MY GRANDMOTHER: EXHIBIT A

AYANGBE MANNEN AND LEKI THUNGON

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ZUBAAN
128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor
NEW DELHI 110 049
EMAIL: contact@zubaanbooks.com
WEBSITE: www.zubaanbooks.com

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MY GRANDMOTHER: A NOTE

This is a collection of memories of four grandmothers from four North-Eastern states of India – Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.[1] We set out to recreate a fragment of these women's lives through stories and illustrations. The stories, in particular, traverse multiple styles of narrative like short stories, memories and ethnographical accounts. All the four stories seem to be predominantly written within the framework of the memoir, but one cannot undermine the social anthropological concepts and feminist theories that informed this writing. Hence, we looked at the relationship between memory, gender and kinship ties. However, it must be underlined that this project was not an intellectual endeavour alone; it also emerged from our personal desire to represent their lives without clichés of victimization or resistance. These stories are an attempt at contextualizing memories in social and political history, in kinship obligations and individual personalities. A scholarly essay might not have allowed us to do so.

My Grandmother is an intentional tongue-in-cheek reference to how North-Eastern societies have been represented in the mainstream. We have tried to steer clear of the tendency to reduce people and

their histories to items of preservation and exhibition. We have seen how this exhibitionist mode of representation has changed within the growing consumption centric culture of tourism. We seek to counter these narratives through the figure of the grandmother as a subject of inquiry. The four grandmothers in this collection highlight the complex ways in which the history of the nation-state and patriarchy weave into personal histories. By reconstructing stories from the women's memories about their grandmothers we seek to highlight questions about familial duties, nationhood and belongingness.

Tilottoma's story is embedded in the historical process of Victorian-Brahmanism that one finds in East India from the 19th century onwards. Her insistence on lady-like habits and ritualistic purity for her granddaughters makes her story a textbook example of middle class Brahmanical morality which Kukum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid discuss in the introductory chapter in their anthology.[2] We also learn that Tilottoma was much more than that. As we know, people are often more than what history presents them as. This project engages with one such way in which people go beyond the sum total of historical processes, that is, to the memories of their kin members, specifically their granddaughters. Tilottoma's resolve in calling herself Rose stands in contrast to her granddaughter's struggle to be at home in a new city. Her story dovetails into another story being scripted today in many women's lives who come from this region to hostile metropolitan cities. While Tilottoma-Rose's story finds cohesion in discipline, her granddaughter's story, which is inextricably tied to hers, illustrates being haunted by one's familial identity and a desire to construct a sense of belongingness outside the ancestral home.

Thangveli's story is set in 1960s Mizoram, a phase also called 'the troubled times', But her granddaughter remembers her around the hearth and her beloved farm. Her story is underwritten not only by the violence of that time and the silence around it but her quiet resilience and tenderness. This is why we chose to remember her not in times of brutality alone but in her everyday rituals and in her quotidian expressions of love and affection. It is here that one becomes

aware of a common thread of melancholy which cuts across all four stories. The memories of grandmothers are fundamentally stories of ageing. Senescence is not only about the inevitable disintegration of one's physical body but also the gradual descent into social invisibility. Without spelling it out, these stories are about shrinking social circles as well. Old age, which is often centred around habits and rituals, is also marked by deaths of spouses, friends and loved ones.

Leibaklai's granddaughter allowed us to peek into the personal life of a woman who suffered loss and learnt to navigate patriarchal social structures and the carelessness of those whom she loved. We meet two grandmothers in this story, both could have easily fit into the archetypal good and kind grandmother as well as the mean spirited and evil grandmother. However, through Leibaklai's story one locates the two grandmothers in a social context constituted by gendered relations and patriarchal familial ideologies. In the semantics of purity of blood and customs of rightful expropriation, we find Leibaklai formulating her own notion of inheritance.

Networks of kinship cannot be understood in isolation. They intersect and overlap with other institutions like the state, religion and law. Abeni's story based in Nagaland illustrates this point. However, just like the other three stories, her story does not end with her. Her story finds a context in the Second World War and is tied to her daughter-in-law's story who had witnessed the period of counterinsurgency in Nagaland. Set across two periods of violence, we see how boundaries between enemies and kin become blurred. We also find questions of belongingness and identity which confront many who choose to stay away from their supposed homeland. It presents an argument for a rootedness which transcends one's birthplace.

Memory is not constant. Like history, it is also constructed. It is informed by the historical context in which it is articulated. In terms of memories of female ancestors, we cannot disregard the feminist endeavour to recover the social history of women, an aspect that has been overlooked by mainstream history. One of the pitfalls of a simplistic reading of such an idea is that we often equate history with

glory. We seek heroism in every story of struggle. This was evident in our interactions with the women we approached for interviews as many told us that there was nothing remarkable about their grandmothers' lives. While one is not undermining the significance of overt resistance and organized struggle for gender justice, we need to illustrate how women from different contexts found spaces to negotiate and carve out their stories on their own terms.

The fact that we, the writer and the illustrator, are from this region also allowed us to connect with the women we spoke to. The biographies of these women were not too different from ours, we are all first or second generation educated professionals who are familiar with the harshness of metropolitan cities in this country. As women from the North-East in mainland Indian cities, we have experienced a sense of estrangement in both the cities that we have made our homes and the place we call 'back home'.

Memory also escapes linearity. The style of writing adopted to reconstruct each woman's story is a narrative which is loosely coherent despite lacking a chronological structure. It would be an overdetermination to claim that the form of narrative here is a simple reflection of how the past is recounted in a fragmented manner. It is but a humble attempt to show how complexities get bounded in the structure of a story with a beginning and an end. The narratives navigate across time and voices. One of the difficulties in reshaping the memories of granddaughters into stories was maintaining the separation between the voices of the grandmother, the granddaughter and myself (the writer). Perhaps the only way to reconcile this difficulty was by accepting that this is just one of the many ways in which our complex realities can be represented.

The illustrations are not representative of the text. Unlike the writer who tried to contextualize the lives of the grandmothers as stories written in history, Ayangbe, the artist presents them as individuals. This should not be read as being contradictory to the text, but as an imperfect yet complimentary relationship between autobiographies and histories. She gives each story a face and a symbol.

Neither of us had an opportunity to establish a close relationship with either of our grandmothers because of reasons like education, language barriers and their deaths. So, in a way, we are outsiders in this domain of female kinship. We would like to thank everyone who shared their experiences of this relationship with us. We also believe that these stories could have been told in a way different from the one we have adopted.

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ROSE ON CLOTH: TILOTTOMA-ROSE'S STORY

She last visited me 21 years ago in Mayur Vihar, Delhi. I had had an exceptionally bad day at work. The cramped room and Delhi's heat was not helping her anxiety. Aita[3] stayed next to my bed that night but her presence annoyed me more. 'Why is she here?' I thought to myself.

I didn't remember getting irritated by her so easily as a child. Some infantile pain, which was not difficult to recover from was caused only when she tried to domesticate me and my cousin into cultured young women. She struggled to transmit her Victorian ways even as she herself lived by her home name, Rose. My cousin and I were disapprovingly immune to Rose's ways and remained Moyna and Sangeeta for the rest of our lives. Aita, however, persisted in teaching us till our early teens. She believed that a girl's cultural values were reflected in two things. First, they were found in a subtle display of patience and beauty: embroidery. She would take a square of a handkerchief, place it over a ring and then put a bigger ring that made the cloth taut like paper. Laboriously, Aita Rose would nudge our interest by showing us the magical routes the red thread took across the lilac handkerchief. She would turn to us from time to time and speak in impeccable British Raj English, 'Are you following, girls?' While the rose that she had embroidered on the stretched cotton cloth looked far more delicate than a real one, it was her English accent that fascinated us more; the fact that it was Rose who spoke through Aita.

'Aita … ?'

'Hmm … ?'

'Did your governess really have eyes like marbles?'

Sometimes I wished for an English governess myself so that I too could speak in *Rosor* English.[4] Every word gravitated into a solid utterance and meaning and even the copular verbs had authorial undertones. But there were no longer any fair haired and light eyed English teachers left in Golaghat. 'We have freedom now,' Aita would say in *axomiya*.[5] 'We can have our land and make our own laws. Foreigners don't rule us anymore.' This was said to extinguish my self-harming desire to sound different from what I did. My sing-song English with its slopes and peaks did not sound as majestic to me as

Aita Rose's English. I saw her spine straighten slightly in those rare moments that she broke into English. It felt like the weight of this cultured language asserted reverence through both sound and body. She would always sign her lady like name, 'Rose', with the needle and thread on every artefact she made. I learned much later that Aita had another name, Tilottoma, the name of a beautiful apsara who had apparently enchanted even the likes of Lord Indra. She, however, remained the white *mekhla*[6] clad Aita for us at home and Rose on handicrafts.

'Don't shuffle your feet. It's unfeminine.'

This was Aita Rose's second pet peeve if I may call it that. Through her mild manners she tried to foster in us all the Victorian games of patriarchy: the angel in the kitchen who should not be heard, only seen. It would have been delightful to snap at her but my life was limited to rote learning in school, playing cricket with the neighbourhood kids and climbing trees. It seemed unfair that only the girls of the household had such guidelines to follow, but the thing that actually bothered me more was the fact that she failed to understand the burden of being eleven. With homework, tyrannical teachers, back-stabbing friends and just not enough time to play, walking like a lady was the last thing on my mind.

She was also an observing Brahmin. Her Victorian training enabled her to learn the tricks of a rising new class, but her caste conditioning was left to be managed by her family. They did a fine job. As long as she lived, we only had Brahmin cooks at our home in Golaghat. She would not have tolerated my father's love for chicken, which was infamously called 'Muslim meat.' The dirty meat of an unsacrificable fowl. 'It was a clandestine affair,' my father recalled decades later. No one is sure if she knew about this breach of a household code as she never showed any signs of knowing about it. The point was, my father would often say and it is something which is repeated by many children who become parents, that we should at least try and hide it out of respect. Naturally, we did many things out of respect for Aita, like shelling peas.

There was nothing as counterproductive as taking the peas out of their pods. I could never shell peas on my first attempt. The pods would be halved most of the time without a single pea escaping the fleshy green walls. I would put all the strength on my thumbs and index finger but to no avail. Sometimes the translucent wall would resist my force and I would only be able to dislocate two or three peas out of their several siblings. The temptation of popping the sweet, green peas straight into my mouth added to the drill. So even when I had managed to complete this task, my side of the *kula*[7] would look like a puddle next to Aita's sea of peas. This ordeal stopped abruptly when I was twelve.

On a long hot day, I felt a little pang in my lower abdomen followed by a desperate need to urinate. I found my underwear soaked with bright red blood. I knew better than to scream. While I was learning to grow into the pains of my anatomy, my grandmother took a surprising decision to discontinue my pea shelling job. She said I was no longer pure. It was a welcome change, I could waste my time my own way now. But I was a little dejected to learn that I was dirty because according to me that was the opposite of purity.

My grandmother's children and their children lived around her Victorian and Brahmanical upbringing. Despite that I didn't dislike her; all of us were actually quite fond of her. She did not rule us like a monarch, but as an even-tempered aristocrat who always found a way around strict rules of division. This became apparent during her last days. All of us were occupied with the thought of her imminent end. Time slowed around my father, I would often find him taking long breaths and longer steps when he walked aimlessly in the house. Time hastened for my mother and other women in the house for they had to prepare extra meals and snacks for the endless guests who came to pay their last respects.

Bhara ghoror Aita[8] was the last one to go. I don't know if they were friends but by virtue of being widows who had lost their husbands at a very young age, both her and my grandmother had developed a bond of unstated understanding for each other. The fact that she was Aita's

tenant or that she was a Muslim from East Bengal did not stop my grandmother from being empathetic towards her. She would sit silently for hours at the foot of Aita's bed, waiting for and/or dreading the next event. In her last hours, Aita asked for the *gangajal*[9] she had kept in the puja *ghor*[10] in her large room. She had saved it for this purpose alone. The judiciousness of the old never fails to surprise me. We all poured the holy water into her mouth including *bhara ghoror* Aita. She was not really one of us, but Aita would not have let this demonstration of good intention pass. She often told me how goodness is to be found not in persons but in intentions.

It was at her funeral that I learnt her proper name. She was always Aita to us. There was no need for another name, except of course Rose which she affirmed through threads and needles. I now wonder who would have called her by her formal name. I have never heard anyone call her name out loud. Perhaps my grandfather did when he was alive. He had died when my youngest aunt was only 4. I wonder what name he gave her when he called her to tell her that he was leaving for Rangoon to fight Rani Gaidinlui's case in the High Court where he was eventually arrested by the British. Did he call her 'Tilo,' 'Tilottoma' or 'Rose'? Or did he just call her the 'mother of his child'? I want to believe that he called her by a name she liked. Do names become useless with the deaths of friends and lovers? What about proper names? Do they die with your professional life? Is it only when summoned by the state that we are forced to recall these names? Invent them? It seems strange to say her name. Like the name of a foreign dish, Ti-loh-tuh-mah.

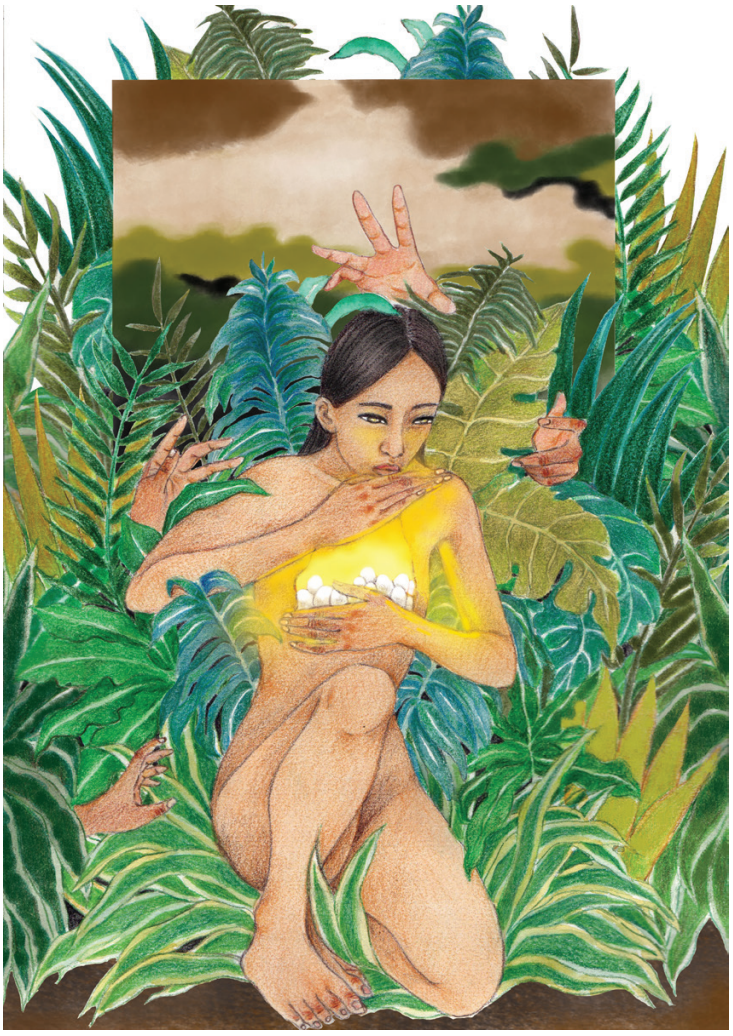
The beautiful intern from Kolkata comes to my mind before Aita. She, however, called herself Ti-lott-to-ma, with a different inflection of the vowel 'o.' A slight variation deduced only by non-Bengali speaking listeners and often unheard by the speakers themselves. A subtle difference in breaking a name. The monosyllable 'Rose' sits more comfortably in my mouth like an old, familiar joke. But both the names made-unmade Aita.

Tilottoma, who followed the codes of purity and pollution was also Rose, who dreamt of regimenting her granddaughters into refined

ladies. Tilottoma found Naga men to be the bravest, strongest and tallest of all because they brought her husband on their shoulders all the way from Rangoon. Aita who wouldn't stop me from eating the heavenly biryani at *Bharo Ghoror* Aita's place on Eid.

I found her staying with me even after her death. It is funny how ghosts of our close relatives don't scare us but only bring a sense of discomfort for they become symbols of times to come. Several years had passed when she last chose to appear again in my small apartment in Delhi. I was not yet used to the cacophony of the capital and the disconcerting stares of its people. The perpetual need to prove myself at work was turning my stomach. The bedsheet was covered with my sweat when I opened my eyes. I couldn't understand why she came that night, but I knew she could not help me in any way at that time. I was angry at the city and at her bad timing. After what seemed like an hour, I tore myself out of bed and went to get water from the kitchen. The sound of my rubber sandals dragging against the dusty floor seemed louder than the traffic outside.

OF TEA LEAVES AND EGGS: THANGVELI'S STORY



The dampness of the jute mixed with the sunny smell of the husk thickened the air in the small kitchen. It had been raining for a week. Light belied time those days, and Thangveli had to rely on the dying sounds of children's voices to know if it was time for the evening ritual. Apart from the shuffling sounds of domesticated animals one could not hear civilization at night. She could hear the last reluctant child, Remi-Remi noisily enter her house. The sound of the door shutting seemed to gulp the existence of the intractable little girl. Perhaps Remi-Remi's mother also realized the time. Thangveli called out to her oldest daughter to bring the jute sacks and instructed her oldest son to get the bottle of kerosene. Her husband had dried the wood and bamboo sticks over the hearth the night before, so the family expected a warm night. The leftover food was still in the pot on the hearth waiting to be reheated now. Even in those times of conflict or rather 'trouble', Thangveli ensured that all seven members of the family ate the night meal together after saying grace. Recently, a new step had been added to this nightly family ritual: the covering of windows with jute sacks.

They had come a few weeks ago in the morning when Thangveli was having breakfast with her children. She had boiled some eggs and had served them with black tea to her five children. She had managed to exchange 10 eggs for her old rooster with a neighbour. Her husband lay on the cot in the corner of the kitchen. His wrists and face were swollen. The bruises had turned an ashy brown indicating the slow repair of his body. She jolted when she heard the boots on the muddy courtyard. She rushed out quickly. 'Stay here!' she said sharply to her husband and children. Had they not had enough? Were they here to take him away?

Her pace slowed as she approached the balcony. She had heard from Remi-Remi's mother what they did to a girl in their village last month. She would not be able to live with her daughter's humiliation; she thought and prayed for strength and mercy. There were about five of them or maybe ten. She could not tell as the strangers in forest print covered uniforms covered the entire compound with their big

tall bodies. Two sets of heavy-lidded eyes looked at her with disdain. She looked at the gun while jerking her chin up acknowledging the intrusion. She noticed a Zo looking man, but she had never seen him before. He had the most indistinct features, but standing next to these tall strangers with facial hair, he could be called short. 'Is this V. Liankima's house?' he asked in Mizo. His soft voice betrayed his small duty.

'Yes. He is wounded and asleep.'

The heavy-eyed stranger grunted something to him.

'We heard that the villagers are sheltering insurgents in Champai district. They want to make it clear that none of that will be tolerated here.'

They left right after. Thangveli was known in the village for her shyness and generosity. In another world, she would have let her husband do all the talking. She would have asked them to stay for tea. But this wasn't a world of niceties and order; both men and women lived in fear. It seemed like God had left them. She quickly shook that thought away. It was clear that the strangers had visited every house in the village. There were no arrests or beatings that day, they had come to merely display a new order and had succeeded. The villagers thought it best to remain as uninvolved and unobtrusive as those times allowed. One of the ways to do this was by living outside time. By cloaking itself in darkness like resilient prey that blended into its surroundings, Ngopa too annihilated its own existence at night. It was not an infallible tactic but it gave a delusion of safety to the villagers and a sign of harmlessness to the strangers. Thangveli made sure this ritual was followed every dusk without fail.

Those were definitely footsteps that she heard the second time. It must not have been very late into the night but who could tell? She could see from the side of her eye that her husband had already got up and was now sitting on the edge of his cot. Her breath suddenly fell short as she slowly took her 4-year-old's hands off her abdomen to prop herself up. The child's dependency on her was now a habit. She wouldn't sleep without the warmth and softness of her mother's

skin; it would be fatal to wake her up now. She felt her tongue bloating in her mouth; only her ears seemed to be functioning well, a little too sharply. Had they surrounded the house? The child started crying unannounced. Her infantile screams absorbed the intensity of the shuddering door. They could have felt the bamboo pillars shaking as the door came unhinged had it not been for Puii's wailing. She almost suffocated the baby with her hands to stifle her cries. She knew her actions were stupid, but that was all that mattered for a brief moment, shutting one source of the sound. Perhaps, if Puii stopped crying, things would go back to invisibility.

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'They beat everyone, even the children.' 'Beat, as in?' 'They beat us up,' she repeated softly. 'Like how we beat rice out of its husk?' 'They beat your father also, he was only ten.' 'Like how we beat the musky seasons out of blankets under the winter sun?'

We were curled around the burning hearth, listening to my shy and simple Pi recounting the times of trouble. I was surprised how she spoke so freely with my aunt, her youngest daughter. Pi had made us special porridge of love and blessings, porridge with boiled eggs. She insisted that we have as many eggs as we could as it would give us physical and mental strength. I quickly swallowed one to avoid the muddy taste and texture of the yolk to please her. She hadn't noticed I had eaten only one, thankfully. She continued after much cajoling from my aunt for details.

'Two of your grandfather's ribs were broken. It was much harder than the previous beating.'

She didn't offer them tea the other day fearing that they would recognize the taste of cantonment sourced tea. They had packets of sugar, oil, salt and tea stamped with 'CSD only' all over the plastic wraps. She was not scared that they might mistake her husband for a thief. She knew they recognized him. The rations were actually gifts of mercy given to her husband by the army stationed on the outskirts of the village. Someone must have told the army that her husband was

one of the best *chheih lam*[11] dancers in Ngopa. Which is why one day he was summoned to the barracks, for what they called entertainment purposes and cultural display. He returned home with his *ipte*[12] loaded with biscuits, salt and oil, items of luxury in those days. She would often reprimand him quietly, 'We don't need these things from them or anyone.' He said refusal wasn't a choice. Her children's excitement stopped her from reproaching her husband further. She resigned herself to the wretchedness of surviving through violence, which emboldened her at moments of possible death.

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The walls were a deeper yellow than the ceiling. This unsound aesthetic preference for mismatched paints always perplexed Thangveli. She preferred the idea of a single colour which bled on to the entirety of the house except the floors. The rest of the room was conventional: minimal and utilitarian. A plastic red rose next to a framed quote from the New Testament stressed the impersonal air of the hospital. She sat as upright as possible on the cushioned stool next to the doctor's desk. Her granddaughter, Tesangi was sitting on a chair across the table, a chair reserved for those who were alright.

The doctor was a young man with thick dark hair styled into a clean short cut. It was always a delight to meet a young man with natural black hair as for the past few years the boys in the village had developed a deplorable liking for brown, red and golden hair. They all looked like roosters according to Thangveli. All the studying must have spoilt his eyesight, she thought to herself. He had a clear complexion and spoke very gently, his thumb and two fingers were gentler than his voice. He asked several questions about the pain - its location, its intensity, her diet, did it occur when she sat or stood or both? She softly thanked god for this inquisitive, young doctor for she found herself always lost for words when asked about her ailment. It hurt right under her right rib cage when she ate one too many eggs and had too much meat. How could she tell him in detail how the knot sometimes imploded inside her, forcing everything to come out of her mouth? These details

made her sick and embarrassed. To relive the episodic pain she made these trips to a doctor very anxiously. By now, she had met many bad doctors who would not understand what she was suffering from. This one, however, was a good one. He asked all the questions without probing her memory and body. But he got most of his answers from her granddaughter. He looked at Thangveli while questioning her and then turned to Tesangi. She wanted to tell him that she liked fish and rice and ask whether she could continue having them. But that was not what he had asked, and Tesangi was doing a good job at explaining things about her so she did not want to intervene. A little fish and rice would not harm her, she decided. Will having *khangsen*[13] and milk be enough?

'Api,[14] you are blushing like a school girl!' she laughed.

Thangveli quickly looked away, exasperated. The journey back to her son's home was longer than the distance. She looked out of the window frequently at the buildings of commerce, religion and culture which had gained depth in the monsoon light. Cars, hawkers, pedestrians and hundreds of brightly coloured two wheelers called scooties manoeuvred the streets of Bazar Bungkawn. A girl with long straightened hair zoomed past their car on her purple scooty.

'Like your friend's.'

'No, hers is a pink one.'

'The hair.'

'Like everyone, Api!'

Over the years, she and her husband, like many others had been able to build a life of habit and co-dependence. It was in times of strained silences, like the one on the roads of Aizawl, that she missed the light brush of her husband's shoulders against hers. He would not have allowed their son to keep her in the city for that long, she thought. He would have understood her longing for the sun and the grass. He would have known that it was the time to clear weeds from the corn farm; she could not bear the idea of her plants wilting. It had been a year since he left for heaven, but she sometimes forgot that detail.

Many misread her preference for silence as a sign of inherent solitude. They thought she preferred the village over cities precisely because she could be left alone there. The heart races faster in a city for no apparent reason. While her illness assailed her with shots of pain on the narrow winding roads, it was her rapid beating heart which worried her most in Aizawl. Senescence is not about the growing fragility of the mind but the reluctant energy of the heart. She rested her hand on the partition of her white blouse and her purple *puan*[15] on her gnarled skin. She decided to buy a sun hat from the market and speak to her son after dinner about her return home.

ATZSA'S[16] HOME: WHERE DO WE COME FROM?[17]

Nagaland witnessed a Second Coming after the Second World War. The news of God's return inundated the region and had a lasting effect for decades to come. It particularly undid various moods and tongues in Abeni. She insisted that angels spoke to her at night through the chinks in the door, and God would also show himself albeit in the form of a bright light hovering over the fireplace on the *tsapiro*[18] on a sunny day. He apparently weakened the light of the sun, thus making it difficult for her to recall his face. This particular argument about God's astral qualities was compelling as her home barely got any sunlight. Her youngest son had built a *pakka*[19] house with bricks and mortar next to the old structure of her home. The only window in her bedroom was permanently shut due to the wall he built around his claimed property. She had to move her bed to the kitchen next to the hearth which was relatively well lit.

She would walk slowly to the window and jerk it open with a strength that belied her age. The window would open to a glimpse of the rusty bricks pasted together by silver grey cement before stubbornly being pushed back. This tumultuous encounter of the bricks and the wooden window became a ritual she would perform each time for her daughters, daughter-in-law or granddaughters when they visited as evidence of the coerced darkness of the walls and perhaps her last worldly, comprehensible desire.

Over time one realizes that growing older involves reluctantly growing into meanings we once dissociated from. Abeni was an enterprising and pragmatic woman. She was the first person to open a department shop in her village in Wokha district. Things took time to reach Chukitong, which meant that she had to make a monthly trip with her driver to Mokokchung in her jeep to replenish the supplies in her shop. One could find everything from slippers to salt in her *galamaal*[20] shop; however, one of the best-selling items in her shop was wool. Women would come in numbers and place their orders in advance. Eventually, Abeni's shop became a centre for women to gather and talk about personal issues and everyday concerns. She would listen closely and intervene once in a while when asked for

advice or her viewpoint. However, all this often got overwhelming for her. So, she would slowly excuse herself, disperse the lively group and retire to the basement kitchen to make tea for herself and re-gather her plans for the day.

She did not seek reverence or claim authority over anything except her business. But like in many small towns and villages, your success becomes an inspiration for others who do not have a reference point to relate to. The ambition to engage with the workings of the new market system was not unnoticed in the small town of Wokha. Her shop became a medium through which people re-affirmed their relationships with each other as a community which was adapting to external changes. On the other hand, it is possible that if she had failed there would have been a wordless consensus amongst the people that her misery was due to her own doing. Luckily for Abeni, her business grew until the day she sold it to support her husband's ambition to run in the elections, a platform where he could directly affirm the convergence of the voices of his people with his own. She readily accepted his argument and decided that running for elections was far more significant than her small business. She stood over a head taller than her husband. One could describe her as handsome with a sharp bone structure. She neither aspired to be known as a politician's wife nor a successful entrepreneur, so the fact that she never became the former and could not sustain the latter did not seem to affect her. But as years passed and people passed away, she became unhinged from her immediate reality. The elements which subtly added complexity to her character were now often replaced by excessive, unilateral bouts of various personas. Sometimes kind, at other times insufferably generous (once she gave away all her utensils to her guests) and at times embodying an unbearable pathos. Watching her transform into a mood was like watching a child use water colours for the first time, pressing bold strokes to paint a landscape, caricaturing an already simplistic imagination of nature.

'Come sit, you look sad. Are you sad about this young man's death? I heard he was a very kind man. It is, indeed very sad.'

She addressed the two well-spoken and educated women who had come to visit her with her daughter. They must be living outside, she thought to herself. Their outfits though casual stood out in cut and quality. A place where fashion was about the loudness of colours and collars, the neat and practical cuts and understated shades of their clothes displayed a sense of self-assurance. The people of the place where these clothes were made perhaps had nothing to prove or hide through their attire. What she did not realize was that she was speaking to her two granddaughters who had come from different parts of the world for their uncle's last rites. It was also clear that she could not understand that it was indeed her closest son who had died of an old ailment.

Patricia fought her tears and looked at her older sister for an appropriate response. Gloria who had never really learnt to cast her emotions in a shadow of good manners was sobbing soundlessly. This was her grandmother-mother, who had nurtured her from the age of two to five. It was under her watch that Gloria had learnt to use language and words as an expression for herself. She was violently transported into her four-year-old self who was now witnessing her tall and strong grandmother shrinking into incomprehension. For Gloria, her initial years of consciousness were tied to her father's mother's shop, hearth and bed. For her, her grandmother's shop was defined by the large and elegant jars of sweet meats and candies which she would be rewarded with for keeping an eye on her eight naughty uncles who were children themselves. Gloria remembered her as both firm and tender. She handled her household and shop with an iron fist, but she was also a scent of a brief home for Gloria, a warm smell of coconut oil on the pillow next to hers (Gloria's). These memories would be relived and reconstructed later as they were underlined with Abeni's bias towards her little granddaughter.

Of course, such a complex impression of their Atzsa wasn't presented to Patricia at the time. She crafted a special version of the story from her sister, replete with sweets and no beatings. Patricia's imagination of her grandmother and her sister's brief home was

shaped by the memories she borrowed from her sister. Their parents kept a few candies in their home, in opaque tin boxes out of her reach.

For Patricia, her grandmother was her mother's confidant and advisor. Her voice was the background to the sound of her mother's beating heart. As a toddler, she would press her ears against her mother's chest and listen to the rhythmic pumping of her heart which lulled her to sleep. She would lie between her mother's legs; her *mekhla* forming a half-moon under the child's weight. Patricia remembered being woken up by the humming sound of her mother's voice vibrating though her chest. The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law duo would often sit near the burning hearth and share notes on all kinds of concerns and news whenever the latter visited Wokha, heads tilted towards each other. These conversations marked a deep relationship between the two women, an unindulgent friendship of sorts which remained unbroken even after the sisters' parents broke their marital ties.

Many believed that Abeni had dissipated into senility by the time she was ninety. She would speak through people facing her to invisible holy ghosts supposedly squatting behind the door. Both Gloria and Patricia could no longer find the tall and clever woman from their childhood in her. It seemed that only her façade was left. But a closer look at her incongruity would reveal traces of her older self. Abeni's audacious talent to give antithetical meanings to things was revealed when she was barely seventeen, when she touched a nylon sheet for the first time. She was volunteering at the Allied Forces camp as a medical assistant for she had some basic knowledge of medicine. At that time, the air was the most reliable medium of transporting supplies to the war zone, so people of Wokha witnessed enormous balloons dropping food to the ground. The strong, noisy and brightly coloured material of the parachutes caught Abeni's attention. She decided they would make a sturdy canvas for her embroidery. The enormity of a war between worlds transformed into a thing of stolen leisure. She re-gifted her craftwork to the wounded soldiers who were leaving for their homes she would never know or visit.

Unlike the sisters' (Patricia and Gloria) mother who had learnt caution from the violence she witnessed in her life, their grandmother drew connections between enemies and victims. The conflict between the Congress led government in India and many groups in Nagaland who could not imagine their identities being tied up to the new nation, embedded in their mother a visible sense of paranoia. Decades after the period of insurgency-counterinsurgency, in a distant continent she would warn her American granddaughters about the looming danger of gunshots through open windows. Abeni, on the other hand, would tell her granddaughters about the similarities between the Japanese soldiers and the people of Nagaland. It wasn't just the obvious facial features, she discovered that they too shared a sense of home in their food. A liminal way of remembering found in many young people who migrated from their homes in Nagaland to other parts of the subcontinent.

'They came in the dead of the night with their guns. I was sleeping with the children. They gesticulated us to be silent. They went straight to the fireplace where we kept *akhuni*[21] and rice. When they opened the banana leaf in which the *akhuni* was tied, they started weeping! Patricia, they said they ate the same thing in Japan, can you believe it?! It was then I realized that they were really young boys, not over twenty, and their faces showed signs of starvation. They ate raw rice with *akhuni* and thanked me and left!'

Perhaps the foreignness of both the enemy and the ally allowed Abeni to make a fleeting connection with the Japanese soldiers. Kohima did not lose its shine[22] because these stories of linkages got buried under the seriousness of a state's political history which was only interested in creating differences as unscalable walls. In the 1950s, the line between allies and enemies was redrawn, but this time as loyalists and traitors, a line blurrier than the one before. The sisters' mother who had learnt at a very young age that the family could also be a place of resentment and manipulation, was now in her mid-twenties and resigned to the fact that distrust and caution were essential for

survival. A legacy she pursued to pass on to her granddaughters in another century and country.

'Shut the windows! Or else someone will shoot us with pistols!'

'We are not in Nagaland, grandma!'

'Hmm…'

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At what point do different experiences, stories and perspectives converge? For many, they are forced together by a simple question, 'Where are you from?' A question unaware of the enormity of the answers that will be pelted back with unhesitating hands. I am from my home. And where is that? It is beyond a city bound address. It is where one can be shot by a pistol, where holy ghosts speak to you in alien tongues. It is in the gossip and resentment of an extended family. It is and isn't family. It is where there could be privacy and sunlight. It is in smelly *akhuni* and lots of rice, in inherited 'exotic' masks, in stories of fairies with feet turned backward, in Hawaii and Christmas and stuffed toys.[23] It is in well-kept gardens in another continent, in minimalist living, in people. It is in the fatal blades of blindingly green grass which inspires neither poetry nor nostalgia but just memories that embolden the resolve to never return.

LEIBAKLEI'S HEIRLOOM[24]

He was saying something about his capacity to take care of all of them, their five children, herself and Swarekha, his former student and now new wife. The news that Professor Brijraj, the respected Sanskrit scholar, had eloped with his young student spread like wildfire across Bishnupur. The couple had re-emerged after a week and were now in Leibaklei's conjugal home. The professor was sitting on the edge of their bed. She could barely hear the following sentences about blind love and commitment to marriage because now there was a film of separation between her world of loss and her husband's world of new possibilities.

'You can stay with us, you know? I can take care of all of you,' he said while brushing the non-existent dirt off the bedsheet she had received as a gift the year before for *Ningol Chakouba*.[25] She left for her father's house the next day with her children. It was the first time in many years that she felt the loss of her sister. She suddenly longed to cry and yell about her illustrious husband who had abandoned her and their children for a girl who was young enough to be his daughter. She would have hissed obscenities against him and his obtuse scholarly world which had taught him nothing but the art of deflecting questions and barring accountabilities. Most of all, she would have decried his poetry which was never penned for her. Was she so unlovable? Her sister or a friend would have listened quietly and then would probably egg her on to say some more nasty things. They would persuade her that it was he who had lost. She must not lose heart for she might have lost a conjugal home, but he had abandoned his moral duty.

She thought about being unpleasant and how light it seemed compared to what she was doing then, taking the bus with five children without abandoning her decorum. Leibaklei had to work hard for her children, and it was in the first year of her marital dissolution that she decided that her daughters and their daughters would inherit all her fields and a pond. Her son would inherit the house she would build over the years.

Years later, in a small rented room near a university campus with piles of under-read and over-read books, Leibaklei's granddaughter

would recall this special heirloom to her two friends, a pond for daughters. The faces of her earnest friends would light up with respect, they would revel about the genius of her grandmother. To find feminism in action, in the vernacular and the familial was charming for Mira's two friends. It intrigued and inspired them to find so many instances of women asserting themselves in the most unexpected places. Mira could see through their large grins that they were constructing her grandmother in a feminist model of perseverance and shrewdness. She didn't discourage them; instead she started thinking about the time her mother's mother came to their home in Imphal, not to visit but to live with them. Her grandmother did not look as glorious then.

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Mira and her younger brother Rajen ran to the door grinning to meet their grandmother; Rajen a little too widely to show off his missing front tooth. He had pulled it out himself the same morning. After gathering enough information from his friends and seniors in school, he learnt that the traditional way of pulling one's tooth was indeed the most efficient one. He tied the loose tooth with one end of a string and tied the other end of the string around the door knob and pushed the door shut with all his might. Blood and tooth were released effortlessly. The rest of his day, until the arrival of their grandmother, was committed to the retelling of his wonderful feat and thus underlining Mira's incapacity to deal with blood or anything brave. Rajen had convinced himself that it was 'his' day, which also meant he deserved more attention from their grandmother. Mira ignored her younger sibling's verbal jabs for she was too busy making a mental list and finally an actual list of things to do with her preferred grandmother. It was a list of miscellaneous things put in order of preference including cooking her favourite dishes, going to the weekly bazar and completing the unfinished story about a man and his adventurous escape from a mother-daughter duo who had imprisoned him. Their excitement was brutally cut short by the sight of their favourite grandmother. Instead of their small grandmother with kind eyes, they found a frail

old woman who looked like an ill shaped version of their grandmother. She was wearing a brand new blue *phanek*[26] which had creases across its length and breadth where it had been folded. Their father had bought her new clothes as the water had destroyed most of her belongings. Leibaklei didn't protest; she thought it was better to look presentable in front of the children. The starched white *innaphi*[27] heightened her hollowed cheeks and pale skin. This was right after one of the most devastating floods that struck Manipur in 1989.

She walked through the gates, squinting her eyes to get a better look at her daughter's children. She smiled and called them out lovingly. 'My dear *eesusa*[28] how big you have become!' Her kind smile dispelled the children's suspicions. They ran towards her while out-yelling each other's respective demands and stories. Their mother put their childish quarrel to rest by deciding for everyone that they would all let grandmother rest, and they could start their plans from the next day. The children reluctantly abjured their desires because everyone knew that the next day was a school day which effectively left them with six to eight hours only between themselves. They could not do anything but ration time and draw a schedule for the next three days before the weekend.

Fortunately for Mira and Rajen, their grandmother stayed for many weekends to come. Coming home from school now had an added charm for both of them. Everything was the same and better, their home now consisted of an even-tempered father, an unobtrusive mother and their gentle and soft-spoken grandmother who could dish out delicious snacks for them. It is true that young children's interests mostly fail the test of time. It does not take long for a passionate indulgence to turn into a boring familiarity. However, in the Singh household that did not really happen. While Leibaklei's innately caring personality had much to do with it, a partial contribution to this sustained closeness between the grandmother and her grandchildren was unwittingly made by Manglembi, their paternal grandmother.

Manglembi visited her son's family every few months to collect the timely parental due from her firstborn. He was the only child who had

a respectable profession; the others still depended on the produce of land and water just like *their* biological father. Manglembi's attitude toward her son compelled one to think if love was ever pure. It is often burdened with an addendum: love and duty, love and purity, love and jealousy, love and incessant attention. Hers was a love wrapped in resentment. So, in that sense she must have loved him. When Thoiba was young, his mother let him know that he was her own by making him single-handedly bear the brutality of her love. Being the second wife and very young, she could not even complain about the tedious chores she would do every day in her husband's home. Yelling and beating the children from her husband's first marriage was unimaginable. Thus, Thoiba became the medium through which she would express the helplessness of her situation. Over the years her resentful love for Thoiba muted a little, with his separation and independence from her and her husband. It would later direct itself flamboyantly towards his wife and children. So, it was natural for Mira and Rajen to dread her seasonal visits. It was only when she was around that their mother would not join them for meals. She would wait for them to finish and then eat whatever was left. Manglembi would speak loudly to the siblings, especially to Mira about the virtues and manners of a good wife and woman.

'You should not sit on the same level as your husband and share a meal with him. It is dishonourable to do so.'

This unwarranted advice was spoken loud enough to reach their mother who was in the kitchen washing glasses for the second or third time to look occupied. Clearly, Manglembi's resolve to use children as a medium of communicating hostility did not dwindle over the years.

In her teens, Mira got a faint idea about the way grown-ups talked to each other. She learnt that they would speak differently in front of her and her brother. It would mostly be exchange of information, but she knew that adults used a secret hushed language amongst themselves occasionally exposing its form but never its meaning to the children. All the audible conversations between her parents were about meals, budget, them (the children) and obligatory rituals related

to their social roles. It was only during fights that her parents talked to each other unmediated by everyday things and concerns. They would for a brief moment become people who also made mistakes, overreacted and occasionally over-acted. This ambiguous language of the grown-ups was employed with an intention to keep the children from growing up early. On the contrary, it was her father's family who revealed how this language could also be used like a blunt knife with an intent not to kill but to cause enough harm to be remembered, and Mira and Rajen were very much part of it. Her paternal grandmother fittingly displayed the ability to deride her mother in the most audible yet discrete manner by sleep talking about her daughter-in-law's many inadequacies. It was these episodic nocturnal complaints which taught Mira that the cut of a woman's blouse could undo her entire personhood.

By eleven Mira had started associating dirty secrets and spiteful loathing with the nocturnal world where anything unacceptable like obscenities, sex and baseless resentment could be rationalized as a disorder. She knew that these were the things she was not supposed to know, these were the things she should forget with the break of dawn. By then she also understood what this language implied; it meant knowledge of the troubles which underlined everything that was a given – food, shelter, clothes, husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters – had to be earned with age. When she was almost comfortably adept at this art of saying very little but showing just enough, this world of deliberate allusiveness was snatched away from her by her aunt. One summer afternoon, Mira found her father's cousin, a tolerable aunt drinking tea with her mother on the porch. She greeted her but when she was about to cross her to enter the house, her aunt held her hands. She felt the coarseness of her palms, every line had deepened from all the manual labour in the house and in the fields, thus giving a different texture to her touch. She asked Mira to sit next to her and said she wanted to know about her school and friends. Mira obliged and asked her mom if she could have something to eat. When her mother left for the kitchen to prepare something, her aunt

immediately cajoled her to talk about the trouble she was creating at home and in school. This unexpected accusation confounded Mira because that particular week she had done nothing remarkable; so she inquired what her aunt meant.

'You know, *ibemma*[29], you should be very careful as a daughter of your father who had such a difficult childhood. Being a step-son he had to go through so much to achieve what he has. Do you want to add to his troubles by being a daughter who can't behave like one?'

She said all of this so swiftly and without any disdain that Mira almost missed this new information about her father's muddied genealogy. When she replayed it in her mind in bed that night, she realized what it meant but did not fully grasp what it implied. How cruelly adults would change the rules of the game! Mira later resented her aunt for sharing information which even age did not allow her to speak about openly. This was perhaps her first big lesson in family secrets and obligations. She continued to prefer her maternal grandmother who would never surprise her with poisoned knowledge but would ease her into uncomfortable truths.

Leibaklai, as far as Mira remembered, never raised her voice in front of the children or at them. It did not mean that her mild nature was immune to the cruelty of life; it just meant that unlike Manglembi who would retaliate with her caustic tongue, her contempt would be a permanent resolve to never engage with such circumstances or people. Her voice too ebbed into a kind of language adults spoke in when in front of children. She was never spiteful towards her children despite being abandoned by many during her lifetime. In that crowded bus to Wangkhei, this allusive language came to embody her. The heaviness of unsaid words of sadness and anger eventually became her primary mode of speaking to others and to herself. Thus, she taught her children and then their children the significance of silence in language. Years later, her daughter and then her granddaughter Mira would inherit this grammar of silence. One could find it in Mira's elusive ailments, worry lines, in beautiful tragedies strung into words, in lost lovers and in the constant retrospective battles with people and with herself of what

she could and should have said to them. They would also learn that some relationships needed to be nurtured and some needed to be left behind and that neither would be neat. This inescapable messiness of life and the choices she made required a woman to have some form of wealth of her own.

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It had been raining incessantly for days; the news broadcast the names of all the places which were hit by the floods. Mira's parents had sent out word to her uncle asking whether her grandmother was alright. Since her son was living next to his mother, they thought it reasonable to communicate with him during those days; but when they called the only PCO in the village, they learnt that the other side of the street was inaccessible as the water levels had risen. Mira's father, Thoiba, had asked his friend who was going to Wangkhei to check on his wife's family. He called him the next day and asked him to reach the village immediately.

Her hut was halfway immersed in water, he said. Thoiba decided to hire a banana stem raft to reach his mother-in-law's place if need be.[30] By the time he reached the village, the water had receded to a foot. He managed to walk through the sluggish water. The entire area smelled like rotten snails. His profession had trained him to rationalize stench, so he did not mind that. However, he was anxious to know what awaited him at his mother-in-law's place.

He did not see her at first. The small room of her mud hut smelled of damp soil and blankets. The room felt heavy and congested. 'Son-in-law,' he heard her soft voice. He looked in the direction of the sound and found his mother-in-law crouched on top of the teak cupboard. He realized that the cupboard looked darker than usual. While the magnificence of the furniture seemed ill fitted in the damp mud room, it had gained a pensive mildewed façade over the years. It was a tangible remnant of a wealthy past. He quickly reached out for her hand. Her smallness shocked him, she looked seven and ninety at once. She did not weep, but he could see the redness in her eyes.

He got a discoloured plastic chair and helped her down. She was too frail to walk, so he carried her out. They did not meet her son who lived next door in a newly constructed concrete house which stood on higher ground. Apart from the pink and red hibiscus which had wilted from the weight of the rain, the building had clearly withstood the flood.

NOTES

1. The term 'North-East' is used due to a lack of an alternative term. It does not signify any kind of unity, territorial or cultural. It does, however, signify a deliberate categorization of heterogeneous societies and histories vis-a-vis the imagined community called India.
2. Sangari, Kukum and Sudesh Vaid (1990). *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. (First published by Kali for Women [1989]).
3. Grandmother in Assamese.
4. The way Rose spoke English. A literal translation would be Rose's English.
5. Assamese.
6. Traditional attire wore by women in Assam. It refers to a wrap-around which is generally worn with a thin shawl like cloth called '*shador'* which is similar to a 'dupatta' or a 'chunni' worn by women in other parts of the subcontinent. Every ethnic group has its own version. A similar dress with the same name is also used by many tribes in Nagaland.
7. *Supa* is a circular plate made out of bamboo or cane used to sieve rice. It is also used to keep vegetables and other edibles.
8. A literal translation will be: rent house's grandmother, so, Tenant Grandmother.
9. Water from river Ganga which is believed to have purifying powers, so much so that it is believed to wash a person's sins of a lifetime.
10. Pantheon.
11. Folk dance of Mizoram.
12. Traditional bag.
13. Herbal medicine made from climbing acacia generally taken for stomach pain.

14. Grandmother in Mizo language.
15. Wrap arounds worn by women in Mizoram.
16. Grandmother in Lotha.
17. Names of places and persons have been changed at the request of the informants.
18 A shelf like structure suspended over the fireplace.
19. Concrete houses.
20. A local version of a one-stop-shop.
21. Fermented soya beans. Every tribe in Nagaland has its own version of *akhuni*.
22. 'Kohima Will Shine Tonight' is a song which was sung by the Allied forces to encourage the soldiers during the war against the Japanese invasion in Kohima in the 1940s.
23. From the poem, 'Where I am from' by Ruth, Patricia and Gloria's niece. Ruth is another pseudonym. This line has been inspired by a poem written by their niece for a school project. 'Ruth' is the daughter of their third sister who lives in the US with her family and their mother.
24 Names of places and persons have been changed for anonymity.
25. A festival which marks the significance of familial relations, particularly with daughters.
26. Meitei wrap-around.
27. Meitei shawl.
28. An affectionate term for grandchildren.
29. An affectionate term for a female child.
30. Many places in Imphal valley did not have boats, therefore, these rafts were often used as a temporary mode of transport and rescue.