, 2019 at Baptist College, Kohima which proposes for a healthy blend of both traditional and modern values, imbibing the best of each so as to stay relevant in this fast changing world. It is hoped that the articles contributed by the scholars in this volume will be of great help to the students, research scholars and all those who are pursuing research work particularly on indigenous culture of the Nagas and also to the academicians and general public who aspire to understand the diverse culture of the Nagas.

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