



## Politics, Class, Women and Society: A study of *The Princess and the Political Agent*

Dr Anuradha Nongmaithem

Assistant Professor of English

Department of Management, Humanities & Social Sciences

National Institute of Technology Agartala

Jirania, Brajala, West Tripura- 799046

---

### Abstract

The paper is a study of *The Princess and the Political Agent* (2020) by L. Romi Roy. The original name of the novel is *Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (1976) which was written in Manipuri language by M.K. Binodini which won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1979. The present novel is the English translation of the same novel. The paper will attempt to sketch the society during the British Raj in Manipur. Through the love story of Princess Sanatombi and Lt Col. Henry St P. Maxwell, Binodini unfold the treatment of women, society, class and political turmoil which impacted the whole of Manipur society. The story is based on the real historical account that happened in Manipur. The paper will also highlights and throw insight into the forbidden life styles and culture of the royals in Manipur.

**Keywords:** Manipur, Women, Culture, Society, Political, Identity

Received 15 Mar, 2022; Revised 28 Mar, 2022; Accepted 31 Mar, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

### I. Introduction:

The backdrop of the historic love saga between Princess Sanatombi and Lt Col. Henry St P. Maxwell was a year before the Anglo- Manipur War of 1891. The story of “ The Princess and the Political agent therefore uncovers a lost chapter in the history of the British Raj- a diplomatic storm that had pitted empress Victoria against Viceroy Lansdowne,...had been hotly debated in the British Parliament” (xx). Though the romance between the two of them is fictionalised, most of the incidents are based on factual incidents. The Princess Sanatombi’s love for Maxwell is taken as forbidden because, ‘it was about 1891, a date that still stings Manipuris today as the year when the kingdom lost its sovereignty and, with it, its identity’ (xxi) and Manipur came under the British rule. *Identity* as defined by Merriam-Webster as “who someone is: the name of a person or the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others”, keeping the definition in mind, first let’s try to understand the identity of Princess Sanatombi. The paper will attempt to trace the identity issues that surfaces through Sanatombi the main protagonist of the novel, *The Princess and the Political Agent* and all the female characters in the novel. Manipur is one of the seven sisters of the North Eastern India. It is surrounded with nine hills in an area over twenty thousand square kilometres. It is mainly divided into the Hills and Plain. Mostly all the Meitei settled down in the plain valleys. There are several ethnics groups living together in Manipur, and the common mode of communication language is Manipuri. It was known by various name as Kangleipak, Tilli-Koktong, Poirei-Lam, Sanna-Leipak, Mitei-Leipak, Meitrabak or Manipur, ‘The present name of the state is of comparatively recent origin dating from the eighteenth century only and it lost its independence to the mighty British in 1891’ (Singh, 3). Princess Sanatombi the daughter of king Surchandra, who was once ruling the king of Manipur and got married to Manikchand, a businessman at the tender age. Her husband used to travel outside Manipur regarding his trade. During his absence Mr. Maxwell met Sanatombi for the first time. They became close to each other which became the talk of the town and leading to conflict between the husband and wife, which ultimately ends with divorce. The union of Sanatombi and Maxwell, in reality was short-live enjoyment, since she was considered a social outcast for marrying a white man by her relatives as well as the people of the state.

**Study:**

When the novel opens with the ailing Princess Sanatombi in her sick bed and was alone with her faithful maid Mainu. Maxwell was not with her at the last stage of her life. The whirlpool romance was short lived, 'She is greatly reduced but still beautiful- even today there are traces of her loveliness of the past' (1). Sanatombi from birth is strong headed child and does not fear to say her feeling out. From her tender age itself she has witness the quarrels, ups and down of kings and the royal politics too. Sanatombi's great-grand mother was concerned about Sanatombi and said to Jasumati, "My dear, keep a close eye on your daughter. She is wilful and is going to be handful. It is not enough to be kind -hearted.... The astrologer also says your daughter is of strong birth" (9). Sanatombi was considered "unruly, strong-willed and driven to win"(10) in the palace and would not be bother by anybody. There was also an incident where she bit Prince Lukhoi her cousin because he has stopped her from playing *Kang* (an indigenous game of Manipur). 'There were countless incident and uproars like this because of Sanatombi' (15). There were many rules and relation to be followed inside the palace, which young Sanatombi finds it hard to digest. Her mother a meek woman:

At night as she lay in bed with her daughter, she said to her child, 'Sanatombi, what is Mother going to do with you. Where was that tantrum coming from .....? You seem to have forgotten that you are a girl. How can you be same as Lukhoi? He is a male offspring. He is going to be king.' 'It is because he is male offspring that I beat him up regularly. If he can ride, why can't I? 'I am going to come to a lot of grief on your account. How can boys and girls be same? We are called women with no burial place.... (53)

From the conservatism between Sanatombi and her mother, it can be understood that in spite of the fact that they belongs to the royal background the plight of the women are still the same. The king has many wives and only the women who could bore a son have some authority and position. Women inside the palace have to be a mere spectator, their voiced were subdued and male offspring were given more preferences. It cannot be denied that during the reigns of Kings, men were mostly on wars so they needed more of male rather than female child. But those situations arise because women were not given an opportunity even to demonstrate their valour and strength. It is unfortunate fate of women at that particular point of time, but still there were many strong women who fought for their land like Lakshmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi, Mavia of Arabia, Queen of the Tanukh, Nzinga, Queen of Ndongo and Matamba to name a few.

Tracing the issues of today's women problem will not be complete without looking at our own distance past. Princess Sanatombi in spite of proving herself capable and daring, she was not given an opportunity to explore her potentials and was even married off at the tender age to avoid unnecessary problems inside the palace. If a girl's child voiced out her opinion it's considered as 'tantrum'. She was silenced in several occasions, except her great grandmother who encourages her and supported her.

When Sanatombi father Maharaja Surchandra fall in trouble and was about to 'run away and sought refuge with Grimwood, the Political Agent of the British Indian Empire' (64), Sanatombi was still very young, but his father knew that Sanatombi is matured beyond her age, 'Sanatombi, listen to your father. You are now the eldest of my children. I won't be able to get your two younger sisters married. You must look into this. Help your mother.' (65). Sanatombi is against her father leaving Manipur, 'Why should Sovereign Father leave Manipur? Do you want to give Kangla to other people?' (65). She is very opinionated child and cannot bear to see injustice done to anybody. She was against her father fleeing to another state.

As a wife she has performed her duties. 'Sanatombi busied herself as a housewife. She mopped and wove and the house was sparkling clean. Not once did she show her unhappiness to members of the household' (120). After three miscarriages she couldn't give birth to child anymore. To that also she told her mother-in-law to find a new wife for Manikchand who can bore him a child. She has never complained faith and tries to impose her position in the family.

Throughout the story it is noticed that Sanatombi is really concerned about her state Manipur and her royal relatives. The event that made Maxwell and she came closer was due to the emotional gap she was not getting from her husband. The love that grew between them was not instant. It gradually grew with time and situation, Sanatombi did not have the intention of betraying the state by falling in love with the enemy of the state. The writer is shrewd and beautifully created the ambience for the characters to draw closer, emotion like love is something which cannot be logical and compartmentalised. It's really hard to blame Princess Sanatombi for falling in love with Maxwell. Anybody in the circumstances would have drawn to that emotion.

The political conflict within the palace, fight among the sons of various queens for the throne, power and money was minutely depicted. The internal politics among the wives consorts of the king. The fight for throne and the competition among the women were quite a common story of any royal household. The women in the novel are calm at the outer surface but there is a kind of uneasiness and restless is felt through the novel. Sanatombi on the other hand is quite confident and outspoken. Grand Queen Mother,

Lady of Meisnam is authoritative as per the position she is holding, 'Dress my granddaughter in boy's clothes.' Right away, they prepared a turban and dhoti, and a full-sleeved shirt of velvet. 'This is taboo, it is not done, it is not good,' people said here and there. But the Grand Queen Mother had allowed it- and it was done by the king' (51). Jasumati, Lady of Satpam Sanatombi's mother is meek and she doesn't have a voice of her own. Kouseswari, Lady of Chongtham, Step-grandmother of Princess Sanatombi, first love of Maharaja Chandrakirti is a strong woman who do not vow under the whims and fancy of the King. She knows her power over the King and knows how to use it too, 'The only consort who refused to come to the king when summoned in this manner was the Elder Lady of Chongtham. ...The king knew she was being difficult and petulant, but he never got angry with her...You have to come, even if you are the king' (83). Mainu, the companion of Princess Sanatombi a mere voiceless woman who is very conventional, strictly follow the rules and regulation in spite of staying in the white man's house. Many princesses in the place were just a mere utilisation for giving into marriage alliance to expand the kingdom, a decorative piece without no role and no voice, just a state property. The value of having male heir was predominant in order to carry forward the lineage. It cannot be denied that tremendous changes were happening during Maxwell stayed in Manipur, both politically and socially, "The government of India further decided that it would administer the state during the raja's minority..., Maxwell was appointed political Agent of Manipur and Superintendent of the state...The period of regency(1891-1907) was fully utilized for making all the major decisions and also introducing several changes in the administrative set up of the native state which could not be changed by the Raja, even after his formal installation on the gaddi of Manipur with full power. (Lal, 74-75).

Keeping in mind the background and if we try to study the role of women, the predominant role for a woman is to produced children which resonate with one of the famous feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir when she says that, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine." Women are considered secondary in relation to men since ancient times. Her role is conceived as one of bearing and giving birth to a child. Women get confined to the private sphere while men dominate the public sphere. It is not the result of any essential feminine feature but it is the result of education and social tradition which are under the control of men. (Dadawala,1). In an article entitled, "What Is Identity (As We Now Use The Word)?" by James D. Fearon, he defines identity as, "identity" in its present incarnation has a double sense. It refers at the same time to social categories and to the sources of an individual's self-respect or dignity. There is no necessary linkage between these things. In ordinary language, at least, one can use "identity" to refer to personal characteristics or attributes that cannot naturally be expressed in terms of a social category, and in some contexts certain categories can be described as "identities" even though no one sees them as central to their personal identity. Nonetheless, "identity" in its present incarnation reacts and evokes the idea that social categories are bound up with the bases of an individual's self-respect. Arguably much of the force and interest of the term derives its implicit linkage of these two things "(Fearon, 1). Princess Sanatombi did try to establishes her own identify. But the whole identity of Meitei women is difficult to sketch; no doubt women are traditionalist in outlook and hardly have guts to fight against the authority except for few. And it is still the same from that time, one can even say that not much have changed. Yes in terms of education and opportunity women are at par with men in many cases. How many women are there in the highest position? It's just a countable few. The social mindset, attitudes haven't changed much. Still there are lots of atrocities and crime against women, treating women as a commercial object is on rise.

## **II. Conclusion:**

With the changing scenario as time passed by with the introduction of English Education and later on with the merger of Manipur with the newly independent country India on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1949, Manipur was going through sea changes which impacted politically, socially and economically. Insurgency was at the peak in the early 80s till the 90s, with that come the changes in attitudes and behavioural changes towards women also. Crimes against women and children have continuously increased in the past few decades. The role and contribution of women has also changed due to the modern education that was introduced with the British rule in Manipur. Like Princess Sanatombi there is few outspoken women, who fight for their right as well for the state, Imrom Sharmila is one of them. The roles of women and identity have not changed due to access to education and opportunity. In the legendary epic of *Khamba - Thoibi*, Thoibi is an idealised character of Meitei woman by many and till date. It is said that, "There is an amalgamation of the four qualities of love, truthfulness, patience and courage in Thoibi" (Rajkumar, 38). She is an ideal woman "a real Meitei Chanu" (44), it time to move on from that perspective. These qualities are still there in every Meitei women, Princess Sanatombi possesses these qualities, yet she could have her own voiced heard. Though the class division has broken up to much extend from the time of Princess Sanatombi, yet there are

some divided rules which are not clear and does created conflict within the ethnic groups and a huge gap between the hills and the valley people. With the changing political scenario thing does have become worse and we lack far behind in development from the rest of the society in India. But the crime rate is on rise and in that sense Manipur runs parallel with the rest. The impact of globalisation is also quite visible with various changes that are happening both in cultural and traditional, one of them is the marriage ceremony. There are few people in order to show their power and money have compromises certain traditional values which will have a lasting impact. Many writer and scholars have also started focusing on the changing customs and tradition in local newspaper and discussion hours too. It can be concluded that not much have changed in terms of women status, position and their roles from the time of Princess Sanatombi. There are few more miles women need to walk in order to bridge the gap of discrimination between the gender disparities in Manipur. The plight of the women is the same everywhere, just because few are voicing out and few countable have achieved both in their career and personal lives, one cannot draw a conclusion the women are at par with men. Men need to change their attitude and perspective towards for a progressive society

### Reference:

- [1]. Dena, Lal. (Ed) History Of Modern Manipur 17-62-1949. Imphal: Reliable Books Centre, 2012.
- [2]. Identity” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity>
- [3]. “Literature As A Means For Women’s Empowerment” by Dr. Darshini Dadawala. Volume I ,Issue 4 I Oct. – Dec. 2018. [http://ijrar.com/upload\\_issue/ijrar\\_issue\\_20542726.pdf](http://ijrar.com/upload_issue/ijrar_issue_20542726.pdf)
- [4]. Roy, L. Somi. (Trans). Binodini’s The Princess and the Political Agent. India: Penguin Books, 2020.
- [5]. Rajkumar.B.S.(Ed). Prof.Nongmaithem Tombi Singh’s Confluence: Essays on Manipuri Literature and Culture. Imphal:Jain Book Shop Publication, 2021.
- [6]. Singh, Ch Manihar. A History of Manipuri Literature. Kolkata: Sahitya Akademi,2013. 7)
- [7]. “What Is Identity (As We Now Use The Word)?” by James D. Fearon <https://web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/What-is-Identity-as-we-now-use-the-word-.pdf>
- [8]. “Merger Act” [https://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session1/IN/COHR\\_IND\\_UPR\\_S1\\_2008anx\\_Annex%20V\\_ManipurMergerAgreement.pdf](https://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session1/IN/COHR_IND_UPR_S1_2008anx_Annex%20V_ManipurMergerAgreement.pdf)
- [9]. <https://www.google.com/search?q=names+of+manipur&oq=names+of+manipur&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i22i3018.4280j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>