

Beyond the Myth of 'Privileged' North-East Women: An Analysis of Select Narratives

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Abstract

When compared to the women from the mainland, women in the North-East are often considered as wielding more autonomy. They are considered women with privilege and free from exploiting rigid societal norms. However, this understanding of the status of North -East women reflects ignorance and the tendency to universalise women's experiences under one umbrella. Although the region is relatively more flexible and provides a secure space for women than their counterparts in India, they are certainly not free from exploits and discrimination. The universalising tendency is the result of the concept of marginalisation set forth by mainstream Feminism. This paper is a close reading of select narratives from the region rooted in fictional and historical accounts. It traces women's experiences through different conflicts that can be personal or even collective and attempts to debunk the myth associated with Women in North-East by highlighting the various forms of discrimination that often fly above the radar of what is considered marginalisation.

Keywords: Culture, Discrimination, Feminism, Gender disparity, North-East, Women,

Feminism is generally attributed as having Western origin that strives for equality for women in the economic, social and political sphere. However, the question arises whether the parameters of Western Feminism or mainstream Indian Feminism are sufficient to situate women's experiences from the North-East. The general assumption of women from the North-East as enjoying equal status with men is assumed because of the lack of caste or class in society. The need to situate women's experiences from this region is not born out to vindicate or refute the frameworks established by earlier feminist movements. Instead, it is an attempt to expand or bring out an extensive viewpoint that is more inclusive of the different kinds of exploitation, marginalisation, and disparity that women encounter throughout their live irrespective of the location. However, one area where location plays a vital role is in understanding how Gender and it's meaning operates differently in different social, political and geographical location as such the need for a more nuanced understanding that is culture-specific is required in terms of the status of women in the North-Eastern States.

The eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura are often clubbed together to form what is referred to as the North-Eastern

States of India. It posits the highest concentration of Tribal population. Each state is home to varied tribal groups that exist in close proximity. The clubbing of the states under one umbrella reflects the lack to address the Heterogeneity of the Eight states. As Spivak opines 'when the colonised nations attained a voice, there were many peripheral voices that didn't possess one'. In this context, North-East takes on the marginalised's role, often subject to neglect and sidelined to the peripheries. In such a scenario, where do we situate the North-East women? In general, women are doubly marginalised first on the grounds of Gender and secondly, Patriarchy. Then where do we situate women from the already marginalised States?. In the introduction to her book, "Women's Agency and Social Change", Meeta Deka cites the definition of Gender put forth by Kathy Davis as categorising 'men' and 'women' into specific binaries. The way society functions based on constructed binaries that create a system of complex hierarchical system of dominance and subordinates as they 'override individual differences and intertwine with other major socially constructed differences', such as race, ethnicity, wealth, age and religion" (13).

Gender Disparity in North-East India

While sex refers to the biological attributes that distinguish a man from a woman, Gender is a cultural construct that conditions boys and girls to behave and their role in society from a young age. "Gender divisions permeate not only individual's sense of self, families, and intimate relationships, but also structure work, politics, law, education, medicine, the military, religion and culture" (Davis:13). This cultural construct further produces narratives and myths on the role of men and women, their position, role in society, code of conduct, etc. which establish stereotypes that further dictate society's functions. This is evident in the numerous narratives that reiterate the idea of 'angel in the house', 'fallen women' or women as the cause of conflict and misery that befall on humankind. From mythologies to folktales, some stories continually asserts female inferiority and male superiority ascribing all the significant negatives as constituted by women. There is the example of Eve and her quest for knowledge as her submission to temptation or Helen as the destroyer of Troy, Sita and Supernakha as the cause of war. However, another essential point Davis makes in her analysis was how Gender as a system of power is something that is maintained both by the oppressor and the oppressed as "both ascribe to its values in personality and identity formation. Davis refers to it as hegemonic control in that many of its assumptions and processes are 'invisible, unquestioned and unexamined' (Deka:13). Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which refers to a method by which the oppressed becomes collaborators with the oppressor thereby contributing to their exploitation, appears appropriate as we see women as equal partners with men. This is made possible as women have been conditioned in such a way that normalises their subordination and marginalisation. However, one needs to establish that women have contested such power structures; if there are narratives that establish male superiority, there are narratives that women struggle against such structure throughout history. From the above understanding, we can state that Patriarchy which operates through various mediums like the circulation of false myth, is culture-specific. The intensity of the hold of Patriarchy in a specific society differs from another. This power structure's looming presence is present everywhere exercising control in subtle ways, and North-East India is no exception.

As egalitarian societies, the North-East states are often said to be free from the rigid societal norms that marginalise the womenfolk. The women from this region are generally presumed to enjoy equality and freedom as there is no purdah system or dowry demands unlike the plain areas or mainland India. Ruth Buongpui, in her article, "Gender Relations and the Web of Tradition" however, cites the idea of North-East women as being free from exploitation as an illusion. Although it is true that there is the absence of practices like Purdah system or dowry demands, this doesn't imply that the tribal women are free from marginalisation. Patriarchy in this sphere operates through local traditions and customary practices. Through the various traditions, religious beliefs, and customary practices rooted in a culture, the role envisaged for men and women in society is constructed. Like other parts of the world, men in most North-Eastern states occupy a dominant role and exercise control over various resources compared to women. She calls for reforms in customary laws that advocates equality in all sphere (Buongpui,79).

Lucy Zehol states in, "Gender Issues in the Tribal Society of the North-East: Some observations", that customary laws are designed in a manner that reflects favouritism of men which further establishes their dominance while the women and their requirements are not taken into consideration which leaves little space for the empowerment of women. She points out that gender biasness persist despite the access to education, employment and reforms in religion and that women themselves exhibit such biasness (100). Customary laws have extensive hegemonic control in a Tribal Society; it functions as an indicator of identity and medium through which peace and order are maintained as such the discrimination and exploits the laws exhibit often go unquestioned and justified. The practice of inheritance of property, marriage, divorce, participation in political spheres, and disparity in religious space are all gendered space where women posit varied limitations.

Ancient Proverbs and myths in the tribal society like the narratives from its counterparts in the other part of the world consist of various false myths that establish female inferiority. Zehol finds this as a recurrent issue in most North-Eastern communities, In the Mizo community, it is believed that "women's wisdom cannot extend beyond the bank of a river, a wife and an old fence can be replaced at any time, an unbeaten wife and an uncut weed in the field are both unbearable" (Zehol:101). In the Garo society, women are ridiculed as lacking the ability to think. Women are considered as having no principles among the Mayon Nagas in Manipur, particularly because they are bound to change their clan after marriage(Zehol 102)

Various taboos exist even in the tribal society that dictates the women and their body as bringing bad omen to men and the communities.

Although women exercise autonomy in terms of movement, this in no way imply that men view them as equal partners which reflects in their attitude. Citing the Angami Nagas, Zehol states the inherent disparity between men and women in the case of extramarital affairs where men are often celebrated for his affairs. At the same time, their counterparts are punished for the same. Like the plains practice, Male heir is preferred and considered auspicious. Although a female child is welcomed, it is on the grounds that she will provide assistance and comfort to the family. Men are seen as protectors, who takes all the important decisions pertaining to all the sphere. While women take a role in decision-making, the final say, however, rests in men's hands. Although The North Eastern States are often celebrated for the absence of dowry system, it is replaced with Bride price, basically, a social practice that involves the payment of some sort in the form of cash or kind to be paid to the bride's parents as a sort of compensation for the loss of an 'economically active member'. This, however, posits a varied form of exploits for women as Nongbri states that such practice, "provided justification for the man to treat his wife as a disposable commodity" (qtd. in Buongpui 78). Such payments rather limited the women and made her more prone to exploits within the family. It also set a limitation on women's right to initiate divorce as it, "entails the obligation to return the bride price to the husband. So women prefer to suffer in silence even if she is ill-treated rather than take recourse to divorce" (qtd. in Buongpui 78).

Women's writing from North-East

North-East Writings is well known for carving a distinct space for its rich cultural Heterogeneity and diversity. Women writers from the region have made a remarkable contribution to bring to the forefront the struggles of the people and provide a strong critique of the gender-biased assumptions of culture. The representation of women by writers like Mamang Dai, Arupa Patangia Kalita, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao and many more deals with oppression, subjugation, and invisibility. In dealing with the issues of silences and marginalisation, they also address the resilience and constant changes that have taken place over time. The narratives are not just the chronicles of sufferings, but rather an assemblage of varied experiences that celebrate the women for their resilience and indomitable spirit.

Arupa Patangia Kalita is a well- established name in the field of contemporary Assamese literature. Her novel *The Story of Felanee*, set against the backdrop of the Assam Agitation Movement (dominant during the 1970s- 1980s), is one of the most turbulent times in the history of Assam. The constant absence of the subaltern voices and their representation in such conflict ridden times is addressed by the novelist. It documents the plight of a group of women, their resilience and will to survive. Felanee, the protagonist caught in the conflict between the Assamese and Non-Assamese suffers from identity crisis. In portraying Felanee and her struggle for identity, the novelist critique the general understanding of identity as having a single static meaning. Felanee with her Bodo, Bengali and Assamese lineage finds it difficult confining herself within one static identity. When she finds herself in a room full of people, she is posed

the question of who she was? The question takes her back to all the people whose blood runs in her, she ponders about:

the Mauzadar's daughter Ratnamala with a gold chain round her neck and the fearless Siliguri youth, Khitish. She could see her mother Jutimala, beautiful and elegant as a swan. And of course, she could see her uncle Ratan and his wife, the two people who'd brought her up with so much love. Who should she name as her family? Perhaps she should tell these boys about her husband, Lambodar(Kalita 31-32).

The writer in depicting the predicament of Felanee also throws light on the many silenced voices that meets the same fate. Home to diverse cultural groups, cultural Intermixing is inevitable in the region, as such when ethnic and communal clash occurs women like Felanee finds herself subjected to different forms of violence and constant death threats. This is a similar experience to the women from across the world. When conflict occurs women, senior citizens and children are the most prone victims. From Partition to Holocaust, we find women and children being the worst victims. She gets threatened by Biren Baishya for wearing Bangles and her association with the Bengalis. Bulen, who supported Felanee through the hard times undergoes a transformation as he gets entrenched in the larger politics of identity and exploitation. He like Biren confronts Felanee and despite knowing her well impose on her the identity with which she doesn't completely relate with, "It was a green and red dokhona with a yellow flowered border. In a prickly tone, he said, "If you want to survive, wear this." (Kalita 177). The women characters in the novel from Kali Boori, Felanee, Jon's mother, Minoti, Ratna's mother are all helpless and caught in an unending cycle of exploit and fight for survival. Jaggu's wife, her sufferings and death is because of the lifelong work she endured to earn a livelihood and the unplanned pregnancy and abortion, which resulted in her uterus constantly coming out. The women in this part, like the rest of the world, becomes victims in times of conflict between the center and state, ethnic clash or boundaries disputes which is recurrent in the States. They undergo not only psychological but physical torment and victimisation as we see in the character of Sumala and the young girl, "Chunks of flesh were bitten off from her breasts. There were teeth marks all over her body. A blood-stained rag was packed into her vagina" (Kalita 178). Similarly, Sumala is found dead one morning, "Her naked body was disfigured, and there were distinct signs of brutality on her person. In place of her breasts there were two raw bleeding wounds. Her emaciated genital passage was a huge open wound" (Kalita 246). In both cases, we find the women's body as a site where battles are fought over territory, ethnic clash and exploits by the militants and army. However, in Kali Boori, we find an individual who, despite her personal hardships, attempts to bring all the women under one roof, encouraging them to earn and make a living. Despite facing the betrayal of a Lecherous priest in her young age, she is not defeated, her destitute doesn't take away her spirit she makes sure she makes a space for herself and is revered by everyone including the menfolk. She advises Felanee to be strong, and all the women characters do exactly that. In the novel, we don't find the women defeated by the constant conflict thrown upon them they not only become a victim of the outside world, but they also are not treated as equal among their own partners at home. We find Jaggu indifferent to his wife's suffering. Ratna's mother started her day and ended it with the constant taunt for not delivering a

baby boy by her husband. Although she makes a living and takes care of the family with her elder daughter, she is never appreciated. However, the subtle irony in the novel comes from the fact that although the women are generally considered victims, submissive, docile, and a hopeless case without their husbands, the narrative succeeds in subverting this constant belief. When all the men were gathered by the army and taken to the camp, it was Felanee and her counterparts who demand the release of their son, husbands, friends and relatives. They play an active role in making a living for the family. They are like the unsung heroes unaware of their strength. However, we find through the course of the novel the women become more strong and independent. The initial belief that they shared was that a husband's presence was a blessing irrespective of whether they were abusive, alcoholic or engaged in extramarital affairs. But Meera's mother refusal to accept her husband when he came back after running away with another woman reflect the changing pattern. The women drew their identity and meaning from their husbands. Men often were the breadwinners, but this underwent a significant transition when they learned that they were individuals capable of living life to the fullest when they gradually started earning and we see a role reversal here. The writer in depicting this is bringing to the forefront the importance of active participation in the economic sphere as it has the capacity to emancipate the women. The bond the women folk share again is one that stands in contrast to the common belief of women being their own worst enemies. The emphasis on sisterhood is dominant throughout the Narrative. We find them capable of compassion even in the face of poverty, marginalisation and conflict. Jon's mother and Minoti bought a petticoat for Felanee knowing well that she could not get one but needed it, "Felanee was on the verge of tears. These two women were so poor; and yet here they were trying to help her. This was something totally new for her. She clutched the packet close to her heart and left with the others" (Kalita:90). The sisterhood the women shares in the Narrative is one that transcends differences and static identity. These are bonds that goes beyond boundaries. Another instance where we find this bond is between Minoti and Ratna who falls victim to the handsome man who wooed both but never came around to accept them. Rather than being resentive, Minoti proves herself as rising above hatred and jealousy by taking responsibility for Ratna's treatment in the hospital. The Narrative is packed with conflict and depicts how women caught up in the power relations both in the domestic and public sphere become the subject of exploit and marginalisation. In dealing with the men-women relationship, the writer highlights the various spheres where Patriarchy persists in varied forms.

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* is subtle in its criticism directed towards the patriarchal structures deep-seated in the customs and traditions of the Nagas. The assumption of the North-Eastern sisters enjoying equal position with that of men is addressed by the writer. The novel is in the form of a bildungsroman. It chronicles the life of Dielieno, but in doing so, we don't find the protagonist overshadowing the other characters in the story. Dielieno and the bond she shares with the different characters, most importantly, her Grandmother is one that opens various avenue for interpretation. Although a girl child is welcomed in the North -East community, a male heir is preferred and celebrated on the basis that they would inherit the property and be their pillar when they grow old and this belief shapes their opinion and the way the society function which remains all the same till today. Leto, who happens to be the most sensitive,

rational, educated and empathetic is also a victim of this construct of a boy child providing security as he laments the deprivation of having a boy child, "How can you live as though there were no hope left? You have a son Vini, don't forget, you have a beautiful son. I wanted a son but I got a daughter". (Kire 241) .Vimenuo's mother lived in constant fear of her husband because she was never able to deliver a boy child. In the novel, we find Dielieno's Grandmother as the preserver of ancient tradition. As Kire states in her introduction to the novel, "Many of the characters are based on real people. The grandmother is a combination of two women, and the values they felt were important in life" (Kire 6). The Grandmother here can be seen not only as reinstating the patriarchal grip but also as a victim to the customs and tradition she holds dear. Patriarchy in North-East functions on the practice of customs that establish it's firm deeper with practice. Gramsci's concept of hegemony, where women act as collaborators in their subjugation is vividly depicted in the character of Dielieno's Grandmother. Her constant pampering of the boys with food and the restrictions put on Dielieno and Bano who never seemed to have their heart's content makes more sense when we look at food and kitchen as a gendered space. As Sanghamitra De in her article Food, Culture and Gendered Space states, "Food behaviour in every society operates like a language which as pointed out by Levi Strauss, is "... a language through which that society unconsciously reveals its structure" (The Origin of Table Manners 495). Dielieno finds herself conscious of the discrimination when she was rebuked for desiring a tender piece of meat which traditionally is meant for the menfolk, "that portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions" (Kire 10) . Despite toiling day in and day out working for the Grandmother, Dielieno and Bano are never given the privilege of choice which again reflect the inherent discrimination in such practice where physical nourishment is also considered secondary for women. Dielieno's mother is a good example of a submissive woman, Dielieno observes, "I had often seen her scraping the pot and giving it to Leto, my eldest brother, or taking out meat pieces from her own plate to slip into Vini's plate saying she was full. The boys never refused. They never seemed to think that she might be wanting to eat it herself" (Kire 11). Dielieno's mother constant act of prioritising the boys is an act which is universal in that it reflects the inherent conditioning of the women's mind where self-indulgence is considered wrong or a sin.

The myth of equality based on access to education is also dealt with in the novel. The generally held idea that women in North East are educated; hence liberated is addressed as Kire take us deeper into the process and ways that education itself is structured and imparted on the basis of Gender. Although women did get education, it is important to note who gets access to it and the difficulties that came along with it. Even in the context of who gets to study it is the boys who gets the preference as they are considered the future lineage of the family. Although women did get access to education, it is crucial to note that it came with its own set of limitations:

From the ninth standard, Mathematics was no longer compulsory for us girls. So we went to another class called Domestic Science where we there was cooking, knitting and sewing. We also did some Arithmetic but it was usually easy sums twice or thrice a week.(Kire 199)

The education imparted to the girls again is Gender biased where they are taught cooking and knitting but not employment-based training that will generate employment opportunities. Kire in

depicting the women is not only depicting them as victims but rather records the subtle changes taking place in the Naga society as we see in the character of Dielieno whose resistance and effort is noteworthy. She emerges as a strong woman capable of questioning the wrongs taking place around her. In doing so, what makes her different is the absence of a strong negation of the traditional beliefs and customs.

Both the Narrative adequately address the inherent disparities that lies dormant in the North-Eastern States where like the rest of the world Gender plays an active role in determining the roles women play in a society and emphasize the need to look beyond such binaries as women have proven themselves capable of nurturing and supporting their families. Feminism doesn't stand for competing with men rather it is the acceptance that men and women are different, but respecting such difference and working towards a more expansive form of equality. I end my observation with Dielieno's mother quote:

But I know differently now. I am sometimes very surprised at your strength, Lieno. The way you took over the household when Pete died. You were just eleven and a half then, and yet you took over my role in our family so naturally. I can see that women are not weaker. They simply have a strength different from men.(Kire 265)

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