

COUNTING THE WRINKLES: THE AGEING STATE OF NAGALAND, A GERONTOLOGICAL STUDY OF EASTERINE IRALU'S *A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY*

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ABSTRACT:

A grandmother telling stories to her drowsy grandchildren in an antic rocking chair with light streaming from a glass window has by now become a stereotype. The first doze of narrative for everyone comes in the form of stories heard from grandparents of another time, a past which always remains a part of their present. Through our grandparents we live an extended personalised history of their growing up which is our first encounter with a different world, a past which like a foreign country emerges in our imagination and shapes the present in its own way, thus we all grow cradled in a gerontological discourse. This discourse slips through various layers of our being and becomes a part of our essential ontological core.

Thus, it is evident that gerontology is best explored and deconstructed as a narrative of individual experience which is a fine blend of fact and fiction, a narrative of personalised historiography and cultural evolution. It is thus a means of connecting individuals with the lived stories of older people, the storied nature of lives, the ways in which we structure our life stories and with metaphysical concepts of “self”.

This paper deals with Easterine Iralu's novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* and explores the prospect of narrative gerontology as a tool to peel off the intricate layers of individual subconscious of an octogenarian and the collective subconscious of an aging tribal society, which are simultaneously mutually dependent and exclusive. Under the wrinkles of both lie crumpled histories of exploitation, war, military insurgency, a journey from paganism to Christianity,

deaths and births, evolution of a saga of personalised and localized ethnography, anthropology and sociology.

KEYWORDS: Matriarchy, insurance, narrative gerontology, ethnographic anthropology, gerontological discourse, personalised history, sociopsychological matrix, collective social unconscious.

INTRODUCTION:

A grandmother telling stories to her drowsy grandchildren in an antic rocking chair with light streaming from a glass window has by now become a stereotype. The first doze of narrative for everyone comes in the form of stories heard from grandparents of another time, a past which always remains a part of their present. Through our grandparents we live an extended personalized history of their growing up which is our first encounter with a different world, a past which like a foreign country emerges in our imagination and shapes the present in its own way, thus we all grow cradled in a gerontological discourse. This discourse slips through various layers of our being and becomes a part of our essential ontological core.

Thus, it is evident that gerontology is best explored and deconstructed as a narrative of individual experience which is a fine blend of fact and fiction, a narrative of personalised historiography and cultural evolution. It is thus a means of connecting individuals with the lived stories of older people, the storied nature of lives, the ways in which we structure our life stories and with metaphysical concepts of “self”.

At the start of the 21st Century, stories began to emerge on aging. The significant increase in the aged population has given rise to new literature, as well as an academic and professional interest in gerontology. The aim of literature on aging is not only to expand knowledge broadly and to gain insights into old age but also specifically to address issues such as ageism, elder abuse, health in later life and dementia. Among various groundbreaking books of the new decade dealing with the issues of gerontology Mike Hepworth's *Stories of Aging* is particularly unique as it is grounded in

sociological theory as well as contemporary novels dealing with ageing. One of the significant themes addressed regarding aging and literature is how fictional descriptions of aging can facilitate understanding of the aging process within a sociopsychological context.

One of the impulses of critical gerontology is to go beyond accepted explanations of age and ageing to plumb the underlying processes that shape these explanations and thereby to elucidate social, cultural and individual experiences of ageing. Critical gerontology therefore provokes a reconsideration of conventional ways of thinking about age and even the discipline of gerontology itself. Its advocates are equally interested in the particular and in the general, querying prevailing norms that define ageing as well as probing how age is experienced by an individual within a specific historical moment. It represents the attempt to move from the ceaseless accumulation of knowledge towards understanding the “hows” and “whys” of ageing (Alley et al. 583) and therefore, to contribute to theory building. Stories of ageing, as these are elucidated by the use of narrative in gerontology and by those who have recourse to literary representations of “age” and “ageing” have become increasingly recognised as lending important insights to gerontological knowledge. They constitute a fundamental part of the endeavour to open up new debates and redefine the meaning of ageing, the desire to embrace rather than elide the complexities of later life. Narrative, literary and critical gerontology all share an ability to confront rather than shirk the ambiguities and complexities of age, ageing and later life and an interest in quizzing the cultural norms of ageing via non-scientific forms of knowing. Indeed, to discuss them as separate entities within gerontological knowledge is to imply that there are dichotomies between these areas of study that do not exist.

NARRATIVE GERONTOLOGY:

Narrative gerontology is a methodology as well as an effective heuristic. It is a means of querying the content of the tales being told to us about later life and a technique for interpreting the disconnect

between the surface appearance of these tales and the underlying trajectory they insidiously follow. It is therefore inherently critical and challenging, a call for change. And the need to radically re-think the ways in which age and ageing have been culturally configured is a central impulse in critical gerontology, which aims to unsettle our habitual and comfortable frameworks and needle us towards personal and cultural transformation.

Narrative gerontology as a tool for teaching relies on the recognition that life can be thought of as an actively constructed text that must be part fiction. Just as the stories in novels are made up so we “make ourselves up” when we relate the substance of our lives. Therefore, the act of reading lives is similar to the act of reading novels or “fictions”. Both endeavours rely upon our interpretative abilities and are full of subjectivity. This recalls the innovations of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1992) who was amongst the first to stress in *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life* the importance of the stories older people told her not despite but because of their potentially fictive content. Myerhoff examined the stories told by older generations about themselves in the following terms: “They ‘make’ themselves, . . . it is an artificial and exhilarating undertaking, this self-construction” (Myerhoff 231). When these aspects of narrative gerontology as pedagogical instruments are appreciated, there is a clear congruence with the emphases of critical gerontology. For instance: the interest in how “age” is performed by the storyteller, the relationship of an individual’s story to the wider stories of society and history (the master narratives that we are inscribed in) and therefore “age” as a dynamic rather than static or fixed concept.

The thrust of this approach is to construe the stories told by older people as narratives and to use these as “data” for uncovering the dynamics of lives as these are affected by aging. This approach then, is a means of capturing the individual processes of meaning making in later life, a way of delving into the interior (and private) aspects of “age”. Many such discussions of narrative gerontology draw overtly on the similarities between reading “lives” and reading

“novels”, the “novel-like” quality of our lives. Thus, Randall and Kenyon (2004) observe: “The feel of time in the midst of our life . . . is akin to what we feel when reading a novel, poised between the beginning from whence we have come and the end to which we are heading” (Randall & Kenyon 335).

The tendency of this approach is to imply that all stories can and should be distilled into coherent narratives and therefore to over emphasise the role of narrative in an individual's life. In so far as this is the case, teleological leanings are discernible: “Narrative too, one could argue, is not only essential to life, or to making meaning in life, but is life . . . as I have tried to argue here, it is in stories and through stories that we live our lives at every level. Without narrative . . . those lives would be devoid of structure and direction, purpose and coherence, momentum and meaning” (Randall 385-386).

THE NARRATIVE:

The text I have selected for this context is Easterine Iralu's *A Terrible Matriarchy*. It explores the prospect of narrative gerontology as a tool to peel off the intricate layers of individual subconscious of an octogenarian and the collective subconscious of an aging tribal society, which are simultaneously mutually dependent and exclusive. Under the wrinkles of both lie crumpled histories of exploitation, war, military insurgency, a journey from paganism to Christianity, deaths and births, evolution of a saga of personalised and localised ethnography, anthropology and sociology.

This novel deals with the lives of three generations of the Naga tribe. The novel is a bildungsroman which begins with young Dielieno being sent off to live with her disciplinarian grandmother who wants her to grow up to be a good Naga wife and mother. The novel is an elongated discussion of how Dielieno explores the territory of the past that was lived by her grandmother and applies it to explore herself, her present, her tribal clan and her ever changing attitude towards her grandmother and the war-torn state of Nagaland. The lives of the Naga women in this novel are depicted as essentially home-spun like their fabric and their periphery limited to the borders

of the clan. The novel is a unique ethnographic representation of Naga life from their social rights to pagan rites and the realistic rustic representation of the oral literature. Various external political conflicts throbs through the book: military insurgency, Second World War, bombing of Kohima, Japanese spying, there is the silent conflict between the transition of the state from Paganism to Christianity. This political and religious conflict is a part of every character's ontological core: "For grandmother, life was divided into two periods, before the war and after the war and life was always better before the war...She made life in Kohima before the war seem like a long series of picnics and festivals" (Iralu 262).

The novel portrays the matrilineal structure of Naga society, which is a very unique phenomenon of the Indian subcontinent. This novel helps to probe into the gerontological space of a very different anthropological structure by examining the psychosocial space of the grandmother, who is at the apex of this societal structure. The character of the grandmother and the aging society can be gerontologically deconstructed into subcategories like: female patriarch, the scars of war, metamorphosis of religion, anxiety of insurance, authority of torture.

THE PATRIARCHAL MATRIARCHY:

While investigating the character of the grandmother in the context of the matriarchal Naga society, I realised though she enjoys a politically powerful position in the society as the head of the family, her sons are socially bound to abide by her decisions, and her husband is rather dependent on her, yet she is but a patriarchal construct and she uses her matriarchal powers vehemently to disseminate patriarchy:

"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. That way one never has a problem with girl children. They will always be busy with some work or other too busy to get into trouble. (Iralu 71)

Nagaland is a matriarchal society as the children are known by the name of their mother. The women in the house are traditionally the bread earners of the family and the husbands are often financially dependent and politically dominated by the women folk. Almost all the male characters in the novels are inferior to their female counterparts. Yet strangely instead of being an ideally feminist society, women are in a more dire condition because, the ritual of torture is continued by the women rather than by the men. The grandmother believes women are the building block of a family on whose shoulder rests the responsibility of carrying forward the name and fame of the family, therefore she has to be trained the hardest from a tender age both mentally and physically and leave all the pampering and luxury for the boys:

“What meat do you want?” she simpered sweetly, as she ladled out gravy and meat. I quickly piped up, “I want the leg, Grandmother, give me the leg.” “I wasn’t asking you silly girl,” she said swiftly put the chicken leg into my brother’s plate,” That portion is always for the boys. Girls must eat the other portions.” (Iralu 1)

The society of Nagaland accepts men practicing polygamy and free sex, even women are also allowed free sex but pregnancy was the problem of women alone. A woman carrying an illegal child is an outcast: “I wasn’t even sure what our morals were. I vaguely knew it was something to do with not stealing and not telling lies and now I knew it included not getting pregnant before you were married if you were a big girl” (Iralu 29)

Therefore, the grandmother kept the women in the house busy with back breaking work so that they could not be involved in illegal sex. However, she was the person who had complied to bring up the illegal daughter of her brother in a strictly disciplinarian manner so that she could become a good Naga wife and mother. By doing this she exploits her two powers: patriarchal and matriarchal simultaneously. She uses her matriarchal power by accepting an illegal child and bringing her up in the normal society, when she should have been an outcast; and her patriarchal power by torturing

the young girl while trying to mould her into a proper woman and keeping her panopticon gaze fixed on the women in the house. By doing this she proves that like a monarch she has the authority to mould the norms of the society according to her discretion and she uses this technique many times in the story to continue asserting her authority in the family and the society.

THE AUTHORITY OF TORTURE:

As the head of the family and the sole authority in decision-making, she plans to bring up her granddaughter in a harsh way but she was extremely kind and affectionate towards her grandsons, as she believed the duty of a male child was to grow into an efficient warrior and to protect its clan, therefore he was spared of all other responsibilities. He was allowed all illegal luxuries like sex, drugs, even murder. On the other hand, a woman had to suffer torture since the age of four because she has to be prepared for harshest of circumstances like war, famine, childbirth, widowhood, social uprooting and exploitation due to Japanese infiltration. She had to learn everything from stitching clothes to ploughing fields, from cooking food to buying meat, from cleaning house to horticulture. She has no right to affection, compassion, education or even sympathy until she becomes the head of the family by reproducing male heirs then her authority is absolute.

The torture on women folk was passed down as legacy, like an inheritance of loss. Grandmother continued this ritual of torture as a kind of revenge which sprung from a sense of injustice done to her in her past, when she was a victim of the authority of torture:

The water pot was almost as big as I was, how did Grandmother think I would be able to fetch water in it? Why didn't Mother say that I was too small to go yet? Then I remember she had once said that I was small and Grandmother had said that she began to fetch wood at four. I was almost five so I guess Mother didn't have any excuse anymore. (Iralu 2)

THE ANXIETY OF INSURANCE:

Your grandmother was the eldest of three children. She grew up in the village and moved to the town only when she was married. When she was young she lived through a very hard time. 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 offspring as possible. Her mother did not have brothers and they lost all their lands and fields when her father died. I think she said that her grandfather had given them a small field to cultivate as long as he was alive. But people were unkind and mocked those who could not produce male children. The understanding was that a woman was that a woman without a male heir would be sheltered by her in-laws. But her daughters could not inherit the father's property. Their best bet would be to marry a man rich enough to have property of his own. Then they would devote the rest of their lives to trying to produce a male heir. Grandmother saw her own mother suffer hardship and poverty and exclusion from many aspects of social life because she had no brothers. It hardened her and made her determined not to suffer as her mother had. I think your grandmother looks at her sons and grandsons as a kind of insurance and she is inclined to take a very conservative attitude toward your brothers by pampering them as she saw other boys being pampered in her childhood. You know that our people say we should love our sons because they are the ones who look after us in our old age. (Iralu 273)

This short biography explains that she treated her sons and grandsons as the insurance of her later life, so that she would not live a life of poverty like her mother and would not die unattended. She tried to bribe her grandsons sometimes with money, sometimes with an extra piece of meat and sometimes with showers of affection. This insecurity had turned her into a matriarchal patriarch. She did not suffer from the normal anxieties of ageing like impending death and

physical suffering; rather she preferred later life than youth, because for a woman youth is the hardest phase of her life where she has to suffer every physical and mental torture. She looked at age as the seat of authority and power once she had produced sufficient male heirs and insured her later life. In fact, the normal decay of aging turned her more powerful, autocratic and omnipotent. With graying age, she became the impersonation of Naga society and also the complex religion: the suppressed paganism and prevalent Christianity. A very interesting fact is that she is never gone even after death; in fact, Naga society has a different outlook towards death which is shared by grandmother also. Death is not dying in Naga society, it is passing into the world of shadows and the dead always keep coming back into the world of the living, sharing a second life with the living, often tripping and brushing against the living. The grandmother also after her death is seen walking about her house, she is equally feared and dreaded; her commands are also followed even after her death, her panopticon gaze immortalised.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF RELIGION:

Nagaland had been scarred with many turmoil internal and external; the chief among them is the metamorphosis of religion. It was originally a pagan tribal state then was transformed into Christianity, but like every transformation this was also an incomplete phenomenon. The society was officially transformed into Christianity but its pagan rites and oral tradition still remained in the subconscious and unconscious layer of the society which often erupted to the surface and like an intoxicated drunkard the society is drawn to its pagan roots. Moreover, the birth of religion is intricately related to memories of war which is bloody and unsettling and religion is used to provide consolation simultaneously. Grandmother's family was the first in the village to embrace Christianity which is a matter of serious pride for her. She was a staunch Christian, but in her subconscious also lurked the intoxicating paganism of the tribalism:

“Can you recognize those girls?” Grandmother asked. I could not and I told her so. “That is Neikuo on the right and

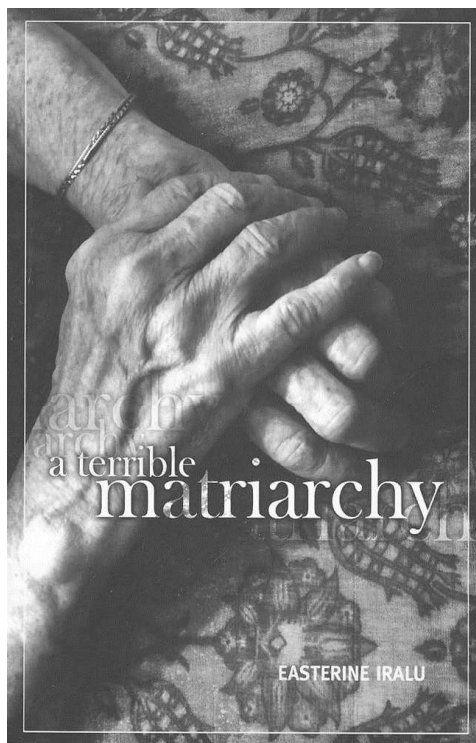
that's me on our mother's left. That is our mother", she said pointing to the middle aged woman. She was a big woman in a body- cloth and she was looking at the camera unsmilingly. "Oh, I remember when this picture was taken," Grandmother continued. "Mother did not want to have her photograph taken at all. She insisted that if you had your photograph taken, it shortened your life because the camera captured your soul by taking your likeness. Of course we had become Christians by then, so we didn't believe it at all. But many of the village folk swore that was true. The white officer who took our picture also took the picture of me in your house." (Iralu 114)

In spite of the assertion of Christian faith, grandmother could not completely rely on it, she never had the courage to display the photographs, and she preserved it in a tin box so that her soul is free from being trapped. Though every dead received a Christian burial, however their spirits never received Christian treatment. Whenever a dead was seen walking into the realm of the living, the society switched from Christian to pagan. Grandmother would attempt to talk to the spirits of the dead, rebuke them for the faults they committed during their life, bribe them with the items, the greed of which was believed to bind them to earth. It is very interesting to note that Grandmother exercised her authority not only over the living but equally over the dead.

Religion unflinching brought with it the memories of war and simultaneously provided a consolation for the loss. The pagan society was incapable to console the families destroyed in the bombing of Kohima during Second World War, or the military insurgency which was a regular phenomenon in Nagaland even in the recent past. They needed a greater philosophy which would unify them, which would provide an answer even if they were unable to deconstruct the answer. Christianity helped them to shift the weight of the loss from them to an unknown abstract concept which they named fate, which was to be accepted with resignation. Pagan tribalism was unaware of the concept called fate for them

everything in this world had a cause-and-effect relation, this dichotomy tore them apart from inside and outside. Grandmother is a personification of this dichotomy. She accepted the deaths of her sons and grandsons with resignation but used her pagan rites to step into the world of the dead and interact with them whenever the pain of the separation became unbearable for her. The memories of death brought her closer to religion and with growing age she became more problematic, the dichotomies of the society peeped through her wrinkles. The Christian Naga society had traces of paganism like: its ghosts, its legends, its version of later life, its oral tales lurking in its collective social unconscious which always made its presence felt as if it was the shadow of Christianity, both mutually co-existent and exclusive.

The Cover:



In this paper I would like to make a special mention of the Cover design of the book.

The cover page itself is itself a food for gerontological discourse. The cover tells the story of a unique matriarchal gerontological narrative, waiting to be unfolded. The hands of an old woman symbolizing the authority and finality she enjoys in the society. It is the imagery of the 'Grandmother': whose lurking presence is everywhere in the novel, she is the eye of the Big Boss who always fixes her panopticon gaze. The poise of her hands represents the years of hard training that has gone into the construction of being 'a good, perfect woman.' The bare hands and the unruly veins appear to be a manifestation of the war torn, military patrolled, conflict-ridden state of Nagaland; both internal and external. The homespun fabric in the background is a metaphor of the essential local character of their life and the rituals of pagan tribaldom which always lurks in the background.

CONCLUSION:

The study of personal life narratives may benefit from critical questions about how lives are experienced, the incomplete way in which they are often lived. Where extrapolations from literature fail to be critical, they also fail to tell gerontologists anything about ageing. Fictional stories can be invaluable for considering the various manifestations of age and ageing. However, these stories are most insightful when they are thoroughly contextualised, when the frame of reference is accounted for and when fiction as one in a range of cultural discourses is appreciated. Incorporating the critical gerontological imagination as an approach to works of literature reveals the possibility that "age" can be considered as a concept that is integral to the reading of a text and as it relates to a wider historical context and cannot be fully understood within the confines of a particular story:

Thus age can be considered as it is a historically specific and therefore shifting phenomenon. A truly interdisciplinary and integrative relationship between narrative and literary

gerontology and critical gerontology could be created, such that there is a mutuality of reflection between these discourses, which have so much to gain from one another. (Katz & McHugh 2010: 274)

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