

**NAGA WOMEN'S
PERSPECTIVES ON
GENDER ROLES:
AN ANALYSIS OF
LITERARY NARRATIVES**

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I WATITULA LONGKUMER





ZUBAAN

128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor

NEW DELHI 110 049

EMAIL: contact@zubaanbooks.com

WEBSITE: www.zubaanbooks.com

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NAGA WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER ROLES: AN ANALYSIS OF LITERARY NARRATIVES



Why my brothers don't carry water from the distant pond... Why
men sit and drink
from morn till dusk as their women sweat silently... Why women
only cry

—Rosemary Dzüvichü, *Poetry from Nagaland*

INTRODUCTION

This quote is from Rosemary Dzüvichü poem titled 'Womanhood.' It provides a good starting point for the discourse in my paper. The quote conveys the gender disparities that exist in Naga society. It also reflects the social responsibilities and roles that are clearly divided between the men and womenfolk. While Dzüvichü aims to bring a change in the mind-set through poems such as this one, the truth of and the extent to

which a Naga woman is allowed/permitted to exercise her social and political roles in society is still very restrictive and limiting. The quote frames the objective of my paper which is questioning the ambiguous definition of empowerment, specifically that of Naga women. The reasons for this are: i) the existing scholarship that misrepresents the status of a Naga woman and, ii) the spillover of these narratives that fails to reflect their representation in the real world. To elaborate further, I will first discuss common presumptions of an egalitarian Naga society.

India is a country with one of the largest populations of indigenous people in the world. The largest concentration of indigenous people is in the eight states of North-East India and the 'central tribal belt' stretching from Rajasthan to West Bengal. North-East India, considered one of the most culturally diverse regions of the world, is a land with a high concentration of tribal population. The tribal customs and laws deeply influence the activities and decisions of the indigenous inhabitants of the region. This means that tribal laws and order impact and adjudicate the social, cultural and political aspects of the community. While the approaches, methods and practices vary in the eight states, a common characteristic of all the tribal communities is the significance of tribal customs and values and the power that they exert. As an indigenous scholar of the Naga community, my study is focused on the indigenous worldview of the community I belong to.

The paper is informed by the existing idea of the roles and representations of Naga women in social and political spaces. I primarily focus on these two factors to debunk the debated myth of a 'privileged' Naga woman. To contextualize my argument, I draw on the lived experiences of Naga women through the fictional works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao. I also refer to secondary material, like administrative records and data suitable for my study, as I intersect my argument with the narrative in these creative works. The intersection of such varied material is important for the paper as the selected texts for study, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2006) and Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), are a blend of history

and imagination, and hence there is a shared space for fictional and historical narratives. The relevance and reference to Ao and Kire's works in this paper is that, first, the narratives in their work offer a faithful representation of the role of Naga women, and second and importantly for my study, the creation of very vocal women characters despite their social positions for me is a unique spin-off of a body of literature that writes from the margins. Ao and Kire's representation of strong women characters can be taken as a reflection of their individual lives as the narratives of their works revolve around experiences that they have faced individually. Ao and Kire are strong women literary voices who have carved a niche in the academic space by creatively engaging with a global audience on the stories of communities that are buried in history.

In terms of literary production, Naga women have seamlessly exceeded their counterparts. Besides creative outputs, what is commendable is that Naga women are presently committed to offering publishing platforms and opportunities to young emerging writers. Local publishing houses such as Barkweaver, Heritage Publishing House and PenThrill Publication House are led by women and are working towards encouraging creative literary production by young emerging writers from the state. Quantitatively also, there is a consistent increase in the number of Naga women writers, scholars and critics. There are a few noteworthy contributions to Naga society, customs and traditions by the earlier generation of male writers. However, in terms of creative writing (fiction and poetry) there is still an evident gap. In the recent past, we have seen a gradual contribution by young male Naga writers such as Sentilong Ozukum and Wedekhro Naro. However, compared to the literary contributions of Naga women writers, it is quite right to state that women writers have surpassed their male counterparts. While most of the writers write out of passion, Easterine Kire and Monalisa Changkija give us another perspective. Kire and Changkija share an understanding that the lack of opportunities for Naga women in social, political and economic aspects as well as in decision making are reasons for their

passion for creative writing. Changkija says, 'Being precluded from inheriting land, Naga women have taken to education with missionary zeal.' (Monalisa Changkija, 'Equality's time has come,' *The Indian Express*, February 7, 2017, accessed on October 20, 2018). Similarly, Easterine Kire says, 'Naga women today are far better off than their counterparts 50 years ago... Today there are educated and successful women in every field. Indeed, literary pursuits have become a popular vocation among the women.' (quoted in Hanghal 'A Writer Born From the Shadow Of Violence,' *The Citizen*, June 2016, accessed on November 4, 2018). Hence, it is very timely that the creative works of Naga women writers are being recognised, and equally important that their narratives are understood, as they are often deeply rooted in the history of the community.

The Naga people are an ethnic group of several tribes native to the North-eastern part of India. They are traditionally an oral society and speak distinct Tibeto-Burman languages. The state of Nagaland officially recognizes sixteen Naga tribes. English is the official language of the state and is used for communication between the tribes that speak around 60 native dialects. While the tribes share many common traits, each is distinct; and hence, Ayinla Shilu Ao, a Naga author, rightly remarks on the vast diversity when she says, 'every tribe could virtually be a nation unto itself' (quoted in *Nagas: Hidden Hill People of India*, 2009, p. 2). The Nagas follow patriarchal social norms and therefore the menfolk take over superior roles in all decision-making. Naga society is deeply bound by a set of tribal rules, framed according to the tribal way of life, that are known as Naga customary laws. It is important to understand that each tribe has its own distinctive characteristics (in terms of language, festivals, dress and food); and hence, every tribe has its own effective system of self-governance. The laws and practices are framed to suit the specific tribe's customs, and therefore, it is quite impossible to have common Naga laws and customs.

While the so-called Naga customary laws give a lot of freedom and authority to the Naga people in decision-making, the same laws

are also prohibitive to a large extent. This restrictive practice becomes visible especially when Naga women come into the picture. A recent and suitable example being the vehement opposition by the male-dominated Naga tribal bodies to the 33 per cent reservation for women in the 2017 urban local bodies (ULB) elections where Article 371 (A) of the Naga customary laws was used to cloak women's demand for justice and equality. It is correct to state that the customary laws are deeply rooted in patriarchy. Alongside other secondary material, this paper also cites information related to the ULB elections to highlight the perspectives on gender roles prevalent in contemporary Naga society, as it is useful for accentuating my argument about the lack of gender equality through the narrative of the literary works.

NAGA WOMEN AND THE POPULAR DISCOURSE

The status of women across all societies has, no doubt, improved considerably. However, we are yet to arrive at and achieve uniformity/equality in all sectors of social and political participation. Although Indian society, which is deeply entrenched in patriarchy, struggles to recognize the contributions and capabilities of women, contemporary women are beginning to change the normative narrative across academics and administration. This is a welcome change. This change in narrative is visible among Naga women in their fight against and resistance to patriarchy, particularly to find a position in the political process. What is remarkable is that the struggle, which is centuries old, is steadily achieving a voice of recognition, an immediate example being the 2018 state elections in which women candidates contested and represented the political process. This indicates that Naga women have begun to take on positions in the social, economic and political process. Changkija discusses the success stories of contemporary Naga women as they successfully manage to carve a niche in society through honest and capable contributions. Changkija says:

Being precluded from inheriting land, Naga women have taken to education with missionary zeal. Today, Naga women excel in the public and private spheres academically, intellectually and to a certain extent economically — this is frightening to the Naga male, who continues to expect the woman to be dependent on him...The new Naga woman is very different from our subservient grandmothers, which is truly frightening to the Naga male, who has failed to and/or refuses to understand and appreciate how much the world has changed from the days of British colonials and American missionaries (Changkija, 'Equality's time has come,' *The Indian Express*, February 7, 2017, accessed on October 20, 2018).

The 'subservient grandmothers' that Changkija mentions reminds me of Grandmother Vibano in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007). A close reading of the novel shows that the grandmother is a suitable example and reference for 'subservient grandmothers' whose values contradict the approach of the 'new Naga woman.' In the novel, Dielieno's grandmother embodies matriarchal hegemony. However, if we take a close look at the grandmother's narrative, we see that the power she exerts on the young female protagonist is primarily owing to a fear of society rather than a contribution to the community's cultural values.

Similar to every patriarchal society, a Naga woman's role is very restricted, and hence her space is very limited. I prefer saying that an indigenous Naga woman is twice subjugated: by the patriarchal social system on the one hand, and on the other, by the stringent tribal laws and customs that restrict her participation in larger social activities by limiting her resources and opportunities. This inaccessibility and lack of participation mainly stems from tribal laws and customs that are ironically defined and framed exclusively by male members/elders in society. This naturally leaves little room for debate or conversation as it reflects an exclusive one-sided approach and also clearly shows how the customary laws directly reinforce patriarchy. Because Naga women, to me, are twice subjugated, a few questions worth pondering over are: i) how different is the status of Naga women or women in

other tribal societies from women in mainland India, especially in the context of scholarship that celebrates the democratic position of women from the North-East, or, a situation that is to the contrary, ii) is the social and political standing of Naga women even poorer than that of the women from the mainland?

For answers to these questions it is imperative to define what constitutes Naga customary laws, as my preliminary research reveals that tribal laws play a significant role in contributing to this gender gap.

Naga women, as compared to their mainland counterparts, enjoy certain privileges, as they do not have to adhere to certain rigid customs and practices. The geographical location, religion, and mainly tribal laws and customs contribute to the disparities between Naga women and their mainland counterparts. However, the extent of Naga women's freedom is not inclusive as it fails to cater to their opportunities beyond a few spaces (mostly the domestic space). While women from the mainland deal with social evils such as the practices of dowry, female infanticide, domestic violence and the caste system, tribal or Naga women are marginalized politically and economically as they are barred from access to resources allocated by the state and central governments, which since time immemorial, have been controlled by men. The position of Naga women and their mainland counterparts shows that democracy in its truest form impacts and affects only one gender. Changkija's remark reflects the singularity of the democratic ideal existing in Naga society:

Much as Naga scholars acclaim Nagas' 'purest form of democracy' in sovereign village-republics and compare it to the 'democracy' of the Greek city-states, the fact is, this 'democracy' is pertinent only to males — only males have the right to land ownership; only males can participate in the village parliament (Changkija, 'Equality's time has come,' *The Indian Express*, February 7, 2017, accessed on October 20, 2018)

A look at the social and political standing of Naga women reveals an even more glaring difference in terms of gender privileges. What is

noteworthy here is that despite the various social issues that envelope the women from the mainland they have managed to secure a place in terms of their participation in legislative and executive bodies, as opposed to the largely invisible presence of Naga women. While the reason for this absence has contributed to disapproval of women's reservations in the recent ULB elections, this event is not the only eye-opener. The question of gender justice goes back to 1980 when 25 per cent of the seats in Village Development Boards' management committees were allocated to women. Despite this, not a single woman has been elected in the Nagaland Legislative Assembly (NLA) elections held so far. Kham Khan Suan Hausing in his essay 'Equality as Tradition and Women's Reservation in Nagaland' examines women's inability to get elected to NLA in elections held between 1964 and 2013 and puts forward an important point when he states:

This (result) is remarkable given that the average voter turnout of women in the 12 assembly elections during this period stands at 78.3%, which is just 0.2% below the 78.5% turnout of male voters. Interestingly, women have exceeded men's electoral participation in eight of the 12 assembly elections held so far. This is puzzling given that Nagaland is one of the most progressive states of India in terms of key gender indicators (Hausing, 2018, p. 249).

The 2018 NLA elections had five women candidates, which took the total of Naga women candidates who have stood for assembly elections since 1964 to 19. However, the results were negative despite concerted efforts by all these candidates who had a common goal—achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. A few significant scattered comments from various social media platforms are mentioned here to substantiate this point. Rakhila, contesting as a BJP nominee stated, 'Men in power do not perform. I will do what they haven't done so far' (quoted in 'Nagaland Assembly elections 2018,' *The Indian Express*, February 15, 2018, accessed on October 25, 2018). Awan Konyak representing the newly formed Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) said, 'Women make significant contributions to the society every day. Their problems, however,

are often ignored. I want to focus on gender equality and women empowerment', and speaking in the context of the Mangyanpula constituency which she represented, she said, 'The ground reality in this constituency is horrible even after 50 years of the state's formation' (quoted in 'Nagaland Assembly elections 2018,' *The Indian Express*, February 15, 2018, accessed on October 25, 2018). Their opinions reveal a readiness to undertake social, economic and political responsibilities and to participate in decision-making bodies.

The freedom and privileges that a Naga woman enjoys because of caste and class divisions are often universalized in scholarly discourse. A Naga woman's non-conformity with these practices surely sets her in a more favourable position than her counterparts elsewhere. However, the problem is when this status results in generalized statements and studies that project Naga women as 'empowered' and liberated by only focusing on these aspects or by comparing their status with women from mainland India (which is not a correct argument as one needs to understand the social, cultural, economic and religious differences in both these spaces). In comparison, Naga women (or women from the North-East) might be in a better position, but these women are also living within the frame of patriarchy and have no alternatives. Therefore, the notion of 'privilege'/'equal' becomes questionable.

Writer-journalist Indrani Raimedhi makes a remarkable contribution in her book, *My Half of The Sky* (2014), in which she discusses the lives of twelve women achievers from the region through interviews. Raimedhi's objective is breaking the common myth of 'liberated' North-East women in the mainstream imagination. In the foreword to the book, veteran journalist B.G. Verghese makes a noteworthy remark which aligns with what my essay's aim is. He says, 'the notion that, unlike their sisters in most other parts of the country, north-eastern women necessarily enjoy a greater degree of freedom and an equal and even privileged position in society is exaggerated' (Raimedhi 2015, p. ix). This exaggeration is true and even more apparent if one examines it in tandem with the narrative of creative work by contemporary women writers such as Kire and Ao,

as their personal experiences/observations become the fabric of the stories that they write which portray a collective experience of Naga womanhood. Easterine Kire claims this faithful representation as she talks about her book *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007):

The little girl [Dielieno] is a combination of many little girls...I put together my experience of school and growing up to piece Lieno's experience into a typical childhood experience. I was bullied at school as the youngest in my class; she is bullied at school. Dielieno actually means, errand girl, so it is a name that designates what the status of a girl-child is, she is considered good for running errands and looking after the house. Nothing very wrong with that but grandmother's way of raising her harshly and preferring the male-children, I felt, was wrong and I have seen that in many families (quoted in *Gender Discrimination*, 2018, p. 15).

Similarly, Temsula Ao draws on indigenous social and political realities of the place and the community she belongs to. Each of the women characters she talks of in *These Hills Called Home* (2006) portray the 'new Naga woman,' a term used by Changkija. In most of Ao's work, both in poetry and fiction, we see a conscious attempt to critique the erased and hidden historical experiences of Naga women's existence. Ao designs the narrative of the marginalized women characters by transferring their positions from victims into agents, as the women in most of her stories actively take control of the chaotic social and political disorder. Rengleen Kongsong deliberates on Ao's women characters in her essay 'Women Frontliners: A Study of Victimization and Agency In Temsula Ao's Fictions' in which she states:

Temsula Ao's fictions are significant for their strong marginalized characters who not only present their side of the story through their voice, and hence their version of history, but also recount the strength of these women who came out triumphant with their humanity intact amidst the oppressive nature of the private space. These characters frequently assume new roles and responsibilities

participating in political struggles redefining traditional roles and existing gender relations (Kongsong, 2017, p. 67).

What is interesting in the narratives of writers like Kire and Ao is their deep sense of rootedness and attachment to preserving the community's culture. Kire in particular shows consciousness in maintaining the essence of her mother tongue (Tenyimi) as she uses and deploys native expressions and terminologies in her work. The inclusion of an indigenous narrative by Naga or North-eastern writers is a recurring theme in the context of their works. Writers like Kire and Ao look at their embedded culture as a process of preservation and continuity of the people. This concept of continuity is essential given that their works, which can be placed under the category of realistic fiction, re-define the permanence of culture and tradition. In an academic lecture by Aruni Kashyap at The City University of New York on 18th May 2012 titled, 'The Peripheral Imagination: Writing the Invisible India', Kashyap talks about the narrative representation of literary texts from the North-East that is often more than just an imaginative story. He refers to texts such as Lummer Dai's *The Laughter of the Earth* (1963), Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (1988) and Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2006). Using these texts as examples, Kashyap brings to light the literary scholarship from the region that is not fixed to a restrictive narrative space of violence but exudes a certain sense of the community's cultural aesthetics in its oral narrative expression. The texts that Kashyap mentions tell the stories of Adi tribes' complex entry into modernity through a set of memorable characters, three high caste widows in a religious monastery in southern Assam, or the human side of the bloody Naga insurgency ('The Peripheral Imagination: Writing the Invisible India,' *Assam Times*, June 2012, accessed October 31, 2018). These works weave intricate narratives alongside a distinct linguistic style that defines the aesthetic characteristics that are often sidelined under an overwhelming political narrative. On the

idea of understanding the narrative of North-eastern literature as a representation of realistic fiction, Kashyap says:

One of the most important mediums connecting different cultures is realist fiction. More we read about a certain people, community and the nation through their fiction, closer they become for us ('The Peripheral Imagination: Writing the Invisible India,' 2012).

As stated earlier, Naga society functions in parallel with a set of tribal laws and customs that are unique to each tribe. This set of customary laws has been surprisingly and interestingly framed and regulated by the male members of society since the time of their implementation. This one-sided control was unfortunately sidelined for a long time perhaps with the understanding that in a patriarchal society certain decisions rest in the hands of a few. However, as Naga women become successful on various platforms, the old policies will require re-examination as they no longer suit the demands of present society and, importantly, because it is an uneasy existence. 'Progressive' Naga men should implement laws and measures to bring a change in the gender narrative and work towards curbing some disturbing stereotypical images of Naga women and collectively of North-eastern women created in the mainstream imagination. This negativity exists and is current and therefore requires equal attention alongside the over-riding problem of terrorism that often becomes the singular image of the North-East.

NAGA CUSTOMARY LAWS

Naga customary laws fall within the ambit of Article 371 (A) of the Indian Constitution, which lays down the following grants to the state of Nagaland. These grants included in Clause 1 protecting the religious and social practices, ownership and transfer of land as well as safeguarding customary laws and procedures:

- (1) Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution,
 - (a) no Act of Parliament in respect of
 - (i) religious or social practices of the Nagas,
 - (ii) Naga customary law and procedure,
 - (iii) administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law,
 - (iv) ownership and transfer of land and its resources,shall apply to the State of Nagaland unless the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland by a resolution so decides;

What is troubling and incomplete in this clause is that Naga customary laws only briefly state what protects the Naga identity. They do not define what encompasses the laws and procedures, and hence, this is the first gap that affirms the ambiguity of customary laws. Naga customs and traditions are diverse. Each of the sixteen Naga tribes takes pride in its own cultural narrative that is translated into distinct and unique festivals and cultural practices including food and lifestyle. This diversity extends to the practices of each tribe which has its own effective system of self-governance that is framed as per the values of the community. This heterogeneity informs us of the absence of homogenous customary laws. What then constitutes Naga customary laws and procedures? This is the second gap. Dolly Kikon in her essay 'Gender Justice In Naga Society – Naga Feminist Reflections' rightfully and strongly states, 'if people argue that all Naga rights since time immemorial is determined by this article [Article 371 (A)] and that this will determine the future of the Nagas, the enormous social and political transformation in Naga society is doomed' (Kikon, 'Gender Justice in Naga Society,' *Raiot: Challenging the Consensus*, February 2017, accessed on November 3, 2018).

Naga customary laws remained in Article 371 (A) of the Indian Constitution till 2017. The laws unexpectedly surfaced and drew the attention of the people, as they were immediately required to protect the so-called men's rights in areas that Naga tribal men felt were

beginning to be encroached upon by women. The most vulnerable area for the menfolk is the increasing presence of women in the public sector such as their participation in local and global politics that naturally means that they will play an equal role in the decision-making process. However, such inclusive participatory responsibility across all aspects has long been recognized by thinkers such as John Stuart Mill. In his book *Three Essays: On Liberty, Representative Government, The Subjection of Women* (1893) Mill underlines the need 'to have intellectual and social diversity in governments by including representatives of both majority and minorities, including women, if they were to be effective and legitimate' (quoted in Hausing, 2018, p. 248). It is both imperative and important to understand that the need for gender neutrality is not for weighing the capability of one over the other but to invite large and diverse participation and, importantly, to initiate a dialogue across gender and race. Scandinavian and Rwandan case studies on the impact of large-scale women's participation in Parliament show a concerted effort by these women in some important areas such as health, education and social issues which are issues experienced by women across the globe (Dahlerup and Friedenvall, 2005). Such efforts help in addressing and leading to change by mobilizing support for problems such as child rights and violence against women.

Despite global efforts on inclusive social and political participation, Naga customary laws are still very restrictive for undertaking such measures. The customary laws seemingly operate as a medium that allows Naga men to prove their masculine powers, control and influence. This raises a disquieting question for a state that, according to the 2011 Census had the lowest differences in male and female literacy rates. Hence, it is important to break down and closely examine what constitutes Naga customary laws in a society that is pluralistic with ancestral tribal customs and practices that differ from one tribe to the other. Let us look at the varied opinions about the law on the measures taken to implement 33 per cent reservation for women

as found across social media posts on the political chaos during the ULB elections.

Shikuto Zalipu, General Secretary of the Nagaland Goan Bura Federation (NGBF) says, customary laws provide 'a model for Naga self-governance' (quoted in 'What is customary law for the Nagas?' *The Morung Express*, February 2017, accessed on September 18, 2018). Nandita Haksar, a human rights lawyer, teacher, campaigner and writer relates this to a similar practice in indigenous communities in Australia and Canada. She further says that for the indigenous Naga community these laws are authorized by the Supreme Court of India for the community to independently conduct and take decisions in specific 'areas of life' that extends to marriage and inheritance (quoted in 'What is customary law for the Nagas?' *The Morung Express*, February 2017, accessed on September 18, 2018). Dolly Kikon, a Naga scholar, recognizes the disparities between the insubstantial statement of Article 371 (A) and the rather vehement agitation on women's role in the political process. She attests to the power interplay by stating:

If Naga customary law is seen as the foundation of justice, the exclusion of women from these powerful decision making-bodies negates the entire notion that these are pillars of justice... Article 371 (A) is a prime example of the patriarchal nature of the Indian constitution that bestows the Naga male bodies to have full authority and power to interpret customary affairs covering social, religious, and criminal cases. (Kikon, 'Gender Justice in Naga Society,' *Raiot: Challenging the Consensus*, February 2017, accessed on November 3, 2018).

An article by Saqib Khan published in *Raiot*, an online magazine from the North-East, underscores that tribal customary laws are a hindrance to achieving gender equality. The author focuses on Naga women's struggle for reservation (specifically the ULB elections which received so much attention worldwide) and addresses the lack of political and economic rights for women. Critiquing the customary laws as obstacle in building an equitable and just society, Khan states,

‘The women’s struggle in Nagaland shows that like other places and societies, the demands of political and economic rights, in this case women’s equality, often bring out the contradictions existing in a society’, while simultaneously drawing the readers to an important point of how, ‘popular discourses on tribes and northeast region often overlook such contradictions and instead tend to highlight “customary traditions” or “harmonious relations”’ (Khan, ‘Customary Laws Vs. Gender Equality In Nagaland,’ *Raiot: Challenging the Consensus*, February 2017, accessed on November 4, 2018).

A close look at some of these views and opinions rules out that Article 371 (A) was passed in 1963 to: i) enable Naga people to become citizens of India and, ii) to be able to establish a position to independently administer and validate the indigenous system of governance that is different from mainstream practices in certain areas. However, in contemporary Naga society these processes that serve and act as an enabler for the community are very singular. The reasons for their singularity vary. First, they lack inclusivity as Naga women are kept at a distance and cannot question their basic rights of participation or voice their identity through representation. Second, the failure to document women’s expressions shows that Naga customary laws are a breeding space of male hegemonic practices. It is very clear that the law interprets a one-sided approach that fits the interests of men only. The question worth re-thinking here is, do reservations for Naga women in the political process disregard customary laws or do they actually demean the patriarchal social set-up? A preliminary evaluation of the opinions stated here results in two possible reasons, with a stronger inclination towards the latter: First, the vehement opposition by male traditional bodies visibly reflects that the primary concern for Naga male bodies is customary laws being a topic of question and contestation, which further validates that customary laws are directly proportional to patriarchy. Second, and in relation to the first observation, is a certain exploitative use of Article 371 (A) to further propagate the denial of reservations to women by underscoring the question of justice. Kikon underlines this in an

essay in which she says, 'The denial of rights to Naga women by citing Article 371(A) is not new and has nothing to do with upholding the customary law and culture of the Naga people. It is a way to propagate male hegemony and authority in Naga society, cloaked in the language of justice' (Kikon, 'What kind of Nagaland are we moving towards?' *Scroll.in*, March 2017, accessed on September 20, 2018).

EGALITARIANISM AND NAGA SOCIETY

Naga society, which does not have class and caste divisions, enjoys a better social position than the other societies in India where the societal structures serve as a marker of an individual's identity. The absence of these factors is very appreciative and has given Naga society an image of being more advanced, inclusive and sensitive to social issues. This claim is visible in the statistical report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) (2016) which found that Nagaland had the third lowest recorded incidence of crimes ('Nagaland: Safest for women,' *The Morung Express*, December 2017, accessed on October 15, 2018). The low criminal records recognize Nagaland as the safest place for women and the only state in the Indian union to have the crime rates against women in single digits (6), as shown by NCRB data ('Women are safest in Nagaland,' *The Hindu*, August 2015, accessed November 2, 2018). Neingulo Krome, secretary general of the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights, responds to this data by stating, 'Ours [Nagaland] is a very peaceful society. There are negligible cases of crime within society, and if we come across anyone with criminal instincts, the person is usually ostracized from the society' ('Women are safest in Nagaland,' *The Hindu*, August 2015, accessed on November 2, 2018). Krome's statement throws light on the significant roles and functions of tribal laws and how they perform in tandem with the laws of the country. This means that Naga customary laws are not a standalone power resting in the hands of a few but that they function

in proximity with the constitutional laws of the country. Customary laws are a product of the Naga village parliament (regarded as the custodian of Naga culture and traditions), recognized by the British and the Indian government. The significantly low crime rates extend to the entire North-eastern region with states like Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh contributing to only 0.1 per cent of the total crimes in the country ('Women are safest in Nagaland,' *The Hindu*, August 2015, accessed on November 2, 2018).

The classless and casteless Naga society brings into discussion the principle of egalitarianism that is widely used to define the Naga way of life. The egalitarian principle that prioritizes and believes in equality as a tradition is often used as an identity marker to highlight the tribal 'others' from the inegalitarian caste-Hindu societies in India. However, a close study of the gender roles in Naga society affirms that the term is contrary to the values of contemporary Naga society with the concept of egalitarianism gradually losing its significance. To me, the use of or association with the term 'egalitarian' in the context of Naga society is very ambiguous. The reason for this ambiguity is the absence of gender inclusivity across all social, cultural and political levels. An egalitarian Naga society will continue to be an uneasy ideology till equality in its truest sense is achieved; or perhaps till a Naga woman is able to exercise her power, privileges and capabilities, this association and presumption will never be fully defined. Kham Khan Suan Hausing essay 'Equality as Tradition and Women's Reservation in Nagaland' throws light on the principle of egalitarianism as one of the common perceptions of tribal societies in the North-East region (2018, p. 250). Hausing relates this by focusing on the attempts of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly (NLA) to extend 33 per cent reservation to women in ULBs. Similarly, in another essay titled 'Equality as Tradition: Women's Role in Naga Society,' U. A. Shimray (2002) questions the ambiguous role and status of women in society despite the significant increase in their education and employment ('Equality as Tradition: Women's Role in Naga Society,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 2002, accessed on October 2, 2018). These reflections are important for recognizing

the uneasy inegalitarian existence in Naga society. What needs to be examined here is the root cause for the glaring differences in people's presumptions and pragmatic practices of the principles in the context of gender equality in Naga society. The stark differences, as identified by Shimray, in the low social status of Naga women and their relatively higher increase in education and employment need to be addressed.

The degree of freedom that is extended to women members of Naga society requires re-examination as the popular definition of women in this part of the world is often oversimplified. Ira Das did a study on the status of women from the North-East versus mainland India. Das' essay 'Status of Women: North Eastern Region of India versus India' (2013) brings an important point to the discussion. Although the essay collectively looks at women from the eight states of the North-East, its relevance to my study comes from a common objective. Das' objective is debunking the popular belief of the 'privileged' status of women from the North-East through a quantitative study. Das observes the low growth in per capita income in the region which terms the North-East as a backward region which is contrary to the perception of a relatively higher status given to women in the region as compared to the all India average. Das' study looks at a few indicators—female literacy, female workforce participation, gross enrolment ratio, dropout rates, sex ratio, female infant mortality, age at marriage and women's participation in decision-making. The study shows a favourable position for women from the North-East in some of these indicators. However, there are puzzling contradictions in the results, for instance, there are high literacy rates, and at the same time there are also high dropout rates. The result of 'workforce participation' variables shows a high level of women's labour participation in most of the North-East states (the author specifically mentions North-East states with 'hilly regions'). However, what is interesting here are the types of roles that women perform. Studies show that the higher female workforce participation rate is linked with women's engagement in field work such as rice cultivation, an activity that is more likely to be prevalent in rural areas.

Based on the results of select indicators, Das concludes that there is a low degree of ‘freedom of movement and low level of control over themselves [women from the North-East]’ (Das, 2013, p. 1). She adds:

High female employment rate may satisfy ‘Practical Gender Needs’ (e.g provision of water, healthcare, employment etc.) only not the ‘Strategic Gender Needs’ (e.g power and control, protection from domestic violence, equal wage, and control over own body etc.) (Das 2013, p. 7).

The studies mentioned here rightly question the non-existent egalitarian aspects in the state, which further add to the Naga imbroglio. Through various platforms, Naga women have raised the discourse on gender discrimination. Naga women academicians like Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Nini Lungalang and Monalisa Changkija, to name just a few, have shaped the literary identity of the indigenous community as they serve as agents of societies that have had to endure a history of neglect, struggle for discovering their identities and importantly, carve a niche in academia. Women’s representation in public spaces is gaining momentum with institutions such as the Naga Mothers’ Association (NMA), the Sisterhood Network and several community based women’s rights organizations including Watsu Mungdang, an apex women’s organization of the Ao tribe. Despite the Naga women’s incessant demand for political representation or economic empowerment the menfolk continue to turn a deaf ear. Rosemary Zürich, advisor to NMA, states, ‘The identity of Naga women for the world lies behind a veil of liberty; in reality, a Naga woman is conditioned by oppressive customary laws and has no voice in making decisions for her community’ (quoted in ‘Discourse on gender discrimination,’ *The Morung Express*, September 2012, accessed on October 15, 2018). The women’s organization of the Ao tribe, Watsu Mungdang, was formed in 1983 in Mokokchung after a series of sexual assaults and human rights violations. The organization’s primary role is to oversee, protect and address topics concerning Ao women while simultaneously extending their participation in inter-tribal women

and state affairs. Chubasangla Longkumer, president of the Watsu Mungdang's Kohima branch, talks about how the organization has started catering to an inclusive need for women's role in society. She says, 'When we look at the family structures, we are not deprived of any right, we are liberated, but when it comes to political representation or economic empowerment, we are far behind. Economic independence of a woman will pave the way for her empowerment in many other aspects of her life, so that's our focus now' (quoted in 'March of the Naga Women,' *Hindustan Times Media*, November 2017, accessed October on 15, 2018).

The 'assigned' roles followed by earlier generations of Naga women are limiting and can no longer be accommodated in the present-day society. Men's reluctance to revolutionize the old village polity further destroys and denies the 'personal freedom' that Naga women have enjoyed over the years as the process of endowing 'personal freedom' to an individual should encompass freedom of all kinds and in all spaces (private and public). The exclusion of Naga women from institutions of power adds to the misleading claim of equality in an 'egalitarian Naga society.' Instead, what we see is a rising level of conservatism in modern Naga society. Highlighting the discrimination and insensitivity of the Ao society that she belongs to, Changkija says, 'you can take the man out of the village but you can't take the village out of the man!' (quoted in 'Discourse on gender discrimination,' *The Morung Express*, September 2012, accessed on October 15, 2018).

GENDERED SPACE IN A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY

The past and present Naga society is so steeped in achieving an ideal community oriented society that some of the urgent concerns and issues that plague the state remain sidelined. Alongside, Naga society has a long and a complex history of political violence and conflict which has affected the indigenous Naga community in several ways

such as loss of individual lives and community values, loss of peace, living under the reign of constant fear and terror, shift in geography and encroachment of indigenous land and culture. This political chapter of Naga history is quoted often and has been extensively studied by scholars across the world. Contemporary creative writings produced from the region mainly focus on topics of indigenous political conflicts that ravaged the state and presently there is commendable scholarship on these works. Temsula Ao's debut work of fiction, *These Hills Called Home* (2006), is an example of the lives of everyday ordinary men and women caught in the web of the social and political disorder. Easterine Kire's first novel *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) is a historical novel that describes the battle between British forces and one Naga hamlet of Khonoma village. Both these debut works tell us that writers from the region recognize the importance of recording the political narrative of the region through lived experiences. Having lived such experiences, it is natural that the issues and concerns of the Naga movement become one of the primary narratives of their work. However, the overwhelming political narrative of the region has blurred several other agendas that plague the state starting with gender justice in Naga society. Gender and empowerment is an ongoing discourse and is not a new topic in Naga society.

Naga women writers are conscious of their subordinate position and have used their writing to express how women are treated in Naga society, a community that is known for its egalitarian values. *A Terrible Matriarchy* (Kire, 2007), is one among the few texts that reflects the ideals and values and how they shape the roles of a Naga woman. What contributes to the uniqueness of this work is the subtle ways in which Kire underlines the power and control of patriarchy. Kire carefully brings in maternal power as the primary subject in the novel which exerts physical and mental trauma on the girl child Dielieno. The conformist role of the grandmother and the principles she abides by is a result of the deeply entrenched Naga patriarchal society. There is no male physical presence in the work, however, there is a subtle yet very powerful force of the patriarchal social structure that vibrates in the

background of the narrative. One can see this spill over to the role of the grandmother who ably takes control of the lives of the three women in the novel (Dielieno, Bano and Dielieno's mother). She is a good example of 'subservient grandmothers' used by Changkija to refer to the conformist attitude of the earlier generation of Naga women. This submissive role in many ways comes through the social, political and economic influence around the early 1960s and 1970s in Naga society as Kire elaborates, 'The story is set in a time of rapid social change, the Nagaland of 1960s in particular,' while further expressing that the novel is aimed at changing, 'the way things have been for women' (quoted in Hanghal 'A Writer Born From the Shadow Of Violence,' *The Citizen*, June 2016, accessed on November 4, 2018). Set against a complex period, Kire projects the significant role of history in the Naga shaping of their customs and traditions. In the midst of a transitional phase in the history of Naga society, the women in society felt additional consequences as their identity and narrative were historically silenced and devalued by being denied opportunities in public spaces. We see a continuous pattern of 'selective participation' as women are still restricted from getting involved in matters of decision-making in particular.

In *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), Dielieno is challenged physically and mentally as she is a girl child. The title of the novel relates to the matriarchal hegemony that is played out by the grandmother who represses the agony of a girl child in a male dominated society. In the process of training Dielieno to become a 'suitable' girl according to society's expectations of a girl/woman, her grandmother fails to realize that her authority is contributing to the principles of a patriarchal society that denies women freedom of choice and decision. We notice this early in the novel as the grandmother rebukes Dielieno's mother for not engaging her 5-year-old daughter in household chores. She states, 'The girl must be made to work at home. Don't let her run about with her brothers anymore. That is not the way to bring up girl-children' (Kire, 2007, p. 4). Beside the grandmother's traditionalist view, there is a troubling way in which she denies an identity to

Dielieno as she refers to her as ‘the girl’ rather than addressing her by her name. As Dielieno questions this puzzling identity given to her, her grandmother swiftly responds to her ‘cheeky’ (Kire, 2007, p. 4) attitude. Interestingly and relatedly, Dielieno in the Angami dialect means ‘errand girl’.

In the process of exerting traditional values and customs, Dielielo begins to question her position as she clearly observes the different treatment meted out to her and her brothers. Dielieno, to me, represents the attributes of a Naga woman in many ways as she is fully conscious of society’s ideal expectation of a good Naga wife and mother. She realizes this on many occasions, particularly on one occasion when her grandmother disapproves of her parents’ proposal that the young girl receive formal education, as she states, ‘In our day... girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learnt the housework... I really do not approve of girls getting educated. It only makes them get fancy notions about themselves and they forget their place in the family’ (Kire, 2007, p. 23). As Dielieno gradually matures she begins to question the unfair and rather rigid customs of her community. While she is already aware of the injustices meted out by her grandmother she also begins to understand the harsh realities of being born a girl. One such occurrence in the novel is when Bano, a young woman who lives with her grandmother, tells Dielieno of an unusual customary practice of the community. The following is an excerpt from the novel where Bano narrates the story of Dielieno’s friend Vimenuo’s family and the reasons for Vimenuo’s father’s unruly behaviour. The narrative is from Dielieno’s perspective:

Bano said that he [Vimenuo’s father] was angry his wife had given birth only to daughters. He wanted a boy to carry on his name. I asked, ‘Aren’t the three girls [Vimenuo and her sisters] doing that?’ But Bano replied that girl-children are never considered real members of the family. Their mission in life is to marry and have children and be able to cook and weave cloth and look after the household. If they got married, they would always be known as somebody’s wife or somebody’s mother and never somebody’s

daughter. That way they could not carry on their father's name. I thought hard about it but could not think of anything to replace that system. (Kire 2007, p. 26)

This specific incident in the novel is one of many instances when we see Dielieno beginning to question the status of a girl/woman in Naga society. In the ensuing narrative in the novel, Dielieno gradually tries to find alternate ways of becoming self-sufficient and useful to the society that she belongs to. She subtly though consistently tries to re-define the expectations from a girl. Dielieno is a combination of many little girls and her unwavering attitude against the forces of society thrown at her by her grandmother is a good representation of contemporary Naga women fighting to establish a voice and identity despite the looming force of patriarchy. Prevented from achieving ownership (material and non-material), as per customs and traditions, Naga women have taken to education with zeal and success. This is reflected in Dielieno's attitude as she realizes that education is the only way to change the rigid system and an attribute which will set her apart in ideology from the older generation of women. However, for Dielieno this is not an easy task as her grandmother continues to harp on a woman's limitations. In one section in the novel, Dielieno is rebuked for being ambitious as she prepares to set off for college education. Her grandmother reminds her of the bitter truth, 'a woman's role is to marry and bear children, remember that. That is her most important role. Men don't like to marry educated wives' (Kire, 2007, p. 206). In the process of protecting and valuing the community's cultural norms, the grandmother internalizes patriarchy and becomes a victim of subservience as she unconsciously, 'keeps herself rigidly confined to her gendered role...and limits the other women in her household to virtual prisoners' (Kire, 2017, p. 56).

The grandmother represents a tradition that is reluctant to change as opposed to the 'new Naga woman' who is 'generally more open, willing and able to adapt to new ideas and change and generally to global culture, politically, economically and socially' (Changkija, 'Equality's time has come,' *The Indian Express*, February 7, 2017,

accessed on October 20, 2018). The grandmother also represents: i) the womenfolk of the past whose identity is a construct of society and who present themselves as subordinate to men, and ii) depicts society's consciousness that is entrenched in traditional practices. Temsula Ao in an essay titled 'Benevolent Subordination: Social Status of Naga Women' (2013) reflects on the possibility of a more gender inclusive Naga society and states that the process of arriving at such a vision is often 'mind-boggling and two-pronged'. She says:

The obvious opposition will be from men; but equally strong would be the opposition from a section of women who are themselves still traditionalists... and would like to continue in the state of 'benevolent subordination' rather than be involved in a struggle to reform the mind-set of men so strongly entrenched in their age-old belief in male superiority (Ao, 2013, p. 131–132).

The process of acquiring gender neutrality for Naga women means addressing male superiority and simultaneously engaging with the psychological trauma of subordination among the women. This gives rise to a conflict between tradition and modernity.

GENDER ROLES IN THESE HILLS CALLED HOME

Women have been assigned the role of subordinate figures, and their social identity and status have, time and again, not been allowed to rise above that of second-class citizens. This is not new for Naga women who are deprived of dignity and rights on the pretext of valuing social customs. However, the narrative is slowly but gradually changing as scholars from the region debunk the simplified idea of an empowered Naga woman. K B Veio Pou's essay 'Charting a Space of Their Own: Naga Women and Writing' (2015) brings into the discussion the invisible identity of Naga women. He frames his argument around the stagnant traditional values that are not conducive to contemporary Naga society. Pou draws the views and opinions of various Naga

scholars on the reality that exists at the grassroots level. He points out, 'Though women in Naga society are often said to enjoy a better status compared to most societies... the level of freedom endowed may be debatable' (Pou, 2015, p. 164). Naga scholar Eyinbeni Humtsoe observes that while cultural erosion is taking place in Naga society because of the influence of modernity, there is also an unwillingness to negotiate with tribal laws and customs. Humtsoe states, 'the Nagas have not been able to do away with cultural forces where it concerns the emancipation of women from cultural chains, which are embodied in customary laws' (quoted in Pou, 2015, p. 89).

One of the distinct characteristics of Naga writers' work is the community centric narrative as each of these writers writes about the customs and traditions of the indigenous community or the tribe that they belong to. The multiple tribes that co-exist within the state make it impossible to have a singular attribute that uniformly ties the tribes together. Ao and Kire tell stories about the communities that they belong to. Kire in *A Terrible Matriarchy* deals with the pressure of matriarchal control in Angami society. Her other works like *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and *Forest Song* (2011) deal with the spiritual aspect of her community. Ao deals with the social, political and economic transitions during the 1960s and 1970s in the Ao Naga community in *These Hills Called Home* (2006) while also defining in her poetry and other fictional works such as *Laburnum for my Head* (2009) and *Once Upon a Life* (2014), the role and status of Ao women through characters that are strongly rooted in the community. Perhaps there are various reasons why writers like Kire and Ao invent and talk about vocal women characters: i) to re-think women's existence behind a 'veil of liberty' for generations, and ii) to debunk the common presumption that Naga women are given space to celebrate their choices and opportunities in taking decisions in the private and public spaces. Like every other Naga tribe, Ao society has a rich oral literature in the form of poetry, songs, myths and legends. Interestingly, the mythical stories of the Ao community include women-centric narratives that talk about the 'inherent power and authority' bestowed

by mythical gods on Ao women. This in itself is a useful reminder of women's capabilities in assuming roles of 'power and authority.' The oral history of the Ao community is an important reference for re-vamping contemporary societal structures that fail to recognize the identity of a woman in a democratic space. The oral narratives provide an alternative story of gender roles. Temsula Ao states in her article 'Gender and Power: Some Women-centered Narratives from Ao-Naga Folklore':

...women... as the weaker sex is often belied by certain figures from myths, legends and history the world over, wherein she is depicted as the embodiment of power of a different kind. The association of some extra-ordinary or extra-human power with women has been a curious but integral aspect of narratives of human history and civilization (Ao, 2004, p. 89).

A few references in Ao Naga folk narratives include the myth of Longkongla, a woman mythical figure who is believed to be the origin of an Ao clan called *Ozukumer* (meaning one who was transformed from a bird). Similarly, the narratives of Temsula Ao's poem 'The Tiger-Woman's Prayer' and the legend of the Ao Naga tribe 'Jina and Etiben' symbolize women's strength and prowess. Temsula Ao is among the first Ao Naga scholars to translate folk stories from the local language to English and also to offer a critical appraisal of the stories.

To a large extent, Temsula Ao's women characters in *These Hills Called Home* (2006), replicate and represent the strength and authoritative power of these mythical figures as we see the characters taking decisions beyond the domestic spaces. Ao's women characters are similar to Kire's Dielieno as they all individually yet collectively represent the experiences of Naga women. This representation is evident in Ao's stories as her characters contextualize their narratives around topics of gender roles, the community's customs and traditions and indigenous politics. These narratives are studied by Sandra A. Zagarell in her essay 'Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre' (1988) in which she talks of the technique

of communistic narrative used by women writers. Broadly, what Zagarell does is identify narratives in literature that shift from individual representation to more collective and community oriented themes. She defines a community's narrative as a 'powerful literary and theoretical alternative to the overwhelming preoccupation with the self...that genre that takes on their subject the life of a community in its everyday aspect' (Zagarell, 1988, p. 499). Her narrative of a community 'portrays the minute and quite ordinary process through which the community maintains itself as an entity' (Zagarell, 1988, p. 499). I use her theoretical approach as an essential interpretative lens as it responds coherently to the community's social and cultural change as I examine how Temsula Ao's stories are constructed. Works like *These Hills Called Home* portray people, their collective memories and the shared histories of pain and pleasure. Although the ten stories in Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2006) are weaved within the fabric of the rise of the Naga political movement in the community, my focus centres around the role of women at an important period of transition in Naga society.

One of the striking features in the stories is the unconscious celebration of women characters who take decisions and control situations. In this collection, the history of violence in Nagaland is illustrated and represented through Ao's creation of very vocal women characters. We come across strong and resilient women characters from the collection in stories like 'The Jungle Major', 'The Curfew Man', 'The Night' and 'The Pot Maker.' In 'The Curfew Man' the female character Jemtila's menial job as a housemaid is not meant to demean her observant attention towards things happening around her. Her husband's uneasy activity of serving as a 'government informer' (Ao, 2006, p. 37) during the 1960s and 1970s, a period marked by social and political chaos, and his inability to quit his job due to the disturbing consequences that could follow puts her into action in the story. She secures his freedom from a sinister bondage. A portion from the story that shows the incisive questioning by the wife speaks of the

shared history of pain caused by the political anxiety that gradually takes a toll on domestic and individual lives. Jemtila's action tells us that, 'this woman was by no means ignorant of what was happening all around them...she had to admit that they were indeed caught in a vice-like situation.' Ao says:

...she became suspicious and began to ply him with questions. Satemba admitted to her that some nights he did not come home because he got delayed while gathering some vital information for the sahib, which he could do only at night. "What information?" she persisted, "and those people you meet, don't they sleep?" He wouldn't tell her at first, but when she threatened to go to the sahib...Satemba had to tell her everything. Jemtila was furious... She also threatened him by saying, "Just wait and see, one of these days the other guys will come for you." It was only then that Satemba told her how the sahib made it clear that her continuing in his household depended on his accepting the job (Ao, 2006, p.38).

Or, consider the story 'The Night' where we come across an unusually poised woman, Imnala, from a small village who despite societal challenges, thoughtfully executes an event that eventually decides her fate. Despite being scorned by society for bearing an illegitimate child for the second time, she is not affected by such rebukes as she makes her choice:

'Come what may,' she thought, 'I shall devote my life to bringing up these two children in the best way I can. I shall finish my high school, get a job and educate them. I shall spend every ounce of my energy so that they have a better life than mine' (Ao, 2006, p. 54).

Like the women characters in these stories, in 'The Pot Maker', a young girl Sentila shows an unwavering dedication to learning the ancestral art of pottery. Despite the difficulties associated with learning this skill, she is reluctant to follow her mother's advice who

suggests a relatively comfortable skill of weaving, 'a skill highly valued as an asset in any girl' (Ao, 2006, p. 57). Sentila's determination and perseverance is the culmination of the society's expectations of a girl/woman and her 'assigned' duties. We see the complexity of tradition and modernity at play in this story. The two different categories of Naga women: the 'subservient grandmothers' and the 'new Naga woman' are visible in this story in which we see a complex mother-daughter relationship through the generation gap that exists between them. Sentila recognizes the pot-making specialty of her community, and the fact that she prefers to learn this art is interesting given that it provides economic sustenance to her family. Here, we see how a young girl realizes the contribution she can make to her family and society. While Sentila is intent in challenging herself with a more difficult art and is determined to financially support her family, we realize that the choice she makes is a retribution for Arenla's mother's remark, which she overhears one night:

The mother [Arenla] was complaining to the father about their daughter's [Sentila] indifference to weaving. She said, 'I don't know what will happen to our daughter when she grows up, she seems so reluctant to learn the craft [weaving] ... She will grow up to be a useless girl and no man will want to marry her' (Ao, 2006, p. 58).

The women characters in Ao's works are an important inclusion and contribution to my essay for understanding the importance of women's role as decision makers. Such representation of women characters in Ao and Kire's works is more than just illustrated characters necessary for the plots of the stories. Each character represents women who exercise freedom and demonstrate agency as the chief protagonists. Such representation not only blurs the gender gap but also simultaneously allows the readers to understand the importance of indigenous narratives that are primeval, distinctly local and universal all at the same time for tribal writers.

CONCLUSION

The increasing polarization and questioning of the restrictive traditional social code of conduct by Naga women tells us that Naga society has arrived at a place where nuanced conversations can be carried out. Although we are yet to arrive at building a more inclusive and gender conscious realization, the space given for discourse and deliberation is a welcome change and as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says in the context of the history of her people (the Igbo community), ‘The conversations we have are coarse. That’s not necessarily a bad thing—it’s much better than no conversations’ (‘Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie On Fiction, Feminism,’ *BuzzFeed*, August 2016, accessed on November 11, 2018).

As I bring this discourse of Naga women’s perspectives on gender to a conclusion by debunking the myth of an ‘empowered Naga woman’ and claiming that gender disparities exist in a subtle yet forceful way, I am reminded again of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s powerful speech on the dangers of a single story. This reference might perhaps be useful to enable one to listen to the other side of the story and in scholarly discourse to avoid oversimplifying the definition of freedom and equality of Naga women. In ‘The Danger of a Single Story’, Adichie talks of a reader running the risk of knowing only a ‘single story’ about another person or place, which can lead to critical misunderstandings. Taking this in the context of the essay’s discussion on the exclusive statements in scholarly discourse on gender rights of Naga society, the failure to reflect on the lived experiences of Naga women results in a ‘single story’. This leads to a condition where a single story becomes the story of a ‘catastrophe’ as Adichie remarks, ‘...show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become’ (TED. (2009 October 7). ‘The Danger of a Single Story,’ *YouTube*, accessed November 17, 2018.)

With the large-scale marginalization of women across the world that denies them participation at the social and political levels, it is impossible to overlook the same sweeping conditions faced by Naga

women. This essay contributes an important point by enabling us to reduce our collective ignorance about the real issues that plague Naga society to understand individual rights in more complex ways. It is time that the tribal laws and customs become more conducive for all genders to pave the way for a new narrative and new stories that are still 'silent and separate,' as precisely encapsulated by Mamang Dai:

Every dawn I think all the stories of the world are connected. At night another voice tells me—no, there are more stories yet that are silent and separate. There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplaced yesterday or a thousand years ago. Perhaps this is one or the other of them...there is another story from an unwritten past beyond the mountain wall (Dai, 2014, p. ix).

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