CHAPTER 5

The Paradox of Women Empowerment.

Concise Oxford Dictionary defines paradox as a “Seemingly absurd or contradictory statement, even if actually well founded”; and Empowerment (noun), from the verb empower means “authorize, license, give power to, make able”. The ‘role of empowerment’ and the ‘objective of the empowerment’ seem quite contradictory in this respect because the women is empowered (or given power/license) within the dialectic of the patriarchal structure of the society. Ashok Kumar Ray observes that:

In the Indian context, the discourse in the liberal school revolves round the constitutional principles of “Equality” and positions the women’s issue into the public policy frame of “Protective Discrimination”. This public policy frame is however not emancipatory although it is managed by the constitution makers on the socialistic pattern of society. In this context therefore the women questions oscillate between the liberal and normative frames of reference and protective discrimination paradoxically co-exists within alienation-exploitation syndrome in the unequal structure of economy and society. (A. K. Ray 44)

On one hand, with the inception of nationalism in India, women issue was treated liberally; and on the other hand the old normative structure of the society that defined the role of women in a traditional society, the cultural distinction of Indian society, created ambivalent factors. In north-east India too, these became imperative with the spread of western education system but the social and political turmoil in North-east India was different from the rest of India. Whereas, India was trying to
achieve freedom from British rule and with independence that end has been achieved. In North-east India, Princely states like Manipur and Tripura, and local leaders in Nagaland and Mizoram were simultaneously attempting for independence from India. India was trying to establish a nation-state, and these regions saw the rise of militancy as the offshoot of subnationalism with secessionist motives. No wonder the literature from North-east has been addressed as voices from troubled zone by litterateurs like Temsula Ao and Tillitoma Mishra. Therefore, the paradox of women’s emancipation has to be understood in the backdrop of two factors: Patriarchal domination and Militancy in North-east India. The core novels in this research paper have touched upon these issues in some or the other way.

If the history of North-East India is troubled by violence, the life of woman is doubly troubled: they are the victims of violence and also victims of patriarchal domination. Women have to conform to their roles assigned by the patriarchal order of the society. Eventually she is caught in the quagmire of tradition and modernity. In North-East India, like everywhere else, the society is trying by die-hard means to emancipate and liberate the women from their deplorable state. However, in spite of these legislations, which otherwise should ameliorate their conditions, the laws to protect women have proved ineffective in the face of patriarchal fury as evinced by the growing rate of crime against women. The failure to emancipate the women from their destitute hovels, time and again, signals the failure of mechanism employed in the Indian society. The cause of this failure can be attributed to the wrong diagnosis of the problem.

The civil as well the political society is trying to bring changes into the superstructure without altering the base; and precisely this is causing the failure. This
has created the paradox of women empowerment. Because the base of the society is firmly rooted into the age old religious and cultural practices which have been designed by the patriarchal society; and therefore the methodology to emancipate women has been rendered useless within this structure. The subsections in this chapter analyses the paradoxical conditions inherent in women’s empowerment by examining the current trend of discourses available in literary history as well as in the national history with special reference to the novels of four major novelists: Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s wife*, Anjum Hasan’s *Lunatic in My Head*, Easterine Kire Iralu’s *A Terrible Matriarchy*, and Mamang Dai’s *Stupid Cupid*. The following sub-sections that deal with the novels will reveal the paradoxes created by the social structure, be it in term of production or family kinship:
5.1 Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife*

Mitra Phukan, a trained classical vocalist, has steadily made her way into the world of literature by her significant contribution into North-east writings in English. She is now a celebrated name in Assam and in recent years there have been many research works related to her two novels. The opening page of her novel, *The Collector’s Wife*, published by Zubaan Books describes her as a well-known Assamese writer and a regular contributor to the English dailies in Assam. She is also a member of the North-East Writers’ Forum and till day she has published four books: Her first book *Mamoni’s Adventure* was published by Children’s Book Trust in the year 1986 and as the name suggests, the book is an important landmark in children’s fiction after Arup Kumar Dutta’s *The Kaziranga Trail*. This was followed by *Terrorist Camp Adventure* in 2003. Her first notable work that has been much acclaimed for its handling of theme and structure is *The Collector’s Wife* published by Zubaan/Penguin in 2005 which was followed by her next novel *A Monsoon of Music* published in 2011 by Zubaan/Penguin.

The publication of her novels by Zubaan/Penguin is itself symbolic to the new found voice of women in the literature of North-east India. Of the very few writers from North-east India, most are women writers and they mostly hail from Meghalaya. Even most English language writers in North-east India had their schooling in Shillong which provided a sound English education system for the elite social class until the 20th century. The Hindi word Zubaan, itself means ‘language’ or the ‘language through which one can articulate’ signals the fact that the hitherto unheard female voices have now found the platform through which they can register their
voices. Although Suresh Kolhi in his review (Kohli 214) points out that the novel lacks the in depth analysis of the problems related to Assam agitation and superficially examines multiple problems, yet Phukan’s pioneering work will stand important because of the very fact that such a work in English in North-east India is unprecedented. Her lyrical language is at once mesmerizing and takes the reader deep down into the fictional world. She has addressed many vital issues of the postcolonial contemporary Assamese society that requires immediate attention of the people and government. Apart from that, the novel addresses the issue of women empowerment through the female protagonist Rukmini who questions the double life that had to be lived by the womenfolk.

Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife* at once brings to one’s mind the first Indian English novel *Rajmohan’s Wife* by Bankimchandra. Although the themes and issues of these two novels vary greatly, nevertheless it has one thing in common, i.e. the structure of the title. As the title suggests, the protagonist of both the novels are female, but both of them are known by the identity of their husbands. The novels are set apart by a gap of 141 years, a considerable length of time which has subsumed many changes in the society, but both the novels deny a subject formation for the females. When Bankim started writing in 1864, the Indian society has seen the fresh waves of modernism and its immediate effect in elite circles. However, Bankim does not talk of educated modern woman in his novels and his depiction of women has been more in the fashion of archetypal prototypes of Hindu women. For instance, on one hand Meenakshi Mukherjee cites from the novel “Indira” the subservient wife’s servitude to the husband (Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*. 74); On the other hand she also points out the fact that:
Bankimchandra handled it by creating a new order of women outside the enclosed space of domesticity who could broadly be categorized as *veerangana* (the warrior women) – e.g. Debi Chaudhurani, the bandit queen for example, or Shanti in “Anandamath” who fought the British invaders alongside men. They could be granted freedom and power so long as they remained in the hills, forests…outside the conjugal domain- Spatially as well as socially. But within the walls of household a woman’s code of conduct was different. (Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* 77-78)

It is noteworthy that although women have been given an equal status to that of man outside the domestic domain, her role within the household has been circumscribed to the feminine role of conformity prescribed by patriarchal structure which sees the gradual waning of the individual identity. Clearly enough, Matangini cannot have any identity other than Rajmohan’s wife. One sees Matangini being chased to be killed by her husband for not being a part in his conspiracy. Her outright nature and sympathy for Rajmohan’s rival makes her an outcast. Without a proper knowledge of her plight, other women out rightly rejects her. Such has been the prejudice of the 19th century misogynistic India against the womenfolk that a lady in distress cannot find a shelter anywhere:

‘But seriously,’ he added with earnestness of manner, ‘Let go womanishness now and tell me truly how can you object to my affording temporary shelter to such a forlorn creature.’

‘Forlorn creature!’ returned Champak, why if she has done ill, she has deserved to be turned out.’ (B. C. Chatterjee 83)
Champak pronounces her judgment without knowing the true circumstances that made Matangini flee from her home. For her, as well as for the society, the woman who is turned out from the house must be at fault and the husband is undeniably always correct.

A few decades later, by the time Rabindranath Tagore has started wielding his pen, the condition of women has certainly been much alleviated than from her predecessors. Nevertheless, they too have been subjugated to patriarchal domination often counterpoised by other females. Dipesh Chakrabarty while charting the direction of progressive society cites the opinion of James Mill that “The history of uncultivated nations uniformly represents women as in a state of abject slavery, from which they slowly emerge as civilization advances…A state of dependence more strict and humiliating than that which is ordained for the weaker sex among the Hindus cannot be easily conceived.” (Chakrabarty 11)

In response to the charges levied by Mill, it is but imperative that the conscious and willing Indian society is ready for transfusion of western ideas but not without a hitch. Chakrabarty quotes from Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s autobiography to show the curiosity of the Indian husband about the emerging modern women: “Can you spell the name?” She said slowly: “B,E,E,T,H,O,V,E,N.” I felt encouraged… and [we] dozed off.” (Chakrabarty 10) Rabindranath’s Chokher Bali deals with the educated modern Binodini who has, for quite some time, been recognised as the emerging woman of the 20th century. On one hand, the husband looks forward to companionate marriage, on the other hand too much freedom to the wife has been considered as baneful. This modern woman has had to face certain difficulties. As the woman tries to emerge, other women pull her back to conventionality. Dipesh
Chakrabarty cites the example of Ramabai Ranade, who participated in the different meetings, related to the freedom movements in India; and in doing so she has been encouraged and inspired by her husband. However, the other women from her household complained, “You should not really go to these meetings…even if the men want you to do these things, you should ignore them. You need not say no: but after all you need not do it. They will then give up, out of sheer boredom….you are outdoing even the European women” (Chakrabarty 16). Thus the freedom given to them have been curtailed by those norms which have been vital to the Indian ethos of womanhood. As Meenakshi Mukherjee says that the man’s role is always dynamic and the woman’s passive and this pattern “goes very deep into the Indian ethos” (Mukherjee, The Twice Born fiction 153). This passive role of the Indian women is justified by her likening to the satitva image which has been construed over the ages with mythical engagements. As Chakrabarty cites the contemporary belief during that time, “The truly modern housewife, it was said, would be so auspicious as to mark the eternal return of the cosmic principal embodied in the goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of domestic wellbeing by whose grace the extended family …lived and prospered.” (Chakrabarty 15) Such myths have been constructed to justify the subordination of women and their discipline within the domestic boundaries. It is not possible to break the effect of these myths because they are the scaffold of Indian nationalism sanctioned by religious practices. Many writers down the ages have tried to address this issue but with little success owing to the illiteracy of the Indian masses or due to religious dogma.

This brief trajectory of women empowerment is required because it exposes the continuation of a patriarchal structure of the society. In spite of progressing
towards civilization in European parameters, women are always subjugated in different ways. This justifies the hypothesis that the women empowerment is paradoxical in nature. On one hand, we empower our women with knowledge, education, freedom and equality; on the other hand, we provide these opportunities within the confinement of the same old patriarchal structure. The base on which the superstructure has been built, is still the same and unalterable. The past traditions are in continuation and are carried in the collective consciousness of the older generation, irrespective of gender. The problems that have been prevalent a century back persist till day. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, “Novels like Srikanta and Sesh Prashna even questioned hallowed concepts like satitva and the sanctity of marriage tie when love is absent” (Mukherjee, Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India. 102) And century later, a novel like The Collector’s Wife echoes the same question in a more inquiring manner. This little prescript will help explaining the continuation of the ambivalent status of women even in the contemporary society as seen in The Collector’s Wife.

The novel is set in an imaginary town which is located in the state of Assam. The novel can be seen as a regional allegory of a place that goes through turbulent changes after independence. But behind the backdrop of a regional allegory of violence and post-colonial decadence, the story of Rukmini stands prominent. What has been discussed earlier theoretically becomes evident in the novel as it cadences the numerous shades of the feelings of a woman. The emotions of the female protagonist stand closer to reality because these emotions have emanated from the pen of another woman. Who else can express the feelings of a woman more faithfully other than a woman herself. It seems the writer has emptied her heart through the
feelings of Rukmini: narrating the untold saga of deprivation and loneliness that has come as a legacy for women down the ages.

The novel opens with the marriage ceremony of Rita, which is thronged by all the high profiles of the society. Apparently the opening chapter gives an inkling of the empowered women because in such a society, the women are mostly educated and participate in many social activities basking under the warmth of companionate marriage. Rita, Priyam and Rukmini are all lecturers in a college and give the idea of a progressive society which seeks equal participation from women. The social participation and responsibility of women is made apparent in the character of Rina Sarma-

…a local contractor’s wife who had lately turned to social work. It was rumoured that she planned to stand for election to the next legislative Assembly. “It’ll be the end of our culture. The end of our people. We will have to have reserved seats…” She fingered the heavy emerald chocker around her neck for consolation (Phukan 7)

The problem she is addressing is real, but the concern lacks genuine feelings as it is faked by a lady who vaguely has any idea about things happening around her. She has no knowledge about the culture that she has been refereeing to, because the high society which has been feeding on the hybrid culture has lost touch with its roots. People like Rina Sarma and her husband flock the clubs which is symbolic of the defunct and decadent colonial structure. However, illusion soon gives way to reality. The readers are made aware of the subservient position of women which raises a serious doubt on the issue of women empowerment. Mitali Bora, one of the characters in the novel observes- “‘In any case, I was brought up in the belief that a woman’s
career is secondary to her husband’s. No matter what.”” (Phukan 115). In the similar way, the female protagonist, Rukmini also declares, “‘I don’t like teaching at all,” said Rukmini. “But I have to take what I can get. I can’t be a total housewife, though part-time lecturing is not much of a career.’”” (Phukan 116). The situation is ambivalent for woman, because the tenets of modern education, on one hand, talks about the employability and proper use of human recourse; the social codes teaches women to be subservient to her husband. Whereas, western education treats knowledge as power which should be wielded wisely; the Indian education system has used knowledge as salvation according to Partha Chattarjee. These two opposite tendencies in the society very often create the crisis in the lives of women. 

Rukmini is a college lecturer at Deenanath Saikia College but she doesn’t enjoy teaching the prescribed syllabus to the students because they have no idea about the ‘skylark’ or the ‘daffodil’. Rukmini complains that these students can hardly write a grammatically correct sentence. The syllabus which has been prescribed to these students is very foreign and serves no real purpose. The redundancy of such a syllabus is symbolic of the redundancy of the social values with which Rukmini has been living. She feels bored by her job, and complains of having no friends because of her husband’s constant transfer as required of an IAS officer. She cannot take a permanent job because of this and so has to compromise with whatever comes her way. Rukmini does not believe in old customs which makes her the target of social criticism:

“Married!” Their looks of astonishment rapidly changed to disapproval. They scanned Rukmini’s head for signs of vermillion powder, found none, and arched their eyebrows as they took in her loose, wavy shoulder-length hair”
“For ten years” added Rukmini helpfully. She felt compelled to say something to win their approval, even though they were total strangers.

“oh…” If anything, they looked even more disapproving. “So how many children do you have, then?” (Phukan 14)

Obviously, according to these ladies, Rukmini lacks in social propriety, which is customary in Hindu society. Women have to fit themselves into rigid watertight compartments, and in spite of all education or advancement, they have to display their affinity to their culture in looks at least, if not in thoughts. These towns are filled with such stereotypes. Further, the last question posed to Rukmini is the ice-breaker about the social prejudice associated with the childbearing capacity of women. When the ladies come to know that Rukmini has been married since past ten years but with no children they blurted out, “‘what times we are living through! In my days even the shadow of a barren woman wasn’t allowed to fall on a bride.’” (Phukan) Whereas, Rukmini’s in-laws have never accused Rukmini of barrenness, Rukmini has somehow felt herself responsible for this lack. The bigotry of indicting the women as responsible for producing female child or for barrenness has produced most malignant strictures against women that classify such women as ominous. Their presence has been banned at auspicious ceremonies and through mental coercion they are slowly pushed into a kind of exile.

Because, after all, Rukmini was a barren woman, and, as everyone knew, when a childless female took an undue interest in one’s offspring, it was time to ward off the evil eye by going home as soon as possible, roasting mustard seeds on an open fire, and murmuring mantras over the head of the child whose name was taken by the barren woman. (Phukan 167)
This has perhaps percolated in the thoughts of Rukmini through the collective consciousness of the misogynistic society and she has started thinking herself responsible for her incapacity to produce a child. Although her husband does not accuse her, yet his passivity has pushed Rukmini to a solitary life where she has no friend to discuss her problems. Towards the end of the novel, when Rukmini (also after discovering the infidelity of Siddharth) breaks the news of her pregnancy, she deprives Siddharth doubly: firstly ripping his of his masculinity; and secondly, of the opportunity to be a father. Siddharth sulkily accepts this double truth: “’So Dr. Rabha was wrong,” he said, unexpectedly. “It wasn’t infertility, after all. At least not as far as you are concerned.’” She nodded, remembering the countless tests that she has been subjected to...” (Phukan 277). The questions regarding the possibility of the male can be impotent or the sperm count can be low or for that matter any other kind of erectile dysfunction that can jeopardize the possibility of normal child producing capacity are never raised in a society. The masculinity of the man is taken for granted.

The idea of companionate marriage which has been taking firm roots in Indian soil is choked by the callousness of such husbands. In the beginning of the novel it appears that the husband being a District Collector is always busy with the official errands and so he can hardly give time to his wife. However, when at a later stage when his infidelity towards his wife has been exposed, he can at best give such lame excuse for his infidelity:

Afraid of the consequences of this entire Fertility Clinic thing. You know- the drugs, the regimented sex at pre-determined times, the rules and regulations that we seemed to be heading for. And then the fertility drug that you were thinking of having. Eight babies in one go.” He paused and chuckled, “I know
it sounds crazy, now-but that really had scared me for a while. And then all
the other pressures. Work. Deaths. Murders. Kidnappings…. (Phukan 312)

Such apprehension is proved to be utterly preposterous because he never
doubts his fathering capacity. As the novel progresses the many vices of the Indian
society are gradually exposed. Marriage which is conceived as a social contract puts
woman on a disadvantageous pedestal. Firstly, the wife has to leave her paternal home
and live with the husband in a completely new set up. The woman more often than not
hardly gets the freedom to choose her life partner, because mostly the parents decide
the right groom for the bride. This at a later stage can be the cause of failed marriages
because of mutual incompatibility, as we see in the two families: Siddharth and
Rukmini, Manoj and Maya. Rukmini feels lonely and isolated because she does not
get the adequate care and attention of her husband. There is a communication gap
between them, which she thinks is owing to the work load of Siddharth. Rukmini has
no intellectual intimacy or physical comfort in Siddharth; and both has lived with each
other in such incompatible way for years-

Her body longed for the reassuring warmth of a male body beside her, for a
voice to tell her that it wasn’t her fault that she was still childless.
Unaccountably, she remembered how Manoj Mahanta’s firm torso had felt as
it had come into brief contact with her on the pavement on M G Road almost
a month ago.

She was asleep by the time Siddharth finally came in.” (Phukan 76)

The vacuum created by the lack of Siddharth is now filled by Manoj Mahanta.
On the other hand, Manoj, who is separated from his wife, despite of their love
marriage proves equally incompatible with each other. He is understanding and caring
and genuinely wishes the best for Maya. Readers can see later that Maya settles down happily after an arranged marriage (Phukan 122). Rukmini is incompatible with Siddharth, and Manoj is incompatible with Maya, and both families have suffered the same problem; but Rukmini and Manoj find solace in each other.

It will be quite pertinent to invoke the epilogue in Rajmohan’s wife which informs the readers about Matangini’s death. Being banished from her husband’s home, and neither having the scope to marrying her lover, she is sent to her father’s home where she dies an early death. The writer can at best think it to be a perfect ending that will do justice for such a women who is neither a widow nor living with her husband. She is such a destitute that only death will be a poetic justice to save her from social embarrassments. A different ending will have upset the popular conventions. But after 141 years, Mitra Phukan can think of an alternate ending. She sees the women emerging out of the society to make her own identity. In the beginning Rukmini struggles hard to keep her identity alive without jeopardizing her position as a dutiful wife to her husband: “In the mean time, her work gave her something to do and also an identity, however frail, of her own.” (Phukan 28) But towards the end, we see Rukmini as a resolute woman, not making any compromise with her life unlike her early days. She has decided to have the child:

“But I, well… I know I have never really been very decisive about anything. But on this I am firm. I’m having this baby. Not” she added quickly, in case he misunderstood, “not because I’m in love with Manoj, or anything like that. I’m not. I like him a lot, but getting married to him- no. In any case he doesn’t even know about the baby. Of course going ahead will be …” she fumbled for
words “I have no idea what I’ll do, how I’ll raise this baby, but – I am going ahead, anyway” (Phukan 315)

The sexual gratification of Rukmini has had some impact on her psychology as well as body. She realizes that she has never experienced such kind of intimate moment even with Siddharth. She has considered herself as a calm personality, but is quite shocked to discover her ardent and passionate nature through Manoj. The novelist poignantly narrates that exclusive moment-

She felt an urge to murmur endearments, but resisted, moving her face to his, instead, and brushing his lips with her tongue till he opened his eyes and smiled lazily at her. She knew that she was smiling, too. Indeed, she couldn’t seem to stop. Nor was there any need to. She touched her breasts and belly, and smiled again. (Phukan 142)

Since her conception of the child, Rukmini has displayed a courageous and confident nature in handling everything. She can reply curtly to Chakravarty and Duara and finally think of an independent identity. Rukmini admires Manoj Mahanta and feels comfortable in his presence because she can feel herself more in his company. Manoj Mahanta has in fact extenuated her condition by offering a fresh air of encouragement- “Women do have careers, you know, in this day and age. I mean real careers, not the kind of half-hearted thing that you are doing” (Phukan 161). He has inspired her to write and Rukmini discovers herself through him. Mitra Phukan finely justifies and paves the way for the women who should cast off the shackles of age old conventions that deny growth and identity to women. Instead of living as someone else’s wife, a secondary identity, Mitra Phukan shows the numerous possibilities of building identity and in doing this Manoj Mahanta becomes her
spokesman. It is only after the discovery of her husband’s infidelity, and the seed of Manoj’s child in her womb that she has started recognizing the possibility of woman’s identity other than the conventional ones. During her conversation with Mrs. Deuri, the widow of the SP, Rukmini is newly inspired-

“…As for me- Deuri’s death thrust the decision on me. Of course, I had been thinking for some time, even while I was here in Parbatpuri, of doing something on my own, being something other than just being Deuri’s wife, or the children’s mother.”… I’m thankful that the bakery is slowly, but definitely, beginning to erase my other identity. (Phukan 302)

The burden of being somebody’s wife weighs down so heavily on the identity of women, that despite of being educated, they cannot have the scope of independent identity which is outside the patriarchal discourse. An instance we have seen in the character of Nibedita in Anjum Hasan’s Lunatic in my Head. Like the 20th century Bengali novelist Saratchandra Chattopadhaya, Mitra Phukan also criticizes the absurdity of the Indian society: “After all, a wife’s chastity was the foundation-stone on which the entire edifice of their patriarchal society rested. What right, then, did she have to judge Siddharth?” (Phukan 274) Whereas a man can easily hide his infidelity towards his woman owing to his physiological advantage; a woman is physiologically in a more disadvantageous position as seen in the instance of Rukmini. Although Rukmini can easily abort the child, such idea never crosses her mind in the first place; but later when she thinks about it, she dismisses it because the child has given her a new identity: the identity of motherhood. She can part with the husband, but it will be too much for her to face the world. The allegation of being a barren woman and the social stigma associated with it is very intensely dealt with by the novelist. Rukmini
decides in favour of social acceptance thereby dismissing the farce of women empowerment.
Like her contemporary Mitra Phukan, Easterine also had an English medium schooling. She has the rare distinction of being the first Naga women to have published a complete anthology of poems at the age of 22 in 1982. In many of the poems, she mourns the death of the Naga warriors killed in conflict with the Indian army during the rise of Naga nationalism. More than a Poet, she is a novelist and a similar theme underscores her two important novels: *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011). Though her first novel *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) recounts fictionally the last battle fought between the Naga and the British. Brought up during turbulent times, her novels have the backdrop of violence. In her introduction to the Novel *Bitter Wormwood*, she writes about the numerous atrocities committed by Indian army on the Naga people in general and the Naga women in particular. Like Temsula Ao, she too writes about the horrific instruments of rape and murder used by the Indian Army to subjugate Naga people. Her latest work is *When The River Sleeps* for which she worn ‘The Hindu Award’ in 2015. Apart from being a supporter of Naga Nationalism, her works are also concerned with the plight of female in such a society that has been ripped apart by violence. The current novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* deals with the plight of Naga women in a traditional Angami Society. The language of the novel is lucid and simple.

The colophon on the back cover of *A Terrible Matriarchy* describes Iralu’s novel as ‘a realistic portrayal’ of people and place she knows well. She takes the readers on a journey to the Naga tribal world and makes them acquainted with the culture, custom and the social setup that makes it possible for a discourse on the issue
of women emancipation. A cursory inquest into the novel makes the title somewhat misnomer, because what appears to be a matriarchy is actually the continuation of disguised patriarchy. The novel brings to light the marginalization of women in a tribal society. However, the economy plays an important role in such subjugation. The subservient position of a female is further aggravated when the society progresses towards an industrial society. Although it is not appropriate to classify the Naga tribal communities as industrial society, yet the inception of modernization and introduction of education system has no longer left it to be primitive hunting and horticulture societies. The spread of education and the availability of jobs have significantly changed the economic front of these tribes. Since economy determines the role of the family members, the change in the occupation has also changed the roles of these people. Thus with the change in its social structure, there has also been a change in the condition of the women in these societies as will be evident from the novel under consideration. Although many critics are of the opinion that women enjoy a better position in a tribal society, Tiplut Nongbri is of the opinion that

…tribal women are not absolutely subordinated and possess greater economic independence and freedom of movement than their counterparts in non-tribal societies cannot be disputed. But it would be naïve to regard this as a sufficient indicator of their superior social status. Evidence suggests that even in hunting societies women were mostly treated as “second sex” with greater or lesser subordination to men. (Nongbri)

Though the title of the novel is *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the traditional Angami society is not a matriarchal society. It is a patriarchal society like other tribes of Nagaland where women are considered as subordinate to the men. The grandmother
earns the position of a matriarch after the death of her husband as her husband was a ‘big’ and wealthy man in the community who worked for the government. The consummation of the life of the grandmother, like all other married women, is realized in serving her husband always. In a traditional Angami society, a wife is always expected to fulfill her husband’s needs and desires and the young girls are ordained in this tradition since their childhood. A Naga woman considers herself fortunate to live as a supplement to her successful husband. The grandmother is also like that and over time, she acquires a privileged status in the family circle after the death of her husband. As the matriarch of her clan, with her husband’s pension, she controls her family members with strict discipline. As the mother/grandmother, she should have been sympathetic towards other female members of her family and she should have changed their lives. But instead of this, she pours her unduly love on her grandsons and makes life miserable for her young granddaughter in order to train her as a perfect ‘wife material’. She says that some men don’t like it if their wives are too educated (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 205). Thus all the other female members of her family are subjugated and oppressed. There are numerous instances in the novel where one can see the unequal power equation between the male and the female. And it is not the male who subjugates the women always; rather the structure is as such that women accept their subordinate status spontaneously and very often female members impose those structures to keep the tradition going.

As Lois Tyson in her book ‘Critical Theory Today’ cites Helen Cixous:

Women will not learn to resist patriarchal thinking by becoming part of the patriarchal power structure, that is by obtaining equal status and equal opportunity in current patriarchal society. For women’s acquisition of power
within the existing socio-political system would not adequately change the system. Indeed the result would be that woman would become more like the patriarchal men because they would learn to think as the patriarchal men have been trained to think. (Tyson 100).

From the very outset the narrator makes the reader aware of the discrimination meted out to her since her childhood by the grandmother. She bluntly declares in the opening lines that “My grandmother didn’t like me.” (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 1) Although a four and half year child she can feel the gender discrimination because the grandmother has clearly stated that the boys are privileged and should get the chicken leg always- “That portion is always for the boys. Girls must eat the other portions.” (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 1) Dielieno fails to comprehend the cause of such discrimination but restraints from informing her mother, lest she will be troubled and sad. Although her mother is younger to her husband, yet she looks much older. She looks aged, burdened and tired. The burden of family life takes a toll on the health of the female much greater than that of men. As Mahadevi Varma observes in her essay:

The Hindu Woman’s Wifehood, “Marriage is the oldest custom of the uncivilized as well as the civilized human race…To see the living proof of man’s thoughtless conduct in our society, we only need to observe a young girl, healthy and blooming like a rose, five years after her marriage. We will find a prematurely aged, sickly mother of many emaciated children, whose helplessness and tragic story is sure to bring tears to our eyes. (Varma 234)

This description transcends religious borders. It is not the story of only a Hindu household, it is also the story of a Christian household, Lieno’s mother. This is the story of every patriarchal society. We see Mrs. Das in *A Lunatic in My Head*
having a similar experience. As Lieno grows up, the discrimination intensifies against her and she becomes used to it. She starts pitying her mother as well because she feels that this discrimination is not directed only against herself, but also towards her mother. She has often seen her mother taking out meat pieces from her own plate and sharing it with his sons, and sometimes when there is a scarcity of food at home, she will sleep empty stomach after feeding her children. Seeing her mother suffering constantly because of the dictates of her grandmother, she has started hating her gradually- “The person she feared most was Grandmother and I hated Grandmother with a vengeance because nothing my mother ever did seemed to please her.” (E. Iralu, A Terrible Matriarchy 3). The Grandmother not only dictates the female in the house, she also decides the nature of works to be performed by the family members as she says Lieno’s mother that fetching water from the well is not a man’s job but a girl’s errand. Not only the tribal societies, the non-tribal societies have gender classified jobs. The women are taken as fragile and weak and so they are assigned with less laborious jobs. The women are constituted not only as physically weak, but also as intellectually inferior to the males. For the grandmother, going to the schools means ruining the girl child. “In our day,” Grandmother began,” girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learnt the housework. Then we went to the fields and learnt all the fieldwork as well.” (E. Iralu, A Terrible Matriarchy 23) The grandmother wants to continue the tradition of not sending the girl-child to the school because girls are supposed to be married off. Such superstitious ideas prevailed in the past that the education for female has been considered fatal for the husband. When Dalhousie has considered introducing female education in India, “Adam pointed out that a feeling allegedly existed in the majority of Hindu females, principally cherished by the
women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to read and write would become a widow soon after marriage and the idea was also generally entertained that intrigue was facilitated by a knowledge of letters on the part of females.” (Ghosh 69). Hence it is not ironical enough that Rabindranath Tagore can conceive of introducing Binodini in such a manner in his fiction *Chokher Bali*. The educated Binodini soon loses her husband after marriage, and one of her prospective suitors thus remarks: “‘Thank goodness I didn’t marry her,’ laughed Mahendra. Had my wife been widowed, I wouldn’t have survived an instant.” (Tagore, *Chokher Bali* 4). How can education possibly make a difference for the female when any rhetoric on the empowerment of women has only been a part of the patriarchal discourse? The All India Women’s conference that has taken place in 1927 in Poona has stated that “Girls must be taught the ideals of motherhood and maintaining a good home…” (Ramachandran and Ramkumar 103). Further, in 1932, The Lady Irwin College for Home Science has been started. Her best education for female is to train her in the domestic and household activities. When the Indian government began thinking about women education en mass, it did not make much difference to the female student because they did not consider the female to play some other role in the society, other than a house wife. Not surprisingly Dielieno reveals in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, “In the tenth standard, I turned fifteen. From the ninth standard, Mathematics was no longer compulsory for us girls. So we went to another class called Domestic Science where we learnt to cook and knit and sew.” (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 201).

What appears to be a matriarchal domination is in fact a disguised patriarchal domination endorsed by a female. As a matter of fact women have very less rights in decision making even in a tribal society. When Lieno’s father justifies the
Grandmother’s harshness, he is actually promoting the patriarchal structure: “It is for your own good, your Grandmother would never do anything to you that is not for your welfare... You know she has a hard life. She only wants to raise you to be a good woman.” (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 6). A good woman is one who does her duty towards the husband unquestioningly. Later on, after the death of the Grandmother, when the dispute regarding the utility of the property is being discussed, the readers are made aware of the patriarchal nature of the society. The will of the male is pushed through the female so as to appear that the women are behind the decision making. On one hand, Lieno’s father says, “Men are not men when they have wives (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 303),”, on the other hand, he again says, 

Your grandfather left the house to all three of us and our male heirs. 

Technically speaking, it belongs to all of us men in the family. Whatever decision we make, it will have to be done in full agreement of all the male members. We should also listen to the womenfolk and what they have to say on this. (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 302) 

Apparently, the women are allowed to speak, but finally only the decision of the male will prevail. In a wider spectrum, this condition of the female in the family set up is also analogous to her condition in the national set up. Tiplut Nongbri criticizes 73rd amendment, 1992 act of the Indian constitution and the Bhuria Committee report- “We can see how the state and the community come together to reinforce male power by consciously and systematically isolating women from policy formulation and the political process.” (Nongbri 196) The novelist presents the plight of the Naga women who has no strong-hold in the socio-economic structure of the society. The women are deprived not only of education but also of land and property
rights. This deprivation has eventually led Lieno’s grandmother to take the position of a terrible matriarchy in the household.

When Lieno narrates the numerous atrocities committed by her grandmother against her, Lieno’s mother calmly replies, “she was trying to teach you to become a good woman. Men don’t like women who are aggressive and outspoken. They like their wives to be good workers. You are a good worker, Lieno, but you must try to be more docile.” (E. Iralu, A Terrible Matriarchy 272). Lieno’s mother is taking the footsteps of Lieno’s grandmother. The older generation has accepted the subservient and secondary position of women in the society for granted. Under such circumstances, the question for women empowerment remains suspended. The cultural and customary set up of the tribal society do not have space for women empowerment, and if a women is empowered through education, and thus being empowered, she becomes vocal about her rights, such women are out rightly rejected by the society. They do not occupy a respectable position within the conclave because other females see such changes as detrimental to their own security. Vini, Lieno’s brother, rebukes her, “Grandmother was right. Girls should never be educated. They always forget their station in life.” (E. Iralu, A Terrible Matriarchy 249) It has been shocking for Lieno to learn that three of the marriage proposals for her have been turned down because her aunts have rebuffed the prospective bridegrooms by citing the outspoken nature of Lieno which does not make her a good wife material. Apparently, Lieno’s tries to prove that despite of being educated and upfront, she has to fulfill her role as a wife. The novelist fails to give a strong position to Lieno in a patriarchal society. She has to imbibe the values of a woman which is appropriate for the tribal society.
These ‘values’ are created by the relationships shared by individuals based on the forces of production as identified and determined by the base, and those gradually become the norms of the society until further changes brought forth by some revolution (be sudden or gradual) to usurp the established ones by the radical interlude (which in due course of time becomes the norms again), or else it happens as a process of evolution that the changes are so slow that it becomes imperceptible but only when compared with a distant past, the change becomes prominent. To understand the value one must investigate into human existence and the society created as a necessity of it.

The question starts with human being’s survival and the formation of a society.

We must begin by stating the first real premise of human existence, and therefore of all human history, the premise that men must be able to live in order to ‘make history’. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things.

[This is] a fundamental condition of all human history which today as thousands of years ago must be daily and hourly fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. (Harman 7-54)

Therefore it can be said that the act of survival is a precondition to everything else. “And the act of survival is the activity of work on the material world in order to get food shelter and clothing” (Harman). The manner the material production takes place always determines the social relations. And therefore, “changes in the way material production takes place lead changes in the relations of society in general” (Harman). For instance, a nomadic way of life for hunters and food gatherers will allow the women to bear fewer children; and a subsistent living on agriculture will allow women to produce more children. And a surplus production and storage of crops
will give an opportunity to rival bands to seize it and therefore a new chapter of warfare will begin in history. In the Naga society, as to be seen in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the insecurity suffered by Lieno’s grandmother has made her change her position from a lenient daughter to a terrible grandmother. Lieno’s mother narrates the story of the Grandmother that being the eldest among the three daughters; she has gone through a very difficult phase of her life—“In the village, widows without sons lost all their husband’s property to other male relatives. So she understood that it was very important for a married woman to produce as many male offsprings as she could. Her mother did not have brothers and they lost all their lands and fields when her father died.” (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 272-273) Since the grandmother has seen her own mother laboring through hardship and her deprivation from many social privileges, she in turn decides to harden in order to avoid the hardships of life. Without right to property, women are left to fend for themselves and end up suffering. In case of Bano, her fate hangs in uncertainty because neither she has a proper education to support her livelihood nor a husband to take care for her. It is only her father who eventually comes to her rescue as he assures that a part of his pension will go to her after his death. Bano has to live in the mercy of others, and obviously she has no space for voicing her opinion. She is the true subaltern who is the topic of discussion, but she herself can never participate in that discussion. No one has ever asked her once, what she wants. It is more like a catch 22 situation where on one hand, if the women are sufficiently educated, they are not considered to be a perfect wife material; and if they are denied education they lose every possibility to support their independent livelihood. In all respect the women are made dependent on the male, so that they can be coerced to subjugation by the male. One cannot deny the importance
of education in the current scenario and when the tribal land ownership is restricted to the males. Such discrimination has social sanctions validated by taboos in the societies. Tiplut Nongbri cites an example in this relation that “among the Ho and Oraon tribes, women’s access to land is constricted by the taboo which forbids them to use the plough- a practice which is rooted in the belief that if a woman uses the plough, it would result in economic and social calamities” (Nongbri 200). Such reasons make the family desire for a male heir than a female one. The desire for a male child is so integral to the tribal and non-tribal societies in India that we see this desire being voiced in all the narratives under consideration.

In another novel by Iralu, Bitter Wormwood, one can see the father rejoicing to have a male child:“Vilau’s husband, Luo-o, was very pleased their first child was a boy. He happily took over the task of harvesting the field so his wife did not have to return to fieldwork in the next month” (Iralu, Bitter Wormwood 17)

No doubt, Vilau is also a part of the forces of production and works in the field; however, Luo-o’s position is more significant as a male member of the family because he not only works in the field, but also performs task which only the male members of the clan could accomplish. For instance, the village has been planning a festival to celebrate a new gate for the clan, and only the male members can participate in the ritual of cutting and bringing down the tree from the jungle to the village. Hunting is another task which is performed only by the male members. The division of labour according to the nature and importance of work ascribes value and importance to the members of the family and this is why their respective social existence determines their consciousness in a relative manner. To quote Marx in this connection:
In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political*)

Once the structure is created on the basis of this, it is difficult to change the values existing in the society without altering the base. This creates an unequal relationship like master-slave, employer-worker (subordinates), husband-wife, where the value becomes integral to the relation in the long run and the norms are build up in a hierarchy in the line of subordination like that of the ‘falcon’ and the ‘falconer’ where the inevitability of a Saviour is assigned to the male always.

Therefore, it is an inherent structure of the society, when living in groups or communities, to create a hierarchy in order of power and status. The very foundation (the base) on which the society is built up seems to be problematic and questionable. How do we discuss about women emancipation within the existing structure which cannot accommodate an alternate status to the women. It will not be possible unless we undo the past on which our present is build up. It will not be an easy task to undo the past, which has oozed out of the customs practiced by our forefathers. But at the same time, we cannot live with it and talk about social change to eradicate discrimination against women. On one hand we are talking about dignity, equality
and liberty; on the other hand we are leaving little scope to promote or implement them. The difficulty to bring change into the existing social structure without undoing the base can be better understood in the line of thought advanced by the Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci.

He divided Marx's superstructure into two elements: political society and civil society. Political society consists of the organized force of society (such as the police and military) while civil society refers to the consensus-creating elements of society that contribute to hegemony. Both elements of society are still informed by the values of the base (the value which is already problematic, my addition), and serve to establish these values in society and enforce them. (Morera 23-37)

Of the two elements, let us consider the ‘Civil Society’: the consensus-creating elements of the society. How the consensus is created? Does it come from the individual to the group, or the group to the individual? It comes from the individual (Patriarchy) to the group (Group of male) and then back to the individual again (male and female; matriarchy acting as patriarchy). This consensus-creating element of the society passes from the individual to the collective consciousness gradually. How does this happen? The society at large thinks of the welfare of human beings, but this is controlled by like-minded individuals who cannot think over individual benefit. Therefore the advantage offered by the society in general is suppressed by another ‘advantageous advantage’ (although detrimental) which is nothing but individual’s personal advantage. The ramification of this supplanting the collective advantage by individual’s advantage is coercive and detrimental for the female living the society (existing social structure). It is therefore the ‘advantageous advantage’ of a few individuals which takes the form of consensus of the civil society and thereby is
enforced by the political society. Once it takes gains currency keeping in mind the values of the base (which itself is based on unequal relationship, as I stated earlier), the oppressed also starts participating in it by becoming the oppressor.

Now contextualizing this with the novel, the Grandmother cannot possibly have any other role than the one she has been assigned. Any attempt to eradicate the repressive tendencies towards the women will fail unless the value on which the base is formed is completely altered; and by imposing the psychological working of the human mind in relation to this society we can actually see how the structures are created which undermines the status of women. Without altering the base, the superstructure cannot be changed because by way of internalisation women and the men alike will never know how to resist patriarchal thinking; rather they become a part of it in due course of time consciously or unconsciously.

The novelist’s target is not the grandmother, but the system that has compelled the grandmother to become a dominating matriarch who works as the vanguard of the patriarchal system. Her deprivation in the society has been so intense that she keeps hovering over the family even after her death in order to ensure the safety of Bano, Nisano and Salhou. She becomes a Ghost and chases away the tenants who come to occupy the house, because she doesn’t want her children to suffer from the homeless condition that she herself has faced during her childhood. Ghosts, like myths and prejudices, keep returning because they live in living memories of human consciousness and are transmuted from generation to generation. The mind remains informed by the pre-existence, which may not otherwise actually exist. These ideas are not pre-existing to human civilization but are imprinted on our minds, the tabula
rasa, through various strategies; after all as William Blake wisely says, if one does not create one’s own system, one has to be enslaved by other’s.
5.3 Anjum Hasan’s *Lunatic in My Head*

Anjum Hasan is a writer from Shillong, Meghalaya and is now settled in Bangalore in the State of Karnataka. Her life in Shillong has shaped her experience which comes forth in the novel *Lunatic in my Head*. One cannot claim the novel as an autobiographical one, nevertheless one cannot undermine the autobiographical elements that has gone into the shaping of this novel. Like the other two novelists, she has also been educated in English Medium schools and her father was a Professor of English at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Her taste for music and her upbringing in Shillong, the feeling of being a Dakhar, all these find expression in her novel first novel *Lunatic in My Head* (2007). In the cover page of the novel Siddharth Deb praises it as “haunting, lyrical and daring, bringing fresh air into the stale confines of Indian writing”. Her second novel *Neti, Neti* (2009), a sequel to the first one, also received critical acclamation as Amit Chaudhuri lavishly heaps praises in the colophon of the novel, saying that Hasan is “one of the most suggestive and subtle Indian writers of her generation, usually aware of the weight, meaning and resonances of the words”. Hasan has two more novels to her credit: *Difficult Pleasures* (2013) and *The Cosmopolitians* (2016). Of all her works, only her first work has been set in the backdrop of North-east exclusively. The novel is indeed lyrical in quality and her language and expression are profound. The novel delineates her mastery over the language as well as the theme of alienation and deprivation faced by women born and brought up as a second generation migrant. In dealing with the hopes and aspirations of the migrant families, the novelist focuses the plight of women who faces numerous challenges in establishing an independent identity.
The novel is written from the position of an ‘outsider’ who has lived for a substantial period of time in Shillong since her birth before moving out. She knows the place in and out; her perception about the place is very intimate but of one who can never acculturate with the growing trend of the place. She says in the beginning of the novel: “A mere glance was usually enough to reveal the important things about them- the languages they spoke, their social position, how long they have lived in Shillong” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 9). Firdaus Ansari becomes her spokes person because she is at once attracted to the place and repealed by it- “Firdaus found that she longed for Shillong even as she lived there, even though she had lived there all her life” (Hasan, *Lunatic In My Head* 101). Firdaus may hate the raucously whistling khasi boys, but she is passionate about Shillong. Firdaus is filled with nostalgia about the life in Shillong and its past (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 103). Nevertheless she meditates on leaving Shillong because she feels that she is unnoticed and is not accepted by the people- “I can always leave, she could say to herself…” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 95). The acceptability should be a part of the cultural spectrum emanating from the unorthodoxity of the Khasi people who are otherwise so desperately trying to free Shillong of non-tribal population. This sense of alienation and bitterness often makes Firdaus feel clumsy and she tells herself that she can leave the place anytime she wants. Here, gender and identity play a great role for such ambivalent nature that is evident in Firdaus’ character. Some critics may refer to her parochial view of the Khasi boys when she says: “She knew that the college boys whistling raucously from across the street were entirely Khasi” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 8). However, she is also nostalgic about her attraction to the tribal boys who comes to Shillong from Diphu, Kohima and Churachandpur who are tall and speaks
good English—“The men she had really liked at the University had never noticed her, and she had admired them from a distance for their beauty and confidence and guitar-playing” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 103). Anjum is also critical of the metropolitan culture which has been baneful for the young generation of Khasi and non-Khasi girls in Shillong. Whereas Mother Gertrude is symbolic of the highest values of discipline, chastity and purity, Sharon Blah is symbolic of the metropolitan life which is not bounded by ethics. One sees the “teenage Chinese girl who ran store with her mother was pregnant” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 50), Sharon having an affair with Nivedita’s husband, Neel, and other girls like Concordella and Anasthesia indulging in drugs and booze and living a debauch life. Free sex and drug abuse seem to be a growing trend recognized as a modern trend flourishing in metros and small towns. Although Firdaus loves to be a part of the Shillong culture, yet she does not approve such things, as the writer observes—“Since Sharon had been an unwed mother, Firdaus couldn’t frankly discuss what she perceived as drawbacks of having children too early and out of wedlock” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 55). The ambivalent nature and internal dichotomy in perception becomes apparent in Firdaus. She doesn’t approve of pregnancy outside the wedlock, yet she approves the extramarital relation of Neel with Sharon because of the sole fact that the latter belongs to the tribal community and the relation is symbolic of the ties between the tribal and nontribal which has been on the wane until sometime. Firdaus is the modern woman who is not tied with religious scruples or any kind of xenophobia. She constantly keeps on washing her hands like Lady Macbeth which shows her nervousness and insecurity. She is unlike the old man from Hemmingway’s *Old Man and the Sea* because of her indecision; and precisely this is one of the reasons that she can neither sympathize with the old man nor
understand the spirit of the text. The novelist, through Firdaus, attempts to show the plight of a non-tribal woman caught in the cross currents of belongingness and alienation. On one hand, she can neither be a devout muslim; on the other hand she cannot be Khasi. The novelist portrays other female characters like Anaesthesia, Concordella, the Chinese girl, and Sharon as the aftermath of a disintegrated society which is quickly losing its tradition in the wake of modernity. The freedom they tend to enjoy is pawned at the expense of tradition and culture. Sex and drugs are not taboos but a part of the modern life. Sharon dies drowning in a river on a trip with Neel, the Chinese girl is pregnant at a young age, and Concordella and Anaesthesia have uncertain futures. Interestingly, all these female characters are Tribal and Khasi, except the Chinese girl, but share a equal fate because of her Mongolian feature. Thus the novelist is critical of the culture of the younger generation of females which is going astray. This has led to the objectification of the females by the male. For instance, Aman says, “The Kind who might fall for a musician…free spirits…girls who wouldn’t mind living on coffee and pot and listening to you going on and on about death metal…Anaesthesia”. (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 109).

The novel underscores the limitation of women in the modern world, who is often the victim of circumstances. The patriarchal values are so well internalized that the objectification and commodification of women meant for male consumption become quite apparent. The female characters in the novel are Firdaus Ansari, Flossie Sarma, Konkona, Nivedita, Sharon, Kong Bina, Sophie Das, Mrs. Das, Elsa Lyngdoh Anasthesia and Concordella. Women belonging to the same society, but having different cultural and religious orientation share different experiences. Two women belonging to the same society may enjoy different privileges depending on their
family and upbringing. Therefore the experience and the plight of all women cannot be equal everywhere. However, what is uniform and universal is the patriarchal domination to which different women respond differently. As discussed above, Sharon and her likes don’t complain about the patriarchal world, and try to enjoy the world as their male counterparts do. But the consequence of this life is to be borne by the women in the form of pregnancy to which the male shares no liability. They become oblivious of the consequences because of the lack of a guiding principle in their life, and the cause of this is due to their loss of culture and tradition under the influence of western ‘modernity’. The term modernity which has been borrowed from the west, especially Europe is invested with a different meaning by the younger generation. It excludes the all round growth and development of a nation and a community, but only emphasises the attributes of consumerism. The modern culture imbibed by the young generation is not the result of a direct contact with the western world. Modernity has percolated as a result of globalization which brings the western culture to eastern nations as finished products for consumers’ consumption. Thus the musical bands like Pink Floyd and metallic songs are cherished and the young generation apes the vices like drug abuse and free sex. Food, culture, movies, books, advertisements on television has created a far reaching effect on the young generation of Khasi people.

Ms. Namrata Sewa Lala, in her research paper observes-

Today even in the Khasi communities, like in other Indian communities, youngsters- both girls and boys alike are highly influenced by western culture especially among the urban youth. They are exposed to a growing variety of entertainment, consumer products, and lifestyle ideals…incursion of foreign media through foreign channels has affected the thinking, attitudes and cultures of Khasi community…Khasi readily absorb the latest western
vogues in fashion…this kind of “rebellion” against traditional Khasi customs and norms create tension in the family. (Lala 258)

Thus on one hand, the tribal women are actually not emancipated or truly liberated even by adopting modern life styles; on the other hand the non-tribal characters like Flossie Sharma, Konkona and Nivedita display a poor resistance to the patriarchal structure of the world. Although Nivedita shares her conjugal problems with her colleagues, she is protective about her husband and tries to overlook his fault. On the contrary, she accuses Sharon for this catastrophe and appears defensive of her erring husband:

See, Miss. First of all, he is running around with some woman and dragging my name in the mud. Second, she is tribal, this women who has totally ruined my life. (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 16)

“He had got better, no?” Nivedita pleaded with her audience. “He didn’t meet her, came home on time everything. Then they met again at that stupid party, he didn’t plan it, it just happened that they met again”… (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 17).

Konkona consistently advices Nivedita to divorce her husband with some kind of sadistic impulse. The writer says little about Konkona and her background, but it is evident from her stance that she does not believe in resolution but is separation. She can neither sympathise nor empathise with Nivedita’s plight so all she can suggest is a divorce. However, divorce is not the remedy in the world from which Nivedita has come. She is of the type who has been taught to worship the husband and cling on to him till the end. No doubt, she has a job in a college and is financially self sufficient. But she has learned to adjust and sacrifice. Divorce is an impossible option for her
when she says—“But divorce…” said Nivedita weakly. “He hasn’t said anything about
divorce, but suppose he accepts, what will I do?”’’ (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 17).
This expression manifests her helplessness and the impossibility of conceiving a
world outside conjugal tie where her identity is defined by the husband. Here lies the
paradox of women’s emancipation that despite of empowerment through education,
she still has to conform to the patriarchal structure of the society for existence or else
she will be rejected by family and friends. She belongs to a well structured Hindu
society where the husband is given the utmost respect despite of whatever deficiencies
he may possess. The manusmriti which is an impediment to the emancipation of
women is so well structured in the collective consciousness of the Hindu families, that
it is difficult to get rid of its preaching despite of all modern education. It will be
pertinent to quote the ideology from manusmriti to show the paradoxical position of
women’s emancipation— “She who shows disrespect to a husband who is addicted to
some evil passion, is a drunkard, or diseased, shall be deserted for three months, and
to be deprived of her ornaments and furniture” (Saraswati 212) The novelist is critical
of such women who cannot cut a niche in the society despite of education and
financial self-sufficiency, but languishingly exist as the shadow of their husbands.
Another instance of such woman is Aman Moondy’s mother whose world is limited
into household activities and the television soaps. Mrs. Das on the other hand had to
pay the price for marrying outside her community. Her relatives have severed all
connections with her for marrying a Bengali. The stigma associated with inter-
community marriage or love marriages looms large in the Indian society for which the
women have to pay the price often. Even her husband is not a promising man for
whom she left her home. Mr. Das preferred a male child over a female child as is
evident from the conversation- “Oh, it will be a boy. A babu. Your parents want a boy, na,” said Kong Bina knowingly. “I heard them talking that day. Baba said- I want a boy, and Mama said- as long as the child is healthy anything is fine. But a boy would be nice, she said. He can be a doctor…” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 40). Such gender discrimination is a habitual practice which has strong roots in Indian societies and cannot be easily eradicated even through education. Gender biasness becomes apparent when medical profession is seen as the exclusive property of men. Later on in the novel, when Mrs. Das delivers a female baby, we see Mr. Das becomes remorseful. The new born is christened Mukulika- “Mr. Das had given his daughter a Bengali name, and Mrs. Das was not entirely happy with the choice but she didn’t argue with him because he had grown even more morose and unpredictable since the birth of the child” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 127)

Thus the writer beautifully brings out the subaltern position of the females living in the Indian society through her novel *Lunatic in My head*.

Identity is the one of the important markers of the civilizations which helps one to associate oneself with a larger body for specific reasons. Since independence, Identity has become the chief pointer in the politics of inclusion and exclusion in India, operating from within and without. Apparently, this politics of identity has assuaged the tribal groups by terming them as citizens and ensuring exclusive rights for them, and pushing the non-tribal towards an uncertain future who have inhabited these places as denizens. This continual classification has worsened the matters more instead of solving them. However, this problem eventually leads to the issue of identity loss and the politics of identity. This problem in north-east India is rightly addressed by Anjum hasan through her protagonists. Whereas, other writers have also
addressed this issue but from the different standpoint. It will be pertinent while examining Anjum Hasan’s novel, *Lunatic in my Head*, to bring in the reference of some other texts from the north-east India like Mamang Dai’s *Stupid Cupid*, Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home*, and Janice Pariat’s *Boats on Land* substantiate some of the arguments that has been made in this research. The central thesis of this section is that Identity is a matter of choice and not a matter of discovery¹ which is limited by external agencies. This section will examine the external agencies that problematise the identity formation of an Individual in the context of the Novel on one hand, and in the context of North-east India on the other.

The novel *Lunatic in my head* is the story of the lives of three characters: Firdaus Ansari, Sophie Das and Aman Moondy who undergo severe identity crisis owing to the changing political scenario in the state of Meghalaya in particular and North-east India in general. Their predicament is worsened by the external identity foisted on them by the word *dkhar* and they jostle with this crisis throughout the novel. Firdaus is a school teacher who is born and brought up in Shillong. The writer says:

She refused to introduce herself as a Bihari because though her parents were from Bihar, she was born in Shillong and had never lived anywhere else. What did that make her? In Shillong’s eyes if nothing else at least a *dkhar*, a foreigner, someone who did not have roots here, did not have the ground needed to put roots in. (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 10).

This idea of not belonging to a place, but being a *dkhar* made her feel uneasy. She is unlike her colleagues at school. Her colleagues like Nivedita, Konkona, Flossie Sharma are all *dkhars*, but they are bound in an Identity which also goes beyond their
ethnic identities. When Nivedita shares her conjugal problems with her colleagues, they all show some kind of sympathy except Firdaus. Here, identity formation helps in solidarity because it brings individuals together to help each other. Firdaus, on the contrary supports Nivedita’s husband, who is having an extra-marital affair with a Khasi lady, because of the simple fact that she is a Khasi. Firdaus toys with this idea—“It made her happy to think that connections were still being established between people from opposite sides of that invisible, yet very palpable, line that divide people in Shillong” (Hasan, Lunatic in My Head 16).

Of the multiple identities that Firdaus has: like she is a teacher, a bihari, a muslim, an M. Phil scholar, an outsider in the language of others, an insider in her own feelings, so on and so forth; she constructs a new identity for herself by imagining Shillong as an indispensable part of her life. Firdaus is neither a devout Muslim nor has she any religious scruples about eating pork. Whereas for Nivedita and her colleagues, the Khasi is the despicable other with whom they can never identify themselves. This becomes apparent from their conversation. Nivedita says, “See, Miss. First of all, he is running around with some woman and dragging my name in the mud. Secondly, she is a tribal…” To this Firdaus retorts, “Tribal, non-tribal?” she asked. “How does that make things better or worse?” (Hasan, Lunatic in My Head 16)

Among all these possible plurality of identities, Firdaus intensely craves only for belongingness to the place. She is an adult who can escape to some other place anytime, however, she cannot do that because she has never been out of Shillong and she wants to be a part of it. Her longing is so strong that she starts an affair with a tribal look (though Manipuri). Her love for Ibomcha (her Manipuri lover) is doubtful,
but her love for shillong is undeniable. She wants to form an affinity with the place and that transpires into her relationship with Ibomcha. Although she could not connect with Ibomcha and wants to tell him that things are not working out (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 101), yet she could not. It will be pertinent to quote Sanjoy Hazarika here-

Affinity and Identity. These, more than any other factors, represented the principal compulsions that triggered the Naga, Mizo, Meitei, Tripuri and Assamese affirmation of separateness from the non-Mongolian communities that dominate the Indian subcontinent. (S. Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist* xvi)

Firdaus is a non-Mongolian, but she does not identify herself as such. She chooses not to identify herself that way, but at the same time her non-tribal look betrays her emotions. Like Sanjoy Hazarika, she is also enchanted by the charms of Shillong. Firdaus echos Hazarika when she says, “Where had they all gone, she thought. What had become of them, what had they done with their sex appeal and nice cloths and large music collections?” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 103)

Shillong has immensely changed. Hazarika explains:

For me, as for millions of others, it also is home and sanctuary, where I grew up and which holds a special, magical attraction with its mist clad hills, lush green forests…all these has changed in my lifetime…the shape of the North-east… has been altered with new lines drawn to recognize new political and administrative realities…and if these frontiers have changed, so have attitudes among its people…so has the way people talk to each other, the things they talk about… (S. Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist* xv)
The effect of this transformation is immense and can be seen reflected in what Aman Moondy’s father, Dr. Gorakh Moondy has come to realize over the years. Dr. Moondy is born and brought up in Calcutta, and he comes to make a living at Shillong as a medical practitioner. He is the middle class man who like many others, has come to this region looking for opportunities and not for philanthropic service. Dr. Moondy instructs his son-

…Shillong has no future. In my time, things were different. One could make a life here. There were opportunities. People were open minded…sab khatam ho gaya. That time has gone. Now, people, boys you know, boys half your height, barge into people’s shops, into offices, and demand money! (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 65)

Dr. Moondy’s comment on the open mindedness of people is worth a scrutiny. Who have been these tolerant people? Are these the same people who have turned violent now? This is a cliché and needs a better understanding of the political scenario and the interplay or rather the tension between nationalism and sub-nationalism as a default feature in post-colonial times. Mamang Dai in her novel, *Stupid Cupid*, projects this issue as a developmental project undertaken by the government of India. She cites the instance of Mareb’s father who has been described as a contractor undertaking different projects and “who toured the frontier speaking the language of the communities and marrying into the tribes” (Dai 36). She further says that “new settlements with new identities could spring up, inhabited by mixed populations full of new hopes and dreams” (Dai 36). To quote Sanjib Baruah in this context:

Many of these tribal societies have been going through a process of transition from shifting cultivation to settled agriculture, from clan control of land to
commodification of land, urbanization, and cultural change associated with the process of ‘modernization’. The new economic niches created in this process of social transformation attract many denizens to the region (S. Baruah 185).

Whereas, Sanjib Baruah, sees this development discourse as the product of the Indian state’s push to nationalize the space of this frontier region (in case of Arunachal), he quotes Anil Agarwal to show the other side of it- “in Agarwal’s words, ‘excellent corridors to siphon off the existing natural resource of the region, its forests’” (S. Baruah 34) However, both these appositions are true and they have internal dichotomies as well. In the attempt to nationalize space, these sparsely populated frontier regions have seen the coming of immigrants from other parts of India, as Sanjib Baruah puts it:

Extending state institutions with a developmentalist agenda therefore has had political functions …In a sparsely populated frontier region, a developmentalist trajectory invariably means changes in demography; this has made the political trends in the region increasingly more complex and contradictory, and has provided a significant political counterweight to actual and potential pro-independence rebellions. (S. Baruah 40).

This attempt at nationalizing space has also been seen as an attempt to assimilate and detribalize the population; hence they meet with severe opposition as well. In this connection Tilottoma Mishra opines:

The policy of integrating the tribal people with the mainstream through exposure to the national culture, however, ironically backfired in later times. Almost every tribal state of the region- Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh- virtually rejected Hindi as the medium of instruction and
introduced English which subsequently became the official language of the state. (Misra 222).

In her collection of short stories *These Hills called Home*, Temsula Ao has romanticized this rebellion against the Indian forces which tried to contain the crisis. The stories capture those moments from history which has witnessed the conflict between the Naga rebels and the Indian forces, the former often portrayed in a romanticized manner and the latter as colonizers. On one hand, the rebels come heavily on their non-tribal population; on the other hand, the nation-state thwarts their cognizable patterns of freedom through police action. Temsula Ao goes on to the extent of eulogizing them as nationalists. It would be pertinent to cite an instance from one of the short stories called *Soaba*:

Unlike the homogenous population of the villages, the citizens of these new towns belonged to the tribes of the Nagaland. Such towns had many ‘outsiders’: Assamese or Bengali doctors or teachers, Marwari and Bihari traders, Nepali Settlers, whose forefathers have fought with the British army and were given land to settle down. Slowly but steadily, a new environment was emerging and overtaking the old ways, and youngsters growing up in such places began to think of themselves as the new generation.

These young people were caught, as it were, at the crossroads of Naga History. The way of dissidence and open rebellion was head winey for many of them and they abandoned family, school careers and even permanent jobs to join the band of nationalists to liberate the homeland from forces, which they believed were inimical to their aspirations to be counted among the free nations of the world (*Ao, These Hills Called Home* 10).
Firstly, both Anjum Hasan and Temsula Ao, comments on the change in ‘old ways’. What has been possible in the past is not permissible in the present times and also the past has to be undone in order to ameliorate the aggrieved conditions of the tribal people. Secondly, Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Janice Pariet and Anjum Hasan observe that these rebels or the protesters are all from young generation and they are from urban or semi-urban background. These group of people has eventually formed the elite section of the tribal groups and soon there can be seen a growing disparity between the elite class controlling the natural resources and contracts, and the rural poor who continue to be deprived of all privileges. Thus a new hierarchy has been created (see A New Chapter, (Ao, These Hills Called Home 123)). The accusations of plundering of natural resources by ‘outsiders’ which has raised a hue and cry in the past, has now taken a different shape. It is now plundered by the tribal themselves but of course they have far reaching political implications\(^3\). Nevertheless, to protect the land and its people certain reservation policies have been adopted by the Indian government. Apart from the reservations, the Khasis also demanded that only those people should be considered Khasi whose both parents are Khasis. This would stop Khasi men and women from marrying into other ethnic groups on one hand, and would also ensure a purity of family lineage on the other. Sanjib Baruah maintains that-

Nearly 85 per cent of the public employment in Meghalaya is reserved. Fifty-five of the 60 seats in the state Legislative assembly are reserved for the STs. While the historical disadvantages that the tribal people suffered account for this elaborate protective discrimination regime, the status of non-tribal in Meghalaya as well as in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and
Nagaland where such protective discrimination exists, is best described as that of denizens (S. Baruah 183).

Thus opportunities started shrinking for the ‘outsiders’ and these exigencies further made it imperative to assert one’s identity in relation to the land. To contain the revolt/protest the government has to make changes in its policies. The ‘outsiders’, who have been living for centuries or decades, are no longer native or locals. They have to go. Janice Pariet’s short story 19/87 recounts the plight of the outsiders through the eyes of a character called Suleiman. He has lived in Shillong since the age of 2. The father and the son arrived in Shillong in the year 1955, the former being an employee of the All India Radio. But after Meghalaya has been curved out of Assam in 1972, things changed:

After that, many locals in town, frustrated with having ‘outsiders’ running the state and controlling banks and businesses, organized themselves into various insurgent groups- the Khasi Students Union (KSU) and the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC)- and waged a civil war against the government and the ethnicities they saw as most threatening. The ones who had taken their jobs, their resources, their women. Now, around him Suleiman heard ‘It was the Nepalis in ’79, Bengalis in ’81, then the Marwaris….(Pariat 98)

Such groups like Hynniewtrep have taken the onus of liberating their state from the encroachers or ‘outsiders’ by invoking a new homogenous identity from their myths. To quote Patricia Mukhim-

They are called the Khun U Hynniewtrep or the children of seven huts. The term Hynniewtrep is today a favourite slogan of politicians and rabble-rousers. It still arouses deep sentiments in people. No one wants to blow apart
this preposterous myth. It suits all to keep the myth alive. (Mukhim, *Myths, Tradition and Identity* 200).

The new identity formation of the tribal population has obviously excluded the non-tribal in the region. Coming back to the identity issue in Anjum Hasan’s novel, the second generation of the outsiders is gradually leaving the place. The violent revolutions has not only alienated the ‘others’ (now role of the other is reversed; the outsiders are the others and are looked down upon with much contempt), but has also instilled a sense of fear and bitterness. Be it Suleiman or Aman Moondy. The only escape is to find a better opportunity and move out of Shillong. People like Suleiman or Sarak Singh (in Lunatic in my Head), who has no roots outside and no education but lives by tailoring or selling *aloo-muri* has little scope to go elsewhere. They live in constant fear and wait for the end.

In the case of Aman Moondy, he has many identities to choose from except ‘tribal’. He is a lover of Pink Floyd and the member of a musical band ‘Proto-Dreamers’. This itself forms an identity for Aman; and all his friends who are member of this band automatically connects to him irrespective of their disparate ethnic identities. His close friend is Ribor, a Khasi, who shares the common interest in music and art. Since individuals have the propensity to identify themselves with groups which would serve their interest, Ribor naturally aligns with Aman. So does David Rockwell. On the other hand, Ribor’s elder brother is not just a bully, but also a murderer. Ribor stands as a defense between his brother and Aman. This gives Aman some kind of confidence. But since choices are to be made by keeping priorities in life in view and also the limits of it, it is imperative for Aman that he cannot belong to the place. Shillong can never give him any identity and will always treat him as a *dkhar*.
Towards the end of the novel, we see him preparing to leave for Calcutta in Shatabdi Express from Guwahati.

The identity politics has gained such intensive momentum that it has also percolated into the younger generations. The writer makes it apparent through Sophie Das. Sophie is half Bengali and half North-Indian. She is just 8 years old when she has been introduced in the novel. We find her to be very close to the landlady where Sophie’s family lives. Sophie has the habit of concocting fictitious tales about her family and herself. But this feeling has come into her apparently because of her choice of identity to identify herself as one of the Khasi, and not a dkhar. She imagines herself, and also she tells her friends this story, that she is not the biological, but adopted child of her parents. Her real father is some imaginary Uncle Syiem, whom she conjured up to establish her affinity with the Khasis. Sophie faces the worse humiliation when she accompanies Elsa to a wedding feast. She is ignored by girls of her own age; and also denied food as a guest: “But a girl about her age from the facing row had noticed that Sophie had been ignored, that the dkhar had been shown her place” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 87). Sophie, at such an early age has become so conscious of her identity that she knows the drawbacks of not being a Khasi in Shillong. Sophie, therefore, thinks that “the nicest thing, the nicest thing by far, even better than being adopted, would be if she could somehow turn into one of them, somehow become Khasi” (Hasan, *Lunatic in My Head* 88). Only Sophie can dream of such an impossible possibility; the grownups like Firdaus and Aman have accepted the reality and also their fate. Thus identity based thinking and politics create disparate groups, divides them, instead of linking them. The Novel ends with no signs of hope for these outsiders. We see Mrs. Nivedita and her husband leave for Calcutta.
Ibomcha’s cousin move to Shillong to set up a beauty parlour at Sharon’s place. Firdaus is waiting for her grandfather to return from Bihar so that she can announce to him about her affair with Ibomcha. Sophie gets her new sister and is happy.

Thus the politics of identity has rendered the younger generation of the migrants in a deplorable condition. Not only they suffer from insecurity in the face of violence, but also have to struggle hard to make a living with limited opportunities. Instead of increasing mutual recognition and respect, this kind of depravation has only cultivated hatred and disregard for each other in the region. Although, the government has reserved these areas as tribal belts exclusively with the best of intentions, the machineries involved have failed to contain the corruption. As a result, the problems that existed before are more aggravated now, far less from being solved. The non-tribal people who had participated in the nation building process and also some whose ancestors have arrived in the 19th centuries are all categorized under ‘outsiders’ by the new generation. To sum up in the words of R.C. Kalita:

Immigration has been dominating the history, politics and culture of Assam since it had been occupied and annexed to the English East India Company’s territorial possessions in Bengal in 1826…After independence the people of the North Eastern region saw before them a bleak future awaiting them in sharp competition in all fields of human activities while extra-territorial elements have been dominating everywhere…an unending war for survival…As the contemporary political history of the region shows it has been in political turmoil since the last quarter of the 20th century. (R. Kalita 141-156)
These immigrants are also in the list of ‘outsiders’ and they are like the homeless migrants waiting to align themselves with some new identity.

5.4 Mamang Dai’s Stupid Cupid.

Mamang Dai was a former civil servant from which she resigned to become a full time writer and journalist. She is also known as a social worker. She has also published her collection of poems and has established herself in the group of poets from North-east dealing with eco-critical themes. Her first novel The Legends of Pensam (2006) is an intricate mixture of fiction, memory and myth. She has received much praise for her first work; however, her second work Stupid Cupid (2009) has received lesser recognition. The Black Hill (2014) is her third novel; it deals with the coming of the British in Assam and the interiors of present day Arunachal Pradesh. Although the novel Stupid Cupid displays the lack of her mastery over language, but it discusses two important issues: the relation between the centre and the periphery; and the women question. Her deft handled of both these questions make her novel an important document in feminist reading. She portrays the protagonist Adna as a free woman living outside the patriarchal domination and who has the full right to exercise her will. The question of women’s emancipation and the paradox related to it becomes evident in the complication created because of the excess of free will exercised by the so-called modern women.

Stupid Cupid is about many things. It talks about love and lust, tradition and modernity, city and village, and the centre and periphery. The narrator attempts at a convergence of these diametrically opposite notions in order to maintain a balance that would not disturb the decorum while transition, only to realize its futility in the end.
For example, love is seen as a kernel feature in a family and it holds the family members together. On the other hand, love which is not sanctioned by the society but is maintained for sexual gratification of two individuals can be termed as lust. Mamang Dai’s characters break the conventional opinion of love and lust and challenge the readers to think ‘liberally’ where love and lust lose its distinction. She places Adna as a city-bred, upfront, liberal, and educated modern lady to confront and reject the conventional role assigned to a woman. The only escape from conventionality is the city life under whose garb one can enjoy enormous freedom. But the freedom comes at the cost of isolation, anonymity, fear and loss. Along with Adna, one sees Julie Malhotra, Jia and Mareb sharing the same feelings to a larger extent and fighting the odds of the male dominated world. And among all the odds, Adna is placed in an alien society (Delhi), far away from her home in Itanagar, which makes her task all the more challenging. However, this positioning of Adna, far away from home is necessary because a traditional society in a small Arunachali town would not have been the ideal location for the story.

Adna belongs to an Arunachali tribal community, but she has been educated in a Shillong convent. Shillong is a cosmopolitan hub where the confluence of multiple communities, cultures and traditions shape the outlook of the people. Shillong has been the headquarter of administration during the British raj and as a result the European influence in matter of lifestyle and culture is very evident. All these in a composite way shape the life and attitude of Adna, who becomes a hybrid product of a cosmopolitan culture. Moreover, her aunt from whom she has inherited the mansion at Delhi, also made some subtle influence in her mind during her formative years. With such a background she comes to Delhi in order to start the ‘four seasons’, a convenient
meeting place for lovers outside the sacramental marriage ties. This entire chain of events in the novel point to the breakaway from custom and tradition of Indian family values; and the conventional marriage system and the role of womanhood are put at stake. A woman, who has been seen always as a part of the family setup, and never an individual in traditional Indian societies, is allowed to exercise her freewill in the novel. The women always stand guard to the family values and the family reciprocally protects the women. However, her breaking away from family ties is also a breaking away from that sacred bond; and eventually she transgresses the protective enclosure of that familial setup. Therefore the family is no longer able to protect the women outside the jurisdiction validated by tradition. This individualistic identity is newly gained in a society which has not yet fully developed protective measures that guarantee the safeguard of women. It is because the society has not given those individualistic identity rights to the women; rather that identity has been achieved by the women who can have the courage to demand that freedom. Once when she is outside the realm of the patriarchal codified domain, exercising her independent free will, she is at her own and becomes vulnerable. In Adna’s case, the new world which she tries to create brings this treat on the life of Amine causing death to her.

The story is set in Delhi with occasional sojourns to the hilly states of north-east India. Adna sets up a “love agency to provide a decent meeting place to lovers and friends” (Dai 1). She breaks the conventional image of Indian women whose only role is to take care of the household and rear the children. On the contrary, she is in a relationship with a married man and runs a love agency that provides the meeting place for such lovers. Undaunted by social conventions, she boldly runs the agency and her relationship as well in which she is aided by Amine and Yoyo. The writer
challenges the conventional idea of a happy middle-class family by exposing the ‘lacks’ that disintegrates these families eventually. It is the lack of love in a family which compels people like Mareb and Adna to embark on the strange journey in search for a new world of love. In Adna’s own words,

And because we were from staid middle-class families, this image naturally modified itself into a married condition with the handsome husband as breadwinner and good, sweet, capable me doing all the rest. This Idea was a fixation…we all grew up dreaming we would be lucky in love”. (Dai 10).

Towards the end of the novel, Adna realizes that it is only an illusion. The reality is:

Love was not everything, after all. Many marriages, too, appeared mismatched, yet men and women managed to keep up front. They fought, betrayed each other, but bigger obligations reminded them that despite the disappointments and failures, each day passed. Yes, love was not everything.

The children grew up and the parents smiled when they talked about the time when their children were babies (Dai 137).

And between these, the women are crushed. The writer explores the possibilities of freedom, love and identity through three principal characters: Adna, Mareb and Amine.

The conversation between Adna and her friends and relatives reveal to a great extent the mindset of the traditional society and the plight of women in such a society. They all boldly express their feelings which have hitherto been repressed because of social taboos. This also by large exposes the hypocrisy of the Indian society, where people look for rooms in hotels to spend intimate moments with lovers on one hand,
but refrains from talking or expressing opinion in its favour publicly. Adna breaks the
convention and makes the reader think- “what is wrong with the world? People only
want to be alone together?” (Dai 1) She questions the conventions of the patriarchal
Indian society which takes woman for granted, be it Dayud, or Adna’s ‘friend’ or
Rizvi. When certain issues are left without being discussed or untouched, the
resolutions are never found. But Adna discusses the issues to find the proper answer to
it. Mamang Dai discusses these issues threadbare and brings out the varied voices of
women. The voices and feelings which have been suppressed so long find a telling
expression in the novel through the speeches of Adna, Amin, Mareb, Green, Jia and
Julie. For Amine, who is brought up in a conventional Muslim family sees extra-
marital affair as adultery but at the same time she also agrees that the intensity of love
is lost eventually in monogamy. This is so perhaps because the husbands take the
wives for granted. She says, “And there is no intensity in monogamy, in marriage,
whatever,” Amine agreed again. ‘Everyone is looking to rediscover something.
But….what?” (Dai 2)

Nevertheless, Amine has no such scruples in her life as she is content with her
present life. This is how the conventional marriages work. The writer tries to prove
this point by posing a question for Rizvi and Amine through Adna: “‘Don’t you think
everything is about love in the end?’ I asked Rizvi and Amine over dinner. They
nodded absently.” (Dai 5) On one hand many Indian couples live in this conventional
manner, where the male is the breadwinner and the wife takes care of the household
and the children; on the other hand, in many families the husband and the wife equally
contribute to the economy of the household. They have no time to talk of the politics,
or society or anything else, leave alone gender equality. They have to work very hard to keep the family going. Jia, the reporter, informs the reader that

Gender talk is for those who can afford it…In our villages there is no time to even think about these things. Women carry firewood and fetch water and men clear forest for planting. We sow paddy and men erect fences to protect the fields. Everyone works. No one can afford to be sick. (Dai 29)

If Jia represents those people who have to equally struggle like their male counterpart to keep the family going, Amine represent the stock who prefer to be housewives. Amine is a contrast to Jia. The writer describes Amine as ‘traditional’: “She didn’t want to work. She enjoyed motherhood and said that all she wanted was to keep a good home with good food and nice things for her family” (Dai 31).

Amine prefers a life of comfort, a cozy life. Gradually boredom or indifference engulfs the life of the people living in this fashion. Amine is soft and fragile and inactive. Precisely, she is not a fighter. She even does not see any threat in her surrounding as she has taken everything for granted by living within her comfort zone. She is unlike Jia, and this is the reason she gets killed by the laborers. On the other hand, Jia is a fighter, always prepared to defend herself. She carries a knife and is vigilant about her surroundings. However, in both the cases there seems to be an absence of either love or respect. Jia’s husband has been abusive and irresponsible and because of this their baby died during Jia’s child birth. Jia then decides to leave her husband and the village as well because she can no longer live with a man who does not respect her, and the village will make her life difficult if she leaves the husband. Such societies in villages do not support a lady if she decides to leave the husband; but no restrictions are imposed on the husband if he decides to leave the wife and take a
new wife. An instance is Mareb’s father who has lived the life of a gypsy “marrying into the tribes” (Dai 36). Mareb can only recall the image of her mother as a “delicate bird fleeting around the house obeying the instructions of her father” (Dai 37). And after her death, Mareb’s father takes a new wife to start a new life. She is neither mourned nor her absence is regret by Mareb’s father; such is the fate of womenfolk that Mareb has witnessed since her childhood. Mareb’s husband also leaves his wife and marries Mareb. When Mareb realizes that she is also having a similar life like that of her mother, she protests inwardly and moves away in search of her past love:

Mareb had taken this opportunity to escape…What she wanted to say was:

‘What shall I do in this dull old place?’ Of course, no words left her mouth, but he caught the fire in her eyes and was enraged by her silent, willful manner. Once she had loved him enough to give up the city and her independent ways- everything that was her life- to be with him. Now they seem to be continually travelling in opposite directions.

‘Go!’ He cursed inwardly. All women are the same. They want everything. (Dai 97)

This little passage speaks volume about the plight of women and the male psychology. The women seem to exist only to fulfill the need of male desire. When Dayud says that women want everything, he indicates women want comfort, financial security, love and freedom; and all these cannot be granted at the same time. Mareb has been swayed by the captivating charm and spirit of Dayud which made her forget Rohit and her commitment towards him. Mareb symbolizes freedom. She has consented to marry Dayud because she discovered many things after coming home: “Coming home was a discovery for her. She understood this place, its secrets and
tradition. She too wanted the river to run free. Let it run as it was meant too, in all its
turbulence and wayward freedom” (Dai 46). The river represents the free spirit of
women who longs to be respected and loved. Any attempt to harness the turbulent will
not only disjoint the harmony of nature, but will also unleash severe consequences by
throwing off the family life. Dayud has tried to harness Mareb, but her indomitable
free spirit can never yield to him:

Her household had kept her running and busy for so many years, mistress of
the big house and hostess to all her husband’s friends, relatives and visitors. It
was enough work and occupation to fill a lifetime. But now some things were
becoming different. (Dai 63)

Mareb is lost. She loses her identity and self. She lives as Dayud’s wife, living
Dayud’s dream. Mareb has had the most solid relation with Dayud, yet she leaves her
husband and daughter and goes in search of her past love, Rohit. Amine and Adna
discuss the reasons for such turnabouts in one’s life, family life: surely there must be
something: sorrow, loss, abuse, boredom? (Dai 64). They try to figure out the lack in
one’s life which results in such changes. Mareb is the clandestine Nora of Doll’s
House, and also Shaw’s Candida because she returns to her husband yet continues to
desire for recognition through Rohit’s love. Although Dayud loves Mareb, she refuses
to live a life of subjugation where her identity is dissolved. Mamang Dai
metaphorically transcripts the urges of a female heart through Mareb:

Dayud remembered how Mareb had said that the pine trees looked nice but
they didn’t let anything grow under them. This was true. They bore their tight
little cones and dripped resin, but they were dark, secretive trees. Well, Dayud
thought, let them be. They may fall. On the other hand they might not. He
turned to the men and said: ‘Let them stand until they fall.’ (Dai 83)

This is also symbolic of human relationship which has been metaphorically
conveyed by the writer. The big pine trees symbolize the married life under the
control of a patriarch. Within its shades there are many secrets which lay unexplored,
and Dayud is still optimistic, this is why he prefers the pines (marriage) to stand there
instead of cutting them down. Mareb’s reticence has overwhelmed Dayud for long.
Dayud later on realizes, again conveyed metaphorically by the author, that the clouds
(love) are always indestructible; even when one does not see them, they are always
there; they can transform and disguise themselves. The mountains are like human
relationships which are scarred over time by rain and wind (hardships and failures),
yet they always stand there. This is the truth of life. These are the checkered moments
of life. One may be swept off their feet by the tide of crises, or may stand ground with
renewed hopes- “Hope! To live in hope, believing that the quite rhythm of life can be
secured again”. (Dai 61). Dayud decides to stand his ground so he comes looking for
Mareb in Four Seasons. He has hope, and wants to give life a second chance; he wants
to give Mareb a second chance: “Now he was stronger than her. Perhaps his love was
bigger too. He was giving her space. He had been giving her space all along, waiting
and standing on the edge…” (Dai 125)

Four Seasons stands as a symbol of love (rather illicit love), and the death of
Amine in the end is a warning by the writer to send the message about the
consequences of such venture. Four Seasons becomes the fertile ground that not only
breeds illicit love affairs but also is the abode that shelters the lovers endorsed by
people like Adna’s friend (he offers to build the patio; and the laborers engaged in the
construction murder Amine). Four Seasons becomes the sanctuary for illicit love relations where the lovers come looking for ‘love/lust’. The precariousness of running such a place is justified by Amine’s death and the writer makes an analysis of why people come to the city and look for such a place. It has been seen that the chaos and turbulence back at home caused by militancy, corruption, and political upheavals make the locals flock to the city in search of a better life. The writer cites numerous instances of drug abuse, threats to the life of political leaders, corruption, lack of employment opportunity, poor road and infrastructure and lack of basic amenities of life as the reason for such migration. Moreover, the custom and tradition give little protection to the rights of women in these hilly regions- “In our parts men kept several wives. It was a practice sanctioned by custom” (Dai 32). Although the women contribute equally to the economy of the state and work side by side with their male counterparts, they do not enjoy equal rights. They had to live like subordinates like Mareb’s mother. It is surprising that Marab came to know much later that her mother could read and write, when she asked for magazines in the hospital (Dai 37). Mareb’s mother has lost her individual identity; and later on after marrying Dayud, Mareb too felt that she is losing her identity. The complete loss of individual identity creates people like Mareb and Jia. The conventionality and traditional life that rules the small towns and the villages work as an impediment in the liberation of women. Therefore, the writer creates the city life which offers numerous opportunities to women who want to enjoy freedom.

One can also see the city life as buffer zone between tradition and modernity. In a traditional Indian society love, sex, living-together relationships are considered taboo; but the inception of modernity as a trend which has been imported to India has
created a space for European culture. However this trend could not be accommodated in a rural setup; and the conducive environment for its growth can only be facilitated in urban environment which has been under the sway of modernity since 19th Century. Living in isolation, being stranger in a crowd, concepts of nuclear family, and a metropolitan life are a part of modernity where it is nobody’s business to interfere in anybody’s business. Therefore, Mamang Dai strategically chooses the city life to showcase the ill effects of modernity. Under the garb of modernity and liberalism which becomes synonymous with city life in the novel, the characters indulge in lewd living and debauchery. Julie Malhotra, a model and choreographer, says ‘Money can buy happiness’ and ‘love is a business’ (Dai 11). She not only manages two love affairs simultaneously, but also equates love with sex. Julie says,

love is not just about heart and arrows. Love is a business. You have to work at it and find your options, and the business of love and loving is expensive, you know! Just to have a quite affair you need money. You need money for travel, transport, a nice room to meet in. Otherwise you will be too harassed to enjoy sex. (Dai 11)

At this point the characters give up the veil of love. It becomes evident that love is all about sex and the writer deliberately exposes the modern world, where emotions and love are seen as a means of sexual gratification. But what are the ramifications of such a life? At what cost such a life can be afforded? The end has already been projected in the start of the novel. Adna’s aunt has lived such a life and she died in anonymity with no one near her. Adna and Julie are treading the same path as well. Although Adna is haunted by the sense of guilt, yet the liberty of city life keeps her dragging to live such a life with the cliché- things happen in city. However,
despite of being city-bred, her sense of guilt becomes apparent in the following speech-

…when I suddenly spied Mareb, sitting at a far table with a man. My first instinct was to stifle my surprise and pretend I hadn’t seen them. For some inexplicable reason I felt my friend would feel uncomfortable if I mentioned Mareb and might say, ‘Let’s go,’ or something… Then I also thought: I don’t want to be caught like this. (Dai 21)

City life has its own limitations. It is not only precarious but is also evasive. Its face is scarier than the known face of tradition-bound village life. Realization dawns on Adna after the death of Amine. She says,

I saw the lights of the city outside and suddenly all I wanted to do was to go away. I did not want to be in Delhi. I did not want to own Four Seasons. I felt shocked and shamed at my stupidity. I hadn’t known anything at all about the city, the broken sidewalks, the plastic wavering down the street, barefoot men who could wield a knife on you for a few rupees… (Dai 146)

After this the writer paints the ugly image of city life (Dai 152-153) and warns the readers of the precariousness of it. Metaphorically speaking, the road to the distant beautiful looking mountains is filled with dense and dark forest. The book raises two vital issues: the rights of women, and the consequences of extra-marital affairs resulting from broken marriages. It makes the reader think what kind of life they want, and the writer just points us the grey areas and the onus is on the readers to select the path they want to choose. The entire novel revolves round the issue of love which these characters try to discover at odd places. Mamang Dai explores the possibility of enriching the experience of a married life by inserting love into it. The readers at times
can actually relate to the lackluster life in the absence of love. Though we see Adna trying to explore love in an unconventional way and satiating it with sexual encounters with her friend, yet her subconscious mind has always kept questioning the ethical aspect of such love. The prick of her conscience has made her “put the whole of Assam, Bihar, UP and the plains of North India” between her friend and herself. (Dai 8). Adna confuses love with lust therefore she oscillates between desire and guilt, justifying her act at first as “women in love” (Dai 24), eventually realizing- “Yes, I had my freedom, but with it there also came a little ache” (Dai 140).

Endnote

1 This is the idea in Michael Sandel’s Liberalism and Limits of Justice, used by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in his Lecture, Identity And Violence: The Violence of Illusion, at The Charles M. and Martha Hitchcock Lectures, Graduate Council Lectures at University of California, Berkeley.

2 Amartya Sen has used this idea of multiple Identities in his book. He says, “The same person can, for example, be a British citizen, a Malaysian origin, with Chinese racial characteristics, a stock-broker, a nonvegetarian, an asthmatic, a linguist, a body builder, a poet, an opponent of abortion, a bird-watcher, an astrologer, and one who believes that God created Darwin to test the gullible.

We do belong to many different groups, in one way or another, and each of these collectivities can give a person a potentially important identity. We may have to decide whether a particular group to which we belong is- or is not- important for us. Two different, though interrelated, exercises are involved here: (1) deciding on what
our relevant identities are, and (2) weighing the relative importance of these different identities. Both task demand reasoning and choice.” (A. Sen 24)

3 Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in Asia-Pacific Case Study Series project led by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, edited by Joel Katz, designed by Rachel P Lorenzen. Case Study No. 16, written by Debojyoti Das, 2007.

4 A mixture prepared by mixing puffed rice, sliced boiled potato, tamarind water and spices.
Works Cited


