Chapter 6

Women's Poetry
In a country like India, the treatment of women has always been paradoxical. On the one hand she is eulogized as Shakti, Kali, Lakshmi, Saraswati, etc, dowry deaths and female infanticide mar that image and give a totally different picture of society. The recent census reveals the imbalanced sex ratio in India as there are only 933 females per 1000 males (2011 census, http://censusindia.gov.in/). Though of late, education has brought about the attitudinal and behavioral changes to some extent, a closer scrutiny reveals that women get exploited on the basis of sex or weaker gender. It is not to deny that in some parts of the country, women do enjoy equal status as men or are deemed to play a better role by virtue of matriarchal systems in place. Irrespective of assertions of equality, a subtle form of gender inequality tends to crop up as a big issue of discovery in any serious endeavour.

In Manipur, women have always remained active in the socio-political sphere of the state. Unlike in some other parts of India, women of Manipur have never stayed behind the veil but have crossed the threshold of their homes and have been active like their male counterparts. One good example is the Ima Market of Manipur, the only market in the world entirely run and controlled by women. The entire process of trade in this market is managed by women from all parts of Manipur. From selling vegetables to clothes, these women have achieved expertise in their trade. From early morning to late night, they manage the market and have done so for many years. Besides these women run their household too and when it comes to taking care of their family, they seem to play a larger and a more important role than the male members.

**Women as activists in the field of Manipuri Literature**

In the field of literature, the participation of Manipuri women is less as
compared to the male counterparts. One of the reasons can be that women writers ventured late in writing than the men. Manipuri women literature is hardly 50 years old. Many notable writers like L Kamal, Kh Chaoba have written about women and they have portrayed women as strong and independent main characters in their works. But the portrayal of women by women started as late as the 1960s. Irom Robindro Singh says,

...in the early days before the 1960s, women in Manipuri society were hardly allowed to have school education. Those women who were educated were generally considered as polluted. Due to this reason, elders did not send their daughters or female members to school. After the 60s, people gradually understood the importance of women’s education. Therefore, with the coming of a new vision, the seed was sown for the rise of women writers and poets. The real feminist literature in Manipur started with the coming of Jannaneta Hijam Irabot (1896-1951), G.C. Tongbra (1913-1996) and Memchoubi and others. (Language in India www.languageinindia.com, Vol. 13:7 July 2013)

Thus, from women characters portrayed by male writers, a new group of women writers started writing about women and their various roles in the society. Three women writers in particular have had a profound influence over the new generation of writers. They are Thoibi Devi (1920-96), Khaidem Pramodini (1928- ) and Maharaj Kumari Binodini (1922-2011). The three of them, as prose and fiction writers, have portrayed women in their work as independent, just and courageous. They have also explored the role of women in the society and have tried to voice the downtrodden women, inspiring them to stand up and fight against oppression. These writers have reflected the activist women's role in the society. It therefore, is imperative to understand the gender role in Manipuri society.
In Manipur, the gender role, specially that of a woman is constructed in the context of a culture specific framework. Manipuri culture has always projected women as possessing characteristics such as being independent, strong and motherly (from legendary and mythical female characters to queens remembered for their courage and independent nature, Thoibi, Panthoibi, Linthoingambi etc). Thus, the role given to women by society as 'meira-paibis' or 'torch bearers', 'nisha-band' signifies the essence of being a meitei woman that is courageous, fighting for justice, as the protector of the society. The same can be said of the term Bhartiya Nari that signifies the constructed (socially, culturally and even historically) essence of being a woman of India and the values attributed to this term.

The role of Manipuri women towards the society can be seen in two historical events namely the two nupi-lans or women's wars. It is time's testimonial of the role given to Manipuri women as active functional members of the civil society. The brief summary of two nupi-lans is discussed in the coming paragraphs.

The Two Nupi Lans

Nupi Lan literally means women's war. History has witnessed two Nupi Lans in Manipur. The first Nupi Lan in 1904 protested against the forced labour system put in place by the British Political Agent Mr. Maxwell. It happened so that a State Bungalow was burnt down on 16th March, 1904. When Political Agent Maxwell could not find the culprit, he ordered a collective punishment that all the men of Imphal will go to Kabow to fetch teakwood to re-build the bungalow. When Maxwell ignored all the petitions to repeal the order, the men of Imphal began to prepare to go to Kabow. But women of Manipur refused to accept the unjust punishment. Thousands of women gathered at the road and started protesting the order. Finally, the British had to
The second Nupi Lan took place in 1939 against the export of rice from Manipur while people were starving in the state. The most important facet of this war was the protest against the Maharaja of Manipur and Political Agent Mr. Gimson of British Government (1933-45). From thereon, the movement signaled the start of an era of constitutional and administrative reform in Manipur. Women were predominantly involved in the production, marketing and selling of food-grains. Women managed the internal trade for food as well as clothing and maintained a just business standard in society as most of the buying and selling in the markets was done by women. One of the most popular markets was the main market called Khwairamband Bazar which was founded by Khagemba Maharaj around in 1580 AD and which is also known as Ima Keithel. The second Nupi Lan took place at this bazar in 1939. The agitation started on December 11, 1939 when the women reached the Khwairamband Bazar and found no one was selling rice in the market. Another group was getting ready to protest the price rise and both groups joined forces to find out if foreign traders were buying rice at lower prices from the local traders. Thousands of women gathered at the State Durbar Office to protest against rice export from the state. When a platoon of Assam Rifles was called to control the situation, the women became even more agitated and shouted slogans like “Manipur Mata Ki Jai”. In the charge of the soldiers, many women received injuries from the bayonets of the soldiers’ guns. But the women were firm on their demands and they kept protesting even without any male support for their efforts.

The women received male support for their efforts on December 16th and the protests became even more active. The support came in the form of political activist
Hijam Irabot of Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha who formed a new political party, Manipur Praja Samelini to support the women's movement. A poet himself, Irabot wrote,

Tonight is spent
A day has gone
Tie up the hair women
That is flowing in disorder
A December 12 has passed
Another December 12 has arrived
Have you forgotten?
Ever imagined that hair should be tied up?
Ever imagined that this day would come?

When Irabot was arrested on January 9th 1949, his followers took up the cause of Nupi Lan and organized meetings which gave a boost to the protests.

As their protests continued and the new women's political party, Manipur Praja Samelini, also demanded the change of Durbar and the Administrative set-up in Manipur, the agitations that started with the export of rice led to changes in the whole political set-up of Manipur, the constitutional, political and economic effects of which are felt even today. The political impact of the protests led to the establishment of a better government in Manipur that was responsible and accountable to its people.

Thus, Manipuri women have continued to play this crucial role in the society. The so-called legacy of meitei nupi or meitei woman has been carried out by Manipuri women as something that they are born with. The two nupi-lans have become a yard-stick to measure the true essence of meitei nupi along with the myth of
courageous women. S. Haripriya, a young Manipuri poet, writes in her poem, Three Questions,

Why did you give me
This irreparable world to inherit
Tainted with stains of history
The world is lost to my kind
Your gallant invoking of mere two battles
Fought by women
Amuses me to no end
For you know not
I live and die fighting
Innumerable ones everyday

One can also say that the gendered role (here, unlike other states of India, a stronger role) given to women is a result of the strong matri-structure that the region has had. Although, except for Khasi community of Meghalya, all the other communities of the NE states are patri-lineal. In the case of Manipur, the two types of social structures seem to have co-existed. But of-late, modernization and globalization have opened new windows to the world and it seems to have brought in other facets of patriarchal values. N Vijyalakshmi Brara writes,

Manipur has always had a patri-lineal system of descent, but matri-structures were always strongly and firmly co existent. Gradually, the gendered spaces became specified, categorized and compartmentalized and non-interchangeable. Today, every process, every issue has a specific role for men and women. (Gill 284)
The changing role of women in this society can be also linked with the chaotic and conflict prone situation of the state, post-independence. It is true that men and women are equal victims in such a volatile situation as prevailing in Manipur, but women become more vulnerable. Preeti Gill writes,

Women...are even more vulnerable than men at such times with greater restrictions placed on them, their mobility, their access to health education, livelihood, employment, even leisure. (ibid 8)

Thus, women caught in this time warp, face physical and psychological trauma like rape, abuse, physical assault and its prolonged after effects. Today, women in Manipur have to face such violence from three fronts, the state, the insurgents and within the domestic sphere. They also have to cope with the reality of life as mothers and wives of those who are killed, missing and hunted. Here, the women become double victims. One glaring example is the brutal murder of Thangjam Manorama in July, 2004. A suspect of involvement with the insurgents, according to the Assam Rifles, Thangjam Manorama was picked up from her house in the wee hours of 10th July. Next day she was found dead with gun shot wounds. As a protest against this inhuman act by the Assam Rifles, twelve elderly women Meira Paibis stripped their clothes and protested naked in front of the Assam Rifles’ gate in Imphal. Nitin Gokhale writes in Tehelka,

Desperate circumstances call for desperate measures. On July 15 over half a dozen elderly and respectable women in Imphal, the capital of Manipur, stripped naked and waved banners that read 'Indian Army take our flesh, Indian Army rape us'. They were protesting the killing of 30 year old Thangjam Manoroma Devi. She was picked up by personnel of the 17 Assam Rifles from her home on July 11. Her bullet riddled body – bearing tell-tale marks
of torture – was found next day. (Tehelka, July 31, 2004)

Nitin A Gokhale has aptly given a title for the report, ‘Look what the armed forces have reduced Manipuri women to’. The naked protest against the murder as well as the much contested law AFSPA, shocked the world and brought forth the condition of the people, specially women in this conflict riddled region. This incident also brought out the resistance of such acts by women and how women of this region have maintained the past legacy (meira paibs and the nupi lans). This incident also resonates with 'Draupadi' by Mahasweta Devi, where the protagonist stood naked in front of her assaulter shouting ‘come on kounter me – come on kounter me’ (Devi 37). The only difference is that one incident happened in real life while the other in the fictional world. In both the cases, a woman's body becomes the site of violence as well as the weapon to counter that same violence.

The talk of Manipuri women and their role in society would be incomplete without mentioning Irom Sharmila, the epitome of resistance who has been on a fast unto death for more than 13 years. N Vijayalakshmi, convener of Manipuri people's union for civil rights writes,

A place called Malom near the Imphal airport witnessed cold-blooded killings of innocent people by the Assam Rifles. They shot at point blank range eight people sitting at the bus stop in the usual garb of 'encounter with insurgents'. This sadistic action was taken lawfully under the draconian law of Armed Forces Special Powers Act. The moment this news spread, Irom Sharmila, a very common girl of Manipur, felt deep hurt inside her. She instantly declared fast unto death till this law is abolished. (Gill 219)

Irom Sharmila Chanu who has been on an indefinite fast asking the Government of India to repeal the Armed Forces Special Power Act is an epitome of
Manipur women’s resistance against any injustice. She started the protest from November 2000 when army personnel shot dead 10 innocent people on the ground of AFSPA. Ever since then, she has been fighting this lonely war for the people of Manipur. A poet herself, she has captured the anguish of the people in her poem. She writes,

Free my feet from the shackles
Like bangles made of thorn
Confined inside a narrow room
My fault lies in
Being incarnated as a bird.
Inside the dark room of the prison
Many voices echo around
Unlike the sound of birds
Not the merry laughter
Not that of a lullaby
..Let the gate of the prison be flung wide
I will not go on another path
Please remove the shackles of thorn
Let me be not accused
For being incarnated in the life of a bird.¹

No doubt that Manipuri women have played a significant role in the social set-up as compared to other parts of India. Even after taking in consideration this role, can one really say that they are empowered, and they have achieved equality in the overtly patriarchal Indian society? Do women play an equally magnified role in the domestic sphere as they do in the society and the community? These are the issues
that need to be examined with a critical eye, and only then, the true status of women in the society will be revealed.

Thus, contemporary women writers of Manipur seem to have undertaken the task of looking at the world from the perspective of 'being a woman' and reflect their sensibilities through creative endeavours. The women writers, who have written about women's sensibility in a patriarchal society, have also been accused of being confined to their own psyche and for excluding themselves. This accusation is true for all the women writers in India. In Makers of Indian English Literature, C D Narasimhaiah writes,

> It will be seen I haven't said anything about our women novelists,- I fear they should be held responsible for excluding themselves on grounds of their preoccupation with female psyche, and society's unfairness to them and their work in terms of sociological treaties. Have they projected a woman, worthy of our emulation? It's all negative, i mean their approach. (Narasimhaiah 34)

The same is the case with Manipuri women poets. Ch Sheelaramani, a poet herself, also says how ‘women’s poetry’ has been underestimated as ‘worthless’ and ‘trash’ by traditional critics. She further highlights that this underestimation might have risen because of the difference in men’s and women’s writings. Women writers have written about the construct of womanhood in a conflict torn society. These poets have tried to capture the different roles played by women over the times, be it different historical movements or issues pertaining to society and they have portrayed the resulting effects on the sensibilities of women through their personal reflections.

The themes of the women writers who emerged in the 1980s are diverse. They are not only concerned about their womanliness but are aware of the changing roles of
women in the society. It is also true that women poets are self reflective as it is hard to move beyond one's personal self. But it would be a mistake if the women poets were termed as unworthy because of the self expression in the poems. Through expressing the self women writers have tried to find and connect the contemporary issues in their poems. Some of the themes that are prevalent in poetry by women writers are violence, fear, peace and harmony, nature and romantic themes, relationship, myth, love and women's condition etc. Notable women poets are A Memchoubi, Thoibi Devi, M K Binodini, Ch Jamini Devi, Y Indira, M Borkanya, Sorokhaibam Gambhini etc.

The women poets might have been relatively new to the field of Manipuri literature, but they have made a significant contribution to the field. Women poets brought forth a new sensibility and emotion to Manipuri poetry to create an all encompassing world of thoughts and feelings. They need a special mention because they are not only talking about the current issues, but they’re looking at the entire history of Manipur from the perspective of a mother, a sister and a wife. While many of the male poets preferred to write about current issues like politics, fear, violence, and identity issues, the women writers ventured beyond these issues and wrote romantic and love-lorn poems. Considering all these factors, women poets have been given a special space in this research.

**Fear, Violence and Peace and Harmony**

As already discussed in previous chapters, post-independence Manipur has been witnessing a series of violent conflicts in the region which have affected the people living in the area. Even though both men and women are the victims, women become more vulnerable in any conflict zone. Many women poets have explored this
issue in their poems. One such poet is Kumari Thoibi Devi. In her poem 'Wither Truth, Wither Beauty, she has looked into the theme of fear and violence that has plagued the region. She has used the rhetoric device of questioning, hardly used by male writers, to bring out the issues of violence. She questions,

Today, this beautiful world has been transformed
Into a place of blood and thunder.
Who caused this havoc?
Was it not the blood-thirsty human beings
Who turned the world into a veritable hell?

The degrading moral value of human beings and how it has become the cause of much violence is the concern of the poet. The phrase 'blood-thirsty human beings' signifies those people who have turned the world into 'hell' for their own need. But the poet has a positive outlook amidst the violence and hopes for a peaceful world. The feminine sensibility of unifying and joining the fabric of the society is expressed in the following lines,

But, I yearn for a world
Where peace and harmony reign supreme.
Let love bind us together
Let humanity bond us as humankind.

Another poet who has also reflected on violence and at the same time hope for peace is Dr Ch Jamini. In her poem, As the New Year Arrives, she writes,

As the new year arrives
A new topic let us talk
That is not about war and killings
Nor about oppression and communal tension
Nor again of molestation and defiling the honour of women
A new topic let us talk
About a new evolution, a new hope
About love and harmony
About marching forward together
About serving our motherland.

Writing about violence is not an easy task if one is living in it. Tilottama Misra says,

Delayed representation of traumatic experiences which allows the memory to pick and choose what it desires to remember rather than recount every experience as it happened in the past is a characteristic feature of all representations of violent events. This is more so when the traumatic experiences are a part of one's own memory. (Gill 249)

Memory plays a very important role in recounting violence. Misra further says that a poet tries to mix her memories with those of the victims to recreate the incident that had happened and in doing so selects the images which convey the violent incident most powerfully. In the poems of these women poets from Manipur this aspect of recounting violence can be noted. Ch Jamini recounts brutal killings of innocent people by Army personnel on the pretext that they were involved in militant acts. Such acts of violence are common in Manipur as the Army personnel have the power to kill under the AFSPA. Ch Jamini writes,

Where they force the common people to fall on line
To be massacred under gun fire
Where people who left wearing a half loin cloth
Are sprawling found dead
Clad on forced combat dress

Holding fire-arms forced in their hands

Where honour of women rampantly is looted.

Such prolonged incidents of violence have bred a culture of fear amongst the people of the region. This fear is captured aptly in the poem Fear by Ch Jamini. She says,

Death is feared sickness is feared

Feels afraid of money extortion

Feels afraid of forced shelter seeking

Feels afraid of abductions

Feels afraid of vehicles forcibly taken away

Feels afraid of exchanges of gun fire..

Of bandhs there is fear

Of curfew there is fear though at home there is fear

Away from home there is fear...

This kind of fear is felt by every Manipuri living in the state and can thus instantly connect with what the poet is trying to say. The people of the region hope for a day when there would be peace and they can be free of this fear. This sensibility can be seen captured in the poems of these women poets. Y Indira writes in her poem, But I cant help Worrying for You Mother,

When will peace and tranquility become our lot once again?

A perfect world of peace and harmony shall we inherit?

How long will the present secret war continue to plague us?

Myth

Myth and mythologies have been exploited by many poets over the years all over the world. Mythologies are a great source of modern poems and poets have
altered and recreated myths to capture the angst modern times. M H Abrams defined myth as derived from Greek word 'mythos' meaning a true or false signified story or plot (Abrams 102). Myths are those narrative forms which may be based on ‘truthful depictions or over elaborated accounts of historical events, as allegory for or personification of natural phenomena or as an explanation of rituals’ (Wikipedia). Myths have supernatural protagonists and events and it is also closely associated with legends and folklores.

The NE poets have used their rich heritage of myths and legends in their poetry. They have tried to locate their current experiences by exploring the rich myths and legends. N.D.R. Chandra and Nigamnanda Das says,

The poets of North-Eastern India have exploited the history, legends, folklories, rumors, day-to-day events and mythology to dilate the experiences of mythic dimensions. In their home-bound pilgrimage, they have explored the glory of their lands to trace their clear identity against turmoil, identity crisis and self alienation. (Das, Chandra 67)

Some of the Manipuri women poets have tried to invoke local myths to depict the hard times. A Memchoubi, one of the most prominent Manipuri poets has used the myth of goddess of lightening, Nongthangleima, to depict the fiery and strong nature of a meitei woman. She writes in her poem The Goddess of Lightening,

I am

The answer to your age old question. Did you think of me as
The skylark floating in moonlight
Or the dew drop clinging
To the soft petal
Of a rose blooming at dawn?

No, I am none of these.

Thus, Memchoubi negates all the metaphors which have been used to depict a woman. The soft and demure nature associated with woman over the centuries is not what Memchoubi wants to define the Meitei woman as. To her a Meitei woman is strong and independent. She writes,

I am the goddess of lightening

The goddess of lightening, do you know?

At my harsh, strident voice

The old world will crumble.

One of the pioneer women writers, M K Binodini has also explored the rich myth and legends of the region in her works. In the lyric, Thabaton Thabaton, she narrates the myth of Thabaton and how she was abducted by a were-tiger. M K Binodini has connected the myth of the disappearance of a girl to the modern times when disappearance and abduction of people have become a common occurrence. She writes,

Fortified by seven loving hearts

Locked up seven times in their house

But lo, all doors were found wide open

Unhinged and unlocked

Thabaton was nowhere to be seen

Thabaton, the house was in complete darkness.

Another important aspect of writing on myths is the mixing of different myths of different sources. Manipur as discussed in the earlier chapters has had a great
influx of Hindu culture and Meitei culture at the point of time in history. Thus, the myths of Hinduism can be found in many of the poems of the women writers. M K Binodini also infuses the myth of Jatayu in the myth of Thabaton. She draws a parallel of the abduction of Sita and Thabaton and writes,

No Jatayu was there to bear testimony to Thabaton's disappearance
Thaba just disappeared without a clue.

H Benubala has also used the myth of Jatayu in her poem Voices. Quite different from M K Binodini, Benubala has used the myth to depict the loss of lives of young people in the name of fighting for freedom. She laments such loss of young lives,

The bodies of youth
In the best of health and beauty
Are crushed into ashes.
Putting on the wings of moth
They jumped into the light of freedom. Then they fall down
Like Jatayu, shorn of his wings
Onto the torn pages
Of the new Ramayana.

The Hindu myths also have been a source of poetry for the region. Not only women writers, but men have also used Hindu myths in abundance in their poems. R K Madhubir, in particular have exploited the myth of Sita, Rama, Ravana, and many more in his poems. Another woman poet, H Nalini has used the myth of Ganga in her poem Ganga. In this poem she has talked of how Ganga has washed the filth and sins of many but still how pure Ganga will remain. Free from all the vices of human
beings. She writes,

O humans!
I am Ganga, the most innocent.
I am not part of the three worlds-
The earth, the heaven, the hell.
I had my nativity
In the Himalayas..
I must flow down, arm in arm with my mates, the tales of freedom to song
In the ocean of freedom.

Women

It is but an obvious statement to say that women poets have written about women and their role in the society. The poems written by these poets are more self reflective as mentioned earlier. They are confessional in nature like the confessional poetry of 50's and 60's American literature. They also echo the concern of the womenfolk for the changing equation of gender role in the society.

It seems that the changing values of society have restructured the rights of men and women in the region. Even though, women played an important part in the economy and governance of the state, it is hard to say that they enjoy the same freedom as men. This issue has been a point of concern for some of the poets. Kh Ibeton has talked about equal right for men and women in her poem Pen. She writes,

Equal rights, yes equal rights
But I wonder how equal are equal rights
My pen often asks this question.

Thus, the poet poses this question, ‘How equal are the equal rights?’ in this
poem, highlighting the differences created between men and women in the society. On one hand, people are talking about equal rights for men and women, but at the same time the society has different rules and regulations and several stigmas when it comes to treatment of certain things regarding men and women. One example worth a mention here is the stigma of 'chelurabi' (who has eloped), attached with a woman if she elopes with a man. Manipuri society sanctions love marriage by eloping, which is an age old custom followed by the people of the state. But in cases where marriage does not happen for reasons pertaining to the families of the man and the woman, it is the woman who carries the stigma of being 'chelurabi'. No one talks as much about the man who is also an equal partner but the woman has to bear the brunt. There are numerous such treatments where a woman is subjugated by the society in the name of custom and beliefs. Some examples are a woman cannot touch the food of her husband when he is eating, a woman can eat the leftover of the husband but the husband cannot eat his wife's leftover, a woman's 'phanek' (wraparound) is a symbol of shame, men cannot touch this cloth etc. Thus, the question posed by Kh. Ibeton, 'how equal are the equal rights?' highlights this issue.

Thus, it seems that the status of women has been compromised and altered from the earlier beliefs. From Thoibi, Linthoinganbi, the modern day predicament of a woman in the region is that of being cursed. Y Roma has written about this issue in her poem, Voice

O woman! O Mother! O Nurse!
O the cursed birth! O the blessed birth!
O the weak being! O the patient one!
Your hundred and eight names.
On the top
You're raised,
On the ground
You are trampled down.

Y Roma has also invoked the image of 'The Mother' in her poems. She has used strong symbols and metaphors like, 'eyes of fire-ball', 'burning gold', crimson-red' etc to depict the anger felt by a mother. She also inter-relates motherhood with the 'meira-paibis'/torch bearers, who have stood guard for the community over the years. She writes,

With the warm tears of your anger
When the community of our women
Gets ready in front of the mirror
Apprehend, today all the mothers
Respond in the hair-raising wrath
Swelling all their breasts are
In the gushing nine-fold springs

Y Indira has also written about the dying flames of the 'meira' (torch) of the meria paibi legacy. She uses the metaphor ‘torch/meira’ as the leading light which will guide womenfolk of Manipur towards emancipation. But she is also worried that, in the present day scenario, where the gender role has been compartmentalized and divided, the role of 'meria-paibi' might diminish. In her poem, 'Is the flickering flame dying at last?' she raises this question. She says, 'Is the light going out at last? / My mind is filled to the brim with an unexplained inexplicable restlessness.'

The 'meria-paibis' have always been an active group present in every locality of Manipur (Meities) and they have played important roles for the safeguard of the society. Nandini Thokchom writes.
Meira Paibi, as the name stands today, originated as a movement to prevent and control public disorder due to alcohol/abuse in the late 1970s...However, seen in the light of the extent of social control in a small population and in larger political context of Manipur and its numerous prescribed militant national liberation organizations struggling against the Govt. of India, the tacitly organized and factually proven role of the Indian armed forces as a source of alcohol supply in a prohibition state as well as couriers of narcotic drugs over the Indo-Myanmar border and into continental India, the movement takes on a completely different hue. (Gill 125-126)

The poet says how important this 'torch' is for women and it is a means of enlightening the 'dark recesses of mind'. She further writes,

No ordinary torch this (is)!
If this golden-colored flame is ever extinguished
There will no longer be any torch
To guide the women-folk in their march towards light and emancipation
They will be left leaderless, hopeless and abandoned
Like waifs and strays

Yet at the same time, she is also worried that the torch will be extinguished one day. Thus, she calls out to the 'intellectual and thinkers' to join and support the cause of 'meira-paibis'. She writes,

The torch will be extinguished one day despite our best protective skill
But let's delay its inexorable end by all means
For the longer it burns the more pervasive will its impact be in lighting up the dark recesses of the mind.
Let us enlist the support of intellectuals and thinkers
In keeping the torch alive.

The same concern is shown by Nandini Thokchom as well, she writes,

The sharply increasing polarization of the political climate in Manipur will bring the Meria Paibi into sharper focus. At this point, the role of the passive section, the educated, the middle class woman, will become critical. As yet, her participation is nominal. Her lack of participation is evidenced by the image of Meira Paibi outside Manipur as anti-alcoholism, anti-narcotic abuse agitation by women of lower classes. This has resulted unfortunately in the isolation of this movement from support that would be readily available from women's organization and networks at the national and global levels. (Gill 129)

Another aspect of women writing is the celebration of womanhood. The sensibilities of woman for being a mother or a daughter or simply as a woman is portrayed in simple language by some of the poets. S Gambhini writes in 'The Village Damsel',

> We indulge in hearty laugh
> At the sight of golden paddy and when we feel
> the smell of fresh earth.
> And when we dye the hair of our mothers
> with charcoal pieces dug up from the oven
> We are village damsels.

The poem brings out the lifestyle of the women of the village, unadulterated by the so called city life. The simplicity in their living and their struggle is celebrated in this poem. The village girls are hard working and they find 'laughter' in their toil. Gambhini Devi has highlighted that Manipuri women are proud of their struggle and hard work.
Romanticism and Love

Among other issues and themes, certain contemporary Manipuri women poets have gone back to the early 20th century poets like L. Kamal and Kh. Chaoba in their subject treatment. The Romanticism of the early 20th century poets which is discarded by the most of contemporary male writers as it is believed that Romanticism does not suit the time, is taken up by women poets, M K Binodini, Ch. Jamini Devi, H Jandho, S Gambhini etc. These poets have also written on themes of women and violence and myths as already discussed above, but they have also touched upon romantic themes as well as lovelorn poets. Thus, encompassing various themes from violence, war to love and nature is one of the aspects of Manipuri women writers. The feminine sensibility of hankering for love and a healthy relationship/bonding is expressed in the form of poetry. These poets have broadened their canvass and some of them have trodden the paths of Indian Romantic Poets like Sarojini Naidu, Torru Dutt and even sometimes Keats and Wordsworth. Like Keatsian ode, H Jandho in her 'Ode to the Lotus' writes,

In an over brimmed lake

Among the deep green leaves

What a beautiful sight

That ye bloom

Blown by the breeze

The vast watery main sparkles,

Like diamond-studded silver shining

And you swaying so smoothly

In the midst of these
Like a true romantic, the poet celebrates the aesthetic beauty of the flower lotus in her ode. There is an abundant use of alliterations, even though the poem is a translation and this poetic device adds to the romantic appeal of the poem. Some examples of the lines,

That ye bloom, blown by the breeze and again in 'like diamond-studded silver shining/ and you swaying so smoothly'. One can also feel the personal fear of the poet for the lotus as she says, 'How worried I am, O Lotus! / To Ponder if you won't be able to bloom again.'

The use of imagery of 'lotus' is not new in poetry. Like mentioned above, Sarojini Naidu has also written about the lotus in her poem 'The Lotus'. The poems are strikingly similar. Sarojini Naidu writes,

O mystic Lotus, sacred and sublime,
In myriad-petalled grace inviolate
Supreme o'er transient storms of tragic Fate
Deep-rooted in the waters of all Time,
What legions loosed from many a far-off clime
Of wild-bee hordes with lips insatiate,
And hungry winds with wings of hope or hate,
Have thronged and pressed round thy
Miraculous prime

Dr. Ch. Jamini Devi is another poet who has talked about the aesthetic of nature in her poem like the Romantic poet John Keats. Dr. Ch. Jamini Devi sees nature as a 'wise lady' who is an 'artful painter' in her poem 'On Seeing the Rainbows in the Sky'. The imageries and symbols used by the poet have the romantic sensibility
of the 19th century English Romantic poets. Ch. Jamini writes,

Now the dusk falls in
The Sun reaches the western ridges
With his own reflected light
The sky now brilliant is made
To the clouds of changing shapes
Crimson powder he sprinkles

Another aspect of these romantic poets is that the treatment of love in their poems. Poets dealing with love themes are rare in the contemporary times in Manipur as most of the poets prefer writing about the chaotic political, economic conditions of the times. It is noteworthy for these small group of Manipuri women poets who have written on love and emotions of lovelorn individuals. M K Binodini writes in her lyric, 'Garland of Songs'

All my tales of sorrow and disappointment
And they were dissolved without reaching your ears
The stars twinkled all night with nonchalance
I waited for news from your end..

The passionate outcry of love for the beloved becomes louder in S Bhanumati Devi's poem, Save Me Again, she writes,

Oh! My beloved of many births
You saved me again and again
From inflicting extreme pain
Denying from achieving my desires

One imminent facet of these love poems is the subtleness of the passion and relationship between the lovers in the poetic expression. The imageries are not bold or
direct and they hover above the surface of societal decency. None of these poets have dared what Kamala Das has done in her poems. In 'The Looking Glass', Kamala Das writes,

Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under shower
The shy walk across the bathroom floor
dropping towels, and the jerky way he
urinates, all the fond details that make
Him male and your only man – gift him all
Gift him what makes you woman

Such boldness of imageries cannot be seen in Manipur women poets. Even though, they also talk of the passion of love, it is grounded and not exhibited. H. Benubala writes in I am waiting

Bearing this awkward life
For many ages, I have been desirous of you
The gentle breeze of summer evening
Under the blue sky
Still, I am waiting for the soft feel
of your touch, oh gentle breeze

Thus, these modern Manipuri women poets have not limited themselves to particular themes and issues of the society, but have also encapsulated in their poetry, every aspect of life (from mother-daughter relationship to pangs of love and passion). Their poetry has different dimensions for further studies and considering the late blooming of Manipuri female writers, they have created a niche for themselves in the
literary field. Their contribution is a huge one in the compilation of Manipuri literature and many more younger poets are coming forward with their works. Notable writers of this new generation are S Haripriya, Ch. Phuritshabam and Shreema Ningombam. Thought, all the three poets write in English (Shreema Ningombam's poem is included in this chapter), the Manipuri sensibility, meitiness is not lost in their work. Another notable poet is I Sharmila Chanu (one poem included in this chapter).

Thus, these women poets, who have struggled and experienced what it is being a woman in the society have beautifully captured their experiences in their poetry and maybe that is why their poetry is wholesome with every aspect of life present in them.

Notes

1. Translated from Manipuri to English by Wide Angle Social Development Organization
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