Chapter 6: Conclusion

'Representation' is the ability of texts to draw upon features of the world and present them to the viewer, not simply as reflections, but more so, as constructions. Hence, the images do not portray reality in an unbiased way with 100% accuracy, but rather, present 'versions of reality' influenced by culture and people's habitual thoughts and actions. As a result, representations are influenced by culture and in much the same way, have the capacity to shape culture and mould society's attitudes, values, perceptions and behaviours.' Commenting on the importance of the concept of representation in the study of culture, Stuart Hall writes, 'Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture', (Hall 2003, 15).

Exploring 'representation' as a signifying practice in a rich diversity of social contexts and institutional sites, Stuart Hall maintains that objects and people do not have a constant meaning, but their meanings are fashioned by humans in the context of their culture, as they have the ability to make things mean or signify something. 'Things don't mean,' writes Hall, 'we construct meaning, using representational systems-concepts and signs' (Hall 2003, 25). Michel Foucault studied discourse as a system of representation. Discourse can be said to refer to a group of statements, an institutionalized way of thinking that can be manifested through language. It produces knowledge, power and idea of 'a regime of truth' (not 'what is true' but 'what counts as true'). Foucault did not believe that any form of thought could claim an absolute 'truth' outside the play of discourse- all political and social forms of thought are inevitably caught up in the interplay of knowledge and power. He believed that knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth', but has the power to make itself true.

It is alleged by feminist writers like Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist and Louise Lamphere (1974) that due to the facts of female biology, and woman's domestic role, the so-called 'feminine personality' is combined to encourage cultural definitions of
the female that tend to be degrading. This constitutes the base of how women have been represented down through the history. The Hmars' ideological bias against women reinforces male authority over women and perpetuates the norm of male heterosexuality as the model of natural sexual identity. This hierarchical binary opposition of male/female reinforces patriarchy and sexual privilege to the disadvantage of women, (lesbians and gay men). Male activities (as opposed to female) are always recognized as predominantly important and cultural system gives authority and values to the roles and activities of men. Male actions are justified and rationalized by a fine societal classification: women as inferior, weak and frivolous. A woman comes to be seen as more ‘natural’ and less ‘cultural’ than man, hence, to be subordinated, controlled and manipulated in the service of culture’s end. This explains that ‘representation’ is a human idea; it may be asserted or assumed by some and questioned by others.’ This has (indeed) led some theorists to a kind of ‘reductionist realism’, to the assertion that representation exists if and only if people believe in it’ writes Pitkin (Pitkin 1967, 9).

Needless to say, “Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do.... something we perform” (Eckert and Ginet 2003, 10). It has become almost a cliché saying that sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex, which means, gender does not naturally flow from sex. The newborn initially depends on others to do its gender, and the ‘others’ come through in many different ways, not just as individuals but as part of socially structured communities that link individuals to social institutions and cultural ideologies. From infancy, for instance, male and female children are interpreted differently, and interacted with differently. Eckert and Ginet (2003, 17) have supported this claim by reporting, “Parents use more diminutives (kitty, doggie) when speaking to girls than to boys........ They use more direct prohibitive (don’t do that!) and more emphatic prohibitive (no! no! no!) to boys than to girls”. With such differential treatment, boys and girls eventually learn to behave and speak differently.
Dindia et al (2006, 28), citing John Gray's *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* (1992), reports the latter's statement that "not only do men and women communicate differently but they think, feel, perceive, react, respond, love, need and appreciate differently. They almost seem to be from different planets, speaking different languages". Carol Gilligan (an American feminist, ethicist and psychologist), arguing from a psychological perspective, states that 'female identity revolves around interconnectedness and relationship' " (Mulvaney 2004, 225), which means, when asked to define herself, a woman often describes her identity in terms of relationships: of being a daughter, wife, mother, lover or friend. Conversely, Gilligan argues that, male identity 'stresses separation and independence'. Contrary to the descriptive words of attachment chosen by women, men select a vocabulary of self-reference that is clearly individualistic. The male "I" is defined by separation. Men distinguish themselves from others by their accomplishments. This is due, at least in part, to differences in the way men and women generally look at the world. This establishes the fact that women behave and speak differently because of their fundamental differences in socialization and biological experiences. This pair of different socialization and biological differences causes women to conceptualize conventions of talking and expression which in turn, engenders sensuality, sensitivity and a psyche of different nature.

Hmar Women in Representation: In Hmar folklore and folk life studies, we find women represented in two major folklore genres- in folktales and proverbs. As folk tales originate from a culture, it is that culture which decides the content and form of tales. In other words, tales reflect the temper and attitude of a culture. Dena (1995, ix) endorses, like any cultural theorists, that the Hmar 'folk tales reflect the totality of a Hmar's attitude towards life.....the traditional values that he cherishes'. Many Hmar folk tales, both mythical and legendary, like 'Chemattepu', 'Sirate' and 'Sakhilawngdar' deal with a manly, a very handsome hero and a good hunter. Whereas the women portrayed are either a demoness who transformed herself into a
full blooming flower in order to trap a very handsome hero, who under normal situation, was beyond her worth and reach (Dena 1995, 21) or a wicked mother, who, after the death of her husband, eloped with a man leaving behind her two minor kids hungry and weeping (Dena 1995, 160-62). If at all the folk tales deal with a beautiful woman, she was either forcefully impregnated by a very ugly man (the hero) (Dena 1995, 27) or she could not free herself from the clutch of an ugly young man (Dena 1995, 33) or she was a witch (Dena 1995, 35) or a half human and half tigress (Dena 1995, 38). Juxtaposed against such manly heroes like Chemtattepu, we have a woman, a widow, who causes unspeakable miseries to villagers by passing ‘stool at the source of the village pond’ (Dena 1995, 5).

Focusing on the representation of women in many of the tribe’s folk tales it is found that young unmarried maidens are generally beautiful, of good character, skillful in domestic works. But such beautiful maidens are married or impregnated by undeserving or deformed men like Chawnpui in ‘Mauzungrakal’ and Kungi by Sairam in ‘Pawthir le Hrangchal’. Maidens with a freedom to select a life partner for themselves are generally daughters of village chief (Tuoichawng in ‘Liendo and his Brother’), but the final outcome of selection often enrages their parents. Some daughters who get married to a man whom their parents dislike are auctioned by the enraged parents to any other man who can snatch them away from their husband (like Kungi in ‘Pawthir le Hrangchal’). In another case, a father gives his daughter to a man who can pacify him with his demands (like the king in ‘Lalhmang’). Step-daughters are generally presented as innocent, modest, obedient and harmless who suffer great tortures at the hand of their step-mothers like Mauruong in ‘Mauruong’ and Thuoitling in ‘Thuoitlingle Ngambawng’. Beautiful maidens whose beauty is the talk of the whole village, and whom the village young ladies feel jealous of are forcibly married by any man on applying magic, like Sawrlai by Vawmpahrawng in ‘Sawrlai’ and Kungi by Sairam in ‘Pawthir le Hrangchal’. A daughter of a king, kept inside a protective palace with layers and layers of protective wall can still be bluffed and married by a common man as we find in cases like Sawrlai by Vawmpahrawng in ‘Sawrlai’.
Hmar folk tales little portray conventional mothers (conventional mothers here means, caring and loving towards their husband, children and kinsmen; expert and adroit in domestic works). Heartless mothers betray the faith of their deceased husbands; abandon their minor children and elope with other men (mother of Liendo and Tuoisiel in ‘Liendo le a Sangpa’). Step-mothers are cruel, cunning and shrewd. They favour their daughter/s over their step-daughter/s. They even favour their own daughters to the suitors of their step-daughters (like the step-mother of Mauruong in ‘Mauruong’ and Thuitling’s step-mother in ‘Thuitling le Ngambawng’).

While labelling all sorts of negative personal traits on the women characters, such kinds of human tale are completely silent about the nature of fathers.

Old women and not old men are generally portrayed as playing the role of an unwarranted adviser to young unmarried men in love. Young ugly undeserving men go to them seeking their advice on how to succeed in marrying beautiful maidens they want to marry (as found in ‘Sawrlai’ and ‘Pawthir le Hrangchal’) whom otherwise, they don’t at all deserve to even dream of. Those old women are mostly gifted with powerful black magic spell to rein the heart of the unfortunate victims.

Another proof of the tribe’s gender bias in representation is found in the dominance of male characters in legends. Those tales that are claimed to be historical focus only on the most heroic deeds of folk heroes like Sura (Dena 1995, 113), Lalruong (Dena 1995, 126), Neilal (Dena 1995, 215) and Chawnhmang (Dena 1995, 217). There is no legend that focuses on great female individuals. For instance, in the world of folk verbal art, we have quite many a name of great female song composers. In the past, many renowned female composers like Pi Chawnghmuok (also known as Pi Hmuoki), Pi Chawngchir (also known as Bapuinu) and Tuonpui (also known as Tuoni) composed catchy songs in praise of nature, in praise of individuals, in praise of someone’s house and in praise of someone’s horses. Few composers, Tuonpui being one of the few, composed romantic songs of love, yearning and enduring passion. (Thiek 2013, 29-32) Other female composers named Chawngngo and
Hranchawn, who lost their respective family members, composed mainly elegiac songs. (L. Keivom 1980, 46 & 57)

Zawllai, another female song composer composed songs of romantic content. (L. Keivom 1980, 48) Most of the songs in Semruk Hla (given in Chapter 2) which young unmarried men and women used to croon were composed by another female composer named Zawltling (L. Keivom 1980, 71). Yet, these heroes could never easily succeed in drawing the attention of the male historians or folklorists to have immortalized their names in the tribe's history of prose narratives.

In the tribe's proverbial lore, we find 'representation' at its worst manifestation. Yet, proverbs, usually conceived as short and concise statement of truth, become very important instrument in exposing the cultural practices, values and ideologies. They reveal many 'hidden aspects of a people's culture and way of thought' (Storm 1992). Frank J.D'Angelo (1977) categorically mentions one important value of proverbs—that they embody habits of thought, customs and moral values. He says that proverbs are a kind of consensus of opinion, manifest truths that may be useful in the conduct of life. Proverbs are, indeed, besides many other definitions, interesting linguistic phenomena in that they are linked with the culture in which they are used. 'In many patrilineal ideologies, women are seen as unnecessary or superfluous, yet at the same time vitally important to men......yet theirs is a power opposed to formal norms' (Rosaldo et al 1974, 32).

Among the tribe under study, proverbs are frequently employed and are numerous in number. Like proverbs among the Anang people of southeastern Nigeria (Dundes 1965, 299), among the Hmars, proverbs are used in all manner of situations— as a means of amusement, in educating the young, to sanction institutionalized behaviour and to “provide ready-made comments on personal relationships and social affairs.” (W. Mieder 2004, 1) In Hmar proverbial literature, woman has been often made a prominent theme for criticism and comment. We find them been represented in a negative light. But, it is a fact that proverbs are not radical historical instruments, nor are they factually oriented. They do not seem to provide us with any traditional
historical data, but, the culture’s perception of its micro world simply gets reflected through them. Proverbs can, no doubt, help a folklorist locate the image of yesterday’s man who is but a part of modern man.

Determined by the engulfing cultural ideology, a woman might be at the receiving end with very little space of her own in matters of religion. Though she might have been made to occupy the bottommost rung of the religious and social ladders, she definitely was an integral part in other spheres of social life. In food-production activities of the tribe, for instance, the contribution of the women folks was great in terms of their rendered labour. Indeed, the tribe’s economic situation would have limped without the valuable service they rendered in each and every stage of food-production activities.

Though Hmar women’s significant role in the socio-cultural life of the tribe has never been satisfactorily given due recognition by historians and scholars, we find that in Verbal Art section female song composers dominated the different sub-genres of Folk Song. Lullaby is a female-dominated genre. Tale-telling tradition has been carried alive by mothers and grandmothers who narrate stories to their children and grandchildren. In many of the Social Customs-related rituals, they have played an important irreplaceable role starting from cutting of an umbilical cord of a new born baby, through feeding of souls of the dead, to festivals, vegetables foraging and agricultural-related customs. They have enjoyed full freedom in religious matters related with Bu In-Ei Na\(^1\) and Puonripui Khôwng\(^2\). Besides, customary practice of Farnu Sa\(^3\) and Farnu Vawk\(^4\) well explains their weight in the socio-cultural life of the community. The tribe’s agricultural life can not even be dreamt of without women’s co-operation. In the tribe’s folk life section of Performing Arts, we find how important a position a woman occupied. Folk dance was not performed without their participation. “There was no social event celebrated without the participation of the women folks” (Lienchawngtho). They dominated much of the genres under Material Culture section as well. The women folks supplied all kinds of cloth – light and heavy- for family consumption. In traditional handloom, they reigned with their artistic creativity, making variegated intricate designs and highly colourful traditional
cloths. This shows that the Hmar women were an unrecognized integral part of the socio-cultural life of the tribe.

Endnotes:

1. It’s a thanksgiving-related ceremony offered to goddess called Fapite.

2. Stretching the warp of puonripui (heavy rug) is often preceded by worship and a divination called Puonripui Khåwng where thiempi (priestess) worships and invokes a female weaving goddess called Kawpuinu, also known as Tapuinu.

3. It’s a sister’s share of a meat. In every event of successful animal hunting, the hunter gives his sister/s their share of the meat. It is generally the bagged animal’s front rib cage.

4. It is a nomenclature given to a sister’s share of a portion of meat when a brother kills a pig. When a man kills a pig, he gives the shoulder or the fleshy thigh of the killed to his sister.