International Journal of
LAW, ARTS AND HUMANITIES
Peer Reviewed, Referred & Indexed Journal
ISSN: 3070-0523 www.zesterapublications.com Original Research Paper

Becoming a Girl in Shillong: The Gendered Identity of D in Daribha Lyndem's Name Place Animal Thing

Yumnam Sanjeevani Singha
Research Scholar, Department of English
Fergusson College (Autonomous), Pune
Savitribai Phule Pune University

Abstract

This paper examines the gendered identity of D, the narrator-protagonist of Daribha Lyndem's *Name Place Animal Thing* (2020), a book of ten interconnected stories about a Khasi girl growing up in Shillong. Because the book offers no conventional plot in which a heroine acts, chooses and changes and because D is for much of the narrative a witness rather than an agent, the paper asks where her gender resides and how it is constructed. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler's accounts of gender as something acquired and enacted, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and scholarship on Khasi matriliny, it advances three arguments. First, D's gender is narrated retrospectively, the paper shows that an adult voice sorts childhood memory into categories and that this retrospective position allows D to claim an interpretive authority the child lacked. The noun-centred structure of the chapters, echoing the children's game that gives the book its title, mirrors this process of classification. Second, D's identity is intersectional: she is not simply a girl but a Khasi girl of a particular class in a town where the distinction between Khasi and *dkhar* organizes everyday life. Third, it is formed in domestic spaces, through a household of women, including the grandmother Mei and the domestic worker Bi, whose authority and labour D observes, and through men and migrants such as Bahadur, whose subordinated masculinities she watches without being able to alter. The paper concludes that matriliny cannot be read as a simple guarantee of female empowerment, since D's gender cannot be separated from hierarchies of class and ethnicity.

Keywords: Northeast Indian fiction, Khasi matriliny, girlhood, intersectionality, gender identity

Introduction

Daribha Lyndem's debut, Name Place Animal Thing was published by Zubaan and shortlisted for the JCB Prize for Literature in 2021. Its publisher calls it a novella that "meanders through ages, lives and places", tracing the coming of age of a young Khasi woman in a politically charged Shillong. The book can be described as a collection of ten chapters narrated by a Khasi girl called D or could also be a book of connected stories whose only unifying element is the first person narrator. The question of form matters for the question of identity because the book offers no conventional plot in which a heroine acts, chooses and changes. D is a protagonist who is also, for much of the book, a witness.

This paper asks how the gendered identity of such a protagonist is constructed and represented. If D is more observer than agent, where does her gender reside? The argument here has three parts. First, D's gender identity is narrated retrospectively which means it is the product of an adult voice

International Journal of
LAW, ARTS AND HUMANITIES
Peer Reviewed, Referred & Indexed Journal
ISSN: 3070-0523 www.zesterapublications.com Original Research Paper

sorting childhood memory into categories rather than a transparent record of how a child felt. Second, it is intersectional because D is a girl but she is a Khasi girl of a particular class in a town where the distinction between Khasi and *dkhar* (a Khasi term for non-tribal outsiders) organizes much of her everyday life. Third, it is formed in and through domestic spaces and the people who inhabit them, in particular a household of women whose authority and labour are visible to D and a set of men and migrants whose own gendered and economic vulnerabilities she watches without being able to alter any of it.

The question of gender

A study of gendered identity in a coming of age narrative can begin with Simone de Beauvoir's claim that one is not born a woman but becomes one. The sentence has a developmental shape that suits a book which follows a child toward "the precarious awareness of adulthood." as the publisher puts it. Judith Butler's work sharpens the point: gender, in her account, is not the expression of an interior essence but is constituted through repeated acts. For a reader of fiction, this shifts attention from what a character is to how the text shows her being positioned, named and corrected and how she learns to name herself. Gender, however, never operates alone. Kimberlé Crenshaw's argument that race and sex intersect in ways that single-axis analysis cannot capture has been extended well beyond its original legal context to analyses of caste, class, ethnicity and region. In the Indian Northeast, this is an especially pressing consideration since the region is internally diverse and has been repeatedly flattened by the label "North East" in the national imagination.

Susan Sniader Lanser's study of women's narrative authority suggests that who speaks, to whom and with what credibility are themselves gendered questions. Smith and Watson's work on life narrative adds that the "I" of a retrospective account is split between the narrating self and the narrated self, a distinction that is essential to *Name Place Animal Thing*.

Abel, Hirsch and Langland note that fictions of female development often turn on constraint, accommodation and partial awakening rather than on the confident self-making associated with the male tradition.

The other gendered aspect in context is the specific social setting. Khasi society is matrilineal: descent is traced through the mother and by custom the youngest daughter, the khatduh is the custodian of ancestral property. Sociologists have been careful to stress that matriliny is not matriarchy. Tiplut Nongbri, writing on gender and tribal society shows that control over property and the passage of descent through women coexist with male dominance in public and political institutions. Reading of D's gender therefore cannot be done without analysing the Khasi woman's position in the domestic space and realising that its centrality does not guarantee equality in the wider public sphere.

Narrative form

The title refers to a children's pastime in which players choose a letter and race to supply a name, a place , an animal and a thing beginning with it. Each of Lyndem's chapters is organized around

International Journal of
LAW, ARTS AND HUMANITIES
Peer Reviewed, Referred & Indexed Journal
ISSN: 3070-0523 www.zesterapublications.com Original Research Paper

a noun in a similar spirit, recounting the narrator's formative years through a sequence of named persons and objects. The table of contents confirms this pattern with story titles that include "Bahadur", "Mr. Baruah" and "Avva". The structure is more than an ornament. The game is an exercise in classification and so is growing up. A child learns to sort the world into kinds of people, places, creatures and things and each sorting carries social weight. A *Feminism in India* article notes that the book's title gestures to the "identification and differentiation of entities and that race, gender, class and nativity surface in nearly every interaction the narrator describes.

The stories are told by an adult recollecting her childhood and young adulthood. The publisher's description praises the "innocent eyes" of a child narrator but the adult presence is unmistakable in the ordering of memory, in the selection of what to include and in the quiet interpretive framing of each episode. Smith and Watson's distinction between the narrating and narrated "I" is therefore useful. The child D experiences a world in which gendered and ethnic hierarchies are taken for granted, the adult D arranges those experiences in a way that makes the hierarchies visible.

It can also be seen that D's weak agency in the book is not a flaw in characterization but a structural feature of her position. It is tempting to read it as a gendered one: girlhood in many societies is an apprenticeship in watching and the child whose authority is exercised through narration. Drawing on Lanser's argument about narrative authority, the retrospective narrative voice allows D to claim, as an adult, the interpretive power that the child lacked.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak reminds us that a narrator;s voice, however sympathetic, is not the same as the voices of those she describes. D observes people such as the help Bahadur and describes their lives but her descriptions are mediated by her own position. The book quietly insists on this limit and that is what makes it ethically interesting and hence tempers any claim that D speaks for the marginalized.

Girlhood in a Matrilineal modern Shillong

The book talks about the dynamics between the househelp, Bi and the grandmother, Mei, the mingling of Christian and Khasi belief and the monthly community cleaning known as *jingpynkhuid shnong*. It also mentions the decline of the informal practice of *iashong*, sometimes described as the Khasi way of having children outside wedlock, as Shillong modernizes.

D growing up among women who hold visible authority within the household and who are connected to one another through labour, age and class. Mei and Bi are not interchangeable; one is a senior kinswoman, the other a paid domestic worker and the relation between them is one of hierarchy as well as cohabitation. D, watching this relationship, learns that women;s lives are structured by more than gender. A grandmother and a servant are both women but their positions in the domestic economy differ markedly and D's own position as the child of the house, differs again. This is the first lesson in intersectional thinking acquired before D has a name for it. In a matrilineal system, women's roles in lineage and property are central and a girl growing up in such a household may well absorb a sense of women's weight within the family. But D also slowly

International Journal of
LAW, ARTS AND HUMANITIES
Peer Reviewed, Referred & Indexed Journal
ISSN: 3070-0523 www.zesterapublications.com Original Research Paper

grasps that the household may be organized around women while public authority remains largely male. Therefore, this is also how one cannot simply treat D as an empowered figure because she is Khasi. The quiet attention of the narrative to labour, hierarchy and the presence of the non-khasis complicates such an idea.

The reported decline of iashong is a useful index in the shifting gender norms of a changing Shillong. Informal unions and the social recognition of children born outside formal marriage point to a looser regime of sexual and familial arrangements than later Christian and urban norms permitted. Hence. D's gender identity is seen to be formed at the point where an older, more flexible Khasi practice meets newer pressures toward respectability.

Intersections

The first story "Bahadur" is about a handyman or househelp who does odd jobs for the families who rent on the hill and his name marks him as Nepali in a place that is moving toward assertions of native identity. It is a picture of ethnic coexistence in which every other family seem to be exploiting Bahadur, D, who is seven at the time is seen being friends with Bahadur's family and enjoys eating with them. The relevance for gender here is two fold.

D's earliest important relationship outside her own household is with a family of a different ethnic and economic standing and this means that her first experience of gendered life includes seeing how masculinity is lived by a man who is poor, a migrant and dependent on others' goodwill. R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt's account of hegemonic masculinity, in which some masculinities are dominant while others are subordinated or marginalized, offers a way to describe what D sees. Bahadur is a man but he is not a figure of power.

Second, D's affection for Bahadur's family and her ease at dinners at their place complicates any simple account of her as a girl hemmed in by prohibition. Her childhood includes forms of cross-class intimacy that she remembers with warmth, even as the adult narrator registers their asymmetry. This double awareness is itself a mark of D's gendered formation. She is a girl who is allowed, as a child, to move between households and to eat with those who work for her neighbours.

As D grows older, she finds a new emotional bond with the Hindi teacher which marks a shift from the world of childhood games to a more complex emotional landscape. The stories then start focussing more on the growing consciousness of the world's complexity, including its cruelties. The emotional bond with a teacher is significant for the study of gender identity because attachment to a figure of authority outside the family is one of the typical ways in which adolescents test and shape their sense of self. School in this setting is also a site of linguistic negotiation. A Hindi teacher in a Khasi and English-speaking environment represents a different linguistic and national orientation and a girl;s affection for such a teacher may carry cultural as well as personal meanings.

Conclusion

International Journal of
LAW, ARTS AND HUMANITIES
Peer Reviewed, Referred & Indexed Journal
ISSN: 3070-0523 www.zesterapublications.com Original Research Paper

This paper argued that the gendered identity of D, the protagonist of Daribha Lyndem's Name Place Animal Thing is a sequence of noun-centred stories echoing a children's game of classification, mirrors the way in which a child learns to sort the world and to place herself within it. Its narrator is an adult looking back on a girlhood in which she was often a witness, ensuring that gender is represented as something both lived and interpreted. Another understanding from the analysis is that even though D's childhood can be measured with Khasi matriliny where it can be read as a simple guarantee of female empowerment, it is further understood that D's gender identity cannot exist without it being situated within particular hierarchies of class and ethnicity.

Works Cited

Abel, Elizabeth, et al., editors. *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*. UP of New England, 1983.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage, 1989.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005, pp. 829–59.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1, 1989, pp. 139–67.

Lanser, Susan Sniader. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Cornell UP, 1992.

Lyndem, Daribha. *Name Place Animal Thing*. Zubaan, 2020.

"Name Place Animal Thing." *Feminism in India*, Dec 22, 2020, https://feminisminindia.com/2020/12/22/book-review-daribha-lyndem-zubaan-books-name-place-animal-thing/

McDuie-Ra, Duncan. *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail*. Amsterdam University Press, 2012.

Nongbri, Tiplut. *Development, Ethnicity and Gender: Selected Essays on Tribes in India*. Rawat Publications, 2003.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed., U of Minnesota P, 2010.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Tiwari, Sandhya. "Book Review: *Name, Place Animal Thing* by Daribha Lyndem." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1–4, https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne42.