

**VOICES BEHIND BARS:
A MIZO WOMAN'S
PRISON WRITINGS**

—

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INTRODUCTION

The war of independence fought by the Mizo National Front (MNF) against the Indian nation state resulted in political turmoil and chaos in the hills of Mizoram, one of the India's north-eastern states. The length and intensity of this war, which spanned two decades (1966 to 1986), affected almost the entire population as a result of which the region entered a 'period of troubles' which the Mizo aptly termed Rambuai. The story of Rambuai is well-known among the people of Mizoram as numerous works focusing on this war have been produced

I am truly indebted to Mrs B. Vanlalzari for allowing me to 'rescue' her hidden stories. Over the past decade, she, has been a key figure in all my pursuits to reclaim and make available the accounts of forgotten women in turbulent times.

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in the region over the last 30 years. However, a considerable number of texts on Rambuai have been dominated by the 'successful' stories of elite groups of men, underplaying the contributions of women and other groups of people involved in the war. Although they willingly joined the underground movement, women were seldom seen as capable of playing the role of combatants. The roles they played, such as looking after the wounded armies, cooking, washing clothes, and stitching clothes for the army in the underground were never included as underground activities in the 'battlefields' (Hmingthanzuali 2019). While numerous women were captured and imprisoned, rarely do we find any record of them in official documents and secondary literatures related to Rambuai.

Victimisation has been at the centre of discussions related to women's issues; prisons were believed to be 'a site for female community and their victimisation' during the Rambuai period. So during the fieldwork for my doctoral thesis I was often told to look for female prisoners. Every time we discussed female prisoners B. Vanlalzari's (hereafter Zari) name was mentioned. She was remembered for the pain she had gone through at the hands of the security forces during her imprisonment. Everyone was concerned about whether she had been raped. But when I interviewed Zari I found in her a nationalist's sense of self that was never recognised by others. When I asked her if she had any personal records, Zari showed me a notebook that had her memories which she wrote during her incarceration. After I completed my doctoral research Zari shared with me another prison notebook and three prison diaries. Aside from the detailed account of her life in prison, Zari preserved her memories as well as personal documents related to her case. From her writings, I came to realise that we can generate an archive of women's personal accounts through which we can recover women's agency and be able to question their misrepresentation in dominant discourses.

Zari was the only convicted female prisoner who was sentenced to life imprisonment during Rambuai. She was a young woman of 22 when she was arrested. While she had morally supported the

independence movement, Zari was officially recruited by MNF in April 1974. Although she did not move outside Mizoram to join underground volunteers, Zari assisted the MNF in its over-ground activities, such as hiding wanted volunteers and their weapons, and providing them medical care till she was arrested in January 1975.

BRIEF HISTORY OF RAMBUAI

Before the colonial intervention, the north-eastern region had never been part of mainland India. Colonial expansion in the north-eastern part of India happened only in the second decade of the 19th century when the Ahom kingdom of Assam became a British territory in 1826. In 1858, when the Crown took over the British East India Company, the tea plantation project was intensified in North East India (Thong 2016). This made the Luseis (Lushais)—the neighbouring hill tribes—attack the British as they extensively claimed these new tea gardens in Cachar district of Assam as their hunting ground. To subdue the Luseis, the colonial government repeatedly sent punitive expeditions to the Hills inhabited by the Luseis. With the last expedition known as the Chin-Lushai Expedition in 1889-90 the British finally occupied the Lushai Hills.¹

The last decade of British rule in the north-eastern Hills witnessed the emergence of an ethnic political movement as it was widely believed that the British were willing to assure complete independence to the Indian government. A political movement started in Lushai Hills in 1946 when groups of educated youth formed the Mizo Common People's Union (later renamed Mizo Union) (Hluna 1985). Besides the new political ideology of a 'Greater Mizoram'² the Mizo Union also proposed that if India attained independence, Lushai Hills must be included within the province of Assam with sufficient representation (Sangkima 2004). The Mizo Union's political ideology successfully dominated Hills' politics. Finally, the Lushai District Council was

formed in 1952 (later changed to the Mizo District Council in 1954) under the Government of Assam.³

In 1959, ethnic politics got diverted when the *Mautam tam* or bamboo famine occurred in Mizo district. The Indian government's inability to provide famine relief provoked the people of the district, and later prompted a group of Mizo educated youth to form the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF), a social service group for rendering help and service to the poor and needy in different areas of the district. When the relief work was over, MNFF was converted into a political party known as the Mizo National Front (MNF) on 28 October 1961 (Hluna 1985). From social service the new party switched its focus to being a political movement with the idea of attaining self-determination for the people of Mizoram and achieving complete secession from the Indian government (Hluna 1985). In October 1963, MNF started recruiting volunteers, and in 1965 the Mizo National Volunteers (MNV)—later renamed the Mizo National Army (MNA)—was established to maintain proper rules and regulations for the volunteers (Zamawia 2007).⁴ Meanwhile party leaders came in touch with agents of East Pakistan and Naga insurgent leaders to learn the tactics and methods of guerrilla warfare and for drawing up plans for an insurrection.

The party started an armed revolt by declaring independence for Mizoram on 1 March 1966, and guerrilla wars broke out in many places. The district was immediately declared a 'disturbed area' under the Assam Disturbed Areas Act, 1955, and MNF was declared an unlawful organisation (Hluna 1985; Sharma 2016). The Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act, 1958 was also enforced in Mizo district. People in Mizo district started living in fear when they entered a 'period of troubles' or Rambuai.

The fight for independence that was fought in the public realm through guerrilla warfare with security forces also resulted in the emergence of another struggle fought in the hidden realms of prisons. Thousands of people, including men and women (some of them

with their infant babies) were captured and incarcerated under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) throughout the Rambuai period. Most of the captives were relatives of MNF leaders and volunteers, government servants, and civilians who were suspected of having connections with MNF (Hmingthanzuali 2019). As jails in Mizoram did not have the capacity to accommodate the ever-growing number of inmates, most of them were sent to different jails in the other states (Zama 2013).

The Church and non-governmental agencies made sincere efforts to bring together MNF and the Indian government for negotiations. Despite frequent setbacks, a settlement was reached through negotiations and the peace accord—Mizoram Accord, 1986: Memorandum of Settlement (MoS)—an official agreement between the Government of India and MNF, was signed on 30 June 1986.

GENDER AND PRISON WRITINGS

Prison literature is more than a hundred years old. However, as Judith Scheffler observes, 'a female prison author and her audience remain widely separated. She is doubly marginal: as a prisoner and as a female writer' (Scheffler 1986: xxii cited in Rowe 2004: 14). Perhaps as part of the effort made by subaltern historians in creating new archives in what Anne Schwan calls a 'feminist recovery project' of the retrieval of silent voices, prison memoirs and prison writings have become a critical concern in literature, history, and interdisciplinary studies of criminology as these give voice to the (voiceless) women prisoners.

According to Paul Gready (1993: 489), the word is a weapon that both inflicts and secures power because 'prisoners are relentlessly rewritten within the official "power of writing", from interrogation and the making of statement through legislation and the political trial to the regulations governing imprisonment. Within this process

the prisoner's sense of self and world is undermined and pain is made visible and objectified in writing and converted into state power.'

While Treacy (1995) presents truth-telling against official stories as the primary reason for writing prison memoirs in her essay on Latin women's prison memoirs, she also places a woman's self-identification in presenting herself as a political activist rather than an apolitical victim of state terror as the first standardised prison narrative. Therefore, for confirming women's agency Treacy suggests that 'deep memories'⁵ of women prisoners must either be entirely repressed or contained in already patterned narratives that conceptualise people as survivors, their daily life in captivity as resistance, and their release as the closure of their experience.

In this essay, I draw inspiration from various academic approaches including the subaltern approach, women's history, and feminist literary critiques for recovering the hidden voices and questioning women's 'silences'. While agreeing with Gready and Treacy's ideas of truth telling and self-identification in prison writings, my paper places the concept of women's agency at the centre of the discussion; this has been overlooked in the history of Rambuai due to reinforced notions of passive femininity. As Anagol (2019: 14) proposes in her studies on the emergence of feminism in India, Zari's agency in her prison writings is explored through the 'twin aspects of consciousness and resistance'. Resistance in this context is defined as 'women's will or volition to act in conscious forms to resist, stretch or overturn structures of power' (Anagol 2019: 14)

Zari's unpublished prison notebooks and diaries (1977, 1978, and 1979), Confidential Report on the assassination of the IGP, DIGP and SP (CID) dated 13th January 1975, Government Record on MNF activities, January, 1975, Aizawl DC Record Room, and the unstructured interviews I conducted with Zari form the primary sources for my research.

THE INCIDENT OF 13 JANUARY 1975 AND B. VANLALZARI'S INCARCERATION

Since the liberation of Bangladesh towards the end of 1971 underground guerrilla warfare received a major setback because of the obliteration of MNF's refuge and guerrilla training facilities in East Pakistan. Perhaps for this reason the party remained in a state of disarray during 1972. MNF insurgents shifted their base to Arakan in Burma. From the middle of 1973, they adopted a new policy by moving their jungle based hostile activities to urban areas, thus creating an over-ground base for their future operations. This policy appears to have met with considerable success resulting in the intensification of hostile activities. The Lt. Governor of Mizoram's ambush on 10 March 1974 was a landmark incident in this process. Different insurgent activities followed this ambush.⁶

On the evening of 13 January 1975 one of the most daring and sensational events took place in Mizoram. Three Indian police officers—G.S. Arya, the Inspector General of Police (IGP), B. Sewa, the Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIGP), and K. Panchapakasen, the Superintendent of Police (SP) (CID)—were having a meeting at the IGP's office in Aizawl, Mizoram. As the meeting progressed, a jeep carrying three persons headed to the office building. Two of the men in the jeep walked inside the IGP's office and gunned down the three police officers who all died on the spot. After firing a few shots in the air, the intruders escaped.⁷

MNF's underground activities, which culminated in the assassination of the IGP, were believed to have started when 'Quit Mizoram' notices against the non-Mizo population were circulated in Lushai (Mizo), English, and Hindi and were found pasted in Aizawl town on 1 January 1975. The late IGP Arya was particularly active in the action that the administration took against this underground activity. He paid personal attention to the question of taking systematic action against underground elements. According to the government's

official report, the effectiveness of Arya's functioning was a major reason why he was selected as the target of the assassination.⁸

This incident drew nationwide attention and immediate steps were taken to control the situation. A new IGP along with his supporting staff was flown into Mizoram, and an investigation team was created under his guidance. As a result of these measures, the first success was achieved when Kapkima, one of MNA's over-ground volunteers, was arrested by security forces on 23 January 1975. The government's confidential report mentioned that it was Kapkima's interrogation that led to Zari's arrest.

On the basis of the investigation team's report, Zari was accused of being involved in the conspiracy to assassinate the IGP. Besides this, she was also accused of helping the underground MNF by giving shelter to its members and hiding their weapons. Arms, ammunition, explosives, and uniforms were recovered from the accused persons. The government's official report mentioned that a major portion of these weapons was recovered from Zari's house and compound. It was also reported that her house served as a rendezvous point for MNF's members to discuss and plan the assassination of the IGP. The government confidential report says:

A significant meeting took place on January 7, 1975 at the house of Miss Vanlalzari working as a typist in IGP's office. Zari had been recruited in the underground as far back as April, 1974 and her house had been utilized by the underground hostiles for taking shelter, hiding weapons and holding their meetings. Lalhleia had been visiting her house ever since his arrival in Aizawl in November, 1974. With effect from January 1, 1975 her house had become the headquarter for the operation to assassinate the IGP.⁹

Many attempts were made to ambush the IGP, and in every attempt Zari's house was used as the meeting place by the underground MNF. The confidential report says:

on the morning of 8th January, 1975 at 4:30 AM. Lalhleia, Thangrehlova, Rohnuna, Kapkima, Zova and Kaptluanga left Zari's house and proceeded to the IGP's residence....

They waited in this position until 10:00 AM, but the IGP did not come out in the lawn.... On the 9th and 10th January, 1975 they again took up the similar positions around IGP's residence but failed to achieve their object since the IGP did not come out in the lawn on these days also.... In view of the above situation resulting from their failure to kill the IGP the assassins decided to change their strategy. On the 10th January, 1975, they met at Zari's house at about mid-day.¹⁰

Zari was arrested with her family on 24 January 1975, but she was kept separately in custody at Mt. Brigade, Bawngkawn. Fourteen days later, she was sent to the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) headquarters in Zemabawk, Aizawl (on 7 February 1975). Throughout her detention at the CRPF headquarters, she was handcuffed and placed in a small room. On 8 July 1976, she was transferred to a new jail in Aizawl reserved for those who had committed serious crimes. While in this jail, her legs and hands were shackled with chains even though she was held in a tiny dark cell. After she was transferred to the new jail, she was summoned to court almost every day. By 14 October 1976, the trial had come to an end.

On 2 November 1976, the judgement order was pronounced. Along with other male MNA volunteers—Kapchhunga, Zoramthanga, and Kapkima—Zari was sentenced to life imprisonment under Sections 121/121A/122/123 and 120B/302/109/34 of the Indian Penal Code. Four of the five cases against them resulted in imprisonment of 20 years each, and in one case (123 of IPC), they were charged with another 10 years of imprisonment. So, altogether, they were sentenced to 90 years of imprisonment. But because of the concurrent nature of the sentences, they had to serve 20 years. On 19 January 1977, Zari was sent to Assam where she was directed to Tezpur Jail with another young Mizo woman, Hliapi, who was detained under MISA for her suspected connections with the MNF. Another Mizo male inmate, Lt. Zathuama, an army volunteer, was also there when they were in Tezpur Jail. While Hliapi was released at the end of 1977, Lt. Zathuama got his release order on 3 June 1978 (Zama 2013). Zari was the only Mizo

inmate left there. On 9 June 1977, she wrote to the jail authorities to transfer her to the district jail in Mizoram.¹¹ However, Zari was shifted to Gauhati Jail at the end of 1980 and remained confined there till she was released on 16 December 1980 (Zama 2008).

After she was released, Zari was re-employed in the police department as a clerical staff, and she retired as Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) on 31 March 2014. Currently, she is an advisor in MNF's General Headquarters in Aizawl. Zari married Zodailova, an ex-MNA volunteer, in 1989. She lives in Chawlhmun, on the western side of Aizawl with her family.

As she was the only convicted female Mizo prisoner (many other Mizo women were detained but were not convicted due to lack of evidence) Zari was always detained in a separate tiny cell and was seldom allowed to mingle with other female inmates. Perhaps for this reason Zari believed that the jail authorities never stopped her from reading and writing.¹² She wrote in notebooks and diaries provided by her relatives. Zari recorded her life and experiences in two different notebooks, which detail her life while she was confined in different jails in Aizawl, and in Tezpur and Gauhati in Assam from January 1975 to January 1980. On 11 October 1976 when she was in Aizawl Jail Zari started writing the details of her experience in jail starting from the night she was arrested in a notebook. She finished writing her first notebook on 27 March 1977 in Tezpur Jail. The first notebook was written as an autobiographical account, and she tentatively titled it *Hnehna chu Lalpa Ta a ni* (Victory Belongs to the Lord). When she was moved to another jail in Aizawl, Zari started keeping another notebook in which she recorded specific memorable experiences from 27 November 1976 to 9 November 1979. Zari used her second notebook as an additional diary to keep detailed records of her daily life and experiences that could not be included in the limited space in her small diaries.¹³ So the second notebook mainly contains details of her life in the new jails in Aizawl and Tezpur. Apart from these two notebooks she also regularly maintained her diaries from 17 January 1977, the date she left Aizawl for Tezpur Jail to 1 January 1980.

STRUGGLES AGAINST VAI FOR THE MIZO NATION

Traditionally, for the Mizos, there are three groups of people—Mizo, Vai (people from mainland India), and Sap (white-skinned foreigners). Of course, due to modernisation and westernisation, two other categories of peoples can also be added to the list: Midum (black people) and Khawchhak mi (East Asians and other groups of Asians similar in appearance to the East Asians). Till this day, however, Vai and Sap are the two major ‘others’ or ‘outsiders’ in the Mizo mind.

Saps are treated with due reverence even as outsiders (Seagor 2019). This perception can be associated with the process of colonisation based on white racial supremacy that has served to ‘shape minds’ or to ‘colonize minds’ of the Mizos (Nogueira 2013). For the Mizos, it was the Saps (colonial administrators and missionaries) who inculcated the culture of modernity and progress in Mizo society. Hence, Saps’ lifestyle and culture is encouraged and appreciated by many Mizos. In due course, as part of the colonisation process, the adoption of Christianity (a foreign religion introduced by British missionaries) also became an important aspect of Mizo identity. In fact, religion is an important tool of exclusion from Mizo society (Pachau 2014). Saps are considered insiders as fellow Christians, and their lifestyle is often valued (Segor 2019).

While the larger Indian state frames the Mizos and North East India as a whole (Pachau 2014), people from the plains or ‘mainland India’ are referred to as Vais by the Mizo people who are generalised as non-Christians or non-believers. They are seen as the most distant ‘other’, while the ‘other’ for the Mizos is not fixed or static (Pachau 2014). In its task of achieving complete independence for the Mizos, the MNF party linked its distinctiveness from ‘other’ Indian people with their faith in Christianity. Hluna (1985) also believes that the young men who joined the party were slowly indoctrinated in anti-government and anti-Vai feelings. Thus, religion became one of the foundations of MNF’s ideology apart from territorial, economic, and political issues. Christianity was one of the main weapons for maintaining and

defending their land (Hluna 1985). ‘*Mizo Hnamin Zalenna a hmuh hma loh chuan rinawm tak a PATHIAN LEH KAN RAM TAN bei zel turin* (To faithfully struggle and fight for God and Our Motherland until the Mizo nation achieves independence) became an oath of allegiance for Mizo national volunteers (Zamawia 2007).

Such a perception of outsiders also had implications for Zari’s writings. Her first notebook started from her memories of 24 January 1974, the day she was captured from her house with her family. She writes, ‘My capture was led by a Captain and a Major, and both were Vai.’ Although she was only 13-years-old when Rambuai started, Zari had a desire to step out for her nation (Mizo). When many Mizo young men and women answered the MNF party’s call to join the underground, she too was prepared to protect her land and nation in the name of the lord. But due to family matters, she had to decline, as she wrote in her notebook, when one day, Vanhnuaithanga, a Member of Parliament in the underground government, visited her home and said to her, ‘Zari, you need not go. Your father works very hard and your mother is not healthy. Your brother is still too young to care for your mother. Your family needs you. Loving and taking care of a mother is a great step towards the development of a nation’ (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

Despite all this, Zari’s desire to do something for her nation became stronger, and in 1968 she furtively made another attempt to join the underground guerrilla struggle. Unfortunately, her mother fell seriously ill, so she had to cancel her plans once again. In her first notebook, Zari says that she was different from other children even at a young age. She writes,

When I was just ten years old, I had not yet known the meaning of the word politics, but I would proudly claim that once I graduated from college I would become a politician. The sentiments and desire to protect our land and the nation was always a part of me.... The choice that I had made at a tender age could not be cast aside; nor will I try to discard it. I was willing to give my body and soul for it. Fortunately, God had chosen me and my family as

worthy of suffering for the sake of our land and nation. So, on 24 January 1975, Vai soldiers captured me and my family (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

In her writings, Zari repeatedly mentions her desire for the freedom of the Mizos from the dominance of Vai Sawrkar or the Indian government. For instance, she writes about her frustrating life in Tezpur Jail in her diary entry of 22 May 1979: 'My mind wanders How I wish the Lord would rescue me from the clutches of these Vais' (Vanlalzari 1979).

Zari always felt that she had been away from her community and her motherland because of her incarceration even when she was in Aizawl Jail. She had this feeling of solitude because she hardly got a chance to mingle with other Mizo inmates. At other times, she was annoyed at being with Vais that comprised of people from different regions and cultures who were morally and culturally distinct from the Mizos:

The inmates comprised of people from different regions and cultures—Assamese, Bengali, Nepali, Bagania, Kachari, Miri, and Muslims and then there was me. Some were convicts, some under trial prisoners (UTP), and some inmates had the problem of NCL (Non-Criminal Lunatic). In this eclectic mix, having a clear and sharp mind has not been easy. In all this my love and devotion for my land remain unaltered and my emotions remained clear and sharp (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

We also find that the Mizos' construction of identity through religion had immense implications for Zari's writings. Although she could make out that 'other' female inmates were from different states with diverse cultures, Zari categorised them into two groups—'Hindus' and 'Mosolmans'. Their strange and weird behaviour is frequently mentioned in her notebooks and diaries. For instance, on 10 August 1978 she wrote in her second notebook,

Right from dawn to dusk you have the amusing option to listen to squabbles in this jail. I have never experienced such loud

behaviour in my land. I am enormously bewildered by these Hindu and Mosolman women.... Oh! How I miss the beautiful life of the Mizos (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

Despite growing abhorrence for Vais who were non-Christians, Zari believed that the other Christian inmates and authorities were more kind-hearted towards her than 'other' Vais. A shared religion, therefore, contributed to a sense of unity and common bond among the inmates and jail authorities. An instance can be taken from her experience on 7 February 1975 when she was transferred to Zemabawk Jail from Brigade Headquarters Bawngkawn:

Captain Mehta, Captain Chibber and his wife and S.I. Thomas came to pick me up and brought me to an airy room with a bed which had clean white sheets spread out. ... When morning finally came, I asked S.I. Thomas if I could take a bath. Now this man was a Christian and a good man. He gave me permission for my bath and I was elated (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

On Christmas in 1975 when she was in the district jail in Aizawl she wrote, 'So in my cell, I cut my cake, shared it with the Christian commander and guards on duty' (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

Zari's writings reflect her tremendous struggle for a Mizo nation by putting God first in her struggle for freedom. It was God who had chosen her to fight for the Mizo nation, who gave her strength to face the torture and resist the lure of temptation, as she frequently states,

I firmly believed that it was the will of God and God's plan was in motion.... I believe that whatever had happened to me and my family happened for a reason, the reason being that it is for our own benefit. I have understood this because of God's grace.

I was able to resist giving into the allurements of wealth not by my strength but because of the Omnipotent One who never left my side and gave me the power to overcome temptations (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

REVEALING THE 'TRUTH'

Throughout her detention in different jails, Zari was confined in a tiny separate cell and seldom had a chance to spend time with other female inmates. So, to fill her free time she started writing her memoirs. As she was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, Zari did not believe that she would leave prison alive and was afraid that she would never get a chance to meet her own people to share her experiences during her incarceration. This also prompted her to write her memoirs so that all the hidden 'truths' about her and her case, which she could not share with her community while she was imprisoned, would be revealed one day.¹⁴ Hence, presenting 'reality' and 'truth' against the partial reports of the state authorities and 'telling the truth' against community 'lies' form the core of her notebooks and diaries.

Despite widespread sexual violence of women, connections were always made between the Rambuai trouble and women's moral decay. Apart from same-sex relationships in various jails (Zama 2013) the belief in women's promiscuity, especially their loose behaviour, led to the most notorious rumours in connection with sex, prison, and the Rambuai event. Even some female volunteers who joined the guerrilla struggle in East Pakistan and were fond of boys, or merely following their boyfriends, were often labelled 'loose' or 'sluts'.¹⁵ This sexual stereotyping of female prisoners is also repeatedly seen in Zari's notebook and her diaries. While she was in Tezpur Jail she wrote on the last pages of her second notebook that she often received letters from unknown Mizo people who furiously wrote and charged her with having a loose character in jail. In these letters, they wrote that while she was in Zemabawk jail, the security forces sexually assaulted her many times, she was tied naked, and they took photographs; they also believed that in Tezpur Jail, the authorities frequently slept with her to quench their sexual desires, and they irately warned her that none of her people pitied her for hiding all these secrets from her community (Vanlalzari, Notebook 2). In her desire to tell the 'truth'

against these community 'lies' Zari wrote in her second notebook on 29 November 1976:

Oh, how much have I suffered as a woman! That too not due to my own fault.... My family, too, is suffering enormously. And what really compounds my sorrow is the rumours on unchaste behaviour between me and the Vais (prison guards). Physical torture involving blood shedding, chain-bonded through day and night, starvation as punishment, imprisonment for life- over and above all these, what has hurt the most is what people have said of sexual promiscuity between me and the prison guards. It would have been alright if I had not heard of such rumours. But I almost break down upon hearing such a terrible thing or when I am being asked. Is it that most people are trying to deface me by way of circulating fictitious stories? Alas! I can rest assured that God knows me, and that is enough for me to know. What is far greater is what and how we appear before Him than before our fellow human beings (Vanlalzari, Notebook 2).

Apart from this, in her diary entry of 22 February 1977, Zari questions other widespread 'lies' and rumours about Mizo women. These community 'lies' seemed to start from rumours spread by the Indian security forces. The Mizo community was offended by members of the Indian security forces boasting that it was very easy for them to win the hearts of Mizo women. Owing to the social and cultural norms governing women's lives, this had severe implications for women's virtue in the community. On behalf of all female prisoners Zari challenged many assumptions about Mizo women's behaviour in prison:

The young men of Mizo society, I beseech you to witness this. We, Mizo women, have a number of shortcomings, and like any other society, there are a great many who have untruthfully hurt your feelings. However, whatever way the non-Mizo bragged about Mizo women is only half the truth. We know that we are under a period of turbulence, and it is most essential to understand whatever is at work to hurt your sentiments. It will not serve anyone any good if you are impulsively condemning Mizo

women on the disgusting acts perpetrated on them. For instance, the army routinely goes about checking every house, and some soldiers, even the officers, confiscated the photographs of some pretty young women and then go on boasting about it. I know this very well from my own experience as a prisoner. I cannot name all the astounding lies which they have so cunningly contrived. I believe that you are more knowledgeable on this than myself. Well, like any other society, there will be some members among us too who are consumed by wanton behaviour. But whatever has hurt the sentiments of the young Mizo men (lies that are trying to break your heart) are nothing but false information. Of course, it is us that bear the brunt of all these deceptive actions of the non-Mizo (Vanlalzari, Notebook 2).

STAGES OF INTERROGATION: STRUGGLES FOR AND TO HIDE THE 'TRUTH'

During Rambuai, the prison emerged as a hidden site where the battle for 'truth' was consistently fought between state authorities and prisoners when the latter were both physically and mentally tortured. Treacy (1995) points out that in this kind of battle the authorities and prisoners were engaged in a struggle to get or hide information no matter how irrelevant it was. Unlike wars fought in the public space, this war was fought through interrogations as most of the people arrested from the Hills were interrogated for information about political plots and the whereabouts of MNF's wanted volunteers. However, whenever women faced different 'stages of interrogation', there was a chance for them to exercise their agency in protecting their menfolk (Hmingthanzuali 2019). Speaking about her first experience of confinement on 25 January 1975, Zari also rightly noted down the first stage of interrogation that she went through:

We finally reached Mt Brigade where the 9th JAK Battalion resided. I was placed in a dark room where I sat waiting for

their next move. Soon after, they came into my room carrying petromax lanterns with bearings of high officials and asked me if I knew a man named “Kapkima”. I told them that I did not know him. Next, they showed me a photograph of four men, to which I also truthfully answered in the negative (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

Although it was on the basis of Kapkima’s statement—the first volunteer arrested in connection with the assassination of the IGP—that Zari was arrested, she denied that she knew him throughout her interrogation. In her interview with me Zari said that she had to struggle to hide the ‘truth’ about MNF volunteers, ‘Even though it was from Kapkima’s statement that I was arrested, me and all my family members forgive him. If I declared that I knew Kapkima, I would definitely be further interrogated and induced to disclose the underground secret that I shouldn’t say. No one was captured because of something I said in my interrogations. Although I didn’t know some of them, I knew most of the wanted volunteers. But I had to protect them by providing negative answers to the interrogators.’¹⁶

She writes in her notebook,

As I continued to answer in the negative, their anger also increased until one of my captors Captain S made a threatening move by taking off his cap and held it to my nose and mouth making it extremely difficult to breathe.... The officers celebrated my capture with food and drinks. They tried to share their food with me, but I could not swallow anything. They then took me outside just as a man was dragged in. They said to me, “Do you know him? Have you seen him before?” I certainly did not know him, but I might have seen him somewhere, like when riding the bus, but he was certainly not someone I recognised¹⁷ (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

Since the first night of her imprisonment, Zari faced different ‘stages’ of interrogation as she was interrogated over and over again. According to Zari’s writings, the security forces were the most aggressive interrogators as physical torture formed the core of their

power in interrogating prisoners. Despite this, Zari told me in her interviews, 'No matter how painful it was, tolerating physical assaults and emotional tortures was more preferable than denying the Mizo warriors.'¹⁸ When she writes about the physical torture that she suffered during her interrogation Zari says,

Whenever a question was asked of me, it was asked in the most forceful possible way. No matter what answer I gave them, their response was again a resounding slap. Those who interrogated me were all drunks. My two main interrogators were Captain S and Major B. They would point their pistols at me, make me twist around using the barrel of their guns. This continued till late into the night. Finally, at 12 midnight they left me to sleep and gave me a thin blanket to warm myself...

The 26th of January was a Sunday, and I had secretly hoped that my interrogation would be halted for the day. My hopes were in vain. Captain S came into my room/cell in the morning, followed by his men who carried wet towels and huge cans of water. I foolishly thought that perhaps they had come to clean themselves. But this was far from the truth. They ordered me to remove my shawl, then they told me to remove my sweater which I did. Finally, they told me to take off my clothes, they harshly put my hands behind my back before I could even finish saying "I don't want to." They covered my whole face with a wet towel and started pouring water on me. I started to gag and it was very difficult to breathe...¹⁹(B. Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

CBI from Calcutta also came and interrogated her and threatened her in every possible manner but without any physical assault. Other interrogators used threats and persuasion to make her confess that she had assisted MNF volunteers in killing the IGP and other Indian police officers and to give them information about MNF's political plots. Their methods of persuasion and means of enticing her into giving them information were diverse and varied. Of the many methods of persuasion, some examples include a promise of rewarding her with Rs 25,000, a nice comfortable house outside Mizoram along with a car

or a jeep from the Indian government and permission to continue her job in the government, if she gave the name of at least one insurgent volunteer. She was also told that she would be given compensation with government jobs for her family members as far as possible (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1). But Zari says, 'My biggest fear during that time was that somebody would get tortured or beaten up because of something that I said' (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

When she talks about her role in assisting the underground members, Zari says in her oral interviews, 'I had neither confessed nor denied to the interrogators that some weapons of the underground were buried in our compound. But when I was forced to sign on the document, I demanded them that I should not sign on it unless the seizure list was shown to me. Though I believed that some items were seized from our compound, I was holding up my ground that I shouldn't sign on the document without seeing the recovered items.'²⁰ She also wrote in her notebook,

On 7th February, 1978 Major B came to me with a document which stated that I was well treated and no harm had been done to me during my captivity. I was to sign this letter to attest the contents of the letter. He tried to coerce me to sign the document but I stubbornly refused. At the same time, Major L P and Captain S also entered, pistol in hand carrying a seizure list. They ordered me to sign the list but I demanded that I first wanted to read it before signing, which they did not allow. At gun point I was forced to sign the seizure list, with no knowledge of its content. It was already evening when I was taken to Jane who also tried to persuade me to sign the document as I would again be brutality assaulted if I refused. Major B had started to lose his patience and lifted his hands to hit me. But instead he took his gun, loaded it and pointed at me in a threatening manner. I was filled with rage and anger, rather than fear. I was so angry that my hands started to shake so much so that when I finally signed the document my signature looked like a stranger's.... He brought with him a seizure list which stated that many documents and other items

had been seized from our house. I said to him, “Why should I sign this? I have never seen these items nor do I know anything about them.” To which he responded, “Signing this seizure has no meaning, it is just a government policy. Signing this will do you no harm. Mr. Lalhmingliana and the Village Council President, (VCP) who have also signed similar documents, have not seen the items in their list either. You should also sign it.” Since I knew nothing about the laws, I was fooled in the most devious manner and ended up signing it.²¹ (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

This statement also makes it clear that the purpose of interrogation was ‘not to elicit information, but visibly to deconstruct the detainee’s voice’ (Gready 1993). Despite her attempts to control herself and her voice, it was the interrogators who always had an advantage in winning the battle for ‘truth’. In her notebook Zari also writes about an incident in July 1975 when she was asked to give a confessional statement before the magistrate based on the statement given by the officers. Mr P, a police officer, took her statement, which was then officially recorded by the officers (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1). Perhaps this is how the state authorities controlled and manipulated the prisoners’ words to corroborate official statements during Rambuai.

While revealing the ‘truth’ was one of the reasons why Zari wrote her memoirs, challenging ‘truth’ as defined by her oppressors was also one of the main intentions for her doing so. To reclaim her misinterpreted words or ‘truth’ that remained hidden during and after the interrogations, Zari testified to the truthfulness of her writings by giving ‘evidence as a key’ (Treacy 1995). So she provided the names of security officers and guards and other jail inmates with whom she had both diverse and similar experiences. In the last part of her notebooks, Zari also gives a detailed record of the dates and times of her trials in court, the names of witnesses of the incident on 13 January 1975 and their statements, a sample statement of the charge sheet against her, and sample letters of her appeal.

RESISTANCE AND ACTION

In contrast to the general representation of female inmates as passive and helpless, a need to reveal women's resistance and a desire to comprehend how they managed to acquire and exert greater control over their own destiny is embedded in the growing body of women's prison literature (Fill 2013). Although most of the existing writings on Rambuai's history perceive women as powerless and seldom recognises their active roles, their painful and distressing lives in jails created chances for Mizo female inmates to exercise another form of agency inside the jails. Given that they were arrested for interrogation, female prisoners by and large refused to give the right answers to the jail authorities (Hmingthanzuali 2019). They were usually threatened by the state and jail authorities. Despite this, rather than talking about their menfolk, female prisoners verbally reacted to the questions or remained silent before the interrogators. Speaking about her interrogation on the whereabouts of Kaptluanga, one of the wanted volunteers, on 27 January 1975, Zari writes,

I was asked the same question over and over again, and my answer remained the same.... It was past midnight when my ears also started to bleed. My anger started to rise and finally I responded to his repetitive question, "He [Kaptluanga] has two feet, he can go wherever he wants with his feet. I am not the keeper of his feet. You have imprisoned me here for three days, how do you expect me to know his whereabouts from here?" As soon as I said this he stared at me with a look that may be deciphered as one of wonder or anger. With one of his big hands he grabbed my throat and with the other he started hitting me. There was blood everywhere, mainly from my mouth (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

There is also an instance of obstinate silence that is a type of resistance. In this form of resistance, a body becomes a site of violence

and resistance. Instead of verbally reacting against her interrogators, Zari showed her resistance by stubbornly tolerating and silently suffering physical assaults as she says, 'Blood started pouring from my mouth since I was constantly hit on my face. The captain would keep wiping the blood from my mouth but I never even tried to wipe it myself nor did I even flinch whether I fell or not. And not even once did I take my eyes off his face' (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

Generally, in prison writings the narrator emphasises that all prisoners—male and female—found their bodies a source of humiliation (Treacy 1995). The authorities' dehumanising social practices therefore often led to chances where women could resist action inside the jails. Aside from physical and mental torture, Zari also frequently describes general discomfort in jails: unhealthy food, sleep deprivation, excessive heat or cold, and lack of medical care. Surprisingly women did not always remain silent and often reacted against their dehumanising conditions. In this kind of a situation, the state authorities usually gave a positive response to their demands:

When one night at around 7, the guard came in with one plate full of rice, to our horror they made a depression upon which they poured a lot of dal. Puii was livid, saying to them "We would not have this kind of pig food...it just looks like pig food!" The guards then reported to the superiors who, unbeknownst whether wisdom suddenly prevailed upon them or not, instructed the guards to kill a fowl and we felt rather delighted (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

Each battalion had its own method of maintaining discipline. It was a simple matter of having one or two scoundrels in the midst of an entire battalion. There was a Mohinder Singh S.I. who would come to shake my hands every day. One day he did not just shake my hands but squeezed it very tightly. I was so angry that I made a complaint against him, thus he was replaced immediately (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

A SENSE OF SELF

As mentioned earlier, Treacy (1995) suggests that self-identification through which a woman presents herself as a political activist rather than a political victim of state terror forms one of the basic parts of standardised prison narratives. In contrast to general perceptions, in her writings Zari also shows a conscious desire to express her sense of self and ability in acting against her oppressors. Hence, it serves as a means that enables a (voiceless) woman to express and define her sense of self. In the process of self-identification, Zari first redefines the image of 'Vai patriarchy' by labelling the security officers and jail authorities as 'cowards':

I was harshly jolted up by Captain S who shouted, "Get up, you lazy woman" slapping me at the same time. The force of the slap did not hurt me as much as the fact that my parents or my friends had never laid a finger on me as this man had. Captain S again shouted, "Stand up." His slap and his ill-treatment made me see him for the man that he was—a coward (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

Despite all the physical assaults that she suffered, Zari never considered herself a victim. Instead she identified herself as an 'actor' whom the security officers admired and were even afraid of in the jails:

I often heard the sounds of these words from the Commanding Officers, "She is a patriot, she is a brave girl." In the month of February 1975 when he gave an order to the jail staff in Aizawl jail the Guard Commander said, "This woman is not only clever, but also bold and very experienced, so make sure you chain her hands and feet. Also make sure to erect at least 1 ½ inches of wooden bar at the windows or else she might take your guns from you and shoot you all." Never in my lifetime have I met anyone who's shown that much admiration for me, I could not even think about the danger ahead of me, I just kept smiling to myself.... It's such a wonder looking back at how scared they were of me! I was cuffed

and tied up even inside the court house. It was difficult to part with my precious cuff. It had become so much a part of me and I could even see my reflection just as clearly as I would in a mirror (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

In another instance, she wrote,

Day and night I was visited by Army officers and sometimes their wives who hid behind their husbands as if they were afraid that I might do them some kind of harm. They did not come to interrogate me. They just came to look at me, to see me with their own eyes. I think this must have been one of the most glorious periods of my life. I was a kind of spectacle that aroused interest and curiosity. My audiences were mostly above the ranks of the Commanding Officer (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

At some other time, Zari used her diaries and notebook as a space to express her feelings of pride and honour: 'Today I can say without a doubt that despite all the pain and sufferings that I had to go through, not a single one of those memories have left me emotionally scarred' (Vanlalzari, Notebook 2).

In short, Zari countered patriarchal attacks on female identity and self-worth. She even concluded her first notebook by representing herself as a 'victor' who (through the guidance of god) had won the battle fought between Mizo and Vai behind the walls of the jails:

I wish and pray that my feeble life be sacrificed for the unity of the Mizo people.

I wish and pray that my worthless life remains in the memories of Mizoram.

Let the blood spilt of our kinsmen be not in vain but lead the way to harmony among us.

Victory belongs to God! The reason I, a mere woman, have been able to overcome the tremendous torture and resist the lure of temptation is because of the Lord! Praise the Lord²² (Vanlalzari, Notebook 1).

CONCLUSION: RECORDS, AGENCY, 'SILENCES'

In the early 1980s a cyclostyled copy of Zari's prison writings (*Zari's Diary*) appeared and was published by the Mizo Students' Union in Shillong, Meghalaya. Extracted from one of her notebooks, the publication came out in two volumes, both just a little more than 10 pages each. The two volumes, published shortly after Zari's release, seemed to reflect the politics in Mizoram wherein violence inflicted by the Indian security forces was stated on the first page of volume 1: 'This diary reveals the brutal behavior of the Indian armies towards the Mizo people as they could even torture the Mizo women.'

However, I argue that Zari's appearance (or recognition) in a publication was because she was recognised only when she was needed in the ethnic politics of the time. Eventually she was forgotten and till now, hardly anyone remembers the existence of the two volumes. She is hardly remembered, and her story has been only retold through rumours. Despite all this, rarely did Zari speak about her experiences and her sense of self.

The only government record that I was able to get hold of was the Confidential Report on the assassination of the IGP, DIGP and SP (CID) dated 13th January 1975, Government Record on MNF activities, January, 1975, from the Record Room, Aizawl Deputy Commissioner's Office. In this report, Zari emerges with a sort of agency.

I also argue that in Mizo society, the spectacular nature of victimisation, the MNF party, and researchers of the subject have erased her conscious agency. For her, notebooks and diaries are the only 'raw material' that enable her to speak about her experiences. It is a site where she can share her insights and worldview.

When it comes to Zari's silence, then and now, it can be read from her text that she had to hide/deny the truth about the MNF. Considering the political outgrowth of Rambuai more than 50 years ago, and what the current situation in Mizoram is, Zari's silence is justifiable. Her 'silence', however, does not render her life story

irrelevant or insignificant. Situating Zari's agency in the 'trouble period' encourages us to look at her 'silences'.

Zari had an unusual ability of both defining herself on her own terms and enacting her identities as she understood them. The very fact that she was able to skilfully put down all her experiences in writing gives her an agency; the way she describes events, persons, feelings, and emotions defines her unique personality and shows off her truly amazing writing skills. Her exceptional ability to translate many of her experiences (including moments) into words makes her prison writings stand out among existing literature in the same genre. Her use of words, exclamations, and sometimes sarcastic sentences gives the reader an opportunity to view her world from a different angle, considering the political and cultural backdrop of the time. Till the end, she was able to stand firm in her resolve, true to her sentiments and remain loyal to her nation. Such tenacity under extraordinary circumstances is rarely seen in Rambuai's history. She carves out a distinctive identity for herself in her writings, physical struggles, and the events that she experienced. Her demonstration of resistance and resilience, most of the time through silence, shapes her identity while enriching women's self-knowledge and extending their emancipatory potentialities.

NOTES

1. Lusei is one of the Mizo clans. During colonial times, they were known to British colonisers as Lushais. As the Luseis were the dominating clans, the term Lusei/Lushai was generally used as a synonym for the Mizos in earlier historical records. Lushai Hills covered the area of present day Mizoram.
2. The ideology of greater Mizoram demanded the integration of 7,500 sq km of Mizo-inhabited areas situated in Manipur, Assam, Tripura, and the Chin Hills, and justified its claim on the basis of the fact that before the advent of the British, the Mizos were spread over these areas, and they lost control over them as a result of a series of punitive expeditions launched against

- them by the British. Malabika Das Gupta. 1986. 'Greater Mizoram Issue and Tripura', *Economic & Political Weekly*, 21 (37): 1629-30.
3. In 1971, the Mizo district was upgraded to a Union Territory and renamed Mizoram.
 4. From 1 July 1966 all the Mizo National Volunteers (MNV) were called the Mizo National Army (MNA). It included all the voluntary armies which had fought for Mizoram and a Mizo nation.
 5. According to Treacy (1995), 'deep memory' is a sense memory that returns the individual to the horrors of camp experience as if she or he were living them again.
 6. Confidential Report on the assassination of the IGP, DIGP and SP (CID) dated 13th January 1975, Government Record on MNF activities, January, 1975, Aizawl DC Record Room.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Lalhleia, an MNF underground volunteer who returned to Aizawl from MNF headquarters in Arakan, took the initiative of sorting out the action against the non-Mizo population to quit Mizoram and the assassination of Shri Arya.
 9. Confidential Report on the assassination of the IGP, DIGP and SP (CID) dated 13th January 1975, Government Record on MNF activities, January, 1975, Aizawl DC Record Room.
 10. Ibid.
 11. B. Vanlalzari wrote her sample letter in her second notebook (pp. 51 and 52).
 12. Personal Interview with B. Vanlalzari, 30 November 2019.
 13. Ibid.
 14. Telephone interview with B. Vanlalzari, 30 November 2019.
 15. This is community gossip about some young women who joined the underground guerrilla movement in East Pakistan.
 16. Telephone Interview with B. Vanlalzari, 13 July 2020.
 17. Translated by Catherine Lalhrulaitluangi Chhangte.
 18. Telephone Interview with Zari, 13 July 2020.
 19. Translated by Catherine Lalhrulaitluangi Chhangte.
 20. Telephone Interview with B. Vanlalzari, 13 July 2020.
 21. Translated by Catherine Lalhrulaitluangi Chhangte.
 22. Translated by Catherine Lalhrulaitluangi Chhangte

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