

ABSTRACT

The study of Naga women seldom interprets and questions the “customary” aspect of women’s subordination or victimization, although a mere documentation of the fact that the Naga customs, both law and practice, are gender discriminatory is consistent. The questions concerning the very nature of the customary law and its application, in how it discriminates, and where one may think about the possibilities of reform, are not sufficiently explored. Therefore, I attempt to address this lack by drawing on Monalisa Changkija and Temsula Ao as primary thinkers in this study, identifying, in their corpus, the various sites of gendering and the perpetuation of gendered experiences that result from customary laws and practices.

In this research, I propose a ‘reading’ of Naga women, which I argue is polynomial. Mohan and Dwivedi’s theory of polynomia informs this argument, through which I undertake the analysis of the polynomic function in both the usages of ‘reading’ and ‘Naga’ in my research. The study involves a reading of Naga women in texts produced by Naga women, as well as a Naga reading about Naga women in the writings of Naga women. The usage of ‘reading’ further incorporates an interpretative function in examining the conditions of Naga women as well as the interpretation of these thematic concerns in the speeches of Ao and Changkija. Narratological inquiry into the reading of Naga women reveals an embedded context in the text. Through such contextualized reading, I provide a critical analysis and expose the customary victimization of women in the Naga culture. I argue that the various existing methodologies in Naga literature, as well as in feminist critique, are insufficient in addressing the problems of gender discrimination in the Naga context without investigating the usages of “customary,” or even the appropriations of what is “customary”; in essence, the study of the Nagas’ *Ura*, which I translate as the village and worldview or the Naga view of the world. Adopting this methodological approach, I juxtapose the representation of women in literature with the experiences of Naga women in relation to the “customary” in their *Ura*. The study of Naga laws, as *Urami zho* (customary law and practice), extends from the *Ura*, which I argue is also performative of customary victimization. This argument is augmented by theoretical postulations from both Austinian speech acts and Bakhtinian speech genres.

In Naga scholarship, various shifts in culture are observed in the *Ura*, which are carelessly viewed and examined as an overall shift in society and culture. However, when considering the continuance of the ancestral discriminatory laws and practices of women's exclusion and disenfranchisement, I ask what shifts? Not only are the thoughts and writings of Ao and

Changkija crucial to this analysis, but their standpoints, assertions, and protestations are also discussed in the thesis as defining the shift in the *Ura*. This argument lends a proto-feminist stance to my reading of Ao and Changkija. Literary narratives merge with reality in both Ao and Changkija's writings, and they discuss gender problems in the Naga communities (tribal societies) through both oral and written forms. Such ways of *telling* aid a comprehensive analysis of Ao and Changkija's critique of customary laws and the various representations of gendered experiences in their literary oeuvre. This research further conceptualizes a thematic structure and content that 'reads' literature as life-making through a constructionist approach, which I extrapolate from Bruner's concept of 'life as narrative.' Drawing on the Naga oral tradition, especially the storytelling tradition, I examine Ao and Changkija's accounts of gender discrimination, an inquiry informed by feminist jurisprudence, feminist approaches to androcentrism, narratology, and theoretical perspectives and literature drawn from Naga politics, history, and society. The 'reading' of Naga women, therefore, takes cognizance of the Naga traditional ethos and the prevalent scholarship against which a paradigm shift is argued in Ao and Changkija's corpus and in the interpretation of thought in the two thinkers.