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Resistance and Ungendering: Poetry of Mona Zote and Monalisa Changkija

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Abstract

While the academic world talks of different waves of feminism that have emerged in Europe and the US in the past few centuries, the feminists from the third world countries have reservations on the use of a western framework of feminism in investigating the challenges faced by the women from third world countries. The structural discrimination that permeates the gender divide in India is so variegated that a homogenous reprisal will be inadequate to understand the problems that persist among several ethnic communities in a postcolonial context. Neither religion nor education could erase the structural discrimination that continues to exist in these ethnic societies because of the persistence of regressive "customary laws" that allow male domination. This essay argues that the emerging feminist voices like Monalisa Chankija and Mona Zote from India's north-east have used "performativity" as a tool to counter these gendered societies on one hand, and on the other hand it has also un-gendered the "essence" of cultural constructs putting it under suspension. However, the success of this effort seems limited only to the literary world as efforts are still underway to bring substantial changes into the political world.

Keywords: Monalisa Changkija, Mona Zote, North East India, Performativity, Third-world Feminism.

Introduction: Feminist voices from Northeast

For a very long time, the literary and intellectual world has been dominated by male authority. This is why the corpus of knowledge relating to philosophy, history, theology, literature, and even science was not only androcentric but was also misogynistic in its tone and language. Meeta Deka (2013) points out,

"Historiography, in general, suffers from an amnesia in respect to several categories that include women, peasants, workers and other marginalized voices [...] This Historical amnesia was diagnosed by the growth of feminism and feminist movements since the 1960s" (p. xvii).

Texts related to women or about women were also produced mostly by men and the female experiences were hardly recorded and they tended to exist in the periphery or the footnotes (Ray, 2001, p. 1; Eagleton, 2007, p. 106). Consequently, women read about themselves through the perception of men, and later on, when they wrote about themselves, they conformed to the plastic

image of women created by men. Mary Eagleton writes that “these feminists are as guilty as the most misogynistic men of marginalizing women and not representing them at all” (p. 105).

This image of women as conceived of by the creative and sexual imaginary of men produced a model which was to be appropriated and internalized by women. The “second wave” of feminism found the male linguistic artifice suffocating their feminine voices. This is because the phallogocentric matrix of vocabulary and subsequent cultural production were devoid of lexicon that could accommodate feminine expressions (Jones, 1981). Writing played a pivotal role in the emancipation of women not only from patriarchal domination but also from themselves, which had so long been entrenched into the matrixes of patriarchy. This functions well in educated and elite societies where women’s movements have support from civil society. But this option remains inconsequential in peripheral ethnic societies marred by violence and remoteness. The tribal societies in North East India are a case in hand, which according to Temsula Ao are “still engaged in solitary activity” (2010, p. 171). The two women poets dealt with here come from Naga and Mizo ethnic groups living in India’s North East. While relating to their poetic work, this chapter will contextualize their experiences with the socio-political history of the places from where they write. Drawing on Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (2011) idea of writing as resistance, this chapter argues that the women poets from North East India use writing not as a tool of self-expression, but also as a “performance” through which they ungender the cultural constructs by putting those under suspension. These cultural artifacts are then stripped of the constructed essence and eventually re-invested with a new essence through their poetic expression.

Double resistance through verse

Mohanty (2011) asserts that “questions of political consciousness and self-identity are a crucial aspect of defining Third World women’s engagement with feminism” (p. 286). The scenario in North East India is different from the rest of India in this matter. North East India is the home to several ethnic communities (Biswas, 2021) and many of these communities have been converted to Christianity after 1826 (Karotempral, 2009). Christianity was seen as a way of liberating these ethnic communities from their “savage” practices by making them “civilized” (Guha, 1996). These civilizing missions not only disrobed the indigenous communities of their tradition, identity, and heritage, they also distanced them from their past, from themselves. Charles Grant argued in favour of proselytizing the various communities in India so that their lives, habits, and customs could be changed and brought to par with western civilization (Ghosh, 2013, p. 14). This vision was finally realized with the coming of Bentinck and T.B. Macaulay who introduced a modern education system built on the western Christian guiding principle (Ghosh, 2013; U. Deka, 1989; Mukherjee, 2000). Whereas this transformation appeared liberating, in reality, it only brought a new kind of colonial domination and subordination. The ethnic social structures and traditional knowledge systems were destroyed by this interference which complicated matters further. On one hand, religion outlined the objectives of the converted communities clubbing them as a separate identity and nation different from pan-Indian identity; on the other hand, the Church became a powerful medium of domination and subjugation as articulated in the poems by Mona Zote and Desmond Kharmawphlang (Kharmawphlang, 2011). Women also became victims of the political turmoil that rocked the North Eastern states since 1947 (Banerjee, 2014). They were caught in the conflict between the state and the militants. These experiences are visible in the poetic works of Mona Zote and Monalisa Changkija. The double resistance that flows from the

feminist poets is not only directed against the conflict situation but is also directed against the patriarchal domination.

Most of the tribal communities in North East India follow customary laws which allow them to carry on their ethnic practices with a legal sanction (Buongpui, 2013). Although some of the practices like marriage or divorce laws may be a contravention to the Indian constitution, yet the ethnic space is given a scope to continue with those practices (Borah, 2015). On examining the folk literature of these communities, one may find that these customary practices and the social structure that scaffold these practices are inherently patriarchal. For example, the Mizo story of *Pi HmuakiZa* tells us about the persecution of a female vocalist because of her extraordinary skills. She was killed and buried along with her gong by the menfolk of her community (Zama, 2011, p. 207). Among the Khasis a sexist proverb is in circulation- "Haba la kynih ka iarkynthei la wai ka pyrthei," meaning "when the hen crows, it will be the end of the world or world will be in ruin" (Borah, 2015, 45). Among the Manipuri Meiteis, the women were denied the right to property (Basanti 164) because ownership of a property is a marker of social status. Among the Arunachalis too, women live in a marginalized position (Misra, 2011b, 230). The Idu Mishmi has a proverb that tells us of the deep-seated misogynistic practices: "Aru Pe Gu Noyu-Mbo Mi." This means "women are like anchorless boats which move easily, even with the slightest stir. It is this logic that projects women as unsuitable in positions of power (Aich, 2015)." All these proverbs narrate the subordinate position of women in the tribal societies in North East India. The discourse on women's empowerment is too good to be true in societies dominated by customary practices. The grand narrative that is created through such mythical discourses or proverbs in the tribal society contributes largely to the subordination of women. Such discourses enter the storytelling and decide the role assigned to women, which is then iterated in all kinds of cultural and political discourses assuming the cloak of truth. Temsula Ao (2006) writing about the plight of women in North East India states that "In actual reality, in this society, women are considered to be of little or no significance in matters relating to the origin, history and civil life of the people. But in fictive reality of these narratives, women have been portrayed as re-appropriating the powers that men actually wield in real life" (pp.23). Therefore, the task of women writers is not only to confront the patriarchal domination but also to portray the struggles through their writings. Talpade Mohanty points out the role of publishing houses and university curriculum in bringing about this revolutionary change in this struggle. The two poets discussed in this chapter illustrate this.

Mona Zote, through her poems, challenges the stereotypes created in society against women. She challenges these cultural stereotypes on one hand and also on the other hand, questions the demonization of women in patriarchal societies. In "The Whores of August" Zote tries to humanize the "fallen women." She speaks of prostitution in the Mizo society where Christian missionaries are in charge of the law of the land. Not only are sex workers marginalized in these societies they are viewed with contempt. Zote (2003), speaking of these prostitutes, notes-

And in the Madonnian embrace find
What no perfect daughters would deny
Sweetness in all their ways (201)

By using the imagery of Madonna, Zote offers a critique of the Christian missionaries who have subverted the existence of these women. Thus, they may not have become the "perfect daughter"

as the patriarchal society would expect them to, but they manage to retain their individuality. On one hand, she critiques the authoritarian Church for the inhumane treatment it lays down for these sex workers, and on the other hand, she also highlights the subordinate status of the perfect daughters or perfect wives who have bartered their individuality for a rightful place in the society. The sex workers are women who cannot legitimately be mothers or wives. Patriarchy derides and relegates them to subaltern position, and even when visible they are simply confined to defined spaces (Geetha, 2007, p. 6). Patriarchy only sanctions women who could give birth to children and act as active parents bringing them up as future citizens (Geetha, 2007, p. 48). Neither the Church nor the tribal society accepted women who broke these stereotypes. Monalisa Chankija too while writing about sex workers wonders-

If Prostitutes and other
 "Morally-loose women"
 are social evils,
 so are "God-fearing
 Chaste women"
 who have mothered
 wife-battering sons. (Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain 6)

Here, Chankija tries to redefine what the patriarchal agents have culturally constructed as the idea of "Morally-loose women". In a way she advocates decriminalization of sex work and consider it as being a source of livelihood (Pillai et.al 313-326; Kotiswaran). Much like Nivedita Menon she draws a parallel between marriage and prostitution; while marriage can be "arduous, undignified, and inescapable as sex work...-and unpaid on top of it all! But we try to empower women within marriages not demand the abolition of marriage itself" (184). The poem also notes, how, in patriarchy, women themselves become agents of repressing other women. By questioning the culturally constructed essence of social roles, Chankija destabilizes the social matrix. Here, the illusion of social identities is being questioned and juxtaposed with each other. The power nexus between married women and "loose women" have been pitted against each other, only to highlight how there is power struggles even among married women. In marriages that are virilocal, that is the wife moving to the husband's home after the marriage, women "derive their power solely from men" and "they are put into positions that are pitted against one another" (Menon, 2012, p. 44). The poet does not intend to further increase the tension among women, rather she intends to unify women against the patriarchal structures which represses women alike. Such patriarchal structures treat them like "second class citizenry" (Chankija, 1993, Foreword)

In the poems of Monalisa Changkija, we note this to be a recurrent theme- women caught in unequal marriages, sacrificing their dreams, desires, and individuality. Changkija counters the patriarchal norms of the tribal society and questions these unwritten rules set down for women. She writes-

I see it nowhere written
 that your unironed shirts
 deserve my attention
 more than my flying lessons (Chankija, 1993, p.27)

Here, Changkija not only draws our attention towards the gender prescribed roles, but she also subverts them by speaking of a woman's desire for flying lessons. While flying or driving has been mostly associated with masculinity, the act of flight is also associated with freedom and liberation. So, a woman's desire to prioritize her flying lessons over domesticity would mean that she is breaking free by ungendering her roles. Butler (1988) observed that- "The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternatively embodied and disguised under duress" (p. 522). Women across cultures have been repressed and culturally constructed for their marginalized existence. This performance of gender is often so inbuilt, that women do not recognize their suppression. They themselves start negotiating a position for themselves, which would be suitable for them after fulfilling their primary responsibility of being the 'domestic labour'. They start taking up jobs which are tagged as female professions like nursing and teaching, and even when they take up other jobs, they need to limit their ambition at the very onset. Like most of India, even in the North East, this sexual division of labour is so normalized that women do not consider their domestic responsibilities as work. Women's labor remained invisible until the 1991 Indian census- the state did not recognize such works because they are not performed for any wage. However, in rural areas, the domestic work includes collection of fuel, fodder and water, animal husbandry, livestock maintenance, post-harvest processing and kitchen gardening. These jobs demand considerable physical strength and yet remain unpaid. If women choose not to perform these domestic responsibilities, the men of the house would have to hire someone to perform these jobs and pay them wage, or the goods are to be purchased from the market. (M.K. Raj ,1990, pp. 1-8; M. K. Raj and V. Patel ,1982, pp.16-19). Chankija (1993) writes-

I have discovered.....
 your life isn't more precious
 your time isn't more valuable
 your profession isn't more noble
 your pay-cheque isn't heavier
 your status isn't more important
 than mine. (p. 21)

With this realization the poet not only breaks out of her gender prescribed role of being the care-giver, she also prioritizes her own profession and her pay-cheque. This is not a personal act of rebellion, as she recognizes her worth as a domestic labour, women start questioning the economy which benefits from this unpaid labour. If the mothers and wives do not perform their assigned gender roles, then either the husband or the state has to pay someone to get this work done (Menon, 2012, p. 15). Women then could become equal contenders in any career of their choice-politics, warfare, sports or any other fields which until now had been dominated by men. They would no longer require to limit their desires.

Chankija's aspiration for the sky intends to break free of gender stereotypes in more ways than one. She wishes to break free of the cultural fiction which limits her individualism, and this breaking free of cultural constructions, also has punitive repercussions. The women, of whom Changkija speaks of, are not only marginalized and denied of their rights and desires; they are

also subjected to domestic violence. The men of these societies resort to masculine aggression to keep intact the gender matrix. Women are reduced to their reproductive and caregiving functions as the men batter and bruise them by “raining blows” with their “masculine hands” - the domestic sphere of the Naga women is as conflictual as the social scene. Violence against women has been normalized and is common in most households. Women are caught in relationships where they find neither solace nor security. The institution of marriage is used to deny women their basic rights. Changkija (2014) writes regarding the Naga marriage that it is a “totally unequal one, where the role of the wife is taken for granted as subservient” (p. 77). They are not only dominated in the household sphere but they are also denied the political rights guaranteed to them by the constitution of India. The patriarchally structured civil societies continue opposing the thirty-three percent reservation for women in Urban Local Bodies (ULB) in Nagaland (Saikia, 2017). Caught in these unequal marriages the women suffer silently, go through miscarriages and other oppressions. They continue being resilient mothers and wives who continue to fulfill their duties as mothers and wives. Chankija (1993) writes-

Violence-induced miscarriages,
black-eyes and bloodied-lips
blue-bruises and broken ribs
within the sanctity of marriages
and security of homes,
are unrecorded indexes
of man’s “progress and growth”
on this planet’s unwritten
Pages of Pain (p. 7)

The personal over here becomes political (Hanisch, 1970). The experience of a Naga woman remains no longer restricted to the four walls of her household, her marginalization and the systematic process of otherizing and silencing her is being written and recorded by Changkija here. These untitled poems are extracted from an anthology which she has titled *Weapon of Words on Pages of Pain*. Changkija has been a reporter by profession who understands the power of words and the need to record the narratives of pain to locate them historically, and further read and theorize them. Her poems do not follow the conventional norms of poetry; with rhyme schemes she suspends the rhythm and conventions to question the prevailing socio-cultural norms and roles. Chankija (1993) writes-

When my verses
do not rhyme
nor conform to
traditional norm,
to you, they are
just words,
not poetry. (p.39)

She is well aware that the society may not acknowledge them as verses, but as mere words and phrases, but this too is an attempt to break free of “sedimented expectations of gendered existence” (Butler, 1988, p.524) Thus, she politicizes the personal not only through her words, but

also by breaking free of conventional poetic structures. These poets are trying to rewrite the history of the culture by highlighting the marginalized conditions of women.

Ungendering Culture

These poems become tools of resistance when the patriarchal agents of the society continuously try to silence them; these poems also create political consciousness among Naga women with shared experiences. In the introduction to her book on "life stories of Jamaican women," Honor Ford-Smith (1987) writes: "These tales encode what is overtly threatening to the powerful into covert images of resistance so that they can live on in times when overt struggles are impossible or build courage in moments when it is. To create such tales is a collective process accomplished within a community bound by a historical process..." (pp. 3-4). As the Naga underground army engaged in a battle with the Indian state, the "Naga way of life" had been turned into a battleground where one could hear the blaring machine guns and revolutionary ideals (Misra, 2011a) – this turmoil finds a parallel in the households of these women, which turned into battles and wars neither lost nor won. Being women, they suffered double oppression in the hands of their men as well as the insurgency. For them, an overt struggle is not possible, so these poems act as a means to unify and record their dissent. Changkija (2003) vents her anguish against the use of brute masculine force to silence them-

"Don't waste your time
Laying out diktats
And guidelines
On how to conduct my life
On matters personal and political" (pp. 200-201)

Both these poets are vocal about the violence and neglect that the people of the North East have suffered over the years- "the cultural genocide, the attempting to erase tribal heritage, the ravages of insurgency, the authoritarian reign of the church, and so forth" (Bordoloi, 2019, p. 95). The women of these regions have used their words to counter the brutality. In Zote's "What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril" (2005) we are taken into the world of a woman living in a male-dominated society. The evening star tells her that "Ignoring the problems will not make it go away," and the music reminds her of the "dusty slaughter", "epidermal crunch" and "sudden bullet to the head" (pp. 66-67). Speaking of the insurgency Mona Zote said in an interview- "People simply shut it out, they don't think of it on an active level yet the trauma filters through in small ways. And while religion supposedly heals or consoles, it can also inflict cultural damage that is difficult to diagnose or even acknowledge" (Tellis, 2011) The world of Zote at once induces discomfort among the audience, the banality and yet the nonchalance with which she speaks of the violence in her world shows that Ernestina is not a demure voiceless woman. The "third eye" is the poetic imagination which the society or the Repressive State Apparatuses (Althusser, 1971) have cut out of her. With the very act of speaking and thinking as a woman, she breaks out of her gender role of being the silenced woman and reclaims her voice in the patriarchal state. She challenges the historical idea of being a woman in peril. She undoes the process of becoming the woman and ungendered herself as she steps into a violent and grotesque world. In her poetic world, we see Zote reverse the historical and cultural construction of becoming the woman (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 273). She unlearns the authoritarian rule of the church, the violence of the insurgency,

and the subordination she has faced as a woman growing up in a patriarchal society. She is not the perfect daughter or wife who would shy away from speaking about the foeticide, miscarriages, the illegitimate children born, and the failed marriages; she blames the church and the state for the peril. Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1999) problematizes the “cultural compulsion” to become a woman; however, in the North East we see a compulsion to be a man. The body becomes a passive battle ground where through determinism or free will cultural meanings are inscribed on the body or meanings are interpreted with the body as the means (p. 12). It is fear, insecurity and anger which pushes them out of their conventional roles and makes them thinkers and critics. Zote (2005) writes, Ernestina would smile and say-

I like a land where babies
are ripped out of their graves, where the church
leads to practical results like illegitimate children and bad marriages
quite out of proportion to the current population, and your neighbour
is kidnapped by demons and the young wither without complaint
and pious women know the sexual ecstasy of dance and peace is kept
by short men with a Bible and five big knuckles on their righteous hands.
Religion has made drunks of us all. The old goat bleats.
We are killing ourselves. I like an incestuous land. (p. 67)

Using both the repressive and ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971), the Mizo people have been “bombed silly out of our minds” (ibid). Here, the very act of thinking or speaking is an act of empowerment, especially when it is done by a woman. The bombing is also an allusion to the bombing of Aizwal by Indira Gandhi in March 1966 (Buhril, 2016). In Changkija’s “Shoot,” (2011a) she writes “Shoot, after all, we are only an inconvenience of a few lakh souls” (p. 90). The poem addresses the threat of genocide; however, she affirms that they will not move from their dream of a unified brotherhood. “One of these Decades” (2011b) is also a poem addressing the socio-political context of the North East (p. 89). Here, she speaks of living a nightmare and the past mistakes of their forefathers. She believes that this time they will not be lured by “riches and glory”, this time they will not be enslaved by the strangers who have wanted to tame them. The poem alludes to the Christian missionaries who have tried to tame the tribal heritage and enslaved them. The “date with destiny” refers to Nehru’s Tryst with Destiny speech (p. 89). Although India achieved independence in 1947 from the British, the North East continues to be caught in a struggle between the insurgent groups, the armed forces, and Christian missionaries. Changkija participates in this collective dream and unified brotherhood, she breaks the society’s gender norms through her social performance of participating in a historical and cultural process, which she is otherwise deprived of, on account of being a woman (Butler, 1988).

The ungendering process of these poets is also performed through the images, myths, and idioms employed in their poetry. Changkija in “Mist over Brahmaputra” (2011c) wishes to be like the Brahma’s son. The name Brahmaputra means Brahma’s sons, the river in the North East is considered a masculine river because of its ferocious currents and it also has a mythical connotation. She wishes to embody the “human inadequacies” and the “spiritual serenity” of the river. The identity of being Brahma’s son lends it shapes, colours, and volume to travel across time and space. She seeks the strength to heal from her “self-destructive tendencies” (pp. 87-88). She suspends the idea of the masculine image of the Brahmaputra as she humanizes it and draws

parallels between herself and the river. The Brahmaputra, which is a cultural artefact and has a history of cultural essence associated with it, is being offered a renewed significance. We see a similar instance in Mona Zote's "Girl, with Black Guitar and Blue Hibiscus" (2005) when she draws a parallel between the subterranean gong and the black guitar in one hand and the computer on the other (pp. 67-68). The subterranean gong alludes to Pi Hmuaki, the vocalist, who was buried alive because of her skills. Hmuaki's perfection is compared to the flawless computer, which is a machine and has a masculine connotation. The gong after being buried becomes the guitar, which too is considered masculine. For the gong, or Hmuaki to be accepted by her society she needs to ungender herself and becomes a man. These poets write intending to critique the cultural constructs and ungender the prevalent narratives by suspending them. These poems then become the site of performance where the stereotypical essence of cultural artifacts is challenged and redefined by these women. The poems, therefore, no longer remain mere sites of resistance, they become cultural fields, where renewed gender acts are performed "invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure" (Butler, 1988, p. 531).

Conclusion

The journey of the women in social, political, and literary life is fraught with deprivation, suppression, and violence perpetrated by the patriarchal hegemonic structures. Not only constitutional amendments failed to rescue women of this plight, but religious conversion also failed miserably to emancipate women. Rather, religion with its inherent misogynistic scaffolding could not offer the restructuring of the social order for women. A cursory inquest into the life of the North Eastern women will at once reveal the participation of women in the economic and cultural front. Despite their active participation, they are relegated to a secondary subject under the patriarchal gaze. The opposition of civil society in women's participation in the political sphere hints at the fact that women will not be allowed to make any changes to the social structure politically. Under these circumstances, a critique of such domination and also altering the cultural constructs through literary practices could play a major role. Mona Zote and Monalisa Chenkija, both working women, have not only subverted the hegemonic structures through their writing; they have also ungendered the cultural icons through performance in daily life and re-appropriated those to exemplify the participation of women in every sphere of social life. On one hand, they have exposed the inherent misogynistic social structure in tribal society; on the other hand, they have re-signified the cultural elements by ungendering those. While it has been witnessed that religion has failed to guarantee emancipation for women in the North East tribal society, the panacea lies in political participation and cultural re-signification through writings.

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