



Research Paper

An Analysis of the Beauvoirian Reading of Mythology through Meitei Myths

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ABSTRACT: The corpus of Meitei myths, folktales, and legends exhibits epistemic and philosophical characteristics and serves as a repository of Meitei culture and tradition. Among the rich abundance of myths within the Meitei community, the most quintessential find expression in the Lai Haraoba, which is primarily symbolised as a reservoir of knowledge, tradition, culture, art, and the worldview of the Meiteis. This paper attempts to analyse selected popular Meitei mythologies to formulate whether one can apply the 'Beauvoirian reading' of mythology to them. This paper intends, additionally, to examine whether the notion of ambiguity in comprehending mythology, which is opposed to the Beauvoirian reading of mythology, is feasible. Simone de Beauvoir's rejection of mythology stems from her assertion that, through the medium of myths, which she claims is palpable in their patriarchal accents, the 'othering' of Woman is sustained and maintained through them. This statement of Beauvoir shall be investigated in this paper, along with the critique of debunking mythology.

Keywords: Ambiguity, Beauvoirian, Knowledge, Lai Haraoba, Meitei, Mythology, Woman.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Meitei mythology is rendered in a corpus of archaic manuscripts called the *Puya(s)*. Genesis, cosmology, theogony, philosophy, literature, poetry, religious beliefs, and issues of morality and conduct are, on a first and cursory look, present in these ancient manuscripts. It is interesting to note that in *The Court Chronicles of the Kings of Manipur: The Cheitharol Kumpapa* by Saroj Nalini Arambam Parratt:

In this respect, the opening passage regarding Pakhangpa, the ancestor-founder of the Meiteis, is especially interesting. This seems to be a kind of structural-historical myth, the purpose of which is to reinforce the supremacy of the Pakhangpa group over a rival group led by one Poireiton. Poireiton most likely represents the autochthonous people of the land (perhaps the present-day Chakpa). There is some evidence that these people, whom one might term 'proto-Meitei', may have had a matriarchal system. According to the *Ch. K.*, Pakhangpa married Laisna, Poireiton's sister, and this probably reflects an alliance between the incoming conquerors (the Pakhangpa group) and the subjugated original inhabitants of the land (the Poireiton group). In an obscure passage, Laisna requests that she may become a *Lai* (divinity) like Pakhangpa, but is refused. Presumably, this is meant as a statement of the supremacy of the Pakhangpa group. Social order is established by mythical history" (p. 12).

The Meiteis/ Meeteis predominantly settle in the valley of the state of Manipur, North-East India. They speak Meiteilon, which is classified as a Tibeto-Burman language. Myths form an essential part of Meitei culture: "The valley has a mythological significance for the Meiteis, and is interpreted in terms of the human body. Mount Koubru in the north-west, the mythological place of origin of the Meiteis, is seen as the head, the valley itself the body, Loktak as the belly, and the various rivers as its arteries" (Parratt, *The Coils of Pakhangpa*, 2017, p. 2). In general, myths unravel history, interpret reality, and form the substratum of worldviews for many cultures and religions. They serve as the foundational framework for developing the creation myths of most religions. The term "mythology" is derived from the Greek *muthos*, meaning "story" and *logia*, "knowledge". The word "myth" originally meant "word," understood as a definitive and authentic statement. "Myth is the 'word' that announces the true state of things, what is factual, what really happened" (Lanczowski, Baumgartner, J.B., Fries, 1974). Myths are primarily regarded as narratives of the deeds and endeavours of the gods and spirits and as well as historical accounts with formative and creative values: an actuality loaded with power and authority. "For myth, the difference between the behaviour of the gods and that of man is only a difference in degree, not of principle. As a result, mythical thinking tends to see the divine and human spheres closely linked to one another. The world

and work of the gods as reported by myth constitute both the essence and the norm for the world of man” (1974, p. 195). Myths can be related to fables, fairytales, folktales, sagas, epics, legends, and etiological tales. According to the Britannica Encyclopedia, there is no agreed-upon definition of any of these genres. However, in the words of Friedrich Von Schelling, myth is a form of expression, a signature or an indicator of human development, through which humans imagine the Absolute. For Schelling, the Absolute is an all-embracing unity in which all differences are reconciled.

In this paper, I have used mythology as a philosophical tool, the notion of ambiguity as a methodological approach, and the relevance of myths to express my arguments systematically. This paper attempts to demonstrate the relevance and the significance of myths in comprehending reality, in navigating the world and discerning the worldview of the Meiteis, and the essentiality of myths in preserving knowledge and tradition, and the importance of analysing their intricate relation. This can be explicated through the knowledge of the Lai Haraoba. The first part of this paper intends to show how the Lai Haraoba of the Meitei community embodies the culture of the Meiteis, and how it reflects the epistemic aspect, as inscribed in the dance and music, which is performed during the festival. The second part of this paper will make an analysis of Panthoibi Khongul, Haloi Taret, goddess Emoinu, and Atingkok Sidaba (in the creation of the world) to demonstrate whether ‘Beauvoirian reading of mythology’ is tenable or not in discerning Meitei myths. The third part is the final concluding section where Beauvoirian reading is challenged; and the significance of mythology in the midst of modernity is claimed, its refutation is critiqued, and critically examined.

II. THE EXPOSITION OF THE LAI HARAObA

One essential characteristic of commonality that connects one Meitei to another is their participation in the *Lai Haraoba*. “The Lai Haraoba mirrors the entire culture of the Manipuri people. It reveals its strengths and weaknesses, the beliefs and superstitions, and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people at their interest” (Singh, 1961, p. 30). The Lai Haraoba is a social and religious festival of the Meiteis, which is reverently celebrated annually in different parts of the valley of Manipur at the herald of the summer season. Commemorated with multifarious Indigenous songs and enchanting dance movements, this festival of “the pleasing of the gods”, which is fundamentally an act of worship, is kindred with the myth of creation. It is interesting to note that the Lai Haraoba is beyond archaic that it is difficult to trace its specific date of origin: “Its origin is lost in dim antiquity, though we come across a faint description of it in the manuscript *Panthoibi Khongul* in which there is an account of how the members of the *Khaba* community paid homage to *Nongpok Ningthou*, the presiding deity of the *Langmai* Hills and *Panthoibi*, his consort by erecting a temple” (Singh, 1996, p. 13). The crucial aspect of the *Lai Haraoba* is reflected in the eloquent ritual dances performed by the *Maiba* (male high priest) and *Maibi* (female high priestess). Their graceful hand and body movements exhibit the cycle of creation of the lives of humans: from the fetus's existence in the mother's womb to birth, to habitation, and extend to the construction of houses, cultivation, and weaving of clothes to be offered to the gods. The festival of Lai Haraoba is an ‘art of enactment’: it is celebrated and enacted in the same manner every year and in the years to come (Yumnam, 2021). In the words of Gadamer, “Enactment is the festival's mode of being, and in the enactment, time becomes the nunc stans of an elevated presence in which the past and the present become one in the act of remembrance. For surely the festival of Christmas is more than a festival of the birth of the saviour who was originally present nearly two thousand years ago” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 59). It would be deemed correct to state that the Lai Haraoba is far more than a festival of pleasing the gods. It is art in itself, as the exquisite dance of the maibi is the provenance of the classical dance of Manipuri Ras, which is one of the prestigious classical dances of India. (Yumnam, 2021).

It is intriguing to note that, “The female supreme *lai* Leimaren has a significant place in the Haraoba and is symbolised by the *leimaren chafu* (or *ishaifu*), a ritual pot, while the male counterpart, Atingkok, is almost a *deus otiosus*” (Parratt & Parratt, 2018, p. 2). The festival of pleasing the gods is celebrated in honour of the numerous deities of the Meiteis, which includes honouring the clan (*yek*) deities, or the gods of the local village, but the most significant haraoba is honouring all the larger clan deities, for instance, the gods *Pakhangba* and *Thangjing*. The pivotal tripartite performers and preservers of the Lai Haraoba are the Maibi, the Maiba, and the *Pena loishang*. Without these three, the Lai Haraoba festival is impossible. The Maibi plays a key role in the festival of pleasing the gods. One cannot naturally or by training become a Maibi, but one has to be chosen. The Maibi of the Meitei of Manipur has in some interpretations, been understood as a shaman (Ibemhal, 2006); however, the term ‘Maibi’ has no exact parallel English translation. Maibis are exclusively adorned in white *phanek* (a long ankle-length wraparound), a white long-sleeved blouse, and a white *inaphi* (shawl); an additional white waist wrapper is also worn on top of the *phanek*, and the long black hair is decked with pretty flowers. To quote, “This dress, however, does not show the classic characteristics of shamanistic clothing, such as the use of animal skins and decorations, and masks. Nor do they act as ‘masters of the spirits’, or exorcise. Thus, it seems to us better to avoid the term shamanism in connection with the maibas and maibis” (Parratt & Parratt, 1997, p. 34).

III. DANCE OF THE MAIBI AS PHILOSOPHY PERFORMED

As time progresses, the idea of what it signifies for an artwork to represent something, or to signify something, has drastically widened in the history of philosophical aesthetics. Although the art of dance is more intimately related to music and theatre, it is nonetheless a philosophy of representation. Although much of the literature review and anthropological approach has been extensively made on the Maibi phenomenon, its philosophical aspect hasn't been explored as it deserves. One can discern the idea that the subtle rhythm and dance movements of the maibi reflect philosophical and metaphysical elements, as there is philosophy in performance. Dance and art are philosophies in themselves: "The metaphor of the cosmic womb from which the cosmos germinates has representation in the hand gestures of the Maibi in the Lai-Haraoba dance. Maibis perform the moment of the release of creative energy at the beginning of the cosmos" (Yumnam, Conflict of Tradition and Modernity With Respect to Maibi Institution: A Philosophical Inquiry, 2021, p. 65). Not only do they preserve the oral religious traditions, but the Maibis also invoke the lais (gods) and make offerings to them. They act as mediums of the gods and are conferred with oracles, which they disclose to the people. In the Lai Haraoba, the Maibi executes a worldview. In the documentary "*Yelhou Jagoi*" by the renowned director Aribam Shyam Sharma, one can grasp the worldview executed by the Maibi. The Maibi uses 364 *khutheks* (hand gestures) in her dance to re-enact and recreate the myth of the creation of the universe. She dances eloquently, recapturing the release of the creative energy: her torso begins to move gently, breaking off the serene stillness and dancing slowly, retrieving the primal cadence. The dance starts with the depiction of the creation by seven female goddesses and nine male gods.

The dance gestures and announcements of the Maibis depict the growth of the child in the womb, his limbs and organs shaping slowly, his birth and his growing up; his activities – the building of the house, cultivation of the land, weaving of cloth, fishing, and so on (Sharma, *Yelhou Jagoi*, 1992).

Understanding a worldview is understanding reality: A worldview is not only associated with "a people's understanding of its social environment but also to its understanding of an even more inclusive environment, reality itself" (Schilbrack, 2004, p. 128). The dance of the Lai Haraoba is led by the Maibi, and the Meitei community follows her dance steps and imitates her graceful movements. It is paramount to note that, "Here, through the act of dancing, the participants come to know that they belong to the community. As Schilbrack puts it, the ritual body, here, in this case, the dancing body, comes to know metaphysical truths "in the flesh". These metaphysical truths inform authentic existence" (Yumnam, p. 77). To participate in the celebration of the Lai Haraoba, the dances, and its rituals is to reflect and imitate how the Gods "act and behave" (Yumnam, p. 77). To further supplement this remark,

Such metaphysical knowledge, inscribed on bodies through ritual, is also practical knowledge. This ritual knowledge of reality is used to shape conduct, to get people to act "properly", as "we" act, as "true humans" act, or as the Gods act. In this way, ritual metaphysics is used to alienate a range of possible behaviours as not in accord with ultimate reality, and thereby to fabricate authentic human beings, authentic in the sense that their behaviour is authorized by the very nature of things" (Schilbrack, 2004, p. 131).

IV. THE INTRIGUING RELEVANCE OF MYTHS

When discussing myths, it is crucial to understand their subject matter, origin, and, ultimately, their function. According to Carl Jung, "Myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings and anything but allegories of physical processes." Myths are to be considered as symbols, and not literally. Hence, the function of myths is to satisfy the psychological requirement for contact with the unconscious: not with the external world but with the human mind. Carl Jung believed that myths and dreams were expressions of the 'collective unconscious', which is the section of the mind that contains memories and impulses that are unaware to the individual. As per Jung, this is common to the whole of mankind. It is different from the personal unconscious, which is the experience of the individual. Jung asserts that the unconscious contains archetypes, or universal primordial images and ideas, which convey central ideas that embody the human species in its totality. To put it in other words, myths are expressions of knowledge and wisdom that have been represented in all human civilizations, either by evolution or through spiritual process. As per the Jungian outlook, the common origin in the collective unconscious gives an explanation of why myths from all around the globe have striking resemblances. If we look closely at Jungian analysis of classical mythology, the main gods and goddesses are expressed as 'archetypes' (an inherited idea in the psychology of Jung that is derived from the experience of the race and is present in the unconscious of the individual), which is a prevalent aspect in every human civilization. So, in Greek mythology, the primary Olympian gods are portrayed as expressions of archetypes of various stages of life evident in the family life: Zeus, being the patriarch, and Apollo, the young man, depicting manhood and independence.

In *The Stranger*, also known as *The Outsider*, Camus uses the myth of Sisyphus to explicate his philosophical concept of "The Absurd". Sisyphus rolling the big boulder up the hill over and over again, only to roll it back up again, is a symbolism that portrays the picture of the repetitive yet challenging, and paradoxical life

that we live. Nonetheless, Camus consoles by asserting that one must always think that Sisyphus is happy. The esteemed existentialist philosopher, such as Camus, utilises the tool of mythical characters and myths to drive his philosophical argument of absurdity. This reflects how significant myths are, even though they seem to be outdated and archaic in the face of modernity and the advancement of science and technology. Myths, indeed, play an important role in discerning reality, although it depends on how one interprets them.

In his *Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (1973), Clifford Geertz observes that the Balinese cockfight “is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves” (p. 448). Weaving stories, telling and retelling them, involves deciphering them, interpreting them to make sense of a complex network of relations. These relations include the physical, the social, and the spiritual, among others. Likewise, the mythologies we inherit and perpetuate serve a function in making sense of our place in the world. It functions to explain and instruct how to act through the agency in which one is placed, and also indicates possible transcendence.

In *The Second Sex* (2011), Beauvoir unearths and analyses the structures of meaning and ideology that have perpetuated the status of woman as “the second sex”, “the Other”, which is only to be defined and measured through the norm that is man. Mythology is one of these structures that she analyses to show how it has been instrumental in subjecting Woman to her unenviable position in history. In mythology, she searches for the basis of patriarchal ideas and myths about Woman. One of the central existentialist ideas that she advances to explain patriarchy and the state of woman in that scheme is that man’s urge for transcendence – the impulse towards life beyond death, which can be achieved only through the appropriation and subjugation of nature’s immanence, the essence he gives to woman. The rejection of mythology announces alienation. This alienation is the alienation of something intimate that has been handed down, an intimacy that informs the meaning-making of a community and its members for the global project of liberation of the feminine. Negotiating a passage has come about in feminist appropriation of mythology through reading and retelling mythology in Woman’s voice. This involves reading that recovers feminism in mythology. A more radical form of appropriation and reclaiming the intimate is to retell these stories from the perspectives of women characters who have been traditionally suppressed in presentations of mythologies (Jackson, 2010; Yadav, 2010). If Beauvoir claimed that ‘some’ mythology has patriarchal tones, but not all myths around the world, then she may have been right in assessing mythology. However, wholesale rejection of mythology would be deemed unwise and unscholarly. In this paper, I challenge the Beauvoirian reading of mythology. I argue that it is not mythology that needs junking but a particular reading of it. Although it is a difficult mammoth of a task, considering the content of mythologies, which is palpable in their patriarchal accents, and a historically dominant way of reading them. But a total refutation of mythology is not tenable, as mythology has a prominent significance and value in our lives, cultures, and traditions.

V. IS THE BEAUVOIRIAN READING OF MYTHOLOGY FEASIBLE TO MEITEI MYTHOLOGY?

In the feminist milestone treatise, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir rejects mythology. She asserts that through the medium of myths, patriarchy is sustained and the othering of Woman is maintained. Thus, capturing her in a state of immanence and subjugated status. She proclaims that the palpable patriarchal accent in mythology is present universally. Beauvoir declares that, ranging from Greek mythologies to Roman mythologies, to the Bible, myths are patriarchally dominant. For instance, in the Genesis Legend of Adam and Eve, from the rib of Adam, Eve was moulded. This legend has profound meaning: She was created for Adam, to be his companionship, to save him from his loneliness. She was destined for him, which implies that she wasn’t created for her own, but for Adam. This mythical implication is reflected and internalised in reality, where women are taught to be subordinated by man; to serve him, with no autonomy, and are expected to have no agency of their own. This validates Woman’s status as the ‘Second Sex’, in reality, in societal norms, and the relegation of her position to the sphere of immanence. Through myths, Woman is placed as the ‘Other’. Beauvoir examines the scenario of the mythical Greek Goddesses and comes to conclude that even the Great Mother was dethroned, the goddess Nout, who incarnates the sky; Isis, who embodies the fertile land, the wife of the Nile, Osiris, were all essentially important, but it is ‘Ra’, the Sun God, who is the supreme king.

de Beauvoir quotes Pythagoras’s remarks on women, “There is a good principle which created order, light, and man, and an evil principle which created chaos, darkness, and woman” (p.). Such a statement about Woman leaves a permanent stigma of connoting Woman with negativeness, mystery, darkness, temptation, and wildness. She argues that Woman is defined in relation to man, and not independently: Woman is the inessential, whereas man is the essential; she is the object, he is the subject, she is the accidental, he is the absolute. To define her as the Other is to deny her humanity. She proclaims that Woman is treated as a ‘plaything of obscure forces’. Beauvoir utilises an abundance of myths to substantiate her feminist argument that there is a universalised form of patriarchy inherent in myths and mythologies globally. This approach, for want of a better word, I have termed “Mythic strategy”. The Beauvoirian reading of mythology explores myths as patriarchal globally and thereby

rejects them on this very basis, to emancipate Woman and free her from the attribution of the Other, subjugation, and exploitation.

In *The Second Sex* (2011), Beauvoir unearths and analyses the structures of meaning and ideology that have perpetuated the status of woman as “the second sex”, “the Other”, which is only to be defined and measured through the norm that is man. Mythology is one of these structures that she analyses to show how it has been instrumental in subjecting Woman to her unenviable position in history. In mythology, she searches for the basis of patriarchal ideas and myths about Woman. One of the central existentialist ideas that she advances to explain patriarchy and the state of woman in that scheme is that man’s urge for transcendence – the impulse towards life beyond death, which can be achieved only through the appropriation and subjugation of nature’s immanence, the essence he gives to woman. The rejection of mythology announces alienation. This alienation is the alienation of something intimate that has been handed down, an intimacy that informs the meaning-making of a community and its members for the global project of liberation of the feminine. Negotiating a passage has come about in feminist appropriation of mythology through reading and retelling mythology in Woman’s voice. This involves reading that recovers feminism in mythology. A more radical form of appropriation and reclaiming the intimate is to retell these stories from woman characters that have been traditionally suppressed in presentations of mythologies (Jackson, 2010; Yadav, 2010). If Beauvoir claimed that ‘some’ mythology has patriarchal tones, but not all myths around the world, then she may have been right in assessing mythology. However, wholesale rejection of mythology would be deemed unwise and unscholarly. In this paper, I challenge the Beauvoirian reading of mythology. I assert that de Beauvoir appears to commit a fallacy of homologising mythology and disregarding its pertinent attributes. I argue that it is not mythology that needs junking but a particular reading of it. Although it is a difficult mammoth of a task, considering the content of mythologies, which is palpable in their patriarchal accents, and a historically dominant way of reading them. But a total refutation of mythology is not tenable, as mythology has a prominent significance and value in our lives, cultures, and traditions. Instead of debunking mythology, I explore an alternative approach to mythology in my paper: an ambiguous perspective.

In Meitei mythology, we find ambiguities in comprehending mythology, whether it is completely patriarchal or not, which is as opposed to the Beauvoirian reading of mythology, which claims that mythology is entrenched in patriarchal tones globally. The *Meitei* creation myths, as found in *Pudin* (2015), *Panthoibi Khongul* (2017), and Moirangthem Chandra Singh (2010), present male principles in a dominant position. The *Atinkok Sidaba*, the eternal fountainhead, could be argued to have a gendered representation. The ascription of “*Mapu*” given, “the owner” if taken in conjunction with the word for husband, “*Mapuroiba*”, the one who is in the form of the possessor, can entertain a gendered interpretation of *Atinkok Sidaba*. The theogenesis in the form of the nine gods and seven goddesses also points to a numerical asymmetry, an asymmetry of dominion and reach. Even within the domestic domain, it is not the *Leimarel* or the *Emoinu*, the goddess of the hearth, who is given a privileged position, but *Sanamahi*, the first among gods, superseded by his younger brother *Pakhangba*. The female goddess *Nongthang Leima* assisted in the creation of the universe. But here again, she was an agent of temptation. She tempted *Haraba*, the god who disrupts order, who kept on destroying what was in the process of being made. During the period when he was enthralled, the making of the universe could be completed. In the tale of *Khoriphaba*, we can find normalization of the restriction of Woman’s choices. Khorifaba’s mother, who is from the Earth, was married to Soraren, the sky god. Soraren and his family are vegetarians. On her visit to her maternal house, Khorifaba’s mother made preparations for eels. His father saw this from above and did not let her enter his house again. Torn between the Sky and Earth, Khoriphaba resides on the hills. These myths indicate patriarchal narratives of mythology; nonetheless, there are many tales that exhibit strong female characters who defy patriarchal norms.

In this paper, I have selected some popular Meitei mythologies to analyse the Beauvoirian reading of mythology with reference to the Meitei mythology. *Panthoibi Khongul* is one among them. *Panthoibi Khongul* (roughly translated as following the trails of Panthoibi) portrays impetuous love against the age-old barrier of social custom and physical obstacles. The title signifies either literally following the trail of Panthoibi after she had left her husband’s home or description of her distinguished protean traits” (Singh, A History of Manipuri Literature, 2013). Panthoibi was the daughter of a Meitei King, who possessed unmatched beauty and an insurmountable charm. She was sought after by numerous suitors. Sapaiba, a king who ruled the western part of the valley, approached her. He tried his best to woo her: he constructed big roads and sturdy bridges, a beautiful house, and alluring fish ponds for her. But Panthoibi was not pleased with his efforts. She simply dismissed them, saying it was not worthy of her taste. “At last she was given away in marriage to Taram Khoinucha, born of Khaba Sokchrongba, king of the Khaba dynasty and the queen Manu Teknga” (Singh, 2013, p. 58). A grand and splendid wedding took place. Remarkable bridges made of silver planks, with iron poles and gold railings, were constructed to impress the princess. However, she could not “conform to the way of life a married woman should” (p. 58). She wanted to roam around endlessly in the vast meadows and spend her time leisurely bathing in the refreshing and chilled water of the running river. One day, while she was enjoying the cool river water, by chance she met the Lord of the *Langmai* Hills, *Angoupa Kainou Chingsompa*. Both fell in love with each other at the spot. He

immediately proposed to her to run away with him and to live happily ever after in his kingdom. But she could not agree to run away with him immediately, as her marriage was not even five days yet. However, they met up very often and spent romantic time together. Eventually, her in-laws got apprehensive of her demeanour. So, they decided to teach her a lesson to instill a feeling of sympathy and guilt and to manipulate her to understand the responsibility of having a family by faking the death of her father-in-law, Khaba Sokchrongba. But to their utter dismay, she took this chance to elope with her lover. The Khabas, who were led by her father-in-law, made a hot pursuit of her; however, she boldly escaped with her beloved. “Their happy union was celebrated with dances and music, attended by divine beings subordinate to Nongpok Ningthou on the sun-washed slopes of the Langmai Hills” (Singh, p. 59). Eventually, the lovely pair of lovers began to be worshipped reverently by the Khabas with elegant dance and music. This formed an integral part of the festival of Lai Haraoba.

Boldness is one of her key attributes, which is popularised and debated. The Goddess’s great escapade with her lover was considered by the Khabas as an ‘achievement of an impossible task, resulting in honoring her as a divine lady’ (E-Pao, Fact 3). It is intriguing to note the fascinating nature of the variations of myths. Hence, in another version of Panthoibi Khongul, it is narrated that the goddess had fallen deeply in love with the magnificent Nongpok Ningthou before she was given away to the Khaba prince Tarang Khoiucha: “One day, while Panthoibi was working in jhum cultivation, Nongpok Ningthou also came there, they fell in love with each other. However, the two could not get the opportunity of getting married” (Singha, Manipuri Legend Panthoibi and the Social Content, 2024, p. 2). It is the tradition for the Meiteis to escort the bride to the groom’s house by her family, relatives, and friends on the day of the marriage, and the guests are to be well-fed and well-served. Thus, Goddess Panthoibi was also escorted to the groom’s house with elaborate pomp and grandeur. However, there were so many guests that the Khaba household ran out of food and wine to entertain them. But Goddess Panthoibi came to the rescue. She saved her father-in-law from humiliation and mockery with her divine powers. She took out her basket of rice, pot of meat, and a pitcher of wine and fed all the guests. The basket, pot, and pitcher refilled themselves miraculously. Panthoibi defied patriarchal restrictions and followed her heart’s desire, challenging the traditional norm of selecting your own partner. Therefore, this myth defeats the Beauvoirian reading of mythology.

The epic poem of *Khamba Thoibi Seireng* by the eminent poet Hijam Anganghal Singh, is considered the most famous and prominent fragment of the *Moirang Saiyon* or *Kangleirol*. It is a ballad that narrates the reincarnation tales of two passionate but ill-fated lovers —the tall, charming, courageous, and virtuous Khumba Khamba and Thoibi, the magnificent, fearless, and strong-willed princess, epitome of beauty, the Princess of *Moirang*. This epic of Khamba Thoibi is widely accepted to have been developed from *Khulang Eshei* (song), sweetly sung while toiling in the fields. Unlike *The Mahabharata*, the legend of Khamba Thoibi is not widely known in India, and internationally, pertaining to its aspect of language barrier. “The story is an intrinsic part of the cultural and historical memory of Manipuri folklore, and their dance of devotion to Lord Thangjing is an integral part of Lai Haraoba celebrations” (Ningthoujam, 2021, p. 4). The protagonists in the epic, namely, Khamba, Thoibi, and Khamnu, are epitomised as the exemplary characters of a man, a woman, and a mother, respectively, in the Meitei community. In *Khamba Thoibi Seireng*, it is through Thoibi’s wit that she could escape the attempt to take possession of her. A mighty fighter like Nongban is defeated by the frail Thoibi, portrayed as a fine horse rider. Nongban, already married to five wives, desires to make Princess Thoibi his wife. But Thoibi escaped his plan wittily. “She rides off on his horse, and he is left sitting inside her palanquin, unaware of the action...Metaphorically, it reflects the reversal of gendered roles. In traditional gendered roles, if riding a horse is seen as an active act, and therefore a masculine activity, being carried in a palanquin is seen as a passive act, and therefore a feminine activity” (p. 21). Princess Thoibi, the female protagonist, who is known for her exquisite beauty, grace, is also identified as a feminist by some scholars, who defies the patriarchal norms of her time. Her character depicts a society in which women are considered to have agency, and their skills, wit, and bravery are asserted with delight and dignity. Thoibi is bold enough to follow her heart, without caring about societal norms and breaking conventional restrictions: “Even as the narrative assigns conventional names by referring to Thoibi as a deer and Khamba as a tiger, it overturns these patterns of predictable hetero-normative relationships. Here, it is the female protagonist who pursues her desires and takes the initiative to orchestrate their interactions” (p. 16).

According to the Beauvoirian reading of mythology, patriarchal structures are entrenched in mythology all around the globe, thereby propagating patriarchy. The Beauvoirian reading of mythology refutes mythology in its entirety. However, this undertaking would be too extreme and overbearing, because if one rejects mythology entirely, then one would be committing the fallacy of disregarding the pertinent aspects of it, of preserving culture and tradition, of navigating reality, and most importantly, of maintaining indigenous knowledge practices. Hence, the Beauvoirian reading of mythology is not feasible in the context of the Meitei mythology, as they exhibit ambiguous characteristics, and assessing them to be either entirely patriarchal or not becomes obscure, elusive, and almost absurd. Therefore, to overcome this difficulty, an alternative approach to mythology is introduced in this paper. The motivation of this paper is to embrace mythology and read it in a new light, to understand the

subject matter of myths in another dimension, where ambiguous interpretations and variations are explored and encouraged. Rather than debunking myths and mythology, a fresh way of reading and grasping the essence and relevance of mythology, in the philosophical struggle for understanding our identities, knowing ourselves, preserving our culture and traditions, especially in the fast-changing days of modernity and scientific advancement, is an urgent call. Because mythology is something that cannot be merely dismissed or deleted. It is the foundation and development of the primordial human mind, civilization, which acts as the preserver of our culture, art, history, traditions, and philosophy. As far as I am concerned, one cannot simply discard and forget the foundation where the human mind flourished and developed at one point in time. It will amount to discarding history and throwing away a part of one's culture, tradition, and worldview.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the Lai Haraoba, the body is engraved as texts through the medium of dance gestures and movements. "But these texts are metaphysical texts" (p. 133), for they are metaphysically informed bodies dancing in tune with the metaphysical truths that the bodies attempt to represent, express, convey, and manifest those truths through the art of dancing (Yumnam, p. 78). And dance is possible through the agency of bodies, which guides us in making sense of the world and reality. Furthermore, rituals have a noetic element. In the words of Yumnam, "Every time the Maibi performs in the Lai Haraoba, they are remaking a world of the Meitei which is already there. While dancing, they are actualizing each of the Meitei's worldviews. Each moment performed is a lived experience for the Meitei" (Performance as Philosophy in the Context of the Lai-Haraoba, 2018, p. 129). Human bodies are not mere bodies, but rather are embodied with meanings and symbolisms. We grasp knowledge and comprehend it, not solely through our minds, but also through our bodies, senses, feelings, and through expressions of dance and bodily gestures. Therefore, one can conclude that the dance gestures in the celebration of pleasing of the Gods of the Meitei community undeniably possess metaphysical as well as epistemological aspects. Thus, the Lai Haraoba acts as a pivotal source of knowledge for the Meitei community.

In my understanding, it would be unwise and unscholarly to discredit mythology. As mythology cannot be debunked, but it can be approached in different ways, perspectives, and understandings: from an ambiguous outlook. A better and strategic method of discerning mythology would be to read it in a different light, to revisit it, to reinterpret it in an embracing perspective. Assigning a singular meaning to a myth is sometimes exasperating and ambiguous, as myth itself is perplexing and has the quality of numerous interpretations and understandings. One myth is not restricted to one meaning. Moreover, myths don't reflect reality as it is, but through symbolism, subtleties, and nuances. Therefore, if we assign a particular meaning to a myth, then it will become stagnant and will have limited interpretations. It is believed that if one analyzes the legend of a community, then one would be able to deduce a significant portion of the culture of that community. But it is to be kept in mind that revisions and new interpretations are crucial in enriching the myths concerned with a certain community. It is crucial to remember what Levi Strauss had observed, "And it is only by treating the myth as if it were an orchestral score, written stave after stave, that we can understand it as a totality, that we can extract the meaning out of the myth" (Levi-Strauss, pp. 39-40).

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