Unspeakable Wounds: Trauma and Mental Health in Manipuri Women's Poetry

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Abstract

Much like the Rambuai of Mizoram and the literature of troubled times in Nagaland, Manipuri literature also documents the suffering caused by the armed insurgency in Manipur since the 1970s. Amidst ongoing turmoil, Manipuri women confront numerous adversities, including sexual abuse, political violence, historical trauma, displacement and emotional distress. Women poets have emerged in response, expressing their challenges and healing through verse, blending personal protest, poetics of violence and trauma. Their poetry directly addresses political regression and the pervasive turmoil endured by women and children. This paper aims to shed light on the enduring impact of prolonged violence and conflict on Manipuri women, analysing how women poets perceive and articulate violence. Drawing from theoretical paradigms such as women's studies and trauma theory, the analysis seeks to illuminate the profound effects of violence on women's well-being and their poetic expressions of resilience amidst adversity.

Keywords: *women, trauma, mental health, violence, poetry.*

Introduction

History undeniably attests to the recognition of Manipuri women for their bravery and self-reliance. However, this historical acknowledgement does not justify Manipuri women's freedom because they continue to function with a biased and deeply entrenched culture and

tradition that instrumentalises them for the state's advantage or the protection of their husbands and children. The general assumption that Manipuri women hold an equal status in society is subject to interpretation. Yet, this assumption is contradicted by the rising cases of domestic violence, harassment, rape, increased control through imposed moral codes and mob policing and even murder over the years.

To provide context to the excessive violence and madness in the state, a symbolic example, satirical as it can be, is given below:

> You are also innocent
> But your turn is evident
> For the whip of the mighty and powerful
> Is sure to lash on the shirtless
> Bare back of yours
> Therefore, put on a shirt Gandhi
> Make sure you wear one. (Premchandra, 181)

It is the voice of a young poet, Akham Yandibala (born 1981), addressing the reign of terror that has fallen upon the vulnerable citizens of Manipur. With a potent and metaphorical take, the poet ironically advises Mahatma Gandhi, the symbol of non-violence, to don a shirt, as his exposed back would bear the "whip of the mighty and powerful." The poet narrates the tale of recurrent and widespread violence in the strife-ridden state. Once more, her verse serves as a poignant reminder of the state's tumultuous history, where violence and chaos have left an indelible mark on everyone, each with their own harrowing story to hide or tell.

Due to the pervasive violence and its profound effects on the populace of the state, the often disregarded but prevalent matter of mental health tends to be neglected, especially among women who bear the burden of domestic and socio-political duties. Gender inequality further exacerbates women's health and well-being, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as encompassing physical, mental and social well-being. Thus, health is not merely the absence of illness but also the state of happiness and quality of life for individuals in a community or nation.The same world body defines the concept of 'Mental Health' in the following lines:

> Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of

> health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development. (WHO)

Sadly, in the most pathetic way, the 'state of being happy' or 'quality of life' has been blown up into pieces by the incessant cycle of violence brought by the freedom struggle. Thus ordinary folks suffer mentally, psychologically, socially, politically, economically and culturally. In Manipur, violence and corruption are the two leading causes of the collapse of once a prolific society. To understand violence and how it plays out, we can look at Slavoj Žižek's categorisation of the same in his book *Violence* (2008) where he identifies three types forming a triumvirate: (i) subjective violence, which is directly visible and performed by a clearly identifiable agent, (ii) symbolic violence and, (iii) systemic violence which is both objective and invisible (2). Violence in Manipur, which is the cause of mental health and trauma in Manipur, is subjective, symbolic and systematic.

Violence in Manipur leaves behind a trail of trauma, yet discussions on this serious mental health issue are conspicuously absent from public discourse. Despite its prevalence, trauma remains unaddressed mainly by government programs and policies, often relegated to radio ads and billboards. Studies on Manipuri women survivors of conflict reveal high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This unacknowledged trauma permeates community narratives, passed down through generations, either as a means of reconciliation or exploitation.Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History,* articulates that trauma is not understood entirely in the original incident, "[…] but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4).

The 'state of well-being' demands a complete secession from violence and a high standard of life. However, traumatic experiences come to haunt the poets as they have experienced them in one form or another. Though the poems under consideration do not directly depict the specific case studies of trauma survivors or provide a direct explanation of trauma from a psychiatric perspective, these poems tenaciously persist in conveying the experience of crisis through observation, emotion and understanding. Addressing and alleviating trauma necessitates "an investigation into both the mind and body, necessitating structural repair" (Waites 22).

Writing 'Lived Experiences': The Saga of Poetry as Protest

Manipuri women poets have effectively intertwined poetry with social and political activism, resonating with the deeply distressing state that the people of Manipur have unwittingly internalised. Therefore, Manipuri poetry surpasses the mere aesthetics of language or the appreciation of the world's wonders. Instead, it encapsulates reality, mirrors lived experiences and articulates the profound pain and suffering that every woman carries with her wherever she is.

The literary arena in Manipur, where women writers passionately articulate their minds, has evolved into a platform of agitprop. This space has taken on an increasingly personal dimension, overshadowing the public sphere and adopting a more political tone over a purely social one. This shift arises because the boundary between the political and social realms has become hazy and indistinct. The personal element is accentuated by the widespread prevalence of violence and trauma affecting individuals across the board.

Local struggles, like HijamIrabot's socialist movement in the 1950s and the formation of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) in 1964, preceded the ongoing conflict in the state. These movements incited mass opposition against the newly established administration, leading to armed resistance in the early 1970s. It sparked a relentless cycle of violence, leaving Manipur in a state of trauma for decades. This turmoil bred pessimism and nihilism, hampering the state's democratic and developmental endeavours amid existing poverty and conflict. The situation worsened when Manipur was declared a 'disturbed area,' subject to the oppressive Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958), exacerbating the crisis.

While it might seem hyperbolic, the fate of life and property in Manipur is dictated by a small group of influential individuals. The theoretical notion of poetic justice boils down to a stark reality: either kill or be killed. It is a desperate situation where one must either submit and face death or embrace violence to survive.It is either Prema's search for the crematorium where her body will be cremated when she wrote, "Crematorium/where are you waiting/for me?" (*Punshi Khongchatsida*, 135) or Tongbram Chandrakala's insistence, "Don't talk about who they kill/Narrate instead, who you've killed" (*Manipuri Sahityada Nupigi Khonjel,* 147). It is also not overstating to observe that every poem is steeped in deep frustration and a feeling of complete disorientation.

The future of Manipur is engulfed in flames, alongside the loss of lives and property. The relentless cycle of killings and atrocities has normalized trauma to the extent that it has become ingrained in the fabric of life and history in Manipur. While empathy allows us to understand others' suffering, the pervasive trauma in Manipur defies the usual mechanisms of forgetting for self-protection. Instead, a culture of remembering emerges, driven by the

collective impact of numerous traumatic events, posing a dangerous trend for the Manipuri society.

Writing Trauma: The Two Generations of Women Poets

There remains a high tendency to develop multiple perspectives on women when it concerns health and its impact on women. Manipuri women poets depict the status of Manipuri women as they exist within the critical and hypocritical gaze of Manipuri society. She is good and evil, according to her obeisance to society's set conventions. Her pain, anguish, mental health and other concerns are for her to endure. There is a Manipuri expression, which is *akhangkanbi.* The phrase roughly translates into 'women endure and persevere anything.' Such cultural constructs worsen matters instead of solving women-related issues in the state.

For convenience, Manipuri women poets can be categorised into two generations, which span half a century of violence – from the 80s to the 2020s. We have poets born in the 50s and 60s in the first generation. These poets were born immediately after India gained independence and witnessed the escalation of violence in Manipur during their adulthood. Notable poets from this phase include Khwairakpam Anandini (born in 1952), Memchoubi (born in 1957), Moirangthem Borkanya (born in 1958), Koijam Shantibala (born in 1960), Lairenlakpam Ibemhal (born in 1960) and more. These poets inherited the trauma and devastation of British rule and the Great War.

In the second generation, there are poets such as Sorokhaibam Gambhini (born in 1971), Sobita Bachaspati (born in 1971), Naorem Romina (born in 1978), Prema Chanu (born in 1981), Yandibala (born in 1981), Angom Sarita (born in 1982) and others leading the way. These two generations offer varying perspectives on the tumultuous period that Manipur experienced from the early 1980s, which continues to wreak havoc even today.

i) The First Generation

In 1967, Khwairakpam Anandini made history by releasing "SajibugiLeirang" (The Flower of April), a woman's first anthology of poems in Manipuri literature. Her work followed the emergence of modern Manipuri poetry after the nationalist fervour ignited by the Anglo-Manipuri war in 1891. Building upon the themes of nostalgia for the kingdom's past glory and linguistic nationalism, Anandini inherited the poetic tradition from her male predecessors. However, her style and perspective evolved as she grappled with the challenges of contemporary life, shifting from the initial tone of nationalist fervour to a more nuanced exploration of self and existence.

In her poem "The Promise of an Embryo," she draws a parallel between herself and an embryo, existing within her mother's womb yet repeatedly terminated as an unwanted offspring. It is not a vulnerable mother who commits the act but rather the omnipotent adversary.

Fueled by anger, she yearns to become a soldier and combat those who afflict her homeland, only to realise her own embryonic state. Her exasperation is expressed in the following lines:

My mother had me killed
Many times, mercilessly
By the opponent's weapon.
My mother did that? Really? (Premchandra, 87)

The poet sees the persons who are to defend her motherland as embryos and everything else in the land. She is sad and infuriated by the fact that the womb is defenceless and embryos have not turned into real flesh and bone which can fight and defend. At the same time, she is rattled by all the unfulfilled promises made by certain individuals and politicians. Given the circumstances, the poet starts seeing Manipur as a womb where things are more unmade than made:

Embryo soldiers
Embryo promises
Embryos destroyed in the wombs
Promises aborted in the wombs. (Premchandra, 87)

Anandini's take on the inadvertent responsibilities of women or mothers to rescue the land from dangers is also shared by Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi, who is the leading poet among the women writers of Manipur. Memchoubi posits that there are innumerable prejudices against women in Manipur, but they still carry the burden of protecting innocent civilians and opposing any non-democratic activities in the state. Her poem"Palem Ima Ningshibi" or "My Beloved Mother" is one fine example to elucidate the point made above:

I asked her one day –
"Palem Ima Nungshibi – my beloved mother
What is there in your basket
That you are carrying on your back?
Show me, mother, show me please."

Without parting it away from her back
My mother slightly tilted the basket and
Showed me the load on her back.
I peeked inside with curiosity
Oh, I saw inside, inside the basket
Her shabby old husband
And her youthful son. (Premchandra, 97)

In a place like Manipur, where the "right to property" is a luxury and the fundamental "right to life" is a constant struggle, the impact is deeply ingrained in the psyche and spirit of women poets. Such harsh realities permeate their minds, sowing fear, anxiety and loathing. These sentiments are vividly portrayed in Memchoubi's celebrated poem, where the poet provocatively asks the old mother what she conceals so discreetly in her basket.These lines capture the traditional role that Manipuri women have borne for generations. Eventually, the protective old woman unveils the truth — she carries her frail and ailing husband and her young and energetic son. Memchoubi's poem is a poignant representation of Manipur's mothers, who have been responsible for shielding and safeguarding their men and sons throughout the ages.

But such a courageous woman can fall victim anytime. Memchoubi is tired of sad songs sung by the wind, songs of death, decay, devastation and rape. She laments:

Do not sing sad songs, O wind,
Do not tell sad stories any more
Tell me instead
How you spent the dreadful night
How you resurrect yourself on your grave again. (Premchandra, 95)

The elegiac tone of the poem yet again reveals a lifetime of living in unspeakable pain and unhealed wounds. Solitude is depicted through visuals of falling leaves, forsaken jhum fields, desolate ravines and ominous nights, among others. There is no one to alleviate the suffering of the individual who bears it in silence. The victim grapples with a haunting experience that persists throughout every moment of her life. The shock of a traumatic event resurfaces, lingering with the survivor even after the actual incident has passed.

Hence, Memchoubi urges all women to rise and advocate for their rights. Recognising the inherent power within women, she encourages them to unleash it. Rather than provoking conflict, she acknowledges that every woman harbours dormant strength akin to a sleeping volcano, waiting for the opportune moment to erupt and catalyse change.She feels that Manipuri women have already snapped; therefore, she calls on every woman and contemplates:

Erupt, erupt, erupt
The sleeping volcano within
That's been holed up for many years
In the wombs of every Meitei woman –
Erupt, erupt, erupt
The sleeping volcano inside. (Premchandra, 96)

In her poem "Androgi Mei" or "The Fire of Andro" from her 1990 collection of the same name, Memchoubi revisits the historical event of the execution of two Manipuri freedom fighters, Thangal General and Yuvraj Tikendrajit, following Manipur's loss of independence to the British during the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. Despite the women's silent presence during the execution, they harbour intense rage, likened by the poet to a "volcano inside" Through the metaphor of a volcano, Memchoubi captures the pent-up anger and dissatisfaction of Meitei women who have long endured repression.

Individuals undergo trauma through various means: as witnesses, residents close to a disaster site or through second-hand exposure via accounts from acquaintances (Kaplan, 2).Similarly, the trauma of the hanging of the two brave heroes of Manipur is still fresh in the minds of every Manipuri as the story is passed down from generation to generation and perpetuated by pictures, radio and TV dramas and popular talks.

Moiranthem Borkanya incorporates cultural and historical motifs to articulate her reflections on prevailing societal concerns within her poetry. A notable example is her poem "Henjunaha,"which is featured in her 2018 collection by the same name. Drawing from the Moirang legend of Henjunaha and Lairoulembi, she illustrates the capricious nature of death inflicted by evil forces. Within the poem, she delves into the poignant theme of loved ones being torn apart by violence and mortality, echoing a universal human experience. Additionally, Borkanya explores the exploitation of youth by influential forces for their gain and convenience, adding another layer of depth to her work.The poet sees exploitation as an act of transgression where the state will reduce the youths to dust:

Henjunaha,
They want to reduce you to a tiny seed
No, no, they want you to be the dry dust inside a dead seed
They want you, your home, your homestead
All inside that tiny dead seed. (Premchandra, 103)

Her stanza below from the poem "The lad on the horseback" showcases her poetic quality and ability to paint the real picture of the people of Manipur. The lines reiterate the old notion that "traumatized people relive in their bodies the moments of terror that they can not describe in words" (Herman, 239). The stanza reads:

After major operations
The patients lie frozen
On the bed
Their sense organs numbed, etherised
By their ache. (Premchandra, 105)

Borkanya also uses medical imagery to express her feeling. Her poem "Sister Meera" is of particular interest. Here are some lines from the poem:

Sister Meera
Sister Meera
Sister Meera at the demonstration room.
Ventral position
Sims position
Vaginal position
Genupectoral position …
(Memchoubi, 2003, 128) [author's translation]

The poet sees the women of Manipur as plastic figurines for the demonstration to the medical students. She performs all the positions without any complaint or protest. She is silent, but her clear eyes seem to see who is 'operating' her. As Kalí Tal says, the "literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it 'real' both to the victim and to the community" (21). It is precisely what Borkanya and other poets do; tell their stories for others and posterity.

On the other hand, Lairenlakpam Ibemhal mostly brings out everyday happenstances which we do not consider important or relevant to women's health issues. The complex interplay of race, class, gender and culture that shapes women's health, as well as the cultural perceptions of women's bodies and their experiences, is a topic widely discussed but seldom acted upon. Writing about Women's health research in the last twenty-five years in Europe, Elianne Riska opines that "[…] beginning with homogenizing women and going on to differentiating between them and to deconstructing the category both of gender and of health - informs us that there is no generic concept of "women's health", but that women's health and men's health are located in time and space" (85). However, the situation in India is different, with significant geographical disparity, languages and cultures not conforming to one single entity. Norms and traditions in almost all regions have placed women at a considerable disadvantage.

On top of that, patriarchal norms and conventions segregate them and leave them to their development. Things are changing in the twenty-first century. There is much talk about girl-child education and other development plans designed specifically for women and girls. However, deeply entrenched "religious tradition, the family form, inheritance patterns, marriage, sex roles in the division of labour and segregation of women" still run deep in Indian societies (Key, 64). Manipuri society is no different. A woman must become one with her husband. Therefore, Ibemhal, despite the inconvenience, performs the duty of a wife:

Night after night
The stink of your alcohol
Slumbered with
The sweet smell of my hair.
Tonight is no different
Let the dreadful stench of your alcohol
Sleep with the sweet scent of my body.
Don't look at me like that
I haven't changed a bit
I've become you already. (Premchandra, 129)

ii) The Second Generation

Second-generation poets offer scathing critiques of the government and its apparatus, attributing Manipur's perpetual darkness to their actions. Their poetry vividly portrays a sense of dread and revulsion towards violence and injustice, whether orchestrated by governmental bodies or other entities. Their verses are laden with imagery depicting death, grief and the harsh truths of existence, including the challenges faced by women, such as menstruation taboos, patriarchal constraints, instances of sexual violence and battles with mental health issues.

Leading this generation is Sorokhaibam Gambhini,who constructs literary trauma as throwing, "[…] a light on figurative or poetic language and perhaps symbolic process in general, as something other than an enhanced imaging or vicarious repetition of a prior (non) experience" (Hartman,540). The poet, in this manner, raises her angst about the rape and murder of one Thangjam Manorama in 2004 in the poem "Sham Punshilu" ("Tie up your hair"), which compelled twelve mothers to protest nude in front of Kangla, in the heart of the capital city. Gambhini echoes the abject frustration of the women of Manipur and calls out to Manorama to come back, to resurrect again:

Manorama! Remove the white shroud covering your face
Stand up Manorama stand up
The Kangla stands with its head down!
You must stand up one last time
In front of the Kangla where the heartbeats of Nupilan were sown. (35-36) [author's translation]

One interesting fact is that Gambhini also carries intergenerational trauma where the trauma of forced migration is passed down from generation to generation and she looks at Manipur from a distance and feels equally concerned and sad about the state. She writes

from Tripura, looking at Manipur with pain in her heart:

In a moment's spurt, it dawned upon my mind
I wanted to go to the land of my origin!
My dearest Manipur,
Also known as Sana Laibak – Golden Land
Adorned by lakes, hills and rivers
To my beloved mother. (56) [author's translation]

Manipur, Gambhini's diasporic centre, calls out to her with open arms. Her forefathers migrated to present-day Tripura during the Seven Years Devastation (1819-1826) when the Burmese soldiers ran havoc in the valley of Manipur for seven long years. She still carries intergenerational trauma, which is the psychological and emotional impact of traumatic events passed down from generation to generation, often through cultural, familial and individual memories making a "living connection" and that past's passing into history or myth (Hirsch "Introduction" 2).

Haobijam Chanu Prema, on the other hand, eulogises *small* things which matter a lot to women but are insignificant from a man's perspective. Her range and vision are exciting. She metaphorically calls the mensural cycle 'Monthly Flower' and makes a list of dos and don'ts that come with mensuration. She showed her traumatic experience as a teenager when she got it for the first time and how innocent and terrified she was.

In the poem titled "Slut," she deals with the issue of displacement, fraud and human trafficking. As violence rages on, 'living' becomes an end which must be achieved with any means available. Many young girls are forced into prostitution because of poverty, drug abuse, widowed by violence and fraud. Prema succinctly portrays these issues as she has seen them. Besides, deprivation can make people do funny things. The poet tells the readers of the unfortunate fate of being a woman:

Trust did make her follow
For a job that she was promised
Now, she does get it in this strange land
A position of the highest kind –
The service to man-kind
A service to the studs
Gaining the title of a slut. (2011, 24-25) [author's translation]

Manipuri women face multiple battles, with human trafficking, drug abuse and STDs like HIV/AIDS adding to their struggles. The state's high urban poverty rate, standing at 40% of the population, exacerbates conditions, particularly in rural areas. Women bear the

brunt of malnutrition and excessive labour to support their families. Despite the rhetoric surrounding women's empowerment and gender equality, efforts to address women's health issues have stagnated.Despite the rhetoric of women's empowerment and gender equality currently espoused by the Millennium Development Goals project, our thinking, monitoring and action on women's health have stagnated (Mohindra and Béatrice 561).

As stated above, Prema's versatility lies in depicting simple things in the life of a woman whose male counterparts fail to understand. The following poem titled "the better half" is an example:

the bride, newlywed,
enters shivering.
all the ten fingers feel frozen.

in the warm cosy bed
the Husband sleeps snoring.

she strokes lovingly
on His forehead,
"are you out of your mind,
must you do that with your ice-cold hands?" (*Punshi Khongchatsida*, 34) [author's translation]

This generation of poets grew up with the sound of guns and smoke from tear gas. Angom Sarita's poem "Nongmei" (Gun) reminds us of a popular culture in Manipur that shatters families and leaves horrendous memories. She writes:

Can't say about the other places
but there in our place, it is dirt-cheap
the price of a bullet.

Only the dead have been made wrong
in this land
where there is no justice for the dead
I'm afraid to live
and also to die. (Premchandra, 182)

Given that these young poets are poised to demonstrate their skill, it is challenging to quantify the value of their poetic creations. Nevertheless, they cannot avoid grappling with the harsh realities of their most profound moments of darkness, which often find their way

into their literary works.

Conclusion

Amid the relentless challenges faced by Manipuri women, there's a glaring absence of discourse on their well-being and mental health, along with measures to address these issues. Manipuri women often go unnoticed and undervalued despite their invaluable contributions to social cohesion. Yet, these brave women poets exhibit remarkable resilience and deep insight into the state's turmoil. Their poetry offers optimism in a despondent society and envisions guiding the state away from violence. Their powerful verses advocate peace, sanity and security, aiming for happiness and prosperity for all. Despite carrying deep wounds and enduring a legacy of trauma, they persevere in writing with a vision for a brighter future for Manipur, striving to safeguard their own well-being and mental health amidst the turmoil of conflict.

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