The Maternal Frame and the Rise of the Counterpublic Among Naga Women

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Abstract

Nagaland has witnessed violent conflict for over five decades. It is a heavily militarized space where draconian laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act allow army personnel to go unchallenged even after committing violent crimes. Few women have used their tradition-specific gendered role strategically to subvert gender norms and exhibit agency against violence within the conflict situation and the systemic violence that bars them from entering the public-political sphere. This article studies how women from the Naga tribal communities use their tradition-specific gender roles of motherhood to gain agency and resist the formation of a hostile, gendered social space.

The state of Nagaland lies at the eastern corner of India and shares an international border with Myanmar, which already places the province in a precarious political position. Historically, the Naga tribes mostly remained isolated from civilizations placed in proximity with them until the British invasion in the 19th century. Even 600 years of proximity with the Ahom civilization that entirely took over the neighboring province of Assam had not affected the Naga culture to a great extent (Khala, 2003). As far as the central Indian subcontinent is concerned, neither Hindu nor Muslim emperors have attempted to set foot in the region. Hence, it can be said that ethnically, as well as historically, the Nagas have largely stayed separate from the Indian nation. The extraordinarily rugged terrain of the Naga Hills protected the Nagas from subjection to the Ahom kingdom and the Assamese, thus defending their society from assimilation into the

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Sanskritized Hindu society. During the colonial period, the British largely adopted policies of noninterference in this region as well, and eastern and northern Nagaland remained outside British purview even after the colonizers created the Naga Hills district in 1866 (Khala, 2003). After the British left India in 1947, Nagaland was included in India's new national structure, but this was done without the consent of the Nagas themselves. In 1951, when the Naga National Council conducted a plebiscite to establish Naga sovereignty, the final result was said to be unanimous, with 99% of voters in favor of Naga independence (Vashum, 2001), but this result was largely neglected by the Nehru government (Khala, 2003; Kire, 2011). By 1956, the Government of India had declared Naga Hills a "disturbed area," and the 1958 passage of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act sanctioned search and arrest without warrants and shooting even unto death, granting complete protection of military and paramilitary forces from legal charges (Nepram, 2010). Numerous accords and agreements have been negotiated since Nagaland attained statehood in 1963, and although they have resulted in temporary ceasefires, they have also given rise to the problem of factionalism, resulting in conflict between the region's underground groups.

The conflict situation has become especially heightened in this region because of the simultaneous presence of three different kinds of conflicts: the conflict between the state and non-state actors, the factional killings inside the rebel groups, and the conflict based on ethnic identity (Khala, 2003). As Patricia Mukhim (2005), a feminist-activist from the neighboring state of Meghalaya, writes, in the sorts of conflict situations that have taken place in the region for decades, women have mostly been reduced to the "cultural identity" of their group (p. 7). Speaking to this context, Khala (2003) writes that in Nagaland, "honour, victory, triumph and revenge are played out on their bodies" (p. 69). When women are held up as symbolic bearers of cultural and ethnic identity, they are by all means thrust into a more vulnerable position. The very nature of women's vulnerability also lies in the fact that during periods of conflict women are frequently the ones trying to provide for and maintain everyday life. Along with sexual violence, women are also subjected to the psychological trauma of loss, especially following the deaths or mysterious disappearances of their male family members. In such situations, they are left with no choice but to minister to the needs of the remaining household, with no time to deal with their personal grief or trauma of loss. Because of the customary laws of most of the tribes in Nagaland, women cannot inherit landed property. Hence, being the head of a family without many resources often pushes them into a condition of helplessness and vulnerability (N. Banerjee, 1996). Here, a triad of state, religion, and community practices have created a gendered social space for the woman where she is reduced to a marginalized subject within an already marginalized community.

There are as many as 17 tribes that fall within the Naga community. Each of these tribes has its own set of customary laws. These customary laws are protected under Article 371(A) of the Indian Constitution. The customary laws are still prevalent in the region, and while they do manifest multiple socialist and egalitarian qualities, when it comes to the rights of women they fail them. According to most of these customary laws, even across tribes, Naga women cannot inherit land or enter the decision-making

sphere. The systemization of tradition and customary laws through the region's self-governing councils has turned women into "internal minorities" (Bhattacharjee, 2002, p. 133), absent not only from the established tribal structures of authority but also from the modern organization of state politics. The state of Nagaland has held 11 legislative assemblies with no representation from women in any of its 60 constituencies. Only 30 women have stood for any election in Nagaland in the past 50 years. The only female representation that Nagaland has witnessed in the national Parliament has been that of Rano Shaiza, who represented the state in 1977 (Manchanda & Kakran, 2017, p. 75). Being denied the right to enter the public-political sphere and facing vehement opposition from their own communities when they attempt to do so, the women here are compelled to look for possible entry points into the heavily masculinized public sphere in this conflict-ridden region. The gendered space that they inhabit shrinks their potential to enter the decision-making and public-political spheres, even though they are prominently visible in the economic-public sphere.

It is in this context that Nancy Fraser's (1990) idea of the "subaltern counterpublic" gains relevance in a postcolonial, war-torn, and rapidly changing tribal society. Fraser takes her cue from Habermas's idea of the public sphere. Fraser believes that Habermas's concept of public sphere helps us evade a notional complication that one may encounter in feminist philosophy. According to Fraser, as this expression has been used by many feminists to refer to everything that is external to the domestic or familial sphere in a generic sense, the notion of the public sphere has become muddled. The public sphere in such kinds of usage conflates three analytically distinct spheres: "the state, the official-economy of paid employment, and arenas of public discourse" (Fraser, 1990, p. 57). But the idea of a Habermasian public sphere is a conceptual resource that can help one avoid such problematic collations. As Habermas (1991) discussed it, the public sphere is the space in which private people can interact and deliberate about affairs and events that are common to all, transcending their private preoccupations. It is, then, essentially an arena of discursive communication that has been institutionalized (Habermas, 1991). However, Fraser (1990) notes that in the postbourgeois society, Habermas's concept of the public sphere needs to undergo critical interrogation, because the object of his study was the rise and fall of a historically specific form of the public sphere, which limited its scope. According to Habermas, the idea of a public sphere is that of a body of "private persons" assembled to discuss matters of "public concern" as "counterweights to absolutist states" (Fraser, 1990, p. 58). In actuality though, the discussion was never made accessible to all. Fraser alludes to Joan Landes's (1988) work, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, which traces how the republican public sphere was constructed in France in opposition to the salon culture that Landes refers to as being more "woman-friendly" (Fraser, 1990, p. 59). The "rational" public sphere that came into existence was supposed to be "manly" in contrast with the "effeminate" salon culture, as this newly constructed bourgeois public sphere was constituted around rational-critical argument (Fraser, 1990). Because the claim that this new sphere was accessible to all was never quite fulfilled, members of subordinate social groups such as "women, workers, people of color and gays and lesbians" had to constitute alternative publics of their own (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Fraser (1990) calls these the "subaltern counterpublics,"

which she defines as "discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses" (p. 67). The following part of the article studies how women in Nagaland have attempted to create their own subaltern counterpublic in the absence of a proper entry point to the public-political or decision-making sphere by taking an alternative route: They have endeavored to enter the public-political sphere through the means of peace activism. For Fraser (1990), a plurality of competing publics is the outcome of the systematic inequality which is entrenched in modern liberal societies. She also believes that the plurality of publics can help endorse the idea of participatory parity over the idea of a singular and overarching public, in both "stratified" and multicultural societies. In Indian communities, which are stratified and multicultural at the same time, and where discrimination based on diversity has long been the norm of everyday communal and political existence, the rise of multiple public spheres could offer a space of representation and resistance for the subalterns against exclusion and subsequent marginalization. It rings especially true for women in India, as gender-based exclusion from the decision-making sphere is normalized in most communities across the country.

In the northeastern states of India, women's groups have been at the forefront of struggle against state militarization on quite a few occasions. However, the Naga women's mobilization is different in the sense that that it has demonstrated the scope of peace activism to be strategically instrumental to women's rights. The conflict situation, in a way, has compelled the women of Nagaland to get organized, which in turn has helped consolidate their efforts to reform women's standing in their communities. This mobilization of women was also fueled by the emergence of societal problems such as drug abuse. The Naga Mothers' Association (NMA), one of the most notable groups in the region, may serve as the best case in point for showing the effectiveness of this strategy. Founded on February 14, 1984, they declared that their motto is to have a "clear objective of combating all social evils confronting the society at that time in various forms to provide a common platform for women's issues and interests and to uphold the dignity of motherhood" (Das, 2008, p. 60). The NMA emblem is fraught with symbolic significance: It is an illustration of a human eye shedding tears of blood. It carries with it a four-word message as well: "shed no more blood." In the symbolic crying eye of Naga motherhood, one may find a gaze of resistance. It is a gaze that stares back at the masculinized space of conflict which willfully keeps women out of it. Thus, through the emblem itself, the NMA presents a critique of a volatile space that seems to have lost its direction in the maze of violence. Although it started off as an organization that worked against social evils at a grassroots level, through decades of social activism in villages and at state level, the NMA's mothers have emerged as significant participants in the peace process. Now, their continuous struggle against social vice has come to also entail the struggle for gender equality, especially through challenging the idea of gender exclusion from the public-political sphere in their community. The NMA has been an integral part of several civil society initiatives such as the "Forum for Naga Reconciliation" and the "Committee for Alternative Agreement," and it has thus translated its local influence into formal authority in the state's public-political sphere (Manchanda & Kakran, 2017, p. 66).

In a highly patriarchal society, women have to steer and negotiate their ways through the prescribed gender roles to assert their identity. What they need is a strategic position that will simultaneously be approved by the patriarchal communities and help them undermine that very patriarchal oppression of their subjecthood. Motherhood can be one such useful strategic position, as it endows women with a context for their everyday micropolitics—especially because of the hallowed status the notion of "motherhood" enjoys in traditional societies like the tribal ones in Nagaland. P. Banerjee and Dey (2012) see in this image of "motherhood" a chance to challenge the "masculinist discourse of nationhood" (p. 16). The NMA's success lies in the fact that it was able to keep the channels of communication open between warring factions by using the space for "mother's negotiation," as Manchanda terms it: They would appeal to the armed factions by inviting them to their kitchens to discuss prospects of peace over a home-cooked meal (Manchanda & Kakran, 2017, p. 71). Their position as mothers was thus turned into a public role, with the aid of the private space.

Groups such as the NMA have effectively translated their traditional roles as mothers into roles as social and political agents. This strategic use of the sexed subject position has helped them to garner an entry point to the masculinized discourse of conflict. Peace studies scholar Samir Kumar Das (2008), in his essay "Ethnicity and Democracy Meet When Mothers Protest," talks about this surge in the metaphoric importance that the idea of motherhood has gained in the context of women's movements in recent years, citing examples from movements around the world from the last decades of the 20th century onward. In cases such as CoMadres in El Salvador, Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, or Mothers' Front of Sri Lanka that came into existence in the 1970s–1980s, when violence wreaked havoc in their part of the world, groups consisting of mothers played a prominent part in carrying forth the message of resistance and peace. Das (2008) calls this mode of activism that centers on the metaphor of motherhood "the maternal frame" (p. 57). However, P. Banerjee and Dey (2012) point out that the image of motherhood can also become a problematic one, as this stance is sometimes traced back to the apparently innate qualities of women as mothers "where 'motherhood' is seen as a performative; a product" (p. 16). The strategy of "motherhood politics" might then be seen as a hindrance for women in their attempts to assert their right to be a part of the formal decision-making sphere. That inference may not be wholly incorrect, especially in light of the 2017 riots against the government's decision to implement a provision that reserves 33% of spots in the Urban Local Body election for women. But it would be wrong to conjecture that by playing a tradition-specific role, women remain bound by the gender-biased rules that perpetuate patriarchy. One must also remember that in the context of a patriarchal tribal society that still practices a few customary laws that are discriminatory toward women, motherhood is one of the few modes of women's politics available in the region—one of the few modes through which women often articulate and organize their democratic resistance. As Das (2008) comments, "their invocation of motherhood as a metaphor should not be seen as a continuation and reproduction of their traditional role but more as a political strategy" (p. 62). This politicization of a tradition-specific role helps them attain an entry point into the world of political struggle,

in which they can organize and assert themselves. In a society where democracy has been rigorously undermined and patriarchy has confined women to their tradition-approved gender stereotypes, this politicization of motherhood gives them a chance to venture into previously unfamiliar territories. Das (2008) quotes Sara Ruddick in this context, who says "in the name of womanly duties that they have assumed and that their communities expect of them, they resist" (p. 70). Malathi de Alwis, too, points out how these women unveil the inherent contradiction between the states' "rhetoric" and "practices" by revealing the states' policies as "denying women opportunities for mothering," and they do this by taking this stance of motherhood, which is essentially a "state defined role" (quoted in P. Banerjee & Dey, 2012, p. 16).

In the context of this politicization of motherhood, Das (2008) distinguishes between "pure motherhood" and "universal motherhood." He describes pure motherhood as a paradigm that "deliberately avoids any kind of political commitment" and "insists only on some form of emotional communion with their children 'long absent', 'disappeared' . . . irrespective of the political cause they have been fighting for" (p. 58). In this scenario, the children's particular political movements and struggles lose importance in the face of the mother's biological and emotional attachment to her child. Although Das (2008) infers that "in political terms such actions are of little value" (p. 59), it cannot be denied that through their personal movements, propelled by their *personal* grief, the paradigm of pure motherhood is at times able to question the very legitimacy of these armed movements—as it did in June 2002, when the families of 210 United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) militants submitted a petition to the Assam Human Rights Commission accusing the militant organization's commander in chief of coercing their children into unlawful activities.

In opposition to this suffering of "pure" mother, who is bereft of political anchorage, stands the paradigm of universal motherhood. The difference between "pure motherhood" and the politics of the "Maternal Frame" may be perceived through the notion that "pure motherhood" is characterized by the pain and anxiety of losing one's children. In this paradigm, mothers are continually bound by the sense of longing for their children. The suffering mother is therefore largely isolated from the public, walled inside the bubble of her own grief. Thus, Pure Motherhood is without any political mooring; as Das (2008) writes, mothers under this paradigm are perpetually waiting for the "moment of reunion" (p. 59). The NMA has turned the concept of pure motherhood (which bears patriarchal implications with it) on its head by disentangling the site of motherhood from any specified mother–child relation, and thus decontextualizing it. Through this strategy, they liberate the notion of motherhood from an exclusively emotional context that is apolitical in nature. The NMA's concern for all victims, regardless of their ethnicity, indicates the transcendence of ethnic boundaries. The organization's work with the Kuki Mothers' Association during the Kuki–Naga clashes of 1992 demonstrates its commitment to forming solidarity with women from other ethnicities and going beyond the discourse of ethnic politics, which was created inside the narrative of the male-dominated public-political sphere. Thus, this particular concept of motherhood is also freed from the specific context of a biological mother–child relation. As Das (2008) mentions, the metaphor

of motherhood in circulation in Nagaland "seems to have consciously stayed away from the paradigm of 'pure motherhood'" (p. 59). The NMA women have successfully accomplished this by attaching the idea of "mother" to the justness of the cause that their children are fighting for instead of to specific children and by organizing themselves around the cause. In doing so, these women are able to reconstitute themselves as equal and democratic subjects. It is their commitment to the cause of resistance, rather than their personal bonds, that simultaneously makes their use of the site of motherhood political and—critically—connects ideas of democracy to both ethnic identity politics and gender politics.

In this way, they are able to rise above their isolated grief and transition from being "individual mothers" to becoming "social mothers." Sukalpa Bhatatcharjee (2002), in her essay "State, Insurgency and (Wo)man's Human Rights," notes that "it is a delicate mixture of the impersonal communitarian entity with the personal female 'self', almost a two dimensional matrix" (p. 135). This phenomenon of mixing heterogeneous sites evokes the Kristevan notion of motherhood, under which motherhood is seen as that ground which can merge different heterogeneous sites, especially that of the self and the other. But because the NMA mothers are also dissenters, the concept of motherhood is further problematized. These are mothers who have politicized their motherhood and gained valid entry into the male-dominated sphere of conflict from which women are otherwise forbidden. The universal or social mother is not only an isolated sufferer; freed from the specific context of the biological mother–child relation, she becomes an agent of political resistance. Her ability to merge heterogeneous sites helps her rise above petty ethnic differences. As Das (2008) observes, the social or universal motherhood is very "unlike the traditional motherhood that remains confined to the four walls of the particular family, clan, or community" (p. 64). The universal mother is able to rise above clan identity and make a space where an open dialogue is possible with mothers from outside her own community, thus bridging the gap that the ethnicity-based politics of the insurgents has only seemed to widen. It is their ability to rise as social mothers that has enabled groups such as the NMA to carry out successful negotiations between the warring factions of different tribes within the Naga community, as well as between the Naga and Kuki communities during the 1990s. Their success lies in the fact that they have been able to keep channels of dialogue open among warring factions. The metaphor of motherhood in circulation in this region today is thus based on the theme of solidarity.

Motherhood has become the most significant metaphor in women's politics in Nagaland today, especially due to the revered status a mother enjoys in traditional societies in India. By politicizing this trope, Naga women make sure that, at some level, their struggle also enlists community and family support, so as to not completely alienate the women's movement from community movements. At times, community movements can even aid the women's struggle, especially when both parties work against the State and the State-produced patriarchy. This peacemaking role is also indoctrinated through Naga customary laws: In many tribes, such as the Angami and Tangkhul Naga, women have played the role of the messengers of peace during conflicts between different warring factions. Thus, groups such as the NMA have held up

traditional roles of women, grounded in the very customary laws of their communities, to strengthen their position.

Bhattacharjee (2002) notes that the symbolic authority of motherhood is more operative than both the authority of the traditional society and that of State power, especially because "both resist any subversion of the symbolic authority of the mother because neither can manipulate it" (p. 137). Thus, the woman emerges from the disempowered, solitary mother figure, a sex-specific object, and becomes a figure of maternal authority. Das (2008) sheds some light on this politicization of the formulaic "woman language" when he writes, "the language these women speak is the stereotypical 'woman's language'—the language of love, loyalty, care and affection—but this they speak with a public anger in a public place in ways they never meant to do" (p. 71).

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