

The Female Body as a Site of Inscribed Memory, History and Enunciation: A Study of Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami: A Redemption Song*

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Abstract

The article attempts to understand the construction of native history in *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015) by Malsawmi Jacob, a writer from Mizoram. The Northeastern part of India has been a unique region both geographically and culturally. In this context, the emergence of alternative histories as explicit in Subaltern historiographies and Gayatri Spivak's take on female agency in historiography raise pertinent questions. The paper looks at how, in the novel, female agency is employed to recreate the native history of Mizoram by foregrounding the female body as a site of inscribed memory and history. The article attempts to problematize these enunciations.

Keywords: Alternative history; Female body; Gender identity; Inscribed memory; Northeast Indian literature.

Introduction

Modern historians are of the opinion that India lacked genuine accounts of history. According to such views, historiography was an unknown terrain for the scholars of India. Although traditional scholarship considers the *Itihasas: Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as history in fictionalized form, such attributions are not taken into account by modern scholars of the discipline of history. Therefore, the beginning of historical consciousness in India is often traced back to the orientalist retrieval of the ancient history of India. It is also observed that prior to British ventures, Jesuit missionaries embarked on an attempt to explore the historical background of the Indian subcontinent. The well-known Indian historian Prof. E. Sreedharan observes:

It was with the Indological quest that modern methods of historical research and reconstruction - then spreading in Europe - were introduced into India. The Asiatic Society of Bengal which William Jones had consciously modelled on the Royal Society in London ushered in the age of scientific and specialized study in Indian history and culture. (397)

While tracing the trajectory of historiography in India, nineteenth century emerges as a critical period with remarkable changes in the conception and understanding of history. Whereas the British imperialist historiography was keen on projecting a degenerated image of India, the nationalist historiographers challenged the colonial agenda hidden in historical projects by retrieving the notion of a glorious ancient past and by projecting the narratives of national unity. As observed by Prof. Sreedharan:

But the most important characteristic of British imperialist historiography on India was the dominance of the political element. Here, British prejudice, the tendency to moralize, intense bias and value-loaded statements found free play. The writers had little interest in Indian life and culture, and economic issues were only treated in so far as they had political application. Works written were confined mostly to the British period, and concerned only with British activities. They always presented the British point of view. (424)

The biased nature of Imperialist historiography paved the way for the rise of nationalist historiography with a strict focus on the construction of national identity. "The conceptualization of the Indian was one of the major currents in Indian Nationalist thought by the turn of the twentieth century" (Zutshi 88). Therefore, the emergence of historical consciousness in India is often treated as a direct result of nationalism. "Filled with legitimate national pride, a rising generation of Indian scholars sought to vindicate their national culture against the unfounded charges of European writers" (Sreedharan 429).

In the wake of post-colonialism, crucial questions emerged concerning historiography. One of the most pertinent questions among them was about the exclusivist nature of National historiography. The totalizing tendencies in elitist and nationalist historiographies were challenged by subaltern historiographies. These historical ventures were keen on tracing the history from the margins. As Gyanendra Pandey observes; "minorities are constituted along with the nation" (608). However, both the national-

ist historiography and subaltern historiography were criticized by Gayatri Spivak as predominantly patriarchal. According to Spivak women are absent as subjects in both the elitist and revisionist historiographies. Spivak observes that female agency is denied even in the historical instances in which women are directly involved. "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak 102). It is in this context that the reconstruction of the regional histories of Mizoram from a female viewpoint becomes important.

The history of Mizoram can be broadly divided into three phases. The first is the period of early settlements in which it is assumed that the Mizo tribes moved from Chin hills around the sixteenth century and settled down in different parts of Northeastern India. As most of the tribes settled down in the Lushai hills, the place later came to be known as Mizo land. The second phase of the history of the region is marked by the beginning of British colonization. During this period, the tribal chiefs lost their hold on the society as the administration began to be controlled by the British. Although the British tried to be on good terms with the chiefs of Mizo land, the course of British rule in Lushai Hills was not wholly peaceful. By the 1890s Lushai Hills came directly under British administration as North Lushai hills and South Lushai hills and it was taken under the control of the Assam government. The British administration paved the way for Christian missionaries and converted the tribal groups into Christianity. It resulted in a large number of Christian populations in the region.

In the post-independence period, Mizoram continued as a part of the Assam state of India for a long time. However, due to constant struggles and turmoil, the independent state of Mizoram was formed in 1987. Nevertheless, the separatist groups such as Mizo National Front began to fight against the atrocities committed by the Indian army and demanded freedom from India. As Somnath Zutshi observes: "The Pulls of inclusion and exclusion are indeed and, can never, be evenly balanced" (88).

Zorami: A Redemption Song (2015), written by Malsawmi Jacob, is the first English novel from the Northeastern state of Mizoram. The state of Mizoram, being a place with a tumultuous history, complex geography and frontiers, offers immense scope for a fictional venture to create a portrait of the region and its people. In this context, *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015) is very much shaped by the region, its history and its peo-

ple. The author of the novel, Malsawmi Jacob, is a writer who hails from Mizoram and *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015) is the first novel written by her, even though she established herself as a writer of non-fiction much before. Her career is notable as a teacher and freelance journalist. She has also published a collection of poems in 2017.

The article attempts to understand the construction of the native history of Mizoram in Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015) and its gender dynamics. The Northeastern part of India has been a unique region both geographically and culturally. Being the abode of innumerable tribal groups with a wide variety of languages and rich oral traditions, the Northeastern region of India had been, for a long time, the exotic other in the pan-Indian nationalist gaze. Also, the separatist movements and the ensuing conflicts in the post-independent era create a different political scenario in the region. In this context, the construction of native historiography in the literature from the Northeast gains utmost importance as it acts as potential articulations against the homogenizing tendencies of the nationalist historiography which led to the effacement of the identity of the minority communities, in the wake of decolonization. The emergence of alternative histories as explicit in Subaltern historiographies and Gayatri Spivak's take on a female agency in historiography raise pertinent questions in this regard.

The paper looks at how, in the novel, female agency is employed to recreate the native history of Mizoram by foregrounding the female body as a site of inscribed memory and history. Such an approach would generate critical insights on enunciations in women's writing. "The discovery of resistance in women's writing also requires the investment of our desires and the acknowledgment of our politics as women/feminists reading" (Rajan 3). The article attempts to problematize these enunciations as they are still not free from the normative patriarchal idea of gender binaries in which the dominant is attributed with masculine traits while the subjugated is visibly feminine.

The Question of the Embodied Female Subject

Zorami: A Redemption Song (2015) is set in Mizoram in the tumultuous insurgency years of the 1960s and is dedicated to all those who long for peace (2015). It revolves around the titular character Zorami and employs a fragmented narration to trace her life. It is interesting to note that the life of Zorami and the history of the Mizo land are intertwined in the novel.

The history of Mizoram unfolds in *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015), primarily, from a female perspective. Here, both the writer and the protagonist are women. Interestingly, the history of the region becomes both the background and foreground of Zorami's story. The novel opens with a description of Aizwal town surrounded by hills and the description goes on to establish a clear picture of the inhabitants of the town and their routines. Zorami is the protagonist and the novel's namesake. It is revealed that Zorami's father who was working in the Indian army had very little time to be with the family. This insecure family situation and the growing turmoil in the region occasion Zorami's molestation by an army officer. In the present time frame of the novel, Zorami is a middle-aged married woman. Although she is not quite happy with her married life due to her past trauma, Zorami reconciles with her husband towards the end of the novel. Having realized that two broken souls are brought together in conjugal union, both Zorami and her husband try to find solace in the presence of each other. The novel ends with a positive note as Zorami is finally redeemed of her miseries. The images of healing and redemption, which appear from the very beginning of the novel, through a gospel reading at the church, reach its culmination towards the end of the novel. It can be seen that the redemption of Zorami symbolizes the redemption of the Mizo land.

Body becomes an important terrain of discourses and critical engagements in the postmodern era. Such systems of thought consider "body as a particular site of inquiry" (Landzeliuz 280). In this context, the bodied subject becomes a site of inscribed memory and history. The representation of the female body in works of art raises crucial questions on the notion of gendered subjectivities too. In *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015), the body of the female protagonist is at the very centre of the narration and the novel illustrates the character of Zorami during different stages of her life. However, this is not a linear representation, instead, fragmented realities of her life are brought together to create a complete image.

The novel tries to account for Zorami's obsession with physical appearance which can be traced back to her childhood. Zorami's conflicts with her own body are further elevated when she was asked in marriage by a young man called Sanga. As the novel progresses, Zorami's character seems to be struggling to give a proper answer to the proposal of Sanga, a desirable young man. The main reason for this hesitation to get married is due to the thought that she is impure. Nevertheless, the wedding takes place. However, Zorami is quite unsatisfied in the initial days of marriage. Soon when her husband himself reveals his tormented heart,

Zorami realizes that he is still struggling to put up with the fate of his old girlfriend who had been killed when the Indian army captured the Blue Valley camp. At this point, Zorami discloses her own long-held secret. She tells him how she was raped by an army man at a very young age and how after this terrible event Zorami's family had to shift to Shillong for a while. The raped female body of Zorami generates metonymic possibilities in its connection with the conquered Mizo land. As Malsawmi Jacob describes in the novel:

A fiend in human body did it in revolting lust. When the thirteen year old did not come back from the *tuikhur* where she had gone to fetch water, her worried mother took a couple of neighbours with her and went in search of her daughter. They found her unconscious, her dress torn and soaked with urine and blood, in the bushes. In the hospital, after she regained consciousness, a nurse stitched her up. Without anaesthesia. How she screamed! The needle pierced her again and again stinging pain upon pain. (177)

The novel is replete with the question of the embodied subject. The initial part of the novel depicts a church ceremony on Sunday which includes a gospel reading on how Jesus Christ heals a crippled woman. This is a symbolic articulation of Zorami's thoughts of herself as "deformed." As a young girl Zorami is insulted by a shopkeeper. For him, Zorami is ugly and looks like a girl from the plains. The novel portrays the manner in which Zorami confronts her own body in front of the mirror and pondering over its shortcomings. Several other instances from Zorami's childhood also reveal that she was not happy with her appearance. Zorami's conflicts with her body get heightened after her abuse. Even her father considers her as "damaged" as she is a rape victim. Therefore, Zorami's body becomes the terrain of a series of conflicts and the image of the tormented body of Zorami recurs in the novel through Zorami's dreams. This image is of utmost importance and central to the novel. Though it initially appears to be an indication of Zorami's post-rape trauma, it has a much higher level of significance in the larger context of the narrative.

She feels a chill all of a sudden. Outside, the morning sun is still shining. But a dark cloud has risen on her inner horizon. She shivers as she recalls her dream - the same dream that has haunted her for many years. Like in an old photograph she sees a girl lying hunched up under a bush. She is down on her side with her back toward her knees almost touching her forehead. She looks dead. (Jacob 17)

Although Zorami as a bodied subject is at the centre of the novel, other women in the region are also included in the narration as objects of violence and conquest. One particular instance, in this regard, is the attempt to assault a pregnant woman called Siami by two army men. As Spivak observes "The group rape perpetrated by the conquerors is a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition" (99). Again, the old girlfriend of Zorami's husband is depicted as a victim of the brutality of Indian army men. Therefore, Malsawmi Jacob asks a crucial question in the novel: "Is right and wrong all about the stronger defeating the weaker" (45 - 46). Thus, body becomes a signifying system on which larger socio-political and historical realities are mapped.

Problematizing Enunciations: Body as a Site of Memory and History

Zorami: A Redemption Song (2015) is a novel with substantial historical and political reality. It traces the history of Mizoram through Zorami's life. As Zorami's life story unfolds, the history of the region gets articulated. The very beginning of the novel establishes the Post-colonial setting of the novel, the present time frame of the narrative, through the description of churches. This evokes the image of a Christianized native society. "By the 1960s, it was a recognized fact that all those who considered themselves Mizo also considered themselves Christian, though the state continued to have a non-Mizo, non-Christian population" (Pachau 29). The Christianisation of Mizo society is further revealed when Zorami learns alphabets in school as a young girl. It is mentioned in the novel that as Mizo language had no script, the Christian missionaries brought the Roman script to write Mizo language. Zorami's father joining the Indian army during World War Second is also an important instance in the historical imaginary of the novel. The narrative also depicts the strikes against the imposition of the Assamese language in the Post-independent times.

The postcolonial nation-state is riven also by the conflicts between the imperative of 'nationalism' as ideology on the one hand, and the reality of the multiple regional, caste, linguistic and religious divisions within its geographical boundaries, on the other. In this contest, the state attempts to assert the forces of homogenization and centralization against the various secessionist or federalizing movements for autonomy and control initiated by regional groups. Women, to whose allegiances grounded in one or other identity appeals are frequently directed, are more often the sites of such contests than participants in them. (Rajan 6)

The famine which affected Mizo land in the post-independent era figures in the novel as an important incident in Zorami's childhood. During this time of crisis, the people of Mizoram feel that their treatment by the government of India is quite unfair. The novel portrays this as the driving force behind the immediate formation of Mizo National Front (MNF) and it clearly traces the gradual emergence of MNF. While the initial chapters have their focus upon Zorami, the focus of the narrative gets shifted to the Mizo national movements and their terrible aftermaths. The ideological underpinnings behind the formation of MNF, which advocates freedom of Mizoram, contribute to the Declaration of Independence by Mizo National Front.

He then read out a list of the injustices committed by the Indian Government on the Mizo people. Among them was the complaint, "The Government of India refused to supply us food and arrange other assistance during the famine. Not only that, it also prohibited us from seeking and receiving assistance from friendly countries. This resulted in the death of many people." It concluded with "We, the representatives of the Mizo people, solemnly publish and declare that Mizoram is to be free and independent, that the people of Mizoram are absolved from all allegiance to India and its Parliament." (Jacob 77)

The novel describes that after the first attack by the MNF, the forces of the Indian army starts occupying the land and a curfew is declared. As the schools were closed, Zorami and her friends could not attend classes. The novel intricately deals with the reign of terror unleashed by the army forces in different villages of the land. Many of the families even had to hide in the forest to save their lives. "Since they failed to catch the attackers, they vented their anger on the helpless villagers who had no part in it" (Jacob 103). Therefore, the insurgency years of hunger and starvation form an important part of the novel. The novel also accounts for the death of several MNF soldiers and the devastated villages of the Mizo land. In this way, the novel traces the native history of Mizoram.

Gayatri Spivak, in the context of the subaltern and minority groups, observes that "The question of "woman" seems most problematic in this context" (Spivak 90). Woman is absent as a subject in nationalist historiographies. Moreover, the same absence can be observed in subaltern historiographies that claim to be revisionist in nature. However, in the novel, the female protagonist becomes a terrain to articulate the history of Mizoram. Therefore, in Malsawmi Jacob's novel, the post-colonial female

subject from a minority group, attains agency in articulating the history of her region. Female subjectivity is reconfigured in the narrative for retrieving the native history of the region. Hence, the embodied female subject occupies the very centre of the narration and the convergence of the embodied subject and the native history of the region create a space of enunciation.

Equating the feminine body with land has been an oft-used idea in nationalistic discourses. The nation itself is conceived in feminine terms in such systems of thought. This connection has been established since the origin of national consciousness in various parts of the world. Such conceptions were an essential part of Indian nationalism as well. Even years after independence, the triumphant mother figure, *Bharatmatha*, is equated to India. Such portrayals are often accused of being part of the Hindu patriarchal ideology in which woman is absent as an active agent. As Spivak observes: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (102).

Malsawmi Jacob's novel brings about a convincing account of equating feminine body with land. Here, body becomes a "political battleground and site of resistance" (Landzelius 284). However, in the novel, the "subjectivities of women, as victims of violence and agents of resistance" (Rajan 5-6) are largely debatable.

As Zorami is central to the narration, so is the Mizo land, creating a "body-space nexus" (Landzelius 282). It is quite evident from the name of the title character Zorami as it is an anagram of Mizoram. The novelist brilliantly intertwines Zorami's story with the story of the land. The importance given to the delineation of different Mizo villages and their struggles during the insurgency years proves this. These historical struggles are articulated in Zorami's body. The portrayal of the feminine body in the novel, in Foucauldian terms, is "to expose a body totally imprinted by history" (Foucault 83). Also, the body of Zorami is a site of inscribed memories. It includes the memory of her childhood at Mizoram and the memory of the rape. It also bears the memory of deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 3) and reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 10) as Zorami's family had to shift from Mizoram for a while and had to return after the insurgency era comes to an end. These memories are in turn the history of Mizoram, the history of a peaceful land turning into a warzone.

The body of Zorami, who is almost dead after the molestation, can be paralleled with the image of how different parts of the Mizo land were attacked by the Indian army. "After nearly a week since the first attack, troops of the mighty Indian army began to arrive with their armaments. They overran towns and village" (Jacob 80). This parallel becomes even more appropriate at the point when the novelist clearly states that an Indian army man was responsible for Zorami's assault. Thus, the control of the female body symbolizes the control of Mizo land by the Indian army. In this way, Malsawmi Jacob's attempt to articulate a distinctively North-eastern experience blends the image of the raped female body with the history of the war-torn Mizoram. Thus, female body is foregrounded "as a key site of personal experience, social distinction and political struggle" (Landzelius 281).

Towards the end of the novel, Zorami is finally redeemed from her sufferings. It ends with a happy note when Zorami sings: "The flowers appear on the earth; / The time of singing has come, / And the voice of the turtle-dove / Is heard in our land" (229). The song, though an expression of her joy, becomes the redemption song of the land. Thus, Zorami's redemption becomes one with the resurrection of the war-torn Mizoram.

Conclusion

Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami: A Redemption song* is a powerful articulation of the sufferings undergone by the people of Mizoram. Through her vivid narrative strategies, Malsawmi Jacob elevates the novel to the status of a well-framed narrative. Here, feminine body becomes a strong symbol of the Mizo land by being a site of enunciation for the historical realities of the region. Zorami's tortured body and agonized being are one with Mizoram in its tumultuous insurgency years and the violation of Zorami's body can be equated with the brutalities unleashed by the Indian army in Mizoram: "Control of the woman meant control of the body politic" (Zutshi 102). The narrative, thus, establishes a striking parallel between the feminine body and the land.

The novel can be considered as an attempt by Malsawmi Jacob to create a feminist revisionist history of Mizo land and it is evident that Malsawmi Jacob employs female agency to articulate the native history of Mizoram. Therefore, the history of Mizoram becomes "her story", Zorami's story, and the story of Zorami becomes the History of the land. The very name of Zorami suggests this association as Zorami is visibly an anagram for Mizoram. It is important to note

that the female protagonist is presented as the core from which the history of Mizoram is articulated.

However, a close examination of the text would reveal that the attempt to trace the native history, by foregrounding the feminine body as a site of enunciation, is problematic in itself. Although, the novel challenges totalizing historiographies by bringing about female agency in the construction of history, the novel gets assimilated to mainstream patriarchal ideologies in which the dominant is attributed with masculine traits while the victim or subjugated is always the feminine. The text fails to destabilize the masculine-feminine binary of normative patriarchal ideologies and reiterates mainstream essentialism. Hence, the construction of “resistant subjectivities” (Rajan 1) to articulate the history of Mizoram, through Zorami’s embodied being, is subverted from within the text as the female subject is portrayed as a victim and has to undergo passive suffering throughout the novel, although she becomes mentally empowered at the end.

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