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MAPPING NEW FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY: POLITICIZING THE PERSONAL IN
CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S MEITEI POETRY IN ENGLISH

PH. SANAMACHA SHARMA

DM College of Commerce
Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, Manipur 795001



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ABSTRACT

The three poetry books, namely, *Tattooed with Taboos*, *Between The Poet and Her Pencil* and *The Finite Days To Come*, studied here belong to contemporary women's Meitei poetry in English. Besides demanding equal status and respect, their poetry aspires to assert their individual identity and their own definition about themselves with regards to woman's self-identity, taboo, desire and sexual freedom, thereby questioning and challenging old Meitei values and the necessity for revision and rethinking to adapt to the changing global time.

Keywords: traditional codes, taboo, womanhood, subversive, individualism.

In the last four decades, regional Meitei women poets have become a dynamic zone in Manipuri literary district. But Meitei woman poets in English belong to a new locality occupied by younger generation whose literary contribution has just begun. It is interesting to see what this minority of women poets in English are doing in the fast-shifting landscape of politics, history and society of Manipur. While male poets involve, in general, with the idea of Manipur, its political culture and lives of a migrant in another state, the women poets seem to withdraw into a private female psychological realm and deal with their personal feelings, complaints, sexuality, desire, typecast yearnings, womanhood and personal self. They are the second-generation children of the new educated middle-class and their use of English cannot be separated from the fact that they themselves started off their education in English-medium schools and studied outside the state for higher education. It is not simply a desire to reach wider audience that they use the second language as the medium of expression. It is due partly to their alienation from their own mother tongue (courtesy their English-medium education), partly their growing confidence in the language and its suitability for expressing their urban-centric experiences and modern values. In this global time, Meitei women as students, employees, mothers and wives are not only located in local areas but also in national and international interstices.

Over a century ago, T.C. Hodson in *The Meitheis* (1908) gave a rough picture of women's position in Manipuri society. "The women hold a high and free position in Manipur, all the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country being managed by them." (23) The women (including the princesses) were occupied with handloom (even princesses learnt weaving) and agricultural works. "In those day education cannot be said to have existed in Manipur, while now there are many primary schools and in Imphal a fair secondary school (...) attended by a small but increasing number of scholars. The education of woman cannot be said to have made equal progress, although (...) in a country like Manipur where women hold such an important position in the economic activity of the State, the efforts to establish a good school for the daughters of the higher classes would have been attended with more success than has actually been the case" (24-25). Women were confined

to only one small cultural locality. Only in the post-independent democratic Manipur, educational opportunities for the women came, initially in small number, then, a massive increase over the decades. Along with growing female literacy came economic opportunities and change in attitudes. Different from the old economic system (handloom, farming, fishing, selling vegetables in local markets), more and more women with different skill-sets are participating in the new work spaces of administration, educational sector, offices, etc.

Notwithstanding woman's minimal presence in the organizational structure of political parties, Meitei women have always been the soul and soldiers of many social movements in Manipur. Women's agitations (1903 and 1939) during colonial time, women torch bearers in the 1980s and 1990s, their involvement in fighting against intoxicant abuses, moral policing, seeking for justice for social and sexual crimes, the list is long. But giving expression to repressed sexuality and private desires are not common. Writing or speaking the female body has been social taboos, a part of unwritten social codes associated with impurities and shame. It can be attempted in English. As the second language, the language of the intellect, the language of internet, it makes it possible to approach intimate subject of female body, which will be really uncomfortable if done in mother tongue (though not impossible).

In *Tattooed with Taboos* (2011), the objectives of the three-woman poets, Haripriya, Shreema and Chaoba (they are either research scholars in reputed university or college professor) are clearly stated: the use of "the personal as a tool to document the changing frames of the society and practices" and "the desire to trespass spaces denied to women in the personal as well as public sphere" specifically in connection with womanhood, desire and the idea of home. (Introduction: i) They hope to approach sexuality without bringing in the question of morality to it, demystify "the forbidden, the secret as well as the sacred nature of sexuality of women in our society" and recognize women's desire "as a natural act of fulfillment, not be condemned through taboos placed on clothing or in her womb." (Introduction: ii) Many of their poems express their refusal to get trapped in women's limited role as man's sexual objects (virgins or prostitutes, wives or mothers) and espouse expression of their sexuality in itself or for themselves.

Soibam Haripriya's 'After The Wedding' expresses the consummation between husband and wife on wedding night as "the deed was done" like it is a simple connection between two bodies without the connection of psychological selves. "The deed" instead of bringing them together into soulful intimacy leaves the female character only feeling empty, "Emptiness succeeded". She later addresses the deed as "bruises of yesterday's invasion". Absence of joy in the 'deed' makes the relationship between the husband and wife vague. It makes one question the purpose of marriage. Is it done under pressure without any love or mutual understanding between the two? Is she a closet lesbian? The next two stanzas brood over the fact the next morning she has to do morning prayer in the courtyard in front of the tulsi tree which is traditionally considered as a holy ritual done by the house of the woman. After terming the ritual as "the strange courtyard of my eternal exile", she voices her desire "to uproot and crumble/ those mute twigs of sacredness." Her thought is made visible to the reader but she does not actually uproot and crumble that symbol of sacredness. She dismisses the sacredness connected with that morning prayer in front of the tulsi tree. Her modern education, possibly, makes her consider it as empty ritual, an obsolete traditional practice. Maybe she finds it annoying to get up early in the morning to tailor into the traditional role of a new housewife. Nevertheless, she carries on with it, albeit, grudgingly.

Haripriya's 'Five Days' Untouchable' is about the segregation of woman for five days during her menstruation period in Meitei society. Finding it offending to her sense of self, the character questions, "Is this blood of life/ Merely to mark me impure?" and she does not like it when "he" keeps her apart because of that "unholy fluid". In another poem, "I Died a little", she condemns, using the image of "impure little droplets", the way a mother takes it as a sign of "a complete woman", how the same blood becomes a celebratory sign of virginity in male's sexual conquest, and how the very same blood, if not seen on the wedding night, ironically becomes a cause for condemnation, and how stereotypical views gradually destroy a woman's true self.

Her "Are You Pleased" is about resisting a man's narrow definition of lust under which she is expected to fit in, "With your door/ so low/ I have to come/ crawling on/ my knees." To set her lust free, she has to use "the

jagged-teeth knife” and “kill/ things /they taught, / unpeel/ the layers/ they painted/ on me”. Then, she will employ lust as a weapon to defeat him. Her “cauldron/ of lust” will overwhelm him and make him “come/ crawling” to her. Then, her “His and Hers” is about how a woman gets used to domestic violence, “A bigger hand/ harder slap/ leaving bluish purple marks/ you get accustomed to.” In ‘Green Kangkhan’, it is about loveless sexual relationship of a married couple where “his touch” has become “my repulse” yet it goes on. As she does not have the strength to come out of it, she tolerates it as a silent passive sufferer:

The monotonous hum
of the off-white Orient fan
watching me
from the ceiling
un-feeling my pain
He and the fan
continued in their motion.

In ‘Apologies’, she says “I can no longer/ be a sponge/ and absorb/ blue bruises and discoloured sperm.” The physical violence turns into existential wound and the problem is that the power, “the handle”, is his hands, so the only option left for her is to turn into the steel blade itself, an object but something dangerous:

The handle is in your grasp
You can still penetrate deeper inside
With your cold steel blades
But my being has overflowed
Oozing out a dark liquid
And I am as cold as your steel blades.

Haripriya’s poems stresses delicately but hardly challenges the mistreatment a woman has to face in life and relationship and lop-sided man-woman power equation. But she has not accepted defeat yet as like a clump of grass “irreparably cracking the cemented courtyard/ I die and sprout again.” (Three Questions).

Shreema Ningombam’s ‘Sublime’ gives a general picture of the suffering women who are always in the receiving end and the desire for self-elimination that comes with it. For this capacity to absorb suffering the poet call them ‘rebels without armour’ but she slams the label “sacred” given to it and also mockingly calls the whole thing “sublime” as it brings with it non/ in-human isolation.

They become sublime
So sublime
They are
Forbidden to touch
Forbidden to love
Forbidden to rescue
They are goddesses
Destined to stand alone.

Instead of treating women like holy gods, the poet demands that they should be looked at and treated as flesh and bone creature with desires and feelings. Being a woman, the poet assumes she represents every suffering woman. Isn’t that why she uses the word “they” to make a general statement of imagined sorrows and hide the specific “I” in it? Such a picture of universally suffered sisterhood ignores differences in terms of race, class, caste, educational level, income, tribe, caste, religion, etc. The line at the end like “It is that you and I/ Have no heart to feel” is ambiguous in the sense that “I” the individual woman is separated from “they” because “I” is ignorant of women’s suffering and need to be told how to feel.

Desire to be free (from all social restrictions) as well as desire as bodily need (that seeks unrestrained fulfilment) are the subject of her poem ‘One Last Time’. Taking on a challenging fearless stand, she says she is not afraid to be “disgraced in front of those million eyes”, of ruining herself without any hope for rescue, to be

immoral without shame, to be wild, to suffer exile, to let her “body be tattooed with all taboos”, to be “a mother without wedlock”, and “be sinfully free”. In ‘One last time’ the narrator wants to break free from as well as go against all hierarchical patriarchal codes. The questions that remain are: after this one-last-time total freedom, is she going to get back into the vicious circle of patriarchal authority? Or, is she going to live with it as a changed person forever outside it? Or, is it just an impotent wish born of a fleeing feeling? Similar sentiment is also seen in the poem “Untamed” where the character utters her desire to remain untamed till death because to be tamed means to live under man’s code.

In ‘Seven Witches’, Shreema uses the local belief in the existence of *heloj taret*, seven non-human powerful female beings, who, though exist outside human realm, have the power to influence and control man. In the secret freedom provided by the only female bonding of secret sisterhood, the poet rouses his sisters: “Once more let’s conspire/ Against them”. Regarding this issue, bell hooks’ remark is relevant, “Sisterhood could not be powerful as long as women were competitively at war with one another. Utopian visions of sisterhood based solely on the awareness of the reality that all women were in some way victimized by male domination were disrupted by discussions of class and race.” (3) Later in the poem, we find out that the word “them” does not refer to man and his world but the lawful wives who are loyal to husband. “Let’s conspire against the world’s loyal wives.” Here, the image of an abandoned illegitimate child appears and she calls it “that magnificent one”. It can be connected with the poet’s desire to be “a mother without wedlock” (One Last Time), or “I, a maiden mother/ an unsolemnised wife” (To the Ema Lairembi). Seeking unbridled sexual desire leads to the problem of unmarried mother. The fact of doing, or aspiring to do, the very thing which is not accepted socially makes it a site of woman’s ultimate defiance and resistance. Rejected by male-dominated society, she, along with her sisters, wants to raise it according to their own secret laws. A binary of what is lawful (read as man-centric) and unlawful emerges in the poem. For the poet, unlawfulness becomes a site of freedom and power. Working out of that secret site, they want to exercise their power and be “the mistress of this world”. Loyal wives, though they are also women, are their enemies because they are supporters of patriarchy. In this struggle for power between the two women: one a mistress (unlawful and free), the other a loyal wife (lawful and binding), man, whose power should have been undermined, is brought in the centre instead, and renders the very meaning of the secret sisters equivocal and their purpose weak.

Womanhood does not have to seek social validation all the time. Chaoba Phuritshabam’s ‘Maiden Mother’ uses the same topic of young unmarried mother employed as a site of struggle and challenge by Shreema. Here, the poet, instead of asserting the validity of such a mother, shows sympathy and asks, “Fallen and unseen/ Are you he enduring leibaklei, / Unafraid of being trampled and disgraced?” Yet, instead of coming out in the daylight in defiance of all, it is kept secret, “Is she the thaballei that unwraps in the midnight/ In fear of the world’s disdain?” Then, ‘Midnight Monsoon’ is about pursuing female desire and expressing it to the full at night. On one side, the poets talk about expressing their sexuality and sexual pursuits with courage and freedom, yet things like pursuing desire or adopting the child of an unmarried mother or the status of an unmarried mother are expressed or done in clandestine manner at night. If they are done only behind closed doors, then, the subversive quality of their action goes unnoticed and the dominant values under their attack remain intact, unaffected. Moving away from the issues of sexual self-affirmation, Chaoba’s “Questions on Her” focuses on how economic deprivation and armed-conflict situation (“smoked bullets fill her empty lubak”) reduces an otherwise honest, hard-working mother to the position of a prostitute:

In the middle of the Loktak
Who cheats her for so long
Embracing her only namesake pride
Lost and left
Only with her flesh
To be bid and sold

Unlike the feminist attitudes of Haripriya, Shreema and Chaoba, Bondina Elangbam’s *Between The Poet and Her Pencil* (2016) takes us to the personal record of a young poet’s evolution concerning her rite of passage — innocence, loneliness, love, initiation into adulthood and self-discovery. Unfazed by others’ view and

indicating a girl who is comfortable with her own self, she says she has a tattoo, a nose ring, six piercings on her ear and is thinking of adding a belly button and confidently answers the question 'Who Am I?'

I am a woman, I answered at last.
 I love to adorn myself, I answered at last.
 I want to paint my thoughts for myself, I answered at last.
 See not my body, see my soul, I answered at last.
 I am a woman; please do not make me hate myself.
 I am proud of being the 'woman' of my choice.

Being a woman with opportunity of pursuing her education from different college and university in different states of India, she got the chance of choosing her own identity. It is all about adorning herself yet she does not want others see her body but her soul. She likes to record her thoughts more for herself than others. Happy of being a woman she does not want to see anything ugly about it, otherwise she might end up hating herself. Happy and proud of herself, of being a woman, can be considered as an independent choice done against dominant cultural codification. Yet such innocent self-preoccupation is not free from a sense of "this vacuum" and this vacuum disturbs her soul/self. Though she is afraid of it, her belief in "a secret abode" gives her hope. The word 'secret', though not similar to the conspiratorial position of Shreema's "Seven Witches", but can be connected with it in the sense of secrecy, of a place, where she can be on her own.

Then, moving from one education location to another, she faces the uninformed cultural other. In 'I Belong Here too', she is located in other's cultural setting where she is aware of or forced to be aware of her difference and similarity:

I seem unlike them
 In language, in food habits, in drape, in ways and
 In looks,
 Had not they asked?
 I would have never realized
 The difference_
 I look different from them.

Despite breathing the same air, eating their food and speaking their language, because of her looks, the Other cannot accept her one of them. It must be really shocking to a proud Meitei. India being an overwhelmingly multicultural nation, it is quite expected for her to get caught in such a situation where she is taken as "an unknown body" and her birthplace "a land/ That they have never heard before?". She has to enlighten them:

My beautiful Manipur,
 We call it our *Sanaleibaak*.
 I am also from India,
 The North-eastern region. And,
 I belong here too.

Her state-to-state mobility has widened her consciousness enough to feel comfortable in a different state of India and say 'I belong here too'. Being a Meitei, a Manipuri and an Indian have become a part of her personal identity. It may be different to someone who is rooted lifelong in a small Meitei locality and has a narrow sense of regional identity.

The tension between self-prettification and not wanting other to see her body continues in her 'His love or lust'. Still not yet ready to accept desire as a part of love or body as the seat of soul, she is not happy to discover that "in the end it is only the flesh that he had meant." Her failure to resolve this conflict is, one assumes, behind her "not ready to be a bride" ('My Fear'). Quite different from the celebration of pursuit of desire (lust) with freedom, beyond social constraints found in *Tattooed with Taboos*, Bondina avoids talking about the body. Even when she writes about male-female togetherness, her approach is that of psychological one as

in 'When Two Become One' and it gets tangible only as "your heady smell" ("Yes, I have imbued your delectable imprints"). It is in this temporary feeling of oneness that her loneliness (probably connected with the vacuum) disappears: "When two become one, / We are knotted; nothing could part us now, / Forever, as one." And it leads to "We dwell in our souls evermore. / Our marriage, Our Promise." Marriage is only a future plan. She is saturated with his "delectable imprints" but nuptial is "a blasphemy to our (their) existing" (Yes, I have..). In 'Your Dirt', the image of dirt (something concrete, body) connected with the idea of sin (immorality) emerges. Dirt is dust, soil or any substance that makes a surface not clean and disturbs that temporary feeling of psychological (non-body) oneness. Instead of accepting it as part of relationship and taking responsibility together, she says:

You know that I do not deserve shame
 You know that I have not sinned
 Your stain tarnished my purity.

Innocence connected with purity is going out after a few complaints and makes way for the initiation towards maturity. Now she is ready to "live thorns-filled life all over again/ Cross with demons and play with fire./ Nothing is coveted more than your warmth" (And of all the love). As expected, she goes through her share of separation - "within, I am torn apart"; heart break - "a soulless life"; 'You no longer belong to me', 'Betrayal' and 'False Dream'. The refined surface of her poetry seems to materialize out of her comfort zone, time living in safe hostel rooms and adolescent faith in one's purity. Solid contents of life, its ugly sides, discomfort, social angst, marital issues, domestic violence, job, child care and suffering of other underprivileged women have not yet found place between her poetic gaze and keyboard. Her poems touch the gamut of fine sentiments encountered in the life of a young poet, probably with the promise of taking her towards a mellowed understanding of things and a progress from the personal to the social.

The F-Ward section in Susma Sharma Gurumayum's *The Finite Days To Come* (2021) with its controlled emotional speed and meditative inertia about female self falls between the subversive feminist aspiration of *Tattooed with Taboos* and the self-possessed, no-problem-with-tradition female sensibility of *The Poet and Her Pencil*. F-ward may mean in the direction of feminism (the goal) or just feminist tendency (but not exactly feminist). The word 'ward' may also mean a hospital or psychiatric wards, where the physically or psychologically injured (applies to both male and female, victims of patriarchy) is admitted for recovery or healing and for this reason, it gives off positive vibes. Similar to Haripriya's 'Five Days' Untouchable', Susma Sharma's 'Culture Induced Blindness' is also about the five days of menstruation cycle where a woman is not allowed to do certain things she is considered as dirty and impure:

I'm not allowed in kitchen
 I'm not allowed in temples,
 I'm not allowed in any place pure.

Conservative women and housewives consider it as full resting period of five days. Modern women take it as outdated cultural practice. New generation regards it as affront to female dignity and self-image and takes it as sort of tradition-sanctioned blindness which needs both insight and sight. Dismissing the cultural meaning of impurity associated with it, she claims:

Don't steal my days,
 my days are mine.
 My days
 are not your business.
 My days are mine.

'Her Story' is about how the restrictive life in a patriarchal environment reduces a woman to a state of suffocating silence and life-denying stasis.

Here sands a life-like menhir of sculptured stone.
 This is how they want their women to be-

white as snow, delicate, pretty, pure,
 all covered, providing no space for indecent eyes to move
 because that was her responsibility, yes;
 mute, knowing her place which is always below someone,
 she was born alive
 and grew into a stone.

She has 'no freedom of movement. No freedom. No.' Yet she fills the life-giving green bowl up with her tears, sweat and blood/ the only things she had.' It is not total freedom (to do whatever she likes) she is asking for, it is less restrictive environment where a space for herself is given and respected so that she could fill the life-giving green bowl, which is a life-affirming, not-life-denying symbol.

Her story is not a knob of butter to get melted in the hot soup of his story. After some point, she wants to shout - 'enough and listen to my (her) story also'. Not totally against patriarchy yet not someone to be pushed around, not a rebel yet solid about her own position in the society, such an attitude is voiced in 'The Photographer Called Patriarchy'. Patriarchy like a photographer orders his model, 'woman', to do different poses only to suit the graded edifice of its aesthetics, politics and sexual fantasy.

'Turn to the side',
 You say.
 'Pose
 with your hands on your waist,
 straight back;
 breasts out,
 look sexy.'

Such dominant presence of patriarchy enrages her and she is ready to resist it. 'And you tell her to smile?/ No./ She won't.' Saying no is an exhibition of resistance, an exercise in power as Michel Foucault remarks, "At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom". (342)

In a meditative but hurt tone, her 'Anatomy of a Bruise' measures the depth of a violent act done to her face by a perpetrator which, if not spoken out, might continue like nothing has happened.

The bruise over her eye
 where blood tried to escape
 the skin, but failed;

 It will change colour,
 it will change contour,
 In about half a month,
 it might disappear
 without a trace.

It was not simply an injury, an external mark, it goes deeper. "The impact of the bruise/ on her mind and heart/ might take longer/ to heal,/ or might never." The vulnerability of her skin/ self and her inner strength to state it comes out in clear, non-figurative lines:

That part of her body where you hit
 is tender,
 it is not supposed to be hit.
 A little pressure and it bruises,
 You are not supposed to hit it.

Living in global time and cybernetic technologies of the Information Age with mass media and mass entertainment means our self, identity and values are no longer entrenched in a particular culture but are exposed to constant assault of unlimited multicultural images and narratives, new models of relationship, new discourses of selfhood. Furthermore, old cultural and traditional codes are under constant attack as seen in the erosion of joint family and popularity of nuclear family, lessening individual ties to community in urban sites, intercultural penetration in multicultural environment and glorification of individualism (personal autonomy and self-reliance). The woman poets studied above belong to the contemporary urban, middle-class, educated and professional group who are not located in one confined culture setting but figures who finished their PhDs from metropolitan universities and influenced by different cultural discourses. Their literary efforts contain questioning and challenging old Meitei values and the necessity for revision and rethinking to adapt to the changing time. Besides demanding equal status and respect, their poetry aspires to assert their individual identity and their own definition about themselves rather than blindly adhering to male-centric cultural codes. Regarding *Tattooed with Taboos*, whether their lyrical poems, partly confessional, partly personal-is-political mode, manage to do justice to their introductory objectives remain a question. They no doubt touch the issues but are not combative or subversive enough. They also do not deal with issues like equal work, equal pay, unwanted pregnancy, safe sex, sharing household chores and parenting.

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