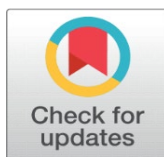
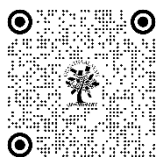


POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM AND MANIPURI WOMEN'S POETRY: A READING OF ARAMBAM ONGBI MEMCHOUBI'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Memchoubi's conceptualisation of the indigenous Meitei woman is rooted deep in history and tradition, vastly differing from Eurocentric constructs of womanhood. The paper will focus on select poems of Manipuri poet Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi where she revisits the folklore, myths, and legends of the Meiteis, interspersing them with a resounding call for the creation of a new world. Through a close examination of the poems, the paper will also highlight the ways in which the poet critiques established norms and attempts to reclaim lost agency by rewriting dominant patriarchal narratives. In the process, her poetry seeks to redefine the image of the indigenous Meitei woman by firmly rejecting essentialist definitions of womanhood. Memchoubi's poetry foregrounds this difference from 'first world' womanhood, thereby reinforcing the view that women are real material subjects of their histories. The paper will thus critically examine the poems and will also address the broader implications of women poets' acts to forge new worlds through their verse.

Keywords: Postcolonial Feminism, Women's Writing, Meitei, Indigenous, Women

1. INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST FRAMEWORK

The emergence of postcolonial feminism underscores the presence of women's movements unique to specific national contexts. These diverse movements advocate varied perspectives shaped by distinct sociocultural, political, and economic circumstances. In other words, postcolonial feminist theory critiques eurocentric constructs of indigenous women, highlighting how such representations fail to accurately capture the cultural realities and lived experiences of these women. Thus, while identifying with the broader goals of feminism, postcolonial feminism diverges from western feminist ideals, at times even becoming a counter to it. It can be noted that postcolonial feminist theories advocate not only feminism of the third

world but also of other marginalized peoples in the world. In the essay "Under Western Eyes," Chandra Mohanty (1984) questions the "the production of the Third World Woman as a singular monolithic subject" and posits the necessity to be specific to the micro-politics of the context, subjectivity and individual struggles (p. 333). She rejects "the assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions" (p. 336).

Women are real material subjects of their histories and their lived experiences are shaped not just by their gender but also by the specific historical contexts. Whereas western feminist ideologies stemming from an individualist perspective has been critiqued by postcolonial theorists like Spivak and Mohanty, the discourse in India can be said to be still limited mostly to class and caste. The question of race and indigeneity are marginalized and not as much a part of the 'Indian' feminist discourse as one would like it to be. This is a primary concern owing to the heterogenous diversity in India which encompasses indigenous populations with native histories of their own before having been annexed/integrated into the modern Indian nation. A critical observation thus highlights a similar problem of harbouring essentializing tendencies by conveniently excluding indigenous womanhood.

The concepts of double colonization (Holst-Peterson and Rutherford, 1988) and intersectionality could be useful in exploring the same. Double colonization refers to the condition of women of colonized nations being oppressed not only because of their gender but also because of their race. McLeod (2000) writes that it implies living under the negative effects of both patriarchy and colonialism and how sexual and racial oppression intersect to compound the degree of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) also discusses what she calls the "multidimensionality of Black women's experience" and how it is distorted by "a single-axis framework" (p. 139). The concept of intersectionality therefore also becomes key to understanding the intersecting, interconnected, and interdependent structures of societies— gender, class, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions, and political affiliation— that function simultaneously to marginalize and oppress women in patriarchal societies. These concepts can be useful to reach a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the women's question in Manipur.

RJ Meetei (2005) comments that there have been efforts by Manipuri scholars since the late 1990s to formulate a feminist literary theory within the domain of Manipuri literature. Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi (2007) traces the origin of *Meitei* society of Manipur to a "matriarchal" society (p.1) where women were important functionaries of state administration, and economically self-sufficient as well as skilled in many different activities. She attributes its decline to the uninterrupted rule of the lineage of Pakhangba which lasted more than a thousand years, the establishment of the *Yoiren Loishang* (Academy of Priests) during the reign of Khagemba (1592-1652) which "put the ancient Academy of *Maibis* (Priestesses) under the control of the priests" (p. 6), and most importantly the imposition of the Hindu religion by Pamheiba (1709-1748). Under this new religion,

the priests remade many myths according to the new religion. They made the creation myth on the basis of the Hindu creation myth with a touch of local colour... So, by the time of Meidingu Khagemba, *Meitei* women started to live in a paradox of goddess and wife. The degradation of *Meitei* women to a lower status quickened by the 18th century when Meidingu Pamheiba converted into Hinduism (a sect from Bengal). (p.10)

Chungkham Sheelaramani (2007) argues that “History that has been written so far regarding ‘Manipur’ and ‘Manipur women’ remains in an authoritarian, dogmatic and patriarchal view of expanding the Aryan cultural root to this remote corner of Eastern India” (p.32). Like Arambam, she is critical of the Sanskritization, yet she simultaneously explores the construction of gender in the *Meitei* society as rooted in the patriarchal moral codes— the Leimarel Code and the Emoinu Code. She also comments on how despite the aim of these moral codes being the nurturing of an ideal woman and an ideal man, “its hierarchical and patriarchal nature tends to breed an uncontrollable male dominance” (p.35). While both scholars acknowledge religious colonialism as a significant factor contributing to the erosion of the matriarchal system within Meitei society, they also point out the worsening of these conditions with the arrival of the British. Thus, women in Manipur who were already disadvantaged under a patriarchal monarchy, now faced additional threats from colonial oppression.

Memchoubi (2007) further argues that the patriarchal “foreign and alien rule” (p.13) post Sanskritization along with India’s annexation of Manipur in 1949, is responsible for Meitei women becoming subservient to a new patriarchal system which treated them as slaves and objects. This view resonates with that of Chungkham (2007) who remarks that there is “incessant oppression of the patriarchal ideology (though different from Brahmanical caste construct) from both within and without” (p. 37). Additionally, RJ Meetei (2005) also comments:

The status of Meitei women degraded after the seventeenth century Sanskritization. With this development, there were attempts to fit the indigenous Meitei women in the moulds of Hindu ideals of women such as Sabitri, Gandhari and Sita, which later on led to seeking a conformity with patriarchal Hindu ideals. (p. 45)

2. READING THE POEMS AND THE POLITICS

Much of post-World War-II poetry in Manipuri literature originates from a disillusionment with previously venerated and unquestioned ideals. This sentiment is discernible in the works of poets like Thangjam Ibopishak, Yumlembam Ibomcha, Sri Biren, and R.K. Madhubir Singh, whose voices are full of anger, discontent, and a deliberate disregard for conventional decorum (Chongtham 2013). However, in the 1980s, a new group of poets emerged who advocated a return to their indigenous roots, aiming to rediscover and reaffirm their native identity. Some well-known poets in this movement are Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi, Lanchenba Meetei, Birendrajit Naorem, Sharatchand Thiyam, and Raghu Leisangthem.

Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi is one of the most important critical voices from among Manipuri women writers. She has published numerous books on poetry, prose, criticism and travelogue. Some of her notable works are *Nonggoubi* (1984), *Androgee Mei* (1990), *Sandrempi Chaisra* (1993), *Eigee Palem Nungshibi* (1998), *Wakma Maibi* (1999), *Haoreima Sambubi* (2000), *Europekee Mapao* (2001), *Idu Ningthou* (2005), *Tawngbo; Irabotkee Aroiba Yahipham* (2015), *Thamamba Ahing* (2021) and *Kortoya Torbanda* (2023).

For centuries, women’s voices have been historically silenced and marginalized in societies that are predominantly male-centric. In such context, women’s writings explore the female perspective in an attempt to retrieve and reconstruct the lost as well as previously suppressed female experiences. In doing so, it seeks to not only recover, but also rewrite the female self and their lived experiences, through reimagining myths, revisiting gendered customs, and questioning traditional values

that had kept them relegated to the margins. The origin of women's literature in Manipur is traced to the tradition of oral narratives that recounts the ancient myths and legends. Memchoubi (2003b) points out how the invocations and oracles of the *Maibi* is one of the oldest forms of literary narratives.

Memchoubi's poetic oeuvre is deeply anchored in the historical and cultural tapestry of Manipur. While her poetry addresses the more common theme of women's subjugation, she also contextualizes this oppression by redefining patriarchal narratives through a womanhood rooted in the Manipuri society. In many of her poems, Memchoubi identifies with the universal problems faced by women in patriarchal societies. In the poem "Paamjadre," the poet expresses her frustration and desire to break free from the shackles of patriarchy:

The house you built for me

That you erected for my dependence

I do not want it, I do not (Arambam, 2003e, p.152)

Nahakpam Aruna comments that the image here is not of the silent, ideal woman placed on a pedestal (Nahakpam, 2022) but rather of a woman who voices her discontentment with living a dependent life. The house can be read as a symbolic representation of patriarchy which embodies notions of authority, control, and ownership, where it is only the males of the household who exercise power. Additionally, the spatial divisions within a patriarchal household designating certain areas as exclusively male domains where decisions are made and power is exercised, while relegating women to domestic spaces like the kitchen and subordinate roles, is also highlighted. This segregation of spaces reinforces traditional gender roles and hierarchies pointing at how the physical structure of the house often reinforces these power dynamics. Subsequently, the house here can be read as symbolizing the oppressive patriarchal structures which keeps women trapped inside the four walls of domesticity. Therefore, the poet's declaration that she does not want to live in this house anymore expresses her rejection of patriarchal norms that limit women's autonomy as well as a desire for agency. She challenges the traditional notion that women should be dependent on men for shelter and support, emphasizing the importance of being independent. The house, as a symbol of dependency, is not merely a physical structure but also an embodiment of a power structure that perpetuates women's oppression. By refusing to live in the house built for her, the poet asserts her right to make her own decisions, perhaps with a realization that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 2018, p.19). Quite significantly, the poet declares that she would rather face the scorching sun and the freezing winter than to live as a dependent.

In another poem "Eigi Luhongba Numitta," the poet recounts how she was 'advised' by her mother and aunts that once she was married, she can never return to her paternal home. As a married woman, she is expected to endure everything regardless of whether she faces a lack of love and ill-treatment.

You cannot die at your paternal home

Whether you're mistreated or loathed

You have to endure, stay there

You can never come back here (Arambam, 1990, p.36)

As in other patriarchal Indian societies, marriage is treated as sacrosanct and often considered a union not just between two individuals but between two families, in which women are expected to unconditionally commit for life. Additionally, the cultural expectation that once a woman is married, her primary allegiance shifts to

her husband's family reinforces the idea that a woman's identity and place of belonging are tied to her marital home. Hence, returning to one's paternal home after marriage due to marital discord or even domestic violence, carries social stigma and is perceived as a failure on the part of the woman and her family. There is societal pressure to maintain the appearance of harmony within the marital relationship, even if it comes at the expense of the woman's well-being. It is precisely this dispossession of women's belongingness and identity that the poet critiques in the poem. The poet questions this notion of sanctity associated with marriage— an institution of patriarchy, that together with patrilocality engenders an unequal power relation. Hence, the poet expresses her disagreement with defining a woman's identity solely through marriage (Meetei, 2005).

The above examples portray the poet's critique of dominant patriarchal norms and women's desire for a liberated existence. While these poems depict the universal angst of womankind, numerous other works by the poet are situated within the distinctive context of Meitei society. Memchoubi incorporates folk elements, such as myths and legends deeply embedded in the history and culture of the Meiteis to comment on the condition of its women.

In her poem "Nonggoubi," Memchoubi employs the myth of the *Nonggoubi* bird associated with rainfall in Meitei cosmogony. According to the myth, the *Nonggoubi* bird could not participate in digging rivers and lakes at the time of creation as she was preoccupied in care-giving for her children. As a punishment for disobedience, she was prohibited from using water from the water bodies, and could only quench her thirst when the rains came.

In the poem, the poet not only employs an important myth of the Meiteis but also revisits it to comment on the condition of women in the contemporary Meitei society. She uses the symbol of the *Nonggoubi* bird to articulate the helplessness of women living under the constraints of a system which constantly marginalizes them. Just like how *Nonggoubi* had to undergo punishment for not participating in creation, most women are unable to participate in community work owing to the burden of domestic responsibilities, ultimately being sidelined for their non-participation.

Come Come Nonggoubi

We are creating the world anew today

Come let us create the world! Come let us create! (Arambam, 2003c, p.149)

It can be noted that feminist poets envision and advocate for the creation of a new world where gender inequality is eradicated and patriarchal structures are dismantled. Their poetry serves as a means to challenge existing social norms and to articulate visions of a just society. They use their words to explore themes of agency and reclaim narratives that have traditionally marginalized or silenced women, and imagine a world where women have equal rights and opportunities. Memchoubi in this poem expresses her concern at the lack of "political consciousness" among women and emphasizes the need for their involvement in decision-making (Nahakpam, 2022, p. 126). She urges *Nonggoubi*, who in the past could not participate in the creation of the world, to come out to create a new world where she would no more be subject to punishment. Just like *Nonggoubi*, the poem articulates how women are excluded from decision-making. RJ Meetei (2005) reiterates the significance of the call for the dismantling of a "male-centric" society in order to establish a new world order where women enjoy equal rights (p.81). The poet's call is therefore a disruptive one capable of re-imagining a new world where *Nonggoubi* would no longer be excluded.

Similarly, in the poem "Nongthangleima," the poet is critical of a society that objectifies women, reducing them solely to sex objects. In a revisionist approach, the poet presents an alternative image of the goddess *Nongthangleima* different from the one found in the creation myth. According to *Leithak Leikharon*, the Almighty created his first son *Asheeba* from his right nostril, and the second son *Konjin Tuthokpa* from the left nostril. Following his father's instructions, *Asheeba* began the creation process. However, he was repeatedly obstructed by his younger brother who kept destroying his creations. *Nongthangleima*, a beautiful goddess, was created by the Almighty to distract *Tuthokpa*, and it was only with her intervention that *Asheeba* was able to complete the creation of the Universe (Chongtham, 2013).

In patriarchal societies, women are frequently objectified and reduced merely to their physical appearance and sexual attributes. Such objectification reinforces the idea that women exist primarily for the pleasure and consumption of men, further perpetuating gender inequality where women's roles and contributions are diminished and their agency undermined. In the Meitei creation myth, *Tuthokpa* is captivated by *Nongthangleima*'s beauty which distracts him. On the other hand, the poet's *Nongthangleima* is not the embodiment of beauty as found in the myth of creation but one who has "a loud shrill voice" and "an ugly appearance" (Arambam, 2003d, p.151). This newly envisioned goddess can burn down antiquated societal norms and is powerful enough to destroy the oppressive structures of patriarchy. Nahakpam (2022) asserts the importance of women having agency in shaping a new history, emphasizing the need to discard superficial external beauty. Hence, the poet's goddess uses her terrifying appearance as a powerful weapon to create a world of her own. The poem can be read as a powerful assertion of women's agency wherein the poet questions and revisits the traditional portrayal of women only as objects of physical beauty.

In the poem "Eigi Palem Nungsibi," Memchoubi depicts her mother as a gentle and dignified woman who navigates through the challenges and hardships of life all by herself. The poet presents the image of a woman adorned with *kokset* and *khwangchet*, a distinctive Manipuri attire worn with the *phanek*. The poet characterizes her *Palem Haobi* as a woman preoccupied with domestic responsibilities and one who does not hesitate to fulfil her roles as a wife and a mother.

There she was carrying in her cane basket

Her aged husband

Her youthful son (Arambam, 2033a, p.155)

The image of the self-sacrificing mother portrays women as ultimate nurturers who prioritize familial needs over their own. She bears the emotional and invisible labour of maintaining harmony, often at the expense of her well-being and personal fulfilment. This idealized maternal role perpetuates traditional gender roles, limiting women's opportunities beyond caregiving. While celebrated for her devotion, it imposes unrealistic expectations and reinforces inequality by undervaluing women's contributions outside the domestic sphere.

Memchoubi's image of the ultimate mother finds resonance with this image of the self-effacing mother, albeit also different from it in that her mother willingly takes up these responsibilities without them being imposed on her. The poet here envisions the ideal woman as the Supreme Mother, rooted in the soil of Manipur. She is the enduring, non-transgressive woman, yet also one who makes the conscious choice to fulfil the socially sanctioned roles and responsibilities of a wife and a mother (Nahakpam, 2022). The poet's ultimate mother does not leave her old

husband and young son in the face of hardships, neither does she complain about their inaction and dependence on her. This representation of the poet's ideal mother is a counter to western ideals of motherhood/womanhood which are more oriented towards questions of reproductive rights and control over one's body. Thus, what might be considered oppressive from a eurocentric point of view is undone here by the poet who advocates for a different ideal of womanhood, one which is more relatable in the context of Meitei society.

3. CONCLUSION

The issues and concerns in Memchoubi's poetry discussed above positions her within a postcolonial feminist framework. Considering the fact that feminism has oftentimes been perceived as a western import, it is crucial to understand the indigenous politics embedded in Memchoubi's poetry. Though her critique of patriarchal structures and reflections on the predicament of women is a common experience of women worldwide, Memchoubi's politics calls for a more specific understanding of historical and cultural context. Her employment of folk narratives, mythical allusions, and historical incidents specific to Manipur, and more specifically the Meiteis, form key elements in her assertion of an alternative womanhood. While Memchoubi undoubtedly emerges as a feminist voice challenging the conventional image of the idealized woman within a patriarchal framework, her poetry also reflects a deep reverence for her indigenous roots. It is at this intersection that one can locate the postcolonial feminist perspective in Memchoubi's poetry.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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