

## Women and Violence: A Gendered Reading of Angst for Homeland

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### Abstract

Following the Merger Agreement, 1949, a majority in Manipur, a sovereign State earlier, have always been skeptical of its inclusion into the Indian Union. In this context and to suppress the subsequent surge of secessionist groups, the Indian Union enacted the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958. Thereby, Manipur has become a battlefield of the native insurgent groups and the Indian armed forces. As such, most works of literature from Manipur deal with themes of violence and conflict. In this bullet-riddled setting, this article endeavours to critically read a collection of poems “Angst for Homeland” from *Tattooed With Taboos: An Anthology of Poetry by Three Women from Northeast India* (2015). Through a gendered analysis of socio-cultural as well as political structures, the article attempts to explore the plight of women and the oppression they undergo amidst what Banerjee calls “two armed patriarchies.”

**Keywords:** Angst for Homeland, Violence, Women, Tattooed with Taboos, AFSPA, Manipur.

### 1. Introduction

Written by three women poets – Chaoba Phuritshabam, Shreema Ningombam and Soibam Haripriya – *Tattooed with Taboos: An Anthology of Poetry by Three Women from Northeast India*, with a total of seventy-seven poems, is replete with contrasting yet suffocating images of common people, specifically women, walking different shades of societal oppression in a shattered state like Manipur. In its entirety, the anthology voices the patriarchal oppression, and the socio-cultural taboos on women while also offering the readers an insightful glimpse into how women become extreme sufferers in such a setting. In their “Introduction” to this anthology, the poets declare:

Circumscribed by the construct of womanhood, enveloped within the halo of love,  
betrayal and breathing, these poems are located in the setting of a conflict-torn  
society. (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 1)

As such, this article aims to interrogate the plight of women as presented in the second section of the anthology. A gendered analysis of socio-cultural as well as political structures is attempted in order to understand how women – privately and publicly – suffer the most. This article endeavours to highlight how women folk caught between “two-armed patriarchies” (Banerjee 2001) – the native insurgent groups

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and the Indian State forces – encounter countless acts of torture, violence and abuse. Sectioned into three categories – the first section, “Tattooed with Taboos,” captures a panoramic view of female sexuality and desires while also dealing with and exploring “the pangs, sorrows and joys of being a woman who is made profane and sacred at the same time” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 1). The first section offers itself as a resolute stand against the societal codes imposed on women and condemns the social impositions. At the same time, it makes a strong case for women's liberation from deeply rooted patriarchal structures of oppression. “Angst for Homeland,” the second section presents a complex tussle of contesting thoughts and ideologies of nationhood. The idea of “home” and “belongingness” in a war-torn border state like Manipur—a place where local factions fight for sovereignty and are in constant combat with the national armed forces—gets a crisp yet comprehensive representation in the section. One can see Manipur becoming a pool of blood with dead bodies floating on it from these very poems. In other words, the poems in “Angst for Homeland” resonate with all the war cries, the violence and trauma that infiltrate into the lives of people in Manipur. More importantly, the poems, despite all these, look for hope amidst clouded uncertainty over what the future holds. The last section, “Love and Longingness,” grapples with the notion of love “which is akin to clasping sand on a shore” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 2). As the title goes, the poets, in the last section, deal with unrequited love, betrayals, heartfelt longings, and uncertainties a woman encounters while expressing love, passion and emotions in a society which is predominantly patriarchal in all aspects. However, this article is focused on the second section, which includes all the poems that contain the themes mentioned in its title.

## **2. Research Methodology and Research Gap**

The following article follows a gendered analysis of socio-cultural as well as political structures in addition to what most scholars who work on anglophone works of literature in Northeast India call “the poetry of witness” in order to understand the conflict and violence that perpetuates in the region. There is a lack of research on the gendered analysis of works of literature from Manipur and such an analysis will help in better understanding the perspectives of women who seem to be the most affected in any violence or conflict situation.

## **3. Manipur and Armed Forces Special Powers Act or AFSPA (1958)**

Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958) or AFSPA, enacted by the Indian Parliament under Act No. 28 of 1958, conferred special powers to the armed forces within the “disturbed areas.” This law gives almost unrestrained powers to the central military forces who can even fire upon or use force on any person who seems to be acting against the law of the State without any evidence. Further, it gave the right to destroy any shelter or structure if it seemed suspicious of being a training camp for the rebel outfits. The AFSPA also legalised the armed forces to arrest anyone without any warrant on mere suspicion and gave full rights to frisk anyone or enter and search any premises without any legal notice (Ministry of Home Affairs, India). All these powers entrusted to the armed forces signify the complete eradication of freedom, liberty and individuality for the citizens in this marginalised part of India. With internal turmoil

and the AFSPA lurking, surviving even a day in these regions becomes a commendable task. Before delving any further into the argument, it is important to note that the Merger Agreement between Manipur and India was never, in reality, considered a just act by the majority of the people in Manipur. As declared in the Preface, the sudden surge in the number of regional outfits and the “rise of the secessionist movement in various parts of the region has provoked one of the harshest militarisations from the Indian state” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, xi). Tunyi and Wouters rightly assert that the “post-colonial political and administrative history of India’s Northeast is a history of containing and accommodating demands for secession and autonomy” (2016, 5). Therefore, there exists a tussle between the government armed forces and the regional militant outfits that eventually results in the call for more blood, sacrifices, bombings, killings, and so on. However, amid this chaotic tussle for power and to gain control over the land, it is the people who suffer the worst at both ends. Law and order, which is extensively formulated and designed to maintain the smooth functioning of a State, then become a torchbearer of tortures, murders, rapes and extrajudicial executions with the implementation of AFSPA.

A Public Interest Litigation (PIL) report reveals that 1,528 people were killed in encounters by security forces in the state between 2000 and 2012 (India Today 2017). Voices all over the globe have advocated in favour of repealing the AFSPA, and one such native voice though renowned globally, is that of Irom Sharmila, who remained on a sixteen-year hunger strike to mark her protest against the AFSPA. However, one should carefully note that the main problem in these cases is not the army or other central forces but the AFSPA and the unaccountable powers vested.

Northeast Indian states like Manipur and the AFSPA have indelibly tattooed histories that foreground the tyranny of such repressive laws, and the consequent dissident reactions from the people. Moreover, the rampant corruption, militancy and ethnic clashes within add to the deploring woes of the people in the state. As a border state, Manipur becomes a hub of all illegal activities and crimes. It is in this context that AFSPA gives the man in uniform all the powers over any subject within the state. As the “Introduction” of the book *Manipur in the Shadow of AFSPA: Independent People’s Tribunal Report on Human Rights Violations in Manipur* states:

The Northeast of India has always existed on the periphery of the nation’s consciousness, and in the footnotes of the narrative of growth, progress and development. In a region where lawlessness, rape, murder, army excesses, arbitrary detention, torture and repression are the order of the day, the man in uniform is a formidable and fearsome figure. The AFSPA that is in force here is one of the most draconian laws that Parliament has enacted in its legislative history. The law has fostered a climate in which the agents of law enforcement use excessive force at their command and set a pattern of apparently unlawful killings of “suspected” civilians. The AFSPA gives security forces unlimited powers to carry out operations with impunity once an area is declared “disturbed” (Dobhal 2009, x).

The sight of twelve women stripping naked, out of the forty women, who stormed the Assam Rifles Headquarters in Kangla Fort, Imphal, in the year 2004, remains fresh in the historical and cultural history of Manipur. The incident which triggered such massive outrage from the women group, also known as

Meira Paibis (torchbearers, in English), was the rape and then murder of Thangjam Monoroma, a thirty-two-year-old woman from Imphal who was picked up from her home by the Assam Rifles. “The twelve mothers who stripped themselves and asked soldiers to rape them” (Ngangom 2011, 47) remain an inseparable, indelible part of the dark history of disparity between Manipur and AFSPA. As such, Monoroma’s killing is just one of the innumerable killings that remain unaccounted for under the dark clouds of AFSPA. The terrible repercussions of AFSPA are best exhibited in one of the poems of Robin S. Ngangom, titled “Native Land.” He writes:

First came the scream of the dying  
in a bad dream, then the radio report,  
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five  
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied  
behind their backs inside a church.  
As the days crumbled, and the victors  
and their victims grew in number,  
I hardened inside my thickening hide,  
until I lost my tenuous humanity (Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2003, 154-55).

Besides, the claim of biasedness from mainland India and racial attacks happening in and around the country have added to the deploring woes of the Northeast. Consequently, writers from the Northeast do not just write but encapsulate a panoramic picture of the severe conditions in which the region suffers. In this regard, Ngangom and Nongkynrih in *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* (2003, ix-x) assert:

The writer from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness. As a natural aftermath to the above, our society has been reduced to a mute witness to the banality of corruption and the banality of terror...We think the task that literature of the Northeast must address is what Albert Camus called ‘the double challenge of truth and liberty’

The never-ending struggles and clashes between the insurgent groups and armed forces regarding AFSPA in Manipur and in the Northeast eventually create an atmosphere of suffocation, fear, and terror in the minds of the general public. As a result, most of the works of literature coming out from this part of India do not exhibit any sort of romanticism, but there exists an undeniable presence of violence, trauma and terror.

#### **4. Angst for Homeland**

As the title suggests, “Angst for Homeland,” the main focus of this study, has twenty-one poems – from poems dealing with the home-land dilemma caught between the inner strife of factional groups and national forces to poems dealing with the fragmentation and subsequent blood bath in Manipur and also,

to poems about hope and optimism “with tails of freedom with no one to harness them with a string” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 98). To this extent, the poems in the second section may be primarily clubbed into three categories: questioning of one’s belongingness amidst the State-Nation tussle for power; assertion or longing for freedom from all sorts of shackles with vague hints of optimism; and lastly, resentment towards the armed struggles. It is pertinent to note that the poems in this section are written by women and the reading of these poems follows a gendered analysis.

Most of the poems in the anthology begin with the first-person singular “I” and are confessional in their tone. And it is in these confessional expressions that the readers experience the peripheral voices of people living in such terrible marginal conditions. The first poem in “Angst for Homeland” – Chaoba Phuritshabam’s “Between Two Flags,” as the name suggests, reflects the oscillating mindset of almost the majority of people regarding the clash of national and ethnic identities, living not only in Manipur but the entire Northeast. The whole of Northeast is home to people with multi-cultural identities and multi-ethnic groups, each tribe or community having their traditions and way of life, which seems to be much different from the mainstream Indian way. The northeasterners, in a political sense, may be called Indians, as Raatan (2011, 11) asserts, but the inherent Mongoloid racial and cultural aspects create a conflict and the consciousness of belonging to two different sets of identities problematises the notion of belonging. As a result of such differences and multi-dimensional cultures, the Northeast is often seen as the exotic “other” or Calibans yet to be civilised which further yields more differences and questions on the idea of belongingness. “Between Two Flags” captures the frequent dilemma and trouble that arises in the heart of every common human while living torn between the State military forces and insurgent groups. A critical read reveals that the poem that begins with declaring love and belongingness for both the flags – the Indian flag and the Manipur State flag, moves away to questioning the repercussions and all the bloodshed in the name of liberation and authority. The over-arching Indian nationalism comes into conflict with emerging ethnic sub-nationalisms in Manipur and the Northeast, and such intense confrontation of ideas leads, in significant ways, to violence (Brahmachari 2019, 281).

Mislaid at the warfield  
Between two flags  
I asked all  
Who do I belong to?  
Frequent in my thought  
Can I belong to both? (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 81)

Notwithstanding the double sense of belongingness and questioning such belonging in “Between Two Flags,” the poem also mirrors women’s degrading and oppressed status.

A gendered perspective suggests the ‘owning’ of women by patriarchal institutions and the constant tussle of power between “two armed patriarchies” which results in the oppression of women folk in general. The poem drifts away from a general purview of being in a dilemma between two flags to more of a personal call, thereby asserting the continuing tussle of who owns the woman. The poet makes a discernible claim that women belonging anywhere suffer the same fate of patriarchal vis-à-vis societal regulation and oppression.

She is mine  
She is mine  
They said  
Sliced me  
Some pieces for one  
Some pieces for another (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 82)

Towards the end, the poet seems to be personifying Manipur by appearing to give her a voice, allowing a declaration at the end of the poem:

Who do I belong to?  
Pacified myself  
I, adrift  
Between two flags  
Between these two flags (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 82).

Chaoba Phuritshabam's next poem, "Freedom," is another thought-provoking poem that engages us in asking about the true motive behind, what we call, "seeking freedom." With all the blazing guns, sudden grenades, constant ambushes and daily sight of blood everywhere, the poems reveal what Ngangom calls "the poetry of witness" (2005, 172). The poem "Freedom" hints towards the notion of freedom that layers into three different aspects – first, the freedom that common people seek from all the blood-battles, destructions and oppressions, which, at times, lead to questioning the very nature and tenability of freedom. Secondly, the freedom that insurgent or liberation groups intend to achieve through armed struggle. Lastly, the freedom that the Indian Nation and Indian armed forces promise to provide to the people of Manipur from all the anti-national groups and activities. However, the question of freedom of the women-folk seems to be a distant affair.

The poet then shifts all her attention towards the natural world around, and pictures shattered imageries of the hills surrounding Manipur – a possible answer to why most poems from the Northeast do not have romantic elements despite being rich in flora and fauna. The poet claims how melodious birds such as "tamna" or "nongeen" that "sings in the hills left the nest in fear of invasion" (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 84) and beautiful flowers such as "shiroy in the hills no longer blooms" (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 84). Such extreme and devastating impact of ongoing gun battles in Manipur on common people and, more importantly, upon our ecosystem and nature puts the very idea or meaning of freedom into question. "Where is our freedom?" (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 84), the speaker asks on behalf of all who suffer such a devastating catastrophe. One may draw a close emphasis on the violation of nature to the violence inflicted upon women. In the Manipuri society, women are used as symbols of the idea of a homeland and this claim may be accentuated by the patriotic idea of "Ema Leibak Manipur" in the native language which translates into "Mother Land Manipur."

In "Patriot of My Land" and "Operation Summer Storm," Chaoba extends the ground realities on the idea of freedom, as proposed by insurgent groups and State forces, respectively and the recurring after-effects of such claims. "Patriot of My Land" is a satirical and critical poem that extensively portrays the

insurgent groups as “patriots,” owing to their separatist stand against the Indian Republic while revealing their inner hypocrisies and impending ill-fate that awaits the common people of Manipur. On the question of never-coming freedom, which all the people in Manipur seek, the poet brings forth the oppressive nature of people who are in power. Even leaders or forces who were believed to be fighting for the cause of Manipur “become another dictator for the same poor people” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 86). While calling themselves “patriots” and standing up for the cause of liberation, insurgent groups or leaders do not liberate but act as tyrants, and in a way, become the same old coloniser. As a result, the idea of “sovereignty” that these insurgents seek to attain yields to the curtailment of individual rights and freedom. In the same context, “Operation Summer Storm” is another narration of gruesome and unfortunate miseries that overcome common people particularly women-folk under the pretext of freedom and liberation from insurgent groups. While insurgent groups fight for the liberation of Manipur, which they believe was unlawfully annexed by the Indian Republic, the Indian and State armed forces, along with laws such as AFSPA, stand against and fight to wipe out any form of secessionist groups.

“Operation Summer Storm started on April 10 and is a joint operation by the State Police and 57 Mountain Division of the army” (Bhattacharjee 2009). The following operation to wipe out militants was carried out in the Loktak Lake, a scenic beauty full of flora and fauna and considered a safe transit place by the militants. It is significant to note that Loktak Lake, a 287 square kilometre area, also includes Keibul Lamjao, the only floating national park globally and home to the endangered “sangai” (dancing deer). Most of the inhabitants of Loktak live life by fishing and building makeshift floating huts on the “phumdis” (masses of vegetation) for settlement, upon which most of the animals in the lake also reside. The poem under study, which appears to be narrated from a woman’s point of view, echoes the unfathomable grief that clouds not just her but every individual living on the periphery surrounded by violence and armed struggle. The speaker, who seems to be living in the Loktak, has lost her husband during Operation Summer Storm. She declares in pain – “The tired corpse of my husband lay on the cold muddy floor” (Phuritshabam, Ningombam, and Haripriya 2015, p. 87). India’s National Commission for Women initiated an enquiry into the violence and conflict in such armed regions in Northeast India and came to conclusion:

Although all the members of communities are affected by the armed conflict, the impact on women and girls is far greater because of their status in society and their sex. The region, under the shadow of conflict, has witnessed a resurgence of patriarchal values and norms, which have brought with them new restrictions on the movement of women, the dress they wear and more overtly physical violence such as rape, which is systematically used as a tactic against a particular community. All this is compounded by the long social, economic and psychological trauma of armed conflict. (NEN 2004, 2)

The unaccountable powers AFSPA hands down to the armed forces also result in innumerable and inexplicable killings in the name of wiping out militancy. A 2017 Supreme Court order to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to initiate investigations on the army and the police on 1,528 alleged encounters from the year 2000 to 2012 in Manipur uncovers the tattooed atrocities and innocent killings

of individuals under the veil of AFSPA (Dhyani 2019). Amidst all these killings, blood-baths, and innocent deaths, there seems to be an existential angst and it occurs on two levels – one for the individual self and one for the homeland. Under such terrible instances of violence and oppression, and with questions on the idea of freedom, an individual also starts questioning the essence of their existence. With omnipotent laws such as AFSPA that do not ask or hold bullets before firing, and the armed struggle of a handful of natives, the common people have nowhere to go but suffer in silence and question, as the speaker does, “Why am I still living on this earth?” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 87). Echoing the same fate of suffering, Temsula Ao in *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone* (2006, x) painstakingly confesses:

In such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the victims, the trauma goes beyond the realm of just physical maiming and loss of life – their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul.

The poems of Shreema Ningombam paint a more vivid picture of Manipur and make an effort to re-imagine or recollect the forgotten histories and cultural traditions. Also, the poems reflect a sense of nostalgia marred with the present dystopian and pessimist view of life in Manipur with little or, at times, no hope at all. Nostalgia and memory remain significant intervening points in the lives of these northeastern writers from India as well as in its common inhabitants. Locked in the prison of AFSPA and insurgent groups, amidst guns and bombs, constantly troubled with violence, trauma and devastating landscapes, they have nothing but nostalgia and memory of their land once rich in culture and tradition, full of life and nature. A reimagining of past events in the present, as the poems exhibit, evokes an apocalyptic vision of the coming future, blurring the past glory and exposing the naked truth quite comprehensively.

In her poems such as “Mother,” “Blooming,” “Fading Landscape,” “Rainbow,” and “Broken,” Shreema Ningombam reiterates the loss of culture and tradition while bringing out a fractured, fading image of Manipur. For instance, “Mother” begins with a search – a search for lost traditions and foregone culture, a search for a place of belonging and peaceful co-existence that one calls motherland, home, and most significantly, there is also a call, an attempt to uplift the status of women. The speaker declares,

You were everywhere,  
Yet I searched for you.  
In the places of carnivals,  
In the deepest of woods,  
In between the locked horns of the wilds,  
Among the cries of the flags,  
Among the phantoms of the nights (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 91).

Referring to as “mother,” the poet attempts to search and recover one’s “home.” The home or homeland that the poet talks about is a “dying landscape” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 94) cobwebbed in gun battles, corruption and all sorts of violence. In addition, the mention of “naophum” – a custom in



which the placenta of a newborn child in a family is placed into a pot and buried in the backyard (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 92) appears to be an attempt to reconnect to the forgotten and lost culture. However, with urbanisation vis-à-vis modernisation looming large, this custom is no longer in practice, and there is nothing but a “faint smell of ancient breath” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 92). Ph. Jayalaxmi argues that “the poet could see the fading away of the rituals and beliefs so she is in a condition of poetic mourning where she grieves for the past as well as the future” (2018, 67). Such forgetting of one’s culture, loss of one’s homeland and inability to reconnect with traditional values allow the speaker to declare:

With pride or with guilt I do not know  
Should I carry another mortal being in my womb?  
I, a nameless mother wait and wait,  
To mourn the death of my yet unborn (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 92).

Along with the nostalgic attempt to remember and reconnect to the forgotten culture and tradition in the poem, these lines portray the distorted image of a woman in a society and the precariousness and vulnerability of life in a bullet-riddled, war-torn peripheral state like Manipur.

With stark comparisons and references to nature, Shreema Ningombam offers the underlying pessimistic view of life inherent to the State’s chaotic affairs. Thus, nature serves in two aspects in her poems. Firstly, the concern of the dying nature because of man-made destruction and havoc and secondly, the ability or cycle of nature to rejuvenate itself and bloom again compared to the fragile humans. “Blooming” captures this nature-human dilemma and tries to exhibit the human quest – all the killings and battles to capture or gain control as an absurd objective. “Peach blooms / It is the age of doom” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 93), the poet declares while trying to assert the permanence of nature contrary to the doomed fate of humans in such a war-inflicted society. The poem’s last lines seem deeply thought-provoking in claiming: “It is time to wait / For the one who will never come” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 93). With this “wait” and the notion of the one who is never coming, the poet conveys the message that the people of Manipur are waiting in vain, portraying the absurdity of life in Manipur. One reading it also offers is the suggestion of an “action” and not merely wait, probably, a hint of revolution of the people.

Nevertheless, despite all the violence and pessimism lurking around, poems like Ningombam’s “One Day, Ema” and “A New House In A New Country” offer hope and an optimistic future, an assurance that nothing has ended yet. Both these poems send this message of freedom and breaking away from all the shackles of violence, gunfights, inner turmoil, and so forth.

One day  
Kites will fly  
In your blue sky with tails of freedom  
With no one to harness them with a string (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 98)

The speaker seems highly motivated and echoes the cry of glory that is going to come someday. In this regard, the speaker speaks to the masses and asks them to “lay down guns and liberate” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 102) themselves. Only then, the speaker proclaims, there will be a return to normalcy and peaceful existence – “You and I shall walk again on the wet fields” (Phuritshabam et al.

2015, 102). All such close associations with nature – the fading nature amidst all the destructive forces and the healing nature visualised by the imagery of wet and grassy fields, bring out the ecological concerns related to this ecologically rich state of Manipur.

Voicing out the same call for resistance to armed conflicts and violence along with portraying the chaotic atmosphere in Manipur as her contemporaries, Soibam Haripriya's poems enable us to look deeper into the bloodied turmoil that has engulfed this border state. The rampant corruption by those in government and power, the militarization of the State, and the rise in insurgencies and communal riots have shattered Manipur into innumerable fragments of suffering. Of Manipur and her doomed fate, Haripriya, in a poem titled "The End," remarks:

This is where  
the road ends  
tarmac  
of India Shining  
gives way  
to gravel  
and red dirt  
of India whining (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 109).

With powerful imagery, the poet tries to convey the "other" India that Manipur is, how there is dirt all around, and that too, red because of all the bloodshed. A critique of all that "mainland" India is, and Manipur is not, the poem questions the very idea of nation –nation-building and development. This idea is further interrogated in "Another Polish for My Nails," where the speaker reflects upon the false promises and hypocrisies of the elected leaders of the Indian democracy, the world's largest democracy. The "polish" being referred to here is the black/blue paint that marks one has cast their vote. In a sarcastic and farcical way, the speaker denounces:

promises and promises  
give it a miss  
It's unsure  
why  
you promised me the moon  
and doted on my nails  
the black stain of your promises  
I live with regret (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 110).

A mockery and, at the same time, a regret of electing a representative leader who is corrupt and untrue to their promises, the poem attempts to capture the angst that accumulates in the people of such a grief-stricken place. Therefore, an aura of sadness, gloominess, fragmentation and death pervades life in Manipur. As peripheral voices try to assert and voice out all that they experience and feel, these poems exhibit life as lived in Manipur. Soibam Haripriya's "September Still," "And We Leave Patches," and "Fragments" trace the unceasing suffering and darkness that lies within every soul – "In you I see /

Fragments and only fragments / The whole departed / And so will the fragments” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 112).

The history of Manipur’s merging with India, as most natives of Manipur view, is annexation by force. The long-term feeling of injustice resulted in the formation of insurgent groups fighting for the independence of Manipur, which eventually brought in the draconian AFSPA. With insurgency vis-à-vis insurgent groups being a major problem in Manipur, the coming of AFSPA further galvanised the situation and saw an increase in the number of such militant outfits in Manipur. In this context, “Join Magazine Secy” is a poem that portrays how insurgent groups try to lure out youths, advertising in the streets and declaring their goal of saving Manipur from foreign forces. According to the “South Asia Terrorism Portal,” updated in 2017, out of forty-two insurgent groups, twenty-five groups have been labelled inactive, and five are involved in peace talks. The remaining twelve groups are divided into active terrorist groups and proscribed terrorist groups, with each having six outfits under the said categories. It is significant to note that due to the settlement of numerous tribes and communities, the number of insurgent groups also comprises different communities and tribes, each fighting for their own cause. However, the Meiteis who live in the valleys are the major tribe/community in Manipur, and the six proscribed terrorist groups are Meitei militant groups fighting for the separation of Manipur from India. These groups recruit young boys by luring them on the pretext of ethnic nationalism and protecting the “ancient” land. Significantly, the most notable factor has been “the punitive regime established by the Army” under the veil of AFSPA, which “aggravates physical and mental disintegration of people and by extension the entire region. Such disintegration(s) have a profound impact on the psyche of people, who are drawn into a culture of violence in the name of supporting” (Arora 2019, 5) ethnic and regional factional groups.

The history of Manipur, for the most part, starting from the eighteenth century, is a history of violence, oppression, armed clashes, bloodshed and deaths. Starting from the Burmese invasions to the arrival of British colonies, the people of Manipur have been battling their sufferings for a long time. In addition, the coming of Hinduism in Manipur during early eighteenth century which converted a major portion of Manipur to following Hinduism, resulted in the gradual forgetting of their ancient culture and traditions. More to add to the woes of Manipur, the debatable merger with India and the AFSPA coming into action have made Manipur a deplorable place to live. The poets in the poems depict all these extremities of suffering and forgetfulness, the “porous amnesia” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 115) that people experience in Manipur. With the use of nature, local myths and folk narratives, the poets have tried to weave a hopeful, yet at times fragmented, picture of Manipur, voicing out the ground realities. The poems, as most works of literature from the Northeast depict, are ruminations and lamentations of the loss of an inexplicable past. However, in this regard, Margaret Ch. Zama (2013, xii) critically claims:

This is not to be mistaken simply as blind nostalgia for a way of life long lost, but must be received as voices of individuals from societies caught in the cross-current of their political and historical inheritances, personal tragedies and cultural ambivalence, voices that are involved in developing and contributing to a much larger literary consciousness that needs to be recognized and interrogated.

One of the concluding poems in “Angst For Homeland,” which is “Let’s Play” by Soibam Haripriya, seems to be a proper summation and tribute to what the poets have tried to convey in all of their poems. “Let’s Play” is a cry of resistance and effective realisation on the part of the speaker who denounces and calls out both these armed patriarchies – government forces and insurgent groups – to lay down their arms and yield for a collective peaceful co-existence. As a result of the never-ending blood battles between the insurgents and the armed forces of the government, innumerable innocents suffer – losing families, destroying livelihoods – surviving a traumatising future that continues. In addition, the speaker is concerned regarding the rich flora-fauna and shuns the corporate organisations that look for selfish ways “to force minerals out of rivers, to force bauxite out of hills, to force timbre out of forests” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 116). There is a sense of disgust and detestation, as the speaker conveys, towards people in power who “stake the land” and “force people out of homes” (Phuritshabam et al. 2015, 116). As such, both nature and women seem to be the extreme sufferers, bodies on which the most violence is inflicted.

## 5. Conclusion

At the heart of these extreme clashes lies the failure of both the Indian and the State of Manipur governance to come to terms with the people. In *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India’s Northeast*, Sanjoy Hazarika (1995, 64) retorts:

India’s Northeast remains a peripheral area, drawing attention only when violence erupts, when massacres, riots, curfews and agitations spiral out of control. This is unfair and reflects the total insensitivity of the brown babus tightly ensconced in a power-sharing embrace with pajama-kurta-clad politicians

Saikat Guha notes that “the mainstream politics imbued with the ideology of subjugation and domination further deteriorated the peace prospect of the peripheral region” (2021, 275). Of India, one should be very clear that “India is not a nation-state. It is a state composed of many nations” (Samrat 2019). The underlying questions in these collections of poems under study, which portray such peripheral extremities and painstakingly agonising life conditions in Manipur, are not asking who is responsible for such a terrible plight but questioning until when these dehumanising situations will prevail and dictate lives in Manipur. With vivid juxtaposition of the past and the present life in Manipur, the poets are sceptical of the future. The poetry in this anthology “springs from the cruel contradictions of that land” (Ngangom 2005, 168) and tends to bring out life and survival experiences witnessed by a common human in Manipur. Also, the poems call attention to the excessive “insurgencies and counterinsurgency” that have, without any argument, “become a part of the fabric of everyday life” in the Northeastern region (Gill 2010, 12). As mentioned before, the “double challenge of truth and liberty” is depicted in clear terms, replete with imageries of suffering, seeking freedom, and loss of nature as well as the culture that permeates the whole of Manipur. The poems seem to hold a broken, fragmented mirror for the world to see what insurgency vis-à-vis militant groups and AFSPA – forms of hegemonized masculinities – had done to the women folk and society in general. While exerting domination and trying to be vindictive in their actions, and counter-actions, these tussles between “two-armed patriarchies” have subjugated other

peripheral voices. Therefore, there is an urgent need to recognize the gendered structures, be they socio-cultural or political and bring them to the forefront for a better understanding of the workings of society. It is only through our recognition and rectification of such perpetuating violence that we can try to pave the way for peace and reconciliation amongst all the stakeholders in the state of Manipur.

## المرأة والعنف: قراءة جنسانية للقلق على الوطن

لونغجام غوراف كومار سينغها

باحث دكتوراه، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة آسام، سيلشار، الهند

### الملخص

في أعقاب اتفاقية الاندماج عام 1949، كانت الأغلبية في مانيبور، وهي دولة ذات سيادة في وقت سابق، متشككة دائماً في ضمها إلى الاتحاد الهندي في هذا السياق، ومن أجل قمع الارتفاع اللاحق للجماعات الانفصالية، أصدر الاتحاد الهندي قانون الصلاحيات الخاصة للقوات المسلحة (AFSPA) لعام 1958 وبالتالي، أصبحت مانيبور ساحة معركة للجماعات المتمردة المحلية والقوات المسلحة الهندية، و على هذا النحو، تتناول معظم الأعمال الأدبية في مانيبور موضوعات العنف والصراع، في هذا المكان المليء بالرصا، يسعى هذا المقال إلى قراءة نقدية لمجموعة قصائد بعنوان "القلق من أجل الوطن" من كتاب "وشم بالمحرمات": مختارات شعرية لثلاث نساء من شمال شرق الهند. (2015) "من خلال التحليل الجندري للهياكل الاجتماعية والثقافية والسياسية، ويحاول المقال استكشاف محنة النساء والاضطهاد الذي يتعرضن له وسط ما يسميه بانيرجي "نظامين أبويين مسلحين".

الكلمات المفتاحية: القلق على الوطن، العنف، المرأة، الموشومة بالمحرمات، AFSPA، مانيبور.

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