

**PORTRAYAL OF WIDOWHOOD IN SELECT WORKS OF TEMSULA AO, MAMANG DAI,
AND EASTERINE KIRE FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA****Miss. Y. S. Manjula**

Research Scholar, English Division

Dept. of S & H, VFSTR Deemed to be University.

Vadlamudi, AP

Email Id: manjulasarvotham87@gmail.com**Dr. Gomatam Mohana Charyulu**

Professor, English Division

Dept. of S & H, VFSTR Deemed to be University

Vadlamudi, AP.

Abstracts

Study on widowhood is one of the neglected areas and it is the need of the hour that, the myths, beliefs and assumptions associated with it need to be examined broadly. Since time immemorial, widowhood is significantly a distressing event in the life of a woman. In the patriarchal Indian society, the religious rituals, customs and traditions made widowhood much excruciating, disapproving and humiliating for women. Globally, apart from the differences in customs, and traditions every culture has its own set of rules to govern the lives of widows. In addition to the stigmatisation and deprivation, the most common experiences observed by every widow are, loss of social status and financial instability. The main purpose of this paper is to focus on the struggles of widows belonging to Naga, Ao, Angami, and Adi tribes of India's Northeast with reference to the selected works of Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Mamang Dai. The paper also discusses how Ao, Adi and Angami tribal widows were discriminated personally, psychologically, socially, economically by the religious rituals and symbolisms. The paper also portrays their animistic faith, and unique sufferings imposed on them through their belief in spirits and supernatural powers. The paper also observes that, despite internalised and institutionalised patriarchy, how certain situations made the elderly widows ingrained with gender disparity, take the privilege of decision making and exercise matriarchal power control over the family members and the clans. The study also dwells upon how the impact of various wars and insurgencies, have aggravated the sufferings in multiple ways in the lives of north-eastern tribal widows.

Key Words: Widows, Gender Disparity, Beliefs, Tribal Practices, Insurgencies.

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Since Vedic period, widowhood is significantly a distressing event in the life of a woman. In the patriarchal Indian society, the religious rituals, customs and traditions made widowhood much excruciating, disapproving and humiliating for women. The sight of the much-venerated married woman becomes inauspicious the moment her husband dies. Widowhood is seen as a stigma-‘pitied at the best and avoided at the worst’.

Reddy (2004) highlights some of the myths that revolved around widows [1].

- A Hindu woman's widowhood is considered as a punishment for the crime committed by her in a previous life. Hence, she is a sinner.
- Widowhood among upper caste is a state of social death.
- Once a person ceases to be a wife ceases to be a person.
- Widows are inauspicious

Temsula Ao, one of the famous writers from Nagaland, in her collective short stories *These Hills Called Home* (2006), dexterously showcases Naga's struggle in negotiating their broken identities and endangered cultural ethos. In the story "A New Chapter" (122-147), Ao highlights the pitiable status of the Naga widows in the midst of the post-independent violent battle between the Indian army and the underground rebels.

An underprivileged widow-Merenla was economically exploited by her own kinsman. In the mid-sixties, after Nagaland got its statehood on December 1st 1963, a new class of Nagas called, 'army contractors' emerged out as the third force. Based on their capacities and capabilities, they maintained the connections with both the underground and the overground. Nungsang, the protagonist, an army contractor, utilised all possible ways to earn unscrupulously. He made an agreement with his distant cousin, widow Merenla who was struggling with her widowhood. Merenla inclined to his lucrative offer, to supply vegetables and livestock to the army outposts.

Besides being cheated by breaching the contract, Merenla was ruthlessly left alone to face her fate to undergo unimaginable shame and mental agony. Greedy Nungsang opted fraudulent substitutions to make good profits and his higher aspirations left Merenla with many mis-giving's about her future. Their business relations were so good that she would grow only pumpkins which only Nungsang would buy. She was also given a soubriquet as 'pumpkin Marenla'. On the business forefront everything seemed to be good. Things didn't turn out as she expected when Nungsang was elected as MLA. Being brought up in traditional family values, Merenla couldn't digest the betrayal. Ao expresses it as:

"Family ties were more sacrosanct than any others and besides, people who go away from villages think and act differently even if they are our relatives." (*These Hills Called Home*:144)

Widows are the most cheated vote gaining bank in democratic political arena. MLA Nungsang would have helped Merenla in sales and relieved her of her financial crisis. Nungsang showed no responsibility on the fate of dejected Merenla. He used her as pawn in his political journey. Merenla repented on her naivete, trusting her cousin blindly. She pined several days staying indoors, doing nothing. Merenla underwent unimaginable mental agony, and depression.

"Far greater than the financial loss was 'the loss of face' suffered by the widow in the community because of her cousin's heartlessness and it was this that hurts her the most." (THCH, 144)

It is to note that, special packages such as widow pension, house loans and other benefits are determinative in both local as well as regional politics in India. The widows are exploited by the fake lucrative election promises. They can neither express their inability to look after their own families nor submit them to the political fate. They are used as vote minting machines in politics.

In the developing countries, like India widows are the most unpaid and exploited in the domestic sphere. The meek and weak widows are completely dejected, abandoned and branded as bad omen or inauspicious. They are often

seen begging near the shrines. But the energetic young widows are forced to perform household chores as unpaid labour. Her own family is not ashamed to exploit her. To get two meals a day she has to do all sorts of menial jobs.

Tribal widows are strong enough to face the deception of patriarchy and social opposition when compared with the general society. It might be due to the freedom given within the limitations of their community. Merenla came out of her predicament, and re-organised her life. The once-priced pumpkins were used as pig feed by her relatives. She hurled out the rest leaving none, as if performing a ritual to get rid of something ‘un clean’, doing away of all the remains of her dealings with her kinsman. She started a new chapter in her life far away from political permutations which wounded her materially and psychologically. The villagers who witnessed her frenzied behaviour were deeply moved; they supported her to alter the circumstances. Now she was called as ‘Merenla’ leaving the sobriquet ‘Pumpkin’, to make her forget the bygone days.

Temsula was successful in portraying the woman as equal to men, but the patriarchal society always treat the woman as ‘Other’. Irrespective of her talents, woman is always on the receiving end. From the spoils of war, people like Nungsang, flourished not to serve but to plunder in a deceitful manner, while the widows like Merenla had no choice to express their anger and resentment, destined to toil from dawn to dusk.

Simon de bour in her book *Second sex*, quoted French essayist, Montherlant’s opinion as:

“According to Montherlant as quoted by Bouvier “there is never a question of setting up any intersubjective relationship with woman: she has to be a simple animated object in man’s kingdom; she can never be envisaged as subject; her point of view can never be taken into account”. (De bour’s, 261) [3]

Mamang Dai, a poet, novelist and a journalist from Arunachal Pradesh, in her book

‘*The Legends of Pensam* (2006) portrays a vivid picture of life of the Adi tribe. She also recounts the discriminatory treatment meted out by widows and the taboos inflicted on them. Through the stories of old widowed women like Me-me; betrayed women like Dumi, and the pitiable lives of young widows, Dai, showcases the marginalisation of Adi women.

Sufferings of the widows are deeply rooted in the various superstitious practices observed by the tribe. In these villages men slept peacefully with no blame to touch them while women had to face the misfortune that befalls their families. Exorcism, bargaining with the spirits, observing the taboos, as solutions to their misfortunes, are part of Adi’s life. Despite everything, women be it a wife or an abandoned widow, always prayed for well-being of their men and sons. From the text to quote:

“We knew in these villages that the men slept peacefully with no blame to touch them the loss of birth life and death are fixed and unchangeable...Let no harm come to our men” (*The Legends of Pensam*, 77).

Manmade and natural calamities, such as wars, hunting, and natural disasters left the tribal women helpless to the mercy of the fate. In many instances the men were killed during their hunting episodes. In the section “a dairy of the world”, the story ‘*the strange case of Kalen, the hunter* (12-16), Dai, describes how luckless Kalen was mistakenly shot by a co-hunter. Adi’s assumed it as a curse of malevolent spirits. Ill-fated Kalen’s wife ‘Omum’-barely in her mid-twenties, became a widow, and had to endure the responsibility of her two small children.

From the text to quote:



“Kalen’s widow, Omum, fetched water, lit the evening fire, fed the pigs and chickens and carried on with her life without stopping to pine or utter recriminations.... it was resilient in an unconscious way, as if programmed to be so.... as if the business of living and loving was a temporary arrangement (TLOP, 15)

In several aspects of the Adi’s -traditional life, the role played by widows and women was immeasurable. They are supportive and play a significant role equivalent to men in the constructing the society economically and non-economically. Yet, they are not given equal social status with the men. It is noted that in the ‘kebang’ sessions women’s arguments are given a deaf ear. From the text to quote:

“While their men held court and negotiated interminable cases in daily meetings of the village council the older women like Me-me sat in the sun and talked. They were bold, hard-working, forthright. They shot out words like angry arrows straight to the point”. (TLOP, 76)

The plight of the widows is heart wrenching. They are always considered as inauspicious and should live all alone in thatched houses, deprived of the minimum luxuries. From the text to quote:

“Old widow Dajer spinning cotton in her dim house” (TLOP, 20)

Attributing misfortunes to women and widows are very common practice in Adi tribe as seen in the short story “Pinyar the widow” (26-35). Orka, abandoned his wife Pinyar and took away and their new-born from her.

“Pinyar bowed her head in shame by all the laws of our clan she alone was to blame for her misfortune and there was nothing anyone can do about it” (TLOP ,27)”.

The burdens the society put on the widowhood in the name of tradition, don’t take away her responsibilities. Though obeyed unquestioningly, at times, failures come from outside. At the age of twenty-five, tragedy struck Pinyar again. Her second husband Lekon was killed in a hunting accident in the third month of her marriage. Pinyar could only grumble and curse her ill fate when the villagers turned a blind eye to her post widowhood dilemmas. Widows are held responsible for any kind of misfortune that befalls on the family or house. When Pinyar’s house caught fire, the luckless widow was banished to the outskirts of the village as per the village customs. From the text:

“When a house catches fire, the luckless owner is banished to the outskirts of the village. It’s a taboo that no one could go and eat with her for fear of provoking the tiger spirit that causes fires and tempting it to follow them home.” (TLOP, 38)

It is observed that widows had no freedom to give their voices. In the midst’s of injury and deaths they carried on with their lives unhesitatingly and no one is held responsible for their fate.

It is also documented that comparatively; the children of widows are also vulnerable to both law and tribal traditions. Kamur, the son of Pinyar, killed his son and baby girl, under the spell of evil spirit. Despite his barbarous killings, no taboos were imposed on him and the community rallied to restore sense and order. From the text:

“Kamur is not to be blamed it is something in the blood the old people of our village had sat around speculating on clan titles and origins on birth, loves, marriages and spirits and ghosts.... The right or wrong be traced to something in the blood, they said”. (TLOP, 31)

Widow-Pinyar rushed to be by the side of her long-lost son, whom she has not seen since infant. She battled fate and the law and did all she could to save him. Finally, she was able to secure his release from the authorities.

In certain contexts, widows take the privilege of decision making and exercise matriarchal power control over the family members and the clans. Easterine Kire (Iralu), the first English-Naga writer, in her novel “*The terrible Matriarchy*” (2007) meticulously brings out the matriarchal power, through the character of Vibano-the widowed Grandmother. Theoretically, women in the third world countries like India, live under four layers of oppression: Oppression by Patriarchy, oppression by the colonial suppression leading to the identity crisis, oppression by the post-colonial feminist dogma and Oppression by Matriarchy. Heartrendingly, all these layers of suppression are applicable to widows too. Kire highlights the fourth layer of oppression executed by grandma on young Dielieno. Granny’s old fashioned sexist behaviour dates back to the war history of Nagaland and the principles of Naga patriarchal society.

The social and economic fluctuations occurred during the wars have procured the various transitions in the lives of Naga men and women. Accordingly, ‘Naga customary law’ was framed to activate the decisions of the indigenous Naga tribes. In doing so, Naga women are twice subjugated by dominant patriarchal social norms and stringent tribal laws. The Angami society considered woman to be weak biologically so, confined to domestic chores, subjecting them to suppression. This has instilled a sense of unworthiness, economic insecurity, fear, etc among the women.

Furthermore, Matriarchs set the standards for other women under their control life, depriving their freedom. Patriarchal set up and matriarchal rigidity have forced the young girls and widows to zip their mouths. They are the real subalterns, considered to be idle and dumb, and remain as voice less puppets in the course of life, making the widowhood unimaginably deplorable.

The widowed granny in the novel has ‘internalised’ or ‘institutionalised’ the patriarchy since her childhood. She was bought up witnessing the conflicts between Naga tribes and the Indian government. Her childhood traumatic experiences have turned her to be stubborn and authoritative to maintain her self-identity and to overcome her sense of insecurity. Customarily, a woman in a powerful position could be a ray of hope and support for other suppressed women, but it is very ironical that we see the widowed granny as an agent of female suppression. She could have groomed the young girls sympathetically with love and affection. Grandma carried all patriarchal qualities and controls all liberties and choices of young Deilieno by all means. She enormously subjugated all the women in the family -her own sister widow-Neikuo, her niece Bano, daughter- in-law Lino, etc are testaments to the matriarchal hegemony.

The main factors behind grandmother’s biased behaviour towards Dielieno is linked with the social and political connotations prevailed in Angami culture and tradition. The Grandmother’s unjust treatment is understandable in a positive way with reference to non-status of women in Angami society’s culture, tradition, and their customary laws.

Mary Walter in her book ‘Feminism’ documents, Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Room of One's Own’ (1927), where she clearly demonstrates that women’s status is not predetermined, but it’s something that has been socially constructed [10].

The Naga’s insurgencies not only caused loss of multitude of lives but also created a picture of worthlessness in the women. Life was very hard in the midst of multiple wars. Men folk fight during the wars and look after the

safety of the family, so giving birth to a son was more significant. The unresolved Indo- Naga conflicts have doubled the troubles of women and the widows, degrading their status to the lowest rung. The widowhood is always related to poverty. Angami women do not have right to claim property from matrimony, the law denied them the right to possess the property even though the girl was the only child. It is obvious and undebatable that woman is economically insecure, so from cradle to grave, she has to depend on men. Grandmother lived in a society where lots of restrictions were laid on the girl child. She also witnessed the hardships of her own widowed mother due to poverty. Her mother couldn't inherit her share because of no sons. Despite all, she was also excluded from many aspects of social life, and deprived of freedom. With all these bitter experiences, grandmother determined not to suffer as her mother. So, she made up her mind to be stern and have grip on the men, so that she cannot be neglected.

John Gray in his book 'Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus', analysed the behaviour of woman, as: "A woman is particularly vulnerable to the negative and incorrect belief that she doesn't deserve to be loved. If as a child she witnessed abuse or was directly abused, then she is even more vulnerable to feeling unworthy of love; it is harder for her to determine her worth. Hidden in the unconscious, this feeling of unworthiness generates the fear of needing others. A part of her imagines that she will not be supported... ". (John Grays, 53) [11].

The emerging modern society, has tremendous impact on the personality of widow. Unlike many Angami widows in the novel the third-generation widow, Nisano is most fortunate to have grandmother's shelter and the family support. According to the Angami custom widowed daughter-in-law should go to her mother's place, and it is considered as a 'taboo'. Nisano paid no attention to the gossipmongers, and she lived in grandmother's house.

In the Indian context, be it in the mainstream or in the tribes, women are venerated and worshipped as goddess on one side and widowhood is looked upon as a curse and inauspicious on the other side. Irrespective of region, caste and creed the widows are neglected and are treated as a burden even in the modern society particularly in the lowest rung.

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