

## **Gendered Violence: A Look at Northeast Women's Writing as Literary Interventions**

**Dr. Vizovono Elizabeth**

MA, M. Phil, Ph.D. in English

Independent Researcher,

Kohima, Nagaland, India

Email Id- vizovonoe@gmail.com

ORCID id- 0000-0003-2548-530X

### **Abstract**

There are more than enough writings and debates on political conflict and violence in the Northeast region of India, but violence targeted at women specifically, has not received equal attention. This paper aims to initiate honest and serious critical examinations about sexual abuse and other forms of gendered violence that are inflicted on women in these communities, but which continues to remain like a taboo subject. Violence against women in Northeast has roots deep in cultural and colonial history. Set against this context, the paper is based on a framework of referencing literary studies and intersecting it with empirical evidence from other relevant studies. The literary works are all based on actual lived experiences of women. Hence these writings also intersect with and validate the social reality of our times. It also highlights how Northeast women writers have been voicing and questioning the silence and shame attached to this issue through their writings. The paper contends that these significant literary interventions into gendered violence are noteworthy and point to the need for understanding the experiences of tribal Northeast women from their specific context.

**Keywords:** Northeast writing, Gendered Violence, Patriarchy, Militarization, Women's Literature

### **Introduction**

The Northeast region of India is a postcolonial construct which has given rise to diverse socio-political problems including the culture of violence, ethno-nationalism and complications of patriarchal notions of gender inequality. The political conflicts resulted in the heavy presence of the armed forces in the region over the last sixty years. In his study on violence against women in Northeast, Duncan McDuié-Ra draws the link between militarization in the region and violence against women. He argues that the postcolonial events of Partition, insurgency and counterinsurgency have a link to the increased violence against women, because it has normalized violence, and reinforced patriarchal notions of masculinity, further disadvantaging women. The Indian army acts with impunity because of the extra judicial legislations like

the Disturbed Areas Act and AFSPA etc., (“Violence against Women”). He further states that the violent form of masculinity displayed by Indian armed forces is replicated by insurgent groups. This is compounded by the various ethnic communities that are governed by stiff patriarchal values and local customary laws. Women are obviously disadvantaged in such a situation.

Naga scholar Dolly Kikon also expresses a similar view. She says: “The years of British administration (especially the periods of WW1 & WW2) and the postcolonial administrative period in India (after 1947), as well as the experiences of war and violence in this region have intimately shaped the social, political, and gender relations today” (118). K.B. Veio Pou also opines: “Besides the various socio-political and cultural underpinnings.... the drawback of living in a patriarchal society where men have the upper hand in most aspects of life, the women’s voices are only stifled or not heard” (xi). Violence against women in the Northeast has roots deep in cultural as well as colonial history. The women are therefore marginalized at multiple levels. As Easterine Iralu states, “We have always lived on the periphery. This is my experience, I have been marginalized simply because I am a Naga, twice-marginalised because I am a woman and thrice-marginalised because I am a tribal, a member of an indigenous community” (273).

This social reality is being reflected boldly in women’s writings. They are acts of resistance that challenge the status quo and literature is used as a tool for intervention – breaking the silence of the suppressed and marginalized voices. These are literary responses to the realities of political and social conflict in the region. They can be considered as ‘interventions’ because they bring to the fore, the concealed issues and call for our attention to address them. Violence is inflicted on women in various forms be it sexual, physical, verbal, emotional or psychological. Following are the representation of multidimensional violence against women at three different levels by select women writers.

**i) Representation of gendered violence by military forces – during colonial/postcolonial events**

In times of conflict, women are vulnerable in ways that are different from men. Temsula Ao’s first collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, portrays the violent history of the most turbulent period of the Indo-Naga conflict during the 1950s. In the story “The Jungle Major,” when Khatila’s husband joins the underground forces, she has to constantly maintain a balancing act not to offend either the villagers or the Indian soldiers. When the Indian army comes to her door looking for her husband, the officer tries to intimidate her with a verbal threat directed at her femininity: “We know how to deal with women like you,” the officer said giving her a lascivious look” (Ao 4). She of course, outsmarts them in this case and saves her husband.

But the threat is carried out in the story “The Last Song.” Apenyo, a young girl who loved to sing, stood undeterred during a raid by the Indian army, and continued to sing “as if to withstand the might of the guns with her voice raised to God” (27-8). The Captain takes this as an open defiance and drags her towards the church and rapes her. Apenyo continues to sing even in the face of terror. When her mother tries to rescue her, she is held by the jawans and is also gang-raped by them. They knock her unconscious and continue to take turns even after her body has become lifeless.

Both these incidents take place in the process of counterinsurgency against the Naga rebels by the Indian army, and demonstrate how the innocent villagers are caught between the two conflicting sides, with women at the receiving end of violence. As pointed out by McDuire-Ra, the army is emboldened to

act in such ways because they are protected by extra-judicial laws. This demonstrates that patriarchal violence is complicated by other axes of power. However, what is noteworthy is that in both the cases, the author ends with their stories being retold over and over again, and they become legendary through the oral tradition of storytelling. Though the victims were silenced by the act, their stories are kept alive in this manner.

In Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Dielieno's mother narrates an incident about an attempted molestation by a soldier during the Second World War. She manages to report the incident and the culprit is identified and arrested. This makes some other women come forward to tell of similar experiences. One person having the courage to speak out had emboldened the others to come forward. Solidarity and a sense of shared experience gave strength to the women, who would otherwise have remained silent. This step of breaking the silence by speaking up about the abuse is a recurring narrative of all the other women writers who have dealt with this subject. It is a metaphor of resistance and assertion of agency out of passive victimhood.

**ii) Representation of gendered violence arising from patriarchal ideology of subjugating women as the second sex**

Assam's Mamoni Raisom Goswami aka Indira Goswami is well known for portraying the oppressive gender practices of patriarchal tradition in her stories. In "The Offspring," a Brahmin widow named Damayanti, is compelled to turn to prostitution to support her two daughters. She had no options because she was poor and illiterate. Prompted by the priest Krishnakantha, Pitambar, a rich man, but of a lower caste, is desperate to have a son. He offers to pay her to bear a son and in turn marry her if she does. Damayanti is treated like meat that is on sale in the market – an object of male sexual desire. To the two men, she was looking "as tempting as meat dressed and hung up on iron hooks in a butcher's shop!" (206).

The story depicts the complexities of the caste-based Hindu patriarchal society - the plight and helplessness of widows who could not remarry. Pitambar's obsession to have an offspring reflects the patriarchal notion of desiring a male child to carry on one's lineage. In the end, Damayanti performs an unexpected act of defiance. Though she becomes pregnant by Pitambar, she aborts the baby and secretly buries it. It was a boy. She exhibits her high caste pride by refusing to bear a child from a man of low caste.

This story sets in contrast the various dynamics under which patriarchy functions according to caste, religion and ethnicity. Such complexities of caste problems or dowry, sati, female infanticide etc. which causes gendered violence in other parts of the country, are not prevalent among the indigenous tribal communities. However, they suffer in other ways which are peculiar to their environment. T. Kreditsu's first collection of poems *Sopfūnuo* presents this theme throughout, highlighting the silenced narratives of tribal women. In "Hibiscus" she writes:

Oh no, we don't do things as barbaric and heartless as burning brides for money or killing  
Fetuses because they are female. No, we grow and temper our women to bend  
Without breaking, or if they must break to break without a fuss, silently  
In stealth, in secret, in solitude – a woman's pain should not be a spectacle for  
Others to see and pity. No, we teach our women resilience so they can survive

Without succour and bloom without months of rain like the hibiscus. (58)

Women experience violence in patriarchal societies everywhere, but even among the Northeastern states, the cultural frameworks under which they operate are quite different. However, the patriarchal ideology of male preference and treating the female as the ‘second sex’ as Simone de Beauvoir puts it, is a shared experience. In the poem “Shame,” Kreditsu writes:

Shame

I first heard the word when my mother could bear no more children

What would they do with only daughters? Will you bring

An end to your husband’s line? Your father in law’s name

That his widow worked so hard to uphold?

Do the right thing and leave him so he can marry another (5)

In “Woes,” she continues this narrative:

Let me tell you brother, of the woes of your sister

That I was conceived in the hope I was you

My birth was an absence of you (9)

Of the daughter, she tells the father, “Her worth is her womb and her womb worthy/Only if it bears a son (ibid).

These poems reflect the invisible forms of violence – of treating the woman as the second sex and using her body solely for reproduction of male progeny. They also inform us that a woman is not safe or secure even within the confines of her home and family.

### **iii) Representation of domestic violence/ violence behind closed doors**

Domestic violence is the most veiled form of violence against women. Monalisa Changkija has been very articulate about this issue. Her first collection of poems *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain* (1993; 2013) is an unflinching, scathing attack on men who perpetuate violence against women behind closed doors. She writes:

If God made man

in His own image,

where shall the

battered seek Justice? (1)

Subverting the patriarchal notion of the dominant male, she terms violence as a sign of male insecurity: “Man’s inadequacies/and Insecurities/speak in the/Language of Violence” (4).

Masculine hands

Raining blows

On bodies

Soft and feminine

To me,

Are battles lost

But not wars won. (2)

As Changkija states in her After-Word, “domestic violence is the most powerful and effective means of perpetuating patriarchy resulting in the suppression, oppression and repression of women, which

manifest in other crimes against women outside the home” (61). It also “negates the very person-hood of a woman, which in turn negates all our claims of being educated, modern, Christian and well, of having emerged out of the darkness” (62).

This is reflected effectively in Neikehienuo Mepfhu-o’s novel *My Mother’s Daughter* (2019) in which she presents the theme of domestic violence and debunks all the assumed notions of educated women being liberated, or rich people having happy marriages and homes. The novel is a narrative representation of the real accounts of abused women collected by the author. So these are not fictitious imaginings of the writer’s creation. It is the lived experiences of the women of our times which can be summed up in Changkija’s words:

These weapons of words  
on Pages of Pain  
are merely records  
of violence that reign  
in households  
of untold  
grieving souls. (19)

*My Mother’s Daughter* is the story of two women – a mother and a daughter, who are both are victims of domestic violence. The author brings out the multilayered aspects of gendered violence – physical assault, verbal invectives, marital rape, psychological trauma and depression, all of which are borne in silence. These are complicated by the feelings of shame, fear of social stigma, self-blame and victim mentality in the abused by internalizing the patriarchal definitions of womanhood. In both the cases, their situation is complicated because of their children. Also, in both cases, the abusive husband is an alcoholic:

I stayed for ten years building excuses and mothering our three children...I forgot that there was more to life than being stuck in a loveless marriage...none of my friends and family knew what went on in my life behind closed doors. (127)

Silence rings loud again because patriarchy teaches that it is a shameful failure of the woman. During armed conflict, violence is perpetuated by nonfamilial agents, but in domestic abuse, the perpetrators are unfortunately family members and relations. Violence behind closed doors is manifested not only in the form of physical beatings and verbal abuse. It even escalates to marital rape and incestuous rape. The narrator in *My Mother’s Daughter* says, “He would allow me come into the bedroom only when he wanted to use my body for his pleasure, sometimes by force when I refused” (128).

Yuimi Vashum’s first book of poems *Love. Lust. And Loyalty* is based on her own experience of being sexually abused as a child. In “Breaking the Shame,” she writes:

When I cut my fingers or skin my knees  
My mother(s) tell me, “Put betadine over your wounds”  
And fusses over my sloppiness’  
Discussing it over dinner table like I lost a limb.  
Yet they refuse to talk about my *vagina*;  
Of the men that abused me ad infinitum,  
....did they know? Did they not know?

Was it shame? Was it disgust? (32)

She questions the silence of the mothers about the abuse, highlighting a very significant aspect of the necessity to openly discuss the truth of the matter. It also reflects the way women themselves become enablers of abuse, perhaps unwittingly, by avoiding the issue with their silence. The poet further questions:

Why will they not tell me

To *scream* and *sprint* if someone tries to put their hands in my underwear?

Why? (33)

Asserting that this tradition of silence needs to be broken, she says:

But not anymore,

Not on my watch.

...My daughter shall fight against this silence;

So shall my daughter's daughter...

Until there is no shame in the *truth*. (ibid)

In "here I am, after all these years," she speaks of the way our foremothers have always been silenced:

For centuries

Our mothers spent years mute – saving words to resist;

... Today I break the chain,

I spend the words our mothers had saved-

I gather the century long courage-

I round up endurance.

...and refuse to be our mothers

Who accept injustice like a birthright.

Today I speak

And reclaim the voice our mothers long buried. (50-1)

Violence is not always in visible forms. In Sanatombi Nigombam's short story "Women's Literature" (translated from Manipuri by Thingam Anjulika Samom), she depicts very succinctly the struggles of a woman to own her creative space. The protagonist is a woman who gets an inspired idea for a story as she is going about with her household chores. She tries to pen down her thoughts while juggling with her cooking. Her husband continuously interrupts her train of thought with unnecessary demands to fetch his sandals, asking for spicy mango salad or a glass of water. This behaviour is an oppressive force that prevents her creative mind to set sail, and requires her to set aside her priorities to serve the man's needs, even when he is quite capable of doing so himself. She says, "my fury rose against the one who time and again imposed a blockade on my freely running literary road... in my inability to blame this royal-born person who does not want to use his own hands..." (204). She finally crumples the paper fiercely when her thoughts became all scattered. This is also form of violence because it is an invasion of her creative mind and space. It prevents her from realizing her independent creative self.

The composite narrative of the women writers is that of breaking the shame, the silence, the stigma, and finding the voice to speak out and change the existing narrative. The dedications of these



books provide a clear picture of the purpose behind the writings. In T. Kreditsu's book *Sopfñnuo*, she dedicates it to "My fellow keepers of silence/In the hope that we will speak." Neikehienuo Mepfhu-o dedicates her book to "all the women and girls who recounted their stories, with the hope of changing the narrative for /those who are yet to tell their stories." Yuimi Vashum writes: "May this book find aching souls and be a source of reconciliation to self-love."

These emerging feminist voices offer alternatives to change the existing narrative. In these narratives, women do not remain passive, silent victims. They act and resist and survive, demonstrating the resilient strength of women. They also point to the potential for developing and theorizing a feminist narrative that is relevant for indigenous women from Northeast India. As stated by Indu Swami in her essay "The Relevance of Mainstream Indian Feminism to North- East India," Northeast women's experiences are unique to the region and therefore do not fit into the mainstream Indian feminist framework, which is partly a replication of western feminism. They exclude the complexities of Northeast women's experiences and further marginalize them. So it is evident that an indigenous form of feminism relevant to Northeast context is required to articulate their experiences adequately.

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