



Gender Construction in the Nyishi (Nyishing) Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: Customary Law, Religion, Feminist Thought and Transformative Modernity

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Abstract: This paper examines the construction of gender in the Nyishi (Nyishing) tribe of Arunachal Pradesh through a conceptual and thematic approach. Using secondary sources, ethnographic accounts, and feminist theoretical frameworks, the study analyses how customary law, religion, Christianity, and modern social changes shape gender roles and relations. Findings show that customary law and ritual practices continue to privilege male authority, while women's roles, though culturally significant, are often confined to domestic and supportive spheres. At the same time, education, state policies, and Christian influence are gradually opening new spaces for women's participation, leadership, and agency. By applying insights from Judith Butler, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Arundhati Roy, the paper highlights that gender is socially performed, culturally justified, and dynamically negotiated. The study argues that customary law and ritual practices continue to privilege male authority, while women's roles, though culturally significant, are often located within domestic and supportive spheres.

Index Terms - Nyishi, Nyishing, gender construction, Arunachal Pradesh, customary law, Christianity, Donyi-Polo, feminist anthropology

1. Introduction

Gender is an important social concept which helps us to understand how roles, responsibilities, and power are distributed between men and women in any society. In modern social science, gender is not seen as something fixed or natural, but as something that is socially constructed through culture, tradition, institutions, and everyday practices (Risman et al., 2018). This means that what is expected from men and women is shaped by society and not only by biological differences. Because of this, gender relations differ from one society to another and also change over time. In India, gender relations are highly diverse because of cultural, regional, and ethnic differences. While many studies show that patriarchal values are strong in most parts of India, there are also variations in the way gender is practiced and experienced (Sarma & Das, 2021). The North Eastern region of India is often considered different from mainland India because of its tribal population, customary laws, and community-based way of life. However, this does not mean that gender equality is fully present in the region. In fact, many scholars have shown that even in tribal societies of Northeast India, gender roles are structured and power is often held more by men, especially in areas such as property rights, village councils, and ritual authority (Longkumer, 2020). Therefore, gender in tribal societies must be understood not only through social structure but also through cultural meanings and symbolic forms of authority that shape everyday social expectations.

Within the North Eastern region, Arunachal Pradesh presents a unique social and cultural context. The state is home to many indigenous tribes, each having its own language, culture, religion, and customary practices. These customary systems play a very important role in shaping gender relations because they regulate marriage, inheritance, property ownership, dispute settlement, and social behaviour. According to Mibang (2017), tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh are not static but are continuously changing due to education, modern administration, and religious transformation. This indicates that gender roles in these societies are also changing, though not in a uniform manner. Among the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Nyishi (Nyishing) tribe is one of the largest and most socially significant groups. The Nyishi people are mainly found in districts such as Papum Pare, East Kameng, Kurung Kumey, Kamle, Pakke-Kessang, Keyi Panyor, and Kra Daadi. Traditionally, Nyishi society is organised on a patrilineal system where descent, clan identity, and inheritance pass through the male line. Marriage practices such as bride price, the role of village councils (Nyedar Namlo), and the importance of ritual specialists (Nyubu) have historically given more formal authority to men in public and ritual life (Tada, 2018).

At the same time, Nyishi women play a very important role in the economic and social life of the community. They are deeply involved in agriculture, household management, food production, child care, and preservation of cultural traditions. This shows that even though women have strong economic and social contributions, their formal decision-making power has traditionally remained limited (Begi, 2019). Therefore, Nyishi society provides an important example where women remain central to survival

and cultural continuity, while men continue to hold greater institutional authority. In recent decades, several changes have started influencing Nyishi society. The spread of modern education, the influence of Christianity, the revival of the Donyi-Polo faith, and the implementation of constitutional rights and government policies have created new opportunities as well as challenges for gender relations. Education has enabled many Nyishi women to enter government employment, teaching professions, and political participation. Christianity has encouraged literacy and influenced certain marriage practices such as polygyny. At the same time, traditional institutions remain strong, and customary practices continue to influence everyday social life (Longkumer, 2020; Sarma & Das, 2021). Because of these developments, gender relations among the Nyishi are now situated within a stage of transition. They are neither fully traditional nor completely modern; rather, they reflect an ongoing process of negotiation where communities attempt to balance cultural identity with emerging ideas of gender equality. This makes it important to examine how gender is constructed within Nyishi society and how it is gradually transforming over time. Therefore, the present study aims to examine gender construction among the Nyishi (Nyishing) tribe of Arunachal Pradesh by analysing customary law, kinship practices, religion, and modern influences through a feminist theoretical perspective. The study seeks to understand how gender roles are socially created, culturally maintained, and slowly reinterpreted within the contemporary context.

2. Review of Literature

Understanding gender construction in any society requires a careful engagement with existing research on gender, indigenous social systems, religion, and processes of social change. The present study draws upon an interdisciplinary body of literature that includes gender theory, tribal studies, and regional scholarship on Northeast India and Arunachal Pradesh. Such an approach is necessary because gender relations within tribal societies are shaped not only by social structures but also by cultural meanings, customary practices, and historical transformations. At a broader level, contemporary gender scholarship explains that gender is not a fixed biological reality but a social system shaped through institutions such as family, economy, religion, and law (Risman et al., 2018). Feminist sociological works further argue that gender inequality continues in different forms across societies, even in situations where women contribute significantly to economic life (Connell & Pearse, 2015). These theoretical insights are important for understanding gender within indigenous communities, where social norms are deeply embedded in tradition and customary practices.

In the Indian context, gender relations have been widely examined in relation to patriarchy, property rights, and access to education. However, scholars emphasize that gender experiences vary significantly across regions and communities (Chakrabarti, 2018). Tribal societies are often perceived as more community-oriented and less hierarchical than caste-based social systems, yet research indicates that gender hierarchies continue to exist, particularly in matters related to inheritance, ritual authority, and political participation (Xaxa, 2016). This highlights the need to examine tribal gender relations within their specific cultural contexts rather than through generalized assumptions. When examining Northeast India, the discussion becomes more complex due to the region's ethnic diversity and strong customary institutions. Earlier perceptions suggested that women in Northeast India enjoy relatively higher status compared to women in mainland India. However, recent studies challenge this assumption and demonstrate that women often remain excluded from formal decision-making bodies, land ownership, and religious authority despite their active participation in economic and social life (Sarma & Das, 2021). Longkumer (2020) further explains that the spread of Christianity in Northeast India has produced mixed outcomes, including improved literacy and education alongside the continuation of male dominance within church leadership structures.

In Arunachal Pradesh, gender-focused analytical studies are still emerging, but several important contributions have been made by regional scholars. Mibang (2017) observes that tribal societies in Arunachal Pradesh are dynamic and undergoing transformation under the influence of education, administration, and market forces. While traditional systems contributed to community cohesion, they also structured gender roles within defined social boundaries. Tada (2018), in his study of Nyishi customary law, documents how institutions such as marriage, inheritance, and village councils are organised along patrilineal lines, directly influencing the distribution of authority between men and women.

Earlier ethnographic and anthropological studies on the Nyishi tribe have primarily focused on social organisation, kinship structure, customary law, and ritual practices rather than gender analysis. Scholars documenting Nyishi society have described the importance of clan organisation, bride price, and ritual authority in maintaining social order, but gender relations have often remained implicit within these descriptions. Such studies provide valuable insights into the structural foundations of Nyishi society; however, they rarely engage with feminist interpretation or examine how gender roles are culturally produced and negotiated within changing social contexts. This absence of gender-focused interpretation makes it necessary to re-examine Nyishi social institutions through a feminist and thematic analytical framework. Begi (2019) specifically examines gender and customary law in Arunachal Pradesh and argues that women play central roles in household management and agricultural production but remain underrepresented in formal governance systems. This observation is particularly relevant to Nyishi society, where women are economically active yet have limited participation in Nyedar Namlo (village councils). Scholars have also highlighted the role of religion in shaping gender relations in the region. Sarma and Das (2021) note that indigenous revival movements such as Donyi-Polo contribute to cultural preservation while simultaneously reinforcing certain traditional gender norms. Conversely, the expansion of Christianity has influenced marriage practices, literacy, and women's public participation, although institutional leadership continues to be predominantly male (Longkumer, 2020).

Another important area of literature concerns education and modernity. With the expansion of schooling and state-led development policies after independence, tribal women in Arunachal Pradesh have increasingly entered formal employment, administration, and political spaces (Government of India, 2020). While these developments have opened new opportunities for gender equality, they have also created tensions between customary practices and modern legal frameworks.

Despite these important contributions, most existing studies approach gender either through anthropological description or policy-oriented analysis. There remains limited engagement with feminist theoretical interpretation in analysing gender construction within specific tribal communities such as the Nyishi. Therefore, the present study attempts to bridge regional scholarship with feminist theoretical discourse through a thematic and interpretative framework, bringing together customary law, religion, feminist thought, and processes of modern transformation within a single analytical perspective.

3. Methodology (Conceptual and Thematic Approach)

3.1 Nature of the Study

The present study is conceptual, interpretative, and thematic in nature. It does not rely on primary field surveys or quantitative data collection. Instead, the research is based on critical and reflective engagement with existing knowledge systems, including academic writings, ethnographic descriptions, cultural narratives, and feminist theoretical perspectives related to gender and tribal societies. The purpose of adopting a conceptual approach is to understand how gender is socially constructed, culturally reproduced, and historically maintained within Nyishi (Nyishing) tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh. Gender relations in tribal communities cannot be fully understood through numerical data alone, as they are deeply embedded in belief systems, customs, rituals, kinship structures, and everyday social practices. Therefore, this study interprets gender as a lived social reality shaped through cultural institutions and symbolic meanings. The conceptual approach allows the study to examine how gender roles are created, justified, and gradually transformed within changing social contexts.

The research focuses on four major thematic dimensions through which gender relations are structured and negotiated in Nyishi society: customary law, religion and ritual practices, feminist interpretation, and transformative modernity. These dimensions represent core domains of social life through which gender roles are defined, regulated, and sometimes challenged. Conceptual studies of this nature are widely accepted in social sciences and humanities when the aim is to interpret meanings, analyse power relations, and understand cultural structures rather than measure numerical variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2020).

3.2 Thematic Analytical Framework

The study adopts a thematic analytical framework in which gender construction is examined through interconnected social, cultural, and ideological themes rather than isolated variables. In tribal societies such as the Nyishi, gender is not shaped by a single factor but emerges through the interaction of customary law, belief systems, economic roles, and processes of social change. The thematic approach therefore allows a holistic understanding of gender relations.

The first theme, customary law, examines rules of marriage, inheritance, lineage, clan organisation, and village governance systems that regulate social behaviour and influence the distribution of authority between men and women. The second theme, religion and ritual practices, analyses the role of traditional Donyi-Polo beliefs, ritual performances, symbolic gender roles, and the influence of Christianity in shaping social expectations and participation. The third theme, feminist thought, provides the theoretical lens through which questions of gender equality, voice, agency, and structural inequality are interpreted. The fourth theme, transformative modernity, explores the influence of education, state policies, employment, mobility, and exposure to wider social processes in reshaping gender relations. These themes are analysed as interconnected and overlapping processes, as gender construction in Nyishi society is understood as dynamic and evolving rather than fixed or static.

3.3 Sources of Data

Since the study is conceptual in nature, it relies primarily on secondary and interpretative sources of knowledge. The major sources include academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles on gender, tribal society, and Northeast India; ethnographic and anthropological writings on Arunachal Pradesh; works of indigenous scholars and regional researchers; government reports and policy documents related to education and social development; and feminist theoretical texts within gender studies. Special emphasis has been placed on recent literature (2015–2025) to ensure that the discussion reflects contemporary realities and ongoing transformations. At the same time, the study recognises the importance of indigenous knowledge systems, acknowledging that tribal societies often preserve social norms and gender relations through oral traditions and lived cultural practices documented in earlier scholarship.

3.4 Theoretical Foundation

The study is guided by feminist and gender theoretical perspectives that help in critically interpreting cultural practices and social structures. The works of Judith Butler, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Arundhati Roy are used as interpretative guides rather than rigid analytical frameworks. Butler's understanding of gender as socially performed helps explain how repeated customs normalise gender roles. Wollstonecraft's emphasis on education and rational agency provides insight into the transformative role of education in women's empowerment. Woolf's reflections on voice and intellectual space help analyse women's representation and participation in social institutions, while Roy's critique of power structures assists in understanding marginalisation and inequality within broader social contexts. These theoretical perspectives enable the study to connect local tribal experience with global feminist discourse while remaining sensitive to cultural context. The aim is not to reject traditional practices but to interpret how gender roles are culturally justified, socially maintained, and gradually reinterpreted within changing social conditions.

3.5 Scope and Delimitations of the Study

The study focuses specifically on the Nyishi (Nyishing) tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and examines gender construction within this particular socio-cultural context. The scope of the research is limited to cultural, social, and ideological dimensions of gender, with emphasis on customary law, religious practices, social norms, and processes of modern transformation. The study prioritises interpretation of meanings and symbolic structures rather than statistical measurement. Geographically, the research remains confined to Arunachal Pradesh with specific reference to Nyishi society. The findings are therefore context-specific and are not intended to be generalised to all tribal communities. Methodologically, the study relies on secondary sources and does not include primary fieldwork or interviews. This limitation is acknowledged, as the objective of the research is conceptual interpretation rather than empirical measurement. The study also primarily examines gender relations within the male–female framework reflected in traditional cultural structures, as discussions on non-binary identities remain limited within available documentation on Nyishi society.

3.6 Significance of the Study

The study holds academic and social significance within the fields of tribal studies, gender discourse, and cultural analysis. By focusing on the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, the research brings attention to a region and community that remains relatively underrepresented in mainstream gender scholarship. The study contributes to interdisciplinary gender studies by integrating insights from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and feminist theory, thereby expanding feminist discourse to include indigenous knowledge systems and local cultural experiences.

The study is also significant because it uses global feminist thought to interpret local realities in a culturally sensitive manner. The works of Judith Butler, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Arundhati Roy are used as interpretative guides to understand how gender is constructed, justified, and transformed within Nyishi society. This bridging of local and global perspectives enriches both tribal studies and feminist discourse. From a broader perspective, the study highlights the internal dynamics of gender relations within Nyishi society, demonstrating how customary law, religion, and social norms influence everyday life while also acknowledging emerging changes brought about by education, policy interventions, and social mobility. In doing so, the research contributes to culturally sensitive discussions on gender justice, education, and community development in Arunachal Pradesh and Northeast India.

4. Discussion / Thematic Analysis

The construction of gender in Nyishi (Nyishing) society emerges through the interaction of customary law, religious practices, cultural expectations, and processes of modern transformation. Rather than functioning as a fixed system, gender relations operate as a negotiated social structure where tradition and change coexist. The following thematic discussion examines how gender roles are produced, maintained, and gradually reinterpreted within Nyishi society.

4.1 Customary Law and Gendered Authority

Customary law remains one of the most influential institutions shaping social organisation among the Nyishi. It regulates marriage practices, inheritance, clan lineage, and community decision-making, thereby defining social authority and responsibility. Traditionally, these institutional structures have positioned men within formal decision-making roles, particularly in village councils and dispute resolution processes. While such arrangements historically emerged from clan-based organisation and division of labour, they have also normalised male authority in public space. Customary institutions in Northeast India more broadly often reflect historically evolved gendered authority structures that influence access to leadership and decision-making roles (Fernandes & Barbora, 2015). From a feminist interpretative perspective, this reflects what Judith Butler describes as the repetition of socially accepted roles through which gender hierarchies become naturalised over time. Women's exclusion from formal authority does not necessarily arise from lack of contribution but from cultural structures that define legitimacy and leadership in gendered terms. However, increasing educational awareness and interaction with modern legal frameworks are gradually encouraging reconsideration of women's participation within customary institutions, indicating that customary law itself is subject to reinterpretation rather than complete rejection.

4.2 Religion, Christianity and Symbolic Gender Roles

Religion plays a central role in shaping symbolic meanings of gender within Nyishi society. Traditional Donyi-Polo belief systems emphasise harmony between humans, nature, and ancestral forces, yet ritual authority has historically been associated with male roles, particularly in priesthood and ceremonial leadership. Women's roles, although culturally significant, are often expressed through supportive and preparatory functions, such as ritual organisation and preservation of cultural practices. The spread of Christianity has introduced new dimensions into gender relations by promoting literacy, education, and new forms of social participation. At the same time, leadership within church institutions often remains male-dominated, demonstrating that religious transformation does not automatically eliminate existing power structures. This reflects Arundhati Roy's observation that structures of power frequently adapt rather than disappear. Thus, religion in Nyishi society functions both as a source of continuity and as a space where gradual change becomes possible.

4.3 Gendered Labour and Social Identity

Gender roles in Nyishi society are closely connected with division of labour shaped by ecological and social conditions. Women play a central role in agriculture, household management, food production, and maintenance of kinship relations, making them essential to economic and cultural continuity. However, feminist analysis suggests that economic contribution alone does not ensure social authority. Cultural recognition and institutional participation remain important factors in determining gender status. This imbalance between contribution and authority highlights how gender identity is constructed through cultural narratives that define value and visibility. With expanding access to education and employment, younger Nyishi women are increasingly negotiating these traditional boundaries, leading to gradual redefinition of gender expectations without necessarily rejecting cultural identity.

4.4 Voice, Agency and Feminist Interpretation

The expansion of education and public participation has enabled Nyishi women to enter new intellectual and social spaces. This shift reflects Virginia Woolf's emphasis on the importance of voice and space for women's expression within society. Women's growing presence in education, government employment, and community organisations indicates emerging forms of agency that challenge earlier limitations on participation. From Butler's perspective, these developments illustrate how gender roles are continuously reconstructed through changing social practices. Agency in Nyishi society does not always emerge through confrontation with tradition but often through negotiation and gradual expansion of participation within existing cultural frameworks. This demonstrates that transformation can occur internally within cultural systems.

4.5 Modernity and Transformative Negotiation

Modernity in Nyishi society should not be understood as a replacement of tradition but as a process of negotiation between inherited practices and new social realities. Education, state policies, mobility, and exposure to wider social discourse have created new opportunities for women's participation and leadership. At the same time, customary values continue to shape community identity and social belonging.

The interaction between tradition and modernity therefore produces a transitional social condition in which gender roles are neither entirely traditional nor fully modern. Instead, gender construction becomes an evolving process shaped by dialogue between cultural

continuity and social transformation. This demonstrates that gender change within indigenous societies is gradual, context-specific, and deeply connected to cultural reinterpretation.

5. Conclusion

The present study argues that gender in the Nyishi (Nyishing) tribe of Arunachal Pradesh is not a fixed or natural category, but a socially constructed and culturally maintained system. Through the analysis of customary law, religious practices, the influence of Christianity, and processes of modern transformation, it becomes evident that gender roles in Nyishi society are shaped through a complex interaction of tradition, belief systems, social structure, and emerging modern influences.

Customary law and clan-based organisation continue to place men in positions of authority in matters related to property, ritual, and community decision-making, while women's roles have historically remained concentrated within domestic, agricultural, and supportive cultural activities. Religious and ritual practices further reinforce this structure by giving greater symbolic visibility to male authority in priesthood and ceremonial life. At the same time, Nyishi women have consistently played an essential role in sustaining culture, economy, and family life, even when their contributions have not always received formal institutional recognition. The study also highlights that significant changes are taking place within contemporary Nyishi society. The spread of Christianity, expansion of education, implementation of state policies, and increasing social awareness are gradually opening new spaces for women's participation, voice, and leadership. Educated Nyishi women are entering professional fields, participating in public life, and engaging critically with unequal customary practices. These developments do not completely replace tradition; rather, they create a negotiated social space where traditional values and modern ideas coexist and interact.

By engaging with feminist perspectives such as those of Judith Butler, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Arundhati Roy, the study demonstrates that gender inequality is not merely cultural but is also connected to questions of power, representation, education, and access to resources. At the same time, these theoretical perspectives help to illustrate that gender roles remain open to reinterpretation and transformation through awareness, education, and community engagement. In conclusion, Nyishi society today exists within a transitional phase where gender relations are gradually moving from rigid traditional patterns towards more inclusive and participatory forms. This transformation is gradual and uneven, yet it reflects both the agency of Nyishi women and the adaptive nature of tribal society itself. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of gender in indigenous contexts and highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and gender-just approaches in education, policy formulation, and community development in Arunachal Pradesh.

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