

**WOMEN IN THE AO-NAGA FAMILY AND COMMUNITY: A STUDY OF
TEMSULA AO'S *AOSENLA'S STORY***

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ABSTRACT

*Much has been researched about the Naga women's status within her internal environment. This paper is an attempt to explore the assumed changes which have taken place in the Naga family in the present day time in an urban locality to trace if such changes in the setting and time have altered the fate of the Naga women. The paper looks at the status of the Ao-Naga women with reference to Temsula Ao's book, *Aosenla's story* (2017) which brings out the condition of Ao-Naga women in their family and community. The study will be based on the framework of well-known Feminist theories, specifically that of Simone de Beauvoir's ideas on the 'married woman', Naomi Wolf's elaboration on 'sex' and Nivedita Menon's stance on the 'family' in relation to women. While projecting the status of the Ao-Naga women, emphasis will be particularly on the position of the girl child in the family, her education and her career, women's choice in marriage and her status in the marital relationship.*

Keywords: North-East, Naga, women, patriarchy, family, education, career, marriage, sexuality, motherhood

Introduction

North-East India has been the site of various disturbances and literature of the region has for a very long time concentrated mainly on the political upheavals, underdevelopment, backwardness, bloodshed and the ever present image of the gun. This stereotypical image of the North-East gives only a fragmented picture of the region and contemporary writers seem to have consciously come out of this one-dimensional portrait. The huge body of emerging writings from the North-Eastern states in today's time bring out the various hitherto unexplored and in several cases, unknown cultural practices, myths, beliefs and ways of life of the various tribal groups of the region. This is clearly visible in the writings of prolific writers like Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh and Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire from Nagaland. Another strain of writing that is noticed from the writers of the region is the

presence of the unique relationship between man and the natural environment (eg. in the writings of Dhruba Hazarika from Assam). Women of the states have been in the centre-stage of many of the writings that have emerged from the region. Several women writers like Jahnvi Baruah, Uddipana Goswami and Mitra Phukan from Assam, M.K. Binodini Devi from Manipur, Malsawmi Jacob from Mizoram, Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh, Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire from Nagaland have presented unique portrayals of women of the North-Eastern states. Even though spoken of as a wholesome entity, mainly because of the geographical positioning, the North-East states of India can never be put under the same bracket in terms of cultural practices, languages and ways of life. The same holds good when one looks deep into the status of women in different states as well as within different tribal groups. Much different from the positioning of women in mainstream Indian literature, the stories which have emerged from the North-East regions on women are unique in their cultural implications and often fraught with the tensions of the socio-political environment of the states.

One of the states in the North-East region which has been contributing immensely to the existing body of literature is without doubt, Nagaland. Writers like Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire have brought out many unique cultural practices, myths, beliefs and ways of life of two most important tribes of Nagaland – the Aos and the Angamis. The Naga woman has also been the focal point of many research activities in the areas of social and cultural anthropology. Several scholars in the present day time are engaged in the exploration of women's status in the Naga family, community and the larger society. Renowned academician, author, and ethnographer, Temsula Ao (1945 -), in her book *On Being a Naga* (2014) dedicates three of her essays to highlight the unique positioning of the Naga woman in the complex terrain of her family and society. Ao's collection of short stories, *These Hills Called Home* (2006) and *Laburnum For My Head* (2009) also bring about interesting narratives related to the Naga women. Born in Jorhat, Assam, Ao retired as Professor of English from North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in 2010. From 1992 to 1997, she served as the Director, North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur, on deputation from NEHU, which facilitated her research and writing on the Naga way of life. Her collection of essays, short stories and poems play a major role in the understanding of the various facets of culture and identity of the Naga people. This paper will concentrate on the woman's position in the Naga family and community as portrayed in Ao's recently published book *Aosenla's Story* (2017). Much has been researched about the Naga women's status within her internal environment. This paper is an attempt to explore the assumed changes which have taken place in the Naga family in the present day time in an urban locality to trace if such changes in the setting and time have altered the fate of the Naga women.

Literature Review

Ao, Temsula in *On Being a Naga* explores the dichotomy in Naga life and lore within the search for a new space where Naga life can be re-thought and re-processed. (Ao, 2014)

Ao, Temsula in *Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* talks about the Ao People and their rich oral tradition with due emphasis on their society, belief system and their myths and tales and how it has shaped their history. (Ao, 1999)

Jamir, L. Sosang in *Ao Naga Customary Laws and Practices* looks at the various facets of culture of the Ao Nagas and its associated practices. The book also highlights the advent of the British and how it ushered changes in the administrative set-up and how western Culture and Education has had an adverse impact on the rich cultural heritage of the Aos. (Jamir, 2012)

Baruah, Manjeet in “Literature in NorthEast India: An Overview” focuses on women’s unique presence in the Northeast states of India. (Baruah, 2008)

Kashyap, Aruni in “Some thoughts on Literature from India’s North East” highlights the wrong assumptions associated with literature from the northeast regions that they should capture only bloodshed, violence and terror. (Kashyap, 2009)

Pimomo, Paul in “A Terrible Matriarchy: A Review” presents a critical review of Kire’s book with emphasis on the girl child’s position in the Naga family. (Pimomo, 2008)

Waten, Susan in “Weaving a Literary Fabric” discusses the position of Naga women in their family and community and the patriarchal mindset and ideology that surrounds the men’s behaviour. (Waten, 2009)

Research Gaps:

A critical review of existing literature suggests that even though research have been undertaken on women’s position in the Naga family and society, it is still a very fertile area of study as not much work has taken place on the subject. No research seems to have been conducted on Temsula Ao’s latest book to explore the position of the Ao women in the family and the larger society.

Methodology

The method adopted is Textual Analysis.

The methodology employed in the paper is an analysis of Temsula Ao’s text based on the theoretical framework of Beauvoir’s ideas on the ‘married woman’, Naomi Wolf’s elaboration on ‘sex’ and Nivedita Menon’s stance on the ‘family’ in relation to women.

Findings & Discussion

1. Customary Laws on Women’s Exclusion

The Naga society is essentially patriarchal. The roles assigned to the women are “...strictly defined by this tradition which says that it is only men who can be decision-

makers in important matters both in private and public affairs.” (Ao, 2014) Several important aspects of the Naga life – education, religion, property, politics – are clearly affected by gender-based regulations. It is the Naga male who is the decision maker and the patriarch of his family. He is also responsible for providing for his family. The woman’s role is centered on helping in the fields, household works and looking after her children. The Naga woman is never a part of the decision-making activities of the village council either. Those important roles are assigned only to the males. An insight into the ‘Ao Naga Customary Laws on Women’s Exclusion’ highlights that the Naga women are deprived of various rights and positions which are enjoyed by men on the assumption of the physical weakness of women. L. Sosang Jamir in his well-researched book *Ao Naga Customary Laws and Practices* (2012) lists down certain areas in which an Ao woman is disqualified –

- 1) A woman cannot be appointed as members of *Tatar Putu Menden/ Samen Menchen* i.e., Village Council.
- 2) A woman cannot become a *Putir/ Patir* or an *Ungr* in the village or in Khel. She cannot perform religious rites and sacrifices, but she can assist her husband in their family worship.
- 3) A woman is not entitled to get honour, title and fame in spite of her good performance, but she can be honoured with her husband in songs that are being sung at Feast of Merit given by her and her husband.
- 4) An Ao-woman cannot inherit landed property and other immovable property. She is also not liable for any debt of her ancestor. She may, however, inherit a share of debt of her husband on behalf of her son if the son is living with her.
- 5) If a land is owned by the wife, it should be made known to the heirs of her husband before he dies. In Ao custom a wife cannot sell any land without the knowledge of the heirs.
- 6) An Ao-woman cannot participate in the discussion of general public or mass meetings of the village citizens. She has no place in the village administration. (Jamir, 2012)

The same clauses of women’s exclusion are noted in *Ao Naga Customary Laws* written by Tajen Ao under the heading ‘Social Disqualification of Ao Women’ which is due to her physical weakness and sex. Thus, patriarchal domination is evident in the Naga society where women have limited or no access in village governance and administration. The Naga woman’s involvement in religion and politics is also minimal. Not only in the old village customs of religious practices did the women take a backseat, but also after the advent of Christianity, the pattern remained the same. Women had a separate day marked as ‘Women’s Worship Day’ but the dominant patriarchal structure in the churches did not allow them to take any decisions of their own. Also the women leaders in many Baptist churches would be designated as ‘Associate Pastors’ but not ‘Pastors’ which was reserved for men. Temsula Ao records that it has been a rare scenario when “(i)t took more than 100 years of the church’s establishment for it to relent and allow an Ao woman to be ordained as a Reverend of the

church, to be able to officiate at weddings, funerals and preside over Holy Communion services.” (Ao, 2014) Similar subordinate status of the Naga women is visible in politics too. There is hardly any visibility of Naga women in mainstream politics which is dominated by their male counterparts.

Set in a modern context and in an urban locality, Ao’s recent novel, *Aosenla’s Story*, portrays similar patriarchal set up in the Naga family. The book opens with the middle-aged Aosenla sitting in her verandah fanning herself as she ponders on the trajectory of her past life in her parents’ home. Her father, much alike other Ao fathers of her community, is a strict patriarch who arranges for her marriage to a much older man in the hope of upliftment of status in the clan without even informing her. Interesting to note in the story is the writer’s description about the father-daughter relationship in a seemingly happy nuclear family. Prior to Aosenla’s house arrest, when her father puts an end to her college education, she had never felt any difference in her parents’ attitude towards her as compared to her brothers. In fact, it was she who was pampered more and showered with better gifts, leaving her brothers to complain that their father was partial to her. However, as she starts delving into the past, what strikes her in this relationship is the lack of a proper communication with her father. The absence of her father’s direct approach to her makes Aosenla wonder –

“Why doesn’t he talk to me directly? Why doesn’t he come to explain to me why he has accepted the offer? Why does he treat me like a guest in this house? Why is he so formal? The moment she uttered the word ‘formal’, she knew for certain that it was the word that she had been searching for all this while. Her father was sheltering himself from her opposition to the marriage by creating a distance between them through this formality. But what she did not realize was that in their society, most fathers behaved in a similar manner with their daughters.” (Ao, 2017)

This formality in the relationship which Aosenla has experienced all her life but has never felt anything odd about is because she has seen all fathers behaving the same with their daughters.

In such a situation, it becomes imperative to understand the position of the girl child in the Naga household. Easterine Kire’s novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2013) represents the dubious status of the girl child. In the preface to the book, Kire states,

“(w)hile the visible structure of the novel is patriarchal and seems focused on bringing out the misuse of the patriarchal system, the less visible under-structure is matriarchy and how it abuses the patriarchal structure resulting in gender abuse within the same gender.” (Kire, 2013)

Lieno, the protagonist of the story, is fortunate to have loving parents and brothers, but her troubles stem from the matriarch of the house, her grandmother, a strict disciplinarian and clearly one without any sympathy for a girl child. Connected to the idea presented by Kire on women’s domination by their counterparts, Ao too opines that Naga women’s position in their own society can be uplifted only when they start believing in their own selves and

understand that receiving their due is their birthright. Coming out of the one-sided view that women's inferior status is only due to the shackles of patriarchy, Ao looks at a larger possibility that any change in the current situation of women will be opposed at multiple levels. Analyzing the probability of such a situation, she says,

“...the obvious opposition will be from men; but equally strong would be the opposition from a section of women who are themselves still traditionalists at heart and would like to continue in the state of ‘benevolent subordination’ rather than be involved in a struggle to reform the mind-set of men so strongly entrenched in their age-old belief in male superiority.” (Ao, 2014)

Aosenla, too, is caught in the quagmire of the girl child feud, not so much as a victim herself in her parent's home but as the mother of two daughters. When she delivers her first daughter, she could see the disappointment written on the face of her husband and in-laws but she is excused on the grounds that she still had many more years of conceiving and birthing. The scenario, however, changes with the birth of her second daughter when even her father-in-law, the patriarch of the house, does not come to see the child and formally name her as per the custom, but merely ‘sends the name’ through his son-in-law. By the time Aosenla is pregnant for the third time, not only is the family already in a celebratory mood with the certainty of the birth of the much-awaited heir, but she also is seen fervently praying for a boy child who could liberate her from familial and social insults and humiliations. Aosenla's subsequent loss of the much-awaited boy child and heir to the family is unpardonable. Not considering her fragile state of body and mind, aggravated with the knowledge that she cannot get pregnant anymore, her husband is seen completely missing and visits her a couple of times in the hospital with his friends as a mere formality. Aosenla's own sense of guilt is more than her pain at the loss of the child at birth; fearing the cruel and insensitive eyes and tongues of family members and visitors, she releases herself unceremoniously from the hospital on her own and returns home through the rear gate in the late evening. Nevertheless, her days from thereon are filled with cruel barbs from her mother-in-law and family friends who blame only her for this misfortune.

2. Women's Education & Career

In addition to the status of a girl child in the family, Ao's book also represents the community's attitude towards girls' education. Aosenla recollects her college days when for the first time in her life she feels that positive changes were taking place in her. Even though she was awkward in the company of more fortunate students in the initial days of her college life, she gained self-confidence gradually, started performing well in her studies and began to dream of a post-graduate degree and a career too. This positive change is reflected in the changed personality of Aosenla –

“...this new sensation added a certain glow to her personality. The sad demeanour was gone; became livelier and began to take part in extra-curricular activities. Faculty

and students alike noticed the subtle changes in her and began to look upon her transformation with interest and growing admiration.” (Ao, 2017)

However, all her dreams are curtailed when in the second year of her college, her father suddenly finds a match for her and her marriage is finalized even without any consultation with her. In Aosenla’s sense of dejection and frustration, we perceive the fate of several such women whose dreams of a career are nipped in the bud. Commenting on woman’s secondary status in the family and her supposedly limited or no career choice, Nivedita Menon says,

“Whether in their choice of career, or their ability to participate in politics (trade unions, elections), women learn when very young, to limit their ambitions. This self-limitation is what produces the so-called ‘glass ceiling’, the level above which professional women rarely rise; or the ‘mommy track’, the slower career track upwards, while women put aside some of the most productive years of their lives in order to look after children.” (Menon, 2012)

This limitation is seen in Aosenla’s case too – deprivation which comes only because she is a woman. While recollecting the past, Aosenla is able to comprehend her formal relationship with her father who treated her at par with her brothers but put her on a separate platform altogether because she was a girl child. His difference in attitude to the children’s education is projected thus –

“...while he made plans for the boys’ college education, the father had secretly resolved that Aosenla would stop her studies after matriculation. It was not because he loved her less; his thinking was dictated by the fact she was a girl and had no need to study more because one day soon, she would be married off and would go away from his house to start life as a wife and daughter-in-law and set up another household.” (Ao, 2017)

Similar attitude among the older generation in the Naga community is portrayed in the grandmother figure of Kire’s novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* too. Lieno is shown to be growing up at a time when the importance of education for Angami girls was still being debated and not prioritized. Grandmother Vibano has very clear ideas about the fact that girls do not need education as it does not help them in any way to attain their most important goal, that of becoming a good Naga wife and mother. She states, “In our day...girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learned all the fieldwork as well. That way one never has a problem with girl-children. They will always be busy at some work or other, too busy to get into trouble.” (Kire, 2007) In Grandmother Vibano’s attitude towards girls, one is reminded of Beauvoir’s insight into the influence of gender roles on the male and female child:

“...in thus accepting her passive role, the girl also agrees to submit unresistingly to a destiny that is going to be imposed upon her from without, and this calamity frightens her. The young boy, be he ambitious, thoughtless, or timid, looks towards an open future; he will be a seaman or an engineer, he will stay on the farm or go away to the city, he will see the world, he will get rich; he feels free, confronting a future in which

the unexpected awaits him. The young girl will be wife, mother, grandmother; she will keep house just as her mother did, she will give her children the same care she herself received when young – she is twelve years old and already her story is written in the heavens.” (Beauvoir, 1997)

These constricting views of the family and community have a great effect on the development of the girl child’s mental health. Lieno’s parents, however, have quite modern views and are of the opinion that Lieno should receive education as much as her brothers had the rights to. For Lieno, her entire life seemed to be centered on going to school and do well in her studies. In order to not make her grandmother angry, she would wake up earlier than usual, finish all her household work, so that she would be allowed to go to school. Once permitted to go to school, she puts her heart and soul in learning and achieving the most out of her education. She proves to be a good student, also a hardworking one and over time is able to gain the admiration of her teachers as well. Lieno is one of those few girls who completes her education and takes up a job as a teacher to support her family. Kire depicts the evolving Angami society amidst tremendous changes and that is mainly showcased by the modern ideas of parents who consider it important for their daughters to get an education and take an avid interest in the girls’ careers as well. This change in the mindset of the younger generation of the community is portrayed in the attitude of Aosenla towards her daughters’ career. Ready to put her foot down against the traditional views of her in-laws, she supports the career choices of her daughters, participates in the selection of appropriate colleges for them along with her husband and draws satisfaction when her elder daughter becomes a medical practitioner. Thus, Ao’s book presents the gradual but welcome changes in terms of women’s education and career visible in the Naga community.

3. Women and Marriage

A study of woman’s position in the Naga family is incomplete without taking into account her status in the marital relationship. It is in marriage that a woman’s position in her family can be better understood. Commenting on how marriage is a different experience for men and women, Beauvoir says,

“In such circumstances the girl seems absolutely passive; she is married, *given* in marriage by her parents. Boys *get* married, they take a wife....He is the economic head of the joint enterprise, and hence he represents it in the view of society. She takes his name; she belongs to his religion, his class, his circle; she joins his family, she becomes his ‘half’. She follows wherever his work calls him and determines their place of residence; she breaks more or less decisively with her past, becoming attached to her husband’s universe; she gives him her person, virginity and a rigorous fidelity being required.” (Beauvoir, 1997)

This passive experience of the women in marriage can be seen in Aosenla’s case as well. Forced by her father to get married to a much older man, Aosenla sacrifices her dream of a

career and higher education. Her marriage to Bendang is a real struggle as they are poles apart from each other. Bendang feels superior to her all the time as his wife belongs to a minor clan. His defensive attitude also stems from his understanding that his wife is well-educated and sophisticated in her manners and behavior. Bendang sees that as a threat to his superior position as a husband and filled with apprehension that he may lose hold over his wife, he says, “....you know nothing about life except your pretensions based on book knowledge. Hah! Who cares for your phoney accomplishments; you are still my wife....” (Ao, 2017) For Bendang, his wife’s achievements are meaningless and of no consequence to him or his family; however, he does not hesitate to ‘use’ his wife to climb up the professional ladder. Aosenla is not only expected to dress up well and accompany Bendang to social gatherings, but also dance, socialize and sweet talk with men who are of professional benefit to her husband. On one such occasion, when Aosenla fails to keep up to her husband’s expectations and refuses to dance with an army major, a drunk and irate Bendang confronts her saying, “Do you know what he said? He said that my wife is snooty, thinks no end of herself and does not know how to behave in polite society. Mind you, if I do not get the army contract this year, it will be your fault.” (Ao, 2017) The initial years of Aosenla’s married life seems to be a saga of accusations of such kind. It is only when she fights back for her self-respect against false charges on her character that her husband and members of his family understand that they can’t take her for granted.

With the elevated position that Aosenla seemed to have gained in her family, there is a marked change that can be seen in her husband as well. Bendang suddenly changed drastically – he became more attentive towards his wife, stayed away from gambling and drinking parties and curtailed his business trips to bare minimum. Aosenla, even though surprised, basked in the glory of her success at last of having a happy married life. She too started taking care of herself, wore western outfits and fashionable clothes, and socialized to such an extent that much to her family’s chagrin she had become quite a popular figure in the small town. What, however, is worth noticing is Temsula Ao’s dwelling on the improved physical relationship between Aosenla and her husband. For Aosenla, it was the beginning of a self-fulfilling phase of her life, until she discovered she was pregnant with her third child. Then on, her husband gets back to his ‘normal’ self and all her delusions of romance and marital bliss vanishes into thin air. On retrospection, Aosenla realizes that her short-lived marital romance exposed the dangerous thin line which separated “sex-as-love and sex-as-means” and she gets thoughtful about this “inherent dichotomy of love and sex between man and woman.” (Ao, 2017) She ultimately realizes the dangerous position that married women like her are in and this new knowledge brings in a new perspective to marriage and marital sex for her. Reflecting on the fear of the patriarchal society about women’s supposedly insatiable sexual urges, Naomi Wolf comments:

“Capable of multiple orgasm, continual orgasm, a sharp and breathtaking clitoral orgasm, an

orgasm seemingly centered in the vagina that is emotionally overwhelming, orgasm from having the breasts stroked, and of endless variations of all those responses combined, women's capacity for genital pleasure is theoretically inexhaustible." (Wolf, 1991)

It is this fear that drives men like Bendang to show women their 'true position'. True to Aosenla's realization, Bendang's interest in his wife seems to evaporate once he is able to impregnate her and get his job done. With her growing maturity, Aosenla is also able to take the knowledge of her husband's love affair before marriage and it is with a lot of difficulty and discretion that she is able to take care of the child who could have destroyed the reputation of her husband and the entire family. In keeping up to the expected patriarchal setup, we find Bendang's attitude to his wife during the early days of marriage as domineering, something of a Torvald Helmer nature who assures Nora: "...you just lean on me, I shall give you all the advice and guidance you need. I wouldn't be a proper man if I didn't find a woman doubly attractive for being so obviously helpless...you know you are safe and sound under my wing." (Ibsen, 1978) The role, however, changes as Aosenla takes a firm grip of her life, her household, her children and after a point of time, her husband's welfare as well as that of the entire family. It takes a lot of time, no doubt, but she emerges as the self-reliant woman in charge of herself as well as one who is the ultimate protector of the family.

Conclusion

This study of Ao-Naga women's position in the family and community as represented in Temsula Ao's book *Aosenla's Story* highlights the status of women in the patriarchal Naga society. The paper traces the assumed changes which have taken place in the Naga family and society in the present day, specifically in an urban locality, to trace if such changes in the setting and time have altered the fate of the Naga women. In Aosenla's narrative, however, we find that girl children are still not accepted whole-heartedly in the family and their education and career are deemed to be of no consequence. The choice of marriage too, for girls like Aosenla, is never their own. In marriage, she finds a hostile family and a husband who leaves no stone unturned to show her 'real' status as his wife. However, *Aosenla's Story* is remarkable for projecting certain changes in the Ao community, wherein a better future for girl children can be seen. In the importance that Aosenla and her husband give to their children's education, their choices of career and ultimately, their daughter's choice of her own husband, do we see the positive changes for women in the society.

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