



Analysing the Concept of Women and Their Status Reflected in the Writings of Easterine Iralu's 'A Naga Village Remembered'

Th Malemnganbi

M.A. (4th Semester)

Department : English

CHANDIGARH UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT:

This paper attempts to highlight the concept of women, their status, crisis of identity and overlooked issues faced by girls and women in the traditional tribal society. Easterine Iralu's novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* depicts various pathetic conditions and consequences of gender discrimination, domineering role and exploitation of girls and women. Amongst the various social, political and economic predicaments, women in the region have been facing more or less various challenges like illiteracy, poverty, domestic violence, early marriage, gender bias, discrimination in decision making in all matters. The suppression and oppression on women in miscellaneous facets have become a very sensitive issue. Domination of women in the patriarchal society is vividly depicted by some intellectuals and distinguished writers from the hilly state. To underestimate the legitimate status of women in the society is a matter of great misfortune. The chauvinism and exploitation of women in society including household activities and the obliviousness of freedom of girls and women are great issues in the society. As regard to the property rights in the villages of Naga society, widows without sons lose their entire husband's property to their male relatives. It is also clear of the fact that the social status of women is always lowered in comparison to men and as a result the women sections cannot come forward to participate in social activities like men.

Key words: - Concept, Women, Gender, Status, Crisis, Decision etc.

Introduction:

In ancient times, the concept of woman has been considered to be a symbol of wealth, knowledge and strength. “Mother is the symbol of Nationality also, which gives us impression of women’s status, higher than men’s status.” (*Mishra, p-8*). Thus, during that period a woman has occupied a significant place in the society and the household affairs and their sacrifices and activities are respectfully acknowledged. “The Vedic period can be called the Golden Age regarding the status of Indian women, because in this period they enjoyed high status.” (*Mishra, p-24*)

The term ‘Northeast’ is a form of geographical, linguistic and ethnic identity of seven different states (now eight) comprising Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Manipur and Mizoram , that lies in the Northeastern part of the Indian union. Northeast India is a treasure trove of exclusive natural beauty. Nagaland is one of the states consisting of seven sisters as well as one of the small states of India which is located distinctly in the Northeast region. Nagaland is said to be a land of unique culture and traditions, rich variety of natural and environmental resources and above all it is an attractive mountainous state. On the other hand, there are many profound women English litterateurs in Nagaland who have been devoting to the study and writing of novels, short stories, fictions etc. focusing on various issues and crisis prevalent in the traditional tribal societies. Easterine Iralu’s novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* spotlights deeply the concept of women possessed by the tribal people of the state as the working tools used usually by the male tribal people. Above all, women in such patriarchal societies are always bound to come under domination and exploitation lowering their social status. In short, the desires and ambitions of women are always ignored and even the traditional laws do not allow women to express their likes and dislikes in the patriarchal family. Thus, various issues grow up gradually like discrimination of women and girls from men. In short, a woman or a girl child is treated to be a malediction in the traditional patriarchal society. It is also fact that these social orders and customary laws are framed by the people of the society who live within the society itself keeping aside the privileges and legitimate rights of women section.

Naga women live in a socially, politically and economically sensitive environment where traditional and customary practices restrict their limit of accession in all social, political and religious activities due to strong patriarchal system which disfavour women. A woman’s happiness depends on herself till she abides by the customary laws. If a woman dares to infringe the traditional law framed by the society are renewed and looked down. But the traditional law always favours the male persons.

Discussion :

Easterine Iralu, in her novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* has depicted the men-made traditional law that speaks not only the concept and status of women but explores gender discrimination, inequality status of women and domination of women by men also in the Naga society in the name of traditional law. In the tribal society, the writer has expressed the character of woman to be hard worker than man. All kinds of household works like bringing up children and caring for their husbands including all the family members are performed by women only. Naga women, getting up early before dawn go out to collect firewood from nearby or far located forest and return home carrying baskets stacked with firewood for using day to day cooking, boiling etc. Thus, it has become daily routine to be done regularly by Naga women only. Sometimes, if the firewood is available for their households, they use to fetch water in their water carriers. Thereafter, they start to cook their morning meal. It is the duty of women in particular to cook food, prepare smoked meat, fish, vegetables scooped, Tathu (pickle), broth and other varieties of dishes. Moreover, women in the Naga society are busy at their looms weaving in addition to their day to day normal works in the field. Moreover, the tribal women are generally very laborious and sincere regarding their responsibility. They play the main roles in the *jhum* or shifting cultivation as cultivators during the seasons taking necessary initiative to go to market and thus they contribute a major share for their livelihood. "A study undertaken in the entire Northeastern region, found that the tribal womenfolk are engaged themselves from keeping the child to marketing. In maximum cases, the womenfolk of each tribal community are only the main earners of their family." (*Bhattacharya, P-91*). It is also fact that much of the work which is important for the maintenance of families, is largely done by these women. But, the tribal women have to pass their lives amidst economic insecurity which is one of the major issues that suppresses the women section.

Childbirth is women's business. While Kovi's wife has died in childbirth, he has been forbidden from crying since there is the strictest of taboos upon the *lashu* death. Kovi's wife has been a good woman as described in the story; never joins the village gossips rather she uses to keep herself to her open fireplace as caring for her husband and children. "No, no mourning for a *lashu* death, it is taboo." (*Iralu, P-5*). This type of death is termed as 'Apotia death' means a woman dying at birth unable to deliver her baby. There is a very strict taboo on such apotia death that funeral rites are denied completely in the society. Such concept or assumption is badly nurtured in the minds of the people and it is deeply rooted in the social system without considering or justifying it on reasonable ground. Such is the status of women and in true sense the men-made traditional rule always goes against the females as ill-being, curse and unfortunate. Thus, the writer has clearly exhibited the traditional concept of women, domination, exploitation and inequality of status of women in the traditional society.

Women are depicted to be very serious in performing their duties systematically giving preference which one has to be done first. Levi's mother's reminding her daughter that they must not forget that they are yet to finish their field work. Again, she has added, "It is not right to be weaving in the morning when the field is calling us." (*Iralu, p-8*). Here, Levi's mother teaches the lesson that they have to finish the field work first in

the morning, than that of weaving. So, the women roles created by the writer are found to be very serious, diligent following their traditional principle strictly for the works to be done by them. So, these customs are constructed by men who take decision.

We can cite here Simone de Beauvoir's most famous assertion, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*Beauvoir, p-301*). By this, Beauvoir means to destroy the essentialism which claims that women are born "feminine" (according to whatever the culture and time define it to be) but are rather constructed to be such through social indoctrination. The gender issues have been prevalent in the Northeastern society since time immemorial. "The subordination of women to men is believed to be older than the civilization itself. The image of women was created by men. It was what he wanted her to be and he never wanted her to be equal, co-sharer of all the privileges he was enjoying. Because the image of women was created not by women or by men and women jointly but by men alone. The standard of womanhood was set for women by men and thus women couldn't have clear perception of themselves." (*Sharma, P-1 & 2*). The writer has thus, strongly viewed that patriarchy system prevailed in the society has weakened the women sense of self worth and made them that their inferiority was pre-determined. Here, the writer has portrayed the picture of women as men think and believe as passive, docile, helpless victims at the mercy of men. The writer says,

"The inner experiences of women were rendered invisible because they were considered to be trivial and not worth considering. The role of women was restricted and, therefore, the experiences of the muted female half of the society were not reflected in literature." (*Sharma, P-2*).

Easterine Kire in her another book, *A Terrible Matriarchy* has clearly portrayed the different characters and status of women in the Naga Society even at their own home. She has explored the lacking of proper places of women and girls underrating their talents, qualities etc. Dielieno's character and role have reflected the influence of gender discrimination existed in the Naga culture and consequently she has been viciously obsessed since her childhood days. In such society education for girl-child is not prioritized and supported in the traditional society at all. She has also not been able to escape from the clutches of her strict and hard-hearted Grandmother who always uninspires and discourages. It is a novel about a little girl growing up in the strict culture and society of Naga tribes. In the novel, it is clearly shown Grandmother's unbending intention when Lieno's mother has proposed her daughter for sending to school for education and immediately Grandmother has firmly refused saying that during their time, girls never have dared to go to school, the duty of the girls are to stay at home, to learn all the household works, cultivation, field works of varieties going physically to the field and thereafter they have to do all those works. "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, P-22*). Immediately afterwards her sufferings and difficulties in life have been started pathetically both mentally and physically. She has to get up an hour earlier and during the time she has to do some extra works like fetching water from pond before dawn, make fire etc. before going to school and that has been very risky since it is dark and she cannot see anything clearly three feet ahead of her. Sometimes, she has been bound to think that her Grandmother always hates her. Temsula Ao, a fiction writer, story teller and poet from Nagaland also describes

about the education system for girl child prevalent in the Naga society in her article *Benevolent Subordination: Social Status of Naga Women* as, “In case of education through book learning, it is the male child who gets the first opportunity to go to school and to continue his education. It is not merit but gender which determines the opportunity for education.” (*Mandal, Book Review: Temsula Ao's On Being a Naga: Essays*)

Similarly, Temsula Ao has portrayed the character of a pregnant girl in her selected story, *The Night* from her masterpiece, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, whose name is Imnala, a beautiful girl studying in the eight class in a high school who falls in love with a boy who is a junior engineer belong to one of the major clans of the village and later on she has become pregnant. In the meantime, the boy has joined the Naga underground army and has left for China for training along with a wife from the female recruits of the outfit and staying together in the training camp. It is unexpectedly a bolt from the blue to her. Now, Imnala is a deserted woman in the society. She can never imagine the incidents that happened to her suddenly, even cannot memorize what has happened not only in her life but the life of the child in her womb also. Her suitor who has encouraged her giving assurance that he takes the decision for an early marriage with her with so many other hopes nourishing her brain and mind. But today, Imnala has to spend every moment of her life in depression suffering from untold, mental and physical harassment thinking of the fact that people will call her daughter a ‘bastard daughter’ because the father of her new born baby refuses to give the child his name. “She would be called names of the worst sort, they would point out that she already had a bastard daughter by a man who had even refused to give the child his name.” (*Ao, P-44*). Thus, Imnala has become a victim in the traditional society on the ground of customary laws. Man escapes always whatever he commits any grievous crime towards a woman and the woman has become the culprit and guilty for any such happenings. Since time immemorial, a man is always protected by their traditional law and this is the social system prevalent in our socio-culture. Another different pitiable story has turned again to Imnala’s life dramatically. A young man whose name is Repalemba, generally called Alemba, a contractor as well as a contract partner of Imnala’s father, a gaonbura comes frequently at Imnala’s house to meet her father in connection with the contract works who, one day in absence of her parents has forced her to fulfill his sexual desire with Imnala and whatever has been happened is not only wrong but also extremely dangerous for her. A few days later, Imnala has become pregnant for the second time without matrimony to a man which has been a great threat to her. The news of her pregnancy has become widespread. Imnala has to remain inside her room. The villagers start to tittle-tattle criticizing the gaonbura and her daughter saying, “The old man’s greed has landed him with a second bastard grandchild.” (*Ao, P- 50*). The old man regretfully expresses his repentance that his family has once again become the object of derision. Thus, the orthodox viewed of traditional law has bound a woman like Imnala to suffer both physically, mentally lowering her status, position affecting her character too even for the unborn child. “In short, life became a living hell for everyone in the family.” (*Ao, P- 52*). Everything has become a chaos in her family breaching all their peaceful life. Imnala recalls what her mother uses to say, “Remember, in our own society a woman must have the protection of a man even if he happens to be blind or lame. A woman also will always be in danger.” (*Ao, P- 53*). Thus, the syndrome of gender discrimination haunts not only a woman like Imnala but there are so many girls or women irked by such customary law and consequently, women are always victims this way or that way and for them no social justice.

Conclusion:

Today, with the rise of feminism, women have become aware of the fact of traditional blind faith that their inferiority is not pre-determined and thus it reveals that gender is neither natural nor absolute but the creation of patriarchy. Modern Indian women writers and researchers have become serious and sensitive to redefine the actual notion of women's 'proper places.' "In India, women idols are worshipped as goddesses in temples and at home. On the other hand, women in flesh and blood are beaten up by their husbands. While we have had a woman as the President of India, common women are struggling for a 'place' in their family in decision making." (*Das and Rubul Patgiri, p-113*). But in real life, women's 'proper place' and 'identity' are not recognized by the patriarchal society. This category of people lives in the society possessing always a misconception traditionally they believe that daughter's birth in a family is not a matter of blissful to recognize or accept it but a root of infuriation in the family on one hand and a woman who gives birth to a son is dignified in the society that the woman has fulfilled her life's 'great mission' as a woman on the other hand. 'They have grown intolerant of women's exploitation and victimization by men and they revolt against the marginalization of women.' (*Sharma, P-2*).

Traditionally, though, Naga women are lowered and placed their status under men, but their gender role is quite significant in different aspects of life which cannot be ignored and the male persons do not perform such role of women. "The fact that Naga society is patriarchal as well as patrilineal implies beyond any doubt that women are not equal to men in certain aspects of life. The Patriarchal Naga society is reflected by notions such as the birth of a male child being auspicious, man as the breadwinner and the protector of the society and women being subordinate to their households." (*Zehol, p-2*). The role of women in present society is being re-defined. At present a woman is no more confined to the boundaries of home. They have become literate, well understood and above all they are working as researchers to find out their real and equal status as of birth right. Today, they are well aware of their surroundings about the day to day happenings. They have come out to participate publicly in decision-making with a view to preserving their identities and personalities as a cultural heritage. In this connection, the women folk must be conscious and aware about their constitutional rights, responsibilities and their legitimate status as a whole to fight against the traditional men-made laws.

References;**Primary sources:**

- Iralu, Easterine. *A Naga Village Remembered*. Kohima, Nagaland :Ura Academy,2003. Print

Secondary sources:

- Ao, Temsula. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. New Delhi: Zuban, 2006. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 1973. Print
- Kire , Easterine . *A Terrible Matriarchy*. New Delhi : Zubaan, 2007. Print
- Mishra, Saraswati. *Status of Indian Women*. New Delhi : Gyan publishing House. 2002. Print.
- Sharma, Sangeeta. *Gender Issues; Fictional World of Shashi Deshpande*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) LTD, 2016. Print.
- Zehol Lucy. *Women in Naga Society*, New Delhi: Regency Publications, west Patel Nagar, 1998. Print.

Books Edited :

- *Gender Issues in Northeast India: Bridging the Gap*, Edited by Sailen D. Das and Rubul Patgiri, New Delhi: Authorspress, 2015. Print.
- *Identity Issues in Northeast India*, Edited by Ruma Bhattacharya, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2011. Print.

On line Resources:

- Mandal, Priti. *Book Review: Temsula Ao's On Being a Naga: Essays*, by Café Dissensus on November 25, 2018.