



## READING 'ZORAMI: A REDEMPTION SONG' AS A RAPE NARRATIVE

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### Abstract

Rambuai narratives represent the darkest period of Mizo insurgency during 1960s. The conflict between the Mizo insurgents and the Indian army turned the lives of innocent Mizo people into hell. The traumatic memories of the period have been recorded in the Rambuai literature including rapes, sexual assault, killings, and gross violation of human rights etc. It serves as the evidence of the atrocities faced by Mizos. During conflict period, women were the most vulnerable and easy targets. Hundreds of women were raped by Indian army to control and suppress the rebel. Rape was used as a weapon and as a strategy to punish and silence the Mizo people. The present paper attempts a feminist analysis of 'Zorami: A Redemption Song' (2015) by Malsawmi Jacob to unveil the violence against women and to highlight the body politics of rape used as a political tool to subjugate and shame the Mizo community.

**Keywords:** Mizo insurgency, violence, rape, mental and physical assault.

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### INTRODUCTION

Rambuai literally translates to "disordered or troubled land." It represents the turbulent decade of the 1960s in Mizoram. The Mizoram Rambuai is regarded as the most tumultuous and horrifying historical occurrence. The Mizoram Peace Accord was signed on June 30, 1986, putting an end to the Mizoram National Front (MNF) armed campaign for 'Mizo Independence', which had begun on March 1, 1966. The political war that erupted in the middle of the 1960s was a result of the Mizo developing a political consciousness after India gained its independence. The leaders of Mizo demanded 'the Mizoram government in the Assam province with its own constitution' but the rejection of their demand resulted in political unrest and the separatist feelings have been further nurtured during the Mautam famine. The foundation of the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) as a new organisation to

assist people in overcoming the crisis was prompted by the Assam Government's slow and insensitive response to the famine-stricken Mizo Hills. Later MNFF was converted into a political party for Mizo Independence. MNF launched an attack to get power in Mizo district and declare its independence on March 1, 1996 that caused the quiet Mizo highlands to be overtaken by murders, torture, and suffering for the next 20 years. The period of insurgency and counter insurgency was not foreseen by the MNF. The Govt. of India sent military forces to suppress the unrest and the entire area was designated a 'Disturbed Area' under the Assam Disturbed Area Act of 1955 on March 2, 1966. Additionally, the district was also subject to the Armed Forces Special Power Act of 1958. The Indian Government took a step that changed Mizoram's history on March 5, 1966. Aizwal was bombed at 11.30 in the morning. No warning was given, and there

was no time to flee and hide. The Indian military, which is supposed to provide protection, attacked its own people. The conflict resulted in many killings, rapes and displacement of Mizo people. The Indian government's counter-insurgency strategies put the lives of helpless citizens in danger. They became frustrated by the constant curfew and the restrictions on their movement that further created the emotions of fear and terror as AFSPA had the power to arrest anyone without warrant. Indian army misused the special power given to them as 'every mizo was a suspect' for them. Innocent people were wrongfully detained and tortured for being MNF sympathizers and used as human shields to protect army from the surprise attacks of insurgents.

Women suffered a heavy price for being Mizo and a woman during the Mizo Insurgency. Rape was used as a political instrument by the Indian army to subjugate the Mizo and weaken their social structure. In 'Suppression of Mizos in India: An Eye Witness Report' submitted to Indian Govt. in 1966 recorded the mass rape of Mizo women "In Kolasib, 50 miles of Aizawl, the army rounded up all the men of the village, about 500 of them. They were collected, made to lie down on the ground on their stomachs to kick, beat, trample upon and confined for the night. At night groups of soldiers moved around. They broke into the houses, helped themselves with everything of value- clocks, sewing machines, clothes etc. and raped the women. There was the case of a woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy- Lathumai, wife of a cultivator, Lalkhangliana. Five soldiers appeared in her house, took the husband out of the house at gun-point and then while two soldiers held the woman down, the third committed rape." (as qtd. in Chandra, p.196) Rape is used as a strategy to control, humiliate and punish the people. The same heinous crime of mass gang rape was committed by Army during insurgency period in 1990s in Kashmir, "soldiers of the 4th Rajputana Rifles mass raped between

30-100 women" (Pandith and Chitra, p. 9) in the name of cordon and search. All the males were forcefully taken out of their houses, collected at a single place and women were sexually harassed, raped and beaten up for "sympathizing and hiding militants and weapons" (Pandith and Chitra, p. 9) One of the most terrifying experiences that haunts the lives of women all over the world is sexual assault and the trauma that results from it. The horrific sexual assault committed during times of war and conflict exposes the susceptibility of women's bodies. The gender dichotomy that now exists in society has historically portrayed men as protectors and women as nurturers, with women being objectified as possessions and commodities. The military uses women's abuse as a disciplinary measure and a means of intimidation in times of conflict and violent political upheaval since it is believed that males own women. Many women and young girls were raped in front of their husbands and families to terrorise and punish the MNF insurgents. The destructive and devastating history of conflict left innocent people helpless and broken. The atrocities of the period were recorded in Rambuai literature; songs, poem, fiction and non-fiction. The novel selected for this study 'Zorami: A Redemption Song' (2015) is a record of trauma and sufferings of Mizo people with a special focus on violence against women.

Malasawmi Jacob, the author, is a prominent Mizo poet, novelist, and journalist. She spent more than 12 years as English teacher in Aizawl and Bangalore. She also worked as a freelance journalist for many newspapers, including *The Assam Tribune*, the Northeast edition of *The Telegraph*, and the *Northeast Frontier*. The novel narrates the social, political and psychological impact of insurgency. 'Zorami: A Redemption Song' is the first historical novel written in English by a Mizo. Malaswami mentions in an interview, "Zorami is a very 'Mizo' novel, unique in several ways... many Mizo language novels based on the political

turbulence came out much before mine. Even an English novel by Pramod Bhatnagar, a non-Mizo writer, came out way back in 1982. Mine only happens to be the first one in English by a Mizo writer. It stands out from the others in the treatment of the theme. It is written with a neutral view, focused on the social and psychological effects of the upheaval on the people of Mizoram.” (Karmakar, p. 198)

The title of the novel “signifies Mizoram, 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.” (Biswas and Khiangte, p. 2) Jacob mentions, “the title was given by the publisher, George Korah, and the subtitle by Ampat V Varghese, the editor. The subtitle is borrowed from Bob Marley’s song with the same heading. The protagonist Zorami, after whom the book is named, is a kind of symbol of the Mizo people – her agonies epitomize the agonies of the community. Her psychological healing through a spiritual experience is also possible for the rest of the people.” (Râltê)

The novel explores Zorami's life experiences in the turbulent territory of Mizoram as well as the shared, horrified, and terrible anguish of the hard times by the Mizo people. The war between the Mizo National Front and the Indian Army at the time caused great unrest throughout the nation. Zorami, who was caught up in the conflict, endured a horrific ordeal that haunted her throughout her life. When she was a young adolescent, she was raped by an Indian Army man, leaving her with severe psychological damage and trauma. It had a significant impact on Zorami, making her more frightened and withdrawn. “Broken? She was lacerated, ripped apart. A fiend in human body did it in revolving lust. When the thirteen year old did not

come back from the tuikhur where she had gone to fetch water, her worried mother took a couple of neighbours with her and went in search of her daughter. They found her unconscious, her dress torn and soaked with urine and blood, in the bushes. In the hospital, after she regained consciousness, a nurse stitched her up. Without anaesthesia. How she screamed! The needle pierced her again and again. Stinging pain upon pain.” (Jacob, p. 197) She began to experience the agony of having been a victim of sexual assault, a secret that was excruciating for her to deal with. She is a representation of the Mizo people in general, Mizo women, and Mizoram. Her struggles and encounters as a victim of the Mizo Insurgency are a reflection of the suppressed struggles of her own people, country, and culture. The horrific Mizo Insurgency and the cruel counter-insurgency tactics used by the Indian army have injured and tortured Zorami and Mizoram.

The protagonist is not the only girl raped by army, there are many minor characters in the novel who met even the worse fate than Zorami. The two sisters; Mawii and Rami were among the unfortunate victims of sexual exploitation and violence by the Indian Army, Mawii and Rami were physically and emotionally damaged to the extent of losing their sanity. They were locked and raped repeatedly by Major Kohli and his fellow army 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.” (Jacob, p. 130-31) The pregnant woman Siami was sexually assaulted by the Indian army, “they began to assault her, removing her clothes with their free hands, the other still holding the guns.....An army officer appeared on the

scene and commanded his men to leave, and the pregnant was saved. But fear never left her" (Jacob, p. 105) Dinmawii, a school teacher was also caught and taken by the army though she was not mentioned again in the following chapters, one could imagine her fate, considering the behaviour of the Army during the Insurgency. "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" ((Jacob, p. 117).

Sexual harrasment, physical abuse, and various forms of torture were common for Mizo women. The senseless destruction of their human personality and their helplessness during an assault on their reluctant body remained a trauma that is rarely forgotten. Various forms of violence from the tragic history of Mizo women can be found in some Rambuai novels. Each text is a collection of women's experiences that serves as a testament and portrays variety of sufferings throughout times of war. Additionally, it explores the significance of gender ideology in determining how trauma is internalised, and most importantly, how gender roles position people as trauma victims. The novel's uncensored account of female bodies being beaten, broken, and tortured by army men mirrors how vulnerable female bodies are. Their injured bodies serve as a symbol of masculine dominance over the female body and as evidence of male superiority. They have used rape as a tactic of debasement, a strategy of demoralisation, and a means of creating fear. As the women characters are in the custody of the men, the army men physically violate their bodies to contest masculine possession in the Mizo community and to demonstrate their masculinity. "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, p.58) Whether it results from personal desire or is used as a political weapon, rape, according to feminist analysis, is a method of preserving masculine dominance and power. Rape turns into not just a male prerogative but also a man's primary tool of violence against women and the main instrument of his will. A male can demonstrate his masculine strength, his supremacy over women, and his ability to forcefully penetrate a woman's will by doing so. "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, p. 38).

In the novel Zorami was left with a wounded psyche and irreparable trauma that represents the universality of pain as well as the vulnerable position of women in war zones. "The story is told in a non-linear manner to represent the chaotic condition that Mizoram went through." (Lushai p.50) Jacob says about her choice of nonlinear narration that it "was a most suitable style for portraying a traumatised society that has fallen into utter chaos. All the side plots have their rightful place, as the novel is about Mizoram and its people, not about just some characters." (Karmakar p. 204) Zorami was haunted by nightmares of a black snake, "an enormous black snake coming after her. She wants to run away, but is held immobile. The snake crawls forward and catches her" (Jacob, p.54) is the symbolic representation of her inability to escape from her traumatic past. Despite the fact that rape is the most traumatic part of armed warfare, it is also the most silenced since "the memories survive only in the private sphere and are dealt with as private matters by the victims' families and often solely by the victim who hides in 'shame'." (Saikia, p.63) In Zorami, we witness the agony of the rape victim, which is rendered significantly worse by her need

to conceal the truth. Zorami "kept her mouth shut", "she never spoke out...such a thing is not for telling" (Jacob, p.43) According to author Zorami serves as a 'prototype' for all the rape victims, "learned to be ashamed. And to keep quiet. So, she did not tell anyone about the bully. Neither did she talk about the dirty man with the dirty touch". (Jacob, p.42) Sexual violence during the Mizo conflict has left many people with haunting memories and continues to haunt lives. "Mizo women who were victims of rape in the aftermath of March 1, 1966 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." (Biswas and Khiangte p.7) Hence, despite the mental trauma it inflicted, this aspect of fear exists in the private sphere's silenced zone and is unable to coexist there with other kinds of military violence, the memory of which has created the 'bond of solidarity' in the Mizo consciousness.

Susan Griffin states, "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." (Griffin, p. 357-358). In times of conflict or war, rape is employed as a tool to subdue communities; raping 'their women' is usually seen as the greatest humiliation and a sexual coup de grace by the men of a conquered nation. Men of the defeated group view rape as a deliberate attempt by the enemy to destroy them. In reality, according to tradition, men use the rape of 'their women' as part of their masculine dejection and defeat. As Mookherjee quotes Yasmin Saikia in her research; rape was connected to ethnic and religious 'purity' during the 1971 Bangladesh War, with the goal of "improving the genes of Bengali Muslims" and "creating a new breed of 'pure' Pakistani" in Bangladesh. (Mookherjee) Rape is a form of war violence that is

associated with the use of terror as a military tactic to achieve the intended impact. Rape as a weapon of war gained strategic significance after the Second World War. The statement made by Yasmin Saikia in 1971 in reference to the Bangladesh War can also be applied to the situation in North East India, "Raping women in Bangladesh was a rite to assert the power of men's ability to destroy the vulnerable and make it impossible for a woman to find a whole self after the war. Rape was a tool to destroy women's link with the past. They were doomed to live without their collective memory; their personal history became a secret that could not be disclosed." (Saikia, p.60-61) Zorami is a real picture of a war victim who always feels herself broken, wanted to clean and heal her wounded self from her traumatic memories; "And the dirt, the dirt! How she wanted to wash herself clean, to be immersed in a flowing river! But there was no such river within reach. All she could get was a few mugs of water for a bath. She loathed her defiled body like a rotten carcass. In sleep, she dreamt of a brook running down a hill. She ran to it, hoping for a dip in its clear, clean water. But when she reached there, she saw only muddy, filthy water." (Jacob, p.177) but considered impossible "Too late. I'm already dead. My brain still thinks, my lungs still breathe, but my soul is dead. Dead, dead! It's hopeless!" (Jacob, p.226) Jacob mentions in an interview, "The Mizo insurgency that broke out in 1966, and the counterinsurgency operations by the Indian Army, with its blood-curdling horrors, are something the Mizo people cannot forget. A 'peace accord' was signed in 1986 and political peace returned. But those who had suffered during the period were still hurting inside." (Migrator)

## Conclusion

The novel, 'Zorami: A Redemption Song', written from the viewpoint of a woman, centers on women and their painful

experiences with sexual assault. The novel provides a realistic depiction of the horrifying rape committed against women victims during the Mizo Insurgency. Malsawmi Jacob aims to illustrate the political turmoil of women's lives amid conflict through Zorami. She carries the traumatizing lore of Mizo history. With all of the painful experiences from her past to the present, the character attempts to remain strong. Zorami's political and personal journey serves as a metaphor for the life of Mizo women. The horror of surviving a conflict/war doesn't get over with the end of the conflict for the women who have been the victims of rape. Even though physical wounds get healed with time, recurrent nature of trauma keeps people's present traumatized and makes them relive their undesirable past as rape is not only committed against the body but also against the psyche. It haunts the victims throughout their life. Jacob reveals that women in times of armed war have their own tales that are worth sharing and worth studying, just like the illustrative heroic stories of males. She gave voice to the victims who have been silenced and oppressed.

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