

CHAPTER V

Gender Continuum and Space Negotiations in Khasi Society

Historian, Sylvia D. Hoffert describes a gender ideal as the cluster of characteristics, behaviour patterns, and values that members of a group think a man or a woman should have, a set of cultural expectations. (Sylvia D. Hoffert, 2009, xix)

Gender equation in the Khasi society is an important theme that has emerged in the course of the study and has been discussed in this chapter. The position of women in the Khasi society is deliberated which is traced through the folk practices vis-à-vis the social set-up. It is argued that though patrilineal connotations are not seen in the folk media, the highly gendered folk media content is a key factor in understanding the gender continuum among the Khasis.

5.1 The Gender Question

In the contemporary times, gender has become a significant concern in the academe owing to the rise in the feminist movement in India, predominantly after the post-independence period. In the last few decades, a large part of the feminist scholarship has been devoted toward highlighting the social edifice of gender. 'Gender' is a frequently used word which can carry different meanings. In the realm of gender studies it is customary to put forth a clear distinction between sex i.e., biology and its task to determine manliness and feminineness and gender i.e., cultural philosophies and customs associated to sex, most commonly specific standard notion of individual characteristics linked with sex and therefore, articulated in femaleness and maleness. The idea that emerged was sex is a biological construct and by contrast gender is a social construct, though this idea has been heavily debated.

Scholars opine that it is difficult to delineate the biological and social construct of gender and as Judith Butler wrote in the book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), “gender cannot be conceived merely as a cultural inscription on a pre-given sex. It must also designate the very apparatus by which sex is produced as natural” (cited in Rege, 2003, 7). Gender thereby, has to be understood in the context of the social world which is inclusive of discourse, cultural and symbolic realms. Furthermore, the social world is not restricted to the cultural realm only; it also engages with matters of social organisation and social practices positioned in it. “It is in this context that sociological feminism has much to offer through an analysis of the different and intersecting facets of social construction of gender” (ibid., 8).

In the book, *Paradoxes of Gender* (1994), J. Lorber sees gender as an institution that establishes patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the everyday social processes, is built into major social organizations and is an entity in and of itself. (Cited in Rege, 2003, 9)

Gender is also considered to be one of the influences that help in the modelling of social life. Gender is an indispensable regulating principle of modern life: “In virtually every culture, gender difference is a pivotal way in which humans identify themselves as persons, organise social relations, and symbolise meaningful natural and social events and processes” (Wharton, 2005, 6).

Gender is seen as a structure of social practices which creates and supports gender differences. Herein, it can be inferred that gender is being constantly fashioned and refashioned. Also, it is not simply a trait of individuals, but trickles out at all levels of the social structure, whereby it becomes a multilevel prevalence. In this milieu it can be seen how social practices, like communication and social institutions reproduce gender. While modern life permits people to have manifold identities, gender identity is conceivably among the most influential in defining the standard people set for themselves.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) states 'Gender' becomes a dynamic verb...Practices, including traits, activities and values, become so-called 'gendered', i.e. people's practices construct members of a community as women and as men (or other gender categories) and their interaction within and between groups. (Cited in Marcussen, 2009, 3)

Further, it is accepted that gender denotes multifaceted ideas, beliefs, images, conceptions and even fantasies. No constituent in a gender structure stands alone. This is reflected in the biological differences that functions in social reality where people make actual decision in terms of allocation of work and expected roles, both in the house and outside. Primarily in the context of time and space the sexed adoptions are reciprocally exclusive. "In the domain of gender, not only do all possibilities exist simultaneously, but each necessarily defines the other" (March, 1983, 730).

It is pertinent to note that the societal gender-functions designated for a man and woman are communicated by family, peers and the media. Undeniably, even at primary stages of childhood, there are enormous dissimilarities between how boys and girls intermingle, which is an outcome of socialisation. "According to the socialization explanation, it is life experiences that reinforce or contradict gender differences: females are taught appropriate behaviours for their gender" (Burn, 1996; Basow, 1980; Crespi, 2003, cited in Gneezy, Leonard and List, 2006, 3). The process of gender socialisation commences with the birth of a child, with the rudimentary question of asking if it is boy or girl. The socialisation concept reinstates that it is life experiences that strengthen or challenge gender differences. Gender can be perceived on a gamut of characteristics revealed by a person irrespective of the person's biological sex.

Gender is culturally formed implying what a man or a woman should be. Any such matter on the gamut of maleness and femaleness, is demarcated by the dialogues that make the structure in which gendered subjects prevail and are located in connection to each other. "The importance of context thus concerns the notion that

categories of gender always are framed within socially constructed boundaries. But gender is also contextual in the sense that gender norms and codes are situationally determined” (Johansson, 2013, 363). Gender roles, thus, are the conventional approaches and behaviours, a society associates with each sex, this description positions gender evenly in the socio-cultural context.

From the point of view of symbolic interactionism, gender surfaces not as a singular trait but something that is attained in communication with others. Symbolic interactionists argue that models used to jointly classify people - such as ethnicity, and gender does not occur objectively but appear by means of a socially created process. Persons titled female or male are bestowed with specific mannerisms demarcated as womanly or manly. Gender roles are organised by set of norms intended for males and another produced for females. Even though each set of norms licenses an array of behaviour choices, the standard result is that gender tags endorse an arrangement between sexes. Men and women brand each other as opposite to who they are, and then act as per the set label. The conduct serves to isolate rather than unite the genders.

Also, it is important to note the perception of gender is strictly interwoven with the judiciousness of finding one’s identity and the ensuing affirmation of that identity. In case of the Khasis also, the gender continuum is embedded in its social and cultural realms which are reflected in their economic, political and religious undertakings. As has been discussed so far, folk media surfaces as a rich cultural pool that gathers ethnic knowledge and this is used as foundation to understand the gender continuum in the Khasi society. Domestic and community roles among the Khasis similar to other societies are sharply gendered. Some gender roles are steadfastly established by folk traditions; others are more fluid in which changes are taking place. “When it comes to the formation of gender identities, Moisala (2000) makes a strong point in arguing that musical traditions actively engender their participants. McClary (2002) makes a similar point in stating that individuals learn how to be gendered beings through their interactions with cultural discourses such as music” (cited in Johansson, 2013, 364).

The role that women have played in the development of human history and culture has not been delimited simply to motherhood and baby care, or to duties for the home and helping men. This gets side-lined in the presentation of folk traditions, and the character of the women as the mother, wife, lover or an assistant to a man becomes more visible. Women are both objects and subjects in the folk media and it becomes imperative to probe the hegemonic male elucidations of folk practices and seeing the other side of the issue is a precondition for understanding the gender equation that exists within the folk traditions and also gets perpetuated through it.

5.2 Gender in Folk Media: Positioning of Women in the Folk Media

In the process of examining gender in folk media, significant attention has to be given to the complete social, cultural, and historical outlooks held by the people i.e. within their cultural milieu; what are the implications of being a man and a woman? This is of relevance for there are manifold casings of reference and each casing is interconnected and unified with other frames of reference. “Again, gendered ideology contains scores of discourse and discursive function shaped and reshaped within given ideological configurations and socio-historical moments” (Hussein, 2009, 101).

The idea that comes to the fore is that, meanings associated to gender rely comprehensively on cultural beliefs and practices. A culture’s description of manliness and womanliness mould beliefs about how an individual female and male should intermingle and communicate. This process of communication between individuals institutes implications of gender which consequently influence cultural outlooks. This outlook is disseminated, designed, and indoctrinated through the varied folk media forms.

Gender is learned. From infancy on, we are encouraged to learn how to embody the gender that society prescribes for us. Young girls are often cautioned, ‘Don’t be selfish - share with others’ and ‘Be careful - don’t hurt yourself.’ They are praised for looking pretty, taking care of others (including dolls), and being nice. Young boys, in contrast, are more likely to be admonished, ‘Don’t be a sissy,’

‘Go after what you want’, and ‘Don’t cry.’ Usually, males are reinforced for strength, independence, and success, particularly in competitive arenas. (Wood, 2009, 24)

Such phrases or proverbs are transmitted orally across generations that shape people’s perceptions about gender differences. There are many such examples across cultures of different communities that exemplify that folk media is also gendered. For instance, in the study, *A Discursive Representation of Women in Sample Proverbs from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya*, the author illustrates how gendered philosophy is conversationally enclosed in some sexist proverbs selected from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan. “All of the selected proverbs directly or indirectly show that the cultural stereotypes about man and manhood form the base for the discursive construction and reconstruction of gender, to weigh the strength of women's thoughts and practices, and to fix their positions in the society” (Hussein, 2009, 96). The author states that it is gullible and unwarrantable to take the Ethiopian proverb, “Woman without man is like a field without seed” (ibid., 97) as a manifestation of wisdom. The philosophical and gendered tendency of the Somali proverb, “The most dangerous thing a man needs is woman” (ibid., 97) equally demonstrates that researchers are barely reasonable in seeing sexist proverbs in Africa as ciphers of wisdom. Through an analysis of the folk practice, the author states how proverbs have been made use of traditionally to demote women to an inferior position in the patriarchal structures of the Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya. In particular, it is highlighted how proverbs have been employed to subdue women through institutionalisation, justifying, sanctifying, or acclimatising their subordinate positions, and occasionally annulling their entire humanity.

In another study on *Norwegian Folk Music*, Johansson argued that the communicative coding of the musical language is deeply gendered. “It is shown that performance norms and aesthetics are related to stylistic constructions of maleness and femaleness that are overlapping and contradictory” (2013, 361).

The most observable sign of male supremacy is the arresting over-representation of men in both written and oral history of Norwegian folk music.

In Fanitullen, one of the most comprehensive source books on Norwegian folk music, women are almost completely absent in the sizable (60 pages) section on influential fiddlers from the seventeenth century to the present (Aksdal and Nyhus, 1993). One of the reasons for this seems to be that few women played the fiddle, and if they did, they did so in private settings. But this is not a sufficient explanation. For instance, in the districts of Nordfjord and Sunnmore, there were a lot of women playing officially, i.e. for dances, at weddings or other gatherings during the 1700s and 1800s (Geitvik, 1952). This fact is briefly mentioned in Fanitullen (Aksdal and Nyhus,), but without giving the names of any of the musicians in question. (Cited in Johansson, 2013, 367)

This anonymous status awarded to women is indicative of folk music history writing, where females are either totally indistinguishable or represented as exotic exceptions. As per this history, women sing, but very occasionally in public; they attend and dance to and act encouragingly towards the (male) fiddler; women play “harmless instruments (again in private settings), such as the flute or the *langeleik* (a Norwegian zither). But they are rarely granted the right to the title *spellemann* (fiddler, or more correctly, socially authorized instrumentalist), meaning that they are not acknowledged as musicians in the full sense of the word” (ibid., 368).

Example is also drawn from the Tamangs, an ethnic community residing in the mid-valleys of the Himalayas in North central Nepal. Weaving and writing are two activities that are gender symbols in the community.

They are gender symbols not only because they tell the Tamang about the separate roles of the sexes, but because they are about what transpires between the sexes as each defines the other. Two opposing conceptions of the world emerge as Tamang men and women view one another; gender symbolises both the opposition and the reflexivity of these world views. (March, 1983, 729)

It is stated that Tamang ciphers of weaving and writing are inspired from the variances between the status of the sexes in a social structure where permanent patri-localities and patrilineal fraternities intermingle via bilateral cross-cousin matrimony. Women's weaving is distinctively connected with the fluidity and indiscretions of marital interchange whereas a man's writing is associated with the permanence and predominance of localised clan identities. "As gender symbols, weaving and writing figure first, in the representation of ethnic and religious solidarity of the Tamang as well as in the construction of indigenous gender-marked theories of culture and society" (ibid., 729).

In India, there are women's oral tradition which is comprehensive of an extensive array of performances, inclusive of numerous topics and circumstantial locations. From cradle songs and maxims to performances and music in many languages and dialects, these are performed both in public domains and private spaces principally in the home setting, in *Parda* or while at work. "Women's stories are often labelled as centered on issues of intimacy, family relations, and household prosperity, whereas men's folklore emphasizes broad political themes (Davis, 2008 cited in Marcussen, 2009, 7).

In the context of Bhojpuri folk traditions too, the gendered nature of the practices comes to the fore. For example, propitious songs are carolled when a son is born; such songs are known as *Sohar*, by contrast no such songs are hummed on the birth of a daughter. "In one of the folk-songs, a father expresses the pangs of his heart thus: "O daughter! As soon as you were born, I became the object of contempt and abuse for others" (Upadhyaya, 1968, 83).

Another folk song compares a daughter to a dark night, while the son is defined as a full-moon night. While in a "Bhojpuri song, a mother says that had she been aware of the fact that a daughter is going to be born to her, she would have committed suicide. Another folk-song mentions the sorrows of a mother for having a daughter. She would have refused sexual relation with her husband if she had anticipated the birth of a girl" (ibid., 83).

In the southern part of India, the prevalence of gender roles in folk tradition is observable; in Dravidian poetry, *Akam* means domestic territory and *Puram* is public realm. *Akam* suggesting women's folk proceedings within the bounds of the domestic hearth, characterised by modest speech, fewer complex tales and songs. On the other hand, *Puram* implies male public events which are inclusive of ceremonial speech, lengthy complex legends and the like.

The intrinsic gendered nature of folk media is also mirrored in the folk forms of Northeast India. For instance, there are proverbs and sayings among the tribes which testify that women are traditionally not given equal status in the society. The conventional approach towards Hmar women are echoed in the maxims such as *Nuhmei Varin Tuikhur Ral A Kai Ngai Naw* which implies that the wisdom of a woman does not go beyond the river bank. A prevalent adage among the Mizos, indicates that a woman and timeworn fence can be substituted any time. "Just as the crab meat is not counted as meat, so also women's word is not counted as word. Unthreatened wife and unthreatened creepers of the field are both unbearable (Dena, 2008, cited in Buongpui, 2013, 74).

In the traditional Garo society, women are derided with the aphorism that just as a goat is deprived of teeth, similarly a woman is deprived of a brain. "The Mayon Nagas of Manipur considers 'women as having no principles' since women are considered to have no permanent clan, as her clan changes into that of her husband's after her marriage (Buongpui, 2013, 75). Similarly, an Assamese proverb *Puroxor Ron Tirir Biyon*, connotes that the trustworthiness of a man is vested in the grandeur of a battleground, while a woman's forbearance is her paramount virtue.

The gender coefficient throws light on the socially fashioned gender roles, power inequities between men and women in both public and private spheres. It has been evident through research that like other parts of the globe, "issues of gender permeate the folk traditions of South Asia. Every piece of folklore is gendered by its performers' identity, while the content of every item reflects, comments on or challenges the gender construction of the community and norms of the performer" (Wadley, 2003, 241).

5.3 Gender in Khasi Folk Media

In the context of Khasi folk media, gender as a genre is not definitive. Both women and men are part of the varied rituals, dances and the like. The gender insinuations are embedded and transmitted through the articulation of folk media in different occasions and platforms. The concept of public and private is a defining factor in understanding gender as a genre, which is evident from the illustrations of folk media from different parts of India. In case of the Khasi folk practices, the idea of complete exclusion of women is not prevalent. Also, exclusive spaces for women is generally not defined in any folk performances or rituals. However, the Khasi men are the frontrunners in any such events or ceremonies. The women are expected to expedite the arrangements and witness the actual execution of the ceremonies by dint of being the custodian of the Khasi customs and traditions. Women are backend support while men conduct the ceremonies. For example, in the naming ceremony as stated in the previous chapter it is the maternal uncle who conducts the rituals. During a death in the family also, it is the men who make the *Krong* (it is similar to an open casket for transporting the body to the cremation ground), whereas the women are entrusted with the task of making food. In Pomblang festival as discussed in the previous chapter all rituals are conducted by men.

In case of folk narratives, conversely both men and women are entitled to oration, but the content of the narratives is gendered. Many male respondents informed that most predictably they imbibed the concept that men are responsible for protecting the women and the clan through varied folk narratives. It is believed that men have more strength and this belief is consolidated by tenets like *U Rangbah Khadar Bor* (it simply means men have twelve strength), which is handed down orally. There is also a saying *Ka Thei Shibor* (woman has one power) which is a way of validating the position of women as weak and whose duty is to remain in the confines of the home and hearth. Such oral sayings and their implication is easy to see in the day to day life of the Khasis, irrespective of the religion one may follow.

The phrases like *U Rangbah Khadar Bor* (men have twelve strength) and *Ka Thei Shibor* (woman has one power) depicts how various terminologies in the folk media affect the cognitive frame of a person and reinforce the notions of physical and intellectual inferior status of women. In Khasi life and culture, women are the foundation of a family, and need protection. Also, because of the capacity of reproduction and care giving nature makes them weak, by contrast bodily strength gives men the role of the protector. And through such expressions the gender roles and beliefs are embedded in the life of the people.

Another common maxim that further strengthens the gender typecasts among the Khasis is *U Nongbsa U Nongbtiah* used to describe the character of a man as the protector and provider. Conversely, the maxim *Ka Nongbat Ka Non Glum*, indicates the role of women as the receptacle and the care giver. These also correspond to the sayings *U Rangbah Khadar Bor* (men have twelve strength) and *Ka Thei Shibor* (woman has one power) owing to which men and women are assigned the designated functions. A 23 year old, Lurimon Dkhar Syeim, argued that the phrases such as men have twelve strength and woman has one power somehow flows through the Khasi understanding of life and associated rules of conduct. Though the concept of sitting by the hearth and narrating stories is fading away but our oral narratives are still alive potentially because for us Khasis, the word of mouth till day is sacrosanct. Most Khasis across generations know the phrases or stories and that to an extent influences the manner in which men and women behave. Even in this modern age, if a Khasi woman is vocal about something people think unpleasantly of her. People compare a woman with a child in many cases where a woman's reasoning ability is distrusted. A common simile is *Ka Kynthei Ka Khyannah*, to hint that a woman can be paralleled with a child.

Further, it is argued that separate category of folk media for women is not there among the Khasis but the gender labelling is present; one can say it is ingrained in the rules that dictate the role of man and woman in the Khasi society. The traditional drums that is played by the Khasis known as *Ksing* are categorised as *Ksing Shynrang* - male drums played with sticks and *Ksing Kynthei* - female drum which is played using the hands. The drums have their designated roles as well, *Ksing*

Shynrang is played during ceremonial rituals whereas the *Ksing Kynthei* are played during festivities like dance, informed a 38 year old, Lapynhun Kharsati. This segregation of playing of the male and female drums in definitive events can be co-related to the popular practice among the Khasis wherein the men conduct all rituals and in some cases women are not allowed to witness the ceremonies either.

The above discussion establishes the idea that element of gender or gender roles unassumingly can be located in the varied folk practices. Illustrations from different parts of the globe and India put forth the indication that there are specific folk practices designated for men and women which is also a reflection of their demarcated roles that they are expected to perform in their day-to-day life as well. Also, the different genres of oral narratives like folk tales, legends, and proverbs are indoctrinated with tenets, morals and beliefs that assist in the formation of gender stereotypes. The folk performances like dance, music and rituals also point out the gender ideals. Herein, the argument can be put forth that gender is a symbolic conception, constructed socially whereby individuals “learn to act in masculine and/or feminine ways (gender)” (Wood, 2009, 23). It is thus, reasserted that in any society the gender construct is neither inherent nor ineludibly constant. It is determined by society and articulated by individuals as they intermingle with others in their society. Thus, the role of folk media in creating gender constructs through gendered content is vital to recognise. The influence of folk media in the daily lives of people cannot be overridden whereby folk media plays a role in gender socialisation operating in a socio-cultural milieu and is a catalyst of gender segregation.

In the process of discussing gender in folk media, it is to be taken into account that there is a local interpretative context that shapes the gender coefficient. This local interpretative context operating is a tool that helps to comprehend how gender roles are understood. Like any other folk forms, Khasi folk traditions too is a storehouse of ethnic knowledge and emulates the gender roles. Though the rules of behaviour are oral, they are evidently defined through the folk customs and are practiced in the course of everyday life. “For the Khasis, folk customs are not separate elements, in our daily activities we practice the varied folk norms and philosophies. Just like

we trace our origin through folk legends so also lessons related to expected behaviour from a woman or a man is imparted via the folk”, reasoned 53 year Basanhun Sawain. Folk media in particular helps to communicate the marginalised perceptions on gender that potentially could be socially threatening. Most importantly women cannot not be seen as a homogenous category but reasonably they are a diversity of human beings grouped under a canopy of a common sex. “The various expressions for ‘gender’ in oral tradition becomes a way to reflect local practices, the particular and contextual, and would highlight how gender is practiced” (Marcussen, 2009, 16).

Like many other folk traditions, it is difficult to point the roots of such oral discourse for they have been disseminated through generations. However, it is pertinent to note that they are part of the social life of the people, in this case, the Khasis. Scholars opine that folk media is inseparable from the community, for it acts as a knowledge pool, influences the cognitive process and also acts as a linking factor.

In the current times, orates 48 year old, Pynbiang Dohling, “we Khasis follow different religions *Niam Khasi*, the traditional faith, Christianity and there are followers of Islam too. A person’s religious belief is a private matter no doubt and it does have an influence on the lifestyle and beliefs. But despite this, we have not given up the traditional ways of defining a woman or man’s code of conduct and the expectations that society has from each”. The gender bifurcation that exists in the Khasi society is comparable to any other community, matriliney does not make anything different or special. The difference between a hen and a cock is very clear and well defined in the Khasi society. And folk traditions help propagate it, it also reflects in various arenas - from private to public. The rituals, dances, music everything combined talks about gender roles, which is no different from other communities.

The gendered typecast is so much prevalent in Khasi folk media is that it is ironic that in a matrilineal society of Meghalaya, they don’t have heroines like Rani Gaidiliu, a Naga woman or Rani Joymati of Assam (Mukhim, 2016).

An examination of the folk forms of the Khasis like oral narratives, rituals and performances gives an insight into the edifices of masculinity and femininity within the society. The case in point, is a common maxim that becomes a point of reference for talking about punctuality is that of *Tiew Lalyngi Pep Shad*, referring to a woman who took too long to get ready that she missed the traditional dance, informed an 83 year old, Pyrtuh Khoglam.

Women in folk media is defined or symbolised through the symbolic structures of language, reasoning, and performance. Folk narratives in course of time, has principally erected imaginings of two kinds of women. One who is the caretaker of the household, care giver as opposed to women who are improvident and disparaging. Folk media has also been instrumental in propagating proscriptions and notions about women as witches, taboo concerning the female body and sexuality and the like.

A formulaic notion that has been doing rounds more so among people who are not familiar with the Khasi society, that Khasi women are entitled to an exceptional kind of autonomy to decide for their own lives. But a closer look at the role of the Khasi women in the society spells out the real picture. As argued earlier, the *Khadduh* is laden with family liabilities, relishes no social movement and traditionally is forbidden from setting up a separate home for herself. That's owing to the tradition of which folklores are based that delineate her roles. *Khadduh* is the guardian of ancestral property and in return she is expected to care for the parents and live with them. This also imposes on her other autonomies such as working outside the home state. The status of women in Meghalaya is not equal to men. There are certain conducts expected of them which is same across all societies. Even in the present day, when feminism has redefined the entire idea of rape as being a power game and not about sex, there are recommendations on how women should be dressed to avoid being raped or why they should not remain out late to evade spiteful circumstances. This is part of our own psyche as women and it is so internalised that getting it out of our subconscious mind is almost impossible (Mukhim 2016).

It is an established fact that “gender’ refers to roles and responsibilities of women and men that are socially determined (World Health Organisation, 1998). Gender roles are highly variable and are determined by social, economic, political, and cultural factors (DFID, 2000). Like race and ethnicity, gender is a social construct which defines and differentiates the roles, rights, responsibilities, and obligations of women and men” (Alim, 2009, 301).

The inherent biological distinctions between the sexes form the foundation of social rules that describe suitable behaviour for men and women; and also regulate the variances in social, financial, and administrative power between them. Though the exact nature and degree of these standards differ across societies, yet there are similarities in the gender roles in these diverse societies. On the basis of male and female procreative roles, it is reasoned that men have commanding and competitive behaviours, while women have nurturing and sympathetic propensities, the gendered folk practices of the Khasi correspond to these notions.

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A common Khasi saying, is *Sa Ia Ka Kynthei* (implying merely a woman), one cannot circumvent it as a maxim only. It has profound influence on the psychic of people. Easily people undermine the position of the women more so in political and administrative spheres. Clan associations is an important part of the Khasi society, whereby any clan related ceremony is conducted by the men. In today’s time, there are clan based organisation called *Seng Kur* which also sees less participation by women, in a way, keeping up the tradition where Khasi women is not entitled to part take in administrative activities.

Here, the argument put by Wood is of relevance, “although individuals learn gender and embody it, gender is not strictly personal. Rather, gender grows out of cultural ideas that stipulate the social meaning and expectation of each sex” (2009, 24). What is implied by gender and how people articulate principally depend on a society’s principles, beliefs, and desired ways of consolidating collective life. All of which is disseminated through the hands of folk media forms.

Khasis believe that the indigenous faith *Niam Khasi* is a clan based religion, *La Seng Is Ka Niam Khasi Ha Ka Kur*. But the rituals are more family based and in these rituals too, women are only nominal authority. It is the men who are the power holders, the only distinguishing factor being here the male members from the matrikin are the helm of affairs owing to the matrilineal set-up.

The point of reference is the Pomblang Festival where abiding by the Khasi matrilineal tradition, the eldest sister of the king also called the *Syiem Sad* is the chief priestess. She supervises the entire ceremony associated with the festival, though the main execution of the rituals is carried out by the official priest who is a male.

Also, Nongkrem dance which is part of the Pomblang festival is a mirror showing the deeply entrenched gender roles in the Khasi society. People from all walks come to see the festival, Khasis following other religions also come to the festival since essentially it is a celebration of Khasi culture. People also want their children to know about Khasi folk traditions and through the dance and the rituals a glimpse of the matrilineal norms can be seen, specified a 37 year old, Donkumar Lamare.

As has been discussed in Chapter 4, the Nongkrem dance is also known as the virgin dance wherein, the woman only if virgins are allowed to dance but no such condition is set for the men folk. This dance of the virgins *Shad Kynthei*, a thanks giving dance is paralleled by a dance by the men, *Shad Mastieh*. The Khasi elders opine that it is a matter of integrity for the girls who take part in the dance to meet the condition. For they accept as true that if someone breaks this custom, ill omens are seen and there have been evidences of such presages in the past.

The position of the dancers in the Nongkrem also is an indicator of how gendered folk traditions are, that the Khasi oral maxims on men and women finds an echo in the dance. It can be said that the dance speaks out loud the expected gender roles, and assists in disseminating it further in the social milieu.

The women dance in the center in somber and elegant moves, while the men in the periphery with vibrant steps. Female dancers signify purity and the tilling of the

ground with the feet as they dance, is an indicator of the hardships that a woman goes through at child birth, also the pain that mother earth is put through during cultivation. Also, the women epithet of all good in the house, she is the *Lukhimai*, the guardian spirit of the house. The woman, as the foundation of a clan is held in high respect, where virtue and purity are her indispensable attributes. Whereby, through these semiotics and social interaction the message is also conveyed that women are the weaker section of the society and need protection and support.

Conversely, the men dance around the women gaily waving yak tail whisks and swords. It is a depiction of the Khasi popular belief, that it is the duty of the men to protect the women, to ward off evils and shield the purity of the entire race. As the saying goes, *Ka Jing Im Ka Bakhuid Ka Ba Suba*, i.e., attaining a life that is pristine and untarnished is the chief aim of every Khasi (Dutta, 2016, 39).

It is also found that the attire and the jewellery worn by the dancers are a key component of the history of the people. The young women and men are dressed in the attractive traditional dress and embellished with gold and silver jewellery. The ornaments are designed using gold, silver along with coral. We believe coral is used for its toughness and its qualities to protect a person from harmful powers and to treat infertility, reasoned 56 year old Jessica Basaiawmoit. The girls are dressed in long sleeve high necked velvet blouses, silk wraps and the *Dhara*. The essential pieces of jewellery comprise of *Pansngait* - the crown customarily ornamented with the aromatic cactus flower, locally known as *Tiewlasubon* (this flower blooms with an uncommonness which is an indicator of its refinement); a sophistication that is also expected from the female dancers and Khasi women per say. On their necks they adorn a *Choker* and *Khonopad*, while on the arms and wrists the *Taad* and *Mohu* is worn. The long multi-stringed silver sash embellishes the body from shoulder to the waist. The hair is bent into a chignon bun; the *Saikhyllong* hangs right down to the lower back. Female dancers are wrapped from head to foot, and the complete ensemble is vibrant.

The attire of the men in comparison to the women is less intricate. Men wear an embroidered sleeveless jacket - *Jainphong*, a dhoti- *Jainboh*, *Jainspong* and a

turban. As mentioned previously, the turban is ornamented with the *Thuia* i.e. feathers of birds. It is a common believe that the feather on the turban symbolises maleness, strength and freedom, denoted by the bird that flies high in the sky. “The quiver, has three arrows placed in it namely the *Nam Blei* - God, *Nam Thawlang* - first paternal ancestor, and *Nam Iawbei* - first maternal ancestress. It is a representation of the trinity of the three most persuasive powers in a Khasi man’s life which helps to defend himself, his family, his clan and community at large, his Hima and country” (Dutta, 2016, 40). On the one hand, the matrilineal insinuations are profoundly embedded in all these observances. Alongside, it pragmatically aids in understanding how signs and symbols, dress code, materials used for making the dance attire cumulatively construct gender labels.

In the previous chapter it has been argued that these folk performances are a reflection of the role of folk media play in perpetuating Khasi matriliney. And using the lens of folk media matriliney can be understood and a co-relation between the two can be established. But the hind side of folk performances also as to be taken into consideration. The virgin dance in its totality echoes the gender typecast operating within the Khasi society and also helps in its continuance.

These practices have been going on since times immemorial, and not much has changed. It has always been a part of *Niam Khasi* belief system and continues to do so. What is important is the fact that the basic essence of the folk practices remains in the Khasi society and the converts too cannot do away with it. People realised that one cannot do away with the communities folk traditions, for they are like communication system that has been present all through the generations. Thus, good or bad, folk media has been an instrument in carrying forward the idea of masculinity and femininity and the subsequent gender roles designated for men and women, opined a 44 year old Borlang Thangkhiew.

For a spectator, the dance may seem to be a conventional community festival celebrating life in general. But the folk practices are more than just celebratory events; these are a manifestation of the Khasi belief system. It is essential to take note that the Khasi tribe, by and large is an oral society, and in contemporary times

the significance of the oral word has sustained its position. All its folk traditions, rituals and believes have been passed on through generations by word of mouth.

Festivals like *Pomblang* help in the exemplification and re-establishment of the longstanding values. For instance, through the nuances of the dance itself, the Khasi forefathers entrenched the rules that direct the role of man and woman in the society. And this is recreated and replicated over and over again during the yearly performance.

Case 15

“I am personally not very well-versed with all the intricacies of the Khasi folk media, but from what I see and understand, gender labelling is evident, be it through the numerous proverbs, stories and even in the rituals. We do not on day-to-day basis think about it but these have been the roots of the formation of the gender equation in our society”. Men have all the powers, women are mere custodians and that men are demanding for patriliney is not surprising, since in that way the nominal right women have can also be taken away, said 33 year old Daniel Nonglait.

I was also intrigued after reading Desmond Kharmawphlang’s book that when male Khasi archers speak of a ‘maiden from Sohra’ they are actually referring to an unskilled male archer. This shows a clear division of labour in Khasi society where a woman is not expected to be an archer, amongst several other restrictions. (Mukhim, 2016, 1)

Case 16

A septuagenarian Kersan Shadap stated, “from my experience I feel our forefathers demarcated the role of men and women very clearly and I do not see any vast difference between matrilineal and patrilineal societies. Khasi women are victims of domestic violence, rape, broken families, just like any other women from the other communities”. One may say, in the more recent situation is a little better because people register the marriage and the concept of a visiting husband is dying out. Earlier women suffered because men were not around to shoulder family duties

and the responsibility of the children. So, the role and position of the mother is sacrosanct in the society that does not guarantee that a woman is free or all powerful.

Along similar lines, 38 year old, Lamtei Diengdoh opined, that women as the mother is highly revered in the Khasi society, and many people still today mistaken Khasis to be a matriarchal community. It is the men who rule the roost, the basic difference, being preference is given to men from the maternal line. Even that is changing where the role of the father has been strengthened in the family. "In our beliefs and practices, the centrality is on the reproductive capacity of a woman, whereby she is the locus of the family and therefore responsible for nurturing the family. She is supposed to be the guardian of the family reputation and rituals, daughters are expected to be chaste and compliant since the continuity of family lineage depends on them". Thus, the men are entrusted with the duty of guarding the home and the women. The biological difference and the gender norms branching off has not only reflected in the folk customs but has also affected the political lives. Even today women are debarred from participating in *Dorbar Shnong* (traditional administrative systems) and that does indicate the gender framework within which the society operates.

The customary practice among the Khasis till day is that women do not take part in the traditional administrative and political activities of *Dorbar Shnong*. The standard decree has been that the councils or *Dorbar's* relied on male attestation and women have no representation in the council. Women were permitted to be present at the *Dorbar* and only in matters related to women. Though in the current times, some instances have been reported in which the stringent role has been relaxed and women take part in the *Dorbar* in some localities namely, Lachumiere and Laitumkhrah among others.

In these few *Dorbars*, women are allowed only as executive members and so far no lady has risen to a post beyond that. On the contrary, subset or additional wings of the *Dorbar* has been established like the *Seng Kynthei* (women organisation) and *Ka Seng Longkmie* (mothers' association) in which women take part but they do

not have any administrative functions. These two wings are more involved in social welfare functions like solving any domestic issue if the matter is reported to the organisation; organising annual locality sports meet, cleaning drives, etc. “We have never had any female headman and many say women are reluctant to take up the duty”. But the mechanism first has to be in place, the mind-set is hooked that Khasi women do not take part in the *Dorbar*. If a Khasi women can manage the home and the market, what difficulty could one have in partaking in administrative affairs, argued a 42 year old, Sharon Kharsahnoh.

Many respondents including both men and women opine that to a large extent, men are unenthusiastic about releasing the controls of a field which customarily has been considered as the sole jurisdiction of the men. Also many oppose arguing that it has been a traditional practice where women is given full space to efficiently play the role of a mother without any burden of politics, and thus the question of accommodating women in the traditional administrative (political) council does not ascend.

Some hardliners argue that those women who want to be in politics can participate in the assembly elections; there are no traditional sanctions on it. However, introducing changes in the *Dorbar* is unwarranted.

Across communities both globally and locally, women in general conduct themselves through traditionally specified descriptions of womanhood. Likewise in the case of the Khasis via numerous folk media practices, a woman has described women as a mother who is the emblem of all that is good and all undertakings of a women draws from these definitions.

Case 17

A church leader of the Catholic denomination opined that the impact of the traditional disentanglement of women from the *Dorbar* is also reflected in church activities, wherein women hesitate to take leadership roles and prefer to support the activities as backhand. “If coaxed to take active roles, they very often say men know what to do, so there is no need for them coming to the fore”. The same informant also felt among the Khasis, a woman who is vocal in the public domain is despised

(a hen that crows is a mutant of nature); it is a prevalent belief which has had its impact of the gender labelling among the Khasis.

It is but evident that there are women who disagree and oppose such folk norms that lead to gender typecasting but it is hard to break the glass ceiling that has been an outcome of time-honoured practices.

By contrast from the opinion of some female respondents, both young and old, it could be seen that they prefer to conform to the customary practice arguing that men prior to attending the *Dorbar* consult them on what is to be said and so he represents their voices.

At a time when the demand for patriliney has been on the rise in the Khasi society, it is indeed interesting to examine the gender equation, where men are using the garb of customary practices to guard their political entitlements. Conversely, an analysis of the diverse Khasi folk media form reveals that implications of patriliney is not embedded in them, while it is heavily laden with gender divergence insinuations.

In this line, Tiplut Nongbri writes, “the position of women in Khasi society is somewhat anticipated by studies of matrilineal kinship systems. Several scholars (Alberle, 1961; Goody 1962; Hill 1963; Murdock 1949) have highlighted the inherent contradictions in matrilineal systems. Audrey Richards (1950) refers to these contradictions as ‘the matrilineal puzzle’. The term may not be entirely appropriate but it is indeed puzzling how matrilineal systems have survived despite their inherent contradictions. One such contradiction arises from the disjunction between the line of descent and inheritance on the one hand and the structure of authority and control on the other. The former, which links the mother to the daughter, comes in conflict with the latter, which links the mother’s brother to the sister’s son” (cited in Nongbri, 2003, 188-189). This self-styled matrilineal puzzle has had an influence on the Khasi society, in which through generations by means of folk media, matrilineal tenets and gender role has been established. Khasi women are liable for the up-keeping of the home and hearth, the customs and traditions, without having any actual authority and relying exclusively on the maternal uncle.

Aged 28, Wandaker Suchiang, brought forth the argument that indeed the folk media has been one of the important tools using which the Khasi ancestors imbibed in us the principle of being a man or woman. The functions allotted to men also breeds tension, a man is battling his role as a husband and father on one side and that of a maternal uncle on the other. Marital ties are given less preference over kinship associations. Children are taught to revere clan and lineage traditions, and the man have no authority in the wife's natal home. He has to juggle in dual roles since the maternal uncle is indispensable to a Khasi family and if he fails as a husband or a father, he is also looked down upon. In this context, the position of a man in the society is also unsteady unlike other communities where roles associated with men and women are less complex.

Case 18

Tang Jait as discussed in the previous chapter, is a very important folk custom of the Khasi, by which a new clan is formed, in case a Khasi man enters into wedlock with a non-Khasi woman. It is an important ceremony and this is the reason why the Khasi community has not perished because the forefathers knew people intermingle and cross-community marriages will take place. In this process the Khasi roots should not fade away, it is a means of protecting and sustaining the Khasi community and people with both faiths, Christians and *Niam Khasi* who follow this tradition up to this day, reasoned a 49 year old Wandondor Swer.

By contrast a 54 year old Rilan Langstieh argued, *Tang Jait* is important and there is no denying about that, but in essence whom is it protecting, Khasi matriliney but mainly the action of the menfolk. Many will disagree, *Tang Jait* protects the activities of the men only when he marries outside the community. But if a Khasi woman marries a non-tribal or tribal man from other community she is put to shame. Khasi men say that non-Khasi men take advantage of the matrilineal system and procure land and overtake the economy. A common catchphrase that people use to deter Khasi women marrying non-Khasi men is, *Wat Ai Lad Ia U Mynder* (it roughly implies do not encourage non-tribal men). They also say that the indigenous way of life is affected, when a Khasi women marries a non-Khasi. If the

mother is originally Khasi, why won't she teach her children the Khasi philosophies, beliefs, language and food items? A non-Khasi mother even if she becomes a part of Khasi society through *Tang Jait*, can she teach her children better about Khasi life and culture? *Tang Jait* cannot be done away, it is necessary to sustain the matrilineal order but at the same time it safeguards man's action. If we become patrilineal one day, will the men still allow *Tang Jait* to maintain the clan system is a question that needs to be raised?

Gender structures have a range of diverse features, though there are cohesions but there are dissimilarities as well. As mentioned in Manusmriti, a woman's behaviour was envisioned in the structure of 'Three Obedience's - first to her father, then to her husband, and finally to her son, stay subordinate to men, despite of the constitutional reassurance of equal rights for women. "Infected by the protectionist approach to gender difference, in which women were understood to be weak and in need of protection" (Chandran, 2009, 294) gender roles are fabricated and is imperceptibly validated. Correspondingly, through an examination of the Khasi folk media, equivalents can be drawn with the conceptualising of gender.

5.4 Khasi Women (Discourse) on Khasi Folk Media

The above avowals necessitates a discussion on what the Khasi woman opine about Khasi folk media practices. With the help of a few field narratives, a case on the view of women is being developed.

Khasi women face the same struggle that women from other communities face, both at home and work. Matriliney is both a boon and bane so to say, since traditionally some safe guard is awarded to the women in terms of having a shelter atleast, but it also makes the women vulnerable to all sorts of problems. All the understating about life as a Khasi man or woman is derived from the folk customs and it is so difficult to break through those norms.

How or who planted the gender stereotype in the folk practices, in the customs no one can say. But it is a way of creating a balance in the society, though many will say gender inequality has become inherent to the society. Men feel deprived because they directly do not own the property, but the dual role assigned to him as

the maternal uncle and father gives him a secure spot in the society. Even in the *Dorbar*, it is the men who are all in all; traditional rites cannot be performed by women either. The folk practices ensure that we are strictly matrilineal and not matriarchal, just having the custody of some ancestral property does not make any society matriarchal, argued Amy Jyrwa a septuagenarian.

Case 19

“It is the order of the day where one or the gender feels disadvantaged and in case of us Khasis, the men are leading the movement. Our folk practices have seeped in the socio-political where role of the women is within the confines of the home and the men are to manage the affairs outside home. As per established norms, Khasi men get double respect as the father and maternal uncle. The women are called custodians of the folk practices, almost like a cabinet, she cannot infuse any change in these traditions she is a mere observer”, opined Suklang Sohkhlet aged 48.

She further argued that although women are considered to be the guardian but they are customarily not participating in any local *Dorbar* or council as they are not commended with any administrative role. It is for the reason that women are given guardianship of the family property and so men are delegated with the task of defending the community and to participate in warfare if needed and to govern. It is not very difficult to see that the women do not rule, though Khasi society follows a matrilineal system. “We are a matrilineal society with patriarchal principles, which is the case with many other matrilineal societies too, I believe. Our folk media is both a carrier of this principle and also a propagator of the same, women are the center of the folk media content and performance but have no say in its actual execution”.

All the elements of the Khasi folk media are in tangent to the matrilineal tenets. Yes there are many gender stereotyping that is communicated through Khasi folk media but one cannot change that, one can only fight gender bias at other different levels. Folk media are part of the traditions and who will dare to initiate any change. “Asking for change means pulsating the doctrines of matrilineality that we live by”. So

despite the fact that matriliney and folk media both reflect gender biases, not much can be done about it at the fundamental level.

Empirically this study reiterates the discourse that Khasi folk media is embedded in gender stereotypes. Both man and woman since times immemorial have been adhering to the gender roles assigned to them. Also it is clearly evident that traditionally women have been considered to be the custodian of the Khasi folk practices and traditions, though that has not facilitated any process of changing the content or context on which gender branding has been taking place. With the women as custodians of Khasi folk media, the gender preconception is still comparable to any other community of residing in India. Gender identities are built on these folk media forms among the Khasis which is a mirror of the matrilineal philosophies. It is also important to note that triggering any change in a bid to (re)create gender identities through the Khasi folk would also mean meddling with the time-tested matrilineal order which is a binding factor of the Khasi community and also a source of shared collective identity.

5.5 Power Differentials via Folk Media and the Position of Khasi Women

This study is also an attempt to break-past the traditional views on Khasi matriliney and also Khasi folk media. The folk media as an apparatus of human communication has been argued. Through it the tenets of matriliney in the context of the Khasis has been moulded and embedded in the socio-cultural and political psyche of the people. Folk media has emerged as the vector of communication and a constructor of social reality. Also the role of folk media in diffusing gender norms among the Khasis is evident.

The varied elements of the folk media is evocative of the fact that Khasi women lacks intellect, is powerless and her befitting role is in the home and hearth. Compliance, dependability, sombre and many such virtues are instilled in the lives of the Khasi women through the folk media. The power differentials is etched out in the folk media which is a means of perpetuating matrilineal ethos. It is indicative of the principle and practice that men should control the seat of authority in the home; and outside and the women should abide by this dominant-subservient

rapport. Thereby, providing all necessary support to a Khasi man to function effectively as a maternal uncle, a father in matters related to clan and family, and also as a traditional administrator of the Khasi community through the *Dorbar Shnongs*.

It should be stressed that in a society where social roles are negotiated along gender lines and the inferiority of women is taken as normal, it is usually difficult to remove the negative attitudes held about women and their roles in the society. There is a tendency to consider the traditional spatial division of men and women as natural and to ridicule the attempt to deconstruct it. (Hussein, 2009, 106)

In the context of the Khasis, hegemonic manliness and understated femaleness are two features of gendered life that gets illustrated through the folk media. “In general, the disparagements staged against women - for example, the proverbial claim that women lack control over their own body, thoughts, and actions – are patriarchal society's ideological strategies to discursively delimit women's sphere of influence in the society. The ultimate aim of such an agenda is women's "passive acceptance and respect for male domination” (Gilbert and Taylor, 1992, 81, cited in Hussein, 2009, 106).

In theory, the women are considered to be the guardians or custodians of Khasi folk traditions and culture. But in practice, it is the reverse. Men are the actual handlers of every ceremony. In the folk dances, it is the men who lead the women, the musicians are men and women are expected to follow. As has been discussed in chapter 4 and this chapter, the folk content is also gendered in which the women have an indispensable role in procreation and thus are responsible for the home and hearth. Since women are central to the family and weak, men have the role of being the protector and defender. “Just as the woman's role in reproduction and nurturance favours the mother, a man's physiological strength, according to the Khasi, give him authority over women” (Nongbri, 1988, 75).

Till this day it is reflected in the practice of systemic exclusion of Khasi women from the traditional administrative system. This is also reflected in the

administration of the church where there are no women leaders. Only one case has been reported in Jowai area where Church of God, a Protestant Church denomination had appointed a female pastor. There is no law that debars women from becoming pastors and the like, but owing to the socialisation Khasi women do not come upfront. Khasi women is absent or has a subsidiary role in traditional power arrangements. The position of women in the folk narrative and performances, along with their actual role in a society also reflects the fact that men want to keep the women confined with family duties. Khasi men fear that giving women power in the public or administrative domain, means men have no power. The reality being it is the men who are in control through the decision making powers vested on them as the maternal uncle and the father.

The power differentials in Khasi folk media is empirically and vividly evident, which is echoed in the socio-political life. The analysis of the folk practices reveals the unerring way in which the position of Khasi women has been defined. Because the folk media supports the continuation of these norms and philosophies, even in current times the Khasi women live in the shadow of these age-old traditions.

Thus, it is seen that the varied forms of folk media are perforated in the complex social events, with the intention to implement symbolic power, putting the Khasi women in a secondary position. Additionally, the study suggest that there is ideological evenness between different folk media forms and matrilineal philosophies and in whatever form they may play out. The folk media function as socio-political ordnances used to influence community members of the assumed feebleness, delicateness, and powerlessness of women and accredit the dependence of women on men. In actuality it appears that Khasis are a matrilineal society with patriarchal realties.

5.6 Summation

In summation it is relevant to point out that study on the status of tribal women has commenced in the recent decade or so. It is an upshot of the general global concern with women issue. In case of Northeast as well, study of women have either been discounted or and if studies are done, it is ephemeral and imprecise. Scholars have

ricocheted the need of studying the women of this region from two perspectives. “The first refers to women’s role in the system, which entails rights and duties. In this, status is linked with a role in the system” (Xaxa, 2004, 348). In which the status is examined keeping in view the mutual responsibilities of both sexes along with defences that are available for protection from the overbearingness of each other. “The other usage of the term status is in the sense of prestige and honour, which may be studied in terms of their legal status and opportunities for participation” (ibid., 348). In this milieu, the gender continuum and space negotiations in Khasi society has been discussed. Women studies routinely represented that women in tribal societies had better social status than their counterparts in caste society. Thereby making it imperious to alter the viewpoint of studying gender in tribal societies, possibly avoiding the lens of high or low status and embracing the lens of gender inequity. “The myth of gender equality or higher status of women in tribal societies has also been critically viewed through an examination of customary laws in respect of property, marriage, inheritance and so on. It has been shown that women in tribal societies are at a deprived position vis-a-vis men in their respective societies” (Nongbri 1998, cited in Xaxa, 2004, 355). This study takes cognisance of the fact that gender relations has to be examined in the light of gender inequality and subordination. Also, predominant gender relationships and descriptions of gender roles have to be examined to bring home the idea that widespread view of female susceptibility in Khasi society is certainly insupportable.

This study also reasons that gender divisions survives because individuals act toward each other on grounds of the connotations they have for each other. Such connotations are an outcome of the process of social interaction, also through a process of interaction and interpretation the meanings are formed, transmitted and altered. “The many roles, groups, and situations in which we all participate merge with our own idiosyncratic, creative, and biological makeup, to shape how we perceive the world, how we experience emotion, and our behaviour in a world of constant social interaction” (Burke and Stets 2009, cited in Smith and Smith, 2016, 63-64). The objective of social interaction is to communicate with others making

use of language, body language, signs, symbols and mannerisms. In this case folk media becomes the language and means of communication via which the gender typecast are patterned, communicated and perpetuated in the dispositions of community life. Gender is performed through the folk media, whereby the meanings associated to the folk media content are socially fashioned and fluid, they are not natural or static. Both manliness and femaleness are performed gender identities, which implies that gender is something that is performed, not necessarily something that a person is. Using the theory of symbolic interactionism, it can be said that children are born into a social world and their individualities are established through their communications. Infants have no sagacity of self, it is cultured as time goes on. With every interaction, an individual continuously forms imageries of who one is and what it implies in the cultural milieu.

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