



REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MIZO HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

For a very long time, the transformations that have taken place in the history of the Mizo is mainly derived from the writings of the colonizers and the Christian missionaries. The entire discourse which was dominated by the white male perspective was slightly altered when the natives began to write their own history. However, women writers were still absent. It was only in the last decade of the twentieth century that women began documenting their history. This paper is an attempt to look at the place of the Mizo women in the narrative through a span of a little more than a century and how they have been represented in the history making process. Women have not always been absent but have always had some sort of 'place' in the narratives. But even in the more modern historical writings, they have been depicted as mere subjects of history rather than actor or maker of history.

Keywords: *Women, Victimization, Representation, Conventional archives.*

Introduction

In historical research, recovering 'reality' of the past has been the main attempt of all historians. To achieve this task, scientific method of historical writing was introduced in the 19th century that considered conventional or archival documents as representing universal truth or reality of the past. However, 20th century discourses on 'new history' have increasingly challenged this kind of traditional approach of history writings.

While the 'new history' aimed to introduce 'total history' by including the roles and attitude of the people, it also challenged historical discipline as an area of knowledge that merely reflects the hierarchical relationship between the elite and the marginalized groups. Since then various discourses, traditions and approaches have emerged in historical writings and its discipline. One of the challenges against conventional history writing also came from feminist historians.

From the perspectives of women's history and gender history, earlier history was constructed by the narrow accounts of elite men marginalizing the role of women and other subaltern groups. As Personal narratives groups mentioned "what was once accepted as normative in history limited the perspectives of gender, class, race, caste, tribe and ethnicity as the regarded objective view of the world was defined and selected from dominant white males' view" (Personal Narrative Group, 1989). Feminist historians therefore challenged the way in which earlier historians interpret the past, the sources they used, the methodologies and approaches they applied in writing history. With this background in view the present paper reexamines the representation of women both in colonial and post-colonial archives in Mizo history.

In Mizoram, records of written documents had been found only from the British intervention in the late nineteenth century and the study on Mizo cultural practices had been initiated by the colonial military officers. These records are available in the form of military reports, ethnographies, travelers' accounts, letters, diaries, government reports, medical reports and Christian missionary reports. However, these works were largely confined to semantic studies of language, folktales, geographical and political conditions and rarely touched upon Mizo history in a larger context. The most cited writings of colonizers include the ethnographical works of T.H. Lewin's *A Fly on the Wheel* (1884) & *Wild Races of South-Eastern India* (1870) R.G. Woodthorpe's *Lushai Expedition* (1873), A.Z. Mackenzie's *History of*

Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal (1884), A.S. Reid, *Chin-Lushai Land* (1893), J. Shakespear's *The Lusei-Kuki clan* (1912), N.E. Parry's *A Monograph of Lushai Customs and Ceremonies* (1928) and A.G. McCall's *Lushai Chrysalis* (1949). From the early twentieth century, a new trend of writing emerged from the Christian missionaries. The famous ones among them were R.A. Lorrain's *Five Year in an Unknown Jungle* (1912), Herbert Anderson's *Among the Lushais* (1914), J.M. Lloyd's *On Every High Hill* (1957) and *History of the Church in Mizoram: Harvest in the hills* (1991). These writings mostly were concerned with the changes and transformations of earlier customs and practices initiated by the colonial officials and particularly the Christian missionaries (Hmingthanzuali, 2010). Mizo histories prior to the British intervention were documented through the transmission of oral traditions including folktales, folklores, myths, proverbs etc. For the very first time these oral traditions were also documented in a written form by the colonizers (Hmingthanzuali, 2010).

Within these sites of various colonial texts women "occur simultaneously in several places" into a subject of history. But in what context were women emerged in colonial texts and archives? In their official reports and textual writings, colonizers such as T.H. Lewin, J. Shakespear, Cole, McCall etc. generally defined Mizo women in terms of their "pitiful" condition in the domestic sphere. Moreover, representing Mizo women as victims under savage or Mizo patriarchal culture who required the

‘protection’ and ‘intervention’ of the colonial government was one of the main aspects of colonial politics (Hmingthanzuali, 2010). An instance can be taken from the writing of J. Shakespear.

“A Lushai woman has to rise early, fill her basket with empty bamboo tubes, and trudge off before daylight down to the spring, which is generally some way down the hill, and the supply of water is frequently so scanty that it takes her sometime to fill her bamboos. Having conveyed her basketful to the house, she has to set to work cleaning the rice for the day. The necessary amount of unhusked rice has been dried the previous day on the shelf of the hearth, and this she now proceeds to pound in a mortar in the front verandah and winnow on an oval bamboo tray till it clean enough for use. The breakfast of rice has then to be cooked, and by the time it is ready her husband is awake. After the meal the real work of the day begins. In the cold weather the women settle themselves to some of the operations connected with cloth making, while the men prepare to pass a day of complete enjoyment, lying in the sun and smoking...” (Shakespear, 1988).

The same ideology is followed by the Christian missionaries. To validate the triumph of their civilizing project, they have portrayed themselves as the saviour of Mizo women. Welsh Presbyterian missionary J.M. Lloyd’s observation on the emancipation of Mizo women reflects to throw light on this as he argues, “This (Emancipation of women) came surely, but slowly through Christian influence” (Lloyd, 1991).

Historical narratives and documentation during the colonial period were indeed dominated by ‘white’ male perspectives that keep men’s activities and ideas dominant even in documenting native women’s life. But it does not mean that male perspective completely suppressed women’s voices in writing and recording about colonial experiences in Mizoram. There were numerous trained women missionaries recruited by both London Baptist missionary society and Welsh Presbyterian Church. Hence, some records on women’s issues like female education, health and sanitation etc are also left by these women missionaries, but only few of them penned down their experiences in a book form. The most famous works include E. Chapman & M. Clark; *Mizo Miracle* (Chapman & Clark, 1968), May Bounds & Gwladys M. Evan; *Medical Mission in Mizoram: Personal Experiences* (Bounds & Gwladys, 1987), Gwen Rees Roberts; *Memories of Mizoram: Recollections and Reflections* (Roberts, 2001). These writings form important sources for the studies of women’s and gender history in colonial Mizoram. The authors of these books mainly highlighted missionaries’ project on education and medicinal works concerning the development of Mizo women. However, white male’s perspectives still governed white women’s perspectives. The evangelical notion of female missionaries on gender relations were strongly attached to the “Victorian conceptions of gendered separated spheres” and most of their writings reflected their absolute conformity to the Western patriarchal thought. At the time of her arrival in South Lushai hills E.

Chapman also envisaged the importance of reinforcing the women's space to domestic chores in education as she said, "We had made a mental note that when schools for girls started in Mizo District, the work and lessons must be done out-of-doors, and life must not spoil them for village work. It must be planned as to make girls more useful in their homes and villages than they were without it" (Chapman & Clark, 1968).

Both colonial and missionary writings reveal that while the colonial reforms institutionalized the power of men in the family through the customary law, the missionaries' reforms reproduced 'new Mizo women' who were domestically trained to fit into the paradigm of a 'new Mizo patriarchy' (Hmingthanzuali, 2010). Similar to Partha Chatterjee's argument on colonial Bengal, female education in Lushai Hills emerged as a new social form of "disciplining" the society according to the new economic and social conditions set by the external forces (Chatterjee, 1999).

Newspapers of that period replicated that in the early 20th century a few literate and educated class of native young men started to write about women's condition and criticized Mizo patriarchal attitudes towards women. The famous among them were Vanchhunga, Dala, Thangbura Sailo, Makthanga, R. Buchhawna, H. Durra, Ch. Pasena and Khamliana. The colonial newspaper, *Mizo leh Vai Chanchinbu* and the first Mizo Christian periodical journal *Kristian Tlangau* echoed the resonances of the voices of these young men for the emancipation of women (Hmingthanzuali, 2010). They mainly concerned women's

miserable condition in the domestic sphere associated with the issues on customs relating to women particularly on marriage systems. All of them urged for the need to educate women and girls and considered female emancipation as the first step towards cultural progress.

Aside from the above mentioned newspapers, it is from the first half of the twentieth century that native intellectuals also produced various texts on the history of the Mizo but without texts produced by Mizo women. The earliest and most prominent among them were Liangkhaia; *Mizo Chanchin* (1938), Challiana; *Pipu Nun* (1949) and K. Zawla; *Mizo Pipute leh An Thlahte Chanchin* (1964) etc. These writings mainly dealt with the socio-economic, religious and political life of the Mizos. The main limitation of the above writers is that their historical writings were mainly recollected from the oral records based on the perspective of 'Lusei patriarchy' (Hmingthanzuali, 2010). Until today researchers and writers of Mizo History mostly rely on their texts.

In the later part of the twentieth century several scholars trained theologians also began to have systematic studies in social, cultural and religious changes brought about by Christian morality and new material cultures. The notable scholarly studies among them were the works of notable theologians such as Zairema; *God's Miracle in Mizoram* (1978) and C.L. Hminga; *The Life and witness of the Church in Mizoram* (1987). Although women were not the main theme of their writings, these writers and scholars unquestionably retained

the notion of glorifying colonial administration and particularly missionaries' activities for saving the Mizo women who were 'victims' of pre-colonial cultural practices. Instances can be taken from the writings of the two trained theologians Zairema and C.L. Hminga (1987). While Zairema states, "If Christianity brings freedom to the men, it does more to the women" (Zairema, 1978), C.L. Hminga also argues, "In Pre Christian days, the place of women was very low indeed...Mizo women have been liberated by Christianity" (Hminga, 1987).

It was only from the last decade of the twentieth century that indigenous women began to draw their attention to documenting women's life. One of the first female produced texts was published in 1994 by Synod Publication Board. As the book is published as one of the series of the Gospel centenary celebration, the author Malsawmi elaborated women's place and their contributions for the growth and development of Presbyterian Church in Mizoram and also acknowledged Christianity for giving chances to women to have contribution within the church activities (Malsawmi, 1994). The same approach is applied by a trained theologian Zomuani in her book '*Kum Za Chhung a Kohhran Hmeichhe Chanchin*' (Zomuani, 2004) Zomuani has produced a detailed account on the roles of Mizo women for the growth of Presbyterian Church from 1904-2004 mostly based on missionaries' accounts. While acknowledging female education that enabled the native women to contribute for the Church she has also

credited women missionaries as liberating force for Mizo women.

Throughout the last century no critical appraisal of the 'civilizing mission' of the missionaries and colonizers in Mizoram were yet to be found. In this context, the present study observes that those few learned or literate young men who had initiated the task of representing the Mizo past were amateur historians but not professional historians. They were totally unaware of historical theories and methods to challenge colonial and missionary accounts and even to introduce new perspectives in studying the Mizo past. The theologians indeed were believed to conduct proper research; their writings however reflected that they were the products of the missionaries. As far as C.L. Hminga and Zairema were concerned they studied in mission schools so the mission's influence on them was very strong. They were impressed by the positive aspects of the missionary activity and were totally blind to even find faults of the missionary enterprises (Lalsangzeli, 2011). Moreover, having been influenced by the ideologies of the missionaries, the Mizo amateur historians and trained theologians enthusiastically instilled in them the new concept of 'Mizo patriarchy' and wholeheartedly praised Christianity for saving Mizo women from the ill treatment of the traditional patriarchy. Malsawmi's and Zomuani's writings reflected that women also became aware of documenting their own life and contributions in the past. But as both of them were the leaders of *Kohhran hmeichhia* (Church Women's fellowship),

their perspective was suppressed by the patriarchal hegemony of the Church.

In the post-colonial period, a new genre of writing emerged as a result of new ethnic and political consciousness. Most of these writings focused on the growth of ethnic consciousness and can be traced from the mid 1940's to 1950's and later, the history of the Mizo Nationalist Movement (MNF) of 1960's-1980's, which the Mizo refer to as Rambuai. So history writings in the Post-Colonial period are mostly centred on political history particularly on the history of Rambuai. For many decades, much attention has been directed towards the roles of ethnic leaders and other (male) heroes within Rambuai history. But much of these writings have been drawn from the personal accounts of male MNF leaders and official documents of the government and the Church. Aside from mainstream and indigenous scholars, most of the earlier works on Rambuai were produced by male writers who were volunteers and leaders of the movement. The result was the absence of the voices and contributions of certain groups, particularly women, involved in the movement. So far, *Ram Tana Tawrhna* (2016) by Rebeki is the only published book written by female volunteers of *Rambuai*. In this autobiographical memoir, Rebeki shared her active contribution as a volunteer and her struggle as a wife of the MNF leader as well.

Hence, the most striking unevenness of the archives and literature of Rambuai is “their gendered nature and the relative absence of female-produced texts” (Ballantyne, 2001). Nevertheless, women

were not completely absent from the archival documents and the literature of Rambuai. One of the main images of women drawn from these documents is their victimizing condition against the atrocities committed by the Indian Security Force in the form of rape, violence and others. Under this “victimizing discourse”, women have been portrayed as passive victims who are to be saved. In most of the existing literatures, women have also been described as “also there” and their duties remain within the role of cooking, nursing, washing etc, which were often described as secondary from the active role played by their male counterparts.

In the present century, there has been a growing awareness of a more inclusive form of writing among the young scholars and indigenous writers. These writers have taken the initiative of bringing to light the hidden roles and participation of subaltern groups. With the aim of recovering hidden voices of numerous Mizo people who experienced the movement, few scholars and writers now began to employ oral sources and giving the voiceless people the space to share their knowledge and experience on Rambuai. Among these C. Zama's *Zoram a Tap* (Zama, 2008) and his *Untold Atrocity* (Zama, 2014), C. Lalawmpuia Vanchiau's *Rambuai Literature* (Vanchiau, 2014), were the prominent works. This new approach indeed gives new opportunity for women's experiences and voices to be heard, featured and examined within the realm of Rambuai literature (Hmingthanzuali, 2019). While hidden contributions of women are unearthed, issue of victimization is still internalized by repressing the subaltern

women to exercise their agency. Within the discourses on female victimization under the Armed Forces Special Power Act women are always repeatedly represented as victims who are to be 'pitied' and needed to be saved by their male counterparts.

In the attempt of placing women as active agents in the making of the society, there has been an emerging interest among female scholars in recovering the lost and hidden voices of women who experienced the movement. From the approach of feminist and gender studies new methodology has been applied to introduce a whole new paradigm in the study of *Rambuai*. Tracing their sources from personal narratives and oral interviews, these writings recovered the real voices, contributions, perspectives and actions of women of different groups. The first female produced text on the experiences of women during *Rambuai* period was Denise Segor's *Tracing the Persistent Impulse of a Bedrock Nation to Survive within the State of India: Mizo women's Response to War and migration* (Segor, 2006). In her doctoral research, Denise Segor brings to light how *Rambuai* affected Mizo women, telling their experiences of the disturbance and stories that have never been told before, their ordeals, feelings, experiences that were never documented. Her research mostly covered the voices of those women who experienced village groupings during the *Rambuai* period (Segor, 2019).

The exclusion of women in the history of *Rambuai* is also challenged in other writings of Mizo female scholars Hmingthanzuali (*Recollecting Women's*

prison memories of Mizo Ethnic Nationalism' (Hmingthanzuali, 2014), *Mizo Women and Agency: Reading Insurgency in Northeast India from a gender perspective* (Hmingthanzuali & Pande, 2017) *Memories, Trauma and Resistance: Mizo Women's Narratives on Rambuai* (Hmingthanzuali, 2019) and Mary Vanlalthanpuii (*Women's Action in the Mizo National Movement 1966-1986* (Vanlalthanpuii, 2019). Stressing the need to move away from victimizing discourse Hmingthanzuali and Mary Vanlalthanpuii have recovered the missing stories of women by retrieving the lost voices of female volunteers, female prisoners and other women who experienced the movement. Putting aside how they were victimized, women's resisting action against their victimization, the protective roles they had played for their community and their male counterparts are highlighted. These writings challenged the traditional approach of representing women as mere victims in almost all historical events of *Rambuai*.

Conclusion

From the above writing, it can be perceived that Mizo women have always had some sort of a presence in historical writings since colonial times. But they have been portrayed as either a passive participant or a victim who needs to be saved. The real voice of women, their stories, perspectives, experiences etc. are prospects that still need to be explored. The few female writers that have emerged are still under the influence of the traditional mode of writing. Therefore, history writing is not inclusive as it focuses on the male story while the women are just "also there". The total history has not been

brought out. The marginalisation of women in political and religious space together with the dominance of traditional patriarchal attitudes over the decades of Mizo history had resulted in the privileging of male perspectives in the Mizo historical record. To recover the “reality” of the past, the conventional sources need to be reexamined. Alternative sources like oral sources, personal narratives, diaries, autobiographies and so on need to be incorporated into the writing of history to bring out a more inclusive Mizo history.

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