GENDER IN FOLK TALES: RE-READING *KHAMBA THOIBI*

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INTRODUCTION

Epic literature often straddles the tenuous line between fact and fiction and idealism and pragmatism and emerges as a nebulous site of cultural assertion. By default, it cannot be attributed to one author since it composes itself through multiple reiterations, evolving with each addition or dilution. This collective construction ensures that it reflects the social, political and economic context of the period, allowing us a glimpse into an alternate route for reassessing history, one perhaps not documented in official, bureaucratic records. 'The epic is a literary crystallization of the heroic ideal' (Thapar 1979). It also *refracts* history since it presents a highly stylised narrative that emphasises the best virtues, larger-than-life protagonists, the triumph of good over evil and a glorified image of the past. For many stalwarts of Manipuri literature like Nillakanta Singh, Jodha Chandra Sanasam and N. Tombi, the tale of *Khamba Thoibi* qualifies as epic literature, but due to its peripheral geographical location and a lack of accessibility to

the language, it remains obscured from a wider audience or readership. It is essentially oral in nature, performative and consists of multiple versions. There have been several books certifying the historical existence of these characters and events, but instead of dwelling on the historicity of this tale, this paper seeks to examine the gendered assumptions, aspirations and anxieties that permeate its narrative structure.

It is widely believed that the story of the protagonists Khamba and Thoibi evolved from *khulang* songs, sung while labouring on the fields. It was originally a concise story involving two star-crossed lovers, but with time it expanded to include several more episodes that display Khamba's strength and courage and Thoibi's passion and determination. 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. The oral folk tale has been traced back to 12th century AD, and since then there have been subsequent additions and revisions. In this paper, I work closely on Jodha Chandra Sanasam's *Khamba Thoibi Sheireng of Anganghal,* which is an English translation of Hijam Anganghal's critically acclaimed *Khamba Thoibi Sheireng* (1940). The tale in its current form is regarded as an epic poem of Manipur and runs close to 39,000 lines. Sanasam's translation remains true to the detailed narrative and spans close to 1,000 pages. It is not feasible to deal with the epic in its entirety, so this paper focuses on incidents that reveal gendered expectations. The paper examines the representation of the lead female characters Thoibi and Khamnu, while referring to Senu, Toro and the mothers to analyse how they conform to or depart from social norms. Additionally, it investigates the meta-narrative of love and desire that operates in the implicit structure of the tale to unfold intersections of class, gender and ideal moral behaviour.

Till today, the tale continues to be popular in contemporary imagination, spawning several movie and theatrical adaptations and musical renditions. In each instance, as it is generally with a large number of versions and episodes in oral literature, it is impossible to

tackle the multiple issues and themes in the story. In this case, my own re-reading too remains an incomplete effort, unable to engage with the plethora of sources. Anganghal's *Khamba Thoibi Sheireng* has been widely acknowledged as an exhaustive compilation and collation of oral episodes sung by *pena* minstrels. The lead protagonists Khamba, Thoibi and Khamnu are considered ideal examples of a man, a woman and a mother-figure respectively. They are celebrated as heroes and heroines, reincarnations of deities and cited as evidence of a compassionate and advanced civilisation in ancient Manipur. While my reading affirms the many progressive features of society, in this paper I explore the nuances of this folk tale to investigate gendered relations in society closely.

The North-East region of India is popularly represented as an area of gender equality, where women have historically held positions of power exercising agency in the political and economic spheres. In Manipur too, specific examples like the Nupi Lan,[1] Meira Paibis[2] and Ima Keithel[3] are used for representing an egalitarian society. Khamba and Thoibi's epic follows the trials and tribulations of a poor, orphan boy Khamba, and Thoibi, the princess of Moirang. Khamba displays courage and strength while battling obstacles while being manipulated by Nongban, Thoibi's other suitor and designated villain in the story and Thoibi's father, Chinkhuba. Thoibi is coerced, punished and exiled by her father for not agreeing to marry her father's favourite. She continues to defy and destroy stereotypes to unite with her beloved. Both are considered divine reincarnations and exemplary models of ideal behaviour. In this context, Thoibi is often cited as a feminist protagonist who is fearless, passionate and rebellious. Through this paper, I re-read this narrative and offer a broader perspective that not only re-evaluates her triumphs but also her losses. I argue that despite her unfettered free spirit, her trajectory is still confined by a patriarchal meta-narrative that leads to punitive consequences for every transgression. I also contend that Thoibi's non-conformity with the traditional code of femininity too is subsumed within a larger gendered perspective of 'discipline' where she is gradually restrained

through the trope of romantic love. Whether it is the protective instincts of the patriarch or the notion of service to one's husband, an analysis of Thoibi's character offers insights into the process of navigating a patriarchal labyrinth.

The other key character is Khamnu who represents a more traditional aspect of femininity but also surmounts its limited scope. She is depicted as a poor orphan child, forced by circumstances to take on the role of a parent for her younger brother, and she rises to the occasion. Her character resonates with a larger reality of women caught in challenging situations and how they find ways to reclaim economic independence and agency. This paper analyses how Khamnu makes space for herself within the patriarchal framework to provide sustenance for herself and her brother. While her resilience is commendable, it also provides an opportunity to see the dual burden of class hierarchy and gender. Class emerges as a significant preoccupation throughout the narrative. I review popular sentiments that Khamba (a poor boy) and Thoibi (a princess) overcome obstacles of class and social pressures and analyse the manner of reconciling this theme. Since it is revealed at the very beginning that Khamba and Khamnu are of royal lineage, the story emphasises that they might lack material wealth but their strengths and victories are by virtue of their noble heritage. I reassess this line of reasoning to suggest that it reinforces the status quo and involves no real transcendence of class.

EPIC AND FOLK TALE

Like any epic, the tale of Khamba and Thoibi is derived from oral narrations of their heroic love, courage and resilience. It is steeped in local traditions, rituals and beliefs that are influenced by the specificities of the regional landscape and flora and fauna. In Anganghal's writing, we find a tribute to the ancient practices of Manipur. Through a mix of archaic and modern language, he attempts to re-present the past and

celebrate its glory by highlighting the unique qualities of the era. He is often referred to as a Mahakavi for his ability to capture the particular sensibilities of that time through metaphors, similes and poetic diction. In the English translation, Sanasam preserves these regional distinctions that do not have a direct English explanation. This can be seen in the names of games like *kang*[4] or terms of endearment in relationships like *ibungo* (son) and *itao* (friend) and several species endemic to the region.

Epics from across the world share some common characteristics. They are narrative, poetic and heroic in nature. Often recited by memory and passed down through generations, they use mnemonics and melody to recall and enthuse the listening audience. A crucial element of an oral narrative is its performative aspect, replete with an innate rhythmic flow that is inspired by its surroundings. When performed for an audience, whether in courts or mass gatherings, it combines dance and music, like in ancient storytelling when performances were participatory. While literature from the North East remains buried due to difficulties in understanding the language as well as the area's geographical remoteness, oral literature itself remains hard to consolidate. Anganghal compiled his epic by writing down the songs sung by *pena* minstrels and strived to maintain the local character and regional specificity in the proverbs and metaphors that he used. The temporal and spatial significance of Loktak lake, complete with its myriad flora and fauna, is a central preoccupation in the narrative. Ancient oral storytelling, according to Sanasam, mimics the calls of birds and animals thus following a melodious song-like flow. During our interview, he explained that non-verbal communication like gestures and body language predate language. Dance and music were essential ways of communicating with one another. The dramatic mannerisms of such performances provide testimony of the cooperative and collaborative narration of such tales. This also means that communication was not codified concretely and remained amorphous in meaning. Additionally, this also produced multiple versions of a story depending on the bard and the context.

Thoibi, the female protagonist emerges as a proto-feminist character who defies the norms of her time. While the historical origins of the story remain a contested topic as to whether it is based on fact or fiction, her representation portrays a society where women have agency, and their wit and courage is affirmed with pride. Khamnu is an example of a different notion of femininity. She takes on added responsibilities at a young age and encompasses the roles of father, mother and teacher for her younger brother. She is the breadwinner of the family, and her compassion reflects the magnanimity of women, especially when forced to struggle in difficult circumstances. She does not reveal their lineage to protect them and performs various jobs like selling wood and running errands for others to make ends meet. In either case both the characters are seen surmounting their inhibitive circumstances to exercise personal agency in whatever capacity the narrative allows them. If feminine liberty is considered a hallmark of modernity, epics provide a rare glimpse into the ancient past to narrate the implicit ways in which women gained and wielded power.

Written at a time when Manipur was struggling to unite various ethnic tribal groups and reviving national pride, this epic was a landmark signal that reminded the community of its ancient glory. At a time when Eurocentric models of development and modernity are increasingly debated for their colonial resource-extraction and exploitative practices, there is a greater momentum in recognising alternate modernities; in this case, alternate premodernities that are often not officially documented and remain exoticised in the dominant discourse. In the documentation and composition of this epic, ancient civilizational values of Manipur such as civility and empathy not only for fellow human beings but also for the environment are brought to the fore. It is an idealised society; the characters are not covetous, and there is friendly competition and not deadly rivalry. Here, the sovereign king is shown to respect and empathise with his nobles and subjects. There is harmonious comradery between the ruler and those he rules over. It is considered a 'divine romantic' where gods and humans are envisioned as living together, resulting in overall prosperity.

The gods themselves intervene to right a wrong or influence events for a peaceful resolution. Unlike the contemporary political scenario where conversations are polarised and chaos results in the suspension of a meaningful dialogue, the political landscape in the epic presents a prototypical alternative. These are pre-modern values that one can hope to aspire to and reveal the values that were upheld.

While there is much to celebrate, there is also much to unpack in the crystallisation of this folk tale. Apart from the compilation and consolidation of the Khamba Thoibi folktale, other works by Anganghal, like *Jahera* and *Laman* are also rightly celebrated for their distinctive literary style and evocative writing. But it has also been pointed out that 'Anganghal appears to have succumbed to the baggage of the dominant psyche that he was informed by' (Arambam 2015). He was a member of the Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha,[5] founded in 1934 as a cultural platform. Its objectives included, 'unifying of the Meitei people, both within and outside Manipur state, the encouragement of Meitei culture, arts, language, script and sports, and the acceptance of Vaishnavite Hinduism as part of Meitei tradition' (Parratt and Parratt 2000). One of the severest criticisms against the king of the time, Maharaj Churachand Singh, was his use of oppressive coercion to enforce Brahmanical practices and repressing indigenous religious practices.[6] Therefore, royal patronage hinged on abiding by the court's stance of popularising Vaishnav Hinduism and the Ramandi tradition and encouraging its propagation among the native population. For Anganghal, this exercise of reviving native pride was circumscribed within the larger dominant socio-political theme of the time –encouraging the assimilation of of Hinduism and indigenous practices. Hence, in his attempts to consolidate the stories and events in the folktale, we find Vaishnav interpolations that are distinctly different from the ancient past that he seeks to exemplify.

This is observed in the invocation to the Hindu god, Chitragupta,[7] who deletes a sin from Thoibi's record for her patience (75),[8] or comparing Thoibi's dance in the temple of the indigenous god Thangjing repeatedly to goddess Durga when the latter danced on

Kailash Mountain (101). Even her anger on discovering her father and suitor Nongban's conspiracy to kill Khamba by trampling him under an elephant is equated with Durga's wrath (437). Such incidents indicate the growing proliferation of Vaishnav theology and an effort to amalgamate both indigenous religious practices and Hindu practices as one. This version with modern interpolations cements, legitimises and disseminates the monarch's policy.

KHAMBA THOIBI: AN INTRODUCTION

Folk tales have an intuitive way of capturing the enduring ethos of a culture and lyrically passing down the stories from one generation to the next. These tales are implicit in perpetuating values, ideals and articulating society's expected values. Very often, they also bypass current conformations by highlighting anecdotes of wit, courage and bravado that challenge preconceived expectations. The epic tale of Khamba and Thoibi from Manipur provides us a glimpse into the social realities and expectations of society and simultaneously reveals the means adopted by the characters to overcome their constrained situations. A closer reading through a gendered perspective enables us to analyse the representations of the characters and their social burdens. The meta-narrative also provides an illuminating understanding of the critical modes that shape these characters and how they are received by the audience.

Epic literature is an intimate part of oral narrations, composed by collective bards and re-told over generations with contemporary interpolations. It punctures the static, bureaucratic documentation of history by revealing instinctive collective consciousness and the lived experience of people predating recorded history. This is noticed in the construction of both the protagonists, Khamba and Thoibi, as divine reincarnations and archetypes of model behaviour. Khamba is revered for his noble character, strength, courage and what he lacks in

material wealth is compensated for by an abundance of moral values. Both are consistently portrayed as ideal prototypes to be upheld and emulated. In terms of both physical and spiritual virtues, both protagonists conform to hetero-normative expectations of beauty. Khamba is often referred to as a tiger, strong-willed and favoured by the gods. But this also deviates from standard depictions of the ideal male hero. Khamba's athletic physique is reiterated to emphasise an alternate masculinity that is not macho or bulky but slender, athletic and graceful.

But Thoibi and Khamnu's portrayals deviate from traditional depictions of women and femininity and even present a radical departure from the cultural milieu of the time. In the preface to *New Folktales from Manipur* (2016), James Oinam notes that folk tales are also a site of dislocation from tradition. He contends, 'In some folktales, traditional stories detach themselves from contemporary value systems, allowing for baffling results.' To demonstrate this, he cites Panthoibi's story where a goddess leaves her husband to marry another man. Khamba and Thoibi's story portrays an idealised version of daily rituals and traditions in ancient society, but also provides us with instances of nonconformity with such beliefs. Dated sometime around the 12th century, the folktale of Khamba and Thoibi was originally sung as agricultural *khulang* or boat songs to enliven the work and reinforce a spirit of a cheerful community working together. They gradually evolved into a full-fledged ballad sung to the accompaniment of *pena*, a native instrument of Manipur. Transmitted orally, the story follows the trials and tribulations of the hero Khamba and heroine Thoibi and their quest for romantic consummation by overcoming the challenges of class, social pressures and familial obligations. In many ways, their romance is considered divinely ordained and plays out across seven reincarnations to finally culminate in a tragic end. Throughout the narrative, we find a complex interplay of divine fortitude as well as human agency as we see the characters plot, scheme and get thwarted by coincidences or witty escapades.

This ballad is a part of the *Moirang Saiyon/Kangleirol/Parba* reincarnation stories of two star-crossed lovers in Moirang, whose devotion impresses lord Thangjing, the god of Moirang who plays an important role in the storyline. His role is similar to the *deux ex machina* of ancient Greek plays, where sudden, divine interventions change the narrative's course. However, most scholars are divided over the number of reincarnations involved in *Moirang Saiyon*. While some argue that there are seven others contend that there are nine reincarnations. The only consensus that remains is that it is the same pair of lovers in each reincarnation, and Khamba and Thoibi are the most popular reincarnations. Mangoljao Singh notes that the ballad originated in the story of Poreiton and Leinataobi, whom the native supreme god Atiya Sidaba (the immortal god of the skies and considered the creator of the universe) had sent to earth to introduce birth, death, love and desire amongst humans (Mangoljao Singh in *Khamba Thoibi Punsi Wari* 1979).[9] This story mentions that Poreiton stayed on Nongpok Hill and was subsequently called Nongpok Ningthou, while Leinataobi was adopted by the Koubru king and renamed Panthoibi. These figures are an integral part of the constellation of indigenous gods and goddesses in Manipur, and Khamba and Thoibi are widely perceived as the reincarnations of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi respectively.

In another version of the myth, Boramani Singh in his *Moirang Saiyon* (1978) remarks that Atiya Sidaba had created two pigeons, and touched by their devotion when they were shot by a hunter, he assured them of a reunion in the next birth cycle.[10] Lord Thangjing is given the responsibility of ensuring that they are reunited in the next reincarnation, and hence he is often perceived as the architect designing the meeting and fortunate events in the Khamba-Thoibi plotline. However, after widespread conversion to Hinduism we find that the language starts incorporating elements of Sanskritic traditions, in some versions Khamba and Thoibi are even mentioned as reincarnations of Shiva and Parvati.

The oral transmission of the story from one generation to the next in pre-modern renditions makes it difficult to concretely trace the development of the story to its current form. While there are various versions available with slight differences in language and episodes, the general framework highlights the obstacles overcome by the lead protagonists to prove their courage and dedication. Substantial additions and expansions were made during the reign of Maharaj Chandrakirti and later during the reign of Maharaj Churachand Singh. In these changes, we find the increasing influence of Vaishnav traditions such as a marriage ceremony or religious traditions. The oral narration of these stories accompanied by the *pena* gained further popularity when the British arrived in India. William McCulloch, the political agent of Manipur (1844–62 and 1863–67) in his book *An account of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes* calls the folktale 'riveting' and notes the use of *pena* to enliven the performance.

Ascertaining the reality or credibility of myths is usually tenuously grounded in obscure references, but it must also be mentioned that the nature of oral history or literature has always been contested and debated. While folklore ascribes divine proportions to the key protagonists in the Khamba Thoibi tale, their historical existence is documented in royal chronicles and manuscripts. The actual incidents are said to have taken place during the reigns of King Chingkhu Telheiba and King Thangbi Lanthaba (circa 1302–1324). There also seem to be genealogical records of the Khuman clan to which Khamba belonged that prove the existence of Khamba and his wife Thoibi who had no offspring. The dating and origin of the folk tale therefore has nebulous beginnings. As a story that has been widely adapted into plays, dances and poems, it is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of the region's literary traditions. It presents archetypal characters who are considered ideal role models for the lead romantic hero, the virtuous beautiful heroine and other supporting characters. The narrative takes place mostly in Moirang, set against the backdrop of the iconic Loktak lake and is spread across the region of Manipur,

including Kabow Valley, now in Myanmar. Thus, a gendered reading of the epic folk tale allows us to revisit society's expectations and how these characters conformed to or rebelled against such social constructions.

Women and Society

The popular folk tale of *Khamba Thoibi* allows us to observe two contradictory models of femininity in traditional Meitei society and how they influenced expectations of female modesty and agency. The two main characters in the tale, Thoibi and Emoinu, have often been referred to as paradigms of conflicting feminisms, fashioned after the two archetypal goddesses, Panthoibi and Emoinu, in the Meitei pantheon of native deities (Navachandra Singh 1984). Hence, Thoibi represents Panthoibi, the independent 'deviant' female who rebelled against her father and seven brothers and pursued her innate desires. She was witty, publicly visible and exercised agency in determining her course of action. Thoibi too does not conform to standards of demure chastity or domestic inclinations. Contrarily, she is athletic, social and an unabashed pursuer of romantic inclinations. Khamba's sister Khamnu, on other hand, is popularly described as ascribing to Emoinu, the goddess of the home who is more oriented towards domestic responsibilities and securing a livelihood for the well-being of her family. These values are ingrained in familial responsibilities that extend beyond the immediate family. Khamnu too zealously participates in the economic market by earning her livelihood and protecting her brother and is hailed as a mother figure. Both these protagonists actualise parallel, incongruent imaginations of an ideal woman, and the tale negotiates these characteristics without assigning supremacy to any particular representation. To examine these dual representations, it is necessary to take a closer look at the folk tale and how the narrative accommodates these contradictory aspects to reflect on the socioeconomic conditions of women in Meitei society.

Thoibi

From our first introduction to Thoibi in the royal court, we are made aware of her beauty. She is the beloved daughter of Chingkhuba, brother of the king of Moirang; she is described as a 'chaste jewel'. She is constantly hailed for her straight, jet-black hair, her fair complexion and slim figure. The physical aspects of her description conform to traditional stereotypes of beauty and reinforce the image of an 'ideal female protagonist'. As the tale progresses, we find her to be not only stunningly beautiful but also excelling at sports and representing her kingdom in athletic events. In her character, we find a popular representation of female protagonists who conform to traditional standards of beauty while simultaneously challenging the expectations of this beauty by refusing to be passive recipients of narrative incidents.

Right from the moment she notices Khamba, she is struck by his beauty and starts plotting ways to catch his attention or secure his stay for a longer time. When she does not see him for a long time after the first meeting, we find her passionately crying and visibly despondent about his absence. With no means to find him as she does not know where he lives, she is shown to live without any joy, yearning to catch a glimpse of him again. The story emphasises Khamba's impact and the hero's charisma by highlighting Thoibi's reactions to portray a larger-than-life hero figure who may be poor in material wealth but is rich in values and virtues. This is a critical point to note because it foregrounds the class conflict that lies at the heart of the romantic plot. It sets an overarching narrative of overcoming class boundaries and heralding the noble native hero trope only to collapse it by revealing that he is indeed of noble lineage, stuck in a poor situation. Thoibi's transgression then is limited by the narrative's motive to ultimately contain the radical act within socially-acceptable contours of agency and desire.

To come back to the impression that Khamba makes on Thoibi, we find her exercising her agency and desire actively as she schemes

ways to get closer to him and catch his attention. 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. Hence, in a remarkable incident, during a *kang* match she prays and throws a dice at Khamba. With divine fortune, it slips through the gap between his neck and shirt and settles in his lap, without him being aware of it. In a hilarious build-up, everyone is made to flap their shirts to look for her dice but Khamba refuses to join the antics because he is certain the dice is not with him. At the end of the game, when he gets up he notices the dice and is filled with despair and guilt. Thoibi's friend's Senu tells him that this was intended by Thoibi; she also tells him that this is Thoibi's gift for him. In a series of incidents, whether it is boating with all her female friends on Loktak lake or a game of *kangjei* (polo) or *kang*, we see Thoibi outshining other characters with her athletic skills. She is publicly admired for her talent and beauty.

Thoibi and Senu's friendship emphasises the significance of female solidarity and encouragement, especially in a patriarchal setting. More than a maid, Senu is Thoibi's confidant, who runs errands, performs chores and distracts people while Thoibi and Khamba meet in secret. Thoibi's bold move to visit Khamba's house and plans to gain his attention are supported and enabled by Senu who provides essential logistical support. Her calm demeanour is in direct contrast to Thoibi who is far more impulsive, but it helps balance the latter's spontaneity to rush into quick decisions. In their friendship, we find a refreshing representation of sisterhood which is not competitive but collaborative.

Thoibi's Exile

An important episode in Thoibi's life is her exile from Moirang. As a heroic figure who manages to surmount all obstacles and prove his valour, Khamba is easily considered a good match for her. The king of

Moirang as well as other local natives approve of his courage, strength and humility. However, Thoibi's father, Chinkhuba, is not pleased with this blossoming romance. He prefers Nongban, an aristocratic figure in the court who desires Thoibi too. But she refuses to submit to the forced relation with Nongban, and hence he banishes her to Kabow Valley, now in Myanmar. As much as Thoibi is celebrated for her radical independence and mobility, the narrative seems to consistently punish her for her transgressions. Her agency is circumscribed within a wider framework of patriarchy, and it is her father who has the final word as an authoritarian figure. Despite all his wives' pleas and his own unwillingness to exile her, her act of defiance by choosing her own partner becomes a point of contention in this close father-daughter relationship.

Her choice to stay with Khamba thus rejecting Nongban is simultaneously an exercise in establishing her own agency as well as challenging the patriarch's authority. For her father, this becomes an offensive affront. His decision to rectify this and exile her, displays his cardinal power over her. He exclaims to himself, '*Disgrace* I have had enough, everything finished, what's left!... Will it be China or Awa, some place I must exile her at a far distance. In Moirang *I shall keep her* not!' (522, emphasis added). The two key ideas to be emphasised here are the ideas of honour (disgrace) and control. Thoibi making her own life choices, especially when they defy her father's wishes, needs to be read in the light of the social context which implicitly upholds gendered access and exercise of power. The notion of honour is explicitly tied to a woman's actions and body; any perceived amount of freedom is limited by the patriarch's *allowance* of such breaches. The instant there is a conflict between the two, the woman's agency is diluted and dismissed, thus revealing the status quo. His statements doubly reveal the conventional conflation between women's bodies and honour as well as women's objectification. Her desires are not only blatantly rejected, but her idea of home, family and safety is also threatened to coerce compliance. Hence, the familial unit is not seen as a collective space; in practice, it is a site where her father exercises

dominant control. The use of exile as a punishment highlights his power to wield it as a benevolent benefit that he offers and can rescind at will.

Consequently, Thoibi is made to leave the house, part with her friends and abandon all signs of her royal lineage by removing all her jewellery. By alienating her from all facets of her social life, the exile not only spatially expunges her but also seeks to remove her temporally. It is Thoibi's mother, sent by her father, who asks her to leave everything behind. When she resists his orders, he cautions her, 'Do you want to settle at your parents' place?' (540). Silencing his wives and daughter, his authority relies on and is justified by patriarchal norms of honour and pride that dictate women's inferior position. The public deprivation of all her ornaments, palanquin and its bearers and her companion-helper Senu are a spectacle that exhibit the reach and range of the patriarch. His action though is cushioned by a conventional trope employed by misogyny to make it more palatable. His anger is attributed to his affection for his daughter, and it is love and concern for her well-being that motivates such an outburst. Pacifying his wife, Thoibi's birth mother Yenkhurangbee, he explains, 'A girl of too much of excellences in everything our daughter Thoibee is. Far above par with you and me. Some of her pride I mean to whack off' (543). He therefore acknowledges her brilliance and admits to exiling her for the sole purpose of *taming* her. Her decision which is in conflict with his plans is reduced to childish disobedience, something that must be schooled into submission. But rather than submit to his demands, she 'was determined she would pay all the price for her beloved; she must go to Sembee on exile' (547).

A crucial turn is seen in her character when she is asked to leave behind her nose trinket. She retorts, 'This is not a thing which uncle, aunt, father and mother gave. Not even my own treasure; it is a thing he [Khamba] gave me, … if this thing is lost, it will be the end of my father or my death it will be' (545). This marks yet another leitmotif in the romance genre where the female protagonist's locus of identity shifts from the patriarch to the hetero-normative male hero. With

all prior symbols of identity and relationships taken away from her, she holds on to the gifted nose ring[11] as the quintessential token of love. It is emblematic of a larger narrative that gradually makes her more pliable and manageable through the rhetoric of love. She is increasingly described with traditionally feminine epithets like, 'a tender delicate flower Thadoi [Thoibi] was' (517). As much as she is an epitome of free will and independence, her character reverses into stereotypical roles of female subjugation and docility when she is with Khamba. As their relationship progresses, we find her collapsing into a regressive status quo where she eats only after him, cries when he ignores her and seeks to cook for and serve him. While these qualities are not necessarily frowned upon given the era and its social context, it does puncture the discourse that Thoibi is an undisputed, free-willed character ahead of her time.

Thoibi's Return

After three months of exile in Kabo, Myanmar, Thoibi's father misses her miserably and realises, 'I gave her such a punishment as hard as lightning!' (617). He calls her back but also manages to slip in his agenda. In his final attempt to marry off Thoibi to Nongban, he sends the latter to receive her. He does this despite it being the very reason for their conflict. But this time we see a change in his wives who team up behind his back to rally support for Khamba. They send the youngest wife, Tombee with all their gold jewellery and garments to his place to help gather wealth and gifts. Even they are shocked at the father's apathy towards his daughter's wishes and lobby Khamba to 'finish off that wicked man called Angom Nongban today itself, and to take our girl our child to his house' (638). Seizing the moment and empowering themselves, the women are seen rebelling against the patriarch's command and colluding to foil his plans. This is done in secrecy and not in a spectacular event of a confrontation, but it reveals the clandestine nature of their power which operates though subtlety and solidarity.

Another source of solidarity is Khamnu who dissuades Khamba from receiving Thoibi after exile. When encouraged to pick up Thoibi by the mothers, she assures him that, 'My special sister-in-law Princess to capture her, within Nongban's power it is not; even in dreams it will happen not. Just wait and see she'll come escaped' (638). Her statement reveals a more liberating conviction which trusts that Thoibi needs no man to save her, instead she can take care of herself. For Khamba to go and rescue Thoibi from another man would deny her the opportunity to resolve this on her own and additionally may give rise to the argument that he kidnapped her on the way back from exile before she reached her house. Even though this is exactly what Nongban plans, if incited by Telheiba Khamba were to follow suit the plan would backfire and both could be punished again for disrespecting the elders. Khamnu's insight, therefore, shows a shrewd understanding of social conduct and implicitly indicates a way of subverting such allegations. As someone who has been exposed to the harsh realities of the external world, she is far more astute than the young lovers in apprehending the possible course of action and its fallout. Further, it also gives Thoibi the freedom to choose how she wishes to return to her homeland. Would she rather return to her parents' house after the long exile, or would she rather stop in Khamba's house? By giving Thoibi this possibility, she also acknowledges her agency and intent, qualities that no male figure in the entire tale contemplates.

Thoibi's return from exile is a hilarious episode where she outwits Nongban and escapes his clutches by her sheer resourcefulness. When she finds out that Nongban will be coming to receive her, she is furious. She remarks, 'So my own birthfather has cheated me as it reveals. Bitter guts father has!' (640). She plots to escape from him and decides that, 'I don't want him though, I will feign I do' (640). And so, we find her using coyness to charm him, disarm him and ultimately outrun him. It is interesting to note that for escaping she exchanges the modes of transport. She rides off on his horse, and he is left sitting inside her palanquin, unaware of the action around him. There are

two interpretations one can draw from this. Metaphorically, it reflects a 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. Thoibi flips this convention on its head. In a very literal way, we find Thoibi taking control of the reins and riding towards her intended destination. Nongban, in the meanwhile, is left sitting inside the palanquin, assuming that he is being carried, but in reality Thoibi's men have already been instructed to perch him on a large boulder so that the shaky imbalance simulates movement even when there is none.

Since a horse is also symbolic of male virility, strength and speed, it is widely associated with masculinity. Taking away Nongban's horse then is symbolic of stripping him of his masculinity and effectively castrating him. Nongban's character is described in hyper-masculine terms as strong, aggressive and proud with a royal lineage. Depriving him of his horse and riding away is an explicit gesture of negating these qualities. This takes on a larger significance when viewed from the perspective that her father had already warned him saying, 'Later today, if my daughter escaped from your Angom hand, then my business it's not' (638). His motive therefore is clearly to test Nongban's ability to capture Thoibi, which would perhaps prove that he would be a worthy husband in his view. But he fails this test on all counts. Not only does she successfully evade his abduction, she does it with his steed while his men are watching. Consequently, her escape accomplishes multiple triumphs. She simultaneously establishes her superior wit and humiliates Nongban. Her escape then unequivocally proves that she is a superior match for him.

In her plans to escape, Thoibi uses her 'feminine' charms to coax and flatter him. It reproduces the tools and strategies that women use to gain power by feigning powerlessness. If patriarchy is founded on the inherent belief that men are superior and women need protection, coyness emerges as a potent performance for using this

underestimation to her advantage. She pretends to fall, to feel unwell, whispers seductive words that would appease him and ultimately takes advantage of his flattered state of mind. Even after she flees successfully, he chases her to Khamba's house. There he holds her hostage to her words, declaring for everyone to hear that she called him endearing words like 'helpmate'. She refutes him by clearly explaining why and how she left him and remarks, 'That I called you my "helpmate", I did because I wanted to escape from your hand, dust I did sprinkle in your eyes! What of that if I called you "helpmate"?' (659) His inability to comprehend the idea of consent reveals a larger underpinning of the narrative, that the woman's consent is either irrelevant or unimaginable.

The Ending

The tragic ending of this folk tale is often skipped or not narrated due to fear of bad luck or audiences' hesitation in watching/hearing the heart-breaking resolution. Sanasam's translation also ends happily when the two protagonists unite in matrimony. This episode is also not mentioned in McCulloch's brief summary of the folk tale. However, well-acknowledged oral versions note a more sinister epilogue where both meet a fatal death. To quickly summarise, one day Khamba, incited by his friends, decides to test Thoibi's loyalty. He resorts to whistling and eve-teasing her from the bushes near their house. She gets annoyed and in a fit of anger, throws a spear at the source of all the noise. It hits Khamba, who dies on the spot, and when Thoibi finds out, she commits suicide in anguished guilt.

An immediate conclusion that can be drawn here is the misogynistic ritual of verifying women's fidelity or virtues. Whether through paternal demands of loyalty and obedience, or her husband's jovial test of integrity, Thoibi is constantly made to prove her desires or merit. Even when rejecting Nongban, her refusal is dismissed as inconsequential; and he continues to pursue her, both directly

and indirectly by colluding with her father. The constant need to validate herself is a reflection of the infantilising approach adopted by patriarchal societies. Her actions, words and motivations are questioned, probed and interrogated as if they can only be legitimised when approved by a man. This betrays a deliberate attempt to keep women on edge, carrying the burden of proving their intentions. This consistent scrutiny could be a reason why Thoibi is hostile, quick to react and takes a violent step.

However, an alternate way of looking at this conclusion is by paying close attention to the meta-narrative. As a tale that is deeply invested in describing class barriers and overcoming the social-familial obstacles, could it be that the tale presents a cautionary, punitive warning that such a triumph is impossible? By withholding a romantic consummation, the meta-narrative depicts the insurmountable nature of class conflict and consequently advocates status quo. With all the literary devices of divine intervention (*deux ex machina*) or poetic justice or simply the formulaic happy ending of the romance genre at its disposal, this tale departs from such practices. Previous reincarnations in the *Moirang Saiyon* also suffer a similar fate and usually result in suicide due to the loss of the partner. However, in these iterations lord Thangjing touched by their devotion and mutual love also resolves the situation to ensure their union.

Khamnu

In contrast to Thoibi's youthful beauty and explicit radical behaviour, Khamnu's character is described as an impoverished, orphan woman who works hard to provide for herself and her younger brother, Khamba. We find that at a young age she took over the role of the mother by taking on all the duties of caretaking, protecting, cleaning and earning a living for both of them. Khamba exclaims, 'Big sister! Mother self-same! Call you sister I further would not; "Mother" I would rather call you now…menial toil, paddy husking you did

next-door, everywhere. Eroded your palm's skin has; thinned out your head, the top has; harvest paddy grain, head-loads you carried much too long now' (1). Even in her physical description, her youth is concealed under shabby clothes and a tired demeanour. Despite Khamba offering to help by earning money, she insists on protecting him afraid that if he goes out, he might get into trouble. In her character, we see the general tendencies of a mother figure who goes out of her way to protect, adapt and support others. She is also a close friend of Thoibi's, who treats her as an older sister, and encourages Khamba and Thoibi's relationship. She personifies the virtues of sacrifice, working without expecting any rewards and being constantly preoccupied with her brother's welfare.

Khamnu is hailed for her responsibility and unnerving endurance despite challenging circumstances. She represents another side of femininity that is celebrated and adored across traditions since it upholds tradition. Her character sheds light on a common phenomenon in Manipur where women are active participants in the economic marketplace. Despite lack of resources, skills or opportunities, she seeks ways to make ends meet and provide food, clothes and subsistence for her family. While a conventional framework would perhaps have included her brother being the primary income earner in the family, here she intentionally resolves to participate in the market. By taking up odd jobs she makes ends meet and successfully shields her brother from the supposed dangers of the external world. She therefore shows a larger reality of women in Meitei society who have historically engaged in the market economy without depending on a male figure for financial gains. Weaving, for instance, continues to be a female-dominated industry. Additionally, women have contributed to agricultural labour and setting up local cooperatives. Her character is also remarkable because she does this with the knowledge that her family indeed belongs to a royal lineage and their father was a respected noble in the court. She does not work towards gaining that wealth or authority back and instead focuses on improving their current situation.

Khamnu's character also exemplifies the duplicity of the venerated position of the mother figure and a simultaneous lack of agency or authority. Khamnu is neither empowered nor does she exercise much independent agency. She is constantly referred to as 'poor' Khamnu and identified by her poverty and tragic conditions. She herself internalises this narrative and is perpetually apologising both for her brother and herself for any misgivings. This representation allows a curious pathos to permeate the trajectory and elicits the reader's sympathy, but not empathy. To counter such a deplorable depiction, Anjulika Thingnam, during one of our discussions regarding Khamnu's character, recalled a play called *Khamnu 82*, where the character is reimagined as a fierce, determined woman who refuses to accept humiliation passively. *Khamnu 82* is a theatrical adaptation of the folktale, which redefines the role of Khamnu, making her the protagonist as a karate-fighter. Remembering a particularly hilarious scene, Thingnam recalls that in a fit of anger, Khamnu removes her traditional *phanek*, a Meitei wrap-around skirt, under which she is wearing pants, alluding to her non-conformity.

We are also informed early in the tale that her father, before his demise, had betrothed her to Pheiroijamba, the son of another noble, Chaoba Nongthomba. The betrothal is intended to provide her with security and familial stability, instead she is accused of trying to deceive the wealthy family. The inherent social hierarchy of the society at the time displays an inability to imagine the union of royalty and the working class. This is observed in the treatment meted out to both Khamba and Khamnu, who are ashamed of their poverty and strive to live comfortably. But this hurdle is overcome with a convenient narrative that reveals their royal genealogy and subsequent acceptance by aristocratic class. Khamnu is unable to access seating during the Flower Festival in *Book 8: Floral Oblation and Flower Festival* of *Khamba Thoibi Sheireng*. When the king commands that she be seated along with Thoibi with royal treatment, Thoibi's father is annoyed at this suggestion, since it would lower the dignity of the royal seating arrangement. Then the king reveals that Khamnu is his

daughter, therefore a princess. Khamba's father, Puremba, had once saved the king from five tigers. In return, the king had promised to give his daughter to him in marriage. But he did not have any daughter for a long time and he 'decided I to part a wife to him. So, I asked my wives each; non gave consent… I requested my fond youngest wife Ngangkhareima, your sister-in-law. By that time, in her a seed had been planted, which she had carried for three months' (117).

This scene demonstrates two critical points. Firstly, Khamnu's access to better opportunities and warm compassion of the masses is enabled by the revelation that she has royal lineage. Apart from Thoibi and her friends, the other characters treat both the orphans with suspicion and disdain, receiving only their pity. As much as they work hard and exhibit virtuous noble behaviour, their upliftment is restricted by the discourse on nobility and royalty. Their virtues are identified and encouraged *because* they come from noble lineage, not due to their work ethic which motivates them to work for improving their impoverished situation. They are thus subsumed within a narrative framework that implies people from the royalty are inherently better than the rest.

Secondly, it displays the commodification of women and the rhetoric of service as well as devotion used to coax women's complicity. In the polygamous society of this folk tale, women carry the burden of appeasement, intentionally or unintentionally, to work towards their husbands' contentment. Ngangkhareima, the king's ex-wife and later Puremba's wife, agrees to the trade because, 'Let me attain the fame that a lady has tried her best to alleviate the distress of her husband' (117). Her acceptance is rooted in society's gendered expectations which expect the wife to ensure full devotion and cooperation with the husband's wishes. The king's promise to give a daughter, and later instead his wife, affirms women's transactional and replaceable value. It annuls the argument that women have held an equal, if not superior position in society since early Manipuri civilisation. Keeping aside the fact that the tale's historical veracity remains to be authenticated, it exposes the instinctive social code valued by the community.

CONCLUSION

Folk tales are often categorised as children's tales due to their didactic nature, simple characters and uncomplicated plotlines. But they also preserve the ethos of an earlier era and the values they hope to pass down generations. They give us a glimpse of the lived experiences of mundane lives, deeply rooted in local specificities. *Khamba Thoibi* has evolved from a simple narrative of two lovers struggling to overcome external obstacles to encompassing an ancient civilisation, complete with its strengths and drawbacks. Hence, it becomes all the more important to explore the text as a product of its time, reflecting and negotiating the rampant patriarchy and class bias that pervaded its social fabric. The tale remains popular in contemporary imagination and is a cornerstone of Manipuri literature and culture. It is crucial to critically analyse the text to move beyond the argument that it depicts a glorious, unified kingdom with strong female lead characters. This is not to say that the perception that Thoibi is a feminist or that Khamnu is a resilient mother-figure is wrong, rather this paper argues that such conclusions are reductive. Such interpretations seek to predetermine a set definition for a feminist and avoid the nuanced complexities of negotiating various institutions of power.

The way these gendered roles are represented in fiction allude to the way such roles are imagined and practised. In this tale, we find the characters redefining their roles but also simultaneously maintaining status quo. It also interrogates the commonly held perception that women have enjoyed gender parity in Manipur historically. As the tale progresses, we find the women carving out sites of power within the scope of patriarchy and extending solidarity and support to each other. Their quick wit, flexibility and subtlety facilitates the subversion of power not through explicit rebellion but by operating through gentle persuasion, negotiation and using the men's underestimation of women to their advantage.

Oral narratives, like the folktale of Khamba Thoibi, not only describe quotidian life of the society (albeit in a stylised, idealised

manner), but they also offer social commentary on the events by capturing information and sentiments not recorded in official records. Such narratives passed down across generations may not have accurate factual dates or undisputed sources, yet they serve as critical references through which bards reflect the characteristics existing or expected of society. The multiplicity of sources adds to the richness of the source material and allows one to appreciate how different cultures may have the same folktale or different versions of the same folktale.

NOTES

1. The first Nupi Lan (literally translated to women's war) (1904) was a protest started by women against the colonial order that sought to reintroduce *lalup*—a system of forced labour, regarded as tax—in which Meitei men had to go to Kabow Valley to collect wood and contribute labour for rebuilding the political agent's bungalow that had been burned down by arson. They successfully forced the political agent to rescind the order. The second Nupi Lan (1939), broke out due to excessive export of rice from Manipur by Marwari traders authorised by the British political agent, which led to a famine in the region. For more on this movement and subsequent constitutional and democratic reforms, see S. Parratt and J. Parratt (2001).
2. Meira Paibis (literally translated to women who carry flaming torches) are a voluntary, vigilante group of women in every locality who work to maintain public order and discourage anti-social behaviour. This grassroots movement began in the 1970s to prohibit alcohol consumption (nishabandhi) and went on to resist abuse of power by the armed forces when cases of rape and violence were rising in the region.
3. Ima Keithel (literally translated to Mother's Market) is one of the largest markets in the world managed completely by women. It was started in the 16th century and continues to be exclusively composed of female traders.
4. An indigenous sport, traditionally played with the seed of the *kangkhil* (*Entada gigas* or *Entada phaseoloides*) tree. More recently, it is played with an oval-shaped disc made of plastic, lead or lac with ivory in the centre, and the players roll the disc to hit a target on the opposite side.

5. Founded by the then-king, Maharaj Churachand Singh (1892–1941 AD), the platform was chiefly run by the president of the organising committee, Hijam Irabot, who worked to raise political, social and economic issues while lobbying for a common administration for both the hill and valley areas. Subsequently, the term 'Hindu' was dropped from the name to remove religious and political connotations associated with it. For more details, please see Parratt (2000).
6. During his reign, rules and regulations became quite stringent and impinged upon individual freedom. The patterns of the traditional *phanek mayek naibi* (striped wrap-around skirts worn by Meitei women) were strictly controlled and restricted by class and occasion. The caste system of Brahmanical Hinduism was imported with vigour to implement the idea of *amang-aseng* (pure and impure) and outcast those who did not comply. For more details, please see N. Lokendra Singh (1998).
7. Hindu god who keeps a record of all human beings on earth and accordingly rewards or punishes them.
8. Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers refer to Sanasam (2019).
9. Singh, Mangoljao 1979 (cited in Singh, Navachandra 1985).
10. Singh, Mangoljao 1979 (cited in Singh, Navachandra 1985).
11. The gifting of a nose trinket is perplexing, since it is not popularly worn as an accessory by women in Manipur. The possibility of its use in ancient Manipur therefore seems doubtful. This incident can be considered another modern interpolation, designed specifically to introduce customs of the Indian subcontinent, like a nose trinket, in the framework of the story.

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