



RACIAL AND SEXUAL POLITICS: GENDER VICTIMIZATION OF INDIGENOUS TRIBES IN MAMANG DAI'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Vulnerability Studies interrogate the intersecting prism of gender, race, poverty, migration and climate change. With a multidisciplinary approach, North Eastern writings explore the postcolonial accounts of identity, ethnicity and history. Stifled by domestic and ethnic violence, women from North East India are imprisoned by the internal structures of the communities attributing them a marginalized status and pushing them to the peripheries. The battles for identity and survival betwixt militants and state agencies deny an appropriate space and make them voiceless. The fictional world of Mamang Dai focuses on the hill-dwelling Adi community of North East India, particularly placing women at the centre of narration through myriad experiences that articulate subjugation and oppression. Her women characters, though positioned in a conflict zone comprehend the racial and sexual politics and try to emanate through resistance strategies. The paper tries to figure out the agents of vulnerabilities which transform women's bodies as locales of entanglements subjected to male gaze, brutal violence and sexual politics. The framework of indigenous feminism employs an inter-sectional approach which denies a secondary role to women and grants them human rights.

Keywords: peripheries, conflict zone, sexual politics, indigenous feminism, and resistance

Received: January 21, 2024, **Accepted:** January 30, 2024, **Online Published:** February 15, 2024

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Violence can and is a recurring motif in Literature. It is emblematic of a disorder and chaos which jeopardizes thought processes and militates against happenings, which in turn is reflected in Literature and Art -

(Ananya S. Guha 'Violence and North East')

Introduction

Indian English literature is typified by diversity in culture, ethnicity, and geographical landscape/contours. The cartographic boundaries of North Eastern literature from India unfold our scrutiny to certain pertinent issues like political and ethnic conflicts, religious violence, insurgency, and violation of indigenous rights. The concept of social exclusion intercepts the folks to interrogate and articulate the myriad of problems emanating from this region. The natives witnessed the swedge between colonialist and resistance strategies giving way to a rift between two antagonistic forces in the world. Literature manifests and interlinks human perceptions and sentiments unravelling the minds of races and aeons. The writers have anthologized the uncharted regions, unblemished beliefs, and solid integrity of the North Eastern population. Political and aesthetic strands are collated by them trying to express a sense of indignation against a dissolute society marked by the erasure of indigenous values. Ethnic conflicts surface less in the

pre-independence history of North East India contrary to the series of ethnic entanglements in the post-independence period.

A prolific literato from the North East, Mamang Dai has imprinted North Eastern sentiments through *The Sky Queen*, *The Legends of Pensam*, *Stupid Cupid*, *Black Hills* and *Escaping the Land*. The chronicle and legend of the Adi tribes of Siang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh are brilliantly perceived through her exploration of roots and preservation of tribal wisdom amidst the sweep of modernization. The distinctive issues of tribal women from her community get an adequate representation in her fiction.

Objectives of the study

The paper delves into the less explored realm of Women's Writing from the Northeast with a special focus on the racial and sexual politics being manifested in their lives in differing degrees. The general tendency to homogenize the subjugated women's experience needs to be revisited in the North Eastern scenario as vulnerability occurs in different shades and



patterns. The positioning of North Eastern women at the periphery needs to be relocated to the centre by dismantling the conventional stereotypes. The women's lives have become turbulent due to the conflicts between and within the communities and against the state. The paper attempts to pinpoint the indicators that affect gender inequality by analysing its impact based on the selected texts.

Problem Statement

Gender inequality delimits women's existence and widens the gap by denying access to education, employment, and health. The bifurcation of power operated by the patriarchal ideology accentuates intra-household stratification which becomes a profound phenomenon in the world. The patriarchal ideology accentuates intra-household stratification when governed by the dictates of male supremacy and it gets manifested through subjugation and objectification of women. Ethnic strife and militant attacks are more prone to North Eastern regions. Women are the worst victims of these burnt of conflicts and rebellions and their lives are always vulnerable. Their bodies become subjected to male gaze, sexual violence and sexual politics. Movements like Meira Paibi Numit in Manipur and Naga Mother's Association voiced the atrocities against women. The recent years have seen

tremendous changes in the attempt to empower and elevate women from their subordinate status. The gradual transition from their gendered roles to peacemakers in conflict zones is perceived as a movement from clutches of existence to liberation in the public sphere of life. This transfiguration is an indicator of social change and places tribal society in the milieu of the contemporary world.

Literature Review

The universalization of women's inequality is manifested in varying magnitudes in different countries and regions. Shrivastava (2001) observes "The chief predicament of women lies in her very precarious condition of not being seen as a total human being" (p.33). Denigration of women as second-class citizens by the gendered framework reasserts this disproportion. North East Indian women are socially marginalized from engagement in society. Sen (2000) has stated, "The persistence of inequality between women and men is a problem that is sharper in Asia than in any part of the world" (p.1). Dreze and Sen (2004) have observed "This discrimination and inequality between men and women are the most crucial and cardinal disparity in most Indian societies" (p. 339). "Women are too often treated as an instrument for others to meet their desires and need rather than treating them as ends

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in their right- persons with dignity who deserve respect from laws and institutions” (Nussbaum, 2000a, 2000b). Rao (2003) in her study about the tribal women of Arunachal Pradesh records: “decisions related to major issues are taken by husbands ... Men dominated in making decisions on number of children to bear, arranging children’s marriage, taking/giving loans, sale/purchase of animals, settlement of disputes, social visits, and to some extent voting” (p. 128). Zama (2013) also echoes similar thoughts emerging from literature from the Northeast region, having undergone historical and political trauma of untold suffering and marginalization, and registers various voices that need to be heard and understood in the context of India’s multicultural mosaic. They usher in a different brand of literary repertoire in ways that depict their various communities, their unique linguistic registers, and the worldview that they project in an endeavour to preserve their cultural and ethnic identities” (p.xi).

Methodology

Race and gender are eliminated by a single-axis framework as two separate entities. Feminist theory and antiracist politics encompass the multidimensionality of women’s experience and distort the

monolithic framework operated by patriarchy and male governing dictates. The stance of theoretical erasure of North East women by the privileged group shoves them as entities of marginalization and multiple victimization. An intersectional approach actively engages the forms of subordination stemming from race and sex/gender. Racial politics define race relations in society and demarcate the peripheral occupation of minority ethnic North Eastern Women. These women are othered by dominant society as “easy going, sexually accessible, socially and culturally polluted.” Kate Millett (1969) in *Sexual Politics* “found it pertinent to define them on grounds of personal contact and interaction between members of well-defined and coherent groups: races, castes, classes and sexes. For it is precisely because certain groups have no representation in several recognised political structures that their position tends to be so stable, their oppression so continuous” (p.39).

Tribal Feminism, an offshoot of Third Wave Feminism, evaluates the experiences of women as primary and addresses a surfeit of experiences arising from patriarchal norms of the community and the interposition of the dominant hegemonies. The narrative voice being



taken by the tribal women triggers social change. Kate Shanley (1984), argues, in the context of the Native Indian experience, “the word ‘feminism’ has special meanings to Indian women, including the idea of promoting the continuity of tradition, and consequently, pursuing the recognition of tribal sovereignty” (p. 215). Tribal women’s belonging to the “place and nation” is a much-debated concept and Ramirez (2007) argues that “too often the assumption in Native communities is that we as indigenous women should defend a tribal nationalism that ignores sexism as part of our very survival as women as well as our liberation from colonization” (p. 22).

Text Analysis

Stupid Cupid (2009) recounts the lives of women characters- Adna, Mareb and Jia who migrate from Itanagar to Delhi seeking independence. These characters oscillate between conventions of tradition and modernity. The village women are represented as subjugated, impeccable, simple, and diligent to make a living while city women are portrayed as affirmative, modern and sophisticated. In Itanagar, women are engaged in both household and other jobs usually ascribed to males like cutting wood, collecting roots and vegetables and cultivation. Further these women are denied access to public spheres and not granted opportunities for personal

development. They are internalized to believe that their proper sphere is the private domestic realm as opposed to the mobility in public domains. The gendered expectation of a good wife and mother is inscribed upon them which delimits their dreams and aspirations beyond the household circle. The allotment of space and spheres by society narrows down the relational selves of these characters. Mareb’s mother perfectly fits herself within the conventions of a housewife “obeying the instructions of her father” (Dai 2009, p.37). Confinement by the internal structures of the communities and positioning at the margin stifles women’s roles. Adnan's narration supports this statement:

Mareb had never seen her mother reading nor heard her even once mention a book or an author’s name before. Perhaps she had hidden her heart. All Mareb remembered of her was her putting up curtains, sewing lace onto the borders of tablecloths and providing some semblance of grace and good living in a life that was constantly on the move ... (p.37)

The women characters who no longer want to be seated within the labyrinth of hierarchy and traditions migrate to cities seeking independence. The site of migration becomes an act of temporary emancipation from the rigid

conventions, patriarchal dictates, familial speculations, marital disagreement and routine violence on women and unemployment. Mcduie-ra (2012) describes city spaces as “perceived or imagined by Northeasterners as places very different from their home towns and villages which are “predatory and caste-ridden as opposed to collective and egalitarian” (p.19). Adna’s liberal perspectives, career prospects, and fierce determination brought her to Delhi against the odds and oddities of the elders. Life turned out to be fruitful when she acquired a job followed by the subsequent ownership of land and house. Adna says:

... this anonymity was the very thing I liked. After the watchful expectations of a small town, being a total stranger among strangers was a relief and a pleasure... I like the heavy evenings, filled with diesel fumes and smoke, and the heat burning our faces ... dusty trees in full bloom...Coming out of restaurants we would stand under the trees and puff at our cigarettes. It was all very different from where I came from. (p.14)

The other face of migration brings to the forefront the crucial issues of identity crisis and citizenship of North Eastern

women. Through their physical appearance, Northeast migrants are not only viewed as others but their otherness is also associated with the ways the Northeast frontier is understood and misunderstood socially and politically in the Indian mainstream (Mcduie-ra 2012, p.87). Adna’s account of a discriminatory practice against her cousin, Jia, by a rude woman in Delhi, is a clear instance of racism against citizenship; “Hey you!Jao!Jao! Go back to your own ... Desh!” (p.52). Dai particularly emphasises the gap between women’s yearning and expectations from urban life and the consequent reality. Adna and Mareb’s attempt to settle with non-tribal men from Delhi pushed them to a state of disillusion. Religion, caste and cultural differentiation transcend the love barriers for these women. They break the cocoons of customary ways by moving from the place which alienates them for cross-cultural marriage issues.

The deception and abandonment of North Eastern women by men is a quite common destiny and is fuelled by deeply rooted stereotypes about them. Adna’s and Mareb’s boyfriend inculcate false dreams diminishing their progress in future lives. Unethical and flawed prejudice is labelled against them occupying the seductive spaces of the urbanscape like hotels, bars



and streets. The debauched depiction of these women as sex instruments in opposition to the mainstream Indian women restricts their upliftment. Becoming alienated and exploited in their land, Dai presents the brutal mechanisms of racial and sexual politics in villages and cities. The new land gradually begins to trouble them with brutal experiences like their native village and the allure of the city soon becomes an illusion.

The multiple identities place women in a dilemma between their individual and community roles. Through “The Words of Women” in *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai (2006) describes a group of village women who have been “in the forest all morning, cutting wood, cracking dry bamboo, and piling stray branches seasoned by sun and rain to be carried back to the village. This is a daily necessity” (p.73). The book recounts the plight of post-widowhood dilemmas faced by Omum and Pinyar, the brutal victims of the blind-eyed society. Tribal society blames women for the mishaps that come upon the family and house. The village ostracizes these women to the outskirts of the village without letting them speak thus lowering the status and right of women to live where they belong to. The passive existence of the voiceless marginalized women is echoed by Dai “It seems my

destiny is cursed” (p. 28). Nenem and David Ferguson’s love bond is questioned by tribal norms. Tussled between the choice of love and land, Nenem favours land scared of the customs.

The unsteady affairs of Adi women are unveiled through Arsi “Why did our forefathers choose this place? Surely, we are outcasts dumped in this bone and knuckle part of the world!” (p. 74). Negligence of these women’s voices, though deafening the mainstream society, gets represented when Arsi says: “In my next life I shall be born a bird.” “And do what?” “Oh, so many things. Sing, fly. Live properly, for instance. Speak English.” Now old Me-me, who had been quiet all this while, said, “Hah! Listen to this bird! You should be careful. If a woman becomes too clever no one will marry her” (p. 75-76). Another character Sirsiri leads a frustrated life despite her ambitions and aspirations to move to the city; “Oh! What a place, cursed ill-chosen and disturbed!” (p.168). Music offered her spiritual solace at times of distress and she coped up with this defensive strategy. The characterization of the tribal women, Gimur is an adequate representation of the shift from local to global. Her marriage with Kajinsha breaks the barriers imposed on tribal culture and Dai aptly discusses the themes related to

peripheries, conflict zone, sexual politics, indigenous feminism, and resistance

cultural integration and hybridization of society.

Conclusion

North Eastern women's writings manifest politics of representation and attempts of resistance. Ripples of change create cultural anxiety to amalgamate and assimilate. The works of Mamang Dai have brilliantly questioned the sufferings of the gendered subalterns; women located on the margins transforming their sufferings to destiny and attempting to survive amidst the restrictions. The conflicting lives of Adi women, their resistance to it and carving an identity as opposed to the former silences become an instance of indigenous women empowerment. Dai's attempt to foreground the tribal women's voices earlier unsung and unheard within mainland India is a perfect example of saturating the survival complexities. Mamang Dai's women are subjugated victims seeking emancipation from hegemonic suppression to apposite renderings in the mainland.

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