THE MASK OF STRENGTH: REWRITING MASCULINITY IN NAGA SOCIETY

Tonotoli Chishi*

Abstract

Patriarchy in the Naga context is intricately woven into customary laws and social norms, as well as the powerful influence of Christian missionary legacy. Despite the outward appearance of equality in community life, deeper structural biases persist. However, patriarchy is a learned and internalised set of beliefs, not just a male-driven agenda. Thus, focusing on systems allows men to be allies in dismantling patriarchy and creates space for accountability without demonisation, encouraging men and women to work together toward gender justice. The essay also addresses the erasure of male victims. Recognising female-perpetrated abuse and male victimhood is not a rejection of feminist legal gains, but a logical extension of feminist ethics that include autonomy and accountability. An ethical society must protect all victims while dismantling the power structures that enable violence in the first place. Thus, the paper attempts to understand how patriarchy simultaneously privileges and represses all genders in qualitatively different ways, highlighting both its internal contradictions and its pervasive grip on human identity. It reconsiders patriarchy not merely as a gendered structure but as a humanist concern. What it does not suggest is a moral equivalence between male emotional repression and female structural oppression. Reimagining masculinity must emerge from within—through reinterpretation of customary norms, stories, and traditions. Ultimately, breaking patriarchy is about creating a world where people are free to be their full selves without fear or shame.

Keywords: masculinity, power, emotional expression, patriarchy, gender.

*Research Scholar, Dept. of Philosophy, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong 793022 E-mail: tonochishi@gmail.com

Introduction

Patriarchy is often conceptualised as a system of gendered power imbalances, typically framed in terms of male dominance and female subjugation. This interconnectedness of male advantages and female disadvantages clearly demonstrates how patriarchy operates as a comprehensive system of inequality, where the privileging of one group inherently necessitates the marginalisation of the other. At the same time, the system works against men in latent ways.

New (2001, p. 730) argues, "In particular, the very practices which construct men's capacity to oppress women and interest in doing so, work by systematically harming men." Essentially, the same forces that structure male privilege over women also harm men by forcing them into restrictive, damaging roles. Cultural ideas of masculinity encourage risk-taking, which can lead to violent behavior and unhealthy relationships.

Men are not oppressed by women or any particular group but society as a whole, such as kin, institutions, and media. They do not lose access to resources or opportunities by being oppressed but to a range of human tendencies and choices such as emotional expression and other non-dominant traits, effectively narrowing their emotional and psychological freedom. Seeking therapy is often stigmatised. Their behaviour is conditioned not by positive rewards but by negative pressures such as homophobia and sexism. Many men rely solely on romantic partners for emotional support, which can lead to breakdowns and loneliness. The expectation that men must be sole providers places immense stress on them, limiting their personal choices and well-being.

Patriarchy in the Naga context is intricately woven into customary laws and social norms, as well as the powerful influence of the Christian missionary legacy. Despite the outward appearance of equality in community life, deeper structural biases persist, particularly in property inheritance and political representation. The essay explores patriarchy in the Naga society to understand how it simultaneously privileges, represses, and assigns rigid roles to all genders in qualitatively different ways, highlighting both its internal contradictions and its pervasive grip on human identity. It attempts to reimagine masculinity as emerging from within—through reinterpretation of customary norms and increased representation of women in public leadership. It argues that community-based organisations and churches have a critical role to play in reshaping conversations around gender so as to reclaim Naga values of collective well-being. It reconsiders patriarchy not merely

as a gendered structure but as a humanist concern. What it does not suggest is a moral equivalence between male emotional repression and female structural oppression.

Patriarchy affects everyone by enforcing rigid gender roles. It is a learned and internalised set of beliefs, not just a male-driven agenda. Blaming individual men alone can lead to defensiveness and resistance. Therefore, focusing on systems allows men to be allies in dismantling patriarchy and creates space for accountability without demonisation, encouraging men and women to work together toward gender justice. A deeper philosophical analysis reveals that breaking free from patriarchy is not just about gender; it is about the liberation of all human beings from restrictive social structures that limit human potential.

The Philosophical Foundations of Patriarchy in Brief

The endurance of patriarchy across cultural spaces is in part sustained by a long tradition of philosophical justification. Recognising these roots is crucial to understanding how deeply gender injustice is embedded in cultural and intellectual traditions. From Aristotle's assertion of natural male superiority to Rousseau's vision of gendered education, many canonical thinkers have contributed to shaping and legitimising patriarchal structures.

Both Plato and Aristotle believed that social roles should be distributed according to nature, however, their differing views on the nature of women led to opposing conclusions. In *The Republic*, written around the 4th century BCE, Plato (2007, p. 167) advocated for equal participation, seeing no essential difference. In *Politics*, Aristotle (1995, p. 8) justified male rule by claiming that women lacked rational capacity and were natural dependents of men; he was convinced of women's natural inferiority. To him, men were naturally suited to rule due to their rationality, whereas women were more inclined toward domestic roles. This view shaped much of Western political and social thought for centuries.

Religious doctrines provided moral legitimacy to patriarchy, embedding male authority into laws and customs. Some legal systems still limit women's rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and dress codes. Debates over reproductive rights (e.g., abortion laws) often invoke religious morality. Thus, strength and leadership were often attributed to men, and education and political rights were denied to women.

In *Émile*, Rousseau (1943, p. 39) unconsciously reproduces the sexist biases of 18th-century French society, arguing that women's

education should focus on pleasing and serving men. Among several examples in the book, he writes, "First teach the child to speak to men; he will be able to speak to the women when required." Thus, women are seen as peripheral to the "serious business" of communication and public life, and speaking to women is framed as something incidental, reinforcing the idea that women exist primarily in the domestic sphere. They are sadly the result of inconsistency within his thought and not of a logical, well-reasoned principle that follows consistently from his broader philosophy.

What becomes evident in these philosophical frameworks is a fundamental mistake: while many of them championed reason and natural rights, they failed to apply these principles to women. The same arguments used to reject tyranny in politics were used to justify male authority in the family. It reveals that patriarchy was not a necessary conclusion of their philosophies but rather a prejudice embedded within them—a point that feminist philosophers, especially Mary Wollstonecraft, would fiercely challenge.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft (2008, p. 87) questioned the patriarchal logic of Rousseau and others, while calling for equal moral and intellectual autonomy. She argued that women are rational beings just like men and therefore deserve the same education, freedom, and moral agency. Later feminist philosophers like Beauvoir (2011, p. 45) argued that patriarchy was not a biological necessity but a social construction that could be dismantled in *The Second Sex*.

Naga Cultural Context

In the Naga context as well, the aforementioned ideological patterns of patriarchy are visible that similarly produce asymmetries in power and moral responsibilities. Here, masculinity has evolved through a negotiation between indigenous values and Christian morality. In kinship-based societies like the Nagas, the lineage system is the foundation of social identity and access to resources. By privileging male descent, a power structure is reinforced that excludes women from inheriting power and property. However, the roles of men and women, as defined by patriarchal norms and customary law, may not always align with the realities of gendered lived experiences, such as in marital relationships where negotiation and power dynamics often exist outside the idealised representations.

The contradictions that exist even within the socially accepted male model reflect the fragility of hegemonic masculinity, where the expectations placed on Naga men (as warriors and providers)

often conflict with the vulnerability they may experience in everyday life, particularly within intimate partnerships. These contradictions are ontological in nature as they expose the gap between ideal masculinity and the lived realities of vulnerability and insecurities. As Zehol (2015, p. 185) observes, idealised roles of masculinity, such as leader and provider, frequently diverge from the actual emotional and psychological experiences of Naga men. The same men celebrated for stoic strength may face intimate vulnerabilities and personal contradictions that do not align with the dominant cultural script.

Similarly, there are contradictions within the social model of womanhood in Naga society. The representation of women as the nurturers and supporters in family life that is tied to motherhood may clash with the public invisibility of Naga women in political and social spaces.

Thus, the ongoing negotiation between husband and wife reflects the fluidity of gender roles in everyday life. This aligns with the idea that gendering is not fixed, but is constantly negotiated and performed. Gender roles are not static or singular but are rather in a state of flux, influenced by the lived interactions between individuals and their society. In the Naga context, this negotiation is especially crucial, given the interactions between customary law, Christianity, and the rise of feminist scholars, educators, and thinkers. The negotiation process in families and communities helps reveal the tensions between the idealised patriarchal order and the evolving gendered realities on the ground.

Power, like heritage, is often perceived as something that must be passed down and preserved. Most of the Naga tribes prohibit women from inheriting ancestral land. Even where women contribute significantly to agricultural production or family economy, land ownership remains vested in the male lineage. At the same time, it imposes a singular burden on men to shoulder family responsibilities and uphold tribal honor, regardless of their individual aspirations or emotional preparedness.

The Sümi Naga tradition of hereditary chieftainship represents an ancient belief in the continuity of leadership, where wisdom and governance flow through bloodlines, much like rivers carving out landscapes over generations. The eldest son inherits the mantle, embodying the weight of ancestral wisdom and duty. This system ensures continuity in governance and maintains the authority of the ruling lineage. The chief holds a position of significant influence, acting as the leader responsible for conflict resolution and overseeing the welfare of the village.

However, in modern times, they have adopted a more decentralised system of administration—from *who* should lead to *how* leadership itself should function. This shift means that while chieftainship may still be respected, governance is no longer solely dependent on hereditary leadership. Instead, power is distributed among various institutions, including village councils and community leaders, allowing for a more participatory form of governance (Sema, 2001, p. 39-42). In this evolving landscape, the meaning of masculine power itself is being redefined. Such a transition opens up space for alternative, more inclusive expressions of leadership.

Masculinity has also been reinforced through cultural institutions such as *Morungs* (traditional boys' dormitories), where young males were trained in the responsibilities of manhood. These institutions have historically served as spaces for learning survival skills and community leadership, further solidifying patriarchal norms. Naga man has come a long way from a time of savagery when his manhood was declared by the number of heads taken. Seen through that lens, his psychic and moral transformation is indeed a remarkable feat. The Naga society has moved beyond its brutal past traditions. Nonetheless, traditional ideals of manhood continue to influence gender roles and power distribution and, in turn, what it means to be a "masculine man."

The Making of Masculine Power

Masculinity has been linked to existentialist ideas of self-definition and authenticity. The role of men in warfare and decision-making has been pivotal in shaping the Naga patriarchal structure. Oral traditions and folktales often glorify male heroism, reinforcing the perception of masculinity as synonymous with strength and leadership. A Naga man is expected to be resilient and authoritative.

Irigaray (2000, p. 70) proposed that humans exist within two layers of power—the power of the universe and of the world created by humans. The power of the universe represents the cosmos and the external forces beyond human control, such as natural laws. It is the vast, objective reality that surrounds humanity. The power of the world created by humans refers to the structures built by humans. Over time, these human-made systems take on a life of their own, appearing independent of their creators. The key idea is that people often fail to recognise their own role in shaping these systems, especially the violence embedded in everyday life. Violence here does not necessarily mean direct physical harm but includes structural violence such as social injustices and exploitation,

normalised and hidden in daily routines. Laws and cultural norms may all contain traces of human aggression, yet they are accepted as if they are natural.

Thus, Irigaray challenges the idea that violence is an essential or natural part of masculinity. Instead, she argues that violent tendencies, such as aggressive impulses are not biologically predetermined but shaped by historical and social factors. She rejects the notion that men are naturally violent by virtue of their biology.

While men may display aggression, this does not mean it is an unchangeable or fundamental trait of masculinity. The way men express aggression or dominance has been shaped by historical processes, including cultural norms and social structures. Over time, certain behaviors have been reinforced as "masculine", making violence seem like a natural part of being a man when it is actually learned and encouraged in specific contexts. This association is perpetuated through upbringing, media, education, and social expectations.

The Consequences for Boys

From an early age, boys are socialised into rigid ideals of masculinity, such as stoicism, often at the expense of their authentic selves. Phrases like 'A man doesn't cry' or 'Be like your father' reinforce gendered expectations that align masculinity with endurance. This leads to a kind of alienation, where boys internalise societal expectations rather than freely define themselves. The suppression of vulnerability and emotions—traits considered "feminine" under patriarchy—creates a crisis of authenticity. Boys may struggle with relationships and self-expression because they are conditioned to reject parts of their human experience. The paradox is that while patriarchy grants them social power, it also limits their existential freedom.

Hooks (2004, ch. 4), in *The Will to Change*, highlights how boys are emotionally disempowered by patriarchal upbringing. She argues that the suppression of emotional intelligence leads to difficulties in forming meaningful connections and contributes to male violence and other self-destructive behaviors. Patriarchy thus becomes a double-edged sword: while it offers boys social dominance, it deprives them of emotional wholeness. The expectation to embody 'rational' and 'strong' masculinity often isolates boys from emotional and communal support. This contributes to crises of mental health and a sense of existential emptiness.

Beauvoir (2011, p. 296) describes little girls as *seeming* to have a privileged position because they continue to receive physical affection and indulgence from adults, whereas boys are gradually discouraged from seeking affection and physical closeness. Girls are nurtured and encouraged to express emotions, which makes them feel secure and valued, but boys are told to be independent and refrain from behaviors associated with vulnerability. These early experiences shape gender identity and reinforce patriarchal norms. Girls are conditioned to seek validation through appearance and emotional expressiveness, while boys are pushed toward stoicism and self-reliance. This early conditioning influences how men and women experience relationships and social expectations throughout their lives.

Thus, boys are socialised into a world where communication with the "other" (women, or even different forms of masculinity) is limited. They are trapped in a rigid identity that values success and detachment, leaving little room for emotional expression or relational ways of being. The masculine ideal is falsely presented as the pinnacle of culture, reinforcing stereotypes that limit male subjectivity. This fosters a culture where boys feel pressured to achieve external success at the cost of their internal well-being. Thus, they are not truly empowered but rather enclosed within restrictive norms that prevent authentic self-development and meaningful relationships.

The Erasure of Male Victimhood

The emotional suppression boys are taught to embody does not simply disappear in adulthood. Instead, it turns into silence around male suffering. When men become victims of abuse, whether emotional, physical, or sexual, they often find themselves without the cultural scripts or legal frameworks to articulate their suffering. The recognition of female-perpetrated violence challenges essentialist views of women as only victims. The latest study on child abuse conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development discovered that 53% of the victims were boys (Study, 2007).

The underreporting of male victimisation can be linked to social constructivism: the idea that our understanding of reality is shaped by societal narratives. The belief that men are "tough" and "dominant" creates cognitive dissonance when men experience abuse. Beauvoir's (2011, p. 6) concept of "The Other" could be applied to male victims—since they do not fit the traditional victim archetype, their suffering is often dismissed.

Butler's (1999, p. 33) theories on performativity might explain why legal institutions struggle with male victimisation; they operate within gendered norms that reinforce certain narratives about power and victimhood. Men who are victims may not 'perform' in ways that conform to systemic expectations of, say, what a "victim" looks like, making them less credible within the legal framework.

Further, the issue of the bias that works against men in the judicial system is often unacknowledged. While laws aim to protect women from historical oppression and systemic violence, their exclusion of male victims and female perpetrators highlights deep-rooted biases that contradict principles of fairness. For instance, under the Indian Penal Code, Section 375 defines rape in a male-on-female context only. This sort of legal framing ignores heterosexual female-on-male rape or sexual coercion in other contexts, further marginalising male victims.

By exempting women from legal accountability, the law paradoxically reinforces gender stereotypes and assumes that men are always powerful and abusive, while women are always vulnerable and incapable of harm. It suggests that one group should be exempt from scrutiny based on historical oppression, rather than applying the principle of justice before the law. Ignoring male victims perpetuates suffering and denies justice to half the population, failing the utilitarian standard. Similarly, it treats individuals not as ends in themselves, but as means to an end. Thus, the exclusion of male victims for the sake of protecting women is morally as well as logically indefensible.

Justice systems must evolve to recognise all victims, so as not to diminish women's claims but to uphold fairness universally. Recognising female-perpetrated abuse and male victimhood is not a rejection of feminist legal gains, but a logical extension of feminist ethics that include autonomy, and accountability.

Man in the Era of Humanisation

The 21st century has witnessed a significant shift towards humanising technology. From user-centered design to empathetic AI Interfaces, there is a concerted effort to make technology more intuitive and responsive to human needs and emotions. There has also been a noticeable increase in pro-life movements for the inviolable rights of the foetus as a moral subject, and also advocacy for a patient's "right to die with dignity" in cases of extreme suffering.

Historically, men have been viewed as warriors, protectors, and providers—roles that, while often valorised, also render their

suffering less visible. When men die in war or hazardous work, it is frequently framed as expected or inevitable, rather than as a human tragedy. In contrast, the deaths of women and children evoke a stronger emotional response, reinforcing an implicit hierarchy of whose lives elicit more empathy. For instance, news reports of civilian casualties with men, women, and children among the dead very commonly read something like, "At least 12 people, including women and children, dead."

Such instances hint at our subconscious insensitivity of men dying, and the acceptance of it as mundane, while reiterating the categorisation of women as vulnerable. They also reflect deeply ingrained societal attitudes. The discrepancy raises important questions: Are we blind to the ways men are dehumanised because their suffering is normalised? And what would it take to extend the same level of compassion and concern to all lives equally, regardless of gender?

Imsong (2021, pp. 79-85) critiques patriarchy by exposing its contradictions and oppressive nature. Men, within patriarchal systems, idealise their roles (as husbands, fathers, and sons) in a performative manner, not out of genuine care but to serve their own egos. This suggests that patriarchy isn't just about structure but also about sustaining illusions that benefit men at the expense of genuine human relationships. She stresses that patriarchy also suppresses free will and dulls human sensitivity; individuals within such a system often act without critical thought, much like a crowd swept up in collective irrationality. Patriarchy is situated within a broader historical context, much like the oppressive institutions of slavery and colonialism—once-prevalent systems that were eventually recognised as inhumane and abandoned—implying that patriarchy too is not a fixed reality but something that must be challenged and transcended. Ultimately, there is a need for a societal evolution, and outdated and harmful thought patterns need to be addressed for humanity to progress.

Reimagining Masculinity: Toward Liberation

Hegemonic masculinity has become both a social burden and an ontological crisis. To reimagine masculinity, we must begin with a critical recognition of the dominant models of manhood. The pathways to counter the system of patriarchy need not be borrowed wholesale from Western feminist models. Instead, they can be rooted in indigenous values and critical reinterpretations of tradition. Naga traditions already contain seeds of egalitarianism. Educational

and cultural revival efforts should thus engage with oral histories and community memory to challenge the myth of historical male dominance. For instance, folklores where men are portrayed not for agression or power but for sensitivity and care may reveal fluid gender roles.

Schools, churches, and family units have crucial roles to play. Educating young boys on alternative forms of masculinity, ones that value emotional intelligence can help break the cycle of rigid patriarchal norms. Raising boys who are confident in themselves and unbound by preconceived notions of masculinity requires a conscious approach to parenting and family life. If parents, especially fathers or male figures, model emotional openness (this includes talking openly about fear, sorrow, mistakes, showing empathy, engaging in caregiving roles, etc.), boys learn that being a man does not require repression. Boys must be made to see that strength can include softness. Families can avoid gendered limitations on chores or interests and celebrate both their assertiveness and their gentleness. Thus, emotional literacy and nurturing responsibilities must become communal values, not gendered weaknesses.

Reforming customary laws is essential. While they are meant to preserve cultural identities, they often legitimise exclusionary practices. Including women and youth in decision-making spaces not only democratises leadership but also disrupts the masculine monopoly of power. It would undercut the idea that being a "real man" means being powerful or the sole property-holder.

Feminist pedagogy needs to expand. It must engage critically with gender justice not as a foreign ideology, but as a continuation of the community's own ethical aspirations. Artists, writers, intellectuals, leaders (both religious and secular) can contribute by narrating alternative masculinities. The future of the Naga society depends on how it negotiates the balance between preserving its cultural heritage and embracing progressive change. It lies in cultivating a masculinity rooted in care and reciprocity, and a society where liberation is shared.

While acknowledging the historical and systemic oppression of women, we must also reject the erasure of male victims and ensure that ethical responses are based on human dignity, not gender norms. An ethical society must protect all victims while dismantling the power structures that enable violence in the first place. Cultural narratives that excuse or normalise violence (e.g., "Men will be men") must be critically examined. Gender violence does not exist in a vacuum; it is linked to power structures and institutional

complicity. A philosophically sound approach must go beyond gender essentialism and recognise the structural and individual dimensions of abuse.

The concern that acknowledging female perpetrators would lead to added harrassment is based on a flawed protectionist legal stance. The goal of justice should not be to shield one group from accountability, but to ensure that no victim is denied protection. Indian laws must evolve to acknowledge male victims and female perpetrators without fear of political backlash and ensure gender-neutral language in sexual offense laws, protecting all individuals fairly.

The misperception that feminist women advocate for men's emotional expression while often preferring strong or emotionally resilient partners in heterosexual relationships arises from a misunderstanding. Feminists in this context argue that men should be free to express their emotions without societal shame, just as women are. It means that they want men to have emotional depth and the ability to communicate their feelings. The key distinction is that advocating for men's emotional freedom does not mean dictating personal preferences; it means giving men the space to be fully human without fear of social repercussions. A truly emancipatory gender politics advocates not prescriptive traits but the freedom for all individuals to express complex identities, balancing emotional intelligence, accountability, and resilience.

Conclusion

Humans are vulnerable to external forces beyond their personal control. It is paradoxical how we live within the systems we ourselves have built, yet we fail to acknowledge them as our own, particularly in how they perpetuate hidden forms of violence. The interplay between man and patriarchy in the Naga context is intricate, shaped by history, culture, religion, and contemporary challenges. While patriarchy has traditionally placed men in dominant roles, it has also imposed expectations and limitations on them. As the Naga society evolves, there is a growing need for a more inclusive and equitable structure that allows both men and women to contribute meaningfully without the constraints of rigid gender roles. A reimagining of masculinity offers a pathway for boys to reclaim their full humanity.

Breaking free from patriarchy, then, is not just about gender justice but about human liberation. Ultimately, it is a humanist

project. It is about creating a world where people are free to be their full selves without fear or shame.

References

Aristotle. (1995). *Politics*. Ernest Barker Trans. Revised with an Introduction and Notes by R. F. Stalley. Oxford University Press, pp. 7-53.

Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. With an Introduction by Sheila Rowbotham. London: Vintage Books, pp. 3-17, 21-49, 293-351.

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, p. 22-33.

hooks, b. (2004). *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Atria Books, Chapter 4. "Stopping Male Violence".

Imsong, I. (2021). "Patriarchy and the Male Conscience". *Gender Narratives: Reinterpreting Language, Culture and Tradition in Nagaland*. Heritage Publishing House, pp. 76-87.

Irigaray, L. (2000). *To Be Two*. Monique M. Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc Trans. London: The Athlone Press, pp. 68-76.

New, C. (2001). "Oppressed and Oppressors? The Systematic Mistreatment of Men." *Sociology* Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 729-748, United Kingdom: BSA Publications Limited.

Plato. (2007). *The Republic*. Desmond Lee Trans. Second Ed. Penguin Books, pp.157-181.

Rousseau, J. J. (1943). *Émile*. Barbara Foxley, M.A. Trans. Ernest Rhys Ed. Everyman's Library. J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., pp. 5-40

Sema, H. J. (2001). Traditional and Modern Political Institutions of the Nagas (PhD Thesis). North Eastern Hill University, Dept. of Political Science, pp. 28-52. http://hdl.handle.net/10603/60510

Study on Child Abuse: India 2007, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. Accessed 24 Feb 2023. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/4978.pdf/

The Indian Penal Code, Section 375. Accessed on 15 June 2025. https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealedfileopen?rfilename=A1860-45.pdf

Wollstonecraft, M. (2008). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and A Vindication of the Rights of Man*. Edited by Janet Todd. Oxford University Press, pp. 84-104.

Zehol, L. (2015). "Why Do Naga Men Always Win?," *NEIRA Journal*, 1(1), pp. 182-188.