

Colonial Legacies and Tribal Women’s Identity: An Intersectional Analysis of Kailash Sharma’s *Anami Nagini*

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ABSTRACT

The issue of tribal identity in India is complex, particularly when viewed in the context of the national identity, which emerged from anti-colonial struggles. Historically, tribal communities lived self-sufficiently, outside the mainstream Indian social structure and were excluded by the varna system as “avarna”. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, tribes are considered a part of the subaltern, and are among marginalized groups outside hegemonic power structures. Tribal women, facing dual subjugation as both tribal and female, experience a unique form of intersectional oppression not fully addressed by the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, which focuses on class, caste, and gender within the Hindu caste system. This study examines the identity of tribal women through the novel, *Anami Nagini* by Kailash Sarma. By analysing the intersection of gender, ethnicity, culture, and socio-economic factors, the study aims to highlight the distinct experiences and challenges faced by tribal women in a patriarchal society. It explores the diverse ways that patriarchal powers garner control over the formation of their identity.

KEYWORDS

Tribal identity; gender; ethnicity; intersectional oppression; patriarchy.

Tracing the Historical Roots of Tribal Identity

The tribal identity has always been put into question throughout the course of world history. In Indian context, the tribal communities struggle to identify with the patriotic sentiment or the Indian national identity that materialized out of the freedom struggles led against the British colonization. The tribes were living a self-sufficient life or “as self-contained units” outside of what was considered to be “Indian society” before the occurrence of colonization. (Xaxa 30) The varna system followed by most of India excluded the tribals, labelling them as “avarna”. (Anthappai) It was only after the British

government’s subjugation of the tribal population to the laws and regulations followed by India at large that the tribal people were pushed into a new “identity” called Scheduled Tribes. Their new status came with the loss of control over natural resources such as land, forest, etc. The colonial power, however, was not the only source responsible for this loss, the non-tribal population of India in the form of moneylenders, traders, merchants, etc., also played a crucial role in this erosion of power. Tribes were hence subjected to double colonization. This double colonization put the tribes in a rift with the Indian national identity. There have been many revolts led by the tribes against the

colonial powers of both the British and non-tribal Indian population. Though some tribes accepted the assimilation, any went against it demanding sovereignty.

Theoretical Framework

The paper views tribal identity through the perspective of social constructivism, where identity is not fixed or inherent but rather a dynamic and socially negotiated construct. (Davis et al.) It is something that can be shaped by social interactions, cultural practices, and foreign influence. Tribal identity, therefore, can be considered as fluid and constantly being reshaped by colonialism and by the Sanskritization process. The construction of tribal women's identity is a complicated and layered endeavour that is a product of various interplaying forces such as social, political, and cultural elements. From a social constructivist perspective, their identity is not static or inherent but rather evolves gradually through their social relation to individuals, their communities, and the environment within which they live. The paper makes use of feminist theory to look at how patriarchal forces have structurally alienated the tribal women by diminishing their selfhood and erasing their cultural, spiritual positions, even within their own communities. The enforcement of gender roles limits women's opportunities and independence by keeping them from education and paid labour.

The paper also draws from postcolonial theorists such as Spivak to examine how tribal identity can be seen through the lens of subalternity. The othering of the tribes puts them in the domain of the subaltern. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes the subaltern as socially and politically marginalized groups who were outside of the hegemonic power structures of dominant discourses. The term 'subaltern' was first introduced in the work "Notes on Italian History" which was a part of

Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1971). Gramsci defined the term "subaltern" as any marginalized class that faced oppression at the hands of the ruling elites. This was further expanded by the Subaltern Studies Group propounded by Ranajit Guha and other South Asian scholars, and then by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak. Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1995) critiqued Gramsci's idea of the subalterns possessing autonomy which, according to her, would homogenize them. She revised the concept of 'subaltern' in the context of capitalist policies and the division of labour on a global scale. Spivak further expands on the original concept of subalternity by bringing in the experiences and struggles of the women, emphasizing their absence from colonial and post-colonial history. The tribes, as a whole, belonging to the subaltern posits the question of the place of the tribal women in this discourse.

The paper also looks at how the subjugation of tribal women is brought about by multiple forms of oppression that intersect each other. Intersectional theorists like Kimberle Crenshaw says that the subjugation faced by women of colour is characterised by multiple forms of oppression such as gender, race and class that intersect each other. The Dalit feminists like Rege, Omvedt and Rao argued that the identity of Indian women is not homogenous and that they face patriarchal oppression in different degrees. They redefined patriarchy as Brahminical patriarchy where the discrimination faced by women, especially Dalit women, was put forth as more than one-dimensional. The three elements that shaped the Brahminical patriarchy are class, caste, and gender. However, Dalit feminist perspectives fall short when it comes to the discrimination faced by tribal women. The Brahminical patriarchy is limited to the Hindu caste system, hence fails to address the experiences of tribal women who fall outside of it. Therefore,

the question of the identity of tribal women is multifaceted. These women experience sexism on three intersecting planes, from the colonial patriarchal power, the upper-caste patriarchal power, and from men of their own communities. This category of “third-world women” are caught between traditional beliefs and the influence of imperialism, which leads to their voices being lost. These patriarchal powers intersect and take control of the formation of the female tribal identity. They assert control by dominating women’s educational and religious spaces, stripping them off autonomy, and redefining their sexuality to serve and gratify the male gaze.

A Synopsis of Kailash Sarma’s *Anami Nagini*

Anami Nagini is an Assamese novel written by the noted Assamese novelist and short story writer Kailash Sarma. It was published in the year 1963. The protagonist of the novel is a Naga woman who belongs to the Angami Naga tribe, one of the indigenous tribal groups of Nagaland, in Northeast India. The Angami-Naga community is a distinct group among the Naga tribes, renowned for its cultural identity. Historically, the Angami villages functioned as self-sufficient entities, akin to small states. Each of these villages had their own unique identities. The Angami people were among the earliest Naga tribes to be influenced by British colonial policies.

The term “anami” means “without a name”, and the term “nagini” is an Assamese word used to address the women of the Naga society. Hence, *Anami Nagini* literally translates to “nameless Naga woman”. The story of *Anami Nagini* revolves around the life of Jasmi, a Angami-Naga girl whose juvenile decisions drove her away from the greenery of her home into the dark alleys of Kohima’s sex-working trade. In the novel, memory plays a central role as most of the narration is done through flashbacks where she recalls and narrates her story to another

character, Kamal Barooah. Jasmi’s struggle for her freedom ends detrimentally, with her being pushed into the world of alcohol selling and sex work. Despite numerous devastating, and life-altering experiences Jasmi’s spirit stayed intact. The novel is based in Naga Hills, now Nagaland, in two places Sisema and Kohima. Sisema is where she grew up with three of her other siblings, and Kohima is where she ultimately had to settle.

Shaping the Educational Struggles of Tribal Women

In the novel, the Angami people are shown to be very hardworking and completely devoted to their work. While Jasmi was narrating her life events prior to her indulgence in sex work, she talks about how it was not in the nature of Naga children to sit idly. Work holds great significance within the Naga society, serving as an integral aspect of their daily lives and societal structure. The present embodies the essence of their existence, there was no place for the past in their lives, and the future seemed to be very far for them to dwell on either. (Sarma 71) Jasmi recounts the societal expectations placed upon girl children, wherein they were expected to undertake household responsibilities after returning from school. Education was viewed as something inessential for both the genders by the village elders and community members who regarded farming as their primary livelihood. People of the Sisema village never left the boundaries of their homeland, hence education, in this case, was thought to be futile if one was to lead the life of a farmer.

Naga women were barred from pursuing higher education and education overall was not much prioritized for women in contrast to men. There is no concrete social logic behind this debarment other than the age-old custom of women belonging solely to the domestic sphere. A common argument was that any

investment in women whether it be education or employment will be only beneficial for her husband's family and not the family she was born in. (NWU et al. 6) The protagonist, Jasmi, protested against these constraining customs and challenged the established norms by fighting for her educational rights. Her decision was met with harsh criticism from her parents, especially her mother who could not fathom why her child wanted to leave the comfort of the village. It was unheard of people leaving their home for a better life somewhere else, people of Sisema village took their first and last breath inside the boundaries of their ancestral land.

In contrast, Sarma introduces another character, Mary who was from the Christian basti (village), where people largely followed Christianity. Mary was someone Jasmi envied because she had the freedom to pursue education and step outside the boundaries of her basti. Mary was studying in Kohima, a place Jasmi dreamt about. It was Mary who planted the seeds of hope and desire in Jasmi to study in Kohima, these seeds bloomed into the spirit of protest.

The advent of Christianity to the Naga Hills, though threatened the Nagas' cultural identity, benefitted the Naga women a considerable amount as education was made accessible to both men and women. The notion that women only belonged to the domestic domain collapsed as women began to come out of their homes to pursue education. (Yano & Pande 83) This was showcased by Sarma through the characters of Mary and her friends, all converted Christians.

The identity of the tribal women remains underdeveloped due to their subjugation by two patriarchal powers here, Christianity and their indigenous community norms. Spivak speaks about this phenomenon in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", where she discusses how the British colonial powers extended their control over parts of India by

portraying themselves as saviours, ostensibly rescuing brown women from brown men. Although the character of Mary experienced greater freedom compared to Jasmi, it would be erroneous to assert that Christianity entirely liberated Mary from the same constraints faced by Jasmi.

Exploring the Male Gaze on Female Bodies

The objectification theory contends that women experience sexual objectification, a phenomenon characterized by the focus that society places on women's bodily attributes for the gratification of the male gaze, thereby diverting the focus from their holistic personhood. (Fredrickson & Roberts 08) This reductionist perspective fosters an excessive focus on specific aspects of the women's bodies which leads to the sexualization of moments that are otherwise non-sexual. This perpetuates societal norms that prioritize reducing women to mere objects of desire, which can undermine their autonomy and agency.

Sarma's depiction of the scene wherein Jasmi and her companions engage in washing clothes by the riverside is characterized by an abundance of sensual imagery. The author employs vivid description, likening the girls' facial features to the vibrant hues of ripe guavas transitioning to the redness of the delicate petals of roses. Additionally, emphasis is placed on the intensification of their physical attributes, such as the deepening redness of their lips under the exertion of physical labour, and the flushed vermilion hue of their wet fingers and toes. As the narrative progresses, the sudden exposure of their waists is likened to the colour of gold, which serves to further accentuate their youthful allure. Furthermore, the rhythmic rise and fall of their chests, accompanied by the gentle trembles of wild youthfulness, is vividly portrayed.

Drops of sweat tracing paths from the nape of their necks to the valley between their breasts evoke a rather sexual imagery of these women. The act of unbuttoning the blouse to wipe the sweat and their suggestive looks at one another accompanied by laughter makes the mere act of washing clothes unnecessarily sensual and sexual. (Sarma 93)

Sarma's portrayal of this particular scene is filled with problematic elements of unnecessary sensualisation. The excessive focus on the physical attributes of the female characters, from their facial features to their bodily movements, serves to objectify them, render them as mere objects for the male gaze. The language used to describe their features, like the emphasis on the exposure of their waist and chests perpetuates stereotypical feminine beauty and sexuality. The narrative's fixation on the girl's laughter and playful interaction, particularly in the context of unbuttoning the blouse, makes the entire scene seem suggestive. Such literary depictions contribute to the oversexualization of women and undermine efforts taken towards empowerment of women, which is one of the central themes of this novel.

Exploring the Upper-Caste Male Gaze on Tribal Female Bodies

Michel Foucault emphasizes that the 'gaze' is not merely about looking but is linked to power. It is an act of power and surveillance, wherein the subject doing the gazing is empowered over the object being gazed at. This concept is particularly relevant to the omniscient narrator, who wields the ultimate gaze over everything and everyone in the story, guiding the readers' focus. Laura Mulvey extends this idea to cinema, proposing that there are three perspectives of cinema, through the camera, the audience, and the characters. In written narratives, a similar multiplicity of gazes can be identified, through the

narrator (camera), the readers (audience), and the characters. (Johnson 42)

Another example of Jasmi's sexualization occurs when an unexpected visitor interrupts her storytelling session with Kamal Barooah, seeking to engage in drinking and revelry with her. The description of this scene is unnecessarily sensualized again. Upon hearing the guests outside, Jasmi extinguishes the lamp and searches for a seat beside Kamal, while doing so touches his knee. She then positions herself beside him, pressing her body against his. Subsequently, she puts her mouth on his ear and whispered for him to be silent, with her warm breath brushing against his face. This sensual imagery was unnecessary as Jasmi, at that moment, was trying to avoid guests that wanted sexual intercourse from her.

While Jasmi is depicted as a woman with hopes, aspiration, and dreams of transcending the confines of her community, instances like the one described highlight the pervasive issue of her unnecessary sexualization throughout the narrative. As the author is an upper-caste Hindu male, his perpetuation of such portrayal reinforces the troubling notion that tribal women are often objectified by men of higher social status. In contrast, the portrayal of an upper-caste Assamese woman, Guneshwari, stands in stark contrast to the sexualization experienced by Jasmi and other tribal women of the novel. Guneshwari was introduced as a former lover of Kamal Barooah's driver, Deben. She is depicted without any overtly sensual imagery. The depiction of Guneshwari, provided by Deben, is characterized by its straightforwardness, lacking any embellishment or sexualization. Deben's assessment of Guneshwari's appearance was nonchalant, noting her lack of conventional attractiveness, yet acknowledging the radiance of her smile, which transcends her darker complexion. He finds her noteworthy despite her darker complexion

because of her proficiency in household chores.

Immanuel Kant posited that theoretically, both men and women can fall victim to objectification, yet he acknowledges the predominant incidence of women being subjected to such treatments in practical contexts. This assertion is evident in Kant's analysis of prostitution and concubinage. Within these morally contentious sexual dynamics, the expression of sexuality results in the commodification of women, reducing them to objects of male desire. (Kant 166). In the case of Jasmi, the emphasis on her body appears to stem from the gaze of the male narrator, rather than a female perspective which would have been more appropriate given that Jasmi is the one recalling these moments from her past. However, the story is narrated in the third person by an omniscient narrator. This narrative choice highlights the power dynamics at play, with the male narrator's gaze imposing a sexualized view on Jasmi, thereby shaping the readers' perception of her in a way that perpetuates the upper-caste male gaze.

Autonomy of the Tribal Woman in Society

Gayatri Spivak Chakraborty talks about "white men saving brown women from brown men" in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 92) while talking about widow immolation. This concept is a critique of the postcolonial narrative of the West, where they try to mask their intention behind wanting control and power over non-Western countries, which is often under the guise of liberating oppressed women. Spivak argues that this overpowers or ignores the agency of the women they were supposedly saving. They paint the brown women as the oppressed and the brown men as their oppressor, thereby reinforcing the stereotypes and partakes in the oversimplification of complex socio-

political realities. This is done so to legitimize and justify the Western dominance.

This concept can be seen in the scenes with Prakash and Kamal, both were shown to be pulling Jasmi out of the dirt, in Kamal's case literally. "দৌৰদৌৰিকৈ কমলে বোকাৰ মাজৰ পৰা মূৰ্ছিতা ছোৱালীজনীক তুলি আনি..." (Sarma 270) ("In a hurry, Kamal picks the unconscious girl out of the dirt") The unconscious girl here is Jasmi. Prakash and Kamal both play pivotal roles as saviours in Jasmi's life. Prakash being the one who gives her the courage to stop engaging in the sex worker trade, while Kamal saves her from dying. Both these upper-caste men are being portrayed as saviours, while the Naga landlord is, to an extent, villainized. When Jasmi rejected the proposal of the Naga landlord, he attempted to break Jasmi's relationship with Prakash, in which he eventually succeeded. He had intercourse with Jasmi under the influence of alcohol, and when she fell pregnant refused to acknowledge it as his child. He left her stranded, and at the brink of death.

The women of the Angami Naga culture already live under the constraints of patriarchy. Although they equally participate in agricultural activities, weaving, and the making of the local Naga alcohol beverage called "zu" ("rice beer"), their roles are confined to the farming and domestic spheres. In the novel, the patriarchal nature of the Naga society is highlighted when Jasmi decides to study in Kohima, she is primarily concerned about her father's approval and not about her mother's reaction, which she expected would be one of intense protest. This illustrates that the father was the head of the household, and his decision was final, and the mother had no position in that decision making process. However, the mother did not give up and posited that she would take this case to the village head, who is also a man, and that his decision would be final. This means that the final

say is ultimately of a man, and Jasmi or her mother had no part in it.

Conclusion

The novel *Anami Nagini* does touch upon a lot of social issues related to the Angami-Naga community. By choosing a female protagonist, Sarma perhaps intended to take a feminist stance, as evident by the comment that Jasmi makes on how her community embraced the change that came into the field of hunting, where men started to use guns instead of their traditional weapons. She was confused as to why the elders did not shame these men moving away from

traditional ways of hunting. Why is it only her, a woman, shamed for wanting change? The novel did not completely fail in putting forward the intended main social issue, the rigid hold that society had on people, especially women. The voices of resistance are still persistent despite the simultaneous oppression of all the intersecting layers of power. The battle rages on to reclaim cultural and political spaces both within and outside their communities. The undertaking of tribal women to guard their identity in the face of oppression continues to unfold in a quest for emancipation, justice, and conservancy of their culture.

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