

Re-reading the Mao folktale of *Akajii Ye Ariijii Ko*

—Rose Mary Kazhiia
—Zothanchhingi
Khiantle

Abstract:

Akajii Ye Ariijii Ko (*Akajii* and *Ariijii*) is a popular folktale among the Mao Naga(s) of Manipur and Nagaland. A close reading of the tale reveals the attitude of a patriarchal society towards women and how their voices go unheard and their achievements unacknowledged. As the title of the story suggests, the apparent central characters are *Akajii* and *Ariijii*, two great warriors of the time in which the story originates. But as one reads the story, one clearly understands that it is Kapeini who is the main “actor”, the unsung heroine. The character of Kapeini is generally seen as the stereotypical woman who uses her charm and beauty to deceive. In this story, Kapeini uses her charms to seduce the man who killed her brother and avenge his death by slaying him. As a female persona, Kapeini is one such woman who represents the voice of feminist consciousness and who has the will and courage to bring change into the conventional society.

Keywords: Patriarchal, stereotype, conventional, feminist consciousness.

The folktale of *Akajii* and *Ariijii* is found not only among the Mao Nagas but different versions of it are found among the *Angami* and the *Khezha* Naga tribes of Nagaland. J.H Hutton had collected this tale from the Angami and titled it as ‘*A Naga Judith*’ in his book *The Angami Nagas* (1921). The Naga society is patriarchal. It is a social system in which men control power. Patriarchy is a “system of social structures and practices where men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby 214). Though the patriarchal structures are no longer so rigid, the Nagas in the past assigned distinct roles for both genders which were strictly followed by the members. Gender roles were maintained in the society through oral instructions mediated by folk narratives. The women were confined

to domestic work, childbearing and cultivation while the men dealt with polity, hunting, warfare, and cultivation. Everyone born into society accepts these norms and roles unconsciously and does not challenge the system that imposes upon them.

Transcending Boundaries

Akajii and Ariijii - two great warriors- hail from different villages. One day they decide to settle for a duel. The cowardly Akajii betrays Ariijii and brings accomplices to kill Ariijii. Back in the village of Ariijii, no one dares to take revenge on Akajii because Akajii was known to be a formidable warrior. It was Kapeini, the sister of Ariijii, who then decides to avenge the death of her brother. With her wit and intelligence and her womanly charm, she succeeds in killing Akajii and brings the decapitated head at her village gate. One of her brothers receives the head of Akajii and enters the village. The enemy was slain and there was rejoicing and celebration upon this victory. In the traditional society, the women were not allowed to bring the war trophy inside the village. This very tradition reveals the patriarchal nature of the Mao society. Kapeini's achievement was not recognised though she was the central character in the narrative; even the story is titled after the male characters despite their insignificant roles.

It is within such a traditional structure that the story of *Kapeini* is told. She is an outstanding woman of intelligence and fortitude. The story narrates an incident of a female act that transcends the male-centric borders in a conventional society. Men's courage in the Naga society was established in their acts of valour in headhunting and fighting against wild animals (Walnunir 17). Heroism and warriorhood seemed to be given more importance above any other political capacities. It is therefore to be understood that the political arena was a man's domain since women in general would not engage in war activities or in acts of valour and manhood except on very rare occasions (Daniel 60-61); head hunting was done by women as in the case of Kapeini, the sister of Ariijii in the story. Women were considered weak and were mostly confined to agricultural and domestic work. The story depicts courage, fearlessness and Kapeini's identity as a woman. Her accomplishment is an act of woman's emancipation, an embodiment of one who goes ahead of her time (Ngone 161) and so consequently comes into conflict with society. This social conflict as a result of transgressing societal norms can be observed from the story under study when members of Kapeini's family refused to accept her invitation to come and take the head of the enemy from the village gate.

The younger brother, who comes and takes the head inside the village symbolizes the open-mindedness of the younger generation in accepting unconventional changes that come about in the society.

The female protagonist

In *Akajii Ye Ariijii Ko* (Saleo 27-32), the story depicts the attitude of society towards women even when they perform heroic deeds. Kapeini is a female protagonist, who in a way defies the law of the land (Ngone 160) and in doing so

ventures out to hunt the head of *Akajii*, a feared warrior. Her bravery today would have earned her an award, jubilation, and celebration, but that was not so in those olden days when the people were governed by the strict laws and traditions of society. The story takes us back to those years when people practiced headhunting. Headhunting in older days was operated within a strict system of 'dos' and 'don'ts', which was rarely challenged by any member of the village community. Women did not directly participate in headhunting (Daniel 61) but they were indirect participants in their roles as bearers of tradition. With sheer determination and focus, Kapeini became a shining example of what a woman is capable of achieving in life. Kapeini is an example of a stable and courageous mind (Rosalind 195).

One can arguably say that the story of *Akajii* and *Arijii* is the story of Kapeini, who takes up justice in her own hands. She is shrewd and crafty. She evinces mental fitness as opposed to the brute physicality of the men of her time. Kapeini illustrates that a woman can be as powerful as a man and cleverer when the need arises. She does something which most men feared to do. The story narrates how a woman can go out of her way to become an embodiment of intelligence and power when she desires to. Kapeini displays her courage in a society where bravery was confined within the domain of the menfolk.

Silenced voice

In a patriarchal society, history looks at women about the situation of men. They are considered the weaker section, incapable of doing any good beyond their assigned role which is almost always in relation to their household (Rosalind 188, 189). It had always been the duty of men to perform heroic acts such as war, avenging the enemy, taking part in politics, and partaking in outdoor activities.

After her brother is killed, Kapeini pleads with the villagers to avenge her brother's death but no one listens. Even on her return with the enemy's head at the village gate, her brothers refuse to come and take the head into the village. Her voice is not heard. Her power of articulation is silenced. Her language is not accepted because she lives in a patriarchal society in which a man's voice is the only recognised voice. Ultimately, the younger brother comes and takes the head to the village. The refusal of the two elder brothers in a way signifies that the traditional generation is not ready to acknowledge the unconventional. The refusal of Kapeini's brothers to acknowledge her success in headhunting speaks of their adherence to the gender roles defined by society. The roles assigned to both genders are strictly followed and accepted by them. Therefore, the heroic act of Kapeini is being looked down upon. Her success is overshadowed by the fact that she is a woman and her act of going out into men's domain becomes an act of defiance. The act of hunting the enemy's head by Kapeini goes against the social norms of the time. Her success does not bring her fame or honour as it would have, if she was a man (Ngone 161). The bounty brought by Kapeini in the text had to be carried inside by the brother to receive social sanctification with proper rite and ritual so that he is entitled to put on a warrior dress (Mao 24), a special standard to measure social status and recognition

for men. Thus it may also be said that the glory that is due to Kapeini is bestowed upon the brother.

A critical analysis of the text reveals that the story has both positive and negative impacts on society. There is a strong undercurrent of stereotyping in the character of Kapeini. Kapeini's story is told as a reminder to the people of women's capacity for deception rather than as an acknowledgement of a woman's heroic deed. Kapeini is said to use her charm and beauty to seduce the man who kills her brother and to avenge his death by slaying him using her sexual allure. She is forced to use the only weapon she has with her to defeat her enemy but this 'weapon' is not necessarily her beauty and charm. It is the paper's objective to re-read the story by suggesting an alternative claim. Instead of calling her strategy as a deception, it will be more apt to claim that it was her intellect and statecraft that helped her succeed when all other men failed. When all pleas for help to avenge the death of Ariijii are denied, Kapeini's skill in political strategy comes into play. Kapeini gains access to an audience with Akajii and like the biblical story of Judith, she uses her wit and intelligence and kills him. The book of Judith in the Scripture narrates how Judith with her charm and beauty leads the enemy to their downfall. The women's sense of keen observation is revealed in the way these women characters identify their enemy's weakness. Judith through her shrewdness and meticulous planning manages to get the general of the enemy of her people killed and saves her people from further destruction. She thus brings victory to her people. Unlike the women figures in the Bible, however, Kapeini's heroic deed is not acknowledged. Instead, undeserved fame and honour are accorded to her brother who takes the head from the village gate to the village. Since headhunting was the domain of the men folk in the olden days, her claim to honour went unheard and unacknowledged in the male-dominated Mao society.

Works Cited

- Bahlieda, Robert. "Chapter 1: The Legacy of Patriarchal ." *Counterpoints*, vol. 488 (2015), pp. 15-67.
- Daniel, M. *Socio-Cultural Life Of mao Naga Tribe*. New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2008.
- Hutton, J.H. *The Angami Nagas*. London: Macmillan and Co.Limited, 1921.
- Kaisa, Rosalind. "The Saga of Hidden Treasures in the Mao Woman." Athikho Kaisii, Heni Francis Ariina, Eds., *Tribal Philosophy and Culture: Mao Naga of North East*. New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2012, pp.187-199.
- Mao, Kaihrii Sani. *Mao Folk Story*. Senapati, 2021.
- Ngone, Medongunuo. "Gender Naratives : Reinterpreting Langaage, Culture abnd Tradition in Nagland." Bendangsengla el at., Eds. *Kaponeo Milikrito and Nichiihmi Ube Uzii Chemo: A Reconnaissance of Patriarchy in Khezha Folk Narratives*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2021, pp.156-163.
- Salco, N. *Edemei Ko Bvii Volume I*. Pudunamei: N.Saleo, n.d.
- The Bible: *Good News Bible*. Mumbai: St. Paul's reprinted 2019-20.

- Walby, Sylvia. "Theorising Patriarchy." *Sociology*, 23(2) (1989), pp. 213-234.
- Walmunir. "Cultural Grammar and Gender Relation: A study of Female Utterances Within Power Structure in Nagaland." Bendangsenla et al. Eds. *Gender Narratives: Reinterpreting Language, Culture and Tradition in Nagaland*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2021, pp.15-32.

□□□

PhD Scholar
Dept. of English
Bodoland University, Kokrajhar-783370, BTR Assam
Mobile: 9127320827 Email id: kazhila@yahoo.co.in

PhD
(Supervisor)
Assistant Professor
Dept. of English
Bodoland University, Kokrajhar- 783370, BTR, Assam.
Mobile: 7086242363 Email id: zoe12.bu@gmail.com