

“The Personal is Political”: Female Predicament in North-East Encapsulating through the Textual Lens

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Abstract

There is no apolitical question when coming to a woman's life. It is, to a great extent, modulated by ideological apparatuses that act as repressive mechanisms exercised by patriarchy. In the context of North-east, 'the exotic borderland' in the popular image, stands as no exception to it. The will be consulted these texts penned down by the North-Eastern women writers have shown different facets of women's psychological as well as physical hindrances that incapacitate their individual growth. The texts here deliver a poignant dialogue on the trauma of women, in a tribal and non-tribal society, who have to supposedly comply with the traditional dictum and how their personal life is permeated by the social and political undercurrents of the time. Both personal and political violence of the time pervade each other. Thus, the present study will attempt to search the thread how the novels have rendered a political discourse attuned with the personal discourse of the female protagonists, thus showing women's predicament not as a product of personal inadequacy but as a direct outcome of not being framed in the accepted female normativity prescribed by the patriarchal society. It will also seek to justify what a woman does or is allowed to do including their personal choices, mostly have political underpinnings.

Key words: Personal, political, predicament, discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf makes a remarkable assertion that deconstructs the so called idea of space and choices accessible to a woman when she says, "As a woman I have no country, as a woman I want no country." Women are not supposedly what patriarchy dictates as a seasonal phenomenon rather what Kamala Das famously writes, "you are eternity". Although the reality for them now is what Keats said, "I fall upon the throngs of life, I bleed". Existence of women in the present world is very ironical in the sense that the life that she chooses for herself is not the product of her own choices rather it is thrust upon her by social institutions which are

highly male oriented. Though there is a huge cry for women's liberation around all corners of the globe, yet beyond the doorstep, they are still facing a dark world. The upsurge of a new generation of Indian women novelists writing in English are trying to assert for this "second sex" retrieving it from the periphery to the centre. North-eastern women novelists have tried their hands effectively in this case and are remarkably successful in delivering a valiant dialogue of women emancipation. Women from this region are crippled with enormous troubles ranging from domestic violence to collective abuse.

The present study aims to delve into the fact that the individual life of a woman is not completely conceived out of her, but affected by all social and cultural factors determining and delimiting her choices and existences. The study accumulates its growth by the frontline thinking of second-wave feminism which underscores the internal thread between women's private life and larger socio-political structures. Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005), Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2005), Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's *Mouno Uth Mukhar Hridoy* (2001) ---- although these texts differ in their context and content, yet each one of them evocatively try to justify how in every phases of history, women become the scapegoat of social and moral violence, confronting difficult dilemmas in her personal choices, still they are expected to be the reservoir of collective prosperity and in all these cases, society itself becomes a repository of women's bondage.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

In an another research study titled "The Metamorphosis of a Female Subject into a Gendered Subject: A Study of Easterine Iralu's *A Terrible Matriarchy*", published in 2021, authors Bompri Riba and Karngam Nyori talk about the gender ideologies constructed upon and disseminated through the body. The polarity between a man and a woman is made blurred here through the figure of the grandmother who

reinforces that matriarchy is the flip side of patriarchy with all its terrors.

Dr. Namrata Pathak in her significant study on “Death and Violence in Mitra Phukan’s Writings: Unraveling an Aesthetics of Pain in *The Collector’s Wife and Hope*” lends the profound morbidity integral to the texts. The questions on death and violence are inseparable from political and moral judgments.

METHODOLOGY:

The whole study is based on the analytical assessment of the texts, therefore, the materials mainly rest on secondary sources with individual judgments on all of them.

DISCUSSION:

The phrase “The Personal is Political”:

Issued forth during the time of second-wave feminism of the late 1960s, the phrase got an upper hand to contextualize and concretize the fact that women’s personal roles as mothers or housewives have political undertone behind such attribution. It supports a transcending perception that each one of personal issues related to a woman’s identity requires political intervention to bring changes. The so called power dynamics changed as women preferred to unshackle their roles at home in order to generate their choices over public domain. For the radical feminists of the time, they blow out the traditional definition of politics, condemning all previous political theories as patriarchal and uttered with conviction that the root cause of women’s oppression is mainly patriarchal gender relations. So, with this slogan, they tried to scrutinize the existing personal power relations between the sexes where women are found to be deprived and marginalized. It was found that with political awareness for rights, women can appeal for the causes of self-denial. An essay was published under the same title in 1970 authored by Anne Koedt and Shulamith Firestone which created a momentum to popularize the phrase among the common mass.

Textual Diagnosis of the Two Texts:

Both Easterine Kire and Mitra Phukan have staged a notable appearance in the Indian literary scene of the twenties and these to be consulted two novels are highly appreciated literary works in the realm of North-eastern writings. Both the novels proceed with a different story line and the backdrops also do vary. But the common thread of concern that binds them together is to make it visible that a woman’s life cannot be entirely free from social and political ethos. A woman’s life oscillates between pleasure and pain. Their life is swayed by the turbulences of time and the changes that it brings with it, with no coping mechanism to regulate her life according to her own choice.

Apart from this, there can also be a metaphorical connotation of the phrase which seems to suggest that in the existing power relations, people are not ready to accept the dynamism. The social forces are deeply rooted in human psyche and in most cases; turning of ethics and traditions into laws in our societies is an unhealthy factor. Today, we speak that as long as women will float in the conventional life, they cannot pursue their choices. But if we think deeply, we will see that women even though they are educated, professional, or working class women, they are not competent enough to

totally get rid of the male authority because patriarchy works in disguise even. It can be in the form of matriarchal hegemony as we will see in Kire’s novel. How the novelists render this idea of “personal is political” is different in these two novels, however, the novels very subtly delve into this problem in different layers and possibly give the best response to it.

The plot of *A Terrible Matriarchy* develops in a traditional Naga society and the family where the protagonist Dielieno, a young girl child of five years is brought up is restrictive in nature. The light of modern changes cannot redeem Dielieno as she has to perform the role of an angel in the house, to go by the conventional notions of her grandmother who wants to tame her youthful ‘spirit’. Easterine has introduced us to a sort of pagan world that the Nagas inhabited, the people who seem to be obsessed with spirits of the dead and women who are obsessed with other people’s lives. Lieno grows up in a society where education for the girl-child is not prioritized, women do not inherit ancestral property. As a whole, the visible structure of the novel is patriarchal and within it, there is a subordinate structure of matriarchal hegemony that abuses the same gender.

There is no apolitical question in a woman’s life. Her personal choices, likings and dislikings are not the demand of her own cravings, but are decided by the accepted ideologies of the time. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, this is what we see in Lieno’s life that reflects the condition of every Naga woman of the time. There is a clash of Lieno’s womanist spirit and the cultural currents of the time where power is the sole property of patriarchy. Moreover, the polygamous nature of the tribal society sanctioned by their customary laws, render the women in such societies quite helpless.

“They like their wives to be good workers. You are a good worker, Lieno. But you must try to be more docile.” (p.272)

Lieno’s mother appreciates her child for being wife-material. The idea of work here is not meant for getting individual ownership rather to be valued as a subject to be owned. Patriarchy designs the society in such a way whereby it can use itself as propaganda to promote a political cause of accumulating power and investing and distributing it in its own interest. A cursory look over the title will make the readers to doubt its meaning because what appears to be matriarchy is actually patriarchy in disguise or in other words, it is matriarchy which yields to the manipulation of patriarchy. Existing in a traditional matriarchal Angami society, the grandmother performs the role of a patriarch after the death of her husband, controlling the home with an iron hand, but it is not to be confused with role-reversal as she inherits the very spirit of patriarchal power structure and disseminates the same mental make-up to other members of the home.

Helen Cixous rightly says that women’s acquisition of power will not adequately change the existing socio-political power structure, on the contrary, woman will become more like patriarchal men because they would learn to think as the patriarchal men have been trained to think.

The ideological privileges served for male supremacy causes mental abuse for the girl child as she sees that her grandmother does not allow her to take the chicken leg piece.

“That portion is always for the boys. Girls must eat the other portions.” (1)

The apparent matriarchal hegemony in the structure of the novel pricks our conscience that what her grandmother does all throughout her life is what she endorses as best, seemingly a hypnotized culture sickened by blind faith on so called power structure. Dielieno’s comment shows this;

“In the tenth standard, I turned fifteen. From the ninth standard, Mathematics was no longer compulsory for us girls. So we went to another class called Domestic Science where we learnt to cook and knit and sew.” (201)

If women do not have proper education and economic independence, they cannot get the freedom to choose the course of their own lives. These types of traditional ethics, code of conduct are designed to perpetrate more acts of violence for a woman. Education, socio- cultural beliefs, religious ethos of a community function as ideological apparatus that believes not in physical suppression but on psychological colonization of the people. They are by products of patriarchal hegemony. Lieno is expected to be constructed as a patriarchal entity rather than as an individual pursuing her inner voice.

Gender-bias is visible when the question of property comes in a tribal society. Lieno’s father becomes the mouthpiece in this context. Though he gives an ear to what women have to say but prominently prioritizes male supremacy when the matter comes to the division of property after the death of the matriarch. Customary laws regarding property division like transferring the property rights to male relatives if the woman has no male offspring after her husband’s death guarantees male privileges through the social constitution. This has become the reason behind the grandmother’s transformation to a terrible matriarch who witnesses such plight in case of her own mother.

It has been shocking for Lieno to know that three of the marriage proposals for her have been turned down because her aunts have rebuffed the prospective bridegrooms by citing the outspoken nature of Lieno which does not make her a good wife material. Education thus becomes a deciding factor for a girl’s fate whether she is eligible for marriage or not, but ironically, it is not appreciated rather condemned as it makes a girl out rightly outspoken. These values uphold by a community from generation to generation creates the ‘base’ of the society, upon which builds the ‘superstructure’ of normative character of a male and female.

Acceptance of women as submissive and men as powerful is again a politicized notion. The novel confirms this in this way:

“In my father’s days, boys never did any work because they had to look after the village and engage enemy warriors in warfare. The household that did not have a male heir was considered barren.” (22)

This pro-male bias eventually produces the image of a man as a ‘male protector’ in the face of violence to protect the passive women folk. This leads to equating land as mother earth, ‘virgin’ and pure, whose honour lies in its ‘chastity’ to be protected by the male and the violation of which results in counter violence. The maleness in the character of grandmother points to this internalization of hegemonic power ideology.

In the backdrop of Kohima War, Kire presents how lives changed after the war in her fiction. This change is presented through the life of Lieno’s mother.

“For her, life was divided into two phases, before the war and after the war and life, in her opinion had always been better before the war. She had been a very young girl then, loved dearly by her parents and getting educated at the Mission School.” (170)

The Kohima War becomes a living testimony to the naked realities of the time. Women were abused, raped. One such incident was when Lieno’s mother was seen alone in the kitchen, a German spy came into the kitchen and pulled her into his arms and tried to molest her but ultimately failed.

Apart from such physical forms of violence and bloodshed, the novel is primarily a critique of domestic militancy which suggests controlling woman’s behaviour in a forceful manner. Apparently, we may think that any forms of violence against Lieno is a product of the terrible matriarch whereas the grandmother as she herself becomes the victim of the paternal structure is compelled to take a differential attitude to a boy and a girl child. Patriarchy has prevailed dominant in many forms in the society because of its hegemonic dispensation of power through different agents as well as the society’s unquestioned adherence to its authority. In the novel, maternal figures such as the matriarch, aunt Bino, or the daughter-in-laws Sino and Leno become agents of the oppressive formula of patriarchy.

Thus, the novel demarcates the existence of two simultaneous spatial worlds- one working outside and the other working in domestic and psychological sphere of the protagonist. Both are social realities of which the anchor lies in the hands of patriarchal power structure. The mind of the protagonist is always a conflict zone that is again developed through the character of Rukmini in *The Collector’s Wife*.

The Assam students’ agitation of the 1970s and 1980s and the violent insurgency following it form the backdrop of the novel. Kidnappings, extortion, and political instability are the order of the day. Rukmini, the protagonist is the wife of the district collector living in a hill top bungalow witnesses the toil and sufferings of the people below. Rukmini’s world is pervaded by this ever-present threat of violence. The novel so evocatively presents how the personal is densely interwoven with the political because the complexities, fear, and uncertainty that grip the town is also reflected in her own life.

The novel shows the ambivalence present in a woman’s life. The region where Rukmini lives is inhabited mostly by high-profiled people and women are expected to have social participation along with their professional life. Rina Sarma, the local contractor’s wife is going to stand for election in the legislative assembly because she thinks that women have to have reserve seats. On the other hand, the readers are made aware of the subservient position of women which raises a serious doubt on the issue of women empowerment. Mitali Bora, one of the characters in the novel observes-

“In any case, I was brought up in the belief that a woman’s career is secondary to her husband’s. No matter what.” (115, *The Collector’s Wife*).

It does not matter how much a woman is educated and self-employed, but social propriety teaches them to inculcate such notions. Though she is a lecturer in a local college, Rukmini

cannot get rid of social bitings. In spite of educational advancement, women are expected to fit herself into certain social codes at least in external appearance, even if not in thoughts. Rukmini's self pronouncement that she is married cannot quest the minds of the women who looked towards her forehead to scan her vermilion mark. Knowing that Rukmini has no children, they blurted out:

“What times we are living through! In my days even the shadow of a barren woman wasn't allowed to fall on a bride.” (14)

The hopelessness that grapples the society is juxtaposed with the hopelessness in Rukmini's life. Starting at the personal level, the story touches the political scenario of the time which affects her life harshly. Her marital life is disturbed to a great extent due to the heightened terrorist disturbances. The kidnapping by the militant group, MOFEH, has created a profound anxiety in the small town. She is deeply disturbed to see her students getting involved in political agitations which have only hampered their careers. Phukan has portrayed the aftermath of the Assam students' agitation of the 1970s and 1980s in its full-blown moment. Like the topsy-turvy situation in the outside- terrorist attack on SP, finding her deriver as a MOFEH man, killings of innocent people like Manoj, Rukmini's life gets bolt from the blue finding her husband in affair with her colleague. Marriage has left a vacuum on Rukmini's part because she feels that her husband, being busy with the frustrated work schedule cannot give her enough companion.

“Her body longed for the reassuring warmth of a male body beside her, for a voice to tell her that it wasn't her fault that she was still childless.” (22)

More shocking above all these were Rukmini's news of being pregnant by Manoj who relieves her from marital exhaustion. In a society, the sign of a barren woman is still considered as ominous whereas the masculinity of a man is taken for granted. Her news of being pregnant later jeopardizes this secured masculinity of a male which is not normally doubted in our society. Siddharth, her husband, tries to disguise his impotency by lame excuses of being a political persona:

“I know it sounds crazy, now-but that really had scared me for a while. And then all the other pressures. Work, Deaths, Murders, Kidnappings.... (312)

It is towards the later part of the story that Phukan makes Rukmini free from her heavy weight of leading a dubious life. The fact of her husband's infidelity and the seed of Manoj's child in her womb ultimately give recognition to Rukmini's identity. Despite being educated, women are not allowed to access for a new identity within the patriarchal discourse. But Rukmini dares not to abort the child as it will surely cast off the social stigma attached to a barren woman. Mitra Phukan criticizes the so called mental set up of the society:

“After all, a wife's chastity was the foundation-stone on which the entire edifice of their patriarchal society rested.” (275)

It gives power to Rukmini as she thinks that her unfaithfulness cannot be construed as greater than her husband who is not ashamed to hide his infidelity for physical privileges.

In and out, the novel becomes the lens where we can find the credibility of a disturbing individual life of a woman due to the political turmoil of the time. The novelist brings home the fact that we cannot cast off the political disturbances and violence while counting on North-eastern zone and the immediate effect it reigns on the lives of common people. Rukmini's life is under the constant surveillance of patriarchal power relations as well as the collective atmosphere of the time.

CONCLUSION

Though social changes have come, still taboos regarding woman's status and position are still prevalent. Women become the worst victim in the patriarchal power structure. Both the novels are honest attempts to unhide facts at personal and collective level. The novelists here deliver a poignant dialogue on the trauma of women, in a tribal and non-tribal society, who have to supposedly comply with the traditional dictum and how their personal life is permeated by the social and political undercurrents of the time. Both personal and political violence of the time pervade each other. Considering North-east, the problem of politics and insurgency has strong hold on the lives of common people and with it, new discourses of power comes out, but every time it relegates women to the margin. Be it a physical violence of bloodshed or mental abuse of breaking them down, woman's enslavement is a direct or indirect product of present power structure.

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