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# Unheard Voices: A Study of Selected Work of Poetess of Manipuri Literature

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**ABSTRACT:** Predominantly, women are always upfront in terms of any social movement from the time immemorial. It has been recorded that in ancient times, women enjoyed relatively greater freedom and status than they do at present. It's sad to see that, in spite of all the benefits that Meitei women enjoy, attending equality is yet an unanswered quest. Literature plays an important role in shaping the culture and civilization of a particular society. With regards to the literary tradition from the male literary tradition in Manipur, women literary tradition is far behind from their male counterparts. Manipuri women started making their marked in the literary tradition after World War II. Ever since then there is no turning back. There are various parameters for checking how women equally participate in the development of a particular society. One of the main point of women's empowerment is participation in the decision-making process and commendable representatives in policy-making and equal participation in political parties as elected representatives. But it is sad to see that in spite of the development and advancement in science and technology women are still far behind men in many ways. This is due to the fact that few mean-minded people are not ready to change the mindset which is outdated and archaic. A few outspoken women writers have voiced out the discrimination that women face in their personal and professional life through their writing. The current paper examines a few of the selected poems written by the poetess of Manipur to highlight the dissatisfaction and lament over their plight and helplessness against the system.

**KEYWORDS:** Meitei, women, discrimination, equality, Manipur

## ABOUT MANIPUR

The undivided Manipur is mainly divided into the Hills and the Valley due to its geographic limitation. With nine lofty hills and land mass of 22,365 square kilometers with a lush green valley as its capital, Imphal, is one of India's North Eastern states. The valley region is mostly populated by the Meitei community and in the hills regions the other ethnic communities reside. Due to the scenic and picture perfect beauty, the late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had rightly named, "Manipur – The land of Jewel". The name Manipur as of today was known by different names; Kache by Burmese, Moglai by Cacharis, Takhel by Tripuris, Kangleipak in early period and Poirei Meitei to name a few. "The present name of the state is of comparatively recent origin dating from the eighteenth century and it lost its independence to the mighty British in 1891" (3). Manipur has a rich tradition of arts, culture and literature. The literary tradition of Manipur can be broadly divided into 1) The Early Period 2) The Middle Period and 3) The Modern Period. The 'Early Period' roughly covered the late 17th century, the 'Middle Period' covered the 18th and 19th centuries with the influence of Hinduism at its peak and the 'Modern Period' covered the World Wars till contemporary. Manipuri women came into the literary scenario only after WW II. The first women's school, Tamphasana, was established in 1935. By this time many women writers have already established themselves in other part of the country and world at large. It may also be noted that, 'The first ever book by a woman writer appeared late on the scene during the second half of the 20th century' (Devi, xv). The three pillar of women writers who laid the foundation of women's literary tradition were Takhellambam Thoibi Devi (1920-1996), Maharajkumari Binodini Devi (1922-2011) and Khaidem Pramodini Devi (1924-2006). These women faced the ordeal of breaking the taboo of writing and publishing literature. Their hard work and determination help women writers to establish a women literary tradition. In the name of patriarchy and safeguarding women, they were not allowed to voice their emotions through literature as it was not considered women's cup of tea. The irony of women's position in Manipur is that women are always upfront and actively involved in any social movement in Manipur. One can even say that no social reform or movement is complete without the involvement of women. Yet in terms of literature, women are yet to get their due recognition. Women writers do not need the validation from male writers or should depend on men to write about issues related to women. There are many women writers voicing out their views and trying carved a niche for themselves. One cannot understand the literary tradition of Manipuri literature without understanding the women's literary tradition. There is a regular publication of women writers over the past two decades. Day by day, their voices are getting stronger and more



vivacious and escalating at great speed. The women poet has relatively brought new sensibility and emotion to Manipuri poetry encompassing thought and feeling with wider perspective. The present study will throw insight into the world of women poets who try to become the voices of many women and raise questions to the prevailing system. The poetesses taken up for study are, 'The Noose' and 'Love' by Lairenlakpam Ibemhal, 'Ode to the Malignant Tumour' by Haripriya Soibam, , Moirangthem Borkanya's "This Strom", "Ode to the Malignant Tumour" by Haripriya Soibam, Farewell! Kangleipak , Farewell! By S. Gambhini

'The Noose' by Lairenlakpam Ibemhal translated by Thingnam Anjulika Samon is a significant poem of retaliation and defiance. It's kind of open letter to her fore- mother against the legacy of bearing the atrocities and being submissive. The poem highlights the forced marriage that women have to undergo due to family pressure or financial issues. The lines below:

Calmly garlanding My Dear Mother Said-'This is your adornment!' (17-21)

The poetess felt that she was forced into marriage of convenient. She is expected not to raised her opinion to anyone. Her sole role is to fit into the standard of good daughter-in law for that she must bear with everything that is impending upon her. Women have no voice in this condition as they are either silence in the name of family's pride or society. They are treated as a decorative piece or adorn as prize achievement without any emotion. This system marriage for convenient is not only related to Manipur, it is a common phenomenon everywhere. The poetess felt that the unnecessary 'newly -wed's necklace' is a burden to her because the garland is not her dream, she wanted to study more maybe want to be an independent and she wants to break free the unwelcome garland:

I've cut off thus today That which you all have forcibly Made into a murderous rope This noose around my neck (39-42)

The poetess at last managed to break free the "murderous rope" which became a hindrance for her personal growth. It is the symbolic representation of defying and embracing new beginning in her life. There was a limited option for women all over the world, not only in Manipur. To be honest the problem pertaining women in Manipur are sometimes far better than the rest of women in mainland India. But this doesn't make things better for the women in Manipur. Equality is a long road to go. The issues related to women are discrimination, lack of opportunity, gender inequality; domestic and sexual violence, inadequate health care etc are also still pertaining in Manipur. The poetess wanted to break free from the entire social stigma that binds her and stopped her from exploring her potential.

In the poem "Love" by the same poet, she questions the nature of love that is fast changing in today's world. The poem is a short poem of 13 lines. The poetess asked the intension of the man for loving her. There many instances where women are trapped in the name of love are not new. There are many incidents where women are trapped into love marries them and sell them off. The poetess tries to warn young women to be careful and not to fall prey in the name of love. Some men are offering love not to actual marries them but to exploit them, she says:

Is it to the restaurant cabins? Or maybe, From the cabin, Is it to the secret bedroom? (10-13)

New age definition of love has totally changed with men hovering only to take advantages. Everything is so superficial and full of mockery. It is rare to get true love and commitment. In the name of love it is still women who pay the price by compromising her virginity, physical exploitation and harassment. The poetess wanted to highlight the tool of love employed by some mean man in order to exploit women. It is merely becoming a mere transaction of business deal for human traffickers. Women should specially take care of all these things and not blindly fall into the honey trap of some mean men.

Moirangthem Borkanya's "This Strom" which is translated into English by Soibam Haripriya is about the images of women portrayed by society.

We've been looking for long at these incomplete images reflected on this mirror in front of us broken into fragments of (1-5)

The above lines are the opening of the poem which talks about the incomplete images of women that is reflecting back to the poetess. It's been centuries that women are presented with fragmentation information by the male or by the society. The poetess says that the narratives of women are always presented in fragment or incomplete. There has been a one sided bias narrative about women, now the poetess urges that women should take up issues in our own hand and narrate her own narratives. Women need not feel inferior towards their male counterparts. Women have the same



ability and are at par with their male counterparts, but the stories are presented in fragmentation which compromises the ideas and views. Thus the poetess says:

Which at one point my not be stoppable: an unstoppable storm churns today from thousands and thousands of hearts of the images reflected in the shards of the broken mirror.

this rising storm is not in vain it does not blow any other way, except yours. this tempest is aimed towards you, only towards you. (45-51)

The concluding lines from the poem vividly reflect the anguish of the woman, who has been holding all her anger and frustration for long time. Like the heavy storm it destroyed everything both good and bad. After tsunami and destruction there is still hope of new growth as after every winter there is summer. The poetess is hopeful that new season for the women will come, equality and humanities will prevail soon. This kind of rejuvenation was needed for the poetess to grow stronger and strife for the best. The poetesses took refuse in literature, as it is a strong weapon for change and build a new constructive society for all.

“Ode to the Malignant Tumour” by HariPRIYA Soibam is short poem of 17 short lines. The poetess narrates the painful trauma of a woman’s life who is suffering a breast cancer. From an internet source, “As per information by Dr. Th. Dhabali, Chairman, Babina Group Imphal he said that Breast Cancer is the leading cancer among women in Manipur. He also state that 12.2 percent of the cancer detected among women are breast cancer. And as per data from Fuji film India is the sixth highest in Asia and tenth in the world”. This is an alarming situation for women in Manipur. The poetess feels sad seeing the emptiness of her breast, and she express that it’s like:

A pre-pubescent emptiness Fugitive organs Did not survive me And left absent spheres on my attire ( 5-9)

The poetess felt wounded and betrayed by her own body organ. The worst is when a mother is not able to breast feed her own child, ‘where his mouth once sought/the harmony of bodies’. The poet felt like a handicap and incomplete as her breast is chopped off. This agony is a hard core reality of many Manipuri women who are suffering from this alignment and fighting this breast cancer war. Women all over the world are battling this disease. Advance treatment are available now a day’s but still not many are benefitting from it due to financial matter or lack of awareness. The poem is a dedicated to all the women going through the tough battle of breast cancer.

“Penance” by Ph. Brajamuhini Devi is a short poem of 11 lines, written in a lucid and crisp manner to share her view about how women are treated in a society. The strong lines:

For Saying the black is black my eyes have been dislocated not to let see the black.

The opening lines are powerful and the message is also quite clear. This poem is not applicable only to the women, but also to the men in Manipur society. There are various conflicts and ethnic clashes since Manipur is an amalgamation of more than thirty five different ethnic communities. The poetess wants to highlight how the voices of women are suppressed by the so called patriarchy society. As we have turned into 21<sup>st</sup> century and with the advancement of science and technology, many things has really impacted and changed our lives. But the question still reminds unanswered how about the mindset of few men. The obsolete mindset still prevails deep within many of us. There are still many men who will not allowed their women to work or cannot tolerate when women give their opinion. They believed that women should obey everything without raising any question. The poem is a true representative of today’s society, where corruption, exploitation of women is at the peak. The world is becoming a darker place and all the more difficult for women to survive, “how long should we survive so and so “ (11). There is no freedom of speech and the powers of media are utilized for negativity leading to conflict between people. Man with power exploiting the subordinate. The rich are richer and the poor are becoming poorer. This has become a common norm. Anyone who tries to question the system are always targeted and even silenced by killing. Things have really turned hostile in Manipur due to the negative usage of media during the recent incident of Kuki –Meitei conflict in Manipur on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2023. People have witness how freedom of speech and media was used for negative propoganda and manipulation.

“Farewell! Kangleipak, Farewell!” by S. Gambhini is a heart touching poem written by a Manipuri from Tripura. It is a long poem of 73 lines. The main theme of the poem is about longing to visit Manipur and be with the people of Manipur. She voiced out the plight of being a Diasporas in Tripura. The poetess laments over the issues of ethnic clashes that occurred in Manipur. The ethnic clash always leave a unwanted hatred among the communities of Manipuris leading to many dead from both the communities and leaving thousand people are lying in the relief camps without much help from the government and the central government. The poetess also decried of all the incidents that are happening in Manipur, she feel that she is directly on going through the issues and laments for her fellow Manipuris. The poetess says that:



No more your daughter wants to see The Kekru lake swollen with salty tears  
Of those mother bereft of their children  
How could my repentant eyes rest at The Great June Uprising Complex (33-37)

The above line talks about the infamous incident of the 18 martyrs who sacrificed their lives for safeguarding the territorial integrity of Manipur on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2001 after “the Union government signed the amended ceasefire agreement with the NSCN (IM) and inserted the words “without territorial limits”, following which people came out in streets to protest and there was arson at many places. To control the uprising, security personnel have resorted to firing leading to death of 18 persons”. The day is observed as the great uprising day in Manipur. She further says:

O Kangleipak! Hills, lakes Rivers of my dear motherland!  
You stay on But call me no more to my mother!  
I will make my way to my distant land In the shelter of my step-mother  
There I will spend the rest of my life (63-68)

The poetess feel that since she will not be able to visit Manipur often , she gave a farewell to her motherland land Manipur wishes Manipur well. She hopes that there should not be any more clashes and sufferings prevailing in Manipur.

### CONCLUSION

Women writers and literary activist are trying their level best to bring about changes and to uplift the status of women. It is difficult to study the condition of women in Manipur without understanding the socio – cultural aspect. In the contemporary Manipuri literary tradition women writer had made a place for themselves, but there are still miles ahead of them. Women in Manipur do face various challenges like gender biasness, domestic violence, limited resources for education and job opportunity due to geographical reasons. Some poetess echoes about gender equality and longing love for motherland. Every human being on this planet Earth is entitled to live with self-esteem and autonomy. No doubt Manipuri women have played a significant role in the social set –up as compared to other part of the country. Even after taking this into consideration one may think that Manipuri women are empowered and they have achieved equality. Reality is that women in Manipur still yet to achieve its equality and need to stand up against any injustice. Without the welfare and developing the women no society can prosper. The poetess decried inhuman treatment of women and tries to unveil few of the multifaceted layered of women situation in Manipur.

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