

Marginalisation Of Women And Its Repercussion As Reflected In The Poetry Of Modernist Manipuri Women Writers

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ABSTRACT

Manipuri society is androgenic by nature and as such woman in Manipuri society have always been kept cornered or marginalised in every respect. They have been kept confined within the four walls of their domestic world and have never been allowed to take part in the administration as well as in the education of the state. However, in the last decade of 20th century, they have started to think anew about themselves, their place and position as well as role in the society. They have started writing about themselves challenging their androgenic society and its harsh iron rules which have marginalised them in their ontological live life.

The present paper therefore seeks to highlight how the modernist Manipuri women writers voice their dissatisfaction against such iron rules of the androgenic society and give vent to their ardent desire for the restoration of the rights they have always denied of as 'others'. In the main, the paper will concentrate on the poems written by some leading Manipuri women writers who are known not only in the national level but also in the wider international level for their insuppressible voice such as A. Memchoubi, L. Ibemhal, M. Borkanya etc.

KEYWORDS: *marginalisation of women, Androgenic society, women empowerment, modernist Manipuri writers*

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Human beings are born free, none of them are born slave. The epithet attached to any man or woman is the institutionalised level commodifying the very person concerned and thus effacing his or her entity. Gender discrimination is one of such institutionalized levels. Indeed without any prejudice so to speak there is nothing different between the two divisions of gender – male and female; one is as much essential as for the other and vice-versa. In other words, both are complimentary to each other and none is superior or inferior to the other. This is evident when we look back at the primitive stage of human beings. But with the advancement of knowledge, human beings steadily strode into the realm of civilization forming family and then society. It is with the formation of the family that the division of labour began - man being engaged in earning bread and woman in maintaining domestic and household affairs. Society which is constituted by the families framed this division of labour as its ruling norm. Then slowly and steadily with the coming of religion and political organizations, more important roles demanding strength and intelligence were assigned to men while women were kept confined within the four walls of their homes as they were considered 'weaker sex' and 'less intelligent' than their male counterparts. They were assigned with the sole duty of maintaining the family. Thus the

society took the form of patriarchy and the legacy has been continued till today. Though there exists the form of matriarchy in some societies, the division of labour is evident as in the patriarchy system, and hence we can say with least hesitation that the male dominance prevails in any form of the society – be it patriarchy or matriarchy.

Thus through the long history of mankind, women have been given subordinate roles and have never been allowed to come to the forefront which has always been reserved for men. This has become a tradition and the tradition has reduced a woman to a commodity. A woman therefore has to possess all the qualities which are regarded as 'ideal' by the society like a commodity that possesses all the qualities that will necessarily attract the attention of the buyers towards it. The selling points of a woman are: she must be good looking; she must be dutiful; she must be faithful; she must be enduring and she must be sacrificing. Besides, a woman must remain confined within the four walls of the house as homemakers running the family to the satisfaction of all the members. She must also do her best to preserve the spirit of the culture in dress, in behavior and in discharging duties. But outside this parameter, she cannot move out and as such she cannot take part in the administrative affairs, military matters, games and sports, education etc.

Like other Indian societies, Manipuri society is also androgenic in nature. In Manipuri society, men are the centre in all important matters while women are pushed back far at the periphery. Women are not allowed to play decisive roles in the social, political and economic matters. They have to remain confined within their domestic works which are unpaid. Mothers are at home teaching their daughters right from their childhood the do's and don'ts so that they may become "a perfect woman" as per the social norms. They have to wake up early in the morning, clean the yards, cleanse the utensils, take baths, prepare tea and cook food for the members of the family. They have to do all other works such as washing clothes, tidying the house etc. Besides they have also to learn spinning, weaving clothes. In short they learn how to run a family with all domestic works done neatly and smoothly.

The social norms of the society demand that a Manipuri woman should always be calm and quite. She should serve the family, the elders with calm resignations and never raise a voice of dissatisfaction and protest. She has no right to retaliate for the wrongs done to her. She should be patient and tolerant. In other words she should be a perfect symbol of passivity having no voice of her own. Which is the reason why, a Manipuri woman always is under the protection of her guardians/parents in her childhood; under the control of her husband after marriage and under the mercy of her sons when she becomes old. This is, in short, the legacy handed down from generations to generations. These are the selling points of being an ideal woman from the platonic point of view, and they have cornered them and made them subservient to the menfolk in the society. Indeed they always are marginalised and are not allowed to come to the forefront.

Though this is the picture of the traditional Manipuri women, still modern educated working Manipuri ladies are not free from this curse of the androgenic society. They are also struggling and fighting very hard in the social fields of life. They are in between tradition and modernity. They have to discharge many social duties and responsibilities. They have to serve the traditional in-laws, discharge many household duties and social obligations and working very hard not to lag behind in their offices and academic works. Of

course, this period i.e., from tradition to modernity may be said to be transitional. But the transitional period will take at least half of a generation. Thus all classes of women (educated, uneducated, richer, poorer) are playing a great role in the social life of Manipur. The next question is as regards their status in society. On an average, their status is not so high as compared with their role. Most of them are not allowed to take part in the decision-making process of the family, of the 'Leikais' and in social problems. Women generally accept what male has already decided. Decision making, it is believed, is the sole right of the men, there are also many social taboos for debarring women to participate in social life e.g. if a pung (Mridanga) is touched by a woman, it won't produce any sound; if a tree is climbed by a girl or woman, the tree will not bear any fruit etc. In short, in spite of the varied activities and great role in social fields, the women in Manipur are not enjoying a level of equal status in society. Gender justice is evasive till the menfolk restores to women, their eroded powers, rights etc.

Manipuri women started to write about themselves in the last part of 20th century after they had got the light of western education. They started to think anew about themselves, their place and position as well as role in moulding the society. They started writing about themselves imitating the style of their male counterparts. Steadily, they developed feminine style of writing, challenging the androgenic society and its harsh iron rules which have marginalised them in their ontological lived life.

The present paper seeks to highlight how the new generation modernist Manipuri women writers voice their dissatisfaction against such iron rules of androgenic society and give vent to their ardent desire for the restoration of the rights they have always been denied of as 'others'. In the main, the paper will concentrate on the poems written by some leading Manipuri women writers who are known not only in the national level but also in the wider international level for their insuppressible voice such as A. Memchoubi, L. Ibemhal, M. Borkanya etc.

From amongst this new generation of poets, A. Memchoubi stands out as an important and forceful poet because of her unique style of writing and handling of themes. So far, she has seven books of poetry to her credit. In her writing

she has exhibited a strong influence of feminism wherein she has voiced to set all the women, irrespective of cast and creed, free from the iron cage of phellocentrism and restore them every bit of human rights which have been denied to them so long. A. Memchoubi is a poet who never feels tired of fighting against all odds just to set right the existing modern Manipuri social system and its values which are slowly and steadily degrading.

In the poem *Nonggoubi* (a bird associated with rain) she uses folkloric elements in abundance with the help of Manipuri myths and symbols to illustrate the misfortune of being born a woman in the Manipuri society:

Come come Nonggoubi
Today we will start the creation anew
And will repair unto the source of light
Come let's start creation! Let's start
creation

[Nonggoubi – A bird associated with rain,
1984, p. 63]

Here, she hints at why Nonggoubi was debarred from using water in general. According to the myth, she could not participate in digging rivers at the time of creation. Eventually as punishment she was prohibited from using water for defying the order but with the help of this myth, A. Memchoubi successfully drives home her points of view regarding feminism saying like Nonggoubi, women are deprived of political rights and their social status as they cannot take part in the political affairs of the country because of their engagement in their household works and child rearing activities. Here, A. Memchoubi uses Nonggoubi as a symbol of woman.

Deeply pained by the miserable condition of the woman who long remained under the confines of the patriarchal society, Memchoubi blared out suddenly:

You drenched the earth with your own
blood,
You aroused waves of excitement with
your smiles
But you remained neglected,
Known to none
Woman, O woman!
Whoever are you?

[Nonggoubi(A bird associated with rain) 1984, p. 69]

The poet feels pain when she sees the big disparity as to the social status entitled to her in comparison with the hard labour she had rendered for the society. For them 'questioning' and 'arguing' are taboo and out of line with the womanly qualities. Today they have questioned, they have argued, which is a real revolt against the polite begging attitude attributed to them.

The ideal of the woman created by the patriarchal culture is analogized to the darkness in heaven by Memchoubi. The woman is regarded as an object which arouses passion. By virtue of her virginity the woman will find access to a poor man's house and there she will work as slave; to a rich man she is a doll well made and decorated to please his whims. Thus the woman cannot own her body and mind herself:

Poor man,
A slave I am in your house
My sire reared for you
Without a blemish;
Rich man,
To you I am a doll
My mother adorned
With spangles to enchant you.

[Nonggoubi – (A bird associated with rain) 1984, p.71]

In her second book *Androgi Mei* (The fire of Andro, 1990) Memchoubi strongly reacts against the social ethics and customary laws that circumscribe a woman in her marriage life. On the wedding day the daughter is given instructions:

A daughter cannot die at the
parents house,
So
You should bear and stay.
Never here again
You cannot return,
No,
Returning to stay here
Would be sacrilege.

[Androgi Mei (The fire of Andro) 1990, p.
36]

The trend and tendency to drag out the women from the cloistered world of traditional ethics and values, and to re-examine them now increases irresistibly. Problems and feelings which were never before experienced are brought out clearly by Lairenlakpam Ibemhal, and she takes up the banner of protest (LeironChankhrabaThajaba, 1993). Why should the women be treated as woman? Such a treatment makes the woman fall lower. Woman is not a plaything, and her soul is not be toyed with:

In moments of your carnal
desires
I was made to play the whore.
I am flattered as the lady of the
house,
A symbol of chastity.
A heroine when you want me to
extol me,
A forgiver when you err,
A soulless thing, a mute puppet,
Forced to pander to your whims.

[LeironChankhrabaThajaba, 1993, p. 25]

The woman is the shadow of the man, she need not have different individuality; the desires and wishes of the man should also be hers. These are the biases with which the woman is looked upon. But if the shadow begins to behave in the same manner as the source of the shadow does, that is to say if the two behaviours are transferred, what will the man feel about it? Now is the time to ponder over it. Ibemhal expresses this situation in her poem *Mami* (Image) by effecting a close conversational tone a peculiar style that is her forte:

Calm down darling
it's only a drop I look
on persuasion of friends,
Don't look at me like that,
I am the former self,
But I only changed into you

[NongthangiInnaphi (The wrapper of lighting), 2002, p.62]

In this patriarchal culture which enjoins division of man and woman, high and low, the complaint of the woman is a cry in wilderness. But cry has a

strong note of warning to break the fortress, and there she shows off her firm stand of a feminist:

You must know me
You and I
are one player on a stage;
Otherwise
By this hand wearied in washing
your feet
Shall have to shatter your image
That is turned into stone.

[NongthangiInnaphi (The wrapper of lighting), 2002, p. 13]

In Ibemhal's poems we find things like splinters thrown out at the eruption of a volcano that lay dormant long in the women's heart. In 'Imager' there occurs a feminine discourse.

In her first book of poems (LoinaidrabaThawaigiEsei: the Eternal song of the soul, 1988), Borkanya describes a poor woman boils some cabbage leaves and in the process she gets more heat that can burn her out than the heat required to boil the cabbage (Kobi champhut- boil cabbage). But she cannot be vociferous about the question as to the misery of the women. She was enveloped by the male paradigm. But as a writer how long could she conceal the female consciousness in her? It is expressed in one way or another. She enters into the episodes of the Mahabharatta and the Ramayana and does a revision of them. The incident of all the men remaining silent spectators as of vow-bound when draupadi was derobed in the open court is described by the poet as an unscrupulous act of watching a sex object with lust, whereas the incident of Sita's ordeal by the fire is criticised as a male centric view:

Hate, I do hate their stories
Your dream, your hope
Your life, your ideal
These are not yours
Hey! You, segregated Panchalini

[SangbannabaAtiyagiIpakta (In vast expanse of blue horizon), 1995, p. 3]

These three modernist female writers are all products of the traditional society where patriarchy still rules. It is not an easy task to break through the cordon of the encircling environs. It

calls for a clear consciousness, an idea conceived in a healthy way. Only then the protest will be efficacious, it will not be nice and good to employ feminism as a fashion of venting out sudden outburst of anger. It is not an attack on the men by harbouring anti male attitudes. It is none other than a protest against the unacceptable and unpalatable things in the old bases. The end result of this repercussion is to make the women believe firmly in her own qualities and strength and that she does not live in a sub culture and she is a human being. It is not violation of the natural law of male-female pair.

However, the most contesting question which is asked more often than not, is the status of the women in society dominated by the male folk. No doubt, the light of education specially higher education has awoken them from their long slumber and enabled them to look into themselves as evident from the voice of the women writers, the moot question that is asked is how successfully have they broken the jinx of logocentrism of male metaphysics of presence in their ontological lived life. The question still remains to be answered with affirmation. But their voice continues with unabated echoes. Who knows will it subside gradually like flood waters or lose its momentum like ripples in the vast ocean

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