



MATRILINE IN THE MARGIN: GENDERED UNDERCURRENTS IN BIJOYA SAWAIN'S SHADOW MEN

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Abstract

The proposed paper examines a unique social practice prevalent in a few states in Northeast India, which stands out in its socio-cultural context as distinct from the rest of India. The region has unique social and cultural characteristics, including a matrilineal system found only in some states of Northeast India. The subtle glance at the matrilineal system provides an emancipated view of women from a distance. The absence of certain social prejudices against women, such as infanticide of girl children, child marriage, purdah, and dowry, depicts a very progressive outlook of matrilineal Northeast society. However, the picture of liberated women on the surface is blatantly ruled down by underlying social stereotypes about women even in matriarchal societies. The study focuses on a novel set in Meghalaya that depicts the decline of the matrilineal system and reveals the gender-based discrimination faced by women in the region. This paper seeks to highlight the prejudice faced by women within a matrilineal society through a feminist reading of Bijoya Sawian's *Shadow Men*, from the Northeast. The study will be a descriptive analysis of a select text using feminist criticism.

Keywords

Matriarchy, Women, Northeast, Literature, Gender, etc.

Full Article

The Northeast is characterized by its unique socio-cultural background and the extraordinary social system, which is peculiar to only a few states in Northeast India. The bifurcation from the normative and the diversification of the established patriarchal system mark the difference from the Northeast Indian states. The northeastern societies practice a romanticized concept of a matrilineal system, particularly among the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes from Meghalaya. They trace the matrilineal lineage, wherein women essentially hold property inheritance rights. It is one of its tribes that celebrate the birth of a girl child. They adhere to the 'matrilocal' marriage system, which is unique in its matrimonial ties, and bring the husband home after marriage. Khasis are one of the rare tribes that celebrate the birth of a girl child. They are unique in their matrimonial ties and bring husbands home after marriage. The girl child inherits the maternal property, and the youngest girl, known as 'Ka Khadduh' or 'Khatduh', holds utmost importance in the household and usually inherits the mother's property.

Family life is structured around the mother's house, which the maternal grandmother guides. The youngest daughter, known as Khatduh, serves as the custodian of ancestral property and is expected to manage it for the longest possible time. The Khatduh never leaves the house and subsequently becomes the head of the family in her mother's absence. In the Khasi society, a man moves out of his mother's house to join his



wife's household after marriage...and, unlike the other patriarchal societies, the father has little authority in a Kashi family. It is the maternal uncle, whether married or not, who acts as the children's mentor (Roy, 283).

This paper is based on one of the unique cultural traits prevalent in some northeastern societies, specifically the matrilineal system. Bijoya Sawian's novella *Shadow Men* has been problematized to articulate the matrilineal system in the northeast society. It is dominant amongst certain tribes in states like Meghalaya, Nagaland, and parts of Assam. This marks a deviation from the norm and also gives readers a sense of eerie disbelief in the existence of this unusual social system. The subversion of the established patriarchal system also marks the diversification of the Northeast from the rest of India's states. Some northeastern societies practice a matrilineal system. The most notable of such ethnic communities and tribes are the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes from Meghalaya, as well as the Angami tribes in Nagaland. These societies follow a matrilineal tradition, where descent and inheritance are passed through the female line. They trace their roots back to ancient matriarchal lineage where women hold primary power, authority, and decision-making within the family and community.

The novella unfolds the story of one of the communities following matrilineal lineage, the Kashi community. It touches upon the contours of power dynamics in the tug-of-war between the two genders. The resignification of women's domination in various spheres of life can be interpreted in terms of the active role women play in business and trade. It was an unusual exposure to a new environment, "Bara Bazar, the main market of Aizawl, bustling with women selling goods from across the border: blankets, clothes, toys, and cosmetics. For an uninitiated Punjabi, it was a cultural shock to see a marketplace completely dominated by women." (Kundra, 129). The ancient open marketplace, called 'Lewduh', in the capital city of Shillong, Meghalaya, is operated by women entrepreneurs. They were lined up from one corner to another, trading in fresh vegetables, toys, groceries, handlooms, and chopped meat. The women traders dominate the entire market, where men assist them with lifting bags and other menial tasks. Likewise, the strong presence of women in Manipur is evident in their active participation in the public sphere, most notably through the *Ima Keithel*, or *Mother's Market*, at the heart of Imphal city. This iconic market, located in the mid-square of Imphal city, is exclusively run by women, popularly known as Keithal Nupi. This is perhaps the only market in the world run totally by women traders. "It is the largest all-women market in Asia. 'Ima', meaning 'mother', has a strong cultural symbolism not just in the marketplace, but in the cultural ethos of Manipur. Wearing colourful phanek (sarong), nearly 5,000 women squat on their assigned spots every day selling myriad wares: groceries, vegetables, utensils, and clothes," (Kundra, 130). The stalls within the market are intergenerational, and they are passed down to daughters or daughters-in-law. The market plays a significant role in subverting class hierarchies, and women from all social strata manage these stalls. A poor woman, among the wives of well-to-do engineers and doctors, sits in the Keitha, which makes it unique in itself. The government of Imphal has also taken adequate measures to keep the male traders away from this market; no men were allowed inside the market. The Ima market is the centre of attraction for many visitors.

However, the existence of matrilineal practices sets them apart from predominantly patriarchal societies, though they too are not entirely devoid of patriarchy or male influence. This matrilineal system challenges the traditional gender role, where men tend to be primary breadwinners and decision-makers. This subversion of power dynamics over the ownership of resources and dominance over the other is purely antithetical to the typical patriarchal structure found in many societies. Thus, it is perceived to be a threat that could dismantle the very foundation



of patriarchal norms and beliefs that confirm women's subordination to men. The threat posed by established power dynamics causes a sense of irritation among the male members, even in a matriarchal system, which will be studied through the novel under study.

Therefore, a subtle emancipator picture of liberated women does not speak out for the entire womenfolk in the Northeast. The outer core can be misleading, as they are devoid of traditional pastoral rituals, such as sati, purdah, and dowry, and are believed to enjoy platonic relations with men. The literacy rates, sex ratio, and work participation provide a favourable environment for women, which somewhat affirms gender parity. Amongst some of the tribal and even non-tribal communities in northeast India, there are stringent gender rules, and roles ascribed to women; the subordination of women is entrenched in the culture of the land. Though at the outer surface the society appears 'gender neutral', the strong androcentric undertones that sustain traditional gender roles, relegating women to the domestic space. However, among matrilineal societies like the Khasis, it is the maternal uncle who presides over matters of land inheritance. These rules secure the status of the customary laws that sketch out the image of an 'ideal girl' or 'ideal woman' in a society. The subtle emancipator picture of liberated women in the outer core is misleading because the subordination of women is entrenched in the culture of the land. The egalitarian outlook of this society, where it is believed that power is shared between genders with women having a strong voice and agency in different walks of life, lies just on the tip of the iceberg. The working of gender bias tends to be prevalent in almost all northeastern societies and often challenges the existence of a matriarchal system. Such substantial social prejudice is reiterated in different forms and shapes in the land. To draw an analogy, a past incident that had occurred in Nagaland reads,

In January 2017, many of the tribes stepped up the opposition against the implementation of a 33 percent reservation to Naga women, which brought the state to a standstill... Nagaland is the only state in India where there has been a sustained opposition to 33 percent reservation for women's participation in public office (Kikon, 113-14).

The above sentence reads the ultimate marginality of women in Nagaland, who were denied access to government offices and public spheres. They were restricted from holding the position of power based on specific customary laws and the culture of the Nagas. This marginality directly corresponds to the predicament of the women. The state of Nagaland is guided by its unique system of administration, governed by its customary codes and tribal belief system. One of the apex bodies of the Nagas, called Naga Ho-Ho, completely rejected this proposal for a 33 percent reservation for women in urban and local body elections. They believe that such privileges for women will directly infringe on Naga customary laws and traditions. The customary codes uphold the agency of male superiority and force women to succumb before them, within the social matrix. The degree of influence of such indigenous customs is unparalleled elsewhere in India and is unprecedentedly guided by the Indian Constitution. The provision under the Indian constitution reads, "Article 371(A) guarantees the protection of Naga culture and customs, land ownership, including preservation of local, social and religious practices. (Kikon, 114).

Bijoya Sawian is a woman writer and a translator from Shillong. Her works primarily revolve around the Khasi community, an eminent tribe from Shillong. She based her work on the Khasi way of life, drawing inspiration from Khasi's myths, legends, and folklore in her writings. She writes for the restoration of Khasi's customs and traditions. In this pursuit, she has also translated many Khasi stories into English. She also belongs to the group of mercurial women writers from the Northeast who aspires to give voice to the voiceless and her ink to the forgotten. Bijoya Sawian, in her novella *Shadow Men*, insinuates the matriarchal system in Meghalaya. She writes,



Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos belong to a matrilineal society. The lineage is taken from the mother. The daughters inherit, with the youngest as the custodian of the major share of the property. Her parents live with her, as do any unmarried family members. The sons do not inherit but are supported by the family until they get jobs or get married and move out to their wives' homes (Sawian, 3).

A novel set in Meghalaya, *Shadow Men* by Bijoya Sawian, explores the Khasi community, revealing a bleak reality about the dwindling matrilineal system within this community. The novel portrays discontent and apprehension among male members regarding the matrilineal system. They hold a strong resentment against it and say, "Even our children belong to their mothers" (Sawian, 30). They have discontentment about the property inheritance rights, which directly go to Khatduh, a younger daughter of the household, who inherits her mother's property. The male members show utter disgust about such rights and say, "We are fighting for equal distribution of wealth but till that comes through most of us just float around like scum in a stagnant well" (Sawian 30). Northeast India stands in stark contrast to the general social convention of the rest of Indian societies regarding its matrilineal system. Such deviation from the normative also irks the male members of the matrilineal society. Men's fate lies in their chances to marry the youngest daughter of the household; those who marry the youngest daughter are seen as fortunate, and others have to bank on the mercy of their sisters. A minor character comes with a realisation that "Those who marry the youngest daughters of the family were highly respected and loved," and the rest have to "wait for their sisters and they pretend ignorance; some offer their sympathies." (Sawian, 33). The male members are apprehensive about the instability in their wives' households and their utter incapability to move their wives and children with dignity. The matrilineal system challenges their masculinity, and men's question surfaces, "Why don't you all just change to a patrilineal society?" (Sawian, 64). The novel envisages how, "this customary practice saw the rise of a one-of-its-kind male suffragette movement" (Kundra, 130).

The novel depicts the undercurrents of gender dynamics among the Kashi men and their unease with the shifting power matrix. However, the novel suggests that even in a matrilineal system, women are unable to surpass men. "Societies such as Kashi and the Garos of Meghalaya are matrilineal (inheritance rights go to the daughter), women have little voice in political decision making" (Hazarika, 70-71). The progressive outlook of the matriarchy does not help women to liberate themselves from their roles as women. They are invariably bonded with their primordial relation to their bodies, which has been used as an object of gratification by man. The novel surfaces the plight of women when Robert confesses to Kong Raseel that, "Faraway in a city in the north, a beautiful aunt of mine had to sleep with a hideous judge. Thereafter her husband won an important land case" (Sawian, 64). It hints towards the existence of substantial sexual prejudice against women, which stresses the 'objectification of women's bodies', which is prevalent even in Khasis, a tribe with matrilineal lineage. However, Khasi customary law allows the youngest daughter to inherit her parents' property. Nevertheless, the administration of the inherited property primarily comes under the domain of the husband, sons, or the mother's brother(s). (Krishna, 178).

The genesis of matrilineal culture among the Khasi and Garo can be traced back to the famous temple of Kamakhya in Guwahati, which is an important antecedent of a Hindu place of worship, known as a 'Shaktipeeth', associated with the mother goddess Shakti. As per a researcher, Hamlet Bareh, cited in Samrat Choudhury, *Northeast India: A Political History*, writes, "Kamakhya was a corruption of 'Ka Meikha', which means paternal grandmother in Kashi language. This was a revered mother exalted as a deity. Both Khasi and Garo were associated with the legendary history of Kamakhya. She further adds that the matriline is directly associated with the Garo tradition,



which states that, “Their remote ancestors migrated from Tibet. The Garos remember that when they migrated to Assam from Tibet, they were met on their way by their enemies, who challenged them. The Garos escaped in time by floating across the Brahmaputra on trunks of plantain to the opposite bank.” (Bareh). Eventually, they found shelter with the Khasis atop the Kamakhya hill and adopted the practice of worshipping the mother goddess, as well as the tradition of matrilineal descent. (Choudhury, 225).

To trace back women’s subordination, it is important to reconsider the exposure of the Northeastern women to violence. Since the last decades of insurgency and counterinsurgency, the condition of women has been completely throttled. The violence becomes the routine of their livelihood, which subverts their role as women. During ancient times, men were mostly warriors and traders, which kept them away from home with minimal certainty of their return. Thus, it was preferred to pass down the ancestral property from mothers to daughters, deciding on keeping women as the keepers of family, culture, and property. With the British expedition to the region, the power dynamics in households began to shift slightly in favor of women. The men of the clan were mainly occupied with keeping the enemy clan or invaders at bay, which left the household shouldered by women. Subsequently, the transgression of women’s role from householders to house owners records the emergence of a rare phenomenon in Indian society. Conflict in the north-east region is more catalytic in households headed by females. This later resulted in a matrilineal system amongst Northeastern societies, such as the Khasi and Garos. However, it is not as dominant as patriarchy; it remained limited to certain tribes such as the Garos and Khasi. The womenfolk from these clans are entitled to certain rights, including property inheritance rights. These are specific to women here and what their counterparts in other parts of the country have failed to secure. Over time, such leverage emerged as an emancipatory move for women, helping them become entrepreneurs, farmers, weavers, and more.

Though a mere glance at the romantic matrilineal system provides an emancipated view of women, a mere glance at it is misleading. The Northeast society and the condition of women are also often interpreted to be much more stable than in other states in India. Meghalaya may give us a women-centric view of society, but officially, men do play a pivotal role. Despite women being assigned a superior status within the household, women are still the primary caregivers entrusted with duties such as cooking and cleaning. However, the projection of a liberated society is ruled down as the narratives from the region unfold the stories of gendered discrimination and gendered violence that women of the region have to undergo. The image of the emancipation of women in the Northeast became an outward appearance where, on a deeper level, Northeast society, too, as much as other Indian societies, harbours discrimination against women. A glance at certain folktales and oral narratives reveals popular negative connotations associated with womanhood. Many a time in the popular stories we come across a narrative that encapsulates women as a ‘damsel in distress’, there are many tribal customs inherently demeaning to women.’ (Buongpui, 77). The conventional approach of discrimination towards women can be traced from the popular anecdotes underlying different Northeast societies, for instance, a Mizoram saying that goes, “Worn-out fences and wives’ can be replaced when they grow old” and “uncontrolled wives and untrimmed grass in the fields both become unbearable” (qtd. in “Contested Fields”, Krishna 176). Similarly, in Garo society, women are ridiculed with sayings like “Just as a goat without teeth, so a woman lacks brain” (qtd. in “Gender Relations”, Boungpui 74). Malaswami Jacob, in her novel *Zorami: A Redemption Song*, employed certain popular proverbs in Mizo society, such as “a woman’s wisdom does not reach far and ends at the village stream’s edge” (Jacob 69). Similarly, some other adages prevalent in the northeast are, ‘let a woman and a bitch grumble away’, and ‘as crab meat is no meat, woman’s word has no value’, which are some examples that help us to articulate women’s position. Such condescending remarks on women reflect a cultural



subordination of women even in a matriarchal society. It highlights the existence of matrilineal as a paradox, and reiterates that patriarchy stands on solid footing. In many ways, Meghalaya is a matrilineal society and not a matriarchal one. “The Khasis women do not enjoy any special power other than that the children carry the mother’s surname; women are merely considered the progenitors of the race” (Roy, 288). One survey has also turned up with an aversive revelation about tribal patriarchy, which asserts that, “Northeastern tribal patriarchy is the most terrible patriarchy in India.” (Swami, 154).

In Meghalaya, land ownership and inheritance rights are also deceptive, which hints at the slowly crumbling rosy image of women’s emancipation. Amongst many matrilineal tribes, despite having the entitlement to the ancestral land, women have no customary rights to sell off the property without the prior consent of the maternal uncle, elder brother, or father. The outward image of Meghalaya as a matrilineal society, assuring the empowerment of women, deviates from the ground realities. However, many believed that northeastern women exercised more freedom and power, and assumed that their condition was relatively better than that of women from other parts of the country. It is often stated that women enjoy greater accessibility and visibility than women in other communities; however, such assumptions are often elusive. Because it does not help women improve their social condition, nor does it help them secure a role in decision-making. Despite such high social indicators of women’s upliftment, women in the northeast face severe problems under patriarchy. In Northeast society, “While the management of the family and all the activities connected with it are concerned with the administration and management of affairs of the community” (Buongpui, 77). The subordination of women to men is a dominant theme in the women’s literature from the region written by women writers. These literary representations of women’s subjugation are interventions to male narratives that project women as eternally subordinate to men. They highlight the issues surrounding women and the marginalization of women’s voices. They resist the justification posed by society for the subjugation of women based on underlying social codes and belief systems. In this regard, Mamang Dai writes that the writings from women writers are “marked by the anguish of love, they are the voice of fierce resistance which poses a challenge to the traditional society based on inherent customary laws which govern women’s life and perpetuate deep unspoken pain (Dai, 3). Their writings serve as a means of resisting the metanarratives created by male writers, which inadvertently leave women’s experiences unaddressed. The intersection of marginality that northeastern women endure can be well cited in Easterine Iralu’s statement, “I have always lived in the margin, I have lived this marginalisation which relegates me to the edge simply because I am a Naga, second, as a woman; and third, as a tribal, an indigenous person with each layer deepening my marginalization (Kire, 273).

Recently, writers from different northeastern states have begun to uncover such prejudices about women in the matriarchal societies of the northeast. Their writings tend to foreground the subdued voices of women, which are testimonies to the gendered experiences of discrimination in the region. Their writings incorporate women’s voices and experiences from the cudgel of domesticity to the streets of conflict. Nationality, ethnicity, identity, and culture are what colour the writings of women writers from the Northeast. They not only bring the experiences of the Northeast into pan-Indian consciousness, but they also catalyze to highlight women’s experiences as an important facet of Northeastern consciousness. Ostriker states “all writing by women from the Northeast is invariably marked by gender” (Ostriker, 9). She further adds that women writers from the region invariably express female sensibilities. They are in pursuit of ‘writing back to the centre’ by recasting their stories and perspectives in their writing, reiterating their stories that have been erased.



The social conditioning of women as subordinate to men is vehemently portrayed in the literature from the region by women writers. These literary representations of women's subjugation are interventions to male narratives that project women as eternally subordinate to men. They tend to rule down every possible justification posed by society for the subjugation of women based on underlying social codes and belief systems. Their writings serve as a form of resistance against the metanarratives established by male writers, which inadvertently marginalize women's experiences. 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 marginalized because I am a woman, and thrice-marginalised because I am a tribal, a member of an indigenous community (Iralu 273).

In Northeastern society, the predicament of women is no doubt contested. They are domesticated by social conventions under which they have to conform to their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. The identity of women in Northeast society is primarily rooted in their indigeneity. The gender role overburdening them is woven into the deep traditional and cultural matrix. The writers, too, are grounded in their indigenous knowledge and depict an array of indigenous rituals, customs, and traditions in their writings. The women characters in their writings embody a large chunk of indigenous culture. The narrative depicts how women in northeast society are overburdened with social customs and traditions that invariably bind them within the cudgel of domesticity. However, the paradox lies in the fact that their identity over time has also declined to the level of a storehouse of their indigenous culture. Other than that, they do not play a significant role. The presence and involvement of women remain limited in certain indigenous rituals and harvest festivals. They were kept aloof from the men's world with no visibility in public spheres. The subordination of women in the Northeast is deeply rooted in its culture so K.B. Veio Pou says, "Besides the various socio-political and cultural underpinnings.... the drawback of women living under staunch patriarchy where men exercise the upper hand in many aspects of life, the women's voices are only stifled or not heard" (Pou, xi).

Therefore, the absence of specific cultural and social limitations on women, unlike in other societies, does not imply the complete emancipation of women in these societies. The paper tends to rest on the fact that patriarchy is still dominant and survives in the garb of matriarchy even in the matriarchal societies in the Northeast. The paper aims to explore the nuances and intricacies of this unique social structure, offering insight into its historical origins, cultural practices, and contemporary challenges faced by these societies. It will help us understand and appreciate the differences prevalent in any social structure. Moreover, challenges the established assumptions about gender roles and power dynamics in the Northeast. The resignification of women's roles in the novella portrays women's domination in various aspects of life. This matriarchal kinship system in the northeastern communities redefines traditional gender roles, which has initiated a shift from the norm and established a new popular outlook. Ultimately, it leaves us with a hope for the possibility of establishing an equitable society based on shared gender roles.

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