CHAPTER VI

NUPI SHABIS: A THEATRICAL AND SOCIAL ONTOLOGY OF ALTERNATE SEXUALITY
The world of theatre is also replete with the possibilities of inversion of gender and sexuality. The characterization in theatre, for some players, is the manifestation of their own sexuality and for others, is just manifestation of the attributes of the character, they essay. However, act of performing the inversed gender role in theatre creates its own sexuality, the \textit{performance sexuality}. In this vein the institution of Nupi Shabis (\textit{Male actresses}) of Shumang Lila of Manipur has been a constant force, which endeavours to cast and recast the real and ideal femininity, through imagery, of the Manipuri women in particular, and women in general.

Nupi Shabis are the performing male transvestites\footnote{The term ‘transvestite’ was invented by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld to address both the heterosexual and homosexual cross-dressing persons. This debate has been dealt with in Chapter I.} who can be regarded, without doubt, as the pivot of the Shumang Lila plays given the immense sway they command among the audiences. Their extraordinary impersonation of femininity through looks, gestures and various levels of embellishments like costumes and make-up, for decades, is reason enough for the sustenance of the essence of this theatre genre and also to subtly awaken people of peripheral sexualities to break free from social stigmas associated with them and also to reveal their hidden identity. Their artistry can be aptly described in these few lines – ‘Theatrical enjoyment lies in the fact that an able-bodied man is limping and squinting. The natural thing is not the natural thing on the stage. When a man acts as a woman it is art.’\footnote{Balwant Gargi, 1996 – \textit{Folk Theatre of India}. Washington: University of Washington Press. p. 22. Also see Wu Zuguang, Huang Zuolin and Mei Shaowu, 1981 – \textit{Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang: A Guide to China’s Traditional Theatre and the Art of Its Great Master}. Beijing: New World Press.} Another feminine side of Nupa Shumang Lila (male troupes) is the male singers singing in female voice in the Eshei Lila ensemble. However, this art of women impersonation is also a common feature in most of the traditional theatres including Asian ones such as the Onnagata of Japan, the Peking Opera, the Jatra of Bengal, the Nautanki of U.P., Punjab and Rajasthan etc.\footnote{Ibid.}

1. Evolution of Nupi Shabis

The term Nupi Shabi is a combination of the words \textit{Nupi} (female) and \textit{Shabi} (male impersonator). Grammatically both the terms are in feminine gender. In its true denotation it should be \textit{‘Nupi Shaba’} (female impersonator) rather than \textit{‘Shabi’} because of their being female impersonators. The term Nupi Shabi literally means the woman who impersonates feminine attributes. So, Nupi Shabi is a gendered body created for the purpose of the
theatre, supported by the cultural ontology of Manipuri society. In juxtaposition to this term Shumang Lila also has Nupa Shabis who are male impersonators in the all female Shumang Lila genre called Nupi Shumang Lila. So, the term Nupi Shabi seems inappropriate. But this term has been in use for them to give extra emphasis on their 'femininity' on the stage in particular and, later, in their personal sexuality in general. This is a term given by the people who are outside the theatrical organizational structure and who are the judges of their femininity on the stage and in the day-to-day experiences.

Societal exigencies played a vital role in excluding women from the secular theatre systems of Manipur. The advent of women impersonators in theatre has been dealt with Chapter 5. Though Stage Lila incorporated women artistes later, Shumang Lila remained as a unigendered theatre form. The reason for the exclusion of women artistes from Shumang Lila could be the social constraint. Being a touring theatre, Shumang Lila needed female artistes to mingle with their male counterparts day and night, which patriarchal Meitei society would not tolerate. Nupi Shabis, thus, were accepted by the audience, as Meitei society had already approved the tradition of transvestism through the institution of *Maibis* (priestesses in Laiharaoba).

2. Institution of Maibis and Transvestism

Functionally, there are two broad categories of Maibis. First one comprises of those who serve as the traditional midwives. The second one has manifold functions. "They are the priestesses invoking the *lais* (deities) and making offerings to them; mediums, receiving oracles from the *lais* and giving them out to the people; and as expert singers and dancers, they are the preservers of the oral religious traditions." These Maibis are the main functionaries of Laiharaoba ritualistic festivals along with their male counterparts called Maibas but they are given more prominence than the Maibas, as they are the vehicles of the lais of which the Laiharaobas are done. They are the Maibis who exercise trances.

Even men are possessed by female deities (lairembi) like Panthoibi. After the possession he becomes a Maibi who trains under an *Ima Maibi* (mother Maibi). The term Maibi which is a feminine gender is applicable to both male and female Maibis. So, Maibi is a bisexual but unigendered institution. In case of male Maibis they are known as *Nupa*

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769 See Chapter V.
770 As seen in Chapter V, women troupes came only in the 1970s.
*Maibi* (male *Maibi*) in order to differentiate them from their female counterparts. But Maibis of both sexes are addressed as *Ima* (mother). These male Maibis are cross-gendered who dress like female ones during performance. Their dresses traditionally are pure white but today, at least, the blouses are of different colours. They consist of *phanek* (sarong type dress), full-sleeved blouse and an additional waist-wrapper worn over the *phanek* till the level of the knees. Both the male and female Maibis apply modern day make-up materials and also adorn their hairs with flowers. The male ones also dance like the female ones with the entire feminine demeanour though some of them may look very much masculine.

Males becoming Maibis have their traces in Manipuri legends too. In the legend of Khamba-Thoibi, the legendary lovers of Moirang, Nongban, the antagonist playacted as becoming a Maibi being possessed by Thangjing deity.\(^{772}\) This was part of his conspiracy to kill Khamba, the hero, so that he could marry Thoibi, the heroine. In this certain event he delivered a doctored oracle that Thangjing deity wanted a ferocious bull, grazing at *Ikop Laipalshoi*, in the land of the *Khumans*, to be offered to him by Khamba and Khamba alone. Despite the danger involved with this venture Chingkhu Telheiba, the king dared not avoid ‘Maibi’ Nongban’s oracle and ordered Khamba to capture the bull and offer it to the Thangjing deity. He also promised that if he could accomplish the task he would be married to Thoibi. Such was the sanctity of the institution of Maibi.

There are three hierarchical divisions within the Maibi institution. They are mainly from three *salais* (clans) - *Mangang*, *Luwang* and *Khuman*. Mangang Maibis belong to the *Shanglen* division, which is at the top of the status ladder. Luwang Maibis are in the division of *Nongmai*, which is second in the hierarchy. Khuman Maibis are in the *Plntra* division, which is the lowest in the hierarchical ladder. They are possessed by their own respective deities. A Maibi has diverse relationships with her guardian deity. She is the servant and medium of her guardian deity. On the other hand she has a conjugal relationship with the deity. Once possessed by a deity, a Maibi maintains a strict sexual life (both for married and unmarried Maibis). The deity visits her in some particular nights of the month in the form of a horse or an elephant or even human beings. She feels the actual sensation of sexual intercourse in such occasions and her husband, if she is married, is prevented from sleeping with her in such nights. Sometimes she is visited by female deity and in this case also she feels the sensation but have lower intensity. This is an indication

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\(^{772}\) See Chapter V for details on Khamba-Thoibi legends.
of the existence of various sexualities in the Meitei society, apart from heterosexuality. All these happen in the subconscious realm but with a real sensation. This whole picture of the institution of Maibi serves as a parallel social ontology to the institution of Nupi Shabi.

There are certain similarities between the institution of Maibis and the institution of 'berdache' of Native North America. Both a male and female can be a berdache. The person moves into the other gendered role without changing his or her sex while resorting to cross-dressing. Some of them are endowed with spiritual powers. 'This cultural ontology is legitimized by social practices, such as an initiation, folklore, a variety of social attitudes, generally approving sexual attitudes.' They have been considered as a case of third gender. But people from societies, where there is strict sexual and gender dimorphism between male and female, masculine and feminine like, Spanish and Anglo-Americans see them as monsters, freaks of nature, demons, deviants, perverts, sinners, corrupters etc.

Another example is that of hijras who are considered to be a case of third sex and third gender. They have also been given cultural space in Indian society by dint of their association with Mother Goddess. Because of their possession of divine power, they 'engage in their traditional occupations of performing at the birth of a male child and at marriages and as servants of the goddess at her temple.' They have a unique place in society i.e. as 'a caste within society and renouncers outside it.' Despite being considered as intermediate between two widely practiced sexes (male and female) and genders (masculine and feminine), hijras dress like women. They want to be called as hijras only but they prefer to use feminine gendered names and pronouns.

In case of Maibis, though both male and female are members, they are only feminine in gender. The name Maibi itself is feminine as there is a separate masculine gendered institution of Maibas. So it may not be categorized as a case of third gender.

3. 'Psycho-socialization' of Nupi Shabis

Nupi Shabis are not regular transvestites but are ones by dint of their profession. There can be two reasons why they choose to be male actresses. First is the fascination of this unique characterization of sexuality through the art of transvestism. Second, their desires to

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774 Ibid. p. 65.
775 Serena Nanda - Hijras: An Alternative Sex and Gender Role in India. In ibid. p. 373.
uncover their already existing alternate sexuality, as they also possess certain feminine phenotypic features and body language. Socially, they come from all classes and ethnic groups of the Manipuri community, from rural and urban both. Once they join, it is the task of the directors to mould them in the forms they want. It is clearly reflected when Ojha Birjit Ngangom, a very accomplished director, narrates how he crafted R.K. Sanaton, a very ‘beautiful’ Nupi Shabi, in all the departments of feminine impersonation.

It is a hectic psycho-socialization process where there is moulding of their psychology through socialisation and training.\(^{776}\) This also involves, up to certain extent, de-socialization of male identity and also toning down of the excess feminine attributes, which some already have. It is also re-socialization into a gendered role (for many, at least for the purpose of stage performance) nearly similar to the total institution, which Goffman talks about.\(^{777}\) Yet this is not exactly the total institution in the sense that these actors are not completely barred from the social interaction with other members of the society. Through the existence of a separate space of their own, i.e. their offices cum living places, and a sub-culture, the actors are able to have a close interaction amongst themselves, which again helps the Nupi Shabis maintain their sexuality. This involves exploration of their alternate sexuality by other members of the troupe. When Nupi Shabis of the second category join troupes they carry with them those ‘excess’ feminine behaviour and feminine voices. Those who are from the cross-dressed dance troupe ‘Seven Sisters’ are good in dance as they have been performing but they lack in acting skills. So, within the Shumang Lila subculture, the senior members have a strict surveillance on their behaviour so that they can limit their excess femininity within a ‘decent’ boundary and can be authentic for performance.


The training revolves around both internal and external recasting of the self albeit temporarily (it may sometimes stick to their permanent social behaviours too). They are trained in voice modulation, feminine dressing, feminine gestures and dancing. This bears on their psychology. For getting the right female voice they are even made to practise remaining inside running water up to their necks. All this requires a lot of creativity, hard work and curiosity to observe the female behaviour of women in their day to day social as well as private spheres. This is because Shumang Lila also needs un-curtaining of private space in the public space i.e. before the audience. This squarely implies that mere having feminine attributes is not the only yardstick for being a Nupi Shabi. This is because this art form depends on the aesthetics of acting.

4. Sexuality of Nupi Shabis

The debate on sexuality is an ever-expanding engagement. To start with ‘human sexuality comprises a broad range of behavior and processes, including the physiological, psychological, social, cultural, political, philosophical, ethical, moral, theological, legal and spiritual or religious aspects of sex and human sexual behavior.’ The question of sexuality is ever present in human histories, though secretly dealt with in some societies in particular era or explicit in some societies.

Most of the human societies have strict code of dimorphism whether it is sexual (male and female), gender (masculine and feminine). This dyadic categorisation is expanded to include nature (biological) and culture, heterosexual and homosexual. In theoretical realm it takes the form of essentialism and constructionism. The above dichotomies have been related to each other in that, nature is to sex and to female; culture is to gender and to male. In European and American scholarship, since the 19th century, the dyadic categorisation of male and female have been stressed. The most influential figure is Darwin who categorically followed the reproductive paradigm of sex. Another

780 The question of dismantling of sex/gender categories has been dealt in Chapter V. For further discussion see Judith Roof – Is There Sex after Gender? Ungendering/ “The Unnameable”. In The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association, Vol. 35, No. 1. (Spring, 2002), pp. 50-67. Available at http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0742-5562%282000221%2935%3A1%3C50%3AITSAQU%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O
781 For a detail discussion on sexual dimorphism and third sex see Gilbert Herdt (ed.). op. cit. (Introduction).
important figure is Freud who was of the view that male and female constitute the fundamental structure of society and human development. This is despite his acceptance of the existence of hermaphroditism in human nature. He talks of deviations from the assumed normal sexuality. In this case he conceptualises 'sexual object' i.e the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds and 'sexual aim' i.e. the act towards which the instinct tends. When there is deviation in the 'normalness' of the first case he calls the phenomenon 'inversion' and in case of the second 'perversion'. But he rejects the idea of inversion being innate and acquired. In this connection he dismisses the theory of 'psychical hermaphroditism' (a man feeling that he is a woman) in the ground that the feminine mental traits can be changed. In this argument he is also trying to come to the phenomenon of 'bisexuality'.782

The historical evidences suggest that the strict adherence to ‘normal’ sexual orientation of a person to his/her opposite sex came, especially in Europe, in the latter part of the 19th century. This is evident from the fact that the term ‘homosexuality’ was coined around 1870 and ‘heterosexuality’ around 1890.783 There was a combination of sex with power beginning in the 17th century Europe as documented by Foucault.784 With the coming of the Age of Reason, there was censorship on matters related to sex. But in contrary to this, Foucault finds that there was ‘the multiplication of discourse concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself’.785 Apart from the existence of sexuality in the realm of discourse, there was also practice of power on the sexualities which were considered to be abnormal. There were persecutions of people engaged in homosexuality too. Foucault sees homosexual as a ‘species’.786 ‘The machinery of power that focused on this whole alien strain did not aim to suppress it, but rather to give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality ... established as a raison d’être and a natural order of disorder.’787

The phenomenon of homosexuality is an evidence of possibilities of various alternate sexualities other than the widely practiced heterosexuality. There has been confusion between homosexuality and inversion, in general understanding. Homosexuality

783 Gilbert Herdt (ed.), op. cit. p. 28.
785 Ibid. p.18.
786 Ibid. p. 43.
787 Ibid. pp. 43-44.
primarily refers to 'both sexual behavior and sexual attraction between people of the same
gender or to a sexual orientation. When describing a sexual orientation, it refers to
enduring sexual and romantic attraction toward others of the same sex, but does not
necessarily involve sexual behavior.' On the other hand inversion 'implies nothing about
the sex of the partner; it refers to a reversal of the commonly expected gender-role of the
individual.'

Homosexuality is not a new phenomenon, though the term is a 19th century
invention. In ancient Greece, men used to engage in sex with young feminine boys. It was
a culturally sanctioned practice which did not question the masculinity of the men involved
but was a sign of virility. But the reaction to the homosexuals varies in different
societies depending on their cultural contexts. In most of the societies masculine members
of male homosexual community may not have visible signs of their sexuality but the
feminine ones are the main targets of discourse. In this line the effeminate homosexuals are
the ones who take into cross-dressing. This way there is a kind of hierarchy between the
two in which the masculine ones claim to be superior or vice versa. The tolerance of a
society towards homosexuals is measured by how it treats its transvestite homosexuals.

The reason why I engage in homosexual discourse in this section is its relevance
among Nupi Shabis. Meitei society has a rigid sex/gender dimorphism. It is also not
unusual to find sexualities apart from heterosexuality in its history and mythology. But, to
categorise all Nupi Shabis of Shumang Lila as 'homosexuals', would be erroneous. This is
because they can be categorized as mentioned above into two groups. The difference
between the two is that the first category limits their feminine sexuality within the space of
performance and the second carry it both in their inner and outer sense of existence. The
indicators I employ to qualify the second category as people having alternate sexuality
('homosexuals') are 1) their visible phenotypic feminine characters, body language, voice
and their preference for feminine dresses and professions, 2) their engagement in man-to-
man sexual relationships.

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788 Homosexuality. In http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality. Also see Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet
Cambridge University Press.


790 Amo Karlen, 1971 – Sexuality and Homosexuality: The Complete Account of Male and Female Sexual
Revision).
For the first category the performing space is the only front stage as far as the feminine sexuality is concerned and their masculine sexuality occupies rest of their public and private domains when the performance is over. Though there is difficulty of temporary possession by the character they recover from it after the process of ‘cooling down’. On the other hand, the second category conceives a very thin boundary between the ‘performance sexuality’ and their personal sexuality. For them both the spaces are ‘front stages’ (though they do not excessively cross-dress in the day-to-day public domain) in terms of their sexual preference and their backstage is constituted by the private relationships they practise with their male counterparts. Their engagement in ‘homosexuality’ is known to the subculture of the Shumang Lila actors, in particular and a considerable number of outsiders, in general.

It attracts people’s attention if something ‘peculiar’ and ‘different’ is happening. So, this chapter will reflect more on the sexuality of the Nupi Shabis of the second category not completely ignoring that of the first one. It is learned that this trend of man-to-man sexual relationship within Shumang Lila is a recent phenomenon, which is around a decade old. Before this there was none of such cases but all the Nupi Shabis were of the first category only. One example from the earlier era is the sixty nine year old Kangujam Achoubi Singh who is better known as ‘Kaminisana Shabi’. Though he still has feminine attributes in terms of appearance, voice and gestures he is a father of seven children (two sons and five daughters). Today the proportion of the second category constitutes around thirty percent, with one or two such Nupi Shabis in every troupe. This has something to do with the recruitment of artistes having this alternate sexuality from the wider society when the commercialization has augmented the competitive zeal among the troupes.

Looking into the subculture of Shumang Lila unfolds its dynamics, here the sexual one. One leading actor of the Sanaleipak Nachom Artistes Association has a story to tell from ‘within’. When he joined the troupe he thought that Nupi Shabis were only acting as females in the plays but males in their day-to-day lives. But that impression changed when he intermingled with some of them day in and day out within the close life of the Shumang

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791 ‘Cooling down’ is the process of returning of the artistes to the ordinary world after performance. It is the effort of a performer to evade from the character he essays and to re-instate his self. He does this by changing dress, drinking water or cold drink, smoking, talking to his friends and engaging in anything, which happens, in ordinary life. Sometimes it is harder to come out of the character than to get into it. For instance, in Bali, there are rituals for cooling down including sprinkling with holy water, inhalation of incense, massage, and even sacrifice of animals and blood sprinkling.
Lila subculture. He opines that these Nupi Shabis of the second category act just like any woman or girl – ‘their talkative nature, making faces when bothered, female gait and seductive looks at their male counterparts etc’. He believes that they have transformed into this mould psychologically. Their femininity is stretched to such an extent that when he touches them they react as if a girl would react to a boy in such situation. The depth of the relationship with their lovers is such that the latter even keep on waiting till late at night (1 or 2 am.) for them to come back after the night shows of the troupe. Nevertheless he does not have good terms with the leading Nupi Shabi of his troupe due to ego clashes. It is just the contrast to their performance relationship where they are cast as star-crossed lovers. But that is a different time and space reference, the performative time and space. This is the world of theatre. When the performance is over they come back to their previous real selves and then relationships.

The second category of Nupi Shabis is effeminate male homosexuals (penetrated) rather than masculine (penetrating) ones. They have sexual partners both within and outside Shumang Lila troupes. They extract gratification from being ‘passed at’ and proposed by men who are bisexuals. They talk of their sexual adventures outside the Shumang Lila subculture, with their partners and even strangers, with great enthusiasm. Instead of regretting over such sexual encounters, they develop the feeling that they are now ‘women’ who are the ‘objects of desire’ for the men. They talk of handsome men and their physical attractiveness. At the same time they look at women, sometimes with envy and sometimes with admiration. It is a latent sign of competition between them and women. Also their mundane talk includes elements like how ‘beautiful’ some of their counterparts are and how they maintain their beauty. On the other hand, Nupi Shabis of the first category take the advantage of their being Nupi Shabis and have fun with the people who pass at them and reveal later that they are not the kind who indulge in homosexuality. This is the extension of their skill of impersonation to their normal lives. With the gaining of considerable social acceptance there is a transition in the social behaviour of the second category Nupi Shabis, today, from being ‘looked at’ to ‘looking’. In the relationships within the Lila troupes the masculine partners are bisexuals who have their own family and children. When they are at home they engage themselves with their family responsibilities, but when they are at their Lila offices they involve in their gay relationships. In Shumang Lila circle such a couple is addressed as ‘Ani Chatpi’ (going by two). This is because if
one is expelled from his troupe for his violation of rules or otherwise, he is automatically accompanied by his partner. One such example is when the second lead Nupi Shabi of the Meitei Leima Jatra cum Drama Association wanted to take the leading character of the play 'Border' he was denied. Unsatisfied and as a sign of revolt, he walked out of the troupe and he was subsequently followed by his partner. This hampers the smooth running of the troupe and its plays. So, troupes have to be cautious enough before taking such decisions.

There is also tough competition amongst Nupi Shabis. In order to attain near perfection in their feminine embodiment, both for performances and their own sexuality, some of them resort to consumption/injection of sex hormones (’dipopovera’) which augment the growth of their breasts and keep their skin younger and shining. This is also an endeavour on their part to be on the limelight as lead Nupi Shabis for a considerable longer time as the age of a lead Nupi Shabi is short, especially with the entrance of many young and ‘beautiful’ ones. With this desire to transform their male bodies into female ones anatomically in all parts of the body (except genitals), they already develop the desire to be culturally merged with the female category. They address themselves in such feminine gendered terms as ‘!bema’ (literally little girl but used in friendly ways among females) instead of its masculine opposite ‘Ibungo’. Instead of ‘Pakhang’ (bachelor) they prefer to use ‘Leishabi’ (maiden) when talking about themselves. Moreover, it is also their desire to be addressed in these terms by others. In addition to these the slang they use for themselves are of feminine gender. Uses of such words of exclamation as ‘haima’ used mainly by Meitei women are popular amongst themselves.

This facet of sexuality of Nupi Shabis is a manifest example of how Meitei society also has people of various sexualities. People of such sexual orientations are normally known as ‘nupa marak nupi marak’ (neither male nor female but between them). If we read between the words carefully we can find out that they are defined from the angle of either male or female sex and gender which is the clear indication of Meitei society’s adherence to the male/female dyad. The instances of the existence of such people are also documented in legends. In the Khoyon haoba–Yaithing konu Shaiyon, the fifth among the nine Shaiyons (incarnations) of Moirang Kangleirol, a character by name of Kege Nongban Sharaba was believed to be ‘nupani nupini shaknайдaba’ (person having no exact sexual
identity of either male or female)\textsuperscript{792} who had a feminine face and voice and dressed like a man. However his accomplishment in archery and blessing of Thangjing deity enabled him to defeat and kill a Khuman hero by name of Khuman Kaoba Hingamba Nongyai Suja. Two better known cases of sexual liminality in the near past are those of Momonlaba, a Bamon (Brahman) of Wangkhei area and Lamangdong Janaki of Bishnupur area. The former lived a cross-gendered life with transvestism in both public and private spheres, though he did not change the sex. He was happier being addressed as ‘Bamon Ibema’ (Ibema, a term of address to girls or females) rather than ‘Bamon Ibungo’ (Ibungo, a term opposite of Ibema). Janaki lived as both man and woman, dressing in both male and female dresses in the public sphere. Both of them fitted well into both male and female social worlds as they were treated as female (because of their gender) by their female friends and male (because of their sex) by the male friends. From these earlier instances it is clear that Meitei society has been tolerant towards such people. However, the sexual norms exercised by the heterosexual hegemony push aside other sexualities to the periphery.

Similar cases of transvestism are also found in other societies. To mention a few, in the United States cross-dressers are addressed with such terms as queen, drag queen, transvestite and female impersonator.\textsuperscript{793} They also showcase their identity in the formal way in the form of ‘drag ball’ whose central event is the beauty contest with the participants donning feminine dresses, high heels, elaborate hair-do, feminine make-up and formal accessories etc. In USA, the treatment by the wider society towards them is negative. They are generally a despised group subjected to considerable violence by the general public and treated by police as a dangerous and criminal class. The case is similar in Britain too. But the attitude is changing thanks to the strong and proactive gay movement in America through the exhaustive use of media. Their projection of themselves as harmless to the society, as victims and as natural as any normal people (‘they were born gay’) makes the general public rethink over the whole structure of gender and sexuality.

Unlike in USA the general public in Latin America has always been tolerant towards the transvestites. The police do not regard them as threat to the society. The treatment to them is similar to the one bestowed to the prostitutes. They are neither revered


nor despised but the general public sees them with indifference. In Guatemala, the effeminate homosexuals are called 'locas' while the masculine ones 'machos'. In Brazil, the 'travesti' is the term for the transvestites. The popular travestis are respected and have high social status. The drag queen performances are also quite popular and are enjoyed by the people in these Latin American countries.794

The tolerant attitude is also the case in the Philippines.795 They enjoy more personal freedom and prestige than in either North or South America. Just the opposite of the case in USA, the transvestite homosexuals control the homosexual organizations in the Philippines where the masculine ones are not that forthcoming. 'Bayot' is the general term for all homosexuals or may imply transvestite homosexuality. 'Swards' are the middle class homosexuals and they sometimes address the lower class ones as bayots. This way there is certain class distinction between bayots and swards. But both can also be seen contesting in the same 'fashion show' (drag beauty contest). These shows are highly popular amongst the general public who is sympathetic and receptive to them. All these above examples show how different societies react to the transvestites. These treatments are in concomitance with the erotic traditions or sexual cultures of particular societies.796

5. Performance Sexuality

Shumang Lila serves as a platform for both the category of Nupi Shabis to explore their artistic acumen and sexuality. It unfolds an unlimited possibility of female roles which they have the discretion to choose from. Especially for the second category Nupi Shabis, this is the manifestation of their latent desires to be 'real' women. The difference between Shumang Lila and Laiharaoba, though both approve transvestism, is that the latter gives a limited choice of roles, i.e. the role of priestess or dancers. Moreover becoming male Maibis involves formal ritualistic procedures i.e. they have to be possessed and subsequently initiated to the role of Maibis. Shumang Lila is an open house if somebody has the creativity and physique. So, Male Maibis, if they desire, can be part of Shumang

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794 Ibid. pp. 73-76.
795 Ibid. pp. 76-80.

330
Lila but not all Nupi Shabis can become Male Maibis. However, both of them share a gendered role and sexuality during performances which can be called ‘performance sexuality’.

Broadly speaking, in theatre, ‘performance sexuality’ is the sexuality of the ‘performed character’ (not the character in itself existing in the written form) independent of the sexuality of the performer. In case of Nupi Shabis, performance sexuality is the sexuality they possess while taking the roles of the female characters. This is peculiar because the character is female while vehicle of that character is male. In this case Nupi Shabis are females yet males. When the character takes him over, the Nupi Shabi is no longer a male but the character. This performance sexuality is real and is made real through the ‘transported’ feminine sexuality of that character. Nupi Shabis are transported back to their own ‘selves’ and sexualities when the performance is over. It does not matter whether the Nupi Shabi is of the first or the second category when they are performing. Only thing which matters is the character. When they are outside those characters they are themselves and no longer ‘live’ them, though sometimes they may be known by those characters amongst the audiences. This ‘performance sexuality’ exists only and only in the theatrical world during performance. The character per se is female and permanent but the performer is male and the performance is temporary.

6. Imagery of Manipuri Women

Through ‘performance sexuality’ Nupi Shabis have been casting and recasting the images (both real and ideal) of Manipuri womanhood, which includes both good and evil attributes, in particular and the womanhood in general. This is a kind of feminism advocated solely by male, though in some of the initial plays women artistes only took the role of female characters. Here the type of feminism they disseminate is the one, which upholds the womanhood, and not necessarily the one, which is against men-folk (this alternative is not ruled out too as the ‘negative character’ may be in contestation with the male members). This arrangement of male spreading feminism may sound little peculiar and contradictory given the patriarchal social system of the Meitei society. But then artistes have a responsibility to play out the reality and also give an alternative as part of theatre. It does not matter whether they personally endorse the message and practise it. They are just vehicles of the characters and the choice to be or not to be is wholly their
personal discretion. This is like Shah Rukh Khan advertising for Pepsi. It does not matter whether he likes Pepsi or he drinks Coke in his personal life.

The type of feminism by male artistes, which constructs the imagery of a positive ideal typical Meitei woman (which is also taken in letter and spirit by womenfolk), is also an attempt to consolidate men’s authority in the patriarchal society so that women are kept within their traditional mould of womanhood and the status-quo is kept intact. This theatrical feminism also enables the female characters, representing the Manipuri women, to project their repressed desires of the real world. But then, the world of theatre is a different world, altogether, where impossibility is made possible. If Nupi Shabis project the soft, sober, submissive and tolerant images of Manipuri women then they are also the mediums of the shrewd, bold and enterprising ones. If they are affectionate mothers they are also the proverbial wicked stepmothers. If they are traditional maidens then they are also westernized ones both in terms of action and thinking. With the broadening of the thematic boundary, today Nupi Shabis have also started embodying the female characters of other societies, both Indian and Western.

Here Let us try to witness the changing nature of Manipuri women for decades through the artistry of Nupi Shabis. For the study, I will be concentrating more on the period when the plays with written scripts are in current. However, selective plays from the earlier eras will be taken up for their emphasis on the women issues.

The period between the two World Wars was mainly dominated by Historical/mythological plays known as Pauranic plays. They were heavily laced with messages of high moral issues for women i.e. how to be an ideal and chaste woman as Manipuri society was very much immersed in the religious tenets of Gauriya sect of Vaisnavism. In Harischandra, the first play with various rasas (sentiments), based on the extremely truthful and kind mythological Indian king of the same name, the women protagonist Seivya, the queen, was shown as chaste, tolerant wife and a loving mother. The king gave away her along with their son, Rohisatva to a Brahman from Kashi to keep his promise. Both the mother and son were tortured by the Brahman with all the ill treatments befitting for slaves. Still she tolerated all these, thinking that the destiny wanted it that

797 The play was the brainchild of Aribam Amubi Sharma and Laienjam Chaoba Singh. Though the female roles were done by women only, this play is considered for its striking impact on the role of women in Manipuri society. This is also because this play is very much in the Shumang Lila structure. The narration of the story of the play has been done in Chapter 1. See Arambam Samarendra – Shumang Lilagi Hourakphum amasung Makhatana Chatharakpa Ma-ong (The origin of Shumang Lila and its later developments). p.7.
way. In the whole play she remained devoted to her husband and finally they met at a crematorium where their dead son was brought for the final rite. Though the content of the play was foreign, it was contextualized in the Manipuri social milieu.

The next important play was *Seita charit*. This play showed a mother's unconditional love for her children and how she could defend them even in the gravest of problems. In this play, the female protagonist is a mother and the male, an honest son. One day, while he was sitting under a banyan tree beside the road, a dog with a large sack in its mouth came panting and suddenly dropped it on the road when it was frightened by him. He picked it up and found that it was full of money and jewellery. He brought it to his mother who became overwhelmed by the jackpot. Bracing up her intellect after a stint of numbness, she came up with an idea to hide the sack. She spread a large sum of *kabok* (dry fried rice) on her courtyard and called her son loudly, 'Lo! there is rain of *kabok* on our courtyard'. The son was also perturbed by her mother's sudden act. After some days a group robbers were searching for the sack and finally came to their home to enquire about the same. Knowing the past record of honesty of the son they first asked him if he had ever come across that sack. The son promptly told them that he found a sack and had given it to his mother but did not know what was inside it. When asked, the mother told that a sack was given to her on the day when there was the rain of *kabok*. The gang was driven to their wits' end as to when the peculiar rain came. Unable to decipher the information, they left. This jackpot anyhow saved them from their poverty. This was an example of how a wise mother could save a son without compromising on his honesty.

One of the most popular plays of this era was *Moirang Parba* which is the dramatisation of the legends of Khamba and Thoibi. Thoibi is the ultimate ideal of any Meitei woman. The imagery of her beauty, courage, devotion to her love, sacrifice etc. created a lasting impact on the viewers. On the other hand, Khammu, the sister of Khamba is the sign of tolerance while the curly haired Toro, the sister of Nongban, the antagonist, a sign of aesthetically lacking woman. So, it was a play laden with ideal types, both of beauty and ugliness of being a Meitei woman.

The first scripted play *Puya (Puran) Meithaba* (1950) was important from the 'feminist' perspective for its depiction of the high-handedness and abuse of authority by

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798 This has been dealt with in detail in the Chapter V.
799 Also see Chapter II.
the king Garibniwaz or Pamheiba (1709-1751) against a commoner woman by the name of Thambal. He was besotted with her beauty who was already married to Irom Chaoba. He ordered all the women, married and unmarried both, to assemble at his palace so that he could select and marry Thambal as his queen. But she did not obey his order and did not turn up as she was already pregnant. In the night of that particular day, he and his soldiers came to her home and asked her to be his. Being a chaste woman who was not lured by the luxury of being queen, she defied his order. After much verbal hot exchange between the king’s party and her ailing husband, the latter rose to fight with his sword and was killed in the act. She was then taken to the palace and made Pamheiba’s queen. This play showcased the blatant use of the king’s power against his subjects and the denigration of a woman’s dignity, that too of a married one.

With the growing popularity of ‘social plays’, troupes started performing many women-centric plays. One very significant play of this era was Mani Mamou\(^{800}\) (mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) (1958) of G.C. Tongbra, one of the pioneers of modern Manipuri literature, and performed by Heingang Party. This showcased the tussle between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law as binary opposites who were in competition to get more attention, both emotional and financial, from the male protagonist who was both a son and a husband. In between he was caught. It was a sincere effort to bring forth the family turmoil prevalent in most of the households and give a plausible suggestion as to how to run a peaceful family. Kangujam Achoubi (better known as Kaminisana shabi) took the role of the mother-in-law and Binod (better known as Jagat Singh Daku), the son, Maniratan. The play was so popular and its effect so immediate that people started inviting the troupe to perform in the localities where such family problem was prevalent. One day a Bamon (Brahman) man praised Binod and his play as shida hidak (life saving medicine) and told him that since the play was seen by both his wife and daughter-in-law they had stopped fighting.

In 1961 the play Fifty Thousand\(^{801}\) came. It was a landmark in terms of its magnanimity in addressing how woman could control her man with her cleverness. It was also a landmark for the institution of Nupi Shabis because of the exemplary performance of the female protagonist played by Achoubi. This play was an effort to highlight the

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\(^{800}\) Gathered from Kangujam Achoubi and M. Binod of the then Heingang Party, which was later known by the names of Mani Mamou Party or 50,000 Party.

\(^{801}\) Gathered from Kangujam Achoubi, who is known for his characterisation of wicked women.
polygyny and its disturbances in the peaceful running of a family. The proverbial stepmother was shown in her full blown form which was (still is) also the social reality. This play had a rich man, who was married to three wives with many children. He deposited a sum of Rs. 50,000 in the bank for his posterior utility. Though he had three wives and many children to look after, he rarely cared for the first two wives and their children. He was in the tune of Kaminisana, the third wife, who was a bitterly wicked woman and who thought only and only of her son and his future. She ill-treated other wives and their children. She was always instigating her husband to spend on her and their son only. She pressurized him to make her son the heir of that Rs. 50,000. This created a bitter family feud from which the manipulative Kaminisana came out victorious.

The response to this wicked character was so huge and venomous that Achoubi had to face many public wraths. It was the starting point of his magnificent tenure as Nupi Shabi as he began to be known as Kaminisana Shabi (impersonator of Kaminisana) since then. The frequencies of performance in nook and corner of Manipur valley also rose under popular demand. Because of its sway, someone created a rumour that the play would be banned by the government. This again augmented the curiosity of the public and the performances, during both day and night, also became quite frequent. The character entrenched so deeply in the psyche of the public that old women in the localities hurled abuses and sometimes hit Achoubi with their cheishu (walking sticks). One woman from the Singjamei side (in the present day West Imphal District) was so shocked by this play as the story was almost same with her own family problem as she was also a stepmother. She took it personally and held Achoubi responsible for disclosing her story to the public and spat on him right on the road while he was walking. Not only this, a rich thikadar (contractor) from Sagolband side (in West Imphal District) offered price to buy him and kill saying ‘leiraga hatlage’ (I will buy you and kill you).

Family plays continued to occupy most of the 1960s too. In the mid of 60s, just after Fifty Thousand, came the play Aoonpot (loosely translated as dowry) written by Ramcharan. That was the reflection of the rising trend of giving more aoonpot in Meitei society in which the family of the bride was in the receiving end. It was more so because of the question of status attached to this practice, which impoverished the already poor.

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802 This was also performed by Heingang Party which began to be known as North Imphal Jatra Mandal after its formal registration in 1963. An extract of the play, which was of half an hour duration, was recorded for AIR, Guwahati, for the Manipuri knowing audiences.
parents of the daughters. This play also addressed the cultural division between lawai (village dwellers) and Imphal (city dwellers). In this play also Achoubi continued to essay his trademark character of the wicked woman. He took the role of a selfish and over-interfering mother-in-law who tortured her daughter-in-law who was from lawai and whom she ill-treated for being a lawai woman lacking in the etiquettes of city life. At the same time she abused her for not bringing sufficient a-oonpot and demanded more. She kept her son in her grip.

One significant play which tried to re-emphasise the ideal Meitei woman was Meitei Chanu (Meitei woman) (1965) of G.C. Tongbra. Like most of the plays it was also a dynamics between good and evil ideal typical women. Jugeshor played the role of Cheitei, an outlaw or goonda, the main antagonist who resided at Barumi ching, a mountain in the east of Imphal. This residential arrangement is an indication of the spatial segregation of people who are not within the social norms, though their space of operation is the society itself. The character was so ruthless that he could do whatever he wished to. Because of his exemplary performance Jugeshor began to be known only as Cheitei Shaba (impersonator of Cheitei). He had a pampered sister who insisted him of marrying her off to the hero by any means. But the latter was already a married man with a very devoted and dignified wife. Despite this, Cheitei forcefully caught the hero and married his sister to him as she wanted. The imagery of a tolerant and ideal typically chaste Meitei woman was itched when the first wife did not object to her husband and remained ever loyal to him and being never bitter to the second wife. So, the title Meitei Chanu was given to her.

Plays of 1970s also inherited the sensitivity shown to women issues. Abir Khan, one of the legendary Shumang Lila plays, came in 1971 and went on till around 1973. But the popularity of the play spearheaded by its theme and dialogues are still remembered and reproduced in both later plays and the day-to-day parlances of the people. This play addressed the inter-ethnic dynamics among Meiteis, Chingmis (Hill people) and Pangals.
The women characters, Helena (a hill woman), Amina and her mother (Pangal women) served as the mediums through which the harmony was brought among the warring male characters, Abung (hill man and brother of Helena), Bir Singh (a Meitei) and Abir Khan (a Pangal man and brother of Amina). The play shows Helena as a strong and courageous sister who wanted to avenge the death of her would-be sister-in-law in the hands of Abir Khan. This again heated up the resolve of Abung to embark on the mission. But finally when Helena and Abir Khan (who was in search of Abung who ‘killed’ his mother) met, she came to know the truth that the latter killed the woman mistaking her as a deer, drinking water in a water source. They instantly fell in love. When Abung was convinced by Helena of Abir Khan’s innocence, he got her married to Abir. This was an indication of the encouragement of the inter-ethnic group marriage. On the other hand, Abir Khan’s mother was an epitome of a mother who loved and regarded both Bir Singh and Abir Khan as her own sons. But she was killed with the bullets of men sent by Abung who wanted to kill Abir Khan to avenge the death of his fiancée. Still she gave her last words to both Bir and Abir to remain ever as brothers. Amina is an embodiment of rebellion against the societal norms which disallowed intermarriage between Meiteis and Pangals. She and Bir Singh are lovers. She swore by her love and withstood the barrier created by her brother. When Bir gave in to the social pressure she rose and confronted Abir. In this whole journey she was courageously backed by Helena, now Abir’s wife. But the play did not show the two getting married and instead left an open ended space for the society to look into the issues provoked.

One significant woman-centric family play of this era was Mamashabi (1972). For a change of image Achoubi took the roles of two good women, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law respectively. The title role was that of the well educated daughter-in-law and the wife of the eldest son. She took the full responsibility to keep the divided brothers in peaceful relationship by disciplining them after the untimely death of her mother-in-law. She acted as a hard working ‘mother’ of the family and filled up the void created by the death. This was a message of how a woman should maintain the heart and hearth of a family with her tactfulness of upholding the responsibility of being the woman head of the family.

806 See Introduction for details on these groups.
This phase also ushered in political plays due to the intensification of insurgency in the state. They also took into account of the pangs of women in this imbroglio when the militarisation of the public space started. The brute force of the state armed forces used against the women was mirrored in the play *Halakhidraba* (the one who never came back) of 1975-76. It was a play based on the rape of a girl called Charui Rose of Ukhrul by BSF personnel in 1974 and her subsequent suicide. Because of this inflammable theme government banned this play. But this served as a catalyst for its popularity and people's demand for performances increased manifold. To hide from the eyes of the authority it was performed with a new name, *Aroiba Khongchat* (the last journey). This was again banned with the intimidation of the BSF personnel. The play was an eye-opener for the people, which multiplied the contempt against the blatant atrocities committed by the armed force against the womenfolk.

The later half of 1970s saw the entrance of a new genre, Eshei Lila. This created a need for Nupi Shabis to be good dancers too along with their acting acumen. This augmented the plays with romantic themes as the lovers found a new way to express their feelings. So, Nupi Shabis had to give an extra touch in the beautification of their body as the song and dance session is in a level different from the normal day-to-day mode of interaction. This was a reflection of the increasing influence of Hindi films on the lives of the women, in particular and masses of Manipur, in general. For Manipuri women looking up to the ‘heroines’ as reference points of aesthetics, both in terms of physical appearance and attires, became a visible sign. Nevertheless, there was, side by side, the increasing contempt against the Indian Army curtailing their freedom. This contradiction was the expression of the difference between the ideal and the real.

The swinging 70s’ representation in Shumang Lila was consolidated by the play *Ee-gi Nong* (rain of blood) (1978-79) of Chana Lukhoi. Along with the main theme of tug of war between the defenders and opponents of the insurgency movement, it also addressed the cultural distance between Meiteis and hill people. A Bamon (Brahman) man married a hill girl. For this, both of them were exterminated from his family. But another Bamon man, who was also a policeman, defended the marriage and tried to salvage the harmony between the two religiously and culturally different people.

The family drama dominated the 1980s also and considerable number of plays based on ‘what a daughter-in-law ought to be’ came. This phase was a period when the
conflict between ‘modernity’ and tradition was manifested publicly (both in behaviour and dressing sense) in Meitei society too with the influence of the Western and Hindi culture, disseminated mainly by Bollywood films. The play Mou Ahum\(^{807}\) (three daughters-in-law) (1980) was again an idealisation of a harmonious family whose maintenance depended on the women members. When his parents passed away, the eldest brother worked hard to give dignified lives to his two younger brothers. But this hope was shattered when they got married to ‘modern’ women who were selfish and kept their husbands under their control. So the joint family crumbled. But the eldest daughter-in-law worked hard to bring the divided family into one roof and succeeded too. In this play the idea of individualism was reflected in a traditional society where collective value was upheld.

1981 again saw such women-centric plays as Imou Ibema\(^{808}\) (my daughter-in-law). There was a comparison between two types of women in this play. One was a city-bred government employed woman (Radha) who knew the etiquettes of city life, both in terms of dressing and establishing connections with people in the power. Here, city was shown as the centre of ‘modernity’. The other (Ibemhal) was from village, representing tradition. She was the carrier of the traditional values of how to respect and serve elders. But both of them were the daughters-in-law of the same family. Finally Ibemhal won the hearts of her in-laws and also made Radha a good friend of hers shedding all the prejudices of one’s place of origin.

The breaking down of the traditional mould of woman as soft, sober, disciplined, tolerant, and chaste was highlighted in the play Keinadan (gifting of the bride) (1981). Pratima was a pampered daughter of a wealthy man, Gopalsana whose wife had already died. She was projected as a fragile and flirtatious woman who had lust for a number of men. But she was tamed by Rupa who took the role of her brother and married her off to her previous lover Dr. Rocky, a tribal man. The play Adhamora\(^{809}\) (half dead) (1981) highlighted how some men were in the clutch of their wives at the cost of family’s peaceful coexistence. So, these men are metaphorically labeled as Adhamora.

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\(^{807}\) This play was a ‘Dialogue Lila’ having no playback singing and background music. It was performed by Bir Tikendrajit Artistes Union, scripted by Kh. Brojendro Singh and directed by W. Babu Singh. Brochure of All Manipur Shumang Lila Festival, 1980. Manipur State Kala Akademi, Imphal.

\(^{808}\) A Dialogue Lila, performed by People’s Yatra Association, Imphal, scripted by L. Rajendra and directed by Takhelambam Chaoba Singh. Brochure of All Manipur Shumang Lila Festival, 1981. Manipur State Kala Akademi, Imphal.

\(^{809}\) Performed by the Young Yatra cum Drama Association, scripted by B.J.C. Sharma and directed by B. Manichandra Sharma. Ibid.
“Nangdaniko Imounupi” (the only daughter-in-law) (1986) showcased a well educated (M.A.) government employed daughter-in-law (Ganga) managing both the family and her job perfectly in sync. Her husband was not that educated and preferred to play the second fiddle to his wife and to do the domestic chores and baby-sitting while she was away at office. But she knew what an ideal daughter-in-law had to do i.e. maintain the hearts and hearth of the family, despite her hectic schedule. So, her song went like this. ‘...Phisu sujage chaksu thongjage ibungo machasu loujage...’ (let me wash the clothes, cook and take care of our son). This was seen as a harmonious blend of modernity and tradition.

1989 saw the play “Leishabigi Machado” (that son of the maiden) which tried to project ‘mother’ as the metaphor of the earth in whose lap people (her children) play. So, mother is the pivotal figure of a family and the society. If family breaks down the society is also affected. If a society is to run peacefully the role of mother is crucial. Mother as the one who could spark off a battle and again stop it was the main theme. Battles could be manifold, battles of unemployment, a-oonpot (dowry), ethnic differences etc. Mother was to play a Himalayan role to repress such battles.

“Lady Killer” (1989) questioned a society in which women were taken as objects who could be exploited for a man’s urge and killed and dumped. This was just in contrast to how parents saw their daughters. They wanted them to be the bearers of good fortune like Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. But when their daughters were ill-treated by men they did not know whom to complain but they had to suffer in loneliness. The person who was the lady killer in the play was a metaphor of the bad characters in the society.

1990s was ushered in with a bang when “Ee-gi Mahao” (taste of blood) (1991) swept the valley like a wave. It was one of the most popular plays of the modern day Shumang Lila history, with its blending of entertainment and strong social message. It was

811 A Dialogue Lila, performed by the North Imphal Manipur Yatra Mandal, scripted by Chana Lukhoi and directed by M.Binod. Brochure of All Manipur Shumang Lila Festival, 1989. Manipur State Kala Akademi. Imphal.
812 An Eshei Lila play, performed by Dhrubatara Artistes Union, scripted by Rupachandra Ghosh, and directed by Tomba Sharma. Ibid.
on the growing social irresponsibility exercised by the people in the power against the ordinary citizens. In this game women became pawns and objects of desire. Ranjit and Rita were son and daughter, respectively, of a minister. They lived their lives to the fullest enjoying the borrowed power of their father. Ranjit had romantic liaison with Radharani, a beautiful girl of a humble family. Ranjit went outside Manipur for his study. When he came back he found Radharani pregnant but denied that it was his child. Unable to pursue her claim she surrendered herself to her destiny and gave birth to a baby girl. In the meantime, Ranjit became a police officer. One day, he told Prakash, his friend, to bring Radharani and her daughter to his place. When they were there some hot exchange erupted and Ranjit shot Radharani dead. Prakash begged to spare the life of the baby. Prakash brought her up like his own daughter. Public rose up against the minister to book the killer and the minister handed over the charge to investigate the case to Ranjit, his son. Since he was the killer Ranjit kept on prolonging the case. In the meantime, Ramesh, the brother of slain Radharani, kidnapped Rita to avenge the death of his sister so that the minister might come out with the truth and punish the culprit. At the end the minister booked his son as the killer and incarcerated him.

1992 saw 23rd Century, a play which was based on a prognosis of the grim future of Manipur. It was a question on the changing dynamics of identity politics where the Manipuris would not be having a say in their own affairs in their land when the land, commerce and politics were dominated by outsiders. In such juncture, people have to be searching for their own existence not much concerned about the politics. So, Thambal, a Meitei woman had to sacrifice her love, a condition her lover also endorsed, for the sake of the survival and marry a Punjabi (Sardarji) who became Chief Minister of the state. But her sympathy towards her lover and own people was still intact though she was helpless since she could not turn back the time and enliven the rule by the native people. On the other hand, Lukhoi (played by Sougrakpam Hemantakumar Singh, also known as Ojha Tolhan) was married to Bhavini (played by R.K. Sanaton Singh), a Punjabi woman who ill-treated him like a servant. She was projected as a woman antagonist who was the binary opposite of the ideal typical Meitei woman. The play showed the ethnic difference in terms of culture, language, food habit etc.

Keisamthong Thoibi, one of the most wholesome plays of the recent times in terms of its massage and entertainment came in 1997. It was a play which addressed the existential crisis of the identity dynamics in Manipur between hills and valley. The valley is symbolic of purity while the hill pollution. Among the Meiteis also Bamons (Brahmin) comprise the ultimate group who upholds the essence of purity. It was in this context that Thoibi, a maiden of Kamei Sagei (Kamei lineage) of Keisamthong Kabui (a hill community) village, was chosen as the medium through which the love and peace between communities both in the hills and the valley were brought. In this play the definition of religion was given not in terms of one’s parochial belief system but in terms of the universal love and humanity which are present in each and every religion. Two women characters, Thoibi and her mother-in-law Manjuri (played by Sorokhaibam Robindro Singh) were the epitomes of womanhood. Gopalji was a fanatic Meitei Bamon who had devoted his life in the observance of the stringiest rules of purity and pollution. But his son, Prameshor was pole apart as he did whatever was restricted for a Bamon i.e. he was drunkard, meat eater and above all falling in love with Thoibi. When she married Prameshor, she was rejected forthrightly by his father. The latter did not eat anything she prepared. But on the other hand, her mother-in-law was a strong wall of support, who even was ready to live separately, though in the same house, with her daughter-in-law and her son to uphold the humanity and live beyond the petty wall of religious separation. She advised Thoibi to always keep up the essence of womanhood i.e. smiling, tolerant, chaste, and ladylike and bear the pangs given by her adversaries so that the latter one day would surrender to her qualities. Thoibi did exactly this as she was in the cool comfort of the unconditional love and affection of her mother-in-law. When Gopalji was treated badly by his younger son and his ‘modern’ Bamon daughter-in-law, he realized the futility of sticking to the obscurantist mindset. He was finally conquered by the innocent Thoibi and the religion of love. The difference between hill and valley communities on the petty grounds of culture and religion was dismantled and the fact that they were of the same origin was emphasized by Thoibi of Keisamthong.

Eshei Lila play, performed by Naharol Khongthang Artistes Association, scripted by Chana Lukhoi, and directed by Bitjit Ngangomba. It was first produced, in slightly different form, in 1992 in the All Manipur Shumang Lila Festival, performed by Panthoibi Yatra cum Drama Association. Dr. Rajen Toijamba (Ed). 1998, Ningshing Chephong: Commemoration of Shumang Lila Veterans and 350th runs of Keisamthong Thoibi. Imphal: published by Narendra Ningomba. pp. 16, 33. Also taken out from a recorded video version of the play.
Ingagi Purnima (full moon of Inga, a month which falls in May/June) (1997) continued to carry the baggage of the decades old emphasis on the idealness of Manipuri women, despite the long journey Shumang Lila has traversed. It was a romantic comedy which captured the traditional ontology of love and romance between maidens and bachelors of Manipuri society. It showed how the carefree lives of maidens in their parental homes transformed into responsible women when they got married. It was a vivid address of the increasing trend of involvement of parents in the match-making in Manipuri society. This was in contrary to a tradition where boys and girls court each other and choose their partners for marriage. Radha (played by R.K. Sanaton Singh), a beautiful village lass, loved Chaoba, also a village lad. But their love took a drastic turn when Dr. Sarat came from Imphal as the doctor of the village hospital. He fell for Radha and endeared his parents to ask for her hand from her father Tomal. The latter, despite knowing the relationship between Chaoba and Radha, assented to the proposition seeing the status and wealth of Sarat. Chaoba being a principled man sacrificed his love to keep Tomal’s words. The bird which caught within the net was Radha. She was dead against the marriage and at the same time her lover was not ready to break the constraints against their love. The trauma a woman feels at the face of patriarchal dictates was seen threadbare in this character. But after marriage she committed herself to her husband as she kept the ‘suti dharma’ and worshipped her husband like ‘ishwar’ (deity), burying her past. In spite of her devotion she was the target of suspicion of her husband because of her past. She has to undergo many tests to prove that she was true and chaste.

The 21st century marks the considerable broadening of the horizon of the themes of Shumang Lila plays. Plays with international themes are making their efforts to educate and entertain the Manipuri audiences. Some of the woman centric plays of the new millennium are Memsaheb-ki Saree (memsaheb’s saree) (2001), (a romantic comedy which is located partly in Manipur and partly in Pakistani Kashmir during Kargil war); Eetinphamda Samba! (fence in the rendezvous) (2002) (based on a woman head of a family again reassures the importance of woman in the smooth running of a family); 21st Century-gi Kunti (Kunti of the 21st Century) (2003) (a high drama of modernity and tradition; present and past temporality; insiders and outsiders, all based on women who are

816 Eshei Lila play, performed by Sanaleiap Nachom Artistes, scripted by Ibomcha Langpoklakpam, and directed by Birjit Ngangom. The audio cassette came out in 1998.
the repository of societal norms and antiquity); *Lidice-gi Gulap* (rose of Lidice) (2004) etc.\(^{817}\)

Through this century long journey of Shumang Lila, Nupi Shabis have been bestowing their inimitable styles in the imagery of Manipuri women in particular and women in general. Though they are the carriers of the women characters, there is also a latent endeavour to consolidate the patriarchal control through these characterizations as seen in some of the plays studied. Because of their success in drawing imageries, women in Manipur sometimes look up to them for tips on how to be more ‘womanly’. Though they are ideal women impersonators, sometimes they themselves suffer from the syndrome of ‘over-womanly’, with their extra body language and make-up.

### 7. Stages of Possession

There are two kinds of performance, one in which there is ‘transformation’ of the statuses of the performers and other in which there is only ‘transportation’. The ‘transformation’\(^{818}\) is the performance where the performers change their social statuses permanently. There is no coming back to the previous statuses. Such cases are that of the life cycle rituals like initiation, marriage, motherhood etc. On the other hand ‘transportation’ happens in those performances where the performers are ‘taken somewhere’ but at the end re-enter the ordinary life. In such situations, the performer starts from the ‘ordinary world’ and enters into the ‘performative world’ i.e., from one time/pace reference to another, from one personality reference to one or more others. It is the donning of another self or character. Acting, in most cases, is the art of temporary transformation. As the performer goes in, he also returns again to the ordinary life where he started, when the performance is over.

The transportation of the Nupi Shabis into female characters involves ‘selfisation’ of the characters through different accretions. It all starts with the make-up which is exclusively done by themselves without the help of any professional beauticians. The materials for the make-up too kept on changing since they started off. In the earlier era, Nupi Shabis used only *chandan* (sacred *tilaka* earth), *tiki* (small cakes made of charcoal dust used to kindle tobacco in the bowl of a *hooka*), ordinary powder, Zinc powder (used

\(^{817}\) See Chapter II for the detailed analysis of these plays.

by veterinary doctors) mixed with sindoor etc. But in the modern day Shumang Lila, all the advanced make-up materials are being used.

For the Nupi Shabis of the first category cross-dressing is a little uncomfortable and awkward feeling, which stings their inner consciousness when they started off. They are particularly careful about the fitting of their wigs, blouses, phaneks, sarees, bras etc. Meinam Nanda Singh, a Nupi Shabi, confides that in his first performance he had to bind the phanek tightly with a thread to prevent it from falling. In this whole process they also take help from their female friends and relatives. Oinam Arun, also a Nupi Shabi, had to borrow female dresses from his iteima (sister-in-law) and learn to dress up to have the closest perfection. Coupled with this, they have to be extra careful about their female voice, dialogues and gestures.

One major reason why Nupi Shabis look so feminine is because of the facial structure of the Meiteis who are within Mongoloid stock. This makes the possession of the character easier. This process of change starts with applying of the base make-up on the face and then other prominent colours on suitable parts of the face; blackening of the eyebrows; and the last stroke of lipstick transforms it into proper feminine face after which feminine sexuality also starts percolating to the inner sense of the Nupi Shabis. Next is the wearing of the wigs (some of them have their own naturally grown long hair) and then jewellery. The last stage of ‘feminization’ comes when he puts on the female dresses of the character viz. the inner garment with heavy padding for breasts, blouse, phanek, or any western costume (skirt, T-shirt, jeans, gowns etc.). Now he is not ‘he’ anymore but a ‘female soul in a male body’. The character has already possessed the Nupi Shabi when he delivers the lines and the audience has also forgotten the masculinity in him.

It would be interesting to see this process of possession by referring to the happenings in the dressing room for the play Ledece-gi Gulap, performed at Thoubal Ningombam, in Thoubal district (27th March, 2004). When the roofless dressing room (open ‘green room’) temporarily constructed with the colourful samiana (thick clothes supported by permanently attached poles), the bus of the troupe serving as one of the four walls, was ready in the midst of the big play ground, Naocha and Sanaton, the two Nupi Shabis started their beautification work earlier than the male characters. They unloaded

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820 In the earlier days wigs were made out of limon (jute strands) which were coloured black.
their suitcases from the bus and took out their wigs, make-up boxes and clothes. They
dangled the wigs on the side of the bus with the help of hairpins. They looked feminine in
their ordinary lives, with their long hairs, but their masculine side was revealed with hairs
on their backs, though they had clean shaven faces. They cared less for these ‘poor hairs’
as their backs would be covered by their long hair and dresses (gowns). This reminded me
of ‘impression management’ of Goffman.

They started their beautification work with, first of all, washing their faces. Taking
photographs at this stage, I thought, was essential to compare and contrast their faces and
bodies, before and after the possession. They started by applying the base powder, then
blackened their eyebrows and attached the artificial eyelashes to give wider and more
sensuous eyes. Then the entire faces were transformed with various ingredients. The
cheeks were made pinker; sides of the bridge of the nose were given light dark shades etc.
The facial work was completed with the careful strokes of blood-red lipsticks. Then the
wigs, which form the fringes of their already long hairs, were attached and coloured to give
authenticity to the roles they were essaying. When the head portions were done, it was the
turn of their torsos. When their colourful and long flowing gowns adorned them, they had
transformed (albeit temporarily) into Silky and Milky (the two characters) and no longer
remained as Sanaton and Naocha respectively. Then, I was not able to recall their real
faces and was even reluctant to see them as males. This change in my outlook also
happened in another occasion (2002) when I hesitantly asked, like a boy asks a girl,
Sanaton for a photograph with me. The whole beautification marked as a mask to hide
their male identity.

In this process of embellishment there is a close competition between the Nupi
Shabis of the troupe to outdo each other. Once the performance is over he tries to come
back to his normal self but with effort. It is also disbelief for a spectator when he sees a
Nupi Shabi peeling off all his make-up and clothes and start speaking in a masculine voice
after the show is over. There is a strange eroticism aroused amongst the heterosexual male
audiences. There is a certain dilemma in their minds whether to trust the femininity and
eroticism of the characters or the male bodies behind those characters. There are many
anecdotes connected to how audiences are dazed by Nupi Shabis. One such instance was
that once in Mumbai a wealthy lady asked the hand of R.K. Sanaton for her son after she
saw the breathtakingly beautiful actor, oblivious of the fact that ‘she’ was only ‘he’. Then
the woman had to console her eyes for seeing only the ‘signifier’ not the ‘signified’. It is a clear case of ‘owner’s pride, neighbour’s envy’.

One ingredient of the characterization is the eloquence in dance. Since Bollywood captured the hearts of the Manipuris, Hindi film dancing styles and music have already sneaked into modern Shumang Lila too. Though Bollywood film and music are banned in Manipur they still rule the roost as the exclusion is only the content (Hindi) not the form (style). So, the audiences and the self-style cultural police do not have any problem as long as Hindi is omitted from the entire project. In case of the dancing style too Nupi Shabis are still mesmerized by the Bollywood styles and regard Madhuri Dixit, Aishwarya Rai and Urmila as their inspirations.

8. Subculture of Nupi Shabis

Nupi Shabi today is a term, which encompasses all the effeminate males though it has been originally associated with the ‘male actresses’. As mentioned elsewhere, they had always been in existence in Manipuri society like in other societies though they mostly lived a hidden identity. They had been employing the service of ‘passing’ to identify oneself with other status or group to be identified as males so that they could be seen within the established heterosexual boundary. However, in recent years the visibility of the effeminate males or feminine homosexuals has increased considerably in the public spaces. They make their presence felt with some signs of transvestism such as a little Inaphi (stole) dangling on their shoulders, very basic make-up on their faces but with very explicit feminine gait. They are gradually gaining their power to assert their sexuality which they even flaunt. They are commonly addressed by people, mostly younger ones, as ‘Homo’ and are treated with amusement tinged with little cynicism.

‘One of the remarkable aspects of homosexual subcultures is the extent to which they resemble each other... despite the differing social and cultural contexts.’ Nupi Shabis have their own subculture and most of them come to know of each other despite the

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821 Passing is an act where those who are ‘passing’ seek to hide their sexuality and be defined as normatively male and masculine or female and feminine (or heterosexual, e.g.; not gay or lesbian), objectifying the very categories (male and female) that stand to their hidden being and desires. A concept used by Goffman in Erving Goffman, 1960 – *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: A Touchstone Book, Published by Simon & Schuster Inc. pp. 73-91. Also see Gilbert Herdt, (ed.). op. cit. p. 57-58.

822 Frederick L. Whitam and Robin M. Mathy, op.cit. p. 86. The presence of homosexuals in theatre is very widespread in United States of America, Brazil, Guatemala, Philippines etc. In America the musical theatre, where acting, singing and dancing are combined, is peopled with homosexuals. Apart from these they are involved in the writing, composition, directing, set design, and costume design.
They have closely knitted bond by being people who are at the periphery of the sexual structure. As part of their subculture they are into the professions which are traditionally regarded as those of women such as embellishment (designing of female clothes etc.), grooming (as beauticians for the brides in marriage ceremonies or for various beauty contests or in their own beauty parlours), entertainment (mostly dance) etc. Recently, ‘homo dance’ programmes are becoming a regular feature in various places in the valley. They dance mainly in the beats of modern music (Matamgi Eshei) of films and private albums. Apart from these, their group having a considerable number, now, has started traveling around organizing the traditional Thabal Chongba dances\(^{823}\) in many localities after taking permissions from the local people. One very popular gay dance group which came up recently is ‘Seven Sisters’ which entertains the audience comprising of both males and females.

There is an increase in the recruitment of such boys to Shumang Lila troupe. In each and every troupe there is at least one of them. Shumang Lila, today, serves as a platform for these people who have been living with a hidden identity. After joining they are trained to be fit for plays as theatre does not dwell only on dance. Some of them start maintaining a distance from their subculture after they become actors, as a sign of gaining a higher status since Lila is conceived to be more respectable than being only dancers. But there are others who are unable to snap their bond from their subculture despite the strict instructions given by troupe members.

There are, today, many beauty pageants organized solely for them such as ‘Miss Nupi Shabi Contest’, ‘Miss Manja Contest’ etc. which serve as a platform to showcase their creativity in adornment, dance, theatre (mainly dialogue delivery) etc. It is an outlet to pour out their hidden desires and also to show that their sexuality is different from the traditionally approved ones. It is also a movement so that they are accepted by the wider society as one of its subcultures. What is important is that these contests are conducted by some local organizations, which are not run by Nupi Shabis themselves. They are open to all ‘Nupi Shabis’ apart from the male actresses of Shumang Lila, though the crowd pullers and most of the winners are ‘male actresses’ of the second category (not all of them prefer to participate in such contests). Such contests and the dance programmes are a craze

\(^{823}\) A dance form, held during Yaoshang or Holi. Girls and boys dance hand in hand circumambulating around a ground in the beats of dhols.
among the younger generation though the older generation shun themselves from them. But it is also true that some of these programmes are disrupted and the participants and the audience driven away by the local elders who think that they are ‘unnatural’ and harbinger of bad times.

The questions which remain to be answered are – why is there an increase in the visibility of Nupi Shabis in the public spaces in recent times? Why does Manipuri society not react negatively? One possible answer to these questions might be that Manipuri society is, today, at a transitional stage due to the impact of various exogenous forces through various means of communication and knowledge dissemination such as films, television, internet, literatures etc. As facilitated by the cultural globalization, the Nupi Shabis, in general, have started gaining confidence and power to reveal their sexual identity following various homosexual movements around the world, today. This is coupled with the inspiration from the male actresses. So, forming an organized subculture is the first step. To their advantage is the tolerant tradition of Manipuri society to most of the emerging cultural traits be they exogenous or endogenous. The cultural history of Manipur is witness to this tolerance. As long as a movement starts with a lower intensity in the micro level it is able to get institutionalized after a certain time when the ‘other’ gets used to it. It is happening in case of this new trend of Nupi Shabis. So culture is a flux which denies being fixated in certain mould no matter how hard the proponents of purism try.

9. Society (Audiences) Talks Back

It is revealing to see the responses of the people to the questionnaires. Two questions, one related to Nupi Shabis in particular and another to the cross-gendered people (both male and female) in general are posed to them. The first consists of two parts. 1) How do you perceive Lila Nupi Shabis? 2) What do you feel when you interact with them personally? The second question is - Do you welcome man behaving like woman and woman behaving like man in Manipuri society? Reason? 70% of the respondents are from Imphal city and the remaining 30% from the rural areas. Male and female respondents share 50% each. The ages range from 20 to 50 years who represent the younger generation Manipuris. Most of them are exposed to modern education system, ranging from class X to

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824 The study was conducted in March-May, 2005. The respondents were from both Imphal and rural areas like Thinungei and Ngaikhong in Bishnupur district. The details of the study have been discussed in the previous chapters.
post graduation. The professions also range from student to self-employment, business, teaching, government service, home making, artistes to sports (football players).

The responses to the first questions are positive. Almost all look at Nupi Shabis as artistes and appreciate their extra creativity which makes them regard the latter as real women during performances. Some of them, even, are proud of them. Some take recourse to the destiny that the Nupi Shabis have been given feminine characters by god and there is nothing wrong in that. What is more significant is the development of sense of gender equality in Manipuri society as reflected in some of the responses. Some male respondents say that there are same rights for men and women and a man can take the role of a woman without any problem. Some even plead others to respect Nupi Shabis for their contribution to society. There is not much difference in the responses coming from the urban and rural respondents as the division is only at the level of geographical, not in the cultural location.

The second question provokes the respondents’ minds and there are myriad of responses both in affirmative and negative. The respondents are divided into the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ sides with around 60% and 40% in each side respectively. Some in the former, while accepting the phenomenon, give qualifications that the cross-gendered members are acceptable when they are within the ‘tolerance level’ of the societal norms. In this group, some also give the ‘scientific’ reason that there is presence of male hormones in female and vice-versa. Some take the biological or ‘godly’ explanation that nothing can be changed since these persons are born that way. Some accept them because they enable the art of transvestism survive in theatre.

The ‘No’ response is also divided. There are some who out-rightly reject this phenomenon because in Manipuri society there is clear-cut sex dyad of male and female. It is thought provoking to find some female respondents accepting male cross-gendered people while disapproving female ones. The reason given is that the female ones are wayward people who develop the habit for their enjoyment while the male ones are biological. In this vein, these respondents find that male ones are not problematic to the society and family while the female ones are. This whole response is an indication of the role differences in Manipuri society on the lines of gender. There is embedded indication of supremacy of the heterosexuality. Women still accept their traditional feminine roles which are not biased against male roles.
The above study reflects the two arguments prevalent in other parts of the world to explain the homosexuality – essentialist (biological) and constructivist (social/cultural). However, there is ample indication that the tolerance level towards the types of sexuality other than the traditionally approved heterosexuality is rising in Manipuri society.

10. Case Studies

In order to record the changing faces of Nupi Shabis, in terms of their acting prowess, characterisation, social standing and sexuality, it is pertinent to take account of both the old and new generation. So, Let us try to read the life history of two Nupi Shabis, one from the old and another from the new generation.

Kangujam Achoubi Singh (Kaminisana Shabi)

Achoubi was born in 1936 at Khongman Okram Chuthek in the outskirt of Imphal city. At present he lives at Khongman Bashikhong. He was educated till X Class. He was married at the age of around twenty five, twenty six which was considered very late by the Manipuri standard of that time, while his wife was nineteen. He has two sons and five daughters. The elder son has a scooter workshop and the younger is in photography, both of whom are not in his profession. All his daughters are married except the youngest one.

He was attracted to theatre, especially female impersonation, from the very tender age. His first exposure to it was in VII Class at Canchipur High School, when he took the role of Urirei, the supporting female character of Madhavi, the famous novel of Dr. Lamabam Kamal, one of the pioneers of the modern Manipuri literature. With this his enthusiasm grew up towards female impersonation though it was subdued for fear of objections from his family and locality. Initially he was quite intrigued by the art of Nupi Shabi – how they dressed up, behaved, spoke, etc. He studied them closely without others’ knowledge. Whenever he saw a Shumang Lila play his attention was solely on them, no matter how other characters did well or bad. He even ventured inside the dressing room and gingerly studied how they applied make-up, put on clothes and wigs etc. Then he was convinced that it was different from other male characters and more difficult too. Personally, he also possessed some feminine characteristics in terms of his face structure.

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825 The essentialist assumes that reality refers to the timeless condition of the body, its phylogeny and ontogeny, whereas the constructionist interprets reality as situated in social roles and lives, with knowledge and desire creating existence not in the abstract but in particular social surroundings’. Gilbert Herdt. op. cit. p. 52.

826 The interactions took place on the 22.04.2004 and 06.05.2004 at his residence at Khongman Bashikhong.
and body language which he thought was an advantage for him to take up this task, instead of the easier ones, which was a challenge for him.

When he failed to pass X Class examination, conducted during that time by Guwahati University, he was too embarrassed to venture out in the locality. One day, when he was playing badminton in the adjoining field, two Shumang Lila gurus Leishangthem Birahari and Laishram Khomdon Singh came to his home as they heard of his enthusiasm towards theatre. They requested his father for his induction to their troupe, but the latter gave them a strong volley of words that his son was still very young and also it was undignified for him to join Shumang Lila. Feeling upset the two went away only to return after some days but to be disappointed again. Seeing the stubbornness of his father, Achoubi secretly fled from his home and stayed at his gurus' homes and started his journey into the world of Shumang Lila. So, he had almost no time for interaction with local friends as he spent most of the time with his troupe members who made up a kind of sub-culture.

His first play was *Shyamjai Khurailakpa*, with the North Imphal Manipur Jatramandal in 1958, taking the character of Maring Chakha Lukhombi, a Maring tribal woman. This 'unusual' move infuriated his father, instigated by the local people who now thought that he was of no use, just wasting time. His father even beat him up and drove him away from home. People looked at him differently as he had become a 'woman'. His family insisted him to take up some government job to lead a dignified life. Despite all these harsh objections, he kept on moving with determination. This paid off finally as he also started earning and some of the money was handed over to his father. After seeing this development his father later commented, *'Maagisibu phagadouribra keino!'* (It seems he is going to be good). His father was finally pacified but his local people were relentless in criticising him.

Apart from acting, he started to learn the nuances of make-up, singing and dancing as the plays in those days had live singing of the *Khunung Eshei* (folk songs). He learnt Manipuri forms of dance like *Leishem Jagoi*, *Khamba-Thoibi jagoi* at Johnstone Higher Secondary School in Imphal. If the script demanded he also performed Naga dances.

He has acted in numerous plays of which some have been discussed in this chapter before. They include *Mani Mamou, Fifty Thousand, A-oopot, Poktabi sharei, Yong natte Mini, Mamashabi, Ningol (in series, part 2, 3), Charairongba, City Spy* etc. He was then
specialized in characterization of wicked women. After the character Kaminisana in the play *Fifty Thousand*, he began to be known by the audience as Kaminisana shabi. But he was quite adventurous and did not want to do only the female roles. So, he experimented with the male roles in *Ningol part 3* and *City Spy*. But he could not be digested in those roles by the audiences. So he had to stick to his old 'other self'. After working in the North Imphal Manipur Jatramandal for long, he started his own troupe, Panthoibi Jatramandal in 1972. In 1981 he joined *Ipom*, the comic genre of Shumang Lila and retired from active theatre.

On the question of psychology of being Nupi Shabi he confided that after acting as one for long his psychological orientation also started changing considerably. Though he did not cross-dress in the real life, he was attracted to the female clothing, in particular. For instance, whenever he was in the market he thought of buying female clothes and jewellery as he felt that they would be suitable for his plays. Nevertheless, his sexuality did not change. In the day-to-day life whenever he went out he was told by women that the particular ear ring he wore in that particular play was beautiful. They asked where they were available and even gave money to buy for them. Men also saw in him the character he essayed. Whenever he went for *Thabal Chongba* dance, men would comment that he was more wicked than their mothers-in-law or would-be mothers-in-law. On the phenomenon of male homosexuality in Shumang Lila in particular and in the society in general, he feels that they are not desirable but are possible too.

Being a touring theatre he had to travel far and wide in the Manipur valley and even outside. As means of traveling they used *ekagari* (bicycle). Even dates of the plays were fixed in such journeys when people happened to see them. They went to even Thanga and Karang, islets in the Loktak Lake, by boat. In the muddy and marshy areas they would dangle their bicycles on their shoulders and travel. If the place of performance was far away they used to spend the night there and come back in the next morning. Those were hard days but there was much money too though they charged only Rs. 60 per show. However he could not save much of them as he was young and free to enjoy his life.

His troupe was often invited to perform in Hojailanka, Cachar, Silchar, Karimganj and other Meitei inhabited places in Assam. Plays were quite popular among those Manipuris who asked them to perform in different localities for days. The locals also had emotional attachment with the visitors as they saw the mainland Manipuris as reference
group. Other than these places he also performed the Ipom Chingaiwa along with Chaoba and Babu, in Delhi on the 23rd October, 1989.

During his career he has been accorded with various awards. In 1982, he begged the best supporting actress in the All Manipur Shumang Lila Festival. In 1998, he was honoured by the Naharol Khongthang Artistes Association with the award of recognition. In 2001, he was bestowed the 6th Foundation Day Celebration (27th October) Award by APSARA (Apunba Porirei Seirol Rhythmic Academy). In 2003, he was honoured by the Manipur State Shumang Lila Council. Again in this year, he was given Film Taibang Award. In 2004, he was honoured with the newly instituted award, Thokchom Iboyaima Award for his life time contribution to this art form. Though, now, he has accomplished his innings of acting he is not taking his life as a static plank but transferring his legacy by training young Nupi Shabis. Best known among his disciples is the Keisamthong Thoibi fame Sorokhaibam Robindro Singh.

Before he signs off he wanted to give some suggestions for the healthy existence of his beloved art form. 1) The present trend of changing of troupes by the actors is a disgrace to the Shumang Lila as a whole. These days it seems money is ruling the minds of the actors. 2) To encourage the actors the government should start giving monetary support to them. This is because of their great contributions to the society and also in helping introduce Manipur to the outside world. 3) Pension system for the retired actors should be initiated by the government.

R.K. Sanaton

R.K. Sanaton was born in Bamon Leikai in Imphal and is thirty years of age. He is only IX Class passed. He joined Shumang Lila when he was only fifteen years old. He was trained under the guidance of Ojha Birjit Ngangom, one of the most accomplished Shumang Lila directors today. When he started off, there were objections from his family and was teased by others both for joining as Nupi Shabi and also for his feminine look and body language. But later on, he earned name and fame.

Today he is one of the most beautiful Nupi Shabis envied by his contemporaries. He has been with Kamakhya Sangeet Mandal which later became Sanaleipak Nachom Artistes. He is the lead Nupi Shabi of his troupe. He has extra interest in the traditional Laiharaoba dance and in order to improve his dance skill he underwent a two months’ dance training at Manipur Dance Akademi, Imphal. He has acted in many popular plays which were accorded the best

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827 See Chapter IV for details on transfer of artistes from one troupe to another.
828 From an interaction on 25th January, 2002. I was in constant touch with him as my field work in 2004 and 2005, was with his troupe Sanaleipak Nachom Artistes. So I also came to know of him from his troupe members in particular and other Shumang Lila artistes in general with whom I interacted.
play awards in the annual Shumang Lila Festivals. Some of the plays are *Ingagi Purnima*, *Imphalda amuk halakpada*, *Memsahebk Saree*, *Ningol Chakouba*, *Meigi Ching*, *World Trade Center*, *Develas*, *Ledice gi Gulap* etc. Through these plays he has been embodying the ideal type Meitei woman, on one hand and also women from other societies, on the other. He has also traveled to other states and cities like Kerala, Kolkata, Mumbai (2001), performing the commercially successful play *Memsaheb ki Saree*, organised by IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association). The anecdote of Mumbai has been narrated before in this chapter. His troupe also performed the play *Meigi ching* in 2002, as part of the annual Festival of NSD (National School of Drama), Delhi.

He has been accorded many best actress awards in the annual Shumang Lila festivals. Among them was for the play *Ingagi Purnima* (1997). Apart from acting he has interest in the grooming activities. He is in much demand for make-up of brides for the marriage ceremonies. As extension of his profession, he took part in the Miss Nupi Shabis Contest, 1999 and begged the title. In order to keep himself in the top rung, he constantly takes care of his body, face and skin, and even takes some medical help. This is because this profession considerably depends on the body.

Being very beautiful and sensuous in his plays and otherwise, there has been a lot of propositions from the sides of young men which he sometimes enjoys and is amused too. He is not comfortable talking about his personal life and has not thought about establishing a family yet. On the other hand, his contemporary Oinam Arun frankly talks about his girl friend who also supports his profession, and is thinking of marrying her. Members of Sanaton’s troupe who know him closely, confide his sexual preference and his relationship with one of his colleagues. As a person who lives in the present, he thinks of continuing his art as long as his face allows. Even if female artistes come into Shumang Lila ensemble, he is not worried and even ready to challenge them in this field where he is in his best.

Nupi Shabis are a reality today, who popularise the theatre movement in Manipur. They are also the ones, recently, who serve as an inspiration for the people with alternate sexuality to come forward and show their sexuality in public spheres. Now, it would be too late to reintroduce women into exclusively male Shumang Lila form, though the Manipuri society has reached a certain stage where substantial amount of liberty is given to the womenfolk. Some say ‘It simply will not get along with the audience.’ The audience has established a strong bond with them. Their theatrical presence or otherwise, has been etched in the psyche of the audience. So, this tradition needs to be sustained in order to retain the essence (peculiarity) of Shumang Lila and to distinguish it from other theatre genres like Stage Lila.