



Research Paper

Locating the Feminine-Self: Self-Representation and Identity of Manipuri Women in *Crafting the Word: Writings from Manipur*

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Abstract

Throughout history, Manipuri women have been represented largely through an outsider perspective, confined to reductive stereotypes such as the coy dancing girl on travel brochures, the market vendor in the famed NupiKeithel, the fearless warrior of the NupiLan, or the vigilant MeiraPaibi serving as society's conscience. Such images, while significant, restrict their identity to societal constructs of responsibility, resilience, chastity, and innocence, often silencing their inner selves. This raises a central question: beyond these prescribed roles, who is the Manipuri woman? Earlier writings rarely explored the subjective world of Manipuri women: their beliefs, thoughts, and lived experiences. In recent years, however, a shift has emerged: not only have scholars shown increasing interest in Manipuri women, but Manipuri women themselves have begun to articulate their own voices through literature. An important contribution to this shift is *Crafting the Word: Writings from Manipur*, an anthology of short stories and poems compiled by ThingamAnjulikaSamom. This collection, comprising works written and translated into English by Manipuri women, provides rare insights into their inner selves and evolving identities.

This paper attempts to analyse these writings through feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, drawing on Hélène Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine* and Julia Kristeva's ideas of subjectivity. It mainly focuses on how Manipuri women's creative expressions embody lived realities, inner desires, and struggles for self-definition. By centering women's self-representations, the study highlights how these works challenge, negotiate, and redefine conventional narratives of Manipuri womanhood.

Keywords: Manipuri women, self-representation, *Crafting the Word*, postcolonial, feminism, *écriture féminine*, identity.

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I. Introduction:

Manipur, located in the north-eastern region of India, has long been a site of political turmoil, colonial encounters, and enduring cultural resilience. Within this complex socio-historical background, Manipuri women hold a distinctive and influential position. Traditionally, they have played vital roles in both economic and social spheres, particularly through their leadership in trade and commerce, most visibly manifested in the renowned *ImaKeithel* or "Mothers' Market." Throughout history, Manipuri women have been at the forefront of social reform and collective resistance, contributing significantly to community development and political activism. Their courage and agency find symbolic resonance in mythological figures such as Imoinu and Panthoibi, who embody the ideals of prosperity, strength, and independence. Historical movements such as the *NupiLan* (Women's Wars) of 1904 and 1939, the *Nishaband* campaign of the 1960s, and the continuing activism of the *MeiraPaibi* or women torchbearers exemplify their resilience and leadership. In contemporary times, figures like IromSharmila, who waged a non-violent struggle for the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), represent the enduring legacy of Manipuri women's resistance and moral strength.

It is evident that Manipuri women have long occupied a central position in the cultural, political, and ecological landscape of Manipur. Yet, throughout history, their identities have been confined within narrowly defined social roles like those of the dutiful homemaker, the obedient wife, and the custodian of virtue and morality. The empowerment often ascribed to Manipuri women appears largely superficial; within the domestic

sphere, their agency remains limited despite societal perceptions of liberation. Popular representations such as the coy dancing girl adorning travel brochures, the industrious vendor at the famed *ImaKeithel*, the valiant warrior of the *NupiLan*, or the vigilant *MeiraPaibi*, serve to celebrate Manipuri women, yet simultaneously confine them to symbolic figures of responsibility, resilience, chastity, and innocence. These images, though culturally significant, mask the complex realities of their inner lives and silence their individual voices. This raises a fundamental question: beyond these prescribed roles, who is the Manipuri woman?

Crafting the word: Writings from Manipur, compiled by ThingamAnjulikaSamomis one of the most recent contribution to the existing corpus of women's literature in Manipur. This book marks a radical shift from the existing narrative defining Manipuri women, and serves as a testimony of the Manipuri women's selfhood. The book is a collection of short stories and poems, which is a collective contribution of twenty seven women from Manipur, "to give us an idea of who the Manipuri woman is, to share their experience of being a woman in patriarchal order and to tell us about the conditions, trials and tribulations and jubilations of their lives." (Samom, 2019). Thus, this article aims to explore the subjective worlds of Manipuri women and locate their feminine self through the literary testimonies of the women themselves.

II. Objective:

The objective of this research article is to analyse recent and radical, yet critically unexplored works by Manipuri women writers in order to show how they articulate new forms of self-representation and challenge dominant narratives. It attempts to understand the potential of literature as a vessel through which Manipuri women's female and subjective selves can be represented, transmitted and propagated. It also studies Manipuri women's literature as a reflection of Manipuri society, as seen from the rarely explored female perspective and its insights into cultural, social and traditional realities.

III. Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative research methodology rooted in literary and cultural analysis. This research attempts a close textual analysis of the book *Crafting the Word: Writings from Manipur*, a collection of short stories and poems compiled by ThigamAnjulikaSamom, to explore how Manipuri women writers articulate themes of trauma, desire, memory and resilience in their literary works. By interpreting these creative expressions through feminist and subaltern theoretical frameworks, the research seeks to bring forward women's voices that have been historically marginalized within patriarchal and postcolonial structures.

Locating the Feminine-self:

Helene Cixous, in her seminal essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa", introduced the term "*écriture féminine*" which has rather become a turning point in the history of women's writing. It refers to "a new insurgent writing" characterised by "indispensable ruptures and transformations" (880). She asserts that, "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (875). It is thus, that Cixous has expressed the urgent need for women to engage in self-expression and literary creation, which will be the tool by which women emancipate themselves from the confines of being mere subjects in literary constructs of male authors.

This theoretical intervention resonates strongly in the context of Manipuri women's writing. For a long time, the literary landscape of Manipur remained male-dominated; it was not until the 20th century that women began to write in the real sense. "A key reason for this delay can be attributed to women's limited access to formal education.." (Wahengbam, 2012). Additionally, societal norms and beliefs surrounding girls' education played a significant role in this delay (Nahakpam, 2019). Their stories were mediated through the masculine gaze, leaving little room for authentic representation of their inner lives, struggles, and aspirations.

The emergence of Manipuri women's writing, therefore, marks a radical shift as reclaiming of narrative space where women write not as subjects of others' imagination but as authors of their own experiences. Initially, many early women writers in Manipur emulated the dominant male styles of writing, conforming to accepted literary norms and themes. However, over the past few decades, there has been a decisive turn toward writing that is more introspective, confessional, and self-expressive, such writings delve into the psychic, emotional, and social realities of being a woman in Manipur. This movement aligns closely with the feminist critical approach of *gynocriticism* proposed by Elaine Showalter introduced in her essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1978), which emphasizes studying women's writing as a distinct literary tradition with its own aesthetics, language, and thematic preoccupations. *Gynocriticism* invites scholars to explore the female literary imagination on its own terms rather than through the frameworks of male literary history.

In this light, developing a criticism of women's writing in Manipur is crucial, not only to understand the unique stylistic and thematic qualities of these works but also to situate them within the broader discourse of women's resistance, identity formation, and self-expression. Manipuri women's literature becomes a site of

testimony: a space where personal experiences intersect with collective memories of social unrest, gendered oppression, and cultural transition.

One significant milestone in this trajectory is *Crafting the Word: Writings from Manipur*, by ThingnamAnjulikaSamom. This anthology reflects the multiplicity of women's realities and shapes a social discourse on the position of women and women's rights in Manipur. The act of 'crafting the word', itself becomes symbolic of women shaping language as a tool of empowerment, of reclaiming their right to narrate. Through these writings, Manipuri women articulate their subjectivity in deeply personal and political ways. Themes of confinement and liberation, silence and speech, tradition and transformation frequently recur. Many of these narratives confront the persistent patriarchal expectations that continue to define women's roles within Manipuri society. Others reflect on the intersection of gender with the state's militarized atmosphere, exploring how women bear witness to collective suffering and often become victims of gendered violence in a marginalised society.

NingombamSanatombi's short story "Sati Interview" (translated by KundoYumnam) offers a sharp feminist critique of the patriarchal underpinnings of Hindu mythology. Through satire and irony, the story exposes the systemic denial of women's agency and autonomy, even among goddesses, traditionally venerated as symbols of virtue and strength. The narrator, while preparing a speech on "Women's Rights in Hindu Mythology," interviews mythological figures such as Sita, Draupadi, and Radha, and many other goddesses in Hindu Mythology, revealing how their lives were governed by patriarchal control and moral double standards. Feminist theory, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other," helps illuminate how these divine women are idealized yet objectified within a male-centered narrative. It highlights the limited agency of women in Hindu Mythology as Goddess Draupati and Sita were not even given the choice of choosing their own husbands. It also highlights the undue emphasis put on the chastity of women as Goddess Sita was subjected to test of fire by Lord Rama to prove her virtue. The narrator humorously puts it in today's perspective and says that if that were to happen today then Lord Rama would surely be behind bars for setting Sita on fire. It also brings forth the leeway given to men, where goddess Radhika is expected to accept Lord Madan Mohan's indecent rendezvous with other women as he is "spreading the joy of love....granting everyone's wishes". The narrator remarks "if such generosity was exerted today, quite a lot of girls would have their heads shaved and given away in shotgun marriages." This is indeed true for Manipuri society, as couples caught in compromising positions are married off by *MeiraPaibisin* shotgun marriages known as "keinakatpa". This short story highlights how even in scriptures considered holy, women never got their rights, and treated as objects to be traded in a game of dice or subjected to test of fire to prove her chastity. This feminist reinterpretation of mythological heroines offers a powerful critique of traditional narratives. By giving voice to heroines the author challenges patriarchal structures and provide alternative perspectives on the roles of women in mythology.

It is often assumed that Manipuri women enjoy greater rights, freedom, and social standing compared to women in other parts of India. However, this perception of empowerment proves largely superficial when examined within the private, domestic sphere, where women's agency remains constrained despite outward appearances of liberation. NingombamSurma's short story, "The Defeat" reveals the hollowness of this celebrated image of Manipuri women's empowerment. The story revolves around Nalini, an accomplished and independent woman, and her husband Bipin, a respected litterateur perceived by society as progressive and supportive. Yet Surma deftly exposes the fragility of this supposed modernity when Bipin refuses to attend the ceremony where Nalini receives a prestigious award, declaring, "I am a man, I do not wish to stand behind you." This moment of quiet yet profound betrayal unmasks the deep-rooted patriarchal pride that persists beneath the veneer of equality. Through it, Surma demonstrates how the deification of women in Manipur does not necessarily translate into genuine gender equality. Instead, the story underscores the tension between public veneration and private subjugation, revealing how patriarchy adapts and disguises itself even within seemingly progressive spaces. "The Defeat" thus becomes a powerful commentary on the contradictions of Manipuri society, where the rhetoric of women's empowerment often coexists with entrenched gender hierarchies and emotional domination within the home.

This critique of patriarchal hypocrisy extends to the ways in which Manipuri society regulates women's bodies and enforces gendered silences. A recurring theme in contemporary women's writing from Manipur is menstruation and the taboos associated with it. As Khurai observes, "Contrary to the constant global development, in a conservative society like the Meitei, there are not many changes in people's beliefs and mindsets. Girls and women are forbidden to participate in rituals and perform kitchen activities during the five days of menstruation." ChongthamJamini Devi's short story "Kitchen Duty" reflects on how such customs continue to bind women within domestic confines. Household chores, cooking, and childcare are considered the duty of women, while men rarely share these responsibilities. When Ekashini, the protagonist's wife, is menstruating, her husband Ibochouba is compelled to take over the kitchen duties, which makes him realise the physical and emotional labour women perform daily. He and his friend Tomchou conclude that "a man taking

over kitchen duty is a good way to understand the hardships women face in taking care of household chores” (Devi, 2010). Through this reversal of roles, Devi exposes the gendered asymmetry of domestic life and calls for a revaluation of women’s unacknowledged labour.

Similarly, Houbijam Chanu Prema’s poem “The Monthly Flower” captures the innocence and confusion surrounding a young girl’s first menstruation, revealing how notions of purity, taboo, and gendered silence are internalised from an early age. By transforming a private bodily experience into a site of collective consciousness, Prema’s poem embodies the feminist assertion that “the personal is political.” In doing so, it breaks the silence that has long governed discussions around womanhood and female embodiment in Manipuri society. Together, these works: Surma’s “The Defeat,” Devi’s “Kitchen Duty,” and Prema’s “The Monthly Flower”—create a powerful feminist discourse that dismantles the myth of Manipuri women’s absolute empowerment. They expose how beneath the surface of social reverence lies a deeper structure of control, where patriarchy continues to dictate women’s bodies, voices, and choices, both within myth and in modern life.

In the riverbed with my girlfriends

Happiness overflowing

Swimming, dipping, playing.....

Oh, Monthly Flower!

Seeing you

The hair on my scalp rose

Ho, Mother! Is it a leech bite?

Soaked in sweat

How I shook in fright,

I recall as if ‘twas yesterday. (Prema, 2011)

Through its childlike tone and vivid imagery, the poem delicately narrates a moment of both awakening and fear, where the female body becomes a site of both mystery and stigma. Such expressions serve as rare testimonies of the feminine self in a conservative patriarchal society that often renders women’s bodily experiences unspeakable.

Ayung Tampakleima Raikhan’s poem “Adornments” extends this subversive articulation of the female body by laying bare the hypocrisy embedded in patriarchal definitions of morality and purity:

I touched your feet one day, in front of all

Tonight at this silent hour you suck my toes

Say whose feet are pure? Whose impure?

And what is purity, do let us hear. (Raikhan, 2010)

Here, Raikhan enacts a radical reversal of power and purity. The act of touching a man’s feet, a conventional gesture of feminine subservience, is subverted when, in private, the same man worships the woman’s body through desire. This inversion exposes the contradictions of a culture that venerates male authority in public while objectifying women in private. The poem’s voice, unapologetically sensual and confrontational, embodies Cixous’s notion of *écriture féminine*, writing through the body that disrupts patriarchal language and asserts female agency. By transforming intimate experience into political critique, both Prema and Raikhan reveal how Manipuri women poets are reclaiming silence as speech and the body as discourse. In doing so, “Adornments” and “The Monthly Flower” articulate a feminist poetics of resistance that dismantles cultural taboos, reimagining the female body not as an object of purity or shame, but as a site of truth, irony, and self-assertion.

Extending this dialogue on the body and desire, the writings in *Crafting the Word* also probe how women negotiate their emotions within the boundaries of social decorum. In the short story “A Debt Repaid,” Ningombam Sunita reimagines feminine desire through the character of Lalita, a young widow whose playful exchanges with the *paan* seller Shyamo gradually acquire an unspoken sensuality. Yet, unlike the defiant sensuality of Raikhan’s verse, Lalita’s yearning remains confined within the invisible fences of convention. Her choice to renounce her feelings and live with the memory of her late husband underscores the subtle yet pervasive hold of patriarchal morality. Although widow remarriage is not explicitly condemned in Manipur, Sunita’s portrayal of Lalita reveals the silent negotiations women undertake between personal longing and collective expectation. Thus, transforming the act of restraint itself into a commentary on social control and gendered subjectivity.

A similar exploration of constrained desire unfolds in Nee Devi’s “Nightmare,” where the narrative broadens from feminine to queer subjectivity. Faced with the weight of conservative norms, Leishna succumbs to her mother’s demand to meet a man, while her partner Somorani’s tragic suicide exposes the impossibility of love that exists outside prescribed social boundaries. Both Sunita and Nee Devi, illuminate the pervasive silencing of female and queer desire in Manipuri society. Yet, by daring to write about such repressed emotions, they grant their protagonists emotional and sensual agency, and inscribe a new discourse of desire and autonomy within Manipuri women’s writing.

Interwoven with these intimate portrayals of desire, another powerful current in *Crafting the Word* is the collective suffering of women amid Manipur's long-standing conflict. The writings not only address the politics of the body but also the politics of survival. Themes of loss, grief, and endurance recur throughout the collection, as seen in Ningombam Satyabati's short story "My Children's Photographs," which offers a haunting portrayal of a woman who loses her husband and children in a bomb blast. Through the symbol of the photographs, Satyabati transforms personal tragedy into a collective testimony of trauma, revealing how women become the silent chroniclers of violence. Similarly, Mufidun Nisha's poem "The Morgue" echoes this sentiment through the image of a mother waiting for her missing child: her silent vigil mirroring the unresolved grief of countless women who live with absence as their only memory.

For the news
Of her child taken forcibly away
At gunpoint.....

(they) will come without fail
To rest at the morgue
To sign in for the final time
To hear the laments
Of mothers, fathers and siblings. (Nisha, 2006)

In the poem, the morgue becomes a symbol of collective mourning. The absence of ornamentation in language and the sparse imagery intensify the emotional depth of the poem, allowing silence and fragmentation to speak for the inexpressible trauma of women's lives in such a militarised space. In such writings, the woman's lament becomes an act of speech from the margins, a voice that does not seek recognition from authority but rather exposes the deep human cost of state violence and social neglect, thus transforming the subaltern woman's experience into a form of testimony. Embodying the shared anguish of countless Manipuri women who have endured loss amid militarisation and insurgency, these writings become a powerful statement of resistance, reclaiming space for women's emotions, memories, and pain within the narrative of Manipur's conflict.

IV. Conclusion:

This study examined how Manipuri women writers, through *Crafting the Word: Writings from Manipur*, negotiate self-representation and reclaim narrative space historically shaped by patriarchal and colonial discourses. The short stories and poems in the book such as "Sati Interview", "The Defeat", "Kitchen Duty", "The Monthly Flower", "Adornments", "The Debt Repaid", "Nightmare", "My Children's Photographs", and "The Morgue" articulate a distinctly feminine consciousness grounded in Manipuri cultural experience. Moving beyond idealized depictions of womanhood, these writings expose the contradictions between societal veneration and private oppression, foregrounding the interior worlds of women: their desires, silences, and strategies of resistance.

Employing humour, irony, and confessional expression, the writers subvert normative gender ideologies and evolve a literary mode that transforms personal testimony into collective memory. Their engagement with themes of domestic subjugation, bodily autonomy, sexuality, and militarized trauma underscores a movement toward reclaiming subjectivity and redefining Manipuri womanhood from within.

While this study analyses only select works, *Crafting the Word* as a whole invites deeper feminist and cultural inquiry. Ultimately, the expanding corpus of Manipuri women's literature signals the emergence of a new literary consciousness, one that does not merely insert women into existing frameworks but reimagines the very act of writing and being. In "writing themselves," these women inscribe resistance, renewal, and redefinition into the evolving landscape of Manipuri literature.

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