CHAPTER V

NUPI SHUMANG LILA: RE-CRAFTING OF HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY
The suppressed smile and the sarcastic look, by the couple in the grocery shop, when asked about the residence of Ibema Leima, a Nupi Shumang Lila actress at Sagolband Moirang Leirak, Imphal, were sufficient to tell the sad story of this genre called Nupi Shumang Lila of Manipur. The woman who plays the role of kings and nobles in innumerable historical and mythological plays is cornered inside a dark, badly furnished house with her young daughter and her very old and ailing mother, surrounded by people with suspecting eyes and behaviour. But she refuses to be a ‘damned’ human being and lives the life of kings and nobles. She is not with the social time but ahead of it yet through the medium of past. She lives in the ‘theatrical space’ and travels in the ‘theatrical time’.

1. The Curtain Raiser

Long before the seeds of Nupi Shumang Lila or Nupi Lila were sown, Manipuri women had entered the not-so-cordial sphere of the proscenium theatre or Stage Lila. However, Manipuri women have always been part and parcel of performing arts, be they religious or ritualistic performances, for instance, Laiharaoba festival, Vaisnavite traditions etc. Rasa Lila is a living example of women being the soul of the entire performance and even an example of transvestism, where a girl is allowed to take the role of Krishna with all the required costumes of him. But the structure in the secular theatre was reluctant to take in women artistes, though the Stage Lila entered into the culture of Manipur in the first decade of the 20th Century. During those initial years of Stage Lila, the female characters were played by male artistes only. For instance, in the first ever stage play *Pravas Milan* (1902) Chingshubam Gopalmacha took the role of Radhika, Lalji Sharma as Yatila, Bihari Singh as Kutila and Nongmaithem Thanil Singh as Rukamani. In the play *Rani Durgavati* (1900s) Hijam Irabot, the renowned leader of Manipur played the role of Rupamati, the female protagonist.

In 1920s the Manipuri women artistes started acting in proscenium theatre. They became part of theatre groups, which were in existence in those days such as M.D.U. (Manipur Dramatic Union), Chitrangada Natya Mandir, Aryan theatre, Society Theatre, Rupmahal etc. Women artistes who had been part of *Chitrangada Natya Mandir* since its earlier days (after its inception in 1936) were Shairem Kanya, Thambal Angoubi (better

---

known as *Ibema Shabi* after her role as *Ibema* in the play *Ibema*), Anoubi Devi, Gouramani Devi, Ibeayima Devi, Rohini Devi, Ibetombi Devi, Punyabati Devi etc. They were the pioneers and many women artistes followed them to keep the tradition intact.

2. The Dawn of Nupi Shumang Lila

In the 1970s, some Stage Lila women artistes started the Nupi Shumang Lila. The prime mover for their venture was the desire to revive the theatre version of *Moirang Kangleirol or Moirang Parba* (Moirang Chapters). This was a theatre tradition, which was believed to have had premature death in the 1950s. This venture was essential, because the male troupes had already given more weightage or rather had turned their faces towards ‘social plays’ in Shumang Lila. That was perhaps an exigency of that particular social time, when the troupes had become commercialized. They had started performing not only to quench their creative thirst, but also to meet the essentials of their lives, including family responsibilities.

The emergence of Nupi Shumang Lila troupes was partly ingrained in the fear of losing the past in the present. That was a movement or renaissance of discovering both the historical and mythological pasts of Manipur. It was also the sharing of this discovery with the people who seemed to have lost sight of the traditional, classical and popular art form in the aura of the omnipotent forms of modern media of entertainment and communication. This new movement was also feminist, not in the sense that it was anti-male, but that it was an enterprise to make concrete the sense of responsibility and creativity of the female artistes. It was more of a challenge because they were not accommodated in the Shumang Lila space, due to its peculiar structure of having *Nupi Shabis* (‘male actresses’). They also knew that Shumang Lila space would be the greatest vehicle to disseminate the sense of belongingness to the audience, given the sweeping impact of this popular genre. In this maiden and gallant endeavour they were encouraged by such patrons as Arambam Somarendra, one of the doyens of Manipuri literature and theatre. The emergence of female creativity was also necessitated by the exigencies of the time, when most of the legendary Shumang Lila male performers of Moirang Parba of 1950s were already dead or retired during 1970s. So, the women artistes took up this Himalayan task to revive this tradition, which if left unattended, would have remained latent.

---

652 Ibid. p. 53.
653 Gathered from Ibema Leima.
In those initial years, those pioneering troupes performed in local Laiharaoba festivals to showcase their new genre. Seeing their enthusiasm and talent the Manipur State Kala Akademi recognized them and they were taken in as competitors in the 4th All Manipur Jatra Festival of 1976. In this event they competed with male troupes, but in the next appearance (1977), they were separated from the male troupes, and were made to compete amongst themselves. So, five troupes participated in that edition. They were - 1) Lainingthou Eeshing Chaibi Nupirup Thougal Lila (play - Kadeng Thangjahanba), 2) Tubi Leima Nupi Shumang Lila Marup (play - Moirang Thoibi II), 3) Imphal Women’s Artistes Association of Indurekha Devi, the daughter of Hijam Anganghal, one of the doyens of modern Manipuri literature (play - Kaophaba), 4) Eereima Nupi Shumang Lila Marup (play - Moirang Thoibi I) and 5) Apunba Nupi Shumang Lila Marup (play - Shamu Khongyetpa). All these five plays they performed were episodes from Moirang Kangleirol. Amongst them, four were from Khamba-Thoibi Shaiyon (Khamba-Thoibi incarnation) except Kadeng Thangjahanba, which was from the Shaiyon of Kadeng Thangjahanba and Tonu Laijinglembi. Different parts of Moirang Kangleirol will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Though Shumang Lila is a touring theatre, for the female troupes touring different places for the performances is not viable due to social and familial constraints. So they performed only in some selected Liharaoba festivals, in nearby localities, mostly in Imphal city and the Annual Shumang Lila Festivals. Despite this fixed routine, the number of Nupi Lila troupes kept on increasing. In 1997, after ten years since its inception, twelve troupes competed for the first best three positions in the Annual Shumang Lila festival. This number is still maintained by the Akademi in the latest edition of 2004. The only still surviving troupe since 1977 is Tubileima Nupi Shumang Lila Marup. This does not mean that the members of other defunct troupes also have ceased to be active. They merged with other troupes or established their own independent troupes with new names, to sustain their love for this genre. For instance, Thokchom Ningol Ibema Leima who was part of Lainingthou Eeshing Chaibi Nupirup Thougal Lila, one of the pioneering troupes in 1977, established her own troupe called Moirang Leirak Nupi Shumang Lila Marup in 1988. This name was changed into Sagolband Moirang Leirak Meitei Leima Jatra cum Drama.

655 All Manipur Shumang Lila Festival Brochure, 1997, Manipur State Kala Akademi.
Association in 1995. This was a survival tactic which allowed the troupe to compete in both the Shumang Lila and Stage lila festivals. Today many Leikais (localities) in Imphal city have their own Nupi Lila troupes. For instance, Malom Tulihal Awang Leikai Nupi Chaokhat Thourang Lup of Malom Tulihal Awang Leikai; Wangkhei Ayang Pali Women Development Association of Wangkhei Ayang Pali; Heirangoithong West Yangam Leirak Nupi Association of Heirangoithong West Yangam Leirak etc. This way the institution of this genre is still kept alive by these artistically enthusiastic women.

Nupi Lila troupes are also the product of the power of the collective enterprise for which the Manipuri women are known for. Most of the names of the troupes bear the name Marup or Lup which means Association. This is an extension of the social collectivity, maintained by them for economic purposes. Marup is a traditional association of women, who contribute money or materials to its members, whenever any important occasion comes. These may be religious, ritualistic or secular ones like Luhongba (marriage), Sorat (death ceremony) etc. It is also organized in the form of lottery, in which the winner collects the amount contributed by the members. This way, it serves as a means to save money and also lightens the economic burden of organizing any occasion. So, The Nupi Lila troupes, in addition to performing plays are involved in other economic activities too in collectivity.

3. How Nupi Lila?

The Nupi Lila had a relatively easy entry into the Shumang Lila space. Above this, the women's impersonation of male characters with the entire male costumes gives an interesting picture given the level of status of women in the society. The acceptance of this peculiar arrangement is because Manipuri society has a tolerance towards cross-dressing, at least in the performing arts. This tolerance is a legacy of the past, when the power of the king initially allowed women to cross-dress as men, in the religious performing arts, mainly the Rasa Lila in which the role of Krishna was also enacted by girls, with proper dress code like pheijom (dhoti) etc. Later, the professional female dancers started taking the role of Krishna, and today this is considered quite normal, when the performances are done even on the stage. So it has become an institution. In addition to this institution, Shumang Lila itself allowed the women artistes to impersonate as male characters since the

656 Gathered from Ibema Leima.
there was no intermixing of sex in this theatre form i.e. it was exclusively either of male or female. It was not viable to allow female artistes in the male troupes since by then Nupi Shabis had already created a niche in this art form, highly praised by the audience.

Nupi Lila artistes taking the role of male characters attached themselves with this already established tradition of cross-dressing which served as a cue and again started a new tradition which could be a cousin of the former. This trend is basically in contradiction to the existing custom of Meitei society. Women in Meitei society are the repository of the practice of purity and pollution. Their clothing, mainly phanek (sarong type dress), are considered impure, and male members avoid contacting with them. Unworn phanek are hidden from the sight whenever any auspicious occasion takes place. For instance, it is considered to be inauspicious to see any Phanek hung on polangkhok (a pole or rope supported by two poles in the two ends to dry clothes) when a male member of the household set off for some work. It may be because of its contact with the woman's body which undergoes a period of body pollution during her menstruation cycle. But then this strict belief is relaxed, and even admired, when Nupi Shabis (‘male actresses’) wear it in Shumang Lila. On the other hand, Phanek is also a symbol of negative power. When a woman has enmity with a man, and wants to deface him before other people, then she can spread it over his head or body. So, it is a sacrilege for women who undergo periodical pollution and whose social status is ‘inferior’ to man, to deliberately wear Pheijom in daily social life. But the case of theatre is different, as the institution of wearing pheijom is already in place.

4. The Artistes and their Craft

The performances are all by female artistes, that is why the name Nupi (female) Shumang Lila though the musicians and male singer who accompany the performance are male artistes. Some in the troupe who have the masculine physical appearance and body language are given the roles of male characters. For instance, Ibema Leima, around 1976, because of her not so ‘feminine’ gesture and expression was given the role of Manao Ibunbo Mathang Khanba (Wangon Ningthou), the brother of Moirang king and the father of Thoibi, the latter being the heroine of Khamba-Thoibi legends. Since then, she has been performing only male roles, except in a few unsuccessful attempts in taking female roles. On the other hand, the women who take the roles of Khamba and Thoibi particularly have to be ‘handsome’, tall and beautiful respectively. This is because they have been idealized
in certain superhuman attributes in the oral narratives, which have been etched in the psyche of the people in general. So, anything which undercuts that imagination will be detrimental for the whole play. For that matter, each and every character in the Moirang Parba narratives, be they Thonglen or Chaoba or Toro etc. have their own inimitable personalities which have to be gingerly taken care of in the theatre versions. But it is not an easy task to find women artistes, who suit or even nearly suit the characters, due to the 'low-brow' status of this genre itself which beautiful maidens refrain from joining.

The threadbare details of the characters of the Moirang Kangleirol were already a prerogative of Pena (a type of fiddle) narrative genre. So, a very rigorous training is called for, to make the characterization perfect. If the appearance lacks sometimes, then the acting should complete all aspects of that character. This is even more taxing for those women artistes, enacting the roles of male characters, since they have to work hard to synchronize the vocal modulation, with the body language. For instance, Ibema Leima learned the nuances of the characterization of Nongban, the antagonist in the Khamba-Thoibi legends, from Ojha657 Manglem, the famous Nongban Shaba (impersonator of Nongban) of the earlier Moirang Parba, of Utlou, a village around six kilometers away from Imphal city in Bishnupur district. She trained under him, learning the acting nuances of how to carry off the character of Nongban, and she noted down whatever he uttered as he was illiterate. She also thrashed out certain topics with him, and even suggested the wrong interpretation of the character. For instance, she commented on certain usage of Meitei terminologies which was wrongly used by him and his generation of performers. The whole training was done in his cowshed. Her eagerness to internalize this art was so profuse that she used to travel this long distance in her broken bicycle and reach her guru's place even before he woke up. This hard work paid off a rich dividend in the form of accolades from certain section of the audience. Because of such endurance and talents many female performers of Moirang Parba were/are considered at par with the legendary male performers of the bygone era who played the same roles as theirs. Muktabali Devi of Imphal Women Artistes Association as Nongban is considered next only to the legendary Laishram Manglem Singh in this role.658 Keisam Ibemhal is noted as Thonglen, the brave and fierce noble who is famous for his warlike nature and Gambhini as Chaoba, the artful minister and statesman

657 Ojha is a term of address to the teacher in particular and elders in general in Manipur.
in the court of the Moirang king.

The directions of the plays were mostly done by accomplished male theatre artistes in the earlier years. With this training in various tools of theatre the women artistes also started the job of direction. This way, in the 1997 festival there were five plays directed by women artistes out of twelve. In the 2004 festival four women directors showcased their products. It is a difficult task to search for directors as this genre does not involve much money. So, the troupes have to anyhow persuade already established artistes, mainly male ones to help them. This is also one of the reasons why women artistes have started directing their own plays. Ibema Leima, for instance, directs most of her own plays.

The problem they faced in the earlier years, and at present upto some extent, was the problem of illiteracy among the artistes. In those days the dialogues had to be read out by the director and the actresses were made to memorise them. That was a tormenting exercise, and it took them several days and even months for a play to come to the final shape. This was basically due to their inability to camp at one place for rehearsals, due to their domestic responsibilities, unlike male troupes which practiced constantly, camping at one place. In those days it was also a problem to find actresses for a troupe due to their reluctance to come out in the public to perform, though they had the desire and talent within them. In this venture of searching actresses, Ibema Leima even went upto Yaingangpokpi, Yunnamkhunou and other places in the outskirts of Imphal city.

Performances of both the historical and the mythological plays in Manipuri theatre in general, and Shumang Lila in particular, maintain a different style of rendition of dialogues, in order to differentiate them from the ‘Social Plays’. ‘Social Plays’, indicated by the name itself, adhere to the realistic style of dialogue delivery found in the day-to-day social conversations. But the historical and the mythological plays make a deliberate modification in the intonation of the words, so that there are several ups and downs in the sounds, quite different from the way people generally speak in the day-to-day conversations. The dialogues are mostly in the classical Meiteilon (Manipuri). In the case of Moirang Parba plays, there is the use of Moirang dialect of Meiteilon in the same fashion as mentioned above. This improvisation is because they belonged to a different historical and mythical time, and context, and the characters are idealized personalities who should be kept a world above the present day mundane players of the society. Yet they are in the present time and context, and belong to the present generation in the form of
cultural elements. It is the reliving of the past in the present. All this is the endeavour of the Nupi Lila troupes. It is also a movement very much part of the strong ‘revivalist movement’ for resurrection of the Meitei religion, customs and traditions which started in 1940s in Manipur.659

Nupi Lila genre started as a purist theatre movement, with an attempt to thresh the ‘corrupted’ language in theatre in particular. In the old form of Moirang Parba of 1950s and before, the dialogues were littered with alien words, particularly Bengali, due to strong religious and cultural influence of Bengal on Manipuri society. As a very active part of this movement Ibema Leima has also been researching hard on the subject, and incorporating the correct Meitei words in such plays. For instance, she is against using the term Lainingthou (king of the god) as a title to address the kings, as this equates the kings with the gods. Instead she prefers and uses the term Eeningthou (my king) for kings as this separates man from the god. Sanakonung (golden palace), as another example is used for palace.660 Again Pakhangba,661 the first historical king of the Meiteis, is addressed as Laigi Maton (the last member in the line of the gods) and Meegina Pukok (first in the line of human beings). In this endeavour, she has been in constant discourse with the experts of the classical Meitei and Meitei scriptures. She also opines that the term Thangjing (thang from thangba - to lift up and jing or ching - hill), which is the name of the tutelary deity of Moirang, originated when this deity lifted up the hill of the same name (a holy shrine near Moirang town) from under the water. She does not agree with others’ version, that the term came into existence when the deity was brought down (thang-thaba) from his actual abode in the hill to his present temple complex in the Moirang town. The proof of her thesis is that Thangjing deity first inhabited the Thangjing hill already, with this name

---

659 In 1930 a Meitei, Naoriya Phulo started an anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindu movement in Cachhar District of Assam. He established a group called Apokpa Marup (association in the name of Meitei ancestor deities). In Manipur valley following his movement a movement called Sanamahi (named after a Meitei ancestor deity) was started in 1945. The central organization is called Meitei Phurup having several branches called Marups. See Manjusri Chaki Sircar, 1984 – Feminism in a Traditional Society: Women of the Manipur Valley. Ghaziabad: Shakti Books. p. 121.

660 But the term ‘sana’ is an imported word which is inherited from the Hindi word ‘sona’.

661 The word Pakhangba means the one who knows (khangba) his father (pa). Pakhangba is a title and the real name of this first historical king of Mangang Salai, later Ningthouja Salai or Meiteis, was Nongda Lairel Pakhangba (33 AD). He was the son of Sidaba, the Supreme god of The Meiteis and Leimarel Sidabi, one of the house deities of the Meiteis. Pakhangba is symbolically manifested in many forms called Paphan. They are in the forms of a snake. This snake is mostly symbolized with his tail inside his mouth which is an indication that the world begins and ends in him. In some forms his body is coiled on all the four corners representing the four directional deities – Thangjing (South-West), Koubru (North-West), Marjing (North-East), and Wangbren (South-East). See N. Bijaylakshmi Brara, 1998 – Politics, Society and Cosmology in India’s North-East. Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 60).
and the present shrine at Moirang is a later development. Notwithstanding the validity of these claims and counterclaims over the terminology, the democratic debate over the usage of the Meitei words is livened up by the Nupi Lila artistes also. It is a success in itself.

In addition to language other attribute which enhances the aesthetic value of the performances is the costumes. As the plays are historical and mythological the costumes have to be of that period and context i.e. formal and authentic too. In historical plays the kings are dressed in silken *Pheijom*\(^\text{662}\) (dhoti), *Leshon Phurit* (Shirt of very smooth texture) with Manipuri style *Kokyet* (turban) and other nobles also adhere to this formality but with lesser amount of opulence. Women characters also are dressed in Manipuri style costumes with *Mapanaibi Phanek* (horizontally stripped sarong type dress) having combination of various hues, blouse and translucent *Inaphi* (a type of shawl) made of very fine fabrics of different colours. The tribal characters are also dressed in the adequate costumes depending on which tribe the characters belong to along with head gears. In the case of *Moirang Parba* plays, kings and nobles are dressed in *Khamenchatpa Pheijom* (a type of dhoti with flower-like motifs, mostly purple in colour, which were basically worn by Moirang people), *Leshon Phurit* and *Ningkhamsha Yennaophi* (a type of headgear adorned with strands of peacock’s feather at the back side). The female characters are dressed in *Phanek Mapanaibi*, *Leson Phurit* and *Inaphi*. In addition to these costumes Thoibi wears a bejeweled head band which is very much like headgear. In the plays which have *Awa* or Burmese characters they even dress themselves up in the *Awa* costumes after doing research on the clothing of that particular era. Due to financial constraints the troupes employ some alternatives too. For instance, when the play involves characters from different Meitei *Salai*\(^\text{663}\) (clans), they cannot adhere to the exact dress codes of these *Salai*. So, some indicators of the particular *Salai* are highlighted in their dresses. For example a red scarf would be bound on the costume to indicate a character from *Mangang Salai*, black one for *Khuman Salai*, violet for *Angom Salai* etc.

For women impersonating the male characters, the costumes serve as masks in addition to certain amount of make-up, such as moustaches and hair styles. This is why most of the Nupi Lila troupes do not perform ‘social plays’ as they need realistic

---

\(^{662}\) The word *Pheijom* is a combination *Phei* (thigh) and *Jom* or *jomba* (to cover).

characterization of male characters. The anatomy of a woman is not viable for transforming her appearance into a male character easily. But a man can transform his appearance into a female character, comparatively easily. This involves the process of addition and subtraction. Female body welcomes addition but not subtraction, while male body welcomes any amount of addition and no subtraction is needed at all. So, Nupa Shabis (male impersonators) do not look like men in those body hugging dresses in the Nupi Lila ‘Social Plays’ while Nupi Shabis (‘male actresses’) become even more ‘feminine’ than any women. But in case of historical and mythological plays the costumes are heavy and loose with various layers which enable the Nupa Shabis hide their body parts properly and look reasonably masculine.

5. Moirang Shaiyon

It is believed that the legends of nine Moirang Shaiyons are narrated by a wainu laba (male crane) called Pongmahana Kadanba to his wife Mori Thoudanbi when they were living on the bank of Loktak Lake. According to this narrative, subsequent heroes and heroines of these legends are the Shaiyons (incarnations) of a pigeon couple. The story goes this way. Atiya guru Shidaba, the Supreme Being, during his creation of the earth and living beings, created a male pigeon and a female pigeon. Time passed by, while both of them served the head-god and one day the head-god suddenly vanished from their sights, never to be seen again by them. In the pain of this departure, the pigeon couple wandered around the Meitrabak (land of the Meiteis) searching for the head-god. Defeated, they came to the land of Moirangs and nested on the branches of a tree at Thangjing hill. While they were resting there, hunters shot down the female pigeon with their arrows. The male pigeon swooped down on the ground and cried his heart out upon the blood-drenched body of his dying wife. In the mean time the hunters also hit the male pigeon and both of them died. Touched by the love of the two romantics, the Supreme Being handed over the two souls to Thangjing Koirel Lai. The latter livened the romances of the two pigeons through various Shaiyons (incarnations) in Moirang. Another school of thought believes that these Shaiyons are the incarnations of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi.

The nine Shaiyons are associated with the reigns of historical kings of the

---

665 Gathered from Ibema Leima.
666 Sarangthem Biramani. op.cit. pp. 3-4.
independent Moirang before the Ningthoujas subjugated them. The first *Shaiyon, Hensuna - Thongnang Lairoulembi* happened in the reign Fang Fang Ponglenhanba (40 years)667 arguably the first historical king of Moirang. The second one, *Shamba Naha Lamnganba - Khamnu Yaidingkonu* was in the reign of Iwang Telheiba (50 years). The third one, *Wanglen Pungdinghanba - Chakpa Yainu Phishaheibi* was during the time of Lai Phongcheng (52 years). The fourth one, *Nganba - Shangloulembi* was in Ura Ngangoiba’s time (55 years). The fifth, *Khoyon Haoba - Yaithingkonu* occurred in Sanarakhwa’s time (51 years). The sixth, *Akongjamba - Leima Phouoibi (Phoiding Nura Atioibi)* was during the king Tushemba (40 years). The seventh one, *Khamba - Thoibi* was in the reign of Chingkhu Telheiba (Chingkhulemba) (55 years). The eighth, *Kadeng Thangjahanba - Tonu Laijinglembi* blessed the reign of NgANGOi Punshiba (Laijingshu Punshiba) (72 years). The ninth and the last one, *Ura Nahakhongjomba - Pidongnu* was also during Ngangoi Punshiba.

Despite their association with the historical kings, these legends lack the historical authenticity. Though they are the vehicles of various social, political, cultural, economic aspects of the times they occurred, there are elements which are mythological. They seem to be the works of various literary craftsmen, who were adept in literary imaginations. They are a conglomeration of epics which have been kept alive in oral tradition, especially by *Pena* singers for ages altogether. So, these legends can be categorized as ‘historical novels’ constructed through oral traditions. Like other oral traditions, *Moirang Kangleirol* is open-ended, giving the liberty for reinterpretation by the people, through whom this tradition has been passed on generation after generation. In this chapter, *Moirang Shaiyons* are treated as works of art and their relevance to Meitei society is given more weightage than their historical authenticity.

### 5.1 Moirang Kangleirol, the Text in Performance

*Moirang Kangleirol (Kangla + gi + lol = stories of Kangla)* is kept alive for ages by practitioners of various performance genres. *Moirang Kangleirol* is a collection of epics of nine *Shaiyons* (incarnations) of *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi*, the manifestations of *Shidaba Mapu*, the supreme being and his consort *Leimarel Shidabi* which originated at

---

Moirang. Initially the stories of these eras were rendered by the practitioners of musical performance genres such as *Phamshak*, *Pena Sheishak* and *Dholok Sheishak*. Later on they were taken up by theatre both Shumang Lila and Stage Lila.

Shumang Lila filled out the characters of the *Moirang Kangleirol* which remain only as imageries in *Pena* and *Khongjom Parba* genres. The first Shumang Lila play based on the *Moirang Parba* was ‘*Moirang Parba, Loikaba*’ (*Moirang Parba*, return from the exile). It started in between 1900 and 1907. The play was basically an environmental theatre which had its main venue at Wahengbam Leikai Lairembi Lampak at the heart of Imphal city. Thoibi, the heroine who was exiled to Kabaw (possibly in the present day Myanmar) returned from her exile to her home in processional style when Thoibi came on the horseback from Kangabam Leikai towards the main performance place which represented Moirang. The play had such props as *Dolai* (palanquin), *Pe* (a form of elongated umbrella) etc which were very much in congruence with the actual procession in ritualistic ceremonies like *Laiharaoba*. The artistes who took part in that play were R.K. Sanajaoba, Sagolsem Tomchou, Haobam Gulap, Wahengbam Chaoba, Sanathoi, Wahengbam Chaonu etc. The production of the play was done by Haorokcham Tompok and Urikthibam Ojha, the Pena Khongba guided the artistes. It was believed that the horse used in the play was Moirang Tonjao.

The impact of such new rendition of the legends was felt by other forms of arts such as painting. During that period of first decade of the 20th century Ojha Bhadra, an accomplished artist painted many scenes of the *Moirang Parba*. The artistes who enacted the characters of the legends were very close to the descriptions of them by Pena singers. So, this might have influenced the artist to come up with his own way of looking at the characters.

This stint of *Moirang Parba* in Shumang Lila was short. It was banned by the authority probably due to its non-Vaisnavite tradition. Instead, the Vaisnavite dance drama forms and theatre forms like Ram Lila, Sanjenba and Gouralila were encouraged. That was

668 Moirang is a town about 40 km away from Imphal, the capital city of Manipur.
669 In *Phamshak*, the singer sings the stories with various appropriate decorative words by sitting on a mat. When she/he sings she/he takes the *tala* (time sequences) by beating her/his hand either on the thigh or on the mat. The singer is accompanied by a *bashi khongba* (flute player) who plays the refrain in between or along with the singer. *Pena Sheishak* is sung by the Pena (a string musical instrument) player. *Dholok Sheishak* is sung with a dholok, a kind of percussion.
670 Arambam Samarendra – *Shumang lilagi hourakpham amasung makhatana chattharakpa maong. (The Origin of Shumang Lila and its Trend)*.
671 Ibid. p. 4.
also a time when Bengali influence was immensely felt in art, literature, culture, religion and social lives of the Manipuris. These religious plays were performed in *Brajabhasha* while the proscenium theatre (stage lila) plays were mainly in Bengali.

The second stint of *Moirang Parba* in Shumang Lila started in 1920s. The first group of this era came from the side of Kongpal, a place in the present day East Imphal District. So, this group became famous as *Kongpal Moirang Parba*.672 This form was operatic in the sense that most of the dialogues were delivered in the form of *Khunung Eshei* (a type of folk song). So, even in the scene of anxiousness, the dialogues were sung. When this group was in popularity another group from Keishampat side came up. This new group was very popular at that time, yet another group from Keisampat side came up. Then, this new group began to be known as *Keishampat Moirang Parba*.673 To differentiate the two from each other, the older one became *Moirang Parba Ariba* (old *Moirang Parba*) and the newer one *Moirang Parba Anouba* (New *Moirang Parba*). Later the *Keishampat Moirang Parba* also began to be known as *Nilakrishnagi Moirang Parba* after Nilakrishna, who played the role of Thonglen, the minister in the court of Moirang king. He was the 'exact' impersonation of Thonglen, the character in terms of physical built-up - tall, muscular; husky voice and extraordinary acting skill etc which the *Pena Khongbas* had been describing the character. It was his charismatic personality which conquered the audience of that era and he being identified with the troupe. During this era another group of *Moirang Parba* called *Tera Urak Moirang Parba*674 also tried to make its presence felt but it was outdone by the two already popular existing groups. The *Moirang Parba* of this era was popular till 1950s i.e. after the Second World War. But it had vanished, probably due to the rise of several 'social plays', and also due to the death and retirement of most of the doyens of that genre by this time.

Shumang Lila plays during this era did not depend on written scripts. *Moirang Parba* was learned from the *Pena Shakpa ajhas* and was dramatized by the artistes under the guidance of a leader. But these artistes had contributed a new style to Manipuri theatre. The dialogue and style of delivery was made deliberately unique, with modifications of intonations of the words spoken in day-to-day conversations. This became its signature style and any *Moirang Parba* play which did not adhere to this style became tasteless and

673 Gathered from Ibema Leima.
674 Gathered from Ibema Leima.
sounded mundane. It was also an effort to differentiate this form from other forms, as it had a legendary stature unequalled by any other plays.

Despite Moirang Parba being a non-vaishnavite lore, the theatre practitioners of this era took the liberty to mix it with some Vaishnavite elements. And also Moirang Parba of this era had numerous Bengali and Sanskritic elements mainly in the dialogues. In the play Loikum Loika (going into exile and returning), Nongban, the main antagonist of the whole epic of Khamba-Thoibi, would sing in Bengali like, 675

‘Kasturi kum kum; agara chandola chandon; chanchohli machhe....’

In this scene when Nongban came to receive Thoibi who was returning from the exile, at Kumbi Terakha, started singing in joy for their ‘impending marriage’. He sang that their prospective children would play Krishna and Radha in the Rasa Lila and he himself would take the lead singer’s role in the Nupa Pala, a form of Vaishnavite Sankirtan singing done by male performers. Such digression was not scrutinized, both by the artistes and the audiences, as they were deeply immersed in the Vaishnavite tradition. It was more so because of the royal patronage of the Vaishnavism which did not allow any force for the revival of the indigenous religion, Meitei Dharma. Nevertheless, it was a different era with a particular social context.

5.2 Moirang Shaiyon in Nupi Lila

The legends of Moirang Shaiyons are treasures of culture and civilization. They present the high culture of the court of the king, meticulous political structure and power the Moirangs exercised over their neighbours and the respect they got from the latter. They are epics of romance and intrigue as a whole. On the other hand, they also document the feudal structure of the land where the well-to-do reigned upon the poor and powerless people. It is often said, ‘Kegeda lamja leiheidre, Moirangda shara panheide’ (it is hard for orphans to live in Kege-Moirang). But they present the polished etiquette of the people, towards each other, and towards the powerful people of the land.

Apart from these accounts, they also give an account on the elaborate descriptions on the indigenous games and sports such as Mukna (a kind of wrestling), Kangjei (a kind of hockey) Lamjel (long distance race), Kang (a kind of bowling game with the use of an oval shaped disc) etc. But the playing of such games was not free from the politics, especially when the people in the power were involved. So, the Shaiyons are political dramas to the

675 Gathered from Ibema Leima.
Most of them are also tragedies in which the lovers had to pay the price for their devotion to each other. Mostly they resort to suicide and also are killed by their political or romantic antagonists. They show the undying love and devotions the lovers have for each other. There is rare mention of polygamy in the relations of these lovers. As a whole these legends are the living novels which transmit the stories of the cultures and societies of different ages to the subsequent generations, who embraced them in whole or in parts. They still serve as ideal types for the Meiteis of the present age.

Nupi Lila troupes have been performing plays based on various episodes from these Shaiyons. However they mostly explore the Khamba-Thoibi Shaiyon threadbare more than other Shaiyons. This may be because of the elaborate narratives found on this politically and romantically charged up legend. Nupi Lila troupes give various names to the episodes of Khamba-Thoibi legend according to their choices.


The Manipuri society is still in a flux today. As mentioned in Chapter 4, it is full of paradox. How people love the aesthetics of the performing arts but refrain from acknowledging the performers. This paradox is the alter ego of another paradox prevalent in the Manipuri society. Manipuri women have great roles to play in social, cultural, religious, economic and political spheres. Despite such highly acclaimed roles their social status suffers a heavy blow. This is the paradox, a paradox of role and status. The answer may be hidden in the patriarchal social structure and mindset. Despite the moderate ‘modernization’ and ‘westernization’, the Manipuri society is not able to break free from the communitarian social fabric. It is a truth that the ‘Manipuri women in collectivity’ is a powerful force but as individuals they are latent. It is also a truth that the stigma labeled to a collective enterprise is mostly born by those individuals of that group.

The study of women artistes in general, and women Shumang Lila artistes in particular, throws up many interesting aspects which sometimes seem to be contradictory to each other. The understanding of the status of these women artistes needs to be holistic i.e. it should be discerned within the structure of the Manipuri society.

6.1. Actresses in the Colonial Era

Questions of participation of women artistes in theatre forms of Manipur, both Shumang Lila and Stage Lila fall well within the patriarchal arrangement of roles and status. It does
not, however, claim that this mode is universally present in all other patriarchal societies. Manipur presents a case of a specific patriarchy. To inform ourselves of patriarchies let us peep into the theoretical currents, generated across time in an endeavour to employ an alternative historiography. It is a known fact that women’s positions are different in different societies ‘given the regional, class, caste variation of patriarchal practices and their diverse histories’. Given this ontology, ‘to rush into theoretical generalization at this stage would be to risk both simplification and rigidity. We are not however making a plea for theoretical eclecticism or “pluralism,” but for flexibility within a field which is still being defined.’

So, interventions in gender questions across time and space need caution. ‘Perhaps the greatest difficulty lies in relating the ideological to the experiential; that is, of relating various symbolic constructs to the lives and actions of women, and in relating the often hegemonic ideologies produced about women (converging across region, caste and class) to existing divisions of labour and systems of production.’

The experiences of women in societies may not be necessarily the same. So, it is a theoretically deficit approach to ‘locate patriarchy as the primary contradiction in society’. What is presumed in this approach is the grouping of all women within a class, negating all the disparities among them. Moreover ‘women and womanhood’ have always been part of the social changes but are made to seem like continuity. ‘That is, the ideologies of women as carriers of tradition often disguise, mitigate, compensate, contest, actual changes taking place. Women and womanhood is often part of an asserted or desired, not an actual cultural continuity.... And yet actual continuity is never either pure or uncontaminated. For it appears in different historical junctures, has different social and ideological locations, and responds to different crises (colonial presence being one such). Further, the long duration and resilience of patriarchal practices makes the matter more complex.’

Taking into account the colonial conditions and the relevant patriarchy during that time in Manipur the following questions need to be raised, specifically on the women’s participation in theatre. Why women were prevented from performing in theatre, both popular and elite forms, for so long in the colonial era Manipur? Where were the female

---

678 Ibid. p.3.
artistes located in the theatrical space? Where were the female artistes placed among the women themselves? These questions can be answered only when we trace the historical contexts within which the female artistes negotiated their positions. In this section the focus will be on the women's position in both the 'popular' theatre of Shumang Lila and 'elite' theatre of Stage Lila in particular and will also bring in the professional female artistes of the religious performing art forms wherever needed in order to draw a comparison.

The participation of women as performers in theatre in Manipur had been very limited during the colonial time. In the sphere of Stage Lila, women were completely denied the privilege of performance during its formative stage of the first two decades of twentieth century. From the very first play itself, male performers impersonated as women. On the other hand, the rules were not made so strict in the popular form of Phagee Lila in the beginning. There were both women who performed and also male who impersonated as women. The women impersonation is evident from Ethel St. Clair Grimwood’s description of a play she saw. She writes, ‘One disguised himself as an old woman, and another as a native doctor, and the third as a sick man, lying on the ground covered with a white sheet....She was supposed to be his wife, and as soon as she appeared a scuffle ensued, in which the old woman’s clothes fell off.’ It is also documented that women also acted in some of these popular forms during the early 20th century. In the plays Harischandra (1918) and Meiraba Charan the role of women were played by women only. But they had been replaced by male artistes (women impersonators or Nupi Shabis) after that, when the genre became a touring theatre which was not socially practical for the women performers. This way the popular theatre became a uni-gendered theatre forever unlike the Stage Lila which later included women performers. Women artistes entered the realm of Stage Lila with the play Prahlad Charit (around 1918). The actresses who took part in this play were Kangabam Maipakpi Devi, Sairem Kanya Devi, Anandi Devi and Nameirakpam Thouranisabi.

The explanation of the initial prevention of women from performing in the 'elite'

---

680 This event has been narrated in Chapter 1.
682 Ayekpam Shyamsunder Singh. op. cit. pp. 15-16.
683 As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, women artistes started their own Shumang Lila troupes only in the 1970s.
proscenium theatre and their inclusion later, needs to be analysed in convergence with the theatre scenario in Bengal. In the Manipur theatre, this can be seen in the dynamics of convergence and contestation between two patriarchies; one, coming from outside and two, the local. This phase i.e. the late nineteenth and early twentieth century marked the height of Bengali dominance in the cultural space of Manipur. The Bhadralok culture of Bengal had already heavily influenced the elites and middle class Manipuris. As discussed in Chapter 1, all the plays during this period were performed in Bengali. With this they brought not only the texts of the plays but also their patriarchy which they tried to impose upon Manipuri elite theatre and as a result on Manipuri society. As the Manipuri middle class was enamored by the new effervescence in the cultural field, they were also party to this new patriarchy.

In Bengal itself, the nineteenth century was a very significant era with lots of modernizations, happening both in the material and cultural field. The middle class was attempting to sanitize the cultural fields from the ‘contaminated’ elements present in the popular cultural forms. Lower class and caste women were active in the popular cultural forms like ‘doggerels and poems, songs and theatrical performances’ like Jatra. The Bengali Bhadraloks were taken over by the description of these women as ‘licentious and voluptuous’ by the British. But ‘(s)ignificantly in nineteenth century Bengal in general, and Calcutta in particular, this popular culture had a wide female audience, ranging from the lower caste and lower class self-employed women of the marketplace, to the wives and daughters of the bhadralok in the sheltered andarmahal or zenana (secluded quarters for woman).’

Later in the second half of the nineteenth century the bhadraloks were in full swing ‘to free the andarmahal from the contaminating cultures of the lower order’. They were successful to a great extent. This was also a time, when there were efforts to construct an adequate ‘image’ of Indian woman. This placed the ‘new’ women in the highest rung, superior to the ‘westernized women of the wealthy parvenu families spawned by the colonial connection, as well as the common women of the lower classes.’ This also brought a ‘new’ patriarchy which was owned up by bhadramahilas themselves.

This trend was well reflected in the cultural production of middle class. ‘Theatre practices of the middle class of 19th century were part and parcel of their assumption of

---


285
hegemony in the production of culture and politics.685 The latter half of the nineteenth century ‘elite’ theatre production, then ‘desexualised’ its space with the introduction of women impersonation. Then there was again an intervention against the ‘artificiality’ in the signification of women roles by these women impersonators. ‘This had to do as much with gender as with caste: many of the boy-actresses came from the lower castes.’ This was also a phase when there was a conscious effort on the part of this middle class to establish an Indian masculinity in the face of the British’s projection of Indians as ‘effeminate’. So, ‘elite’ theatre again was inclined to take in women in its productions in the later part of the 19th century.686 But there were voices of dissent within the middle class against inclusion of women performers and women performing in theatre at all. Women’s coming into the public sphere and being mobile was something which was contradictory to the idealized model of Indian womanhood. Many were of the view that theatre should/would have done without actresses.

This was the period when proscenium theatre was introduced in Manipur by the elites of Manipur in convergence with the Bengali bhadraloks. When it came from Bengal, it came with the same structure with its own patriarchy. This theatre structure and the patriarchy were also accepted by the middle class Manipuris, as they were already part of the bhadralok culture. This was why women were prevented from participating in the new ‘elite’ theatre. This was also reflected in the popular forms like Phagee Lila, when they also restricted women from performing in this genre. This went on for around two decades. Then women entered the ‘elite’ theatre in 1918, as mentioned above. This did not mean that all the theatre groups of that time had women performers. There was also parallel existence of women impersonators. But important thing is that the entry had already been made by women performers.

The question remains, why this development took place at all. Here one needs to delve into the structure of Manipuri patriarchy which is not as same as that of the new patriarchy brought in by the Bengalis. There were both convergence and contestations between the two patriarchies. The site of negotiation was the women’s body and women’s


686 Lata Singh. op. cit. 

286
social status. Strict following of bhadralok culture of Bengal needed the Manipuri middle class to converge with the patriarchy disseminated by the former. But convergence with the local social structure needed them to contest some of the elements of this new patriarchy from Bengal. There needed a middle path which was purely neither of the two but a synthesis of the two. This synthesized mode was also a 'new' patriarchy in itself. This meant that the middle class also had to be selective in acquiring the bhadralok cultural elements. So they also established a connection with the indigenous roots. Nevertheless, the realm of women remained the site of the practice and discourse of patriarchy.

This period coincided with the consciousness among this class for reflexivity on cultural elements, both internal and external. The rise of cultural politics was witnessed when there was a feeling, among this class, of the need to produce plays in Manipuri language after a long stint of Bengali language plays. So, the first play in Manipuri language, with various indigenous fervour, like inclusion of Manipuri folk songs, Parthaparajay was performed in 1918. It was such, despite it being a translation from a Bengali play by the same name. The major thrust came from the king himself. He was dissatisfied with the texts and forms of the then theatre and wanted Manipuri theatre performers to come up with a 'real' Manipuri play, which would be a break from the Bengali plays and Manipuri translated plays. As mentioned elsewhere, the play Nara Singh was laboriously rehearsed under the patronage of the king at his own palace compound itself for one month. Then it was performed in 1925, with all grandeur, on a stage which was especially constructed in the Govindaji temple's mandava (congregation hall). This play was important, in that it traced the history of an independent Manipur, when Nara Singh was a king. It had the king's personal connection as Nara Singh was his great grandfather. Again it carried a patriotic theme which also aroused political consciousness during that colonial era. The context of the play was the occupation of Manipur by the Burmese which led to the Seven Years' Devastation i.e. 1819-1926. The Burmese could easily be identified with the British. So, the play had such patriotic songs as, 'Meitei leibak ibema, nungshibi ima Manipur, khudang pifam teiduna hikna hikna kapliba' (mother Meiteileibak (land of Meiteis), Manipur, my love, crying incessantly being subjugated). Another song went as 'Lanfam firal numit kharadang munehrabasu avana, mulge eikhoi

---

687 Ayekpam Shyamsunder Singh. op.cit. p. 37.
purakke thuna, ima nangi nathada' (though the battle flag has been snatched by Ava (Burmese) for some days, we will snatch it back from them and put it on your lap). It is evident from these sentences that they do not have even a single Sanskrit or Bengali or Hindi word unlike in most of the plays of this era.

This consciousness of indigenous cultural elements was also responsible for bringing a change in the gender relation in the theatrical sphere itself. This created a compromised situation between the two patriarchies of the Bengalis and Manipuri society. While women were made part of this genre, there was also an attempt to create a ‘new’ Manipuri woman, taking these actresses as the medium. This is evident from the kinds of plays, mostly religious, mythological and historical, popular during this period.

Then who were these women artistes? Like in Bengal of nineteenth century, they were from the families who were involved in performing art forms, mainly religious genres like, different forms of Sankirtan singing, pung yeiba (mirdanga players), Manipuri Jagoi (Manipuri dances like Rasa Lila and Lai Haraoba) etc. But unlike Bengal, they were not necessarily from the lower class. Some of them also were from the family, already involved in the Stage Lila e.g. father, uncle etc. For instance, Tondon Devi, a well known actress of the 1940s and 1950s, was trained in dance and Khubak eshei, (a form of community singing using palms to give tala). According to her, ‘My entire family was involved in acting, and I joined them. My sister used to act in Jamuna gi Mandir, a place in Singjamei bazaar, as a heroine. I would accompany her, and whenever there was the part of a child available, I would play.... Then, when I went to the border areas to perform for the troupes (during World War II), it was with my own company. It was a small, a family concern, actually, since almost my entire family was involved - sister, brother, mother, uncles, aunts etc.’

Another actress of that era is Nayani Sija. The title ‘sija’ indicates she was from a well-respected family connected to the royalty. She was trained in acting by Arambam Dorendrajit who was a well accomplished theatre personality and an ardent follower of bhadralok culture. Again Khongbantabam Ongbi Randhoni Devi’s father was into theatre. She says, ‘My father once got involved in a local play and acted as Yudhishthir. Seeing him rehearsing and wearing different costumes attracted me, and I became very

---

588 Ibid. p. 42.
589 Anjum Katyal. op. cit. p. 187.
590 Sija is a title given to the women belonging to the families of Ningthemchamayum which is a yunnak or lineage name for those having blood relation with the royalty. The male members are known as Rajkumars (R.K).
interested in theatre." Most of them started early, taking the role of male characters like child Krishna and then when they reach adolescence they switched over to the roles of the 'heroines' of the plays.

Their bodies were then used as a site of a new patriarchal order with the staging of plays based on many women from history, mythology and religious texts. Apart from this, 'elite' theatre had been trying to 'recast' the image of Manipuri woman, even from the years when women were not part of this genre. During the initial years, when most of the plays were produced and directed by Bengalis the plays were full of moral messages. This morality also revolved around women. Some of the plays were Savitri, Sita, Rijiya, Bangebarji, Pandav-Kourav, Jaydeva, Rani Durgavati, Anudhvarer Hari sadh, Iruner rani, Karnarjun, Prithviraj Sangyukta, Biblamangal, Kedar Rai. This was when they tried to create femininity in the mould of Sita and Savitri who were devoted to their husbands, even when their lives were to be sacrificed. The women impersonators also tried to create this womanhood through their body language, dialogue delivery etc. This endeavour also influenced the popular forms of theatre and they performed plays like Harischandra (1918), Savitri Seitavan etc.

Later, when women became part of this 'elite' theatre this trend continued, only that the body was changed from a male to a female. One important play adhering to the creation of prototypes of Manipuri women of this era was Ibema of Hijam Anganghal Singh, one of the pioneers of modern Manipuri literature. This representation was so wholeheartedly received by the audience that Thambal Angoubi who took the role of Ibema became Ibema Shabi (one who plays Ibema). As this theatre was dominated by male, the actresses were taught how to be a 'woman'. Khongbantabam Ongbi Randhoni Devi says, 'Pabung Lalit taught me a lot about how to act as a heroine, also Pabung Dhanachandra and Dada Nilamani. Pabung Nilamani taught me all the minute details in Thambal (the chief female protagonist of the play Yairipok Thambalnu, based on a nineteenth century tragedy); in order to show me how I was to cry he devised a strategy." (Italics mine)

Where, then, these women, who were the Savitri, Sita, Rejiya, Thambal or Thoibi (a Manipuri legendary heroine) of the stage, were located in a patriarchal theatre and wider

---

691 Anjum Katyal. op. cit. p. 192.
692 Ibid. p. 194. Here, the term pabung is an honorific title given to an elderly man of the age of one's father. Its literal meaning is father. Dada is for brother.
social structure? As seen above, the roles and characterization of the women performers were decided by the male members of the troupe. Moreover all the directors of that era were male. From this it is evident that the actresses had a very subordinate status within the theatre structure itself.

This was within the theatrical network but then outside this frame, these women again fell into the patriarchal network of Manipuri society. What was important in case of Manipur was that the social stigmatisation came not from the middle class but from the common population, unlike in Bengal where there was strong opposition against the women performers from the bhadralok community. The strong sense of gender differentiation and division of labour in Manipuri society between women and men consolidated the concept of womanhood.

6.2. Status of Nupi Lila Artistes, through a Case Study of Thokchom Ningol Ibema Leima

Ms. Leima was born on the first of March, 1942. She was the only child of her parents though her father was polygamous and had about ten wives in different places. She grew up as a tom-boy, preferring half pants (shorts), and other male clothing, during that era of Manipuri society, when phanek was the ideal clothing of Meitei females. That was the beginning of the making of a rebellious and independent personality in her. But she was married off at the age of seventeen. During those days she was considered to be a spinster at what was considered to be a late age of hers. Mostly girls were married off at the age of 13-14 years. If a girl reached even seventeen, people would start commenting, “Lawai Singreng hikpi langamdre, taretki chengjen puduna” (even the lice would not be able to cross the front hair divide in seven days’ journey). This meant that the hair started becoming spare and people began to laugh at those spinsters. Even though she was married, she could not show the ‘softness’ of a woman even to her husband, so there was no romancing between them. She then gave birth to two daughters. In the mean time, she got interested in theatre.

She was influenced by her indomcha (maternal aunt) who was into theatre,

---

693 Today due to the rise in number of girls in higher education they prefer remaining spinsters even till their 30s. This trend brings in a new culture of 'engagement' of girls and boys for marriage by involving the task of their relatives which was quite strange some decades back, specially because the Meitei society sanctions courting between girls and boys by themselves before marriage. So, there is the rise in the popularity of the 'Matrimonial Column' in the local news papers.
performing Moirang Parba. Her maternal line was much into the performing arts. In contrast her father’s line was against the arts and artistes. Her mother was also a renowned singer of Meitei Sanamahi Pala. Her mother even had to discontinue her engagement with the art form after her marriage to her father. Seeing her interest in theatre one day her Indomcha secretly took her to a troupe called Lainingthou Eeshing Chaibi Nupi Thougul Marup and its leader took her audition test. Because of her masculine body language and husky voice she was given the task to enact the male characters. Her first play was Loikum Loika about Thoibi’s exile to Kabaw in the present Myanmar. It competed in the All Manipur Jatra Festival in 1976.

She did not disclose her new found engagement to her husband. In the mean time her husband became promiscuous and then married another woman. Instead of being jealous and losing her heart and mind she became even more engrossed to her art. Moreover she did not have that ‘womanly’ nature towards her husband. Her devotion to this art form culminated at a point when she even practiced her dialogues wherever she went. Hearing her self-uttering, the second wife intimated her husband that she had gone mad as she spoke to herself. One day her husband also happened to hear her speaking to herself and sarcastically commented that she had gone mad and he would have to send her to Ranchi, the place where there was a mental hospital. By this time around, her husband anyhow discovered that she was into Shumang Lila. When he objected, she, instead of confronting him head-on, replied that he was mad after women and she after Shumang Lila and she got some rewards for her efforts but what about him for womanizing? Despite objections and distractions, she followed her heart and pursued her passion relentlessly. She even rehearsed her dialogues when traveling by rickshaw. One day the rickshaw driver got frightened by her practice, and looked back at her to see if something was wrong with her. Understanding his suspicion, she clarified that she was only practicing for her plays and told him that she was not mad and directed him to drive properly.

Her passion took its toll when her dominating husband grew impatient with her involvement in theatre. Finally they agreed to disagree and got separated. She started living with her two daughters. Analysing the whole episode she found the outcome satisfactory.

694 Sanamahi pala is a type of devotional singing on the line of Sankirtan singing in Manipur. But the text is of the Meitei religious ones related to the deities including Shidaba Mapu, Sanamahi, Pakhangba, Nongpok Ningthou, Pantoibi etc. It originated with the rise of Meitei revivalist movement. The Sankirtan style of singing will be dealt with in length in later part.
she got freedom to pursue her art unhindered. Nevertheless she was not free from the society. People in general used to frown upon her and other Shumang Lila actresses and showed them great contempt. "Madumuk thina ngangnaba leite" (there was not worse words than the ones spoken to them). People used to comment on them that they were doing what even the men-folk were reluctant to be in i.e. Shumang Lila. Even the male Shumang Lila gurus were rumored to be womanizing in the midst of the female artistes. Her neighbours used to shout aloud "taningkhidreda" (Huh! Just shut up.), when rehearsals were going on in her house. She was a kind of out-cast for them. When some girls walked along with her, onlookers would comment to each other and sometimes to her, "mashu Lila yaorabra?" (Is she also in Lila?). Because of such stigma people avoided their company. Though the intensity has come down a little bit, even today the stigma is still intact. Whenever she asked her nieces to give a lift on their scooters they refused saying that people would ogle at them. So, she never asked them again. Even her daughters are uncomfortable with her profession. Whenever she performed in a locality in Imphal they would avoid going that side for fear of embarrassment from the comments of their friends on their mother's play.

She is also an ardent follower of Meitei religion or Sanamahi movement. During those days, some decades ago, the followers of this indigenous religion were looked down upon by the dominantly Vaisnavite Meitei society. Even today this attitude is intact though the 'revivalist movement' has been able to draw a considerable number of followers and certain level of consciousness among the people of their non-Vaisnavite past. For her it was double stigma. She was not even invited for any occasion of the locality for the same reason.

Apart from the above limitations, money has always been a nagging problem for Nupi Lila troupes. Very little comes comes their way but much is given away. Both money and energy are expended unlike the case in male troupes. When her troupe practices plays, she meets all the expenses of the troupe members, since she is the leader of her troupe. She has to arrange tea, snacks and even meals for them. As the members were not wealthy enough, sometimes one would complain that she did not have anything to cook and would ask to go back little early from the rehearsal. In order to pacify such members and to complete the sessions of rehearsal she would offer rice to them. When they performed plays, and could not collect enough money for themselves, she used to give some extra
money to the members from her own. It was because they would be embarrassed to go back home without any money as they went for performance. So, to maintain such expenses and the expenses on the costumes and other paraphernalia she sometimes had to mortgage her jewellery and even her daughter's too. For this her daughter often rebuked her. This way, small and little rebellions come up even from within too.

Even the rehearsals of a play take two-three months since the members cannot camp at one place unlike male troupes. Sometimes one member would not turn up saying that her husband was there, as many of them participated hiding from their family members. When one member did not turn up her partner would fume and say that it was just wastage of time to come there. So, in order to anyhow complete the rehearsal she used to play the part of the absentee.

According to her, *Leishabis* (maidens) are reluctant to join Shumang Lila as they consider it as a low-brow art form though some of them are still there. So, the actresses are mostly married ones or divorcees. For maidens Stage Lila is more prestigious since it is considered high-brow. Moreover the male troupes do not give much importance and respect to these female troupes. This again worsens the ever present problems.

As for the monetary help from the side of the government her troupe was awarded a grant of Rs. 65,000 in 1999 by the Human Resource Development Ministry, New Delhi. Subsequently, another grant of Rs. 55,000 came her way. After that the troupe got grants of Rs. 15,000 each for four consecutive years from Sangeet Natya Akademi, Government of Manipur. All these grants were used for arrangements of costumes and other essentials of the troupe. The remaining was shared by the members as a reward for their hard work.

Regarding her plays, in addition to playing Nongban and Manaob lbungo or Wangon Ningthou, the two antagonists of Moirang Parba plays, she also took part in many historical, mythological and 'social' plays. In a historical play *Charui Huimadon Leima* she took the role of *Nongmai Khulakpa*, the head of a Maring tribe village. It was a play on *Luwang* (a kingdom and later a *Salai* or clan) king Khunthingba and his queen Huirem Chanu. The play showed a harmonious relationship between the king and the Khulakpa. It was a script of the noted playwright Chana Lukhoi.

Among the few 'social plays' they performed *Hourakpham thiba* (in search of the origin) was very popular. It was scripted by Ningombam Budhi Singh. It tried to search the identity of the Meiteis through the Meitei Dharma. It depicted the religious and the
ideological tussle between a man and his father-in-law. The man was a devout follower of
the Meitei dharma and the father-in-law a staunch Pankot, follower of the sect of Radha.
The man lived in his father-in-law’s house along with his wife as Ya-onginba. So, the
father-in-law insisted that the man convert to Vaisnavism which suggestion the latter
squarely rejected. Finally the couple decided to leave the house. To this the father
persuaded his daughter to remain with him but she refused to do so saying that whichever
religion or ideology her husband followed she was ready to follow them being a dedicated
wife. This was a clear sketching of an ideal Meitei woman who should be ‘womanly’ and
devoted to her husband.

In this same play there was a scene in which the wooden idol of Gouranga
Mahaprabhu, the Bhakti saint from Bengal, played by an actress, was shown. When this
idol was placed on the stage a forest officer, played by Ibema Leima, came in and
demanded to take the measurement of it by using a Phita (measuring tape). He took the
idol not as a sacred object but simply as a wooden figure which came under the purview of
the Forest Department. He measured the length, breadth and the height of the idol to take
marsoon or tax on a forest product. The popularity and powerfulness of this particular
scene made the entire play known by the name of Mahaprabhu Phita onba (measuring of
Mahaprabhu by the measuring tape) subsequently. The play was so much loved by the
audience that it was performed about eighty times in every nook and corner of Manipur
valley. In Thanga, an island village in the middle of the Loktak Lake in Bishnupur District,
the audience response was so huge that she experienced the deep entrenchment of the
Meitei Dharma even at this far flung place. But the objection to this play was revealed at
Moirangpokpa Laibung in Imphal when some people in the audience (possibly Bamons
[Brahmans], she suspected) pelted at her which left her ankle swollen for days.

In the historical play Paona, based on the valour of Paona, the hero of Khongjom
lan (Khongjom battle), a battle, part of the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, she played the
role of the hero. It was directed by Jugon. For this play she underwent the training of
Thangta, a form of Manipuri martial art using swords and spears. But she was hospitalized
a few days before the day of performance due to nasal bleeding. She memorized the

---

695 Yaonginba is a matrilocal residence system when the son-in-law stays with his wife in her parents’ house
some period after the marriage. This arrangement is basically done when the parents do not have any male
issue in the family. But it is not considered to be a good status symbol in a patrilocal society of the Meiteis.
696 Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 was the first and the last visible armed conflict in a large scale between the
British and the Manipur king’s army. See Introduction for details.
dialogues even on the hospital bed. On the day of performance, she prayed to god to give her energy at least to complete the play undeterred. In a scene, she was supposed to cut the British flag. In her first attempt it did not go as the flag staff was little hard. By saying acha-chal! (Huh!), she again swung the sword and successfully cut the flag. That was a technical flaw of theatre which she confidently minimized to keep the tempo of the scene. In between the scene she used to gulp down those ‘glucose samples’ to keep her energy running. In this endeavour, A.K. Bengal, the popular male Shumang Lila actor helped her a lot.

For the past four to five years, her troupe has not been performing Moirang Parba plays for lack of women artistes who can play the roles of Khamba and Thoibi. According to her, the role of Khamba and Thoibi cannot be and should not be taken by anybody as they are ideal hero and heroine with unique personalities and physical appearances. She does not want to perform them in the name of enlivening the art form as some other troups do.

Her constant engagement with this art form finally paid her great dividends in the form of awards bestowed on her by the government and other concerned organizations. She was adjudged second best ‘actor’ (1994), best director (1998), best supporting ‘actor’ (1998), best director (1999), second best director (2000), best production for her troupe for the play Khuman Lamja (2001), second best production for the play Numit kappa (2003) and the best production for the play Nungthel Leima (2004) in the Annual Manipur Shumang Lila Festivals organized by Manipur State Kala Akademi, Imphal. In addition to these recognitions she was awarded a certificate of honour (Achievement award) by the Manipur State Shumang Lila Council in 1998. Despite these, she does not receive the most important reward i.e. the encouragement and respect from the general public.

Such annual festivals are not without their internal politics. The competition among the troups is really tough and sometimes it takes an ugly face. Her rebellious self came forward to face the truth. In one of these festivals her play was adjudged second place and she complained it to the Akademi that her play was superior in quality and deserved the first place. The Akademi then threatened her troupe to be excluded from the next festival if she did not withdraw her complaint. This dire decision was anyhow prevented by the intervention of male troups.

The troupe, she nurtured from the scratch, reached a higher pedestal when it
performed in North East cultural festival in Mumbai in 2002 and 2004, sent there by the Department of Art and Culture, Government of Manipur. Such tours are an eye-opener for her and her troupe members. She realizes how insufficient she is in terms of language as she does not speak either Hindi or English properly. Anyhow she used her survival tactics and communicated with those local people.

She has already devoted her entire life to the art of Shumang Lila and now she is sixty two but still ready to move on with her active life. Despite her talent in this theatre form she had never tested her talent in films. She is of the opinion that she cannot take the role of a woman since she lacks the feminine attributes. She feels that in terms of looks and body language she is much worse than any Nupi Shabis. She opines that they are fantastic and even more feminine than any normal Meitei woman.

Today she lives in her own house at Sagolband Moirang Leirak, Imphal with her old mother and her unmarried daughter independently without any ‘male members’. In order to run her family she has always been in small scale trade in the nearby Khwairamband Keithel\(^{697}\) or Bazaar whenever she is not involved in her passion, theatre. Today she is a hardened woman, hardened by the time and society which most of the time stood against her.

6.3. Stigmatized Identity: An Analysis
The status of an individual or a group depends on the recognition by others in the society. Taking this as a cue the Manipuri society in general has ambivalent attitude towards women artistes in general and Nupi Lila artistes in particular. People appreciate the creativity of the women artistes in their performances. Again they respect the creativity as such of the artistes. On the other hand they disapprove their patterns of socialization, which bring their status down in the status hierarchy. Explanation of such attitudes towards them may be found in the patriarchal social structure of Meitei society. Women artistes constitute a community with stigmatized identity. In this section when I talk of stigma I will refer to Goffman. Stigma, however, is an old phenomenon, which is present in almost every society where there is the concept of social acceptability and unacceptability of certain actions conducted by its members. In the ancient Greek society ‘signs were cut or

\(^{697}\) Khwairamband Keithel in Imphal is the main centre of local trade solely run by the women traders. It was established during the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652 AD). For that matter, trade and commerce which are done in the open market is the sole responsibility of the womenfolk.
burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor. Stigma, according to Goffman, is ‘a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity.’ Here the virtual social identity is the one which the ‘normals’ assume what the person ought to be, whereas the actual social identity is what the person actually is. So stigma in principle, ‘refer(s) to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationship, not attributes, is really needed.... A stigma, then, is really a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype,..., in part because there are important attributes that almost everywhere in our society are discrediting.’ Stigma, according to him can be seen in two persepectives, Discredited and Discreditable. Discredited stigma is when the sign of stigma is already known or apparent to others. For instance, a person with deformed limbs. Discreditable stigma, on the other hand, is one in which the differences are neither known by others nor are they perceivable by them, for example, a person who has had a colostomy, or, a homosexual passing as straight. How stigmatization started at all towards the women artistes in Manipur has its own history. This history is connected to public performances by ‘professional’ women artistes. Before I come down to this issue it is pertinent to discuss the performing arts in Manipur so that the background is laid out.

Performing arts in Manipur can be broadly put into two categories, as briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, in terms of text and context - a) Religious/Ritualistic and b) Non-religious. In terms of context the liberty has been given to each category to enter each other’s space due to the exigencies of the modern time. For instance, the Religious/Ritualistic ones are performed in secular space like stages and the secular ones in ritualistic sphere like Laiharaoba festivals. Nevertheless the categorization can be justified taking into account their original forms.

The Religious/Ritualistic performing arts of Manipur face limitations in grouping them into the established categories which are known to outside cultures. There is osmosis of elements among them. Nevertheless they can be put into certain categories keeping in mind the higher degree of an element’s presence, for instance, music, dance, histrionics etc. So, they may be put into the following categories - a) dance, b) dance drama, c)

---

musical performances. Within the category of dance Laiharaoba Jagoi (Laiharaoba dance), Khamba Thoibi Jagoi etc. may be incorporated. Under the category of dance drama such Vaisnavite performing art forms as Rasa Lilas, Gouralilaka etc. may be incorporated. 701

Under the ‘musical performance’ the various forms of Sankirtan singing may be incorporated. The Sankirtan performance by females is called Nupi-Pala (women musical genre). This domain of Sankirtan singing is also posited within the gender differentiation. Women performers were made more ‘feminine’. In contrast to male artistes’ rigorous body movements and stark white Pheijom (dhoti) and large imposing Kokyet (turban) in Nupa-Pala (male musical genre), women artistes had to limit their body movement and used to ‘wear plain-looking faded pastel orange Pungou Phanek (wrap-round) with white Inaphis (thin shawl). 702 The bold and rebellious side of the Manipuri women was seen in this art form only in 1980s when a woman Sankirtan singer, Manimacha Devi started wearing Mayeknaibi phanek with stripes of various hues and jewelleries during the performance. 703 She also started using the large Kartal (cymbals) used by the male performers and also performed standing and moving like her male counterparts. Following her valorous footsteps today women performers have established it as a tradition.

Under the categories of ‘secular performing arts’ we may include musical performances and theatre. Under the musical performance the most prominent one is Matamgi Eshei (modern songs) or Adhunik Eshei. This style of singing is on the line of Indian musical style found in Hindi films and other recordings. This singing style was popularized with the advent of radio. The opening of Imphal Centre of All India Radio (AIR) in 1963 served as a shot in the arms for the talented youth. Before this the Manipuri programmes were broadcast from the Guwahati Kendra of AIR. With the development of Manipuri films and the forming of numerous musical groups like Roop-Rag 704 many

702 Manjus1i Chaki Sircar. op. cit. p. 109
703 Ibid. p. 110.
704 The first Manipuri feature film ‘Matamgi Manipur’ was made in 1972, produced by Karam Manmohan Singh, directed by Aribam Shyam Sharma, Music by Shyam himself. It had four songs sung by Kamala Jamuna and Aheibam Bhudhachandra. The songs were recorded in Calcutta. Roop-Rag, one of the most popular and pioneering musical groups in Manipur came into existence in 1961 (Shyam Sharmagi Numit, a booklet published by Roop-Rag in commemoration of its 43rd anniversary, 2004).
artistes turned into professionals. Apart from recording for the radio and their private cassettes, they, including female artistes, started touring and performing on stage in various parts of the valley. Under the category of theatre, female artistes took part, the Stage Lila and Shumang Lila can be incorporated.

Community performances by women, generally in the religious performing arts and dance in particular, are considered to be a prerogative for them. Also it is not stigmatized. Every Manipuri female is presumed to know how to dance. Whenever any occasion comes, say Laiharaoba festival, women of that particular Leikai (locality) or Khul (village) are required to take part in that dance.

Stigmatisation is when it comes to the women ‘professional artistes’. Even the women artistes who attend to the services of gods and goddesses are not spared and are also the target of stigmatization by the people in general. So, the genesis of stigmatization does not lie in the sacred sphere and service but somewhere else. Possibly the genesis lies in the socialization patterns of Manipuri society in general and among the professional artistes in particular. There are other indicators which assist this one, for instance, the educational level, the status of their family, performing art as a profession itself etc.

Manipuri society is still conservative when it comes to the liberty bestowed to its womenfolk because of its patriarchal social structure. Like in many other societies. Manipuri females are expected to stick to the ‘ideal’ mould of a ‘woman’ i.e. gentle, sober, subtle, caring, disciplined etc. in both gesture and language. This is implanted in the socialization pattern of the female members. So, if a girl or a woman does something which does not adhere to the understood behavioral pattern of a female then she is commented as ‘Nupi manjadeda’ (it is unlike a woman). Except for some, the Manipuri women as individuals maintain a subordinate status to their male members. So, boisterous expressions of their emotions, desires and even rebellion are considered ‘unwomanly’. Singing aloud by them at home or locality in day-to-day life is also considered uncenemonious. Whenever it happens people around would comment. ‘nakhoina Eshei shaklibadubu yum mayanime

705 (it is near your home that you are singing). Some decades back even humming Adhunik Eshei (modern songs) by them would invite glances and comments since they were laden with romantic words. But humming devotional songs and Khunung Eshei (folk songs) was not a social irritant.

705 Gathered from Achoubi, one of the popular ‘male actresses’.
Stigmatization of women performing artistes, both of religious and secular performing art forms, is also due to the socialization pattern amongst themselves. Otherwise there is no reason why people love and admire the various performing arts and stigmatise the artistes. Social stigma also is a product of prejudices and stories fabricated by the ‘outsiders’ of that particular group. It is not to claim that a certain amount of truth is not involved in the stigmatization. The general impression of people against the Manipuri female performing artistes as ‘loose’ women is because of their close interactions with their male counterparts. They are considered to be ‘liberal’ or ‘liberated’ which is not sanctioned by the society in general. In order to get training they ought to be with their male counterparts and also male gurus, in many of the cases, most of the time. In addition to this, being professionals and public performers they have to travel to places, near and far, sometimes spending nights at the places of performance. Coupled with this is the public expression of their moods and sentiments during performances using their ‘face’ and ‘body’. In case of theatre it is the confusion between the character and the person. All these give a wrong impression to the audience that they are quite ‘accessible’. So, finally the genesis of the stigmatization is concentrated to the core issue of their sexuality or rather ‘imagined sexual perversion’.

In case of theatre, there is again a stratification of status between women performers in Stage Lila and Shumang Lila. In this ladder, the former are put in a higher stratum than that of the latter. It is because they are part of ‘high-brow’ culture. So, women artistes who think that they are a class apart with considerable amount of educational qualification would prefer to join Stage Lila. The prejudice against Nupi Lila artiste is made concrete by their family’s social status. Mostly they were illiterate some decades back and even today there are many. Even those who were literate had a little education. Ibema Leima is just a 5th standard pass while Indurekha, the daughter of Hijam Anganghal, (one of the pioneering figures of modern Manipuri literature) was only 10th class pass. Education among the girls was not encouraged at all, even in decades into post 1950s, when the education system comparatively improved; instead they were led to take up those ‘womanly’ professions like Phishalonsha (handloom, knitting etc).

Despite their hard work and creativity, people consider them as women who waste time just merrymaking instead of doing something ‘productive’. This impression is again augmented by Nupi Lila being a very poor sister of male troupes in terms of the frequency
of performances and amount of money they earn from such performances. Of course, there are people who appreciate their hard work and endeavour in the face of such obstacle but the number of people who think otherwise is huge. In case of Nupi Lila artistes it is a constant tussle between the ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. But this tussle is not an effort for rejecting the ‘outsiders’ by the ‘insiders’ but rather to woo and win the former. For ‘insiders’ Shumang Lila is a medium to shape their personality and improve their confidence which most of the ‘outsiders’ do not experience. It is also a space where they can empty their repressed emotions and desires against the antagonists both, theatrical and real. For those playing the male characters it is a platform where they own the ‘velour’, ‘chivalry’ and ‘freedom’ of masculinity. They are kings and queens at least for the performance time which sometimes get inflicted inside their existence exuding the characters wherever they are.

Stigmatization of female artistes can also be seen through the dichotomy of the social space into public and private domains or ‘ghar and bahir, the home and the world’. The patriarchy of Manipur had selective arrangement of both the public and private domain for both the male and female members. It was not complete division between the two, where one domain was wholly kept for one gender and other for the opposite gender. It was unlike the one created by the bhadraloks of Bengal. For them “The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world - and woman is its representation.” In case of Manipuri society, there was convergence and compromise of two systems, one that of Hindu middle class tendency of the North India and the other the local one. In the local social structure the public domain was divided into male and female spheres. Again the private domain had its own division of labour.

In Manipuri society women had always been active participants in the economic, cultural and religious activities which took place in the public domain. The context of late nineteen century Manipuri society is vividly presented by Ethel St. Clair Grimwood as

The women did all the hard work, as a rule. They wove all their own and their husbands’ clothing, and cooked and looked after the house generally, besides working in the fields

---

and coming every evening to the big bazaar with merchandise for sale or exchange. No
men were allowed to sell in this bazaar with the exception of a few Bengalee traders, who
sat in a different part of the market....They sat in long rows in the bazaar, and it was
divided up in a most methodical way. Vegetables and fish occupied one end, and cloths
and jewellery the other, and the whole of the female population turned out, and even the
princesses occasionally sold in the bazaar. 708 (Italics mine)

So far so good, and no amount of stigma or status crisis is attached to the
participation of women in these religious and cultural activities in the public domain. They
are sanctioned by the Manipuri patriarchy. The problem with the professional women
artistes is because the realm in which they enter is beyond the selective sanctions of the
women’s presence in the public sphere. These women, whether in ‘elite’ theatre or in
religious genres, were labeled as ‘morally loose’, because of their ‘seemingly excessive
mobility in the public sphere’. 709 Their mingling with male artistes creates an impression
that they were ‘sexually available’ for other men. This was beyond the concept of
‘femininity’ and selective access of women in the public sphere of Manipuri society which
was carried by both male and female members of the common population. S. Tondon
Devi’s words are evident enough for the situation during those years of 1930s and 40s.

In the beginning when I would go for rehearsals, people on the street would be very
insulting and call me names, accuse me of working nights with men. In those days
actresses found it very hard to get married. Even then, I didn’t give a damn.... At that time,
women could not wear shoes for fear of arousing adverse comments from the people, so I
would carry my shoes wrapped up in a bundle, and while returning at night I would put
them on, as in the dark I couldn’t be barefoot. They were difficult times...I had to face so
much criticism and slander. Even my family came in for the same. 710

It was not the case that womenfolk as a whole were agitated by such moral
principles; rather they would accept the concept of femininity as they had been culturally
programmed in this mould of patriarchy. It does not mean that they were just blank slates
on which men wrote their whims and fancies. They still maintained the sense of agency as
they willingly carried out the gender roles. This was also evident in Bengal when
bhadramahilas were willingly involved in creating a ‘new’ woman in nineteenth century.

As in Manipur and Bengal, stigmatization of women artistes seems to be present in

708 Ethel St. Clair Grimwood. op. cit. pp. 54-5.
709 Lata Singh. op. cit.
710 Anjum Katyal. op. cit. p.187.
all the societies some time or the other. The sanitization of the stigmatized identity might come earlier in some and might not come at all in some societies. In ancient Rome acting as such was considered as a despised profession. ‘Actors were, for the most part, slaves trained and supported to add prestige to their wealthy masters or to be hired out to the state or to other individuals as a total acting unit.’ They were ‘as a whole classed as infami’. One interesting part was that ‘some of the more fascinating female mimes and pantomimists became the mistresses of prominent men’ despite their being in low class.

Like in Jatra of Bengal, Tamasha of Maharashtra has been considered as a low-brow theatrical genre. The artistes are mainly from the lower castes such as Mahars and Mangs. Women performers are the main attraction of this form. They already carry a ‘discredited’ identity since they are outcast. ‘Most Tamasha women are unmarried, except for those who play straight dramatic roles. The dancer (known as Nautchi) lives freely with the drummer or the hero or the villain-anyone she chooses-and may bear many illegitimate children.’ (Italics mine) Since the time when women roles were played by boys there have been erotic contents in Tamasha. Such tradition was also carried forward by these women performers. Balwant Gargi writes,

The very fact that the Tamasha woman is an outcast gives her freedom. She is not one of the audience. She is outside the pale of social morality, and the audience has pushed her to it. Everyone thinks her vulgar and low. She must hit back and be the image they have made of her, show how really vulgar she can be. She shocks the most outspoken rascal in the audience by her remarks. She is the free spirit, a dressed-up nude who brings to light the gestures and words lurking in the heated subconscious of the repressed onlooker.

The actresses in the special drama of Tamil Nadu give us a case where there is tussle between women’s place in domestic domains and outside it in the public spaces. Special drama being already a ‘stigmatized’ performance form is a reason enough for the actresses to be stigmatized also. Susan Seizer writes,

Stage actresses are women stigmatized precisely for being too public, and for moving out into the world beyond the bounds of proper, modest feminine behavior. They have long been the paradigm of illegitimately public female bodies. Not having properly internalized

---

712 Ibid.
714 Ibid.
the gender constraints that should have blocked their road, that should have kept them indoors (or it least working in and for the maintenance of the domestic sphere), they are the very definition of the “bad” public woman. Unlike the chaste loyalty of the good wife who reveals herself to only one man, an actress’s profession requires that she willingly expose herself to the gaze of many unfamiliar men, brazenly stepping out into the limelight.\textsuperscript{715}

7. Nupi Shumang Lila, a Feminist Theatre?

It is not easy to out-rightly label Nupi Shumang Lila as a feminist theatre if we try and combine its historical contexts, forms and contents, and the experiential aspects of the artistes with the concepts of feminism as understood through its multiple variants of discourses. Before we go to this issue let me try to analyse the history and contemporary debates revolving around the concept of feminism in both India and West.

Feminism as a political movement originally started in Western Europe. The word was first used in 17th century with the rise of liberal and humanist ideals of Lock and Rousseau which later triggered the French Revolution and American Declaration of independence.\textsuperscript{716} Today it is characterized by a ‘maze of discourses’.\textsuperscript{717} ‘The definition thus can and does change because feminism is based on historically and culturally concrete realities and levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions.’\textsuperscript{718} However, it can be broadly defined as ‘both the belief that women should be treated equally to men as well as a political movement that works to gain rights and privileges for women. Feminism attempts to explain and eradicate the domination, oppression, and subordination of women.’\textsuperscript{719}

In the western context feminism has come across three forms of waves. The first wave started in 1800s and continued till early 1900s when the main focus was on the right to vote for women or suffrage, and access to birth control. This wave was triggered by the question: ‘And what about the women? In other words, where are the women in any


\textsuperscript{18} Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan. op. cit.


304
situation being investigated? If they are not present, why? If they are present, what exactly are they doing? How do they contribute to it? What does it mean to them?\textsuperscript{720} These are descriptive questions which underlines the women's different situations from that of men. This calls for the description of the social world. This wave was dominated by liberal feminist thinking. The second wave arose, after a long lull, in 1960s when the focus was on the political and identity aspects of women's domination. This arose with an explanatory question of 'Why then is all this as it is?'\textsuperscript{721} This requires an explanation of the social world. Radical feminist dominated this new wave and what most people think of "feminism" today was a product of this wave. The third wave opened up a new perspective in the feminist discourse and movement. It started in 1990s when the differences amongst women were highlighted. It was an effect of the third basic question 'And what about the differences among women?'\textsuperscript{722} This third wave, nevertheless, coexists in time and space with the second wave. It 'looks critically at the tendency of work done in the 1960s and 1970s to use generalized, monolithic concept of woman as a generic category in stratification and focuses instead on the factual and theoretical implications of differences among women.'\textsuperscript{723} It started amongst the black feminist scholars and activists who saw black women as minority within minority, in terms of race, class, and patriarchal system.

Feminism has, in its historical development, given emphases on theories of difference, of inequality and of oppression. Under the theories of gender difference, there are such strands as cultural feminism which is concerned with promoting the values of women's difference from men such as cooperation, caring, pacifism and non-violence in the settlement of conflicts. This theorization which gave more positive energy to the feminine personality came in response to the attempts of denigrating women as inferior and subservient. On the other hand, there have been theories on the origin of the difference between men and women on the grounds of biology starting from the Old Testament to Freud to some contemporary scholars. Another is social-psychological explanations which 'look at the ways that deep structures in the culture-fundamental typifications and language-are so gendered that people find themselves unable not to think gender, not to do

\textsuperscript{721} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{722} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{723} Ibid. p. 332.
The gender inequality approach stresses that women in society are not only different but are treated unequally in terms of ‘material resources, social status, power, and opportunities for self-actualization’ than men. But feminisms which adhere to this line of argument also argue and work for change of these systems. One of its strands is liberal feminism whose focus is on gaining equality in the public sphere, such as under the law, in politics, and in the economy. Liberal feminists, however, do not challenge the conventional role of women as primary caretakers in the private sphere. Another strand is Marxian feminism which combines Marxian class analysis and feminist social protest. Women, according to this perspective, suffer inequality in both capitalist system and patriarchy. This means both capitalism and patriarchy need to be abolished for the women to gain equality with men.

Theories of gender oppression give emphases on ‘a direct power relationship between men and women in which men have fundamental and concrete interests in controlling, using, subjugating, and oppressing women—that is, in the practice of domination.’ One very forceful strand is radical feminism. It is based on two emotionally charged central beliefs: (1) that women are of absolute positive value as women, a belief asserted against what they claim to be universal devaluing of women; and (2) that women are everywhere oppressed-violently oppressed-by the system of patriarchy. Their approach is to regard ‘personal as political’ and in this process introduced gender identity politics. Radical feminism has its roots to Simone de Beauvoir’s work The Second Sex. She raised her voice against the accepted generalization of humanity itself. For her, ‘humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being…. And she is simply what man decrees, thus she is called “the sex”, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being…. He is the subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.’ She also claims that women ‘have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing.

---

724 Ibid. p. 313.
725 Ibid. 314
727 Ibid. 326.
728 Joseph M. Palmisano (ed.). op. cit. p. 231.
730 Ibid. p. 16.
they have only received. 731 She asserts that women's 'subordinated' condition is because they do not form part of 'the contingent or incidental nature of historical facts.' It has been a natural condition for women to be subordinated. She says, 'A condition brought about at a certain time can be abolished at some other time.... But it might seem that a natural condition is beyond the possibility of change.' For her the problem lies with women who are not able imbibe their subjective attitude as 'We'. This, however, is due to the lack of organization amongst them. 732

All these strands of feminism still have their followings across the world. In fact their number has increased with their influence in non-western societies including India. These contemporary feminist discourses have been given a time to introspect with the coming of the third wave. The obvious dynamics of differences within women, who constitute almost half of the global population, which had been consciously sidelined by mainstream feminists, has been voiced by this wave. This has to be taken care of by the already existing strands of feminism if they really desire the equality of men and women and to establish a humanity where differences are respected not subordinated.

In support of this wave, there have been attempts to deconstruct the modernist way of thinking in feminism. One such attempt is to combine feminism with postmodernism. Many questions are raised. What is the female body? What is it for, for whom? 733 These bring in the question of redefining the boundaries of feminism. This boundary becomes changeable and is a state of becoming rather than being. This is because 'postmodern subject is a subject in process, organized by a will to know and desire to speak.' The possibility of many voices and many subjects within feminism is iterated by Judith Butler when she asks such questions as: Who is not spoken to in feminism? Who was the 'subject' of feminism, but is no more? How has feminism opened itself out to many female subjects and yet still engages with only a few? 734 She underlines that the old centrality of mother as one of the stable subjects of feminist discourse has changed and with it feminism also changes. She tries to see the possibility of developing 'post-feminism'. In this process she brings in postmodernist notion of subject where she claims that 'postmodernism does not mean that we have to do away with the subject but rather we ask after the process of its

731 Ibid. p. 19.
732 Ibid. p. 18-19.
construction.' And also ‘feminist postmodernism does not eliminate the subject or the self but finds it in operation as a series of bit parts in the concrete field of social relations. Politics must therefore imply subjectivities in process, interacting and debating.'

One prominent development in the contemporary feminist discourse is the questioning of the hitherto unquestioned categories of sex and gender. Butler explores the possibility of turning what we have been thinking as biological and given, i.e. sex, into a socially constructed category. She writes,

If gender is the social significance that sex assumes within a given culture ... then what, if anything, is left of “sex” once it has assumed its social character as gender? ... If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties but, rather, is replaced by the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption, and gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces “sex,” the mark of its full substantiation into gender or what, from a materialist point of view, might constitute a full desubstantiation.

Sex has thus been left only as the foundation from which gender can emerge. This also assumes that sex is a matter which is ‘irreducible’. But Butler questions this very assumption, ‘how and why “materiality” has become a sign of irreducibility, that is, how is it that the materiality of sex is understood as that which only bears cultural constructions and, therefore, cannot be a construction?’ She brings in the power angle in this terrain of selective construction. For her ‘what is at stake is less a theory of cultural construction than a consideration of the scenography and topography of construction. This scenography is orchestrated by and as a matrix of power that remains disarticulated if we presume constructedness and materiality as necessarily oppositional notions.’

The above brief account tries to visit the feminist discourses in the West. These theoretical engagements seem, despite all their sincerity, to give an impression that social science, in general, and feminism, in particular, are trying to be ahead of society.

---

735 Ibid. p. 69 & 70.
738 Ibid.
theoretical developments instead are trying to direct society rather than the other way
around. For instance, the rapid changes in theories do not match up with the changes taking
place in the society. Before there is no deconstruction of the sex/gender binary in the
experiential social world, there has already been deconstruction of the same in theoretical
terrain. May be this will be passé in a few years or months. Nevertheless, the experiences
in other societies give different sites of engagement. And India is one.

It has been a long drawn debate, since the 1970s, in India whether the concept of
feminism can be applied in Indian societies at all, given its western origin and
characteristics. Many in India who are working for the cause of women refrain from
calling themselves feminists. Culture specific arguments are to support this. Suma Chitnis
is of the view that ‘although the deprivation, exploitation and oppressions suffered by
women are almost identical in the two societies there are basic differences in the value
systems and historical circumstances in which they are pitched.’ She points out three
points which mark the differences between experiences of Indian and western feminists.
First is the average Indian women’s disapproval of feminist anger. Second is their ‘mixed
and confused reaction to the feminist emphasis on patriarchy and particularly on men as
the principal oppressors. The third is their relative inability to tune in to the demands for
equality and personal freedom.’

The rise of feminism in the West was triggered by ‘the hypocrisy of a culture that
accords centrality to the values of equality and individual freedom but nevertheless denies
equality to women.’ But such historical development did not take place in India. In fact,
Chitnis stresses, ‘the concept of equality, as a correlate of the concept of individual
freedom, is alien to Indian society.’ So Indian women did not have to suffer the indignities
European and American women have had to. This does not mean that Indian societies
confer a dignified status to women. It is just that women have been deeply meshed in
societal norms and ethos. India has its long history of movement against the social evils
against women. Surprisingly, at least to the West, these movements were led by men - Raja
Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, Malabari Phule,
Agarkar, Ranade Karve etc. But this approach of reform under the tutelage of colonial
masters did not bear much fruit and hence most of the reforms movements became

---

739 Suma Chitnis. op. cit. p. 8-9.
740 Ibid. p.10.
741 Ibid. p. 10-11.
enmeshed with the nationalist movement in the 20th century. However, women’s question was kept alive with Gandhi emphasizing on the equality for women. When independence came Indian women did not have to fight for equality and suffrage as they have already been included in the constitution. So is the dilemma amongst some whether to label Indian condition as feminism or not. Though Indian women have been granted the legal sanction to fight injustice against them there is inability and reluctance amongst them to take this course as social and cultural ethos overpower the legality. Taking the legal line means fighting against their own father, brother or husband, which is unthinkable amongst Indian women, except some, as both cultural and economic angle are involved. Moreover, not men always are the perpetrators of crime against women but also women are e.g. involvement of mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law in dowry deaths. It is here that the basic difference between Indian and Western contexts comes to light. In the Indian case, there is incongruence between political/legal and social/cultural. So instead of taking the course of confrontation Indian women settle down for compromise on the capacity live with contradictions and to balance conflicting alternatives which is taken as a positive way. However, the word ‘compromise’ rings an alarm bell in western context where it is construed as low self esteem on the part of the women.742

The differences of experiences between western and Indian women are reiterated by Madhu Kishwar also. Refusing herself to be called as feminist she counters feminism as laden with a proselytizing role. She reveals the patron and client relationship between some feminists in India and their sponsors in the West for the sake of grants and foreign visits. She refuses to be a ‘mindless prototype’ of the western feminist. Her ideas and activism focus on ‘ensuring social and political space to minority groups for the evolution of their identities’, in general and ‘women’s equality and freedom in all areas of life’, in particular.743

Mary E. John sees the above argumentations as one against homogenisation and essentialisation which are very much part of the postmodern thought of the West.744 Nevertheless, there is still, in them, the inability to come out of this mould. Talking of diversities in India also suffers from essentialisation when it fixes and freezes what is in a

742 Ibid. pp. 8-25.
744 Mary E. John. op. cit. pp. 52-66.
state of flux. John tries to find a way out of the binary of universalism and relativism. She writes, ‘I proposed an alternative view of theory as being structure in partial and composite ways, while also arguing for greater accountability towards the discrepancies and dilemmas of Third World locations.’

An attempt has been made to recast the definition of feminism in the South Asian context by feminists in the region. Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan articulate this accepted definition as ‘an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation.’ Their take on the claim that feminism is very western in origin and characteristics, is that neither parliamentary or presidential systems of government, nor capitalism, private ownership of land and absentee-landlordism, industrial revolution, Marxism, socialism were not born in South Asia. They see certain power dynamics in the attempt to cast feminism as western. For them it is very much a South Asian reality.

After this brief prelude over feminist discourses let me now turn to how feminism has entered into the terrain of theatre or how theatre became an effective medium to voice the feminist ideas. Feminist perspectives in theatre can be seen in two ways, one the participation and location of women artistes in theatre network and second is the content of plays. In the United Kingdom, the plays with feminist contents and women participation got a new life with abolition of censorship in 1968. This was also combined with the arrival of the new feminism in the late 1960s. It allowed the theatre to come out of ‘its bourgeois citadels - plays should not be done in theatre buildings - but taken to the people, where they lived and worked. It should address itself to the fabric of ordinary people’s lives and support their struggles.’ One such example was seen during opposition against the ‘Miss World’ contests in 1970 and 1971. ‘Street theatre, caricaturing the trappings of feminine appearance, and seeking to provoke questions about the economic base which underpinned mere “appearance”’ was part of this demonstration. Many all women theatre groups started coming up. Three of the most popular are the Women’s Theatre Group (WTG), Monstrous Regiment and Gay Sweatshop. They and others began to use

745 Ibid. p. 59-60.
748 Ibid. p. 77.
749 Ibid.
‘bold visual imagery … to satirize and question received notions of femininity and masculinity. Sexuality, make-up, fashion, the intimacies of private lives were dragged out from behind closed doors, taken into street theatre, and exaggerated into visual shock tactics.’\textsuperscript{750}

This development, notwithstanding, there has been absence of the representation of women’s theatre experiences in theatre histories. Spurred by this act of ignoring women’s contribution to theatre, there arose a movement to theorize a separate feminist history, influenced by poststructuralism.\textsuperscript{751} This influence of poststructuralism to feminist theatre theory is reiterated by Jill Dolan. There is a rise of a feminist performance theory which breaks away from the previously existent ones in the sense that it uses ‘poststructuralism to deconstruct both traditional, male-identified realism and alternative, woman-identified ritual drama and performance art for their belief in coherent, unified identities.’\textsuperscript{752}

History being not all about the past but about how past is seen through the lens of the present is shown when past plays and playwrights are looked through the lens of poststructuralism by feminists. Nowhere more intense feminist intervention is found than in the criticism of Shakespeare when he is labeled as ‘patriarchical bard’. ‘Shakespeare’s privileged texts had become an obligatory place to debate whether the bard was subtextually subversive or complicitous with patriarchial oppression.’\textsuperscript{753} Such content analysis keeping in mind the patriarchal system has also been done from the point of psychoanalysis. Postmodern feminists attack the traditional Western theatre of being only of two main genres, comic and tragic. They try to deconstruct the patriarchal content in the plays like \textit{Oedipus} and \textit{The taming of the Shrew} based on popular myths. In these two ‘we have the tragedy of the man who discovers his sexuality and the woman who learns to disavow her own in the very apprehension of a repressive patriarchal law. One scenario identifies civilization with male payment for his own sexuality; the other identifies it with

\textsuperscript{750} Ibid. p. 82.

312
male control over disordered female sexuality. Both not only record but promulgate the values of a repressive patriarchal culture.\textsuperscript{754}

Let me now explore the gender aspect in some Asian theatres. Cross-dressing, like in Shumang Lila, is one of the most prevalent phenomena in Asian theatres. Peking Opera is one of the most well-known theatre forms in which this phenomenon is pivotal. But in the 1930s there was a radical change when women entered and started acting the women roles. This happened side-by-side with cross-dressing. New change challenged the 'stereotypical notions of gender' which 'were encoded in China,' by cross-dressers. 'The resulting representation of gender freed women from the formalism invented by men and encoded in the performances of female impersonators.'\textsuperscript{755} There was increasing tendency to move towards realism.

Inspired by extraordinary impersonation of women in this theatre form Brecht tried to apply his theory of alienation. In case of women performing women roles 'gender was not alienated but embodied, setting in motion a system of signs that transgressed the social order. What was alienated was the convention of using female impersonation.'\textsuperscript{756} The difference in theatre theories in the West and the East is shown when Brecht sees this theatre form with his western eyes. He came in contradiction with the famous women impersonator Mei Lanfang (1894-1961). Carol Marine writes,

The four salient characteristics of traditional Chinese acting at the time of Mei were fluidity, plasticity, sculpturality, and conventionality. Conventionality, however, refers not only to form but also to \textit{xie yi}, which has no exact equivalent in English but which can be understood as "essence".... While Brecht was seeing "alienation," Mei was concerned with essence, specifically the four essences: life, movement, language, and decor (costumes, general setting). Mei's technique appeared to Brecht's Western eyes as form but was to Mei, at least in part, a transcendent kind of theatre refined from life into a higher plane of human movement, lyrical language, and theatrical visuality.\textsuperscript{757}

This approach of Brecht is a pointer to the hegemonic West trying to see the rest of the world as a blank space. This is applicable to gender studies also. The need to reverse

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{755} Carol Martin – Brecht, Feminism, and Chinese Theatre. In \textit{TDR}, Vol. 43, No. 4, German Brecht. European Readings. (Winter, 1999). p. 82. Available at http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=1054-2043%28199924%2943%3A4%3C77%3ABFACT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-J
\textsuperscript{756} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{757} Ibid. p. 78.
\end{footnotesize}
the trend is indicated by Martin,

Brecht's prominence in feminist theatre history and theory has obscured the complexities and contributions of Chinese women (and men) to 20th-century theatre practices. We have to be increasingly mindful of histories that are seemingly not our own.... Asian theatre has been theorized in ways that can no longer be ignored by Western feminist scholars. There is much more beyond Brecht's formulations of Chinese theatre. Chinese theatre and other Asian forms should be directly, rather than through the filter of Brecht's partial understanding.... As I see it the question is: What other aspects of Asian and Western theatre aesthetics and practices might serve feminist theatre practitioners in both parts of the world? 758

Case of Indian theatre is also similar to the western scenario in terms of women's participation in theatre in general. The absence of women playwrights in India even in the early years of second half of twentieth century, however, was not a reason for not having women as main character in the plays. However, women's issues have been addressed in different ways by male playwrights. Lakshmi Subramanyam is of the view that 'the image of women seen through the male gaze is contextualised within this discourse of modern Indian sensibility, and cannot be interpreted in any homogenized or essentialist way.' 759 Plays written by male playwrights are informed by their 'political, cultural and social contexts ... and their patriarchal biases.' According to Subramanyam, 'the voice of the woman playwrights in modern India is muffled'. However, 'woman practitioners have expressed no problems in finding texts, for most of them have reconstructed and adapted available or given texts, or worked in close collaboration with writers to create texts which articulate their ideology or prioritize their concerns.' 760 There is adaptation of the characters in folklore in the contemporary playwrights' works. One example is that of Shanta Gandhi who, in 1967, wrote, designed and directed a Gujarati play Jasma Odan. In this play the Sati ideal was represented in the 'dignity and strength of a down-to-earth working woman.' 761

One pioneering figure of women's movement in theatre, in 1960s, was Vijaya Mehta who started her own theatre group Rangayan. One difference in her was that she

760 Ibid. p. 22.
761 Ibid. p. 25.
never adopted ‘gender as a political stance. But she doesn’t forget, and doesn’t let you forget that she is a woman.’ She, however, was dictated by the choice of the audience despite her wish to select themes. For instance, in the play Savitri, the woman protagonist who was deserted by her lover for the sake of his wife had to die at the end of the play. This is an indication of ‘an audience that largely see women through the “historical male gaze”.’

During the 1950s and 60s, though women directors worked within the conventional theatrical system, they also departed from those accepted practices. In the 1970s and 80s women directors produced plays which were women centric. In the 1990s there arose a different language of theatre in the works of women directors and playwrights. Such can be seen the plays of Anuradha Kapur where she uses collaborative theatre which moves towards ‘more fluid boundaries with a non-single authorial tradition’. This new feminist language in Indian theatre does not ‘converge, where parts are not blended into one another and the play is episodic in nature’. In her plays women characters are presented as ‘inflected, glossed or layered’. Another important figure of this new language is Tripurari Sharma who experiments with a theatre where there is participation of the audience to convey the message of the play deeper.

The above review of feminist trends in India and outside will enable us to examine whether Nupi Shumang Lila can be termed as a feminist theatre or not. It is important to see if what has been defined as feminism is really present in a society like Manipuri society. Before we make a conclusion it is deemed crucial to make a distinction between ‘feminist theatre’ and ‘women’s theatre’. ‘In contemporary feminist theory in the West, feminist theatre has a political context while women’s theatre is seen in a more general context.’

Nupi Shumang Lila as such may not be a completely feminist theatre when it comes to the texts. As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter the launching of this genre was spearheaded by some male theatre personnel. This was an endeavour to bring in women performers in Shumang Lila. The exclusiveness of female membership was necessitated by the format of Shumang Lila itself as male Shumang Lila troupes are also constituted by males only. The launching of the genre may not be interpreted as feminist as it was not to challenge the male dominance in Shumang Lila by establishing a parallel form. Moreover

---

762 Ibid. p. 28.
763 Ibid. p. 33.
764 Ibid. p. 20.
it was not to represent women's issue and image as different from what male troupes have been doing but it was, as mentioned in other parts of this chapter, to rediscover the tradition of Moirang Kangleirol in theatre. The texts, till today, also are not politically feminist or women centred though it is an all women theatre form. The troupes are still trying to stick to the texts which are extracted from the oral tradition. Women who take the role of male characters try to project the Meitei masculinity in its utmost perfection. Even they have been taking training from male teachers on how to look like Khamba, Nongban, Chaoba etc. who are the main characters of Moirang Kangleirol. Even in historical and social plays the troupes try to carve out a general picture of Manipuri society, not specifically of the patriarchal system and the status of women.

It would be simplistic to negate their efforts as the one not concerned with the status of women in Manipuri society. The theatre form itself is a claim of their place in a male dominated theatre scenario and it makes their voice heard without being so outspoken or political. Their constant effort and survival is an indication that they are also accepted by a section of people though many stigmatize them. Given these indicators I would call Nupi Shumang Lila a 'women's theatre' rather than a 'feminist theatre'.

This is not to say that Manipuri society is not affected by various strands of feminism at all. If we try to interpret the past and even the present through the contemporary feminist perspectives it would not be unusual to find feminist elements in Manipuri society also. Manjusri Chaki-Sircar while studying whether Manipuri society has its own feminism or not writes,

the sex role ideology of Meitei society is very different from that of Hindu society, which promotes the patriarchal model of male supremacy. In the Manipur Valley, the process of sanskritization failed to work in the socio-economic and religious areas because of the vital presence of female power, which may be described as a kind of feminism. This can be recognized in women's individual and collective solidarity. Here feminism does not entail a sub-culture or anti-male attitude but as a moral support to the male, an integral part of the social system.765

Debates on feminism notwithstanding, what is of importance in case of Nupi Shumang Lila artistes is how they still survive with a 'spoiled identity' for so long. Their struggle and survival can be symbolically compared with the grandiose nature of the kings and queens whom they impersonate in their plays. This again is a manifestation of the collective power of Manipuri women.

765 Manjusri Chaki Sircar. op. cit. p. 10.