

Traditions and Community: Violence against Women in Manipur

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Abstract

Women are highly vulnerable to multiple forms of rights violations within both private and public spheres. They are frequently compelled to relinquish their individual autonomy under the guise of entrenched traditional and cultural belief systems. This article seeks to critically assess how three contemporary Manipuri women writers: Ningombam Sunita, Ningthoukhongjam Ranjana and Nepram Maya articulate the detrimental role of community structures and traditional practices in perpetuating both psychological and physical violence against women. It further analyses how these writers depict the tendency of common people in Manipur to appropriate mechanisms of law and order as reflected in their widely read short stories. The article demonstrates how traditional and cultural belief systems function as mechanisms that marginalize and disempower women. Their writings collectively document women's sustained struggles to reclaim lost dignity, social identity and bodily integrity within oppressive socio-cultural structures. The short stories examined in this study articulate critical and often conflicting arguments that expose multiple forms of violation including those sanctioned by ancient customs and patriarchal traditions.

Keywords: traditions, elopement, violence, oppression, patriarchal community

Introduction:

Women, particularly widows, are highly vulnerable to multiple forms of rights violations within both private and public spheres. Following widowhood, many women experience systematic discrimination and maltreatment often perpetuated by their own family members. Although 'home' is perceived as the most secure space, empirical evidence indicates that it frequently constitutes the primary site of gender-based violence. Violence has, as quoted by Ningombam,

health and social consequences for individuals, families and communities. Violence against women and girls reduces their contributions to development, inflicts cost on national economic and undermines poverty reduction efforts. (Ningombam, n.p.)

Widows are subjected to economic deprivation, physical assault and sexual harassment within familial and community contexts. Furthermore, when they engage in public spaces, they are stigmatized and subjected to social surveillance, objectification and moral suspicion. These intersecting forms of marginalization severely restrict their livelihood opportunities compelling many widows to engage in precarious and odd jobs including manual labour and in extreme circumstances, survival-based activities such as prostitution and other illicit means to feed their children.

Women are frequently compelled to relinquish their individual autonomy under the guise of entrenched traditional and cultural belief systems. In Manipur, one such customary practice that significantly contributes to the subordination of women is the tradition of elopement. This practice functions as a mechanism of social control that undermines women's dignity and agency. Eloped women are often socially categorized on par with widows resulting in the loss of their perceived unmarried status and a consequent decline in social standing. Such categorization carries enduring social stigma and restricts within familial and community structures. Moreover, the practice severely erodes women's rights by normalizing coercion in cases of forced elopement. Victims are compelled to marry their perpetrators in order to preserve familial or social honour. This coerced outcome often condemns women to long-term psychological distress and socio-economic marginalization.

This article seeks to critically assess how three contemporary Manipuri women writers: Ningombam Sunita, Ningthoukhongjam Ranjana and Nepram Maya articulate the detrimental role of community structures and traditional practices in perpetuating both psychological and physical violence against women. It further analyses how these writers depict the tendency of common people in Manipur to appropriate mechanisms of law and order as reflected in their widely read short stories.

Social Surveillance within Manipuri Society:

In the stories by Sunita, there is a sustained critique of the intrusive nature of social surveillance within Manipuri society, particularly the community's propensity to interfere in private lives through rumour-mongering and moral policing. Her narratives assert that despite the community's indulgence in unwanted intervention, women are portrayed as confronting these challenges with resilience and moral strength. Victims of rumour-induced stigmatization and gender-based violence are consistently shown to refrain from lodging complaints or seeking public redress. This silence is not indicative of passivity but rather functions as a strategic response aimed at preserving personal dignity and social respectability. This thematic concern is vividly illustrated in the story "Likli Mchet" ["A Piece of Glass"], in which the main protagonist Sanahanbi experiences betrayal and social exclusion following her elopement with a guy named Naoba who subsequently abandons her and refuses to acknowledge responsibility. Sanahanbi's marginalization is intensified by her lover's refusal to support her compounded by the community's collective condemnation. Despite these injustices, she consciously avoids public confrontation or complaint prioritizing the protection of her self-respect and social image. Furthermore, Sanahanbi's decision to distance herself from Saratchandra who expresses willingness to marry her despite being aware of her past demonstrates the internalization of patriarchal norms and the pervasive fear of societal judgement. Under the societal pressure and rumours, she chooses emotional suffering over social acceptance reinforcing the gendered expectation that women bear the consequences of moral transgression. The narrative reveals how patriarchal authority enables men to define moral codes while women are socially conditioned to accept silence as a form of compliance. As the narrative progresses, both the wider community and Saratchandra's mother who initially displays maternal concern toward Sanahanbi begin to accuse her of deceiving an "innocent" unmarried man. This shift highlights a broader societal pattern of victim-blaming, wherein women subjected to violence and exploitation are held responsible for moral disruption while male perpetrators remain unexamined and unpunished. The story,

thus, exposes the deeply entrenched gender hierarchy in Manipuri society in which male superiority is normalized and accountability for wrongdoing is disproportionately imposed upon women.

Like Sunita, Ranjana engages with similar thematic concerns, particularly the intrusive nature of Manipuri society. Her narratives foreground the community's tendency to exaggerate minor interactions and interpret them through a lens of moral suspicion. Ranjana critically exposes how routine professional or social interactions between men and women are readily misread and transformed into narratives of moral transgression. In the Manipuri social context, even brief acts such as a man sharing a casual meal or engaging in casual conversation with a female colleague are often sufficient to provoke unfounded speculation which is then transmitted to spouses and family members thereby generating domestic conflict. This thematic critique is exemplified in her short story "Yani Sida Sum Leirage" ["I Shall Stay Here"], which centres on Subadani, a young and trusting woman whose marital stability is threatened by malicious rumours concerning her husband Ibohal, Deputy Commissioner posted in Thoubal, geographically distant from Imphal. The physical separation of the couple due to occupational posting creates conditions that enable and intensify social interference. Ranjana underscores that such rumours often originate from close relatives highlighting the paradoxical role of kinship networks in destabilizing family structures. When Subadani visits her parental home to attend her brother's *Swasthi Puja*, she is confronted with insinuations from a close relative regarding her husband's alleged extramarital affair. Although the truth ultimately emerges and marital harmony is restored, the narrative serves as a cautionary commentary on the destructive potential of unverified gossip. Through this story, Ranjana articulates a strong ethical appeal urging society to abandon rumour-driven interference and instead foster mutual trust, solidarity and constructive engagement for collective social well-being.

Patriarchal Mechanism:

From a feminist literary critical perspective, the tendency to hold wives accountable for their husband's moral and social failures, particularly in cases of alcoholism and drug addiction, reflects the deeply entrenched patriarchal logic that governs gender relations. "Women do not have their own identity but are often identified by their husband and sons." (Tombisana, 2012: 29) Ranjana's short story "Kala Bazar" ["Black Market"] offers a powerful critique of this gendered injustice by foregrounding the lived experience of a woman systematically deprived of agency. The protagonist, Bilasini, is coerced into marriage through the manipulative intervention of Chandani, a female figure who functions as an agent of patriarchal ideology rather than a source of solidarity. Subsequently, Bilasini is blamed for her husband's descent into drug addiction – a condition shaped by male peer influence and social neglect, yet socially attributed to the wife's supposed failure to perform normative marital duties.

The plot reveals how Bilasini's body and labour become sites of control and exploitation within marriage. Subjected to sustain verbal abuse and the persistent threat of physical violence, she is compelled to procure a daily sum of forty rupees to sustain her husband's addiction. Her entry into the black-market sale of cinema tickets is not an act of moral deviance but a coerced survival strategy within a socio-economic structure that denies women legal, emotional and financial protection. Ranjana, thus, exposes the patriarchal

community's complicity in normalizing domestic violence while simultaneously silencing female suffering. The narrative critiques Manipuri society's refusal to recognize male accountability and instead perpetuates the feminization of guilt. Ultimately, the story positions Bilasini as a representative figure for countless women in Manipur whose lives are circumscribed by patriarchal violence and who bear the consequences of transgressions they did not commit. The actions of the community reveal a profound absence of ethical reasoning and social justice. Rather than engaging in rational investigation to identify actual perpetrators and hold them accountable through lawful and humane means, the community resorts to collective punishment and moral policing. Such actions disproportionately target vulnerable individuals, especially women while allowing systematic injustices to remain unaddressed. The practice of mob justice publicly humiliating suspected individuals and punishing innocent family members reflects a patriarchal mechanism of control that prioritizes social conformity over justice and empathy.

The community's treatment of women further exposes the gendered nature of punishment and surveillance. In many instances, there appears to be a disturbing sense of gratification in publicly shaming women, transforming punishment into spectacle. This dynamic aligns with feminist critiques of patriarchal societies where women's bodies and reputations become sites of social discipline. Maya's narratives consistently interrogate this phenomenon by exposing how communities manufacture unnecessary conflicts and perpetuate gender-based oppression under the guise of morality.

In her short story "Warep" ["Decision"], Maya portrays the character of Enetombi as a victim of intersecting oppressions – gender, widowhood, poverty and social exclusion. Enetombi is unable to escape her past which continually resurfaces to strip her of dignity and agency. As a widow without economic security or social support, she turns to selling alcohol as a means of survival. Although alcohol trade is prohibited in Manipur, Maya does not frame Enetombi as a criminal figure; instead, she situates her actions within the larger context of structural deprivation and gendered marginalization. The punishment inflicted upon Enetombi by the local community is overtly violent and symbolic. Cutting her hair in public, forcing her to wear broken glass around her neck and compelling her to run through the locality, function as tools of dehumanization. From a feminist lens, these acts represent patriarchal urge to control and discipline women through bodily humiliation. The public nature of the punishment reinforces collective power over the individual silencing Enetombi's voice and denying her the right to self-defense or explanation. Her trauma persists precisely because no one is willing to listen to her plea, reflecting the systematic erasure of women's experiences in patriarchal social structures.

Enetombi's anger stems from her realization that self-reliance is condemned rather than supported. She understands that the same community that violently punished her would never sustain her economically, yet it rejects her attempt at survival. This contradiction becomes even more apparent when the community later shows leniency toward male wrongdoers, such as the corrupt man in the story. The selective application of morality underscores feminist arguments about gender bias in social justice where women are harshly penalized for survival-driven actions while men are shielded despite greater ethical violations. Although Enetombi recognizes the injustice, she is ultimately compelled to submit, aware that individual resistance is insufficient against collective patriarchal authority. Maya, however, does not endorse the act of selling alcohol; rather, she critiques the

inhumanity of punitive practices that rely on public humiliation instead of ethical accountability. Maya advocates for compassionate and dignified forms of justice that do not violate human rights. Furthermore, the narrative emphasizes the critical importance of women's education and economic empowerment. Maya suggests that access to education can enable women to develop resilience, autonomy and critical consciousness allowing them to sustain independent lives with dignity after the loss of a husband. In this way, "Warep" ["Decision"] functions as a feminist intervention that exposes structural inequalities while calling for systematic change to protect women from social violence and marginalization.

Elopement: A Boon or a Burden!

One of the most problematic customary practices in Manipur that significantly undermines women's rights is the tradition of elopement. Although, elopement has been practiced in Manipur since time immemorial and is often represented as a culturally sanctioned and convenient means of marriage, feminist critiques challenge its presumed liberatory character. Popular discourse within Manipuri society claims that elopement "gives the girl a more democratic and empowered role in choosing her life partner." In fact, as stated by Thingnam,

eloping is so socially and culturally accepted that even in an arranged marriage involving much older couples, parents often ask their children to elope if the horoscopes disfavour the union. Upon elopement, this disfavour or ill luck is considered nullified." (Thingnam, 2010: n.p.)

However, this perception obscures the deeply patriarchal structures that govern the practice and limit women's autonomy in reality.

In practice, elopement frequently operates as a coercive institution rather than a consensual choice. Once a woman is eloped, whether willingly or unwillingly, she is socially compelled to marry the man involved. Her right to withdraw consent or to envision an alternative future is effectively nullified as her social value becomes tied to notions of honor, chastity and family reputation. Feminist theory identifies this as a form of gendered social control, wherein women's sexuality is regulated through moral surveillance and the threat of social ostracization. Furthermore, if the man refuses to accept the woman as his wife, the burden of dishonour falls almost exclusively on the woman. The existence of the practice known as "izzat dabi", wherein the woman's family demands financial compensation from the man's family reduces the violation of a woman's dignity to a monetary transaction. This mechanism reflects a commodification of women's bodies and reputations, reinforcing the argument that patriarchal societies often resolve gendered injustices through economic settlements rather than ethical or legal accountability. The aftermath of elopement further complicates a woman's future. Women who have been eloped are frequently subjected to social stigma and are viewed with suspicion regardless of their consent or lack thereof. This social labelling restricts their mobility, marriage prospects and psychological well-being. The community's reliance on financial negotiation rather than justice particularly in matters concerning women reveals a broader patriarchal logic in which women's suffering is normalized and rendered invisible. This situation is exacerbated in rural areas, where many women remain unaware of their legal and constitutional rights due to limited access to education and gender-sensitive awareness. Feminist scholarship emphasizes that lack of

knowledge functions as a structural barrier enabling the continued perpetuation of gender-based violations while ensuring that many cases remain unreported. The silencing of women's experiences is not incidental but systematic, sustained by cultural norms that discourage resistance and prioritize social harmony over women's rights.

Most alarmingly, in extreme cases, survivors of sexual violence are coerced into marrying their perpetrators in the name of preserving dignity and social respectability. Such practices represent a severe violation of bodily autonomy and consent, effectively transforming marriage into an instrument of oppression rather than protection. This practice perpetuates rape culture by shifting the focus from the accountability of the perpetrator to the perceived honour of the victim. Thus, while elopement is often framed as a culturally progressive and empowering tradition, its function can be exposed as a patriarchal institution that systematically restricts women's agency, legitimizes coercion and normalizes gender-based violence. The call to dismantle this practice emerges not as a rejection of cultural identity but as a necessary intervention to uphold women's rights, autonomy and human dignity.

Women are systematically discriminated against through culturally sanctioned traditions and social practices that regulate female behaviour and sexually. Sunita similarly argues that the tradition of elopement functions as a mechanism that erodes women's dignity rather than safeguarding their autonomy. According to her, eloped women occupy a social position comparable to that of widows, as both groups are subjected to heightened moral scrutiny and social marginalization. When an eloped woman or an innocent widow dresses smartly or attempts to live independently, her actions are often interpreted through a lens of suspicion and moral judgement. Such women are denied the freedom to occupy public and private spaces without surveillance reinforcing their symbolic exclusion from respectable womanhood. Once a woman elopes and is subsequently rejected by her partner or once she becomes a widow, her social mobility is severely restricted. Feminist theory conceptualises this restriction as a form of gendered discipline, wherein women's bodies and choices are continually monitored and policed. Every action becomes subject to criticism and silence is imposed as the expected mode of survival. This dynamic is clearly illustrated in the character of Sanahanbi, whose every movement is scrutinized and misinterpreted as an attempt to seduce or entrap unmarried men. The moral panic surrounding her presence reflects society's anxiety over women who exist outside patriarchal marital protection.

As a socially and economically vulnerable woman, Sanahanbi is unable to defend herself against these false accusations. Lacking institutional or communal support, she is compelled to distance herself from her lover, Saratchandra, despite her emotional attachment. Her submission is not an act of consent but a consequence of structural powerlessness. She is forced to accept social exclusion as her fate and to spend the remainder of her life in isolation, solely because she eloped with a man who later rejected her. With no legitimate platform for complaint, Sanahanbi internalizes the belief that women are inherently inferior to men and that challenging male authority is futile, as women's grievances are routinely dismissed or invalidated. Rather than eliciting empathy, Sanahanbi's suffering becomes an object of moral gossip. Community discourse shifts its focus away from the accountability of the male perpetrator and instead fixates on the woman's image, chastity and perceived shame. This reflects the patriarchal logic that equates a woman's worth with her sexual purity. The loss of maidenhood is constructed as the loss of social identity itself, rendering

the woman irredeemable regardless of the circumstances. Sanahanbi recognizes how easily a woman can lose everything due to a transgression she did not intentionally commit while the actual wrongdoer remains unexamined and unpunished. In contrast, no social sanctions are imposed on the man who abandons her. He faces no resistance from the community and is freely allowed to marry another woman through arrangements made by his mother. This double standard exposes the deeply entrenched gender hierarchy that grants men sexual and social freedom while demanding obedience and moral restraint from women. Both society and eventually, Sanahanbi herself participate in sustaining this ideology normalizing the belief that men possess authority over women and that women must comply without protest. This systematic inequality also explains why some women are compelled to undertake stigmatized or precarious forms of labour including prostitution. As Sunita argues, such choices are rarely voluntary; rather, they are produced by social exclusion, economic deprivation and moral condemnation. The focus shifts from individual blame to structural causation, emphasizing that it is society itself that drives marginalized women into so-called “deviant” paths. The narrative ultimately exposes how patriarchal norms not only victimize women but also deny them the means to reclaim dignity, justice and agency.

Sunita seeks to demonstrate that women’s expressions of strength and courage are often constrained by prevailing social norms, particularly the fear of becoming a burden on family members and the anxiety associated with the loss of social image and dignity. In the short story “Cheirak” [“Punishment”], the author initially presents the protagonist Memcha, as assertive and resilient. Unlike the stereotypical portrayal of Memcha actively seeks the intervention of insurgents to punish Mahendra, the man who raped her. This action momentarily positions her as a character exercising agency within an otherwise restrictive social environment. However, this apparent assertion of agency is reversed at the conclusion of the narrative. Memcha forgives Mahendra, pleads for his life and ultimately agrees to marry him. This decision reflects the limitations imposed by socio-cultural realities rather than personal empowerment. In Manipur society, unmarried or sexually violated women face significant social stigma and limited acceptance within their parental households. Having lost her parents, Memcha anticipates that prolonged dependence on her brothers and sisters-in-law may eventually render her a social and economic burden. Within this context, marriage to the perpetrator emerges as the only socially permissible option available to her. The stories discussed thus demonstrate how the tradition of elopement undermines women’s freedom to choose their life partners. Rather than functioning as a practice of individual choice, this tradition operates within a patriarchal framework that restricts women’s autonomy legitimizes coercion and diminishes their social dignity and agency.

Gender Equity:

As a woman writer, Maya foregrounds the issue of women’s status and argues for its elevation to a level equal to that of men. A critical reading of her work reveals that she draws an implicit parallel between patriarchal social structures and the phenomenon of “fake” insurgents. Just as they exploit and dominate the vulnerable through intimidation and extortion, patriarchal authority functions by asserting control over women within the domestic sphere. Men, positioned as heads of the household, exercise dominance through everyday practices including resistance to or complaints about domestic responsibilities such as kitchen work which married men in Manipur are socially expected to undertake for a limited number of days during the menstruation period of their wives.

Maya asserts that women are equally entitled to freedom and autonomy and should not be solely responsible for household labour. Her narratives consistently challenge the naturalization of domestic work as a female obligation and advocate for a more equitable distribution of responsibilities. Notably, Maya contrasts patriarchal men with those who recognize women as equals, likening the latter to genuine freedom fighters. These “real” freedom fighters are portrayed as individuals who willingly sacrifice personal interests for collective liberation, remain attentive to the needs of the people and refrain from exploiting those who support them in times of crisis. Respect for women, thus, becomes a defining ethical attribute of true resistance and leadership in her fiction. Through this analogy, Maya advances the argument that opposition to patriarchal ideology is integral to broader processes of social and national development. Men who reject patriarchal dominance and support gender equality are represented as active contributors to social progress. Consequently, Maya’s work emphasizes that the creation of a developed and just society necessitates the equal participation and cooperation of both men and women, positioning gender equity as a foundational element of meaningful development.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, all three women writers assert, through their respective narratives, that the social consciousness of a large section of Manipuri society is shaped by the unlikely roles of community members, military forces including insurgent entrenched traditions that infringe upon women’s rights. This article has attempted to demonstrate how traditional and cultural belief systems function as mechanisms that marginalize and disempower women. Through their creative engagement, the three writers mobilize literary discourse as a form of resistance against the systematic violation and exploitation of women. Their writings collectively document women’s sustained struggles to reclaim lost dignity, social identity and bodily integrity within oppressive socio-cultural structures. The short stories examined in this study articulate critical and often conflicting arguments that expose multiple forms of violation including those sanctioned by ancient customs and patriarchal traditions. Sunita and Ranjana present forceful critiques of societal norms and practices that mislead and entrap innocent women, while Maya employs a compelling metaphorical framework by equating social and moral violators with “fake” insurgents. Together, these narratives offer a sustained feminist intervention that challenges normalized oppression and calls for a re-evaluation of tradition, power and gender relations in Manipuri society.

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