

Gender, Dance and Identity: Exploring the Intersections in *The Chosen One*

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Abstract

Dance and gender identity are intrinsically linked, with the body operating as a site of both personal and cultural expression. It is through dance that an individual negotiates and constructs gender identities in the larger social context. This relationship between dance and gender identity is a multilayered one, resulting from a complex interaction of individual agency and sociocultural values. In the context of Indian cinema, dance has often been used to express and reinforce gender norms, with women's bodies often objectified and sexualized in performance. However, in women-centred films, dance also acts as an opportunity for women to reclaim their bodies and to engage in performances that challenges and subverts dominant cultural values about gender stereotypes. This paper aims to explore how ethnic and religious dance intersect with gender identity in Manipuri cinema through a reading of Aribam Syam Sharma's film, *The Chosen One* (1990), originally titled as *Ishanou*. *The Chosen One* is a Manipuri film that revolves around a woman's life which is drastically transformed when she becomes an important religious functionary of the Meitei indigenous religion. The paper will hence explore how she finds a new identity through indigenous dance performance during religious rituals.

Keywords: Gender; Identity; Indigenous dance; Manipuri cinema; Religion.

Introduction

Over the years, many scholars and audiences have consistently identified the use of song and dance sequences in Indian cinema as an integral part of the national cinema of India. The typical element of these sequences as a part of the narrative sets Indian cinema apart from other cinema cultures. The use of song and dance sequences in Indian cinema expresses emotions

and advances the plot, and these sequences have become an idiosyncratic characteristic of Indian popular cinema (Ganti 123). Indian cinema reflects a variety of dance forms, from Indian classical dance like Bharatanatyam and Kathak to more modern styles like Hip Hop and Bollywood-style dance. The song-and-dance sequence is not only a distinguishing feature of Indian cinema but also a reflection of India's rich musical and dance traditions. The success of the songs and dances in Indian cinema can be attributed to the fact that dancing has always been an important aspect of Indian culture and tradition. Thus, in some ways, the nation's cultural identity is closely woven into its films. Even though many have identified the usage of song and dance in the plot of cinema as Bollywood cinema, the other regional cinemas of India also employ dance sequences as part of the narrative structure. It is important to consider songs and dances as a different paradigm of narrative ploy that distinguishes Indian cinema as the "cinema of interruptions" (Shresthova 14). Thus, songs and dances are essential for the narrative in Indian cinema and cannot be dismissed as a departure from the main narrative.

Indian cinema has incorporated a wide range of dance forms, from classical Indian dance forms to contemporary styles, each adding its own unique identity and style to the film, thereby serving to enhance the storytelling, express emotions, and add visual appeal. However, among all the dance forms that are seen on the screen, the most common dance form in Indian cinema is the folk dance. Folk dances from different communities such as Garba from Gujarat, Bhangra from Punjab, and the Koli dance from Maharashtra are seen in films in their original forms or in dances inspired by these forms. Folk dances are community-based dances which are typically performed by members of a specific community, who often share a common culture and lifestyle. Indian folk dance has its roots in specific communities.

Thus, the communal way of life of the Indian people serves as the framework for the folk dance style, and all folk dance styles reflect this shared tying together of people's lives in their artistic spirit (Sukhatankar 12). Throughout the history of Indian cinema, folk dances which belong to a particular community are popularised by mainstream films "to add local flavours" and help choreographers "devise intricate moves" in cinema dances (Ahuja, par. 2). As Shresthova notes, most of the Indian film dance's inspiration come from a variety of performing and non-performing traditions, ranging from different folk styles from various regions (19). In the mainstream films, dance choreographers draw the content of the moves from indigenous performance traditions (Appadurai and Breck-

enridge 5). As indigenous dances and other folk forms are appropriated in mainstream popular cinema, many drew flak for the appropriation of indigenous cultures. Folk dance styles came to be linked to “colorful costumes, group formations, gestures, and body positions” to be more acceptable to the larger audience (Shresthova 24). As dance in Indian cinema started to evolve, the role of women in these performances also started to transform. The visibility to a larger audience in the case of cinema has also limited women’s role in dance to the binary demarcation of either chaste women or sexualised women.

Dance and Gender Identity

Gender is culturally and socially defined roles and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Gender identity is influenced by several things, including cultural norms, assumptions, attitudes, and practices. Butler notes that the concept of gender is not biologically determined but rather constructed through performativity within the established normative standard of a society (72). Practices such as dance which is an integral part of any culture reflects the norms and values of a particular society and therefore, it will not be entirely wrong to assume that “dance reflects gendered socio-cultural patterns” of the society (Oliver and Risner 1). An artistic expression such as dance does not exist in a vacuum but it is part of the larger cultural context of a society which also assigns identities based on gender. However, some dance aesthetic components are seen as masculine and feminine due to the inherent differences in the physical structures of male and female bodies.

For instance, the idea that men often possess greater upper-body strength than women (Jensen et al. 81) and that women possess more flexibility in the hip region (Etnyre and Lee 222) has created certain movements in dance that have come to be associated with notions of masculinity and femininity. Over a period of time, modern choreographers have come to the understanding that these dancing stereotypes, such as leaping and lunging to be masculine and flexibility as feminine, need not limit how women and men dance. On the other hand, the relationship between dance and gender identity is multilayered, with the performing body acting as a site for both cultural and personal manifestation. As “dance is an art form of the body, and the body is where gender distinctions are generally understood to originate,” the relationship between dance and gender identity is fundamental (Daly 1). Thus, through dance, one can negotiate, construct, and perform gender identities. Subsequently, the influence of dance and performance on the development of gender ex-

pression had led to “the perpetuation of gender ideas, expectations, and norms throughout dance discourses” as well (Henderson 1). Through dance, individuals express their gender identities to others by performing gendered movement styles. The interaction of individual agency, cultural norms and values, and cultural historicity in the link between dance and gender identity is multidimensional. In other words, understanding the relationship between dance and gender identity can provide an insight into the construction and expression of gender, as well as how individuals and communities use dance to negotiate and perform gendered identities. Human existence is artistically and aesthetically enhanced through dance and it is impossible to isolate the body from dance (Fraleigh xiii). This intersection of dance and gender identity can also be read from a feminist perspective. Dance and women’s identity is also addressed through the female dancing body and the power dynamics in dance (Daly 19).

Women’s bodies are frequently objectified and sexualized in dance performances, which has been used to convey and represent certain gender stereotypes. Mulvey posits the idea of the “male gaze” where the performance of the women are represented for the viewing pleasure of the males, and women are treated as mere objects for the male gaze (11). At the same time, women also use dancing as a means to confront and oppose patriarchal conventions, and in a way, claim their own agency and autonomy. Daly observes that women might avoid “being co-opted by the conventions and expectations of the male gaze” through dance, which has the power to subvert the male gaze (3). Indigenous dances in particular frequently give women a space to express their cultural identity and share their perspectives and experiences, thereby reclaiming their bodies and engaging in performance that challenges and subverts dominant cultural norms. As Jha suggests, the form of indigenous dance provides the possibilities for conveying the patriarchal oppression faced by women and their resistance to patriarchal values (1). Thus, women are seen to negotiate and resist patriarchal power structures through their embodied practices of dance.

Indigenous Dance of Manipur

Manipur is a state located in the northeastern part of India which is also the easternmost state that shares an international border with Myanmar. Even though it is a small state with a territorial area of only 22,327 sq. km, the state has many diverse ethnicities with *Meitei* as the majority and other smaller communities of Naga and Kuki tribes. Being a state with multiple ethnic communities, the state has a rich cultural heritage with traditional

dances and music. Sanjenbam notes that “the art of cultural synthesis of the Manipuri brings out a unique heritage in the state” commenting on the cultural diversity in Manipur (11). The biggest community of *Meitei* also commonly referred to as the Manipuri community mainly follows Vaishnavism, the religion which was adopted by King Garibniwaz, who reigned between 1709-1748 in the erstwhile kingdom of Manipur in the 18th century (Laisram 1). Before the adoption of the Hindu religion, the state majorly followed an indigenous religion called *Sanamahism*. In the indigenous religion of *Sanamahism*, the most significant and fundamental ritual performance is *Lai Haraoba* which in itself is a unique socio-cultural institution (Nongthombam 34). The *Meiteis'* practice of ancestor worship is where *Lai Haraoba* began its development. Its underlying concept provides some insights into how the community ensures a peaceful co-existence between man and nature, as well as between man and supernatural forces. It is a ritual which predominantly symbolises the *Meitei* worldview of the universe and where the creation of the cosmos, the settling of the *Meitei* people, and their civilization are performed through songs, dance, and rituals (Yumnam 120). At the heart of the rituals, is the dance performance which is performed by “the female religious functionaries” called *Maibi* (Parratt and Parratt 41). Even though there are other religious functionaries in the ritual performance, *Maibi* is the most important functionary as they not only perform rituals but also embody tales and legends while performing the indigenous *Maibi* dance (Nongthombam 45).

Unlike in other religions where one becomes a priest through their caste or by choice, one cannot become *Maibi* by any entitlement or by choice. Only a woman can become *Maibi* “through direct possession” of spirit by the gods (Parratt and Parratt 49). *Maibi* are “the chosen ones through which the gods and spirits speak” (Yumnam 120). After they are possessed by the spirit, they are trained in the institution of *Maibi* which comprises only of women. It is in the institution of *Maibi*, the new ones are trained in dancing and singing. The songs are the oral scripture of the indigenous religion which are accessible only to the female *Maibi* and not to male religious functionaries (Parratt and Parratt 41). Not only are the songs the liturgy of the community but the dance performance is the community's perspective and beliefs of how the universe was created. This is performed only by the female *Maibi*.

The dance performance is performed over ten days during the ritual of *Lai Haraoba*, where in the beginning the female religious functionary does a series of expressive movements to invoke the spirit through her body. Thus through the dance performance, “she becomes a medium through which

the words from the world of supernatural are communicated to common humanity" (Nongthombam 47). In another ritual dance performance, the female *Maibi* through her dance depicts the complete sequence of life on earth, beginning with the creation of men and women. She performs the "formation of human body limb after limb in the mother's womb" through "symbolic gesture" through the medium of dance (Akoijam 289). The dance performance continues to depict the integration of the soul into the body, the building of houses, the making of clothes through weaving, and how civilization comes into being. Additionally, numerous sequences during the dance performance illustrate the continuation of human life (Yumnam 121). Thus, the indigenous dance of the *Meitei* community of Manipur uses the female body through her dance as a religious text. As Taylor notes, the constraints of textual knowledge are always transcended by embodied performance since embodied knowledge cannot be contained and archived (94). It is evident then that the indigenous dance of the *Meitei* community of Manipur is a complex dance performance, encompassing female bodies as text through dance, symbols, and history to understand the nature of the cosmos.

Manipuri Cinema and Aribam Syam's Film

Manipur being a small state of various ethnic communities where many languages and dialects are spoken, there is a constraint of running a sustainable business in the film industry. There is not enough audience that understands a specific language to make a profit from a film. However, some film exhibitors who owned the early film theatres in Manipur started a film production company under the name Shree Shree Govindaji venturing into filmmaking in Manipur. The company adapted a popular play, *Mainu Pemcha* to make the first film in Manipur in 1948. But the producers were doubtful that there would be a market for Manipuri films as Imphal only had three theatres at the time, so they changed the language from Manipuri to Hindi (Kongbam 38). However, the film was never completed due to financial problems. After 24 years, Manipur was successful in making its first feature film with the release of *Matamgi Manipur* on April 9, 1972, which was directed by a Bengali filmmaker, Debkumar Bose. In the same year, a Manipuri director and producer, Sapam Nodiachand made *Brojendragee Luhongba* (1972). The first two films produced in Manipur focused on the societal changes taking place in the region, as they both explored the impact of modernization on society (Kongbam 437). From this period onwards, Manipur started producing films consistently with 28 feature films being released within 25 years from its first feature film. During this early phase of Manipuri cinema, films such as

Saphabee (1976) directed by Aribam Syam Sharma explored the rich folk traditions of Manipur through the adaptation of the folk drama of Manipur Dramatic Union (Wahengbam 26).

Manipuri films were consistently produced since the release of its first film *Matangi Manipur* (1972), but they were primarily appreciated only within the domestic market of Manipur. However, in 1982 "Manipur cinema got a unique place in the international arena" with Aribam Syam Sharma's film, *Imagi Ningthem* (1981) winning several international awards (Kongbam 9). The film is the only Indian entry in the Grand Prix section of Festival des 3 Continents in France and the first Indian film to win the Grand Prix award in 1982. Through his groundbreaking films, Aribam Syam Sharma established Manipuri cinema on the international scene (Baruah par. 4). Even though *Imagi Ningthem* (1981) is his fourth film, Aribam Syam has been involved in Manipuri cinema from the first film itself as a music director and actor. His directorial debut film, *Lamja Parshuram* (1974) was commercially successful with the film running for a record 15 weeks in Manipur. Aribam's next superhit film was *Olangthagee Wangmadasoo* (1979) which ran for 32 weeks becoming the longest-running Manipuri film till now. Since the 1970s were dominated by mainstream Hindi films in Manipur, these films followed the taste of Bollywood (Kongbam 72). However, Aribam Syam soon shifted from making mainstream films to films which are much closer to reality. Aribam claims that he wanted to make films so that he could share his insights into reality rather than catering to the entertainment of a mass audience (46). After making a mark internationally with *Imagi Ningthem* (1981), a decade later, he made *Ishanou* (1990), which was officially selected for Un Certain Regard at Cannes International Film Festival, in 1991. The protagonists in these two films are powerful women characters that "ruminate on the narratives that establish the identity of Meitei women and their social relations in the society" (Rajkumar 119). It is also interesting to note that most of Aribam Syam's films deal with Meitei women as central characters in the Meitei society at large (RK 1).

The Case of *The Chosen One*

The film, *The Chosen One* revolves around the life of a woman whose ordinary life drastically transforms when she gets possessed by a spirit and becomes a *Maibi*, the most important chief functionary of the indigenous religion of the Meitei community. The woman, Tampha lives in a small happy family with her husband, her young daughter and Tampha's mother. They live a humble life, with the husband Dhanabir working as a small-time government employee and the wife, Tampha being a home-

maker taking care of their daughter. They live in her mother's home who is a vendor in a market where all are predominantly women. The markets which are exclusively run by women are a symbol of the culture and tradition in Manipur, a state where women have long been at the heart of the socio-cultural and political realm (Pal, par. 5). The significant plot point of the film where Tampha gets possessed is the crux of the film as the film observes the life of a Manipuri woman pre and post-possession by the spirit. The director of the film, Aribam explains in his book *Living Shadows* that there was a yearning "to create a story based on the transformation of a woman, with a simple uncomplicated life, into the dramatic character of a *Maibi*" on how the idea of film came about (57).

The opening of the film is a text exposition which explains that the film is based on the life of *Maibis* of Manipur who belong to the indigenous institution of the *Meitei* religion. The text further reads, "One becomes a *Maibi*, not by choice, nor initiation but when chosen by a deity. *Maibis* are respected and addressed as Mother which situates the film in the intersection of religious and gender identities. *Maibi*, being a female, plays a crucial and significant role in the rituals of the indigenous religion of the *Meiteis* and is more significant than male religious functionaries (Nongthombam 47).

Establishing the everyday life of the protagonist Tampha's life, the first sequence of the film depicts the customary ear piercing ceremony of her daughter, Bembem. The ear-piercing ceremony is an important social function performed by the Manipuri Vaishnavites (Singh 123). Before the adoption of Vaishnavism in the 18th century, Manipuri people followed their indigenous religion. In the ceremony, some female performers are seen singing and the male performers are playing traditional drums in front of Hindu gods. This is an indication of the identity of the Manipuris who, by then, had embraced Vaishnavism abandoning the indigenous religion. Putting this sequence as the first sequence, the film foreshadows the turn of events that is going to occur in the film where Tampha's life radically changes to become a chief performer of the indigenous rituals and rites. At night after the ceremony is over, Tampha and her husband has a conversation about their daughter who is fast asleep. Dhanabir tells her that his sister-in-law wanted to adopt Bembem, and if she gets adopted their daughter will get gold. Tampha immediately rejects the proposition and accuses her husband of thinking only about gold. Tampha's refusal of giving up their daughter for adoption establishes her shift of identity from being a wife to being a mother where a woman's identity is mostly "child-centred" (Hays 8). However, immediately after this intimate moment of the mother-child relationship, the film shifts to a sequence where

Tampha is fishing in a local pond with other women. As she is fishing, Tampha's husband comes looking for her and she looks annoyed seeing her husband in her personal space. She shrugs him off saying that she cannot even fish in peace. This is an indication of Tampha slowly shifting away from the identity of a wife and mother as she wants to be left alone in her personal space. This gradual transition is resonated in the scene where Tampha and her husband are taking a walk on a hilltop. As they are having a conversation while walking, Tampha suddenly stops and shifts her focus onto a flower. She is enthralled by the flower and exclaims that the flower is calling her. It is at this moment onwards that she gets possessed by the spirit and eventually becomes a *Maibi*. Nongthombam notes that not any woman can get possessed by the spirit and thus it is not a matter of choice but they are chosen by the spirit (48). The phenomenon of spirit possession in Manipuri indigenous religion is believed to be possessed by a particular goddess who selects the woman (Parratt and Parratt 41). This demonstrates the transitioning of Tampha's character to the identity of a woman rather than the assumed identity of being a wife and mother in the larger socio-religious context in *Meitei* society as she gets possessed by a goddess. Roy notes that Tampha "breaks free from her comfortable life as wife and mother, feeling not the tugs of a mother's love but responding to an inexorable shamanic calling" elucidating the gradual transformation of the protagonist (59). This possession by the goddesses is gendered as most women get possessed and not men. However, in rare cases when a man happens to be chosen by the spirit, he has to dress like a woman (Parratt and Parratt 49).

The moment of Tampha's interaction with the flower reveals a realm beyond the rationality of everyday life. A woman who gets possessed functions as a medium linking the natural and the supernatural realms of existence (Nongthombam 46). After this, she walks away from her husband and climbs up the hilltop where she sings praising the beauty of nature. As she sings, she starts to dance gracefully making hand gestures that are of a slow and fluid movement. These movements, when both hands turn in unison in the *Meitei* indigenous dance "symbolises union and a process of cosmic creation" (Biswas, par. 3). This is a representation of the "cosmic womb" from which the universe germinates according to the religious belief of Manipuris (Yumnam 120). Thus, the body of a woman is metaphorically used in the dance movement. The scene of Tampha dancing is cut to her daughter dancing amusingly in front of Tampha's mother, indicating the centrality of dance and female identity in Manipuri society. The change in the character of Tampha after the incident is portrayed by a series of sequences where she gets sick and delirious. However, in these

changes, she seems to have developed a sense of individual agency free from the responsibilities of being a wife and mother. Tampha is found playing in a local pond and talking to a rounded vessel floating on the pond where the vessel itself is indicative of a feminine symbol (Ningombam 225). The turn of events pushes Tampha away from domestic life as she tries to get free from the family during her trance episodes. In one of the scenes where she gets delirious, she tries to run away from home exclaiming to let her go only to be physically stopped by her husband. She is then tied to her bed so that she will not run away. This scene shows the agency that she got through the spirit and her unconscious efforts to discover a new self away from the life she was living in the family. As her conditions worsen, Tampha's husband seeks the help of a doctor but he is also unable to help her. One night when her husband wakes up, he could not find Tampha in bed. She is found dancing and making slow hand gestures in the corner of the room. The progress of the erasure of her previously lived identity and in the pursuit of a new self, she is shown dancing in the film which is reflective of the route of discovering a new identity through dance.

Following failed attempts to take help from medical science to address her condition, she escapes from her family one night. After discovering Tampha's escape, her husband along with other males of the locality chases her as she runs away. She runs to a house, *Maibi Loishang*, "an institution where women symptomatic of *amaibi* are trained" (Ningombam 226). As she reaches this institution the morning light has come up, to symbolise that the dawn has broken into her new life. This *Maibi* institution is where a woman who has the symptoms of spirit possession is treated through dance performances and they are initiated for the religious functionary duties which include dancing and reading of oral liturgy. When her husband tries to convince her to return to her family, she refuses and walks inside the house where only female *Maibis* are allowed. This institution embodies an agency of space exclusive to females where they are trained in the traditional indigenous dance of Manipuris. Hence, in her search for a new self, Tampha is found in this gendered space where she is trained to become a *Maibi* who performs the indigenous dance. When a woman becomes *Maibi*, she "performs the ritual duties which entail performing the actual ritual and also performing the special dances and singing the songs associated with different ritual celebrations" (Dutt and Munsu 252). Therefore in this institution, Tampha finds a space that enables her to discover a new identity, that of a *Maibi*, which is exclusive to females. In order to become a *Maibi*, she gets trained by the senior *Maibi*. First, Tampha is taught incantation and then the dances. She is seen practicing the dances

along with other women in the courtyard of the *Maibi* institution. While she is learning the dance, her husband comes and sees her dancing but he couldn't intervene. He turns away as Tampha continues to keep her focus on the dance. This illustrates the separation of Tampha's previous identity as wife and mother from her newfound identity as *Maibi*.

Following Tampha's training in dance and rituals, there is a sequence of her taking a major role in *Lai Haraoba*, "the most important ritual which is made up of an enormous complex of song, dance and ritual activity" (Dutt and Munsu 253). In the rituals, Tampha performs a series of dances as she becomes *Maibi*. In the *Maibi* dance, "the essence of the dance is the curve, spiral or circle. This dominates not only the general choreography but also the individual body, hand and foot movements which constitute the individual parts of the dances" (Parratt and Parratt 183). Even though the dance represents the creation of the cosmos, the aesthetics of curve and circular movements symbolise the femininity of the dance and situate the dancer as a woman. However, in the film, Tampha who just led a docile life in a family as a homemaker transforms into a woman who becomes a significant functionary in the public space of religiosity through the agency of the particular indigenous dance which is accessible solely to women. As Tampha performs the *Maibi* dance, the film shows a series of hand gestures that reflect the creation of the universe through the *Maibi* dance. In the dance, hand gestures "describes the formation of a human body inside the womb" signifying the relationship between dance and the creation of the universe where the womb is a characteristic of a woman (Biswas, par. 7). Here, the woman's womb is symbolically represented as the cosmic womb from which the lives in the universe emerge. This reinforces the connection of gender identity in the indigenous dance of Manipur. Just as the dance performance of Tampha finishes, four young girls are seen dancing the traditional dance illustrating the inheritance of the dance text only in the female gender.

Conclusion

Aribam's film uses the ordinary life of Tampha as a vital dance performer through her transformation as an important religious functionary which is accessible only to women. The traditional knowledge of civilization through the worldview of the Manipuri community is passed from one generation to the next by women performers through its indigenous dance. Through the body of a woman, literally and symbolically, the dance has used a text to preserve the inherited knowledge of the community. The indigenous dance of *Maibi's* practices inherently asserts the

woman's identity through the dance performance in the ethno-religious context of Manipuri society. In the film, through the depiction of Tampha, the film intersects dance and gender identity in the course of searching for a new self after she becomes *Maibi*. With the becoming of *Maibi* and training of the indigenous dance, the film creates a woman's space with the agency of dance performance. Even though woman's identity and dance performances have been explored in different films, most of the discourse revolves around the woman as "an entity who goes against the 'normal' cultural construct of an 'ordinary', or 'good/ideal image of a woman' as against the male performer" (Dutt and Munsri 253). In the case of *The Chosen One*, the gendered dance performance of *Maibi* occupies a sanctum space in society with the female body as a religious text through their dance performance.

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