

Echo of Feminism in Nini Lungalung's *The Child of Fortune*

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Abstract

Nini Lungalung, a Naga woman writer takes to poems and short story writing to express the angst of women particularly the Naga women. An excellent and poignant short story, the *Child of Fortune* brilliantly captures the author's construction of feminist thought being portrayed through the trajectory of the women's body and soul unfathomably ingrained in the principle gender stereotyping. The story is explicit in articulating parallel narratives which exposes the depth of entrenchment in women's consciousness in embracing a lifestyle of silence and subservience but not missing on unearthing the deeply interiorized resistance to gender stereotyping: the story also traverses into those spaces where women's body becomes a vending outlet to extreme atrocities borne at the hands of sadistic maleness in war and conflict zones.

Key Words: feminist thought, gender stereotyping, entrenchment, interiorized resistance, atrocities

Nini Vinguriau Lungalang (1948-) is a fine writer and a pianist of distinction from Nagaland. Lungalung is someone who had always been "fascinated with the rhythm of words and its natural progression." ("Tunes of a piano teacher." www.ashley-kirk.com) and she takes on the art of writing and the potential of words in constructing creative art giving equal importance to lexical correctness, the emotional characters, the suggestiveness of a word, as well as its sonic significance. In reading her poems and short story one cannot but appreciate the fine philosophical finesse of meanings to the words she weaves into lines of storytelling. Lungalung dwell on issues ranging from ecological concerns, gender concerns, concerns on conflict, motherhood, human relationships etc. In her one and only poem collection *The Morning Years*, Lungalang's commitment to this philosophy of poetic

calling is displayed brilliantly in her poems which are endowed with meditative and philosophical qualities giving important premise to the element of thought perfectly coalesced with emotional qualities mingled with beauty, vividness and propriety of language and imagery, these characteristics of which spills an echo in her lone short story *The Child of Fortune*.

Though the lens of the short story in discussion called *The Child of Fortune*, the intellectual geniality in Lungalung captures and mirrors the suffering and anguish of the Nagas being caught in the wake of the Indo-Naga conflict. Tracing into the background of the story is found factual historical hardships faced by Nagas in the hands of Indian security forces as corollary to its national movement for independence. The story takes place in an Angami Naga Village called Khanam which was sparsely

populated counting only to eleven households. The trajectory of the plot thus gives a glimpse to human suffering caught in the throes of armed conflict but within its inner circle is chronicled of how women's body bears the brunt of war's consequences. The poet is able to sew and hem into its main line of narrative with another narrative themed around feminist tenets.

The Child of Fortune may not be labeled as a pure feminist text but does ring a coherence with the pointer that, "Feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality." (Barry 122). It coheres with the idea that "Feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence." (Barry 121). Nini Lungalang uses the imagery of her protagonist in exposing what then is called the mechanisms of patriarchy promulgated cultural mind-set in both men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality and violence. In the short story *The Child of Fortune* the author broached the theme of women pitted against dual hegemonic consequences of culture and warring conflict where the question of women's subsistence is brazenly translated through the key characters. This question is dealt with by the writer with great dexterity indicated with much force and explicitly enunciates passionate philosophical and the substantial

value of the thought that renders evocative and thought provoking exposé on women's angst.

Author Nini Lungalang challenges the patriarchal stipulated typecast mentality on gender through her succinct story. Her approach is deeply philosophical and interiorized. The author's subjectivity drives the narrative into the deep recesses of the protagonist's mind in *The Child of Fortune*. The apparent story line reads of a mother and her little girl entangled in the dark times of the Naga National Struggle, a nation which is bed-rocked along patriarchal value system. However, the author propels the protagonist and her little girl Rokono to sublime heights casting them as symbolical figurines to the deep cravings of every woman rising way beyond man made detrimental shackles.

The short story begins and ends with the narrative of the brutal reality of how women's body is used to display male sadistic prowess, a manifest of men's sense of false power. Tucked in the middle of the story is interlaced with the narrative of women's consciousness in embracing a lifestyle of silence and subservience through Rokono and her mother. The plot structure seem to be constructed as to render breathe into the words Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* where she opines that ultimately all power resides in the use of force and that physical force plays a determining role in contemporary patriarchy. Susan Griffin's analysis in *Rape: the All-American Crime* also showed that power is constituted by, develops, and is exercised through the interconnection of sexuality, aggression, violence and masculinity. At Lungalang

begins the story she captures the horrific ordeal of women paying the price of being the female. Lungalung narrates, "That terrible year when the soldiers first came to New village....It was just before the planting time that year ...then one day, the soldiers came: hundreds, they seemed. No one knew why they had come, but they came like a swarm of hornets....The women were stripped and raped, even the old crones, while the soldiers laughed and cheered. They spared her only, and that because she was huge and pregnant; but they had stripped her too and laughed." (Lungalung 93) As the writer weaves the story to its end, a span of four years have passed and the village was befallen with a repetition of the dark ordeal when the soldiers, "returned. Like a swarm of hornets, they returned, roaring and shooting into air....Again the men were beaten, Again, the women raped." (Lungalung 95) In drawing about a full circle of the plot, the author brilliantly entwines the quandaries of Rokono and her mother, of being entrapped forever in patriarchal mores of conduct and of being caught in the risk of sexual exploitation as a symbolical representation of the plight of women based in patriarchal societies as the crux of women's many angst.

Lungalung decorously corroborates to the advocacy of femininity which values the role and responsibility of women as wives and mothers in concurrence to stirring away from participating willingly into subservient gendered spaces strictly construed along culturally constructed notions. Lungalung impinges on the crux of patriarchy through Rokono's mother. In so doing, the author leads the readers into the recesses of her character's mind where a clear confrontation

to the patriarchal order of life is delineated representing the unspoken desires of every woman. It was as if Mother Nature herself acquiescence in perfect symphony with this mother's surreptitious desire in an intense magical moment when, "On an evening as she sat in enforced idleness, she saw the new moon low in the sky holding the old moon in the circle of her horns. Pale she was, the moon, and fragile as the finger nail of a newborn. As she gazed, she felt the first stab of birthing pain. An omen, she thought, and smiled her secret smile; it will be a woman she thought exultantly. She will be my joy."(Lungalung 94) The author creates a thrilling sense of trepidation as she ventures to denigrate the classic characteristic of patriarchy's celebration of male progeny.

The pulse of trepidation to the moment of birth reaches a feverish intensity with the comments made by the women who came in 'the sisterhood of pain' even as the birthing mother writhes in pain. Perhaps a better understanding of such trepidation is wrought in comprehending that customarily in the Angami Naga traditions which serve as the social milieu to this story, the birth of a son is received with great celebration but the birth of a daughter faces disdain aspersions in comments like 'hou! Orù!', which means, 'Oh Well! But a son would have been better!' Unlike such stereotypical expectations, Lungalung portrays a welcoming sight in the birth of the child and named her to be the 'Child of Fortune' as an epitome of hope. Rokono's birth was received with, "a murmur of approval from the young women" and "it was as if her birth had made them whole again."(Lungalung 94) Echoing the accepted custom of patrilineal fervor, the women heartens the

mother saying, “You will have a strong son, they crooned, and he will defend you and avenge his father’s death” (Lungalung 94). The mother’s dissent, tussle and her triumph against the socially and culturally constructed mindset drenched in gender biasness is writ in lines, “No! She gasped as she twisted with pain. It will be a woman, as beautiful and constant as the moon that always returns, And it was a woman.” (Lungalung 94) The crescendo of the trepidation comes to a hush-hush thrill of an end but only in the mother’s heart when a daughter Rokono meaning Child of Fortune was born.

Soon the child of fortune becomes the centre of attention in the village which was more of a big family. Her brothers would attend to her needs cheerfully and Rokono grew to be child who “was a joy to behold.....everyone had affection for this child.” (Lungalung 96) Rokono grew to be so lovable but she was so different from other children. Unlike others she would remain very silent and never pester her mother, a child who hardly ever coo or cry. The child, “was a quiet, placid baby, said the older mothers, for she cried only when she was hungry: a strange, hoarse, low wail, so unlike the high angry shrieks of a hungry infant. And she never smiled. While other babies born after her cooed and gurgled and laughed when tickled, this one was silent and still if she moved at all, her movements were slow and jerky, and all the time, she would stare out of those great black eyes that seemed to see everything-or nothing at all.” (Lungalung 95) Bitter reality did dawn on the mother about her child’s physical state when one evening the older in an impetuous way had

said, “My mother, our friends say that our sister is dumb and idiot. Why can’t you teach her to talk? They say that her breath will make other babies into idiots!” (Lungalung 97) One would wonder if Lungalung calculatedly makes the child dumb using it as an allegorical representation to eulogize women’s lot. Should the child be not dumb, would her lot be any different? Perhaps it won’t have been of any relevance at all and the mother realizes the unavoidable painful reality.

Nini Lungalung uses ‘Death’ and ‘Silence’ as paradigms to infringe and transcend the fraught prescriptive gender categories and roles. In so doing, the author could stir up a sense of detest and resistance to hegemonic culture of stereotyping, suppression and oppression. The author breaks down and transcends the fraught categories of gender; she disrupts muted state of surrender to the socially and culturally constructed gendered mores and succeeds in brilliantly rousing up a consciousness towards gainsaying gender stereotyping. Lungalung beautifully translates the seemingly subservient archetype of women image to a subversive state of trouncing and triumph. The mother’s courage and decision in *The Child of Fortune* speaks of the female’s delusion to live a peaceful and gender just life liberated from being discriminated and exploited on the basis of their gender. Disparaging over the fate of her daughter and herself, the mother decides to vindicate and unfetter themselves out of life’s bleak miseries. The author then uses death to defy a life of subjugation, perhaps to say death is a better choice than to live a wretched life.

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