

Locating History and Culture in Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami: A Redemption Song*

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Abstract:

*The indigenous customs, traditions and beliefs of the Mizos have undergone tremendous changes since the arrival of the British in the Lushai Hills. One of the major contributing factors that bring about these changes was the conversion of the Mizos to Christianity as well as the introduction of a script by the British. The Christianization of the Mizos led to the decline of many indigenous cultural practices that do not align with their new religion. However, many of the indigenous practices of the Mizos continue to survive in one form or the other, and the confluence of the two cultures gives birth to a hybrid culture which ultimately comes under the umbrella term Mizo culture. The aim of this study is to highlight these cultural practices and the changes therein of the Mizos within a specific historical context, particularly the rambuai, as seen in Malsawmi Jacob's novel *Zorami: A Redemption Song*.*

Zorami: A Redemption Song (2015) is a historical novel that retells the horrifying tale of Mizo rambuai. With the use of memory as a narrative device, the novel presents the testaments of many witnesses and victims of the violent clash between the Mizo nationalists and the Indian Army that occurred in the 1960s, known as rambuai. While revisiting the events surrounding the conflict, the quest for redemption and reconciliation is embedded in the novel. Significantly, the novel showcases the life and culture of the Mizos during this extremely difficult period in their history.

Wars leave lifetime scars, scores to settle, and intense emotions to deal with. They are historically important, not least because they act as markers of meaning for the societies they bring into being. (Schendel 76)

Mizo rambuai, generally referred to as the Mizo Rebellion or troubled times, is an armed conflict that took place in the Mizo Hills in the northeastern part of India. The Mizo National Front (MNF), originally known as the Mizo National Famine Front which was an organisation formed to address the problem of famine caused by Mautam (flowering of bamboo), led a rebellion against the Indian Government in the 1960s, the immediate cause being the latter's inefficacy and mistreatment of the Mizos during the famine, and sought to establish an independent Mizo nation. The conflict lasted several years until 1986 when the Mizoram Peace Accord was signed between the Indian government and the MNF, resulting in the restoration of peace and also leading to the establishment of the state of Mizoram.

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A Brief Overview of the Novel

Zorami chronicles the life of the eponymous heroine Zorampari, known as Zorami. The name of the heroine is significant as it represents the land of Mizoram as well as the people who lived and witnessed the rambuai, as admitted by the author Jacob. "This act of conflating two identities (name of place and name of person) underscores the inextricable link between being and belonging to a place" (Biswas 2). Jacob further denotes that the non-linear manner in which the story is narrated is symbolic of the chaos and disturbance that the Mizos experienced during the rambuai (Rajpal). There are two strands of stories that are interwoven in the novel. On one hand is the personal journey of the heroine, and on the other, the collective Mizo struggle for Independence. These are simultaneously presented in the narrative and are inextricably linked to each other.

Zorami comes of age at a pivotal time in the history of the Mizos, namely the struggle for independence which resulted in social and political unrest. Like most Mizos during that period, she and her family share the same unfortunate fate when the independence struggle became violent. Thus, their future as individuals and a nation too became uncertain as they tried to survive the horrific events that unfold in their community. The novel Zorami reenacts the gruesome incidents of rape, betrayal, torture, executions that occurred during the rambuai. As is the case in war zones, many innocent lives are lost, many women including the protagonist Zorami are brutally raped, and the trauma that haunts those who lived through these terrors form a major portion of the narrative. There is also the issue of displacement as a result of village groupings and burning of certain villages. But despite these, the Mizos as a community show resilience, and are persistent in upholding "stoical endurance", which is considered one of the ultimate virtues among the Mizo people (102), and *tlawmngaihna* that most beautiful quality that defies definition which has been practised since the time of their forefathers (102).

Folk Narratives and Culture

The task of telling a story in English pertaining to non-native speaking Mizo people is definitely challenging. One of these challenges lies in the fact that the author has to tell a story "in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own...the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language" (v) as Raja Rao rightly denotes in his Foreword to *Kanthapura*. To articulate the Mizo sentiments, expressions and cultures, and that too, during one of the most significant and transformative period in Mizo history is itself a daunting task. It is imperative therefore to employ a narrative technique to solve this issue. Jacob skilfully retains her local vernacular from time to time and equally significantly employs the traditional narrative technique of the Mizos in order to tell a story: its history and cultures that is uniquely theirs.

Before the Europeans came, the Mizos adopted the tradition of imparting indigenous knowledge and values orally. Some of these oral folklore include folktales which are now seen as important documents for the preservation of Mizo history and culture as they embody the popular attitudes, beliefs, customs, traditions, and values of the society where the stories originated, thus, enriching consciousness and appreciation of one's culture. The story-telling tradition of the Mizos has always been central to understanding their history and culture.

The culture of the face-to-face communities which is distinguishable from the abstract nature of social relationships in the 'modern' world, is a distinguishing feature of the oral and it has continued as the dominant influence on the literary creations from the region. (Misra xvii)

Folktales may be seen as the bridge that connects the past and the present, the ancient and modern, bringing about integration of all “Mizo hnahthlak” (Nuchhungi vii). In *Zorami*, Jacob highlights the indigenous games of the Mizo through Zorami’s memory that bears historical and cultural significance. More importantly, she uses folktales to give a romantic representation of the current socio-political situation as seen in the chapter “Tales Grandma Told”. These stories that their grandmother told them include “magical folk tales. Stories of wood nymphs who helped men to shoot animals, of tragic lovers who turned into stars or butterflies after death, of poor orphans who attained great wealth...[and] tales with a comical touch, like Chhura, Chemtatrawta, or stories of action and fight” (40). Many of these tales are either didactic or comical, and are used to educate and entertain.

Folktales were constructed with purpose and served specific functions. Folktales were meant to be a form of entertainment as well as a way for society to teach lessons of life to their younger members, such as stressing the importance of wits. (Abler, “The Moral of the Story”)

Focussing on the current political unrest, Jacob employs folk narratives to critique war and conflicts rampant in the past and present Mizoram: “And what good does any war bring?” (46). The condemnation of violence is seen through Grandmother’s retelling of Mizo folktales thus upholding the tradition of using folklore as a means to educate and preserve culture. One of the tales that Grandma narrated “chungleng leh hnuaileng indo”, is used as an allegory to address the ongoing political struggle to her young audience. The tale encapsulates the contemporary political climate which is represented through Grandma’s rendering of Mizo folktales providing an understanding of the nuances of the socio-political unrest in their community. Malsawmi Jacob’s rendering of traditional Mizo folktales and oral story-telling tradition in *Zorami* gives insight into the past while also preserving tradition.

Centrality of the Church

Mizo culture during the rambuai of the 1960s, is a subject that intertwines historical, social, and cultural dimensions. The troubled times, led by the Mizo National Front (MNF), significantly impacted the cultural fabric of the Mizo people in Mizoram. The armed conflict, initiated by the MNF in the early 1960s, had profound implications for Mizo culture, influencing various aspects of social life. Despite the disruptions caused by the troubled times, Mizo culture exhibited remarkable resilience and solidarity. The Mizo people, renowned for their close-knit communities and cultural vibrancy, navigated through the challenges posed by the conflict.

“The Mizos understand their identity to be inextricably linked to their Christianity” writes Pachuau, and “The collective consciousness of the Mizos propagates a ‘Mizo Christianity’” (Pachuau 137). As mentioned before, the mass Christianization of the Mizos during the colonial era has proved to be an influential factor that brings about changes in the customs and traditions of the Mizos. The concept of morality, virtues and ideals are thus redefined in conformity to their new faith which are based on Biblical teachings. More importantly, they found collective identity and representation in the Church. Thus, “society organizes itself around the church as an institution and operates in accordance with the values defined and inculcated by the church...Respectability, honour, propriety, hierarchy, and so on, are idioms expressed through the institutionalized church in Mizoram.” (Pachuau 146)

The centrality of the Church in Mizo society finds expression in the novel *Zorami* which opens with a Prologue describing a typical Sunday morning in Aizawl:

Sunday morning church-bells pealed. In different tones and rhythms...They rang from

all directions.

People of all ages hurried towards their churches...

Men in suits and ties, women in tops and colourful puan...(11)

The Prologue showcases the predominance of Christianity in modern Mizo society, the influence of western culture and its confluence with traditional Mizo culture; and how all the Mizo, regardless of their clans and spatial affinity, are brought together as one unifying body i.e. Christians. In a way, Christianity overcame the barrier of division that the Mizos had, which were mainly based on differences in language and clan, fostering a sense of kinship among the Mizos (Khangte 2). Christianity shapes the worldview of the Mizos, and instances are found throughout the novel that profess their faith, or how their thoughts are informed by Biblical teachings. Forgiveness, peace and reconciliation in accordance to Christian ethos are ideas explored in the novel in this regard.

The role that the Church played in the negotiation and reclamation of peace in the land that had been ravaged by war for so long is extremely crucial. It acts as an agent of peace and unity as depicted in the chapter "The Peacemaker". With the men of the Indian Army occupying important places and encroaching the town and villages in Mizoram, the civilians live in constant fear of both the Indian Army and the Mizo Army. Communication between the volunteers became increasingly difficult as they settle in different camps. Under such turmoil, there seems no prospect of the war coming to an end. The Church, convinced by Reverend Thanngura, finally steps in. Reverend Thanngura "knew it was risky" to negotiate a peace talk between the underground army and the Indian Army but he "decided to take a chance" (142). This was "the result of months of negotiations with the church, social organizations and political leaders" (145). He sought out the MNF camp in Southern Mizoram where he met Lalringa, a captain in the underground army, trying to express how peace talk is the need of the hour during that time.

You know the condition of our native land because of the fight for independence... Our people are suffering terribly under the army operations.

Many young people have joined the MNF. Many have been killed. If the MNF is willing to hold peace talk and peace returns, we can all work together to build our nation. (144)

In short, Reverend Thanngura's appeal bears fruitful results as the MNF soon agreed to have a peace talk with the centre, which later culminated into the signing of the Peace Accord. Additionally, the novel affirms the importance of Christianity in aiding the Mizo to reconcile with their past trauma that resulted from rambuai. This is encapsulated in the Bible verse read by Pi Rinmawii on a Sunday morning Church service as seen in the Prologue: "When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are healed of your sickness.'" (14) Thus, the aforementioned verse which is taken from the Gospel according to Luke (13) once again establishes how religion plays a significant role in bringing peace and reconciliation in the society.

Women and Society

The understanding of a community's culture is deeply rooted to the study of human relationships within the given community. In this context, the roles and position that women have in the society as compared to their male counterparts is pivotal in aiding the understanding of their culture. Having said that, it is also crucial to recognize that the position of women in any society is diverse, and societal perspectives tend to change over time.

Mizo society has always been patriarchal since pre-colonial times. As such, women were

usually confined to perform household duties. Although modernisation has brought certain changes, the novel shows how women are still expected to take on these duties in order that they may become good wives and mothers. One early indication of this in the novel is when Zorami recalls being called home by her father who reminds her that she “should be working in the house or studying instead of playing about all the time” (26). Among many other instances like this, the father’s action here reveals the societal norms towards women, and how they are moulded for domesticity since childhood. Throughout the novel, women are also seen performing household duties while the men are seldom seen in that position. It becomes inevitable therefore, that Thangliana has to put on women’s garments while performing such duties in an attempt to avoid apprehension.

‘Give me some women’s clothes, quick,’ he said. He changed quickly into a puan and a loose top, and covered his head with a cloth in the manner of older women. He asked for thlangra and rice, and sat sifting it in the corner of the kitchen. (123)

The mother’s concerns over her daughter during the latter’s childhood were on issues related to femininity and modesty and so on, qualities that were linked with the concept of the ‘ideal woman’.

Mother was worried. Her little daughter seemed to be getting quite immodest...At this rate, she might grow up into a tomboy or a shameless person...

...Girls shouldn’t do such things or talk too much. (37)

Thus, Zorami learns to remain silent and is incapable of articulating her “inner turmoil, her emotional battles” (38) even when she is sexually abused. In a dialogue on gender issues with Zorami, Kimi notes: “Remember the old adages” ‘Woman’s wisdom does not reach beyond the village stream.’ And ‘A wife and a broken fence are meant to be replaced.’ She further states: It’s all so unfair! And our customary laws are so hard against a woman. She has worked hard for the family, but if her husband decides to divorce her, she has to go out with an empty hand. Nothing belongs to her, she cannot take even her children with her. (69)

Zorami responds by saying, “It looks like all societies are biased against women.” (69) Despite their laments, Zorami’s generation show a change in which the gender roles undergo undeniable changes. The following statement on the same issue can be seen as evidence of the departure from the passive roles that women typically play in the old societies.

These days, in our society, girls seem to take up more responsibilities than boys. The girls are manlier in that sense. Boys somehow seem to be getting soft and helpless. (68)

As women’s roles continually change, the novel also reveals how the culturally accepted notion of heroism became inclusive of all the members of Mizo community regardless of their gender. Contrary to traditional practise, the armed conflict paved the way for the active participation of women in the political sphere. Women’s access to higher education and financial independence play an important role in changing gender dynamics as is seen in the novel Zorami. Zorami’s story is a testament to the modern departure from the practices and attitudes of the past pertaining to women’s position in Mizo society. The shift is seen when Zorami relays her colleague Pu Tluanga’s theory on the changing gender behaviour,

He said that in the old days, the men had their regular duties. They had to hunt, clear the jungle for cultivation, and do many other jobs which women could not do. But now, especially among town dwellers, those works are gone. So they are left with not enough to do to occupy themselves. Women, on the other hand, keep up what they had been doing through the ages,

like looking after the household, as well as joining in producing food or bringing an income. That's why men tend to hang loose. (68)

Pu Tluanga further claims that "men are becoming the weaker sex. Women are now given equal chance for getting education. So they're getting into all professional fields, and men are getting ousted." (68)

The political conflict brought about certain changes in the traditionally accepted gender roles in Mizo society. In *Zorami*, Malsawmi Jacob exposes the changes in gender roles by portraying how women started actively participating in the struggle for independence. *Zorami* who has the opportunity to pursue higher education and acquire a job to secure herself financially serves as a notable example in this regard: "Mami, work hard at your studies. If you are educated, you can get a good job when you grow up." (22)

To *Zorami's* father, education was of prime importance. It was the magic key that would unlock the door to a better world. (32)

Marriage is a theme that is recurrent in *Zorami* where the customs and traditions of the Mizos are showcased. *Zorami's* life is a testament to the changing perception of the Mizos on marriage. In Mizo culture, marriage is seen as a social obligation for both men and women and especially for the female child, it is seen as the ultimate destiny. Sanga confesses, "My uncle's family and my friends advised me to get married. They were all worried I was turning into an old bachelor." (49). Similarly, *Zorami's* parents, especially her father is worried about her daughter when he retorts, "She is so stubborn. She may refuse to get married unless we are firm with her." (56)

However, the story of *Zorami* reveals how the idealized notion of marriage and the qualities that are expected of a woman in relation to matrimony has undergone certain changes due to rambuai conflict and modernity. Nuchhungi writes:

In the olden times, Mizo women did not have the right to choose husbands. Her parents had the sole authority to decide who she would marry. (Biaksanga, 256)

With regards to marriage, *Zorami*, an educated and financially independent woman is an epitome of the modern Mizo woman. Traditionally in Mizo society, marriage takes place when parents give their consent (Lalrinawma 56), and their involvement in the selection of their children's life partner was vital. But instead of showing absolute authority and control over their daughter and her prospective marriage, *Zorami's* father prioritizes *Zorami's* decision unlike what is traditionally seen when marriage proposals are sent. He tells the messengers:

We will consult our daughter and see what she says. These days, girls have become headstrong; it's hard for the parents to give a final word without their consent. (55)

Hence, the manner in which *Zorami's* parents handle the marriage proposal can be seen as a significant change that has taken place in the societal norms of the Mizos.

Conclusion

The troubled times affected existing social institutions within Mizo society. It had profound implications for gender roles within Mizo society. This period witnessed a re-evaluation of traditional gender roles within the context of conflict. The culmination of the troubled times with the signing of the Mizoram Peace Accord in 1986 marked a turning point in the history of the Mizos. The interplay between traditional practices and the adaptations necessitated by the conflict contributed to a dynamic cultural landscape. The experiences of the Mizo people during this period contribute to our understanding of how culture serves as both a bastion of

continuity and a dynamic force responding to historical upheavals. The study of *Zorami: A Redemption Song* thus offers an understanding of the Mizo culture by providing a nuanced and immersive portrayal of the social, political and economic life during one of its most significant historical period.

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