

Mapping Literary Histories: A Brief Overview of Manipuri Women's Writing

Dr. Gurumayum Deepika

Assistant Professor, Department of English
G.P. Women's College
Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur

Dr. Neeruka Angom

Assistant Professor, Department of English
G.P. Women's College
Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur

Abstract

Women writers have increasingly shifted their focus from emulating and accepting the models and stereotypes propagated by male literary works to articulating a distinctly female experience. Likewise, Manipuri women's writing has evolved through generations— from narratives rooted in oral traditions to contemporary voices challenging oppressive patriarchy and marginalization. The paper will trace a brief history of women's writing in Manipur and highlight some of the important works pertaining to each period. It will also discuss the defining characteristics of Manipuri Women's Writing at different points of time, focussing on their major themes and concerns. While many of the portrayals and representations of women's experiences evoke universal resonance, the rootedness of their narratives within the specific context of Manipur renders their lived experiences unique, and therefore their writings, truly different from the works of British and American women writers as well as Indian women writers.

Keywords: Women's Writing, Manipur, Manipuri Literature, History, Representation

Introduction

In her 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous demonstrated a profound awareness of the necessity for women to engage in self-expression and literary creation, emancipating themselves from the confines of being mere subjects in the literary constructs of male authors. This act of writing the self is what Cixous terms *écriture féminine*, "a new insurgent writing" characterised by "indispensable ruptures and transformations" (880). Hence, "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (875). For centuries, women's voices have been marginalized and silenced within predominantly male-dominated societies. In such a context, the act of writing emerges as a

powerful tool for not only reclaiming these silenced voices but also as an act of resistance against prevailing gender hierarchies. It is important to note that while writing as a form of resistance may not possess the visibility associated with more overt modes of resistance like activism and armed rebellion, it is nevertheless a potent space for resistance (Mafe 7).

Women writers have increasingly shifted their focus from emulating and accepting the models and stereotypes propagated by male literary works to articulating a distinctively female experience. They strive to recover and reconstruct previously suppressed female experiences, ultimately aiming to both retrieve and redefine the female self and their narratives. In essence, women's writing transitions from male representation to female representation, prioritizing the expression of female sensibilities. Additionally, they underscore the distinctions between male and female literary traditions by highlighting their differing positions within male-centric societies. The primary objective of women's writing, therefore, can be understood as the establishment of a female literary canon and an attempt to recover, narrate, and articulate a distinctly female experience. Women writers achieve this by reimagining myths, revisiting gendered customs, and interrogating traditional values that have historically confined them to the margins. The publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) are some of the important milestones in the history of women's writing.

In the essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics," Showalter asserts the need for a well-defined female theoretical framework, and further contends that prevailing "literary abstractions" purporting to be universal have been constructed primarily from male perspectives and experiences. Thus, she highlights the importance to "construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories" (Showalter). According to her, women's agency as readers remains confined primarily to the act of reading and analyzing texts crafted by male authors who have constructed and conveyed specific images and stereotypes of women to serve their own purposes. Hence, she posits the necessity for women to shed the secondary role historically ascribed to them and position themselves as the primary agents who articulate and elucidate the female experience. Subsequently, when women assume the role of writers as "Gynocritics" (Showalter), they create and shape texts and their meanings. In this process, women not only furnish themselves with a framework for exploring new themes and genres, but also establish a foundation for the examination of subjects like the "psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and, of course, studies of particular writers and works" (Showalter). Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar also examines the challenges faced by women writers in a patriarchal Victorian England in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* where they conceptualized women as embodying two contrasting archetypes: "the angel in the house" and the "madwoman in the attic." While the former was characterized as virtuous, obedient, and morally upright, the latter was depicted as being fuelled by anger, passion, and power (Gilbert and Gubar). Some of the major writers of nineteenth century England are Mary Shelley, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Emily Brontë. They were followed by twentieth

century Black women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Zora Neale Hurston who extensively wrote about racial injustice and the African-American community.

In the Indian context, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, in their two-volume work *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C to the Present* have attempted to delineate a distinct female literary tradition by tracing the history of women's writing in India all the way back to the sixth century BC (Tharu and Lalita). Additionally, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, in their book *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Sangari & Vaid) explore the question of women's writing in the backdrop of colonial India. Similarly, Maya Pandit has also emphasized the significance of reinterpreting the historical narrative of women's writing in India with an objective to challenge established literary conventions and to redefine the roles of women and the expression of their experiences within a predominantly male-centric framework. The earliest known anthology of women's literature in India is identified as those written by the Buddhist Therigatha nuns (Koshy, Tharu and Lalita). Rassundari Debi who wrote the "first ever full-length autobiography in the Bangla literary space" (Sanyal 92) *Amar Jiban*, Savitribai Phule during the social reformist period, and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati were the harbingers of women's writing in India. Later in the nineteenth and twentieth century writers like Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Nayantara Sahgal emerged. Mahashweta Devi's "Draupadi" is one of the most powerful political commentaries on subaltern defiance in Indian Women's Writing.

Women's Writing in Manipur: History and Issues

The origin of women's literature in Manipur can be traced back to the tradition of oral narratives, which revolved around the retelling of ancient myths and legends. Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi highlights the significance of the invocations and oracles performed by the *Maibi* (priestess) as a form of ancient literary narrative (Arambam, Introduction 7). Besides the prominent role played by women in the oral liturgy of the *Meiteis*, women also made significant contributions to the tradition of folk tales and various lyrical forms (Nahakpam, The Journey 19). However, despite the fact that these early "ritual songs and hymns played a pivotal role in the emergence of early Manipuri poetry and, by extension, Manipuri literature" (Chongtham 12), it was not until the nineteenth century that women's literary writings began to take shape in Manipur.

Manipuri literature came to be firmly established in the 1920s and 1930s, marked by the works of writers such as Hijam Anganghal, Khwairakpam Chaoba and Lamabam Kamal (Chongtham 219). This period also witnessed the emergence of several literary journals like *Meitei Leima*, *Meitei Chanu*, *Jagaran*, *Yakairol*, and *Lalit Manjari Patrika*. On the other hand, it is significant to note that writers like Elangbam Nilakanta, Laishram Samarendra, Hijam Guno, GC Tongbra, and Arambam Somorendro played pivotal roles in shaping the literary landscape of post-Second World War Manipur, with a few of them challenging traditional values associated with womanhood in their writings (Nahakpam, The Journey 21, 22, 24). Despite the advancement of literature by male writers, women's entry into the literary arena in Manipur occurred significantly later. A key reason for this delay can be attributed to women's limited access to formal education, which only became available in 1935 with the establishment of Tamphasana High School (Wahengbam 90). Additionally, societal norms and beliefs surrounding girls' education played a significant role in this delay

(Nahakpam, The Journey 24). Although a few women contributed to journals as early as 1931 (Wahengbam 98) and the first book written by a Manipuri woman writer *Nuja Phidam* by Khaidem Pramodini came out in 1957, it is widely regarded that the year 1965 marked the emergence of women writers in Manipur. This shift was exemplified by the publication of Thoibi Devi's novel *Radha* and MK Binodini's anthology of short stories, *Nunggairakta Chandramukhi* (Nahakpam, The Journey 27).

Thoibi Devi, MK Binodini, and Khaidem Pramodini belong to the first generation of women writers in Manipur. They started writing in the 1960s and 1970s and are the pioneering figures of Manipuri women's writing (24-25). While these trailblazers explored an idealized concept of womanhood, they also depicted the plight of marginalized individuals within their literary works. Thoibi Devi envisions her ideal woman as someone who is educated with a modern outlook while remaining rooted in tradition and adhering to societal norms without transgressing them (28).

MK Binodini's literary oeuvre encompasses not only the lives of ordinary people but also delves into the intricacies of palace life and royalty, and therefore she is a writer "inextricably bound" to the larger story of the Maharaja's household (Nahakpam, A Princess Remembers xxi). In her essay "The Journey of Women's Writing in Manipuri Literature," Nahakpam Aruna observes that Binodini depicts women as she sees them— "the maidservant serving in the palace, the divorced woman trying to recover from a bad marriage, or the woman given the worse cards of fate" (28). Her works primarily revolve around the challenges faced by women and their varied experiences. Chongtham Manihar notes that:

of the stories, 'Raas Purnima', the close study of the minds and feelings of two socially divided young women, 'Sur' the account of a lady to the manner born but in her later days finding herself misplaced among the philistine younger generation, 'Imaton' (Step-Mother), a young woman and the second wife of a widower who gradually instils motherly affection in the grown-up son of the man and 'Eigi Thahoudraba Heitup Lalu' (The Sweetened Apple that I Did Not Send) recounting the separation of a just married woman with her husband conscripted for the First World War (locally known as German War) are mainly representative of her. (277)

The "second generation" (Nahakpam, The Journey 30) of Manipuri women writers who started writing from the late 1960s continued to write till the 1980s, embarked on an exploration of the portrayal of the educated, middle-class women, grappling with the confines imposed by a traditional patriarchal society (31). This period also witnessed the rise of women as significant actors in the sociopolitical landscape of Manipur, marked by the establishment of movements such as *Nishabandh* and *Meira Paibi*. Within this context, the second generation women writers embraced the archetype of the resilient woman who, despite adversity and oppression, continued to embody her nurturing qualities. These exemplary women, who steadfastly adhered to a path characterized by righteousness, tradition, and self-sacrifice remained non-transgressive (32). This portrayal of women as non-transgressive figures is prominently reflected in the literary works of writers such as Chongtham Jamini, Sanjenbam Bhanumati, Khwairakpam Anandini, Haobam Satyabati, Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi, Moirangthem Borkanya, and Lairenlakpam Ibemhal.

Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi is one of the most important critical voices from the second generation of women writers who set "a new poetic vision centred on the woman, her identity, and the shackles that bind her, thus ushering in a feminist ethos" (Oinam 2). Her

works focus on nativist themes and employ folk elements such as myths, legends, and riddles. In the process, her poetry seeks to redefine the image of the indigenous *Meitei* woman by rejecting essentialist definitions of womanhood. In her poem “Nonggoubi,” she rejects the stereotypical image of the silent woman and revisits the *Meitei* myth of the *Nonggoubi* bird. Nahakpam notes:

The new brand of women that Memchoubi envisages is, interestingly, not one based on a Euro-centric model. Rather, it is one drawn and sculpted from the roots of this land; it is the image of the Ultimate Mother . . . The image is not one of a dependent creeper, or a suppressed soul; it is the image of one doing her duty and claiming it as her responsibility. (Nahakpam, *The Journey* 35)

In contrast to the relatively conservative inclinations of the preceding generations, the “third generation” (38) of Manipuri women writers adopted a more assertive stance on matters related to women’s rights and gender equity. Writing from the 1980s to the 2000s, they actively spoke out against gendered customs, challenging the erasure of women’s individuality within the institution of marriage, and tackled subjects encompassing women’s sexuality (40). Some of the well-known writers in the third generation are Nee Devi, Ningombam Sunita, Ningombam Satyabati, Maya Nepram, Bimabati Thiyam Ongbi, Mufidun Nesha, Leiyiwon, Tonjam Sorojini, and RK Sanahanbi Chanu. Their literary works indicate a significant departure from conventional depictions of the dichotomy between virtuous and morally flawed women. Instead, they demonstrate a profound shift in perspective, revealing a fresh understanding of women’s roles within Manipuri society with an attempt to carve out a distinct space for women that exists beyond the confines of patriarchal, traditional, and religious constraints (38). Thus, despite being constrained by societal norms, these writers venture beyond the conventional image of the suffering mother, the enduring wife, the virtuous widow, and the wanton woman in their narratives (41).

Nee Devi’s writings explore realistic representations of the struggles of socially ostracized and marginalized women—widows, madwomen, and women disowned by their families (Gurumayum 347), while “highlighting human relations with haunting poignancy” (Tayenjam 105). Her works question patriarchal society’s association of morality and honour solely with women and also addresses the question of women’s sexuality. Nee Devi’s protagonists forage beyond the ideal, submissive woman in their quest for a livelihood, and critiques of objectification of women and sexual violence against women are major concerns in Nee Devi’s short stories like “Laidhibee” (Rag Doll) and “Chinzak-kee Wari” (Preys). In “Laidhibee,” she explores the vulnerable position of young women in the story of Leishna who is forcefully ‘eloped’ by her brother-in-law in the name of custom (Devi 59). Her writings critique the categorization of the ‘ideal’ good woman who is docile, submissive and oppressed, and the non-conforming ‘bad’ woman, depicting in the process, the lived realities of Manipuri women, questioning deeply entrenched patriarchal values (Gurumayum 352).

After the 1980s, the rise of numerous women writers hailing from diverse communities across Manipur has led to the continued exploration of a wide range of themes and writing styles in Manipuri as well as in English (Nahakpam, *The Journey* 43). The works of contemporary women writers writing from the early 2000s to the present are characterised by their move beyond mere depictions of patriarchal oppression or the quest for an idealized womanhood, instead focusing on the exploration of their self and their negotiation with multiple identities.

Conclusion

Manipuri women's writing has evolved through generations, each contributing to the creation of a unique literary corpus. From narratives rooted in oral traditions to contemporary voices asserting multiple identities, Manipuri women writers have contributed significantly to the broader discourse on gender, culture, and society. While many of their portrayals and representations of women's experiences evoke universal resonance, it is the rootedness of their narratives within the specific context of Manipur that renders their lived experiences and therefore their writings, truly unique.

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