

Rooted Yet Restless: Identity and Longing in Selected Tripura Manipuri Women's Poetry

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Abstract

The paper is a study of selected women poetry from Tripura. Tripura Manipuri poetry by women writers emerge from a complex historical and cultural context marked by migration, displacement, marginality and discrimination. Living outside the geographical and cultural centre of Manipur, Tripura Manipuri communities often experience a persistent sense of rootlessness and cultural dislocation, which deeply informs women's poetic expression. This paper examines how selected Tripura Manipuri women (TMW) poetess articulate feelings of longing, fragmented selfhood, and the absence of a stable and unified identity. Their poetry reveals an ongoing negotiation between inherited cultural memory and the lived realities of exile-like existence within Tripura, where language, tradition, and belonging remain continuously under strain. The poetess' voices oscillate between attachment to ancestral roots and a restless search for self-definition, resulting in expressions of loss, nostalgia, and emotional vulnerability. Through close textual analysis, the study highlights how personal longing becomes a metaphor for collective uncertainty, reflecting the community's struggle to assert cultural identity amid social invisibility and historical neglect. The paper argues that Tripura Manipuri women's poetry not only records emotional unrest but also serves as a subtle form of resistance, preserving cultural consciousness while simultaneously questioning the possibility of a secure and unified identity. Through close reading, these poetesses transform personal pain and emotional restlessness into acts of self-assertion, using poetry as a space to negotiate belonging and articulate alternative forms of identity.

Keywords: Tripura Manipuri Women, Identity, Feminism, Rootlessness, Ima

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Introduction

India's northeastern state Tripura has a rich cultural and historical heritage. Geographically, it is located between longitudes 91.10°E and 92.21°E and latitudes 22.56°N and 24.32°N. Bangladesh makes up the majority of the state's borders, with Assam to the northeast and Mizoram to the east. Agartala is the capital of Tripura. The state is broadly divided into hills and valleys. The Manipuri community in Tripura dates way back to 1798, when Princess Hariseswari, the daughter of King Rajarshree Bhaigyachandra (Meidingu Chingthangkomba), married Maharaja Rajdhar Manikya of Tripura. In addition to marriage alliance, a larger migration took place during the Seven Years' Devastation (1819–1825) in Manipur. Despite relocating to a new region, the Manipuri people made conscious efforts to preserve their language, customs, and cultural identity. In 1928, during the reign of Maharaja Bir Bikram, a Manipuri booklet outlining the rules and regulations of the Kendrio Manipuri Sabha was

published. This publication is regarded as the first written work in Manipuri produced in Tripura. The journey of Manipuri literature in Tripura is comparatively still young and is in its prime stage. Keeping in mind the limited number of Manipuri communities and Bengali influences it is praiseworthy that a good number of literatures are produce and Manipuri literature in Tripura could have a tradition of its own. Over the few decades one can sees a steady publication of books in Tripura. This indicates a positive sign that the public reading is also increasing but comparatively women writers' publications are quite less in number due to various reasons. Though the publication is less each piece is worthy of its appreciation and uniquely contributed in carving women identity in Tripura. Slowly but steady it started carving a women literary tradition in Tripura.

The paper focuses on the recent publication of selected women poetesses of Tripura. The poetesses taken up for studies are L. Mina Devi, Khoisanam Ongbi Birola and

Kshetrimayum Madhabi Singha. These are the contemporary women voices and their collection reflected the unsung songs of the women in Tripura. The poetry collections are written originally in Manipuri language. The titles of the poems and lines are translated roughly in English for my study without sacrificing the essence of the original Manipuri meaning. The women represented by them cannot represent the whole of Manipuri communities in Tripura but they are able to represent the ethos, uncertainty and anxiety of the Manipuri community in Tripura and the universal situation of women. Their poetries represent a voice unheard, an uncertainty of their identity, a frustrated yet trying to hold and preserved the culture and tradition. These women try their best to have 'a room of their own' which is often denied to women who struggles to have their own personal space. As rightly point by Nasrullah Mambrol article entitled, "Analysis Of Virginia Woolf's A Room Of One's Own", that, "*A Room of One's Own* is concerned not only with what form of literary language women writers use, but also with what they write about. Inevitably women themselves constitute a vital subject matter for women writers. Women writers will need new tools to represent women properly" (Web source). These women verses are simple mundane and regular usage in one's daily conversation, yet it touches deep as it is written from their personal experiences that each of the women had undergone. Their voices together strike a deeper meaning to the lives and the situations of women in Tripura. Three different women, three different background, three different positions in society, a social worker, a cultural activist and a housewife but a common shared emotions of motherhood and a longing voice for better Manipur, a better world to live in.

The Study

L. Mina's Devi poetry collection *Mit Taanghanbiro*, Naa Panghanbiro (Let me blind, Let me Deaf) is a collection of 26 poems. The verses are straight from the heart written without any filter. The poems are collection written over the years and finally saw the light of publication in 2024, making it one of the important contributions to the literary tradition of Manipuri in Tripura. In "Ima" (Mother), she highlighted the love and qualities of a mother. She juxtaposes the love of a biological mother and motherland Manipur, she says that one can totally surrender without any hesitation and tell anything to a mother. The poetess acknowledges that we are in this beautiful world because of our mother. She invokes the blessing of her mother. She highlights the duty of a mother and venerates the sense of sacrifice and unconditional love which is rare to get in today's selfish world. The poem reflected the relationship with her mother. The last concluding lines of the poem it says that:

You are the only world for me
Which I can see the mother goddess
River of unconditional love
The source of all love
Mother! My lovely mother.

The tone changes to a more stern and serious in "Nasagi Saktum Maghunganu" (Do Not Lose Your Identity). In this particular poem the poetess warns the younger generation to take care of one's own identity for the welfare of the whole community. She warns that one's must love one's own culture and tradition. She felt dishearten to see what was happening around her. The meaning of 'tulsi' in this poem is double layered. After the Manipuri's settlement in Tripura there is

always a longing to be with the mainland Manipuri in Manipur. The poetess tried her best to safe guard their fore father and mother's tradition and culture of Manipuri which was passed it to them over generations. The subjective 'I' represent the foremothers who have carried a 'tulsi' plant with her, here the 'tulsi' symbolically represent the culture and tradition that was passed on to them. The poetess felt that the tulsi plant is withered and would ultimately die. She is afraid that she won't be able to save it, she a felt a nostalgic connection with tulsi. She put all her energy to save the plant and ultimately she was able to save the tulsi plant as a new sapling grew from the same pot. The poem ends on a positive note of revival and sustaining ones identity.

If one examines Tripura Manipuri women's literary expressions, the question of belonging to the state Manipur emerges as a central emotional and epistemological alliance. The sense of belonging is neither purely geographical nor merely nostalgic. For women writing from Tripura, Manipur is not only a homeland remembered it is a lived inheritance carried in language, ritual, memory, and imagination. It is a sense of pride and identify.

In 'Chey Gi Leigum '(Like A Paper Flower), the poetess question the identity of women being treated only as a decorative piece without any feeling. The poem poses a universal reality of women's position in the society. Their opinion doesn't matter in decision making of the house hold. The lines are embedded with multiple layers. The poems traces the journey of a gardener wants to create a flower garden. He collects different types of flower from different part of the world. He wants his garden to be beautifully decorated with varieties of flowers from different part of the world. The poetess felt a sense of helplessness and muteness in asserting her identity. As the society thinks that women are like that flower made of papers without live and emotions. The identity of women is challenge like those of beautiful flower just fit to be pluck and planted somewhere for the sake of an amusement or hobbies. The muted flower has to quietly follow the gardener's whim. It depicts the condition of women. At the outset women are occupying certain position in the society but within the four wall of the household they still have no voice and the power of decision making is a distant dream. No matter what position they hold, how much money they earn, they still are muted like the paper flower. From the time immemorial women only fit duty as per the society is producing babies and looking after the household. And it still echoes as a reality in many household today.

In the title poem of the collection *Mit Taanghanbiro*, Naa Panghanbiro (Let me blind, Let me Deaf), the verses echoes the ethnic crises that took place on 3rd May 2023 in Manipur. The clash has lead displacement of more than 30 thousand people, forced to live in refugee camps and over hundreds of people dying from both the communities. Ever since then, there has been a series of conflicts and killing without proper solution. As the conflict still continues today, the poetess felt that it's better to be deaf and blind than to see her beloved motherland burn silently. The poetess says in the concluding lines of the poem:

Let me be blind
I don't want to see such a dreadful scene
Communities killing each other
Make me deaf
I don't want to hear the cries of the destitute
News of war from Sanaleibak

Ksh. Madhabi's poetry collection *Thamoi Machet* (Pieces of heart) has 45 poems; it was published in the year 2024. The collection is a series of poetries written over several years. Each of the poems reflects the poetess the inner struggles for survival and search for her identity. In the poem entitled "Leitapham Khangdraba Punshi" (My Apprehensive Life) depicts her personal journey of struggles for survival as a single mother, a displaced from Bangladesh and trying to settle in Tripura with limited resources and reclaiming her own identity. The opening lines of the poems bears open the wound in her heart:

My unsettled heart
 Hunt for peace in chaos
 Tears that roll in my heart
 Asking the question regularly

The spirited poetess never gave up. She fought the battle called life with utter most dignity. She questions her sense of nothingness and identity through her verses. The verses are emotionally charge depicting her journey for survival and redemption. As define in an article by Aroop Saha entitled, "Displacement & its Consequences in the Postcolonial Literature: A Brief Discussion on Naipaul, Coetzee and Desai's Representation," that... Displacement is a vibrant issue in the realm of postcolonial literature for its vast range of consequences on the post-colonial human psyche and their societies... Displacement occurs into two stages. One is physical and another is psychological. The postcolonial writers focus on both stages in their writings to portray the struggle of postcolonial subjects. The physical or territorial displacement forces the people to move to the alien land and it results psychological alienation or displacement". As pointed out by Aroop Saha, the poetess also felt alienated with the land and people as she is physically and emotionally displaced. She skillfully converts her struggles into magnificent verses of life and leading an example of motivation to many.

In "Eaigi Ahangba Atiya" (My Empty Sky), the verses echoes the unending failure and hurdles she faces in her life. This poem also echoes the sense of alienation and displacement. It echoes four main characteristic of alienation as per Marx's theory of alienation are applicable with this poem. They are, (1) Powerlessness, this is reflected how as she is force to leave her own family and her own birth place and without knowing any one is a new place and environment 'what happens in their lives is outside of their control'. (2) Meaninglessness she tries to find a new meaning and purpose of living but she fail every time she stands up for herself. She started to believe that her live has no meaning, everything is so hollow. (3) Social Isolation, society tries to push her away as they consider her and her children a burden. She feels that there is no meaningfully connected with community and do not have meaning with social relationships with other people. As she has been treated like dirt. (4) Self-Estrangement, she felt that there is no one for her so she has no obligation, no interests and desires to satisfy demands placed by social norms. The poetess felt she is lost in this wide world with no one to be called as her own. Even her own family has disowned her and her children. The poem is very subjective, yet reflected the story of many women. The sky is empty for her, she search for meaning and purpose for her existence. She says that:

Wherever I look around
 Its darkness that surrounds
 I must live my life
 Carrying a huge burden
 These entire burdens are designed by my lord.

In this hopeless situation, even death is not friendly with her. She surrenders everything to the almighty. A helpless single mother nowhere to go, nobody wants to own her and help her carry the burden. She compared her life with the dry lifeless leaf. She has no idea what her last pages of her life would be, but she decided not give up and will perform the duty that is assigned to her by almighty.

In the title poem of the collection, "Thamoi Machat" (Pieces of Heart), it talks about the meaning of life, society and identity. The poetess lamented over her failure and struggles for survival. She felt that there is no place for her. Even God chooses whom to listen. The person whom she trusted the most betrayed her, stood against her as an enemy. Everything is against her, even her life, her heart is against her. Life has designed her path and she compromised with it. Death is against her. The poem ends on a discouraging note. The concluding lines say:

Surprise at the wishes of Almighty
 Surprise at my heart way of suffering
 Heart! Who created you?
 What is heart?

The poetess felt that the pieces of her broken heart cannot be mended. She sometimes is amaze at her own tremendous courage to fight against life. The poem is a personal documentation of the poetess triumph over the atrocity that life throws upon her. With each struggles she comes out stronger.

In *Mikap Thoklo Kanglei Cha* (Wake up Kanglei People), the poetess highlighted virtues and qualities of Manipur. It also highlights the contemporary situation in Manipur, the ethnic clashes and the disagreement among the different communities in Manipur. She started parsing the beauty of Manipur. The clashes and problems are symbolically highlighted through different flowers like Siroy lily, Kombilei, Inganlei (indigenous flower of Manipu). The poetess laments the various forms of violence and exploitation of women. She warns that we should be vigilant and safeguard our own identity. The poem ends on positive note praying for peace and harmony.

In "Nupi gi Magun" (Persona of a woman), here the poetess leisurely took time to idolize the qualities of women. A quality woman is not defined merely by her external achievements, but by the depth of her character, resilience, and compassion. She carries within her the strength to nurture and the courage to stand firm in the face of adversity. She is educated not only in academics but is emotional strong. She knows when to speak and when to remain silent, when to be gentle and when to be rigid. She balances tradition and modernity with sophistication and poise. She may face limitations imposed by circumstances, yet she transforms obstacles into opportunities for growth. In the concluding lines she prays for women hood. She says:

Women always be alive
 For centuries and centuries

The poetess juxtaposes both creator and destructor qualities possessed by women. A quality woman balances strength and sensitivity. She does not seek validation through traditional values. She seeks growth through authenticity. She challenges stereotypes that women must be soft-spoken or self-sacrificing. The collection surely takes the reader into another layered of struggles, redemption and calming womanhood with grace and dignity.

Kh Birala's poetry collection "Ima da Iba Chithi" (Letter written to Mother) has 44 poems, it was published in the year 2021. The poetess discussed Manipur's evolving situation as a result of globalization and adhering to western trends in "Ima Gi Poatak Kaona Ray (We have forgotten the advice of our Mother)." She makes an effort to advise the Manipuri people in Tripura to be careful and not to forget our roots. Women have long been seen as guardians of morality, language, and culture. Although this position recognizes their impact, it has frequently limited them to unseen work and unacknowledged contributions towards society and community building. This invisibility is contested by feminism. It demands that women's intellectual, creative and cultural work be recognized as activity rather than must obligation. The poetry collection represents poetess personal desire to become a better person and make society safer for women.

"Imalon" (Mother Language) highlighted the necessity and importance of speaking one owns language while conversing at home. In Tripura majority are Bengali speaking people and the means of communication is Bengali. The poetess feels that since Manipuri in Tripura are minority, Manipuri language is often less spoken as many Manipuri speak in Bengali for their daily conversation even at homes. But over the decade conscious effort has been made by the Manipuri people to speak in mother tongue during their conversation at home. This has brought a significance changes. In Manipuri society, women have never been passive figures. From the historic *Nupi Lan* movements as rightly pointed out by Shruti Chakraborty stating that "... Manipuri women have bravely led protests across the years-be it the Meira Paibi movement in the 1970s against drug abuse and alcoholism or the 12 women standing nude in 2004 against AFSPA. There have been other women-led movements across the country as well, but *Nupi Lan* remains a strong testament to the power of women's voice in India" (Web Source). In spite of all the achievements something is not right. The poetess felt that the vibrant presence of women in the Ima Keithel (Mother's Market), Manipuri women have long occupied visible and powerful spaces. Yet, despite this visibility and their intellect, women have not always received due credit. The poem urges a feminist perspective to re-examine and re-value the contributions made by our mothers beyond symbolism.

In "Akhoi Gi Leibak Kanan Lapkani" (Who Will Decide Our Destiny), the poetess question the plight and the situation of Manipur. She worries who will take care of Manipur. Manipur has always been in war zone, conflict, ethnic crises one after another. So she pleaded the younger generation to safeguard and protect the integrity of Manipur. The poem questions our sense of duty towards our motherland. Are we giving the due and respect to our motherland? Why is Manipur so divided? Who is responsible? Who is accountable? The poetess felt that we need to come together as one without any discrimination to safe our motherland. Just glorification will not work, we have to live the talk and walk the talk to safe Manipur.

In "Meitei Leina" (Manipuri's Disease) it beautifully captures the root cause of problem in Manipur. The term 'disease' is a symbolic representation of all the problems pertaining to Manipur. The diseases the poetess indirectly highlighted are corruption, power struggle, money vs. muscle power, extortion, ethnic clash, egoistic, jealousy, bandh, strike, blockage, exploitation of poor people, and competition of dowry. The poetess tries to warn the mindset of modern man, she says:

What's your, what's mine
Mine is better than yours
If some are better off
The jealousy running deep
We are all one

The poetess expresses dissatisfaction with the current trend of running after wealth and power. By fighting among ourselves we are giving opportunity to other. The poetess urges the importance loving motherland and treating everyone as one family and to stop fighting among ourselves.

In "Nupi" (Woman) the poetess highlight the mistreatment of women. How women are look down? A woman who upholds dignity and cultural awareness becomes the silent engineer of generations. But she needs to justify her existence, through her words and actions. As the poetess rightly says in the concluding lines that women have to:

Answer? What
As I am born as a woman
We are supposed to live as a subordinate
We are unfortunate being born as a woman
Alive! Tortured life with heavy burden
Taking each step carefully
Try to calm the anxious heart.

The title poem of the poetry collection "Imada Iba Chithi" (Letter Written to Mother) is a poem about love gratitude and appreciation. The poetess pens down the unconditional love and admiration for her mother land (Manipur) and to her biological mother. In literary and artistic spaces, women play an equally transformative role. Whether as creators, critics, performers, or mentors, they bring sensitivity, depth, and authenticity. Their voices enrich the narrative of a community. When a woman is empowered intellectually and culturally, she becomes a torchbearer of language, literature, and identity of her community.

Mother
The realty has not yet diminish
The colour of the sky never fades
More it becomes prominent
Real face of the Pretension friends today all your children are
together
Do not worry Ima

Thus the poetess ends the poem on positive note of acceptance, tolerance and co-existence.

Conclusion

The poetry collections are personally experience and are charged with emotions. The poetesses are grounded in cultural ecology, yet negotiating displacement felt by many as it can trace back to their roots.

They make every effort to recover their identity and are genuinely content and proud to be referred to be Manipuri women. Their poetry frequently displays an internal struggle with a need to fit in. They understand the various roles that women play. The poetesses' attempts to break free from societal scrutiny reflect their feminist existential ideas. They reclaim language rather than merely inheriting it. Instead of enduring longing in silence, they turn it into text. The "land" becomes a touchable and symbolic negotiation arena for Tripura Manipuri communities. While the current environment becomes a place of adaptation, the homeland (Manipur) frequently exists as a place of remembrance and cultural rootedness. This ecological continuity is embodied by women as the major memory bearers. The three poetesses aim to develop women who inspire others, foster development, and selflessly contribute to the welfare of families and society. Their strength lies not in dominance, but in firmness. Women who can sustain tradition while embracing modernism. In cultural and literary spaces, women's voices have often been marginalized or filtered through male perspectives. "Ima" (Mother) is the recurring theme of these poetesses. Their experiences introduce new themes of identity, longing, displacement, resilience, body politics, and emotional labor expanding the literary and intellectual landscape. They sketch the image of a worthy woman who is an aware, thoughtful and who defines herself outside of set limitations. Communities become more equal, inclusive, and vibrant when women are self-sufficient intellectually and culturally grounded. Their verses attempt to convey a powerful message of gender equality, love and universal brotherhood and acceptance.

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