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Of Contested Landscapes and Women's Bodies: Rape as an Invasive Weapon in Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami*

By Debajyoti Biswas¹ and Zothanchhingi Khiangte²

Abstract

The geopolitical history of India's Northeast replicates the history of the struggle of the ethnic communities living along what is often referred to as a "troubled periphery." The fictionalised stories produced in this region, therefore, often betray the wounds inflicted on people living in this contested territory. As such, the history of this place and the story of its people lose their distinctions, allowing ethnographic study and the fluidity of personal narrative to converge and inform each other. Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami* (2018) encapsulates this history of strife and contestation through emphasizing a double significance in the eponymous character symbolising both land and women's bodies in a conflict zone. While women very often become the target of state forces during conflict as seen in *Zorami*, this article aims to read the defilement of women's bodies by an invasive power as a war strategy to discipline communities and territories. Drawing from Susan Brownmiller's idea of rape as an attack on the body politics and Foucault's idea of disciplining the body and soul, this article conflates war with rape to argue that both these invasive weapons are symbolic of patriarchy on one hand, and the victim's body as a site of conquest on the other hand. Like the history of a territory is written and rewritten by successive conquering forces, the stories of atrocities on women also undergo a similar process. The article further underscores that the victim's body is denied agency as it goes through a process of erasure, where written records or memory of the perpetration exist only in the lived memory of the victim. For the contesting powers, however, such perpetration is only a matter of defeat or conquest, thereby precluding the physical traumatic experience. Taking a New Historicist approach, this article will substantiate its arguments by referring to archival materials, non-fictional works, and other historical sources available on *Zorami*.

Keywords: Mizo National Front (MNF), India's Northeast, Rape, Women's Bodies, *Zorami*, Body Politics, Patriarchy

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Introduction

Zoram (Jacob, 2018, p. 238) signifies Mizoram,³ from which the eponymous character in Malsawmi Jacob's fictional work draws the name Zorampari, otherwise fondly called Zorami. This act of conflating two identities (name of place and name of person) underscores the inextricable link between being and belonging to a place. Unlike the idea of ancient nomadism that subsumes possibilities of mobility, the tribal communities in India's Northeast have become politically rooted in their places of arrival due to social-cultural and economic intervention by the British since colonial times (Kar, 2016; Sharma & Banerjee, 2021). These valiant warring head-hunting tribes (see Colonel Lister's description in Mackenzie, 2012, p. 287) classified as Kuki-Chin, migrated to vast stretches of land "lying between Chittagong and the Irrawaddy valley to the south of Cachar and Imphal" (Chaube, 2019, p. 170) over a span of time to settle down permanently⁴ at places they refer to as home today. Like other tribal communities inhabiting the hilly terrains of Northeast India, the Mizos also identify themselves as an "indigenous"⁵ community belonging to the hills, as the root word "Zo" suggests (Chaube, 2019, p. 171). This is why land becomes an inalienable marker of identity among the tribes of Northeast India because their identities are shaped by the landscape. In the past, the community-home-space of these tribes had fluid boundaries, very often involving inter-tribal conflicts (Thirumal et al., 2019, p. 12), but with the British occupation of the region, these borders became more or less ossified, as evident in the nomenclature of the regions named after the communities (Hassan, 2011, p. 212). However, this act of naming became problematic in the post-1947 era because of the superimposition of community identities over place and space. With the inception of postcolonial modernity, the primitive conflicts among the tribal groups gave way to contestation over land resources and cultural identity. Such conflicts were not only between communities but also between the state and the tribal communities.

It is against this backdrop that many of the stories from India's Northeast try to narrate the ordeal of the individuals and communities. On the one hand, the individual narratives lend legitimacy to the stories as they accrue from personal encounters and experiences; on the other hand, the collective memory of the communities becomes the repository of shared suffering and trauma. Zorami's traumatic life and story replicate the social upheavals that rocked Mizoram through the 1960s to 1980s. With the rise of Mizo nationalism and the demand for a separate nation, the region became embroiled in contestation relating to sovereignty based on ethnic and linguistic identity. This contestation, we argue, is rooted in masculinist hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses where the power structures are sustained by patriarchal forces (Banerjee, 2001, p. 132; Kolas, 2017).⁶ The ramifications of such contestations, however, spill over to all sides, where women and children become the victims of these contesting forces. In the case of Northeast India, one can see women becoming the target of state forces as well as militant groups in places which are declared as "disturbed areas" (Vanlalthanpuii, 2019, p. 22; Choudhury, 2016). Whereas territory is the apparent site of contestation in this context, women's bodies also symbolically typify a site of the community's honour, which needs to be guarded like that of a territory. This is so because women's sexuality remained a means "by which a patriarchal culture maintained control over women" (Cahill, 2000, p. 44). Therefore, an attack on a woman's body through rape and torture is an attack on

³Mizoram means land of the Mizos: "*Mi* meaning man, *Zo* meaning Hill." (Chaube 2019, p. 171)

⁴Mizos led a nomadic, non-sedentary lifestyle (Thirumal et al 2019, p. 12).

⁵The idea of the indigeneity of the tribal and non-indigeneity of non-tribals has been contested and problematised by Bodhisattva Kar and Virginius Xaxa in their respective works.

⁶Paula Banerjee discusses how women participate and negotiate between two armed patriarchies during conflict in the case of Assam and Nagaland. This reading can also be extended in the case of Mizoram, where women became victims of the two armed patriarchies. Citing Paula Banerjee, Ashild Kolas writes, "Women are still viewed primarily as victims, or as helpless bystanders caught between 'two armed patriarchies' (Kolas, 2017, p. ix).

the community's honour when seen through a patriarchal lens: "The body of a raped woman becomes a ceremonial battlefield, a parade ground for the victor's trooping of the colours. The act that is played out upon her is a message passed between men—vivid proof of victory for one and loss and defeat for the other" (Brownmiller, 1993, p. 38). Although this remains an act of physical violence, it also triggers a psychic disposition in the victim, leading to trauma and affecting sexuality, as argued by Foucault and others (Foucault, 1988). Zorami's trauma too leads to her lifelong abhorrence of a sexual relationship with her husband as well. However, a simplistic analysis of this trauma is problematic (Foucault, 1988). Whether the trauma is due to physical violence or due to "certain social ideal formations" (Foucault, 1988, p. 204) is not explored by the author nor the Mizo society. This viewpoint eliminates the possibility of recounting the traumatic experiences of the victimized women, denying the victim agency. Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami* exposes this attempted erasure where women's bodies are defiled and violated by state forces on one hand, and the lack of empathy from the Mizo nationalist forces on the other hand. Both these forces are symbolic of right-wing orientation and patriarchal domination, where land and women's bodies are treated as prized possessions.

Through emphasizing a double significance, *Zorami* encapsulates the history of such contestation through the eponymous character, symbolising both land and the woman's body in a conflict zone. Whereas women very often become the targets of state forces during conflict, as seen in *Zorami*, this article aims to read the defilement of women's bodies by an invasive power as a war strategy to discipline communities. Drawing from Susan Brownmiller's (1993) idea of rape as an attack on the body politic and Foucault's idea of disciplining (1977) and regularising (2020), this article conflates war with rape to argue that both these invasive weapons are symbolic of patriarchy on one hand, and the victim's body as a site of conquest on the other hand. The stories of atrocities against women, like the history of a territory, are written and rewritten by successive conquering forces. The article further underscores that the victim's body is denied agency as it goes through a process of erasure, where written records or memories of the perpetration exist only in the lived memory of the victim. For the contesting powers, such perpetration is only a matter of defeat or conquest, thereby precluding the articulation of physical traumatic experiences undergone by women.

The Context of Violence

India's Northeast has remained a contested site at least from the time of its independence. This frontier borderland region has undergone several cosmetic transformations to suit the administrative convenience of the sovereign. Without going into details of the pre-independence border negotiations that took place in this region, we specifically focus on the post-1947 era, which saw the rise of various "partisan" (See Baishya, 2010, p. 239) forces claiming to form independent nations. However, such attempts to secede from India have been met with strong resistance from the nation-state, leading to the emergence of a postcolonial "troubled periphery" (See Bhowmik, 2009). Journalistic and non-fictional writings reveal the plethora of inhuman acts committed by armed forces in these "disturbed" peripheral areas (Bhattacharyya, 2018) to maintain peace and the sovereignty of the nation-state (Sethi, 2013).

Anglophone literature from Northeast India has marginally portrayed this saga of terror and pain through a fictional rendering of the events collected from cultural memory and lived experiences of the survivors. Anglophone fictional works from India's Northeast by Aruni Kashyap, Uddipana Goswami, Jahnvi Barua, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika, Janice Pariat, Hannah Lalhlanpuii, and Bijoya Sawian exude the impact of armed conflict that shapes the lives of the Northeasterners (see Biswas, 2021). However, very few novels or short stories render the traumatic experiences of women who have been caught at the crossroads of violence. Stories of brutalization and sexual violence against women in Northeast India remain undocumented or underrepresented in both nonfiction and fiction.

Although it is difficult to discern the reason behind the un-narratability of trauma arising out of sexual violence on women's bodies, one obvious reason for this suppression could be the stigma associated with the defilement of women's bodies in societies shaped by chauvinism and patriarchy, as we shall argue in this paper. For instance, when the Mizo National Front (MNF) underground army captured Major Kohli to avenge the rape and murder of innocent Mizo women, they discovered a diary in Kohli's pocket, which has the record of all the women he has ever raped. The discussion among the MNF members will further elicit the way rape is seen in a patriarchal society:

Then they discussed what to do with the horrid dairy. "Let's preserve it as a memorial of vai army's dirty deeds on our people," someone suggested.

"No, it's better to wipe it out [...]. Finally Dina took the decision. "My wife's sister's name is written on it. I want it removed. That must be the wish of all those girls and their families. Let's destroy it." (Jacob, 2015, p. 119)

Of the scant texts available, Temsula Ao's "The Last Song" (2006), "This is How We Lived" (2014), Aruni Kashyap's "His Father's Disease" (2019), and Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami* show us how armed forces use rape as a tool to brutalise, terrorise, and subjugate communities. Ao's, Goswami's and Kashyap's short stories and Jacob's novel depict scenes of rape and violence perpetrated by the Indian army that remain etched in the collective memory of the community.

Zorami is a fictional rendering of the historical events, brutalities, and atrocities committed by the state forces and by the militant organizations in the context of the Mizo uprising from the 1960s to the 1980s which was then violently suppressed by the state (Hazarika 2013). To quell the armed uprising of the Nagas, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was first clamped down on at various places in Northeast India (Hazarika 2013). Later on, with the Mizo uprising, the dreaded draconian Act was further extended to other areas. Under this Act, the military was given immense power to search and arrest, or even kill with impunity, any person suspected of militant activities (Bhattacharyya 2018). The narrator, in this connection, remarks, "The state was under Armed Forces Special Powers Act since it was declared a disturbed area. The Indian army could do so as they pleased; no one could stop them as they had the sanction of the highest authority in the country" (p. 117). Through these lines, the narrator removes the fog of doubt about how such acts could be sanctioned by a modern state which is based on the ideals of equality and liberty. To make these atrocities sound plausible and real, the narrator chooses to reckon on the contemporary political climate of Northeast India that makes this possible. Thus, Northeast India entered the phase of a "state of exception" where the Armed forces determined who would live and who would die. Under these circumstances, women and children become not only defenceless against state powers but also soft targets. Paula Banerjee writes:

The AFSPA is often used as an excuse to rape and brutalise women who appear in any way agentive. Sometimes it is used to dishonour entire communities with the result that the men of the community try to retrieve their masculinity by subordinating their women (Banerjee 2014, p. 58)

With the enforcement of AFSPA, the citizens were stripped of their right to life guaranteed by Articles 21 & 22 of the Constitution of India (Bhattacharyya 2018) and exposed to what Agamben calls bare life (1998). Reading it this way, one can see that the sovereign power

negotiates between disciplining and regularizing communities, not as two different methods,⁷ but as a complementary process in which errant bodies (not docile) are disciplined through coercive measures (See Heath 2018)⁸ and then regularized through panopticon structures (See Nag 2011). David Buhril, in this regard, writes:

Following the bombing, the Union government implemented what it termed the “regrouping of villages” in which thousands of Mizos deep in the hills and hamlets of what is now Mizoram were forcefully displaced – their homes and villages burned – and relocated in centres along an arterial highway under armed guard, ostensibly so that the Indian state could keep an eye on them. (Buhril 2016)

In this process, the act of raping women's bodies is a method deployed during war or counter-insurgency measures to discipline errant communities who dare to revolt against the state. Susan Brownmiller (1993) catalogues the numerous instances when rape was used as a weapon of terror during warfare: “In the name of victory and the power of the gun, war provides men with a tacit license to rape” (p. 33). Brownmiller further explains how rape is used as a weapon to subjugate communities during war or conflicts:

Men of a conquered nation traditionally view the rape of “their women” as the ultimate humiliation, a sexual coup de grace. Rape is considered by the people of a defeated nation to be part of the enemy's conscious effort to destroy them. In fact, by tradition, men appropriate the rape of “their women” as part of their male anguish of defeat (p. 38).

Whereas rape of women or retribution of it by avenging the act (as seen in *Zorami*, p. 118) remains an out and out man's task, the traumatic experience of the victim is given scant attention in real life. At times, instead of sympathising with the victim, they are considered a burden by their parents or relatives. Even the mothers or other female members of the family share the same ideology and fail to empathise with the victim. Susan Brownmiller (1993) and Malsawmi Jacob (2015) portray the plight of such victims in their respective works.

Brownmiller cites the infamous rape incidents that were perpetrated during the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971, when most of the family members of the victims refused to accept them in the family (see Saikia 2011). In much the same way, *Zorami's* father feels that she is a “damaged” person after the rape and so she should marry whoever approaches her for marriage. It is an irony that there is no stigma attached to the perpetrator, and all the consequences are to be faced by the ill-fated female victims. Therefore, it is not only the state machinery or sovereign power that exercises its power over the bodies of women through its agents; it is also the male members of the victim's community who are an equal party in inflicting violence on the body and psyche of women, at times literally and at times metaphorically. In other words, it is the patriarchal system that creates the environment for the subjugation of women and is normalised by the hegemonic structures of governance.

⁷Foucault in his *Society Must Be Defended* (2020) points out two series, “the body-organism-discipline-institution series, and “the population-biological process-regulatory mechanisms-state” (250). We argue that in a post-colonial nation like India, both the disciplining and regularising mechanisms are employed by the state to varying degrees.

⁸Deana Heath points out that Biopower, according to “scholars of colonialism... was a part of a larger disciplinary and regulatory regime” (p. 224). She further writes, “While Foucault argued that the emergence of modern forms of power such as discipline led to the ‘disappearance of torture as a public spectacle’, this was not true of colonial India, where both judicial and extra-judicial torture by the state agents was frequently carried out in public’ (p. 225). My reading goes beyond this, and I argue that such measures were taken in Independent India, as seen in the instance of bombing Aizwal during the Mizo uprising in 1966.

Zorami's Ordeal

Zorami's story is also the story of Mizoram. The conflicted land and defiled body represent unequal power relations between men and women, between the state and the region, and between the center and the periphery. The power that flows from state machinery is controlled and wielded by the male members of society, where women are taught to be silent and submissive. The relationship between dominant and residual, therefore, is not simply a gendered binary but relative. The mannerism taught by Zorami's mother is no different from the ones imposed by the nation-state over the periphery. Therefore, the deviant one is punished by coercive means like rape, bombing, and killing. This is how the personal becomes political in *Zorami*.

The ordeal faced by a rape victim finds articulation in Jacob's story of Zorami: "She runs home panting and crying [...]. She gets violently sick. Her mother asks but she can't, won't tell. Such a thing is not for telling. She keeps vomiting through the night" (p. 37). Here, the act of vomiting, which is visceral, physical, and grotesque, must be seen in the metaphorical sense of the body's attempt to rid itself of what it is forced to consume. As Michele Fazio points out, "Vomiting is itself a violent act" signifying the body's "refusal of other tastes" (2007, p. 133). In her study of Pietro di Donato's autobiographical novel *Christ in Concrete* (1939), she shows di Donato as purposefully associating the distasteful image of vomiting with the survival of the Italian immigrant and demonstrates the inability of Italian immigrants to digest capitalism and consumerism. The Biblical use of 'vomit' may also be read as an act of cleansing in relation to sexual defilement:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations... otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. (*The Holy Bible*, 1973, Leviticus. 18: 24-28)

Also, what is most painful in Zorami's ordeal is her being denied the capacity to speak. She internalizes the idea that being sexually violated is humiliating and therefore she must bear her shame in silence. And ironically, it is not the father but the mother who indoctrinates her daughter with the idea of feminine shame and of girls "talking too much" (p. 37). Therefore, Zorami could not confide to her mother "about the dirty man with the dirty touch" and thus, she never "spoke out" about her painful experience (p. 37). Thus, "men and women tacitly collude in not voicing women's experiences and build relationships around a silence that is maintained by men not knowing their disconnection from women and women's not knowing their dissociation from themselves" (Gilligan, 2003, p. xx). Apart from cultural repression, which denies a woman the ability to articulate her traumatic experience, Zorami's silence can be interpreted as the impossibility of speech in expressing the violation of a body that is "historically limited to being sexual object(s) for men" (Jones 1981, p. 248). In a culture that is fundamentally oppressive and phallogocentric, experience is narrated and written through the experience of the man, who claims to be the centre, and the woman's experience fails to find expression within the dominant discourse of patriarchy (Gilligan, 2003; Jones, 1981; Kristeva, 1980).

One of the reasons that women's experience of sexual violation during the *rambuai*⁹ has not found expression either in the historical documentation of the Mizo Movement or in

⁹ It is literally translated as "troubled land." This refers to the period of the Mizo Uprising.

the war narratives of Mizo writers is that men control the power of articulation and they get to speak for all; men's experience is the only experience and therefore women's voices are shut out: "Men's experience stands for all of human experience...which eclipse[s] the lives of women" (Gilligan, 2003: xiii). Traditionally, Mizo culture (like most patriarchal cultures) relegates women to a position of silence, conditioned through psychological processes. Folktales and proverbs are powerful ideological devices for producing and legitimizing social control. Proverbs like "Hmeichhe fin in tuikhur ral a kai lo" (A woman's wisdom does not reach beyond the village stream (Jacob, 2015, p. 69); "Hmeichhia leh pal chhia a thlak theih e" (A Wife and Broken Fence are to be replaced) (Jacob, 2015, p. 69); *hmeichhia leh uipui chu lo rum lungawi mai mai rawh se*¹⁰ (let a woman and a bitch grumble away); *hmeichhe thu thu ni suh, chakai sa sa ni suh* (as crab meat is no meat, woman's word has no value) are some examples that reflect the society's role in ensuring a culture of silence as far as women are concerned. "Liandova te unau," "Rahtea," and "Rimenhawihi" (Khiangte 2004) are examples of tales that project women in a negative light, highlighting women's lack of proper judgement. One of the popular folktales, "Rimenhawihi," which Api (Grandmother) narrates to Zorami and her brother in *Zorami* (Jacob, 2015, pp. 41-43), carries a social message about women's emotional weakness and greed through the story of Rimenhawhii's susceptibility to temptations. In the story, Rimenhawihi is lured and whisked away by the soldiers sent by the king from the Plains. The story foreshadows the larger story that unfolds. When Zorami objects to Api's made-up inclusions and exclusions in the story, Api reminds her about the unreliability of stories. It may be interpreted as a warning against the dangers of memory, which is unreliable as it can be interpreted and re-interpreted without the authenticity of writing. Writing, as the prerogative of the dominant, does not make space for women's subjectivity. Mizo women who were victims of rape in the aftermath of March 1, 1966¹¹ are doubly silenced: first, as a woman belonging to a marginalized community whose cries go unheard in the dominant discourse of mainstream Indian politics; and second, as a woman belonging to a culture in which a woman's voice is compared to a dog's whining.

Traditionally, positions of power are held by men in Mizo society (Lalchungnunga, 1994; Nag, 1993), with very little space given to women. Politics and religion, which are the two domains of power, are controlled by men.¹² Among the traditional elites were the *Pasaltha* and *Thangchhuahpa*, upon whom earthly honour and spiritual comfort after death were bestowed. In the traditional belief, *pialral* and *mitthi khua* are the two places spirits go to after death. Although there was no concept of heaven or hell, the hegemonic structure of society can be discerned in the cultural imagination of after-death. Whereas *mitthi khua* is believed to be a place of hardship and ceaseless struggle, *pialral* is conceived to be a place equivalent to the idea of paradise where there is comfort and pleasure. Only the *pasalha* (those who have achieved success in war and hunting) and *thangchhuahpa* (persons of eminence who have performed *khuangchawi*, a ceremony involving a public feast similar to potlatch) are permitted to enter the *pialral*, whereas an unescorted woman is denied entry regardless of her achievements in life. There were also no female religious priests in pre-colonial Mizo society, unlike some Northeastern indigenous tribes like the Bodos, who had female shamans who performed religious rituals like the *Kherai*.¹³ After the colonial encounter in the nineteenth century, with the introduction of modern education and the adoption of Christianity by most of

¹⁰These are Mizo proverbs that are circulated orally.

¹¹Mizo National Front (MNF) unilaterally announced a Declaration of Independence from India on this day.

¹²The few Mizo female chiefs like Banaithangi and her mother Pi Buki, Bungte-a's mother, Poiboi's mother, and Ropuiliani held the positions either on behalf of their underaged sons or because of their husbands' deaths (Chakraborty 2011), and the councilors of the chief *Lal Khawnbawl* were all men.

¹³This is a folk ritual of the Bodos related to the indigenous religion called *Bathou*. The authors have visited the site to watch the rituals.

the Mizos, the centre of power shifted from the traditional elites to the new elites (identified by Anup Chakraborty as the “black coats”), i.e., the educated middle class who became authorities in church affairs. Along with the political office, the church became an important center of governance. According to Chakraborty (2011), politics and religion were assigned superior positions while economics was ascribed an inferior position in Mizoram: “The Mizo patriarchy under the impact of Christian traditions began to view economics and the notions of business and profit to be both sensuous and materialistic and linked them with the notions of original sin and sexuality” (p. 587). Women, stereotyped as “greedy, materialistic, greedy and immoral,” are “excluded from the realms of spirituality and politics” (p. 587). This idea of women being viewed as sexually immoral, greedy, and more susceptible to temptation was reinforced by the Biblical idea of Eve as the cause of man’s Fall.¹⁴ Thus, women need the protection and guidance of men, without whom women would stumble and lose their way.

It is in this sense that the failure of Zorami’s father to protect his daughter from the enemy can be read as the Mizo man’s failure to protect his women and his land from the aggressors. It is ironic that Kimi’s family, who was looked after by her mother, escaped unharmed: “Kimi’s family was fortunate [...]. After her father’s death the Indian army did not molest them” (p. 130). As the honour of women is closely tied with the community’s honour, women must be closely guarded against outsiders at all cost. The iron house of Rimenhawihhi is symbolic of women’s metaphorical imprisonment in Mizo society. Significant in Api’s storytelling is what Matea, Zorami’s younger brother, pointedly reminds us: “Zawlhthia came back and rescued her (Rimenhawihhi) and they lived happily together” (p. 43). The role of man as protector and the rescuer reverberates in *Nunna Kawng Thuampuih* (Zikpui Pa, 1994), one of the most popular fictional works published in the aftermath of the *rambuai*. The story, scripted with the Mizo Movement as the backdrop, has a female protagonist, Ngurthansangi, who ends up being sold as a sex slave in mainland India by an Indian army officer whom she was compelled to marry. True to the cultural imaginary, it is a Mizo man-assumed to be untainted and morally virtuous (compared to Sangi, who is tainted and morally sinful) who comes and rescues Ngurthansangi from her shameful and sinful existence (shameful and sinful are what women are made to feel for their plight, which is in no way of their making). The analogy between crab’s meat and women’s words, signifying women’s lack of worth and lack of direction, acts as a powerful ideological signifier that gives rise to what Rini Ralte calls “crab theology” (See Chakraborty, 2011). This idea resonates well with Zorami’s father’s determination to get his daughter married to Sanga, whose “protective instinct” attracts him toward Zorami (p. 56). It is only a husband who can compensate for the failure of the father so that her “damaged” image of being raped can be erased.

The cultural trope that revenge is to be taken not by women but by men is built on the idea that receptivity and passivity are natural attributes inherent in women. In her psychoanalytical study of how the female body is perceived, Malkah Notman says that “the “receptive” position during sexual intercourse was thought to be an expression of inherent female receptivity and passivity, and this model for female sexuality was extended to describe personality” (p. 584). The idea that revenge or justice (and for that matter, forgiveness) is a man’s duty to deliver anoints a man with the power to decide for women (See Harris 2000). This presumption further gains ground in the religious discourse that emphasizes the act of forgiveness as the noblest quality: “[...] it’s hard to forgive [...]. But we are taught to forgive as we have been forgiven, aren’t we?” (Jacob, 2015, p. 66).

From domestic to political, it is a man who decides for a woman. It is a man who speaks for women, as evinced by the *Mizo Hnam Dan* (Customary Laws) that dictate terms of

¹⁴It might also stem from the colonial idea of the colonized women as being more sexual. See T.H. Lewin’s *Fly on the Wheel*, which describes Mizo women as being lustier than men.

marriage, divorce, inheritance, punishment of crimes, fines for rape or other forms of violence, and all other matters that concern the social and political life of a Mizo. The power of representation continued to be men's prerogative even at the negotiating table for peace in 1986. The Mizoram Peace Accord, signed on June 30, 1986 between the MNF and the Government of India, while reaching certain agreements that include compensation for the destruction of buildings, crops, and land, made no mention of any reparation or compensation to women, who have been the worst affected by village grouping and army atrocities. It may also be pointed out that the safeguarding of Mizo Customary Law in the Accord, instead of benefiting women in any way, reinforces women's subordinate positions and sustains patriarchal rulings on sexual offences (Vanlalthanpui, 2019). Women's issues have hardly gained attention in the peace-building processes, nor have their sufferings and victimization been acknowledged. It took more than 56 years for the government of India to award reparation in the form of monetary compensation to two women who had fallen victim to sexual atrocities of the State Forces during the Mizo Movement (Halliday, 2013).

Silencing and Disciplining

Rape, as a weapon of war, is an ancient practice (Card, 1996; Hirschauer, 2014; Coomeraswamy, 1998) and an "accepted instrumentality of sexual violence" and, as such, "remained, for centuries a matter of silence" (Hirschauer, 2014, p. 5). It was not until after the Bosnia and Rwanda rapes that martial rape became seen as a "legitimate threat component within the new 21st-century global security environment" (ibid, p. 2) through the establishment of international tribunals for Bosnia and Rwanda. Hirschauer maintains that "Bosnia accounted for the first convictions of rape as a war crime and a crime against humanity—wartime rape systematically implemented for specific political goals" (ibid, p.2). During the 1971 Bangladesh War, rape was associated with racial and religious "purity"—"to 'improve the genes of Bengali Muslims' and populate Bangladesh with a new breed of 'pure' Pakistani" (Mookherjee, 2008; Saikia, 2011). Therefore, martial rape has the potential to "destroy a group's identity by decimating cultural and social bonds" (Card, 1996, p. 8). Even if the rape does not result in pregnancy, men have rejected wives, mothers, and daughters who have been raped (Brownmiller, 1994; Card, 1996; Mookherjee, 2008, 2015; Saikia, 2011). In Bosnia, rapes were committed systematically (Allen, 1996; Brownmiller, 1994) with a "concerted policy of cultural eradication" (Bayard, 2015). According to Susan Griffin (2015), rape is not only an act of aggression in which the victim is denied her self-determination, but it is a form of mass terrorism (pp. 357-358).

In Mizoram or Nagaland of Northeast India, areas where there were, which Chadha (2005) terms in military vocabulary "low intensity conflicts," martial rape has been treated quite differently compared to those in Rwanda and Bangladesh. Instead of addressing them by what Hirschauer calls the "new grammar of horror" (2014, p. 223), they have only been seen as a "strategic-method-of conflict" (2014, p. 223). Sexual violence during the Mizo conflict of 1966-1986 has ostensibly been left unaddressed and silenced in most of the Mizoram conflict narratives, although it has left indelible memories in the lives of many and continues to haunt lives. Two women of Mualcheng Village who were allegedly gang-raped by the Indian security forces in November 1966 were given compensation of Rupees Five lakh each after five decades (Halliday, 2013). Both of these women lost their sanity. While one "sits quietly in a corner," "with a blank expression on her face," the other woman suffers from "extreme paranoia." While one is the daughter of a chief, the other is the daughter of the head of the village council at that time.

With the violent act inscribed on the body of the victim, the trauma lingers and "there's no such thing as bygone as long as the effects last" (Jacob, 2015, p. 243). The potential of rape

in depersonalizing and dehumanizing a person finds expression in Malsawmi Jacob's narrative of the two sisters who were repeatedly raped by Major Kohli and his men:

Major Kohli...commanded his men to arrest the two women. They were dragged away... They would release them after some days, and arrest them again whenever they wished. Then the arrests stopped altogether. The two sisters had forgotten to get back to their home. They forgot to take a bath or to change their clothes... They had stopped talking and *communicated only through screams* [emphasis ours]. (pp, 130-31)

It is important to emphasise the impossibility of normal conversation. Communication is replaced either by silence or hysteria. The woman who has been raped assumes an image of what Mookherjee (2015) calls a "horrific sublime." She is described in terms that evoke scenes of horror – "dishevelled hair," "loud laughter," "muteness," "the one who stares into space," and one with "deadened-eyes" (Mookherjee, 2015, p. 381). Temsula Ao's story about the rape of a young singer and her mother during an army raid in Nagaland by the Captain and his band of rapists stirs up similar feelings of terrifying intensity. The old storyteller's suggestion of a ghostly presence on certain nights in December, when "a strange wind blows through the village, which seems to come from the area of the graveyard and sounds like a hymn" (Ao, 2006, p. 32), adds to the horror of what happened on that terrible Sunday.

Nandini Sundar opens her discussion on sexual violence during the Mizo insurgency with the lines: "Although sexual predation was comparatively low compared to other conflict theatres, and non-existent on the part of the Naga and Mizo armies, it forms an indelible part of the narratives" (2011, p. 54). Considering the absence of any authentic data, it might be too rash to determine the "comparatively low" or high number of sexual predations in Mizoram. Such broad conclusions rule out any possibility of launching discussions aimed at seeking justice for and de-stigmatizing victims of sexual atrocities committed during the conflict. It was only after almost forty years of the *muktijuddho* (Bangladesh War) of 1971 that the International War Crimes Tribunal was set up in 2009 and wartime rape was treated as a crime (Mookherjee, 2015, p. 380), made possible with rape victims of 1971 breaking their silence after 2001. It also helped bring about changes in the representation of wartime rape in public memories (Mookherjee, 2015, p. 380).

In the narratives of the Mizo insurgency period, martial rape is a subject that has been silenced. Many factors contribute to the politics of silence that surrounds rape. With the Mizo Hills District declared as a "Disturbed Area" in 1966, the Indian Army, armed with the Armed Forces Powers Act of 1955, carried out extensive counter-insurgency operations throughout the land. In the name of security, within a few months, by December 1967, eighty-five villages were burnt, and by 1970, the exercise of village-grouping was completed, affecting 82 per cent of the total population of the Mizo Hills (Verghese, 1996, p. 142; Hluna & Tochwang, 2012, p. 160; Chadha, 2005, p. 345; Pachuau & Schendel, 2015, p. 308). The homeless population was herded into camps known as "grouped villages," a British counter-insurgency technique (Sundar, 2011, 50; Pachuau & Schendel, 2015, 306; Hazarika, 2018, 98) which continued to "flow over into the post-colonies, despite their own recent histories of freedom struggles" (Sundar, 2011, 50). Different methods of torture and mass punishment were applied to the civilian population, of which the most shocking was the aerial bombing of Aizawl, now the capital city of the state of Mizoram. The ideology behind such security measures was that the entire population of a given area was hostile and had to be kept under protective custody and kept under surveillance. In such a state, the juridical order becomes invalid, and citizens are divested of all their political rights and are reduced to "bare life" (Agamben, 1998, p. 133). The highhandedness and violent atrocities of the Indian Army in a war that they were clearly incapable of handling but nevertheless, had the capacity to dehumanise a group of people in

the worst possible ways. As Lieutenant General Matthew Thomas stated in an interview: “We did not have any concept...[of] how to fight this type of a war. Even though Nagaland had taken place, most of us had not put it into practice” (Chadha 2005, p. 346).

The period was the darkest in the Mizo collective memory, although the rest of the country was oblivious to the atrocities committed against their countrymen (Chadha, 2005, p. 346). Among the many incidents of rape by the state forces, the majority of them went unreported (Hluna & Tochwawng, 2012, p. 163), mainly because of the stigma attached to rape. There is no hard data available to estimate the number of female (or male) victims of martial rape during the Mizo conflict period. Apart from the fear of social stigmatization, shame and humiliation associated with rape (Hluna & Tochwawng, 2012, p. 163; Vanlalthanpui, 2019, p. 35), there is also the desire to forget and erase it from memory. A woman's body becomes a site of patriarchal dishonour and power, as well as a site of male contestation.

Conclusion: Future Possibilities

In the process of post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation and peace (in the Mizo context) seem to be sought through religious deliverance in the idea that justice is to be served by God. Thus, their sufferings become identified with Christ's sufferings for humankind, and the idea that a peaceful reconciliation with the traumatic past can only come through spiritual salvation holds predominance in the cultural imaginary of the Mizos post-conflict. And spirituality, as it identifies with the personal, necessitates women's experience of sexual violence to fall within the realm of the private and therefore the silenced. Although there had been widespread cases of sexual atrocities (Vanlalthanpui, 2019, p. 31) during the *rambuai* with “cries of women filling the air” (Hluna & Tochwawng, 2012, pp. 162-63) that set off the reign of terror by the state security forces, people preferred to say “Many women were raped by the Indian army, but it did not happen in our village” (Vanlalthanpui, 2019, p. 31). Thus, silence is used as a tool to negate sexual violence during the war to create a realm of forgetting (Saikia, 2011, 74). A few who have been identified as victims are said to have been healed “through God's healing power” (Vanlalthanpui, 2019) and have overcome fear despite what they have experienced, a fictional representation of which is given by Jacob in *Zorami*.

In the novel *Zorami*, through the protagonist's refusal to allow herself to forgive when her friend Kimi advises her to leave justice to God, the author seems to suggest that forgiveness is problematic when it is given at the behest of the cultural requirement to hide female “shame” to regain masculinist pride. While religious acceptance may provide some solace, the solution does not lie in denial, because refusing to acknowledge women's experiences of violence during post-conflict reconstruction merely reinforces patriarchal dominance over the narrative. It forces women to internalise what patriarchy brands as “shame.” Thus, patriarchy silences it under the hypocritical rhetoric of protecting women's honour. Rather, it is important to recognise the need to re-engage with women's experiences, acknowledging their dehumanisation and their pain, because their experiences cannot be written out of history. It is only through defeating the masculinist ideology of women's sexuality tied to a nation's honour that women's reintegration into society can be made possible.

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