

The Shifting Role of Women

The Shifting Role of Women:

From Chores to Cores

Edited by

Vivek Kumar Dwivedi

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0154-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0154-6

To

The most important woman in my life

Saumya.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first debt is to Prof Yogesh Dubey who has always encouraged me to keep working on new assignments. His untiring encouragement finds no match in my life. His presence in my life has been very instrumental in completing this project. Without him this book would not have taken the shape it has. His assistance has been exceptionally helpful, particularly on questions of the range of topics the book covers and the approach it adopts to address the issues it planned to highlight.

Prof Sarvesh Mani Tripathi's precise comments and suggestions have been extremely useful. His guiding presence at all the stages of the book has led to the successful completion of this project. He has proved an extraordinarily patient friend-come-guide in dealing with me while introducing fresh and original insights.

Dr Sheba Hayat and Shadan Zeb Khan have been a constant force in my life, without whom I become completely withdrawn and show less interest in almost everything. They have always been thoroughly persistent and unflustered in providing me with the academic, as well as emotional, support I often need. They have read the manuscript several times to weed out irrelevant portions and have also advised some vital changes.

I cannot express enough thanks to my colleagues at the University of Allahabad, and many more whom I consulted for their support and guidance. It would be thoughtless of me if I forgot to acknowledge the unceasing support and care I have received from my parents, teachers, and friends, especially Prof Rajesh Verma, Prof Sanjay Pandey, Waliur Rahman, Monika Rana, Dr Mustafa Alhumari, Arun Tiwari, Fatima Zahra, Zahwa Khalid, and Sarah Khan.

—Vivek Kumar Dwivedi

CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN, VIOLENCE
AND THE MATRILINEAL SOCIETY:
A STUDY OF THE *A·CHIK*
WOMEN OF MEGHALAYA

L.K. GRACY
DWIJEN SHARMA

Abstract

In a world where patriarchal structure is the norm, the Garos or the *A·chiks* residing mainly in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya have long been recognised for their matrilineal practices. It is understood that such a society gives much importance to women, since matrilineality envisages women's welfare and provides relative power, including ownership over property. It is also the women who are the village or clan leaders (*nokma*), and the lineage is strictly carried forward by women rather than men. This paper examines the present position of the women residing in the West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya in North East India, and the relevance of the matrilineal practice when it comes to gender-based violence. It also asks whether matrilineal kinship is associated with a more secure environment for women, or whether they are still vulnerable to violence in spite of the fact that matrilocal residence is predominant in this society, and women are always surrounded by their kith and kin when looking after their day-to-day activities. Using the primary data and drawing from feminist theories, we argue that the traditional practices of safeguarding women's rights and security by the elders of the particular clan are still seen as relevant and adhered to; however, simultaneously, more *A·chik*-educated women rely on the administrative set-up provided by the government in the district, such as one-stop centres, women's police, and social service centres.

Keywords: *A-chik* women, Matrilineal, Matrilocal, Kinship, Violence, Gender

In this predominantly patrilineal world, people follow and practice the matrilineal system of kinship only in few areas of the world. Meghalaya, a small state of the Indian Union, boasts a thriving matrilineal society, unlike other matrilineal societies which have slowly collapsed and given way to patriliney. For instance, the Nairs, the Mappilas in Kerala, and other non-Brahmin Hindu castes of Malabar, Cochin and Travancor, were matrilineal in nature, but have now moved towards a patrilineal system of kinship owing to changes in land inheritance acts and other factors. A number of anthropologists and sociologists have attempted to demonstrate that most societies in this universe have evolved from matriarchy to their present form; the patriarchal society. Matrilineal systems exist in every region of the world, but are much less common than patrilineal descent systems. In one enumeration of all ethnocultural groups in the world (Murdock 1967), 13% practice matrilineal descent, including 16% of all societies in Africa (exclusive of Madagascar and the Sahara), 3% in Circum-Mediterranean (North Africa, Turkey, Caucasus, Semitic Near East), 1% in East Eurasia (including Madagascar and islands in the Indian Ocean), 15% in Insular Pacific (including Australia, Indonesia, Formosa, Philippines), 13% in North America (indigenous societies to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec), and 8% in South America (including Antilles, Yucatan, and Central America). Within Africa, matrilineal societies appear in all regions of the continent, although there is a particular concentration in the south-central region surrounding the Zambezi River (Davison 1997), often referred to as the 'matrilineal-belt' (Richards 1950). In the context of India, Madhusmita Das, in her article "Changing (the) Family System Among a Matrilineal Group in India", states:

In the Indian context, the matrilineal social system is found only among small pockets of the south and northeast India. The Nairs and Mappilles in Kerala, the tribal groups of Minicoy Island and the Khasis and the Garos of Meghalaya are followers of the matrilineal system. However, the matrilineal system of the African countries differs considerably from that of the Southeast Asian groups (Das, 2).

Similarly, U. R. von Ehrenfels in "Matrilineal Joint Family System in India" observes that "In Kerala, the leading section of the Hindu non-Brahmin and significant groups of the Muslim landholding societies in the plains as well as some groups of Highlanders in the Western Ghats were traditionally organized in matrilineal joint families" (Ehrenfels, 4).

The Garos, or the *A·chiks*, as they are fondly and popularly called, are one such unique tribe who still follow the matrilineal pattern of kinship. They reside mostly in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, while certain sections are found in Assam, Tripura, Nagaland and the neighbouring country of Bangladesh. As per the 17th edition of *Ethnologue* (2013), “It is estimated that the total Garo population in Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland, Tripura, West Bengal, Canada, the US, Europe, Australia, and Bangladesh together, is more than one million”. One of the unique features of this Garo population is that, unlike the mainstream Indians, where female infanticide is common and where the birth of a girl child is often frowned upon with disdain, the birth of a girl child among the Garos is greatly rejoiced over and celebrated. In the opinion of anthropologists, they exhibit a matrilineal kinship in a true sense of the term, which is characterised by three factors: First, the family name comes from the mother, and her children take up her title. Second, the matrilocal system of residence is practised, wherein the husband resides in the wife’s home after marriage. Third, the female in the family inherits the ancestral property of the family; property is handed over to the daughter. Referring to this, Julius L R Marak, in his book, *Garo Customary Laws Traditions and Practices* (1985) states, “Any daughter who has been selected by the parents as *nokkrom* (heiress) inherits the ancestral property with the responsibility of looking after her parents till their death, and the performance of funeral rites” (Marak, 55). The people of the *A·chik* tribe of Meghalaya exhibit all these features in their society. The children of the *A·chiks* carry forward the surname of their mother, and not the father, as is normally practised in the rest of the world. When it comes to residence, the groom moves to the house of the bride, at least immediately after the marriage. Hereafter, the *agate* or a daughter other than the heiress, eventually moves out to have a separate residence. It is the *nokkrom*, who inherits the land and property of the family and who also looks after the parents. In practice it is the youngest daughter who is the *nokkrom*, but these days sometimes a preferred daughter other than the youngest is appointed. In fact, in Garo Hills, the custodian of the land is generally the female who is called the *A·king Nokma*, and often handles all the work typically expected of the *A·king Nokm*, while the husband is usually referred to as *Nokma*. William Carey, in his book *The Garo Jungle Book* (1919) reiterates this fact by stating that “The influence of the women attracts notice. The wives of the chiefs have as much authority in debates as the chiefs, possibly a little more” (Carey, 15-16). Further, Carey adds, “All property belongs to and descends through the women, and the youngest daughter is the heiress of the house” (Carey, 16). In what may sound incredulous in today’s world, he observes, “Women of means are allowed

to choose a temporary husband, and when tired of him, pay him off, and take another. But these customs vary in different parts of the hills” (Carey, 16).

It is expected of such a society that it will give much importance to the women, since they seem to be the overall owners of the property and the lineage is strictly carried forward by women rather than men. Similarly, women are expected to receive greater support from their own kin groups, since they settle within the family, and husbands are supposed to have less authority over their wives. It also asserts the fact that women enjoy unlimited power here, and the position of women is definitely on a higher level. However, as is prevalent everywhere, gender-based violence also seems to exist. In fact, the position of women in the matrilineal society of the Garos is rather paradoxical in nature. This paper examines whether women enjoy a liberal space to live their lives in their own terms and conditions in the *A-chik* society. Are the women truly liberated, and do they have their own space in this society? Is the matrilineal kinship associated with a more secure environment for women, or are they still vulnerable to violence in spite of their matrilineal residence?

To examine these issues, we have not only explored the rich archive of texts on the traditional *A-chik* society, but also collected primary data from the Women’s Police Station and One Stop Centre, in Tura. *The Garo Jungle Book* (1919) by William Carey is about the missionary work among the Garos, with some information on the tradition, customs and lifestyles of the Garos in the mid 19th century. *The Garos* (1909) by Major A Playfair, one of the earliest documentaries on the Garos by the then Deputy Commissioner, is a monograph on the Garos. *Garos Customary Laws Traditions and Practices* (2015) by Julius L R Marak is an in-depth research on the basic principles, intricacies and complexities of Customary Laws, Traditions and Usages. Milton M Sangma’s book *History and Culture of the Garos* (1981) deals with the social life, the traditional agencies of village administration, and the matriarchal society of the Garos. It also gives us a glimpse of the indigenous religion of the Garos and the impact of Christianity on them. Patricia Mukhim’s book *Waiting for an Equal World Gender in India’s Northeast* (2019) is a thought-provoking book on gender, political, social, and cultural issues. It reveals the genuine problems faced by women, and the question of whether women in the matrilineal society are truly empowered is asked, time and again. These texts have been important to assess the position and the problems faced by *A-chik* women through the ages, and to further analyze the actual position of the women in the present day. Further, schedules were prepared and data on the crimes

committed on women were collected from the Women's Police Station and One Stop Centre, in Tura. Furthermore, the perceptions of the participants involved in handling the cases related to crime perpetrated on women were collected. Finally, an in-depth analysis of the primary data and the literature based on Garo society, as well as texts on gender violence, was done.

Gender-based violence is deeply rooted in almost all societies. It has taken on the proportion of a global issue, threatens the wellbeing, rights, and dignity of women, and continues to be one of the most notable human rights violations, extending across regional, social, cultural, and economic boundaries. Violence is inherently linked to power, and there is arguably no act of violence that does not intersect with gender. However, feminist theories examining gender-specific violence tend to remain within the confines of the male/female binary (Heyes, 201). If the feminist lens is to offer a more complete understanding of violence on the global stage, the feminist space needs to be opened up to include the analysis of violence targeted at individuals or groups whose gender identities do not conform to established gender constructions (Heyes, 207, 211). By 'gender violence', we mean the violence perpetrated on a person because of his or her gender, but in general, by 'gender violence' we usually mean violence inflicted on any female. S. Nigam, in his article "Silent Enemy in the Home", has categorically divided the atrocities committed on women into various groups. First, there is physical violence which "may include assault, battery, serious injuries or burns" (Nigam 2002). Sexual violence entails robbing the dignity of a woman not only by indecent behaviour but in an extreme form of rape. Sexual violence also includes female genital mutilation (FGM), which is the removal of the clitoris and other parts of a woman or girl child, and is often practiced in African countries. Verbal violence means indecency, or use of abusive and filthy language against a woman, or her near and dear ones. Social violence includes demeaning, disparaging, and humiliating a woman or her parental relatives and friends. Emotional violence, being the deprivation of love and affection, concern, sympathy and care, also includes depriving a woman of custody of children. Financial violence, means depriving her of financial means and the bare necessities of daily life, and also includes taking away the assets which a woman possesses or earns. Intellectual violence means denial of her rights to take part in decision making and discussions on pressing issues. Other forms of violence may include denial of education, access to health facilities, reproductive rights, etc. (Nigam 2002).

The *A-chik* women are no strangers to such violence. Patricia Mukhim, in her article in *The Shillong Times* titled “A Journey I Did Not Choose”, observes:

My work entailed a deeper understanding of gender and how it plays out in our day-to-day lives even in a society that claims to be overtly matrilineal and egalitarian. The world of activism revealed that women in Meghalaya too suffer many of the biases and prejudices that affect patriarchal societies. Women here had no platform for political participation and decision making even in matters that affect their health and mental well-being [...] The National Family Health Survey-2 revealed that Meghalaya had the highest incidence of domestic violence (Special Supplement I, 10 August 2019).

There exists a myth that women in Meghalaya enjoy immense power and freedom, as it's a matrilineal society. However, a close inquiry into the position of the women in the *A-chik* society highlights the fact that there exist traits of patriarchy there too. Throughout history, feminism has celebrated women who have been breaking the glass ceiling, but the reality is that many women are still looked down on and treated as lesser human beings. Simone de Beauvoir, in her iconic text, *The Second Sex*, applied her extensive knowledge of philosophical, historical and psychological theory to analyze the problem of modern women. She conceptualized woman as an immanent ‘other’, unable to achieve freedom. A woman, according to de Beauvoir, was produced in opposition to a transcendent male, who would choose liberty, and “finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other” (de Beauvoir & Freedman, 262). She poses some pertinent questions regarding the very existence and freedom of women thus:

How can a human being in woman's situation attain fulfilment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome? These are the fundamental questions on which I would fain throw some light. This means I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty (de Beauvoir & Freedman, 262).

As discussed by de Beauvoir, we can posit this case with women in *A-chik* society who take the position of the ‘Other’ facing discrimination, repression, dominance and denial of freedom even within the confines of a home. In the *A-chik* society, the father is considered to be the *de facto* head of the family, and plays a decisive role when it comes to important matters in the family. Similarly, in any dispute in the family, the uncles, called the *mamas*, and elder brothers, referred to as *chras*, play a pivotal role in sorting

out matters of dispute. Their opinion is always taken into consideration and one cannot do away with it. In fact, it is the men who are the decision-makers in this society and they play a significant role in determining the course of action when it comes to the *A-chik* women.

The position of *A-chik* women when it comes to the customary laws has been elucidated by some noted scholars who have done an in-depth study on the customs and traditions of the *A-chiks*. Milton M Sangma, in his book, *History and Culture of the Garos* (1981), elaborates on the customary laws. With regard to customary laws, he states that the Garos do not have a written code of laws but they cannot be said to be devoid of laws. They have, in his opinion, “too many laws which they still consider fully binding” (Sangma 1981,181). However, in earlier times, prior to the arrival of the colonisers, any dispute that came up in Garo inhabited areas would have been looked into by the village elders, and punishment would have been meted out according to the degree of the crime committed. For any dispute, quarrel or complaint, the village elders would convene a meeting (*melaa*), enquiries would be made, and witnesses would be brought forward for fair dispersal of justice. Decisions made by the elders were considered to be final and binding. In this context, Playfair observes, “[...] for in former times, the village met in conference to decide any matter in dispute between its members. When in these meetings evidence could not be adduced, recourse was, and led to trial by ordeal” (Playfair, 82).

Nevertheless, with the coming of the British, formal village councils were set up, followed by the appointment of “Laskars, Sardars and the Village Nokmas in the hill areas and the Gaon Buras in the plain Mouza” who had some executive power over a certain number of villages (Marak 1985, 43). In his book, *Garó Customary Laws Traditions and Practices* (1985), Julius L R Marak deals with the Garo customary law extensively. For any violence that was committed, it was the villagers’ court that was set up by the British after their annexure of the Garo Hills, who settled matters. In this context, Marak states,

A man is said to have committed Rape (*Drae til-eka ba Anchara*), if he was found to have committed rape, he shall have to pay a fine of Rs 60/- to the woman or the girl (*me-tra*). However, if a girl (*me-tra*) or woman really misbehaves, for instance, she commits adultery which seems to be the main infraction of woman, it is her lineage mates, uncles and brothers, and never her father, who berate and punish her (Marak, 79).

Similarly, it is stated that if the man who has committed rape has a wife, the man will have to “[...] pay a fine of Rs 60/- to his wife and a sum of Rs

5/- as '*gitok*'. But in some cases, the sum of Rs 15/- only has to be paid, as a fine for '*Drae til-eka*' (rape) or as decided by the wronged party" (Marak, 79-80).

The formal laws came up with the coming of the colonisers and were practised even after India attained Independence. However, in pre-colonial times, rape was considered by the *A-chiks* society as a serious offence and the accused was beheaded or driven out of the village, but with the passage of time, a fine or *dai* was imposed for the crime committed (Marak, 80). According to Julius Marak, when it came to attempt to rape, a fine of Rs 15/- was imposed on the accused. Sexual assault, like the inappropriate touching of a breast, was considered a great offence, and fines ranged from Rs 30/- to Rs 60/-. Similarly for all offences, like fornication, seducing, adultery, and so on, fines were imposed:

Garo Customary Laws, Traditions and Usages have different ways of tackling the certain immoral acts, words and allurements of a man which are considered as Moral Offences for which one is punishable for bringing or putting one to shame and causing defamation under the aged old Customary law; Such as (i) *Mong-a-Sala* (tempting); (b) *Kattachi mikmalata* (seduce by words), (c) *Jakjipa* (beckoning); (d) *Ku-simika* (whistling), (e) *Mikjipa* (winking); (f) *Jakgitok rim-a* (grasping the wrist); (g) *Rim-roka* (caressing), (h) *Doktopa* (patting); (i) *Ja-si ga-depa* (putting one's foot on the toe of a woman); (j) *Sok rim-a* (touching the breasts) and so on. The *dai* for such acts of moral offences are punished with the payment of *dai* or otherwise according to the nature and circumstances of the case which is decided by the *chra* and the *mahari* (Marak, 75).

In cases of gender-based violence, the *nokma*, along with the *mahari* (clan members) of both the man and the woman, assemble together, along with the *chra-pante*, which comprise the maternal uncles, nephews and brothers of the same *ma-chong* (a sub-clan following a common lineage). The *paa-gachi* comprising the husbands of the grandmother, mother, sister, daughter and nieces of the same *ma-chong* are also present. A gruelling session takes place, and after an intensive interrogation of both the accused and the victim are taken into account, punishment is meted out to the guilty person. As mentioned above, a fine or *dai* is imposed which seems to be minimal to the outside world, but the very fact that the guilty person has to face almost all the villagers, and the ordeal he suffers when found guilty, which also brings shame to the entire clan, is considered to be a fitting punishment for the crime or offence he has committed. This may sound archaic, absurd, and redundant, but is practised even today in far-flung villages. The society depends on the clan members to intervene and mitigate the crimes faced by

them. Many times there have been instances where even rape committed by a father on a daughter has been brought before the clans, and a sort of compromise takes place.

For ages, women have been depicted as physically and mentally inferior, and vulnerable too. In this century, however, women have been breaking free from age-old constraints in order to assert newfound energies across international borders, specifically within the contexts of democratic, revolutionary and labour movements. Cultural feminism, an offshoot of radical feminism, has been advocated by feminist stalwarts like Alice Echols, Linda Martin Alcoff, Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, and Carol Anne Douglas. It is a movement which lays emphasis on the essence of a woman which makes her special and different, as compared to a man. As the name implies, the superior cultural values of a woman are taken into consideration, rather than the purely biological differences. The female essence is appreciated, and they are of the view that this very essence will make a woman contribute positively towards the peace of mankind if she is involved in decision-making processes in the society. Cultural feminism also aims for the creation of safe havens for women, like women's crisis centres and shelters. Such spaces will give women places which are dedicated exclusively to their needs.

In India too, with the opening up of Women's Police Stations, there has been higher reportage of crimes committed on women. In the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, the *A-chik* women have been breaking the age-old shackles of social convention that inhibit a woman, such as having to depend on the clan members to solve what is inherently a woman's problem. At present, more women turn to the Women's Police Station which has been set up in West Garo Hills, where specially trained female personnel who aim to respond to the needs of women facing all sorts of violence and harassment are deployed. The opening up of such stations encourages women to comfortably approach them for any of their grievances. With widespread education among women, more economic independence, and being made aware of the laws provided by the authority, legal processes, and the provision of free legal aid, a number of women these days are seeking redress from the courts and police stations specially set up to address their grievances. A close look at the data (to June 2019) provided by the Women's Police Cell of Tura, the headquarters of West Garo Hills, busts the myth that women enjoy utmost power under matrilineal practice. Patricia Mukhim, in her book, *Waiting for an Equal World, Gender in India's Northeast* (2019) opines, "What's tragic is that Meghalaya is a

matrilineal society, which the rest of the world assumes is a Utopia for women” (Mukhim 2019, 79). She further states,

Truly we are living in a very sick society, yet neither the state nor civil society or even the churches seem capable of unravelling this societal perversion or to address the ailment at its roots. Many rape victims have not had closure. Their psychological wounds continue to fester and kill them by degrees (Mukhim 2019, 79).

The total number of recorded tribal women residing in West Garo Hills was 167,379 according to the 2011 census (District Statistical Handbook 2014-15). Unfortunately the total number of *A-chik* women cannot be asserted, since the District Statistical department looks into scheduled tribes as a whole, which includes the Koch, Hajongs, Rabhas, and others. Nonetheless, on analyzing the data given below, it can clearly be seen that women approaching the government institutes are increasing year after year.

Rape cases increased from two in 2015 to four in 2016, and decreased from six in 2017 to three in 2018. Up to June in 2019 there were four rape cases. Similarly, looking at POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act) cases, which basically look into the protection of children against offences like sexual abuse, sexual harassment and pornography, we can make out that there was a staggering increase from eight in 2015 to 14 in 2016, and 21 in 2017. In 2018, POCSO reported 20 cases, and to June 2019 there were eight. There has been a decline in molestation charges over the years, but in 2021, to June, there were five cases registered, as compared to seven cases in 2015 and six in 2018. Kidnapping cases have also risen over the years. There have been no murder cases filed so far. Only one case of attempted murder has been registered in the span of four and half years.

Section 498(A) of the IPC deals with the “Husband or relative of the husband of a woman subjecting her to cruelty. Whoever, being the husband or the relative of the husband of a woman, subjects such woman to cruelty shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years, and shall also be liable to fine” (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/538436/>). Crimes committed which fall under this section have increased year on year, from two cases in 2016 to three cases in 2017 and 2018. There have been no cases of abetting a suicide, whereas, when it comes to grievous hurt, only one case was reported in the year 2015, but there were two in 2018.

Case registered under ST (Garo) and SC/Others categories for the years 2015-19

Related Cases	Garos (number of cases reported)						Non-Garos (Number of cases reported)				
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019 To July		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019 To July
Year											
Rape	2	4	6	3	4		2	2	1	3	0
Attempt to rape	6	2	0	5	0		0	0	0	0	0
POCSO	8	14	21	20	8		5	2	6	4	6
Molestation	7	5	6	6	5		3	3	2	3	2
Kidnapping	7	4	8	4	2		14	2	7	6	1
Murder	0	0	0	0	0		4	1	2	1	0
Attempt to murder	4	0	0	0	1		5	0	0	0	0
498 (A) IPC	0	2	3	3	1		4	3	3	0	2
Abetting to Commit Suicide	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	2	0	0
Grievous Hurt	1	1	0	2	0		0	0	0	0	0

Data provided by the Women's Police Station, West Garo Hills, Tura

Similarly, data was collected from the One Stop Centre, in Tura, which provides integrated support and assistance to women affected by violence in private and public, such as within the family, the community, and the workplace. The centre further facilitates immediate emergency and non-emergency requirements which include medical, legal, psychological, and counselling support to the women affected. The following data procured from the Centre provide the following statistic, where we see a steady increase in lodging complaints in such institutions set up by the government. This, again, goes on to say that women in the West Garo Hills now rely more on these centres, rather than handing over their cases to the clans and the elders. It is to be noted that almost all the complaints received by the One Stop Centre are forwarded to the Women's Police Station, hence the cases are reflected in the data provided by the Women's Police in Tura. In some cases, the women come only for counselling and do not lodge a formal FIR in the One Stop Centre.

[illegible]

From the table provided by the One Stop Centre, we can deduce that gender-based violence has not taken on the proportion of dowry deaths or bride burning among the *A-chiks*. Dowry is unheard of among the *A-chiks*. Similarly female infanticide is not practised here. However, violence, both physical and sexual, is as prevalent as it is in the rest of the world. Records obtained from the police provide details of reported cases of crime against women, but much of the violence goes unreported, and is still being redressed by the *Maharis*.

Looking at the present scenario, the District Child Protection Officer, Junichi K Marak, in her conversation, opines that with the opening of Women's Police Stations and One Stop Centres, *A-chik* women are now more forthcoming when it comes to lodging formal complaints. She further states that there are still some cases where *A-chik* women rely on traditional methods of meting out punishment arising out of gender-based violence, due to the fear of being deserted by close relatives and clan members. Often this fear prevents the *A-chik* women from taking legal recourse to address the domestic violence they often undergo. To the question as to whether the women from Garo Hills are empowered since they belong to the matrilineal society, or whether they are as vulnerable as their counterparts in the mainland, she says that though the society is matrilineal in nature, the men, consisting of the uncles and brothers, take most of the decisions, while women are just nominal heads. To add to that, the women are still victims of domestic violence, irrespective of age, or educational or financial status. Similarly, when it comes to whether or not rural-based women are more victimized than the urban-based women, she points out that both are victimized. Whereas women from rural areas fear their husbands because the husbands are the breadwinners and they fear abandonment, the women from urban areas fear social stigmatization, so they choose to suffer quietly, or just mutually agree to separate. Women from both rural and urban areas often face threats from their spouses, so they prefer to remain quiet.

Laura Pinky N Marak, Additional Protection Officer at the One Stop Centre, Tura, asserts that, in spite of belonging to the matrilineal society, women are still vulnerable to violence. The biggest fear that women have when given the option of approaching the One Stop Centre to lodge a complaint of domestic violence is that they will be stigmatized in society. Most of the women are also economically dependent on their husbands, so they often put up with violence instead of reporting it. Often, domestic violence is inflicted by husbands who are in an inebriated condition. However, after counselling, and signing agreements, some positive changes and reconciliation have often been achieved in the relationship between husband and wife, and

this is often noticed when surprise home visits are conducted by personnel from the One Stop Centre. With regard to the rural women facing violence, Marak is of the opinion that they still rely on traditional practices to sort out the differences, but if the problem persists they report either to the Women's Police Station or the One Stop Centre.

Jaynie N. Sangma, an activist from Tura, is of the opinion that the government agencies and non-governmental organisations should reach out to the women in villages and make them come out with their stories. She also states that when a woman has the courage to raise her voice, society often tries to muffle her instead of supporting her. The victim, who is already traumatised, has to go through another round of mudslinging, and in Sangma's opinion, the worst thing is, if the woman is educated and independent, the ordeal becomes more intensive, with society questioning the 'motive' behind levelling allegations against a man, especially if the man comes from a 'respectable' society.

From our study, it can be concluded that though *A·chik* society belongs to a minuscule world of matrilineal societies, where women are supposed to be living an idyllic life with much authority and independence at their disposal, the actual scenario of the *A·chik* women is mostly romanticised and over-glorified. Significantly, the patriarchy is silently at work in this society and women here actually live a muted existence, which is reflected in dismal representation, even in the political arena. At present, in the whole of Garo Hills, out of 24 MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly), only two elected representatives are women. Similarly in the District Council, the citadel of traditional institution, which looks into the tradition, culture and custom of the *A·chiks*, and which also dispenses justice and governs through their own customary ways, only a lone elected woman out of 29 constituencies is found. Further, in recent times, a bill to amend Garo Customary Law has been tabled, where it has been categorically stated that *A·chik* women marrying outside their tribe will have to forfeit their Scheduled Tribe status. Though the Bill has not been passed yet, it further immobilizes the freedom of choice and right of an *A·chik* woman. The most ironic aspect of this Bill is that the opinion of the public, particularly of *A·chik* women, was not taken into consideration during its formulation. As the Bill envisages that if *A·chik* women marry non-*A·chik* men, their tribe will be diluted, it places the onus on women to maintain the purity of the tribe. Hence the position of the *A·chik* woman is a precarious one today. One can only hope that, with the passage of time, the *A·chiks* will preserve their unique identity as a matrilineal society in a world dominated by patriarchal societies, and that

the women here are truly liberated and walk together along with their male counterparts in a gender-free world.

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CHAPTER TWO

FROM OTHER TO SIGNIFICANT: A JOURNEY OF WOMEN FROM THE PERIPHERY TO THE CENTRE IN *RAAT RANI* AND *CUTTING CHAI*

DR. SHALINI KAUSHIK

Abstract

This paper tries to explore the journey of female protagonists in *Raat Rani* and *Cutting Chai*, two out of the six segments in *Modern Love Mumbai*, a web series available on Amazon Prime released in the Amazon Original Series on 13 May 2022. The journey is seen in terms of an outward phase, which includes spatial/physical mobility, which leads to an inward phase, thus making their voices significant. The women discover/rediscover themselves through the physical journey, female bonding, food, and non-alcoholic drinks. The feminist awakening moves them from the periphery of society to the centre. The paper also examines the differences created by caste, class, gender, religion, and culture, which are some of the elements which oppress women. The mental and emotional journey, via the physical journey, becomes a means of self-discovery for women. Female solidarity helps in identifying the female voices which were neglected earlier, and ice-cream (*kahwa*) and cutting chai help in overcoming the identity crises the women are going through in their lives. The segments also highlight different kinds of love: self-love, heterosexual love, and lesbian love, and at the same time, the complications in love, all in the city of Mumbai. This gives a modern perspective to the various kinds of love depicted.

Keywords: Raat Rani, Cutting Chai, Husband, Woman, Food, Bicycle, Marriage

Introduction

OTT services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, BigFlix, SonyLive, Disney Hotstar, Aha, ALTBalaji, Voot, Zee5, Jio Cinema, and even YouTube, have become quite popular in India. Today, most of the OTT platforms go by the notion of “Content is King” (Evans). In urban regions, viewership is shifting from television to web content for various reasons. A person living in a city can afford subscriptions to these OTT platforms, and in some of the cases there are great deals for consumers. For instance, someone who takes out Prime membership on the Amazon shopping app gets Amazon miniTV and Amazon Prime App for free, keeping aside a few pieces of content which are paid for under the title ‘rentals’. Moreover, one does not require a television for these platforms; an android phone, which is available to almost everyone in the bigger cities, is enough to install them. The scene is different in small cities and rural areas, where people are struggling even for essentials like water and electricity, so android phones become a luxury; however, exploration on this is not within the ambit of this paper. The term ‘Other’ is used by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* to signify how society sees women as second-class citizens, and she later shifts to ‘Absolute Other’. This paper focuses on two texts which feature on Amazon Prime; *Raat Rani* (dir. Shonali Bose) and *Cutting Chai* (dir. Nupur Asthana) which are two episodes of the web series *Modern Love Mumbai* (2022). *Modern Love Mumbai* is an anthology of six episodes by six talented directors, Shonali Bose, Hansal Mehta, Vishal Bhardwaj, Alankrita Shrivastava, Dhruv Sehgal, and Nupur Asthana. It is a very recent (May 2022) Indian adaptation of the US-based series *Modern Love*, directed by John Carney, which was inspired by *The New York Times*’ weekly columns with the same name. *Modern Love Mumbai* is the first of the three-part series; the other two, which are yet to be released, are titled *Modern Love Chennai* and *Modern Love Hyderabad*. The series title, *Modern Love Mumbai* evokes the binary of modern and traditional with a touch of Mumbai, which is constantly seen in all six episodes. Both the texts which are part of this paper see the shifting roles of women when they move from chores to cores, thus making their voices significant within their homes and outside. There is an attempt to bring women from the periphery to the centre, from the Other to the Self, from the Object to the Subject. The women in these texts belong to different socio-cultural backgrounds. In terms of economic background, Latika seems to belong to the upper middle-class and Lalzari belongs to an economically weaker section of society. The use of various types of transport, social media, female bonding, non-alcoholic

drinks, and food, helps women in the episodes to discover/rediscover themselves.

From Without to Within: A Road Towards Self-Discovery

Solnit writes, “Fathers have sons and grandsons, and so the lineage goes, with the name passed on the tree branches, and the longer it goes on, the more people are missing: sisters, aunts, mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers; a vast population made to disappear on paper and in history [...] coherence - of patriarchy, of ancestry, of narrative - is made by erasure and exclusion” (Solnit, 64-65). In a patriarchal society like ours, where the journey of a female has not been of much significance in popular culture, it is crucial to recognize and explore the texts which celebrate a woman’s journey. The use of various modes of transport, for instance, scooter, Mumbai taxi, Mumbai local, train, and bicycle, in the physical journey, that is, a journey ‘without’, plays a significant role in the women’s journey ‘within’. Throughout this trip, there is a kind of self-awakening of women in these texts. Riding alone on a bicycle, in the case of Lalzari, or spending some time at the CST Station, in the case of Latika, inculcate a kind of confidence in women in these shots. Women generally think twice before taking the lead, especially in terms of travelling, for many reasons, the main ones being safety issues and low self-confidence due to their conditioning. They’ve been conditioned to seek some kind of male support. The times are changing, and we get to see women riders and travel vloggers, but the number is still lower, compared to men. The travels of female protagonists Lalzari and Latika are limited to going to work and a book launch event, respectively. These everyday routines of sorts play a major role in their feminist awakening.

The routine or local travel works differently for the two women. Lutfi, Lalzari’s husband, takes the scooter with him when he decides to leave Lalzari. For Lalzari, the switch from scooter to bicycle is a journey. Initially, it was a switch which she had to make unwillingly, because Lutfi deserted her, but later it becomes the reason for her awakening. The act of balancing her bicycle and cursing her husband for leaving are acts of her unconscious/subconscious awakening. She is angry while she takes the bicycle, as her husband hasn’t even left change for her to buy a bus ticket. In the middle of the journey, she loses her slipper, and stops the bicycle, letting it fall on the ground, before going back and picking it up - which is symbolic of gathering herself together by picking up the bits. She releases her anger by competing with the speed of a train on her bicycle, and shouts