

## **An evolving literary landscape: L. Somi Roy's reinterpretations of the culturally rich Manipuri children's stories, linking children to their heritage and rejuvenating culture**

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### **Abstract**

Introducing culturally relevant books to young readers is important for the sustainability of culture. Children see characters, families, and traditions in books that reflect their experiences. They validate their identity, make them feel, seen and valued, and provide a place of belongingness. It is a complete myth that all Indians share the same cultural values. There are diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences that must be acknowledged when introducing Indian culture to children. Manipur, with its long-standing history filled with rich culture and traditions, has passed this wealth orally, through manuscripts and retellings of the stories in many art forms. Exploring the genre of children's literature to uplift culture can be an exhilarating and a practical move.

**Keywords:** Children's literature, sustainability, traditions, identity, cultural values.

### **Introduction:**

Manipur, a state situated in India's far Northeast is a land influenced by many customs and cultural patterns. Its rich cultural heritage is evident in its dance, folklore, ballads, and other forms of expression. Their unique traditional belief system, myths, tales, and practices have been passed down orally or through manuscripts. But as time passes, these stories have been disseminated in print form, resulting in an abundance of folklore and myths available to explore. Several authors like Linthoi Chanu with her works *The Tales of Kanglei Throne*, *WARI: A Collection of Manipuri Short Stories*; Thangjam Hindustani Devi who co-wrote *Feathers, Fools and Farts* with Somi Roy; and Ngathem Ningol Kongbam Ongbi Ibeyaima Devi, famous for her

work *Sorarengi Machanupi Atonbi Leimashang Amasung Atei Phunga Warising*, all share a common trait: celebrating and indulging in the rich culture and traditions of their land in their writings for children. Another noteworthy writer besides them is L. Somi Roy.

Although Manipur still has a long way to go in the field of children's literature, the strides made so far are truly impressive and promising for the future. L. Somi Roy is known for his commendable contribution to the literary field of Manipur and the Northeast of India. Son of the renowned Manipuri writer M.K. Binodini Devi, his contributions include translation of his mother's historical novel *The Princess and the Political Agents*, her memoir essay *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father*, her play *Crimson Rainclouds*, and her screenplay *My Son, My Precious*. In addition to his translational work, his contributions to the field of children's literature with the retelling of Manipuri myths continue to empower and educate young readers. With books like *And that is why* (2021) and *Feathers, Fools, and Farts* (2024), he meticulously crafted his writing style by addressing the young audience directly, using terms of endearment to establish a strong emotional connection with them. This approach enabled him to create an engaging and relatable narrative resonating with his young readers. His efforts in preserving his mother's work and contribution to digitizing the manuscripts of the land are very significant, and his approach towards conserving Manipur culture is admirable. Filled with vibrant writing styles and lively illustrations, he promotes and celebrates the cultural heritage of Manipur.

### Children's Literature:

Defining children's literature is more challenging than it may seem in its face value. In the past, children read *Aesop's Fables*, *Panchatantras*, and *Grimm's Tales*, although these stories were not specifically intended for them. Later, abridged or adapted versions of the stories were created to make them more age-appropriate. Works like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Sherlock Holmes*, and *Gulliver's Travels*, which are now considered classics of children's literature, have been simplified. The complexities in these stories have been reduced compared to the original works, and simpler language has been used to make them easier for children to read. Sutherland, in her *Children and Books*, defined children's literature as those that are not only read and enjoyed but

also that have been written for children and meet high literary and artistic standards. (p.6) This body of literature has often been overlooked, but with increasing academic research focusing primarily on didactics and literary studies, its significance is becoming more recognized. Its ability to colonise young minds needs to be acknowledged and taken advantage of, as children can be influenced significantly. In children's literature, there is a clear distinction between good and bad characters. Unlike adult literature, it should not contain obscene plots; characters should be relatable, and because they will act as ruminants to these texts, it is important to portray characters that they can idolise and set a good example. Roald Dahl remarked, "Children read a book they like ten times; we read a novel once. Children, once they fall in love with a book, read it again and again."

### **Cultural values in children's literature and its impact on young minds:**

Before we delve further, let's first understand what 'Culture' is. Culture is not something we simply absorb; it has to be learned (Cultural Studies, p .7). We become who we are, influenced, and shaped by the culture we were brought up in. An anthropologist named Tylor has defined culture as that complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The belief system of a community is a fundamental aspect that shapes their culture, customs, and way of life. To effectively understand a community, it is crucial to engage with their belief system openly and empathetically, leaving behind any preconceived notions or biases. Only then can one truly appreciate the richness and diversity of their culture and heritage. Introducing culturally relevant texts at an early age is essential. These texts not only reflect a child's own culture but also introduce them to diverse perspectives. They play a critical role in shaping a child's understanding of identity, empathy, and diversity. Furthermore, they establish a strong foundation for inclusive values and open-mindedness, which are crucial for fostering a harmonious society. Children, from whichever part of the world they belong to or whatever their heritage is, will have to go through different cultural traditions to deal with the larger world. According to the Lockean concept of comparing the child to a tabula rasa, we need to understand one thing: children will be what we give, and what they become, depends on what they have been exposed to. In *The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature: A Critical*

*Review* by Kathy G. Short and Dana L. Fox, they argue that cultural authenticity is multifaceted, involving not only accurate portrayal but also an understanding of the complexities within a culture. They highlight that the author's background, intentions, and relationship to the culture are critical factors, though not solely determinative. They also discuss the importance of accurate, respectful cultural representation, emphasizing that authentic texts are those that avoid stereotypes and provide genuine insight into a culture's values, customs, and perspectives. The burden of preventing cultural appropriation is something the author has to bear.

Not everyone possesses the skill to write effectively for a specific audience, but Somi excelled at delivering exactly what the children want and what the society needs. Somi Roy's retelling works are fascinating anthologies of tales that not only provide a glimpse into the beliefs of people from a bygone era but also offer a vivid portrayal of the culture and traditions of that time, which still exist today. The genesis of his children-centered works has been derived from the *Puyas*, which was introduced to the author by his mentor Khelchandra. Now what are these *Puyas* and how are they related to preserving the cultures of Manipur? *Puyas* serves as an invaluable collection of stories that have been thoughtfully handed down through generations. *The Puyas* are crucial cultural texts that were originally written in the ancient script known as Meitei Mayek, or Meitei script. They are the chronicles of the Meitei community, so they can also be considered the cultural narratives of the Meiteis. This script is integral to the rich heritage of the Manipuri community. While numerous *Puyas* have been successfully rendered into the modern Manipuri script to enhance accessibility, it is important to note that only a handful have been translated into English, limiting their availability to a broader audience. This compilation is enriched by the contributions of scholars, balladeers, and grandmothers, each adding their own unique perspective. By sharing these narratives, we can foster a deeper appreciation for our cultural heritage, allowing future generations to learn from the lessons and experiences embedded in each tale. This endeavor not only preserves our history but also encourages dialogue and connection within the community. His works are a beautiful palimpsest of these stories, with each successive retelling adding a new layer of interpretation and meaning. The author's works can be seen as a continuation of this rich tradition, building upon the foundation laid by those who came before them. With stories that mainly focus on pre-Hindu religious practices, it features gods, goddesses, heroes, heroines, and magic. These practices were heavily

influenced by ancestor worship and animism, and the stories are a fascinating glimpse into the beliefs and traditions of the time. The author has drawn upon mythologies used in the story from the Meiteis, who are a predominant community in the state. Meiteis place great importance on myths, which include tales of the creation of the universe as well as the origins of clans and dynasties.

The book *And That is Why* begins with a story about why humans are creative and capable of thinking. The story revolves around the almighty God Soraren, who is also known as the sky God. Soraren, with the help of his son Asiba, also known as Sanamahi or Leisemlon in the manuscript, creates all living existence. This book contains stories that can serve as an alternative way of passing on the history of Manipur. Even though we live in a vastly different world than the one described in these tales, some of these ancient beliefs still hold a special place in our hearts and minds. They continue to shape our cultural identity and influence our way of life. Truly, the power of storytelling and its ability to provide a window into the past while simultaneously connecting us to the present is mind-boggling. The author of the book had a deep understanding of his target audience when he wrote it. In an interview with *The Times of India*, L. Somi Roy revealed that the most valuable piece of advice he received during the writing process was to avoid underestimating the intelligence of young readers.

In one of the stories, "And That is Why the Cat Buries Its Poop," Somi presents an intriguing concept that has been passed down through generations. According to the tale, it is believed that individuals born under a water sign and a fish sign have an unbreakable bond that cannot be separated. The idea is fascinating, and it continues to be a topic of interest even in modern times. Shamans, known as Maiba or Maibis played a significant role in the Meitei culture long before the arrival of Hinduism in Manipur, as they were regarded as messengers of God. This has been backed by the story in the book 'And That is Why a Doll is Worshipped in Kakching Village'. In the same story, rituals performed for the deities have been intricately described. The book's vivid descriptions of these rituals give readers a deeper understanding of the villagers' beliefs and traditions. Additionally, the book explores the complex relationship between gods and humans, depicting the deities as powerful yet benevolent beings who are

willing to help humans in times of need. As a small community, we take great pride in upholding our traditions and customs.

The newly released book *Feathers, Fools, and Farts: Manipuri Folktales Retold* (2024), which was co-authored with Dr. Thangjam Hindustani Devi, features ten whimsical folktales that explore the rich cultural heritage of Manipur. Like his earlier work, he reinvents traditional Manipuri folktales for modern readers. Roy, seen as the guiding force, lends a sophisticated and cultural revivalist touch to the anthology, while Dr. Sapha's vibrant Subika-inspired illustrations elevate the book to a work of art. The folktales have been cleverly retold with modern references and unexpected twists, blending humour and nostalgia.

In an article entitled 'The New Challenges: Writing for Children Literature in Manipuri,' Dr. Gurumayum Bijoykumar Sharma highlighted the evolving landscape and challenges faced by Manipuri writers in creating literature for children. Sharma advocates for new approaches to storytelling that make traditional Manipuri tales accessible, engaging, and relevant, ensuring that children in Manipur can see themselves and their cultural heritage represented in the literature they read. Somi's retellings of the culture-filled tales retold in English can help educate and provide accessibility to not only the Meiteis but also introduce them to children across the globe.

### **Conclusion:**

Children's stories serve as a platform for young readers to develop empathy and understanding towards people from diverse backgrounds, which promotes inclusivity and cultural appreciation. Somi Roy's works are a fine example to show how it is an absolute necessity for achieving this goal. Because of his contributions, we are one step closer in our efforts. It is regrettable to witness the decline of oral storytelling customs in this era of social media and the internet. The dissemination of these exquisite stories is in danger due to this breakdown, but thanks to literary works devoted to enhancing society, we are still growing and developing. Literature also plays a vital role in helping children feel a sense of pride in their cultural identity and in reuniting with their heritage. Through these stories, children can learn about different cultures, broaden their horizons, and develop empathy and respect for others. Ultimately, preserving culture in children's literature is essential for shaping the perspectives and

values of future generations. As this literature continues to develop, it will undoubtedly continue to play a vital role in connecting children to their roots and promoting cultural appreciation and understanding.

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