

Dynamics of Violence in the North East: Reviewing Some Contemporary Mizo Poems

Aishwarya Banerjee

Abstract:

The Mizo insurgency of the 1960s is a significant chapter in India's history characterized by the Mizo people's quest for their survival, rights and cultural identity. In 1959, Mizo hills were devastatingly struck by a bamboo famine. Unable to procure any massive help from the Central Government, the local famine relief group metamorphosed into a political party naming it Mizo National Front or MNF. Under the leadership of Laldenga, the MNF resorted to arms, declaring independence from India. Repercussions rapidly ensued when the Indian government declared Mizoram to be "a disturbed area" and the Indian Air Force conducted a series of aerial attacks dropping bombs in several parts of Aizawl on 5th March, 1966. This heralded the twenty-year long chronicle of insurgency, *Rambuai*. The Mizo insurgency has been documented in granular details by Malsawmi Jacob whose novel *Zorami: A Redemption Song* is the first English novel from the region that sheds light on the harrowing experiences of Mizo people during the insurgency. Equally important yet overlooked are Jacob's poems that address the trials and tribulations of her land emphasising how the war on humanity is also a war against geography, territory and Nature. Jacob advocates the need for political peace in her poem "Peace Land", "No hurting no killing in this country / the place only for lovers of peace." The post-pandemic vision of a world marked by global cooperation has been constantly and drastically reshaped by reports of violence taking place in the North Eastern region. In such a scenario, Jacob's poems not only harp on the trauma of her people during the insurgency but are also a deliberate plea to recreate a world where vultures cannot have their full meal. This paper thereby attempts to read Malsawmi Jacob's poems from the perspective of insurgency, environment and peace-building in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: Mizo insurgency; Nature; Peace; Poetry; Pandemic.

Introduction

War annihilates civilization and heralds a demolition of body, culture and human consciousness. It is relentless in its own content that brings a dramatic change in the lives of the common people. Diplomacy, politics, territorial expansions are issues that are cut from the lives of the common people. Nonetheless countless lives get stuck in this hell-hole of war violence unable to find an agency to escape the stagnation. The cartographic construct of India's North East reflects a history of conflict and violence. In fact, the instability in North East India is characterized by multifaceted violence – political movements against the Union Government, ethnic clashes among the indigenous groups, and the stringent relationship between the migrants and the non-migrants. Violence as a means of protests and as a means to contain such protests has been the focal point of all the conflicts in the North East. The region has often been defined by separatist struggles against the Indian nation-state and the latter's attempts of crushing it. Although the Naga movement has been adequately discussed, very little documentation has been done on the Mizo uprising both in terms of information and understanding. The Mizo National Front (MNF) initiated a secessionist armed struggle in 1966. Even after the uprising, there was hardly any report in the mainstream media covering the incident except for a few pieces in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, which were vociferously critical about the state's violation of human rights in the Mizoram.¹ The history of blood and violence in Mizoram thereby remained largely undocumented as is expressed in a report,

For twenty years, the Mizo people had lived in fear of being branded rebels, and for twenty years, they refrained from writing diaries, creative outpourings or records of experiences because the dreaded soldiers who could not read the language were wont to brand these as “MNF documents”.² (Hluna and Tochhawng)

Malsawmi Jacob, however, has endeavoured to fill this void with her works. The Mizo insurgency has been documented in granular details in her novel *Zorami: A Redemption Song*, which is the first English novel from the region that sheds light on the harrowing experiences of Mizo people during the insurgency. Equally important yet overlooked are Jacob's poems that address the trials and tribulations of her land emphasising how the war on humanity is also a war against geography, territory and Nature. This paper thereby attempts to read contemporary Mizo poems from the perspective of insurgency, environment and peace-building.

Background

Mautam is a cyclic phenomenon that occurs almost every fifty years in Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur, parts of Assam and Myanmar. When a particular species of bamboo flowers across a wide area in these years, it is followed by a “rat flood”- when rats multiply in response to large supplies of bamboo seeds. When the bamboo seeds are exhausted, the rats leave the forests to forage on stored grain, which in turn causes devastating “bamboo famines.” In 1959, Mizo hills were devastatingly struck by a bamboo famine. Unable to procure any massive help from the central government, the local famine relief group metamorphosed into a political party naming it Mizo National Front or MNF. Under the leadership of Laldenga, the MNF resorted to arms on 28th February 1966 declaring independence from India. The repercussions followed sooner when the Indian government designated Mizoram to be “a disturbed area” and the Indian Air Force ushered a series of aerial attacks dropping bombs in several parts of Aizawl on 5th March, 1966. This heralded the twenty-year long chronicle of insurgency, *Rambuai* which, when translated into English, means “troubled land”. Sanjoy Hazarika gives a vivid account of the insurgency,

Four days after the rebel assault erupted on 1 March 1966, fighter jets of the Indian Air Force came screaming over Aizawl...It (MNF) had believed that there would be retaliation but not the scale of the counter-strike that followed, which smashed and burnt villages, molested and raped women, virtually displaced the district’s entire population, destroyed property and tortured elderly men and youth. The violence was unprecedented in the history of India and its already nascent struggle against the pro-freedom group in Nagaland which had erupted over a decade earlier....The Rambuai had begun in real earnest with a campaign that, fifty years down the line, should make every Indian ashamed of the government and what it did to a civilian population during a time of conflict. (96-98)

However, this twenty year long saga of “manifest violence” forms only the tip of the iceberg while there are other latent forms of violence that remain below the waterline. The insidious grip of “manifest violence” extends to the human psyche long after they have been manifested. The psychological and the psycho-pathological shades of violence depict personalized trauma, a sense of loss and alienation. In *Reconstructing the Bengal Partition: The Psyche under a Different Violence* (2013), Jayanti Basu terms such violence as “soft violence.” Such violence is like a living wound as the subjects have been constantly suffering from multiple forms of trauma. Malsawmi Jacob in an interview talked about a similar kind of experience that her people have encountered,

The story of Mizo people, especially what they went through during those turbulent times, is important. I used to wonder how they were dealing with the psychological trauma of the time even though ‘political peace’ had returned. After listening to many people, I realised that the emotional wounds had not healed. (2016)

Poems of Protest

If there is one thing that the war cannot paralyze, then that would be words; the words that are shot from the barrels of poets, writers and artists making the age old proverb truer than ever that pen is indeed mightier than any sword. Malsawmi Jacob, who is celebrated for her novel *Zorami: A Redemption Song*, is a poet at heart weaving in her poems a rich mosaic of cultural imagery, social matrix, group laments, angst and reconciliation.

Malsawmi Jacob’s poem “Pi Hmuaki” talks about the Mizo story of Pi Hmuaki, the first known Mizo poetess and her persecution because of her extraordinary vocal skills. She was said to have been buried alive along with her gong. Malsawmi Jacob’s poem “Pi Hmuaki” can also be read keeping in mind the context of censorship and suppression that have been levied on the Mizo people during the twenty year long insurgency. The poignant lines “They couldn’t stand your prophetic voice/ that spoke against their misdeeds as night after night you sang your songs in your lonely hut/ Your gong music enchanted them/ melody drove them wild/ but the lyrics did the mischief –the lyrics pierced their hearts” (Jacob) rightly encapsulate the struggle between poets and tyrants, a war often forged in the shadow of censorship and oppression. Poets, with their prophetic voices, wield a unique power to unravel the truth and interrogate the status quo. Therefore, this power is often interpreted as a threat by those in authority. They cannot stand the prophetic voice of the poet, for it exposes their misdeeds and lay bare the injustices that they perpetuate. In the face of such adversity, poets persist, singing their songs of truth in lonely huts like Pi Hmuaki piercing the hearts of those who would seek to silence them.

Pi Hmuaki

They couldn’t stand your prophetic voice
that spoke against their misdeeds
as night after night you sang your songs
in your lonely hut
Your gong music enchanted them
melody drove them wild

but the lyrics did the mischief –
the lyrics pierced their hearts.

The heroes loved their exploits
heads and loots won in raids
killing was the way to live
to attain the honoured place in pialral³

You derided their philosophy
wouldn't sing their eulogy
after a successful raid,
tried to stop them dating lasi⁴
told them to choose tlangsam⁵ over kangthai⁶

Their annoyance grew day by day,
decided to silence you altogether
Shut you out from golden sunlight
wind and call of chuk-chu-ri-kur⁷ .

Your gong still rings under the earth
Bong! Bong!
A disturbance in tyrants' ears. (Jacob)

Jacob's "The Songster's Lament" carries a unique tone of environmentalism where she emphasizes the devastation of violence hurled on the flora and fauna. She says that "When guns sounded in our land/ bombs shouted/ fire screamed/ cicadas stopped singing..." (Jacob). She reflects how the airspace meant for birds and insects has been drastically overthrown by blackbirds or the black fighter jets of the Indian army that hovered across the sky carrying out an aerial raid. The poem minutely documents the ordeal of the Mizo people during the period of rambuai when she writes "homes went up in flame/ hearths were razed/ the sacred profaned/ music fell silent/ laughter turned to shrieks/ dreams to nightmare wild wolves prowled/ fear stalked every street/ songs curdled rozen by night" (Jacob). However, there is a sense of optimism in the last lines of the poem where the poetess waits for better days to come, for sun to shine on their hills again.

The Songster's Lament

On blue mountain the songster sits
guitar strings all broken
the song becomes a tuneless chant:

“When guns sounded in our land
bombs shouted
fire screamed
cicadas stopped singing

homes went up in flame
hearths were razed
the sacred profaned
music fell silent

laughter turned to shrieks
dreams to nightmare
wild wolves prowled
fear stalked every street
songs curdled
frozen by night.

I'm waiting, waiting.
Will the great bear turn around
over our bamboo hills? (Jacob)

In “Roses, Tar and Blood”, Jacob intertwines images of Nature's beauty with the grim reality of violence. The juxtaposition of scenes, such as roses blooming in the garden and the sun and moon as erstwhile friends, with the brutal images of misdeeds and violence points out the discord between Nature and human beings. The poetess' desire to sing of simpler subjects is thwarted by the darkness of their reality, where the ink of her pen transforms from the beautiful blue of the sky to the murky tar of oppression. Through stark metaphors, the poetess conveys how war pollutes the purity of nature, as blood and tar muddle in the streets, staining everything

with its insidious hands, “So my pen flows with blood;/ today it is someone’s/ tomorrow it may be yours/ then you will find/ the colours all same./ Bloom away, roses in your ruby beauty though blood and tar meet in the street” (Jacob).

Roses, Tar and Blood

“Why have you gone political?”

they ask, “Why don’t you just do
your thing?”

Sure I’d love to sing of roses
blooming in the garden
and on my baby’s cheeks

It would be fun to tell
tales of sun and moon
invent fanciful stories
how they once were friends
then quarrelled one day
and parted ways

The ink I write with
should be blue as sky
flowing out freely
on paper white.

But our land is smeared with dark deeds
crimes so beastly no beast would commit

So my ink becomes tar
sluggish stinking sewage
oozing slimy lies you tell
generation to generation –
lies that justify
treading down
part of humanity
spilling blood

So my pen flows with blood;
today it is someone’s
tomorrow it may be yours

then you will find
the colours all same.
Bloom away, roses
in your ruby beauty
though blood and tar meet
in the street. (Jacob)

Conclusion

Malsawmi Jacob says in her “Power of Words” “I’ll go for words,/ Words are my forte./ Words stab and jab,/ Heal, hurt,/Mask, unmask,/ Paint pictures./ WordsCreate” (Jacob). These words hope to change the world as they lay bare the grim realities of violence. War and its violence can never brew greatness, it can only entail futility and barrenness.

Notes

¹J. V. Hluna and Rini Tochhawng, *The Mizo Uprising: Assam Assembly Debates on the Mizo Movement, 1966-1971*, Vol. IX (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

² J. V. Hluna and Rini Tochhawng, *The Mizo Uprising: Assam Assembly Debates on the Mizo Movement, 1966-1971*, Vol. XI-XII (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012)

³ The place where the spirits of dead people were believed to go.

⁴ Wood nymphs.

⁵ A plant used for healing wounds.

⁶ Nettle.

⁷ Spotted dove.

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