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An Identity Born Out of Shared Grief: The Account of Rambuai in the Contemporary Mizo Literary Texts

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Abstract:

Anthony David Stephen Smith's definition of nationalism as a feeling of "intense bond of solidarity", when applied to contemporary Mizo nationalist consciousness, is a bond born not out of pre-historic kinship but of shared grief and a spiritual anchor in Christianity. The MNF movement for self-determination, which began with half-hearted support from the people spiraled off into the most violent and darkest period in Mizo history known as *Rambuai* (1966-1986) which, when translated into English, means 'troubled land'. The human experience of this period has been a subject of Mizo literature. Three works of fiction— *Nunna Kawngthuam Puiah* (1989), *Silaimu Ngaihawm* (2012) and *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015) are among the best literary representations of human suffering in the troubled land. These works will be used as textual bases upon which the role of religion and spirituality in bringing about a reconciliation and healing can be studied. The paper examines how the *rambuai* memories construct the Mizo identity that relies on forging connections between religion and a heroic cultural past.

Keywords: Rambuai, Mizo, identity, reconciliation, memory

The Mizo National Front was formed in 1961 with sovereignty as its declared objective. The 'call for independence' against the Indian government was preceded by the *Mautani* Famine (1960). The MNF declaration has been commonly seen as the culmination of Mizo nationalist sentiment that had been in the making for long (Nibedon, 2013; J.V Hluna and Tochwawng, 2012). The Mizo political consciousness developed since the nineteenth century when the Mizos came into contact with the British Raj. Although the present study aims to focus on how the collective experience of pain during Mizo Movement, as recounted in literary texts, has shaped the Mizo consciousness in contemporary times, it seems pertinent to take a historical detour to arrive at a better understanding of the subject under study.

The British expedition of the Lushai Hillsⁱⁱ was a result of the regular raids conducted by the tribesmen on the plains of Assam and so the objective was to teach the raiders a lesson. It however proved to be a difficult task to bring the people who inhabited the Lushai Hills under control. It took more time than to conquer the subcontinent (Nibedon, 1980, p.171). Therefore, it was thought wiser to bring in the missionaries who would 'civilise' them through religion and thereby enable the British administrator to conquer them culturally and morally (Sajal Nag, "Folk Intellectual Tradition for Resistance: Invention of Traditions and Lushai Counter to Cultural Colonialism in North East India, 1904-1911", pp.1-2). And since the land was not considered to be economically very lucrative, as is obvious from the report of Major Anthony Gilchrist McCall, the

colonial experience in the Lushai Hills was quite different from that in other parts of India. The colonial intent was to be seen as a paternal figure of authority rather than as an invader who must be resisted at all cost. Therefore, the image of the white man as a self-sacrificing figure who has come to enlighten the people with his religion and education is more predominant in the Mizo perception of the British Raj. The British policy that “help must therefore be at a sacrifice, spiritual and financial, the latter at any rate in the beginning, from those who control its destiny” ensured that “control at such cost will be welcomed, not resisted as domination and exploitation” (Mc Call, 1977).

Although the British encounter may not be seen as the catalyst to the Mizo ethno-nationalist consciousness, it did initiate two necessary elements for the act of ‘becoming’ a Mizo and these were- religion and vernacular literature. These, according to Adrian Hastings, are the integral and determinative elements for the construction of nationhood (1997, p.3). The British annexation of the territories inhabited by the Mizos was soon followed by the arrival of Christian missionaries who synchronized the gospels with education. The two missionaries, JH Lorraine and FW Savidge who arrived in the Lushai Hills on January 11, 1894 formulated the Lushai alphabet “A Aw B Ch” and made possible the development of vernacular literature. The translation of the gospels in Duhlian dialect, first initiated in 1896, made possible the adoption of a common language for the Mizos, who till then did not have a lingua franca because each clan had a different dialect or language variation. Not only did each clan have different languages but also different *sakhua* (loosely translated now as religion) and it was only after the adoption of Christianity that it became possible to overcome distinctions made on the basis of clans:

“Besides the linguistic barriers, Christianity also overcame the establishment of separate villages and communities based upon clanship divisions. As different families and clans strictly observed particular *sakhua*, changing one’s *sakhua* was akin to cutting off one’s identity and risking the wrath of the family deities” (Dingluaia, 2018, p. 246).

Thus, literature and the new religion became important determinants in fostering a sense of kinship amongst the different clans. However, the nationalist consciousness that was brewing in different parts of India against the British did not quite reach the Mizos because of the fact that Lushai Hills was governed under a different administrative policy as ‘Excluded Area’, which kept the region and its people remain secluded and sequestered.

Therefore, it was not until the twentieth century postcolonial context that the people actually became aware of their distinctive identity- an identity defined by common cultural traditions, folklore and linguistic affinities- different from other communities. Based on such similarities and commonalities, the varied groups of people, who were once at war with each other, decided to come together and carve out a common identity under the nomenclature ‘Mizo’ or ‘Zo-fate’. In fact, the generic name ‘Mizo’ by which the people inhabiting the mountainous regions that later came to be named as Lushai Hills (in 1890-92) are now known was adopted only by the turn of the 20th century. Lushai Hills became named as Mizo Hills District within the state of Assam on 25th April, 1952.ⁱⁱⁱ With a change in the political scenario of the country, there began a growing consciousness amongst the Mizos as to the need to preserve their cultural identity as a group distinct from others. A certain sense of the ‘we’ and ‘them’ was becoming more pronounced when faced with a gradually looming threat to Mizo cultural identity. Mizo language and traditions were

steadily being abandoned by the younger generations who were becoming more exposed to other cultural groups. With the objective to safeguard the ethnic identity of the Mizos, the Mizo Cultural Society was formed in 1950 under the leadership of Laldenga, which was rechristened as Mautam Famine Front during the *mautam* famine and finally became the Mizo National Front.

It may be said that the Mautam Famine of 1960 provided Laldenga and his supporters the opportunity to express the dissatisfaction of the people against the Assam government and gave birth to the Mizo National Front, formed in 1961, with sovereignty as its declared objective. Although the Mizo nationalist uprising, that began with only half-hearted support from the people, may be seen as a catalyst to the Mizo 'nationalist becoming', it lacked the 'intense bond of solidarity' Anthony David Stephen Smith identifies as crucial to the spirit of nationalism. It is, in fact, the experience of indescribable pain endured as a result of the uprising which has formed the "bond of solidarity" in the Mizo consciousness.

K.C Lalvunga, who writes under the pseudonym of Zikpui Pa, points out the lack of enthusiasm to the nationalist call for sovereignty in his *Nunna Kawng Thuam Puiah* (1989) when he narrates that the elders chose not to object too harshly to the idea of sovereignty because they did not want to hurt the sentiments of the young men : "*tlangval ho rilru tih nat loh nan independent chu an do tak duh lova...*" (p.73) and that there were also some sections of the populace, especially the supporters of Mizo Union, who were ridiculing not only the call for sovereignty but also the very idea of distinct Mizo identity (p.74) but among the youth, a self-consciousness was definitely growing as a result of being "othered" by the dominant Assamese community. The novel *Nunna Kawngthuam Puiah* (1989) shares instances of the processes of 'othering' through the recollections of the protagonist, Chhuanvawra Renthle, about his college days in Shillong:

"Once during our football match, some Assamese boys, inspite of knowing fully well that we could not speak Assamese, were stubbornly speaking to us in Assamese and gave all the instructions about the match in Assamese. Angered, Thansavunga replied, 'Stop your bloody Assamese. I can't understand'... 'Why can't you understand Assamese? Don't you know it is a state language, you bloody fool?'" (p. 49).

Such instances have the potential to ignite deep passions, when repeated over a long time. Sanjoy Hazarika's account of a young Mizo whose father was a Brigadier in the Indian Army reaffirms this sense of 'othering' that was present within the postcolonial Indian context:

When narrating about the Indian Army brigadier musing about his son, Sangliana, "The young man 'loved', he said, the idea of a homeland, taking up arms for it, of fighting against India, the juggernaut. Even in his travels to New Delhi and Calcutta and elsewhere in the country, he had felt the sting of discrimination and racial slurs despite being an army officer's son, his family being part of the elite of their people. That sting continues to be felt by countless others from his state and their region decades later when they are snubbed, teased, abused and the women molested and groped in New Delhi and other parts of the Hindi heartland." (2018, p.83).

Much as such observations like those of Nirmal Nibedon that "...deep in the Mizo psyche there persisted a sense of unfulfilment, a silent and sincere search for their identity and an effort to bring tremendous latent energy of their people back to a level of dignity and equality they had known before the invaders [the British] had come" (1980, p.311) cannot be said to be totally

untrue, the view that the colonial rulers were seen more as paternal figures also seems to hold much ground, as reflected in statements of prominent Mizo figures like K.C Lalunga, "As we look back, we are able to discern more clearly the changes the colonial rule had brought about. It is easy to blame the colonialism but we must remember that colonialism had brought with it a civilizing factor and Mizos are the true beneficiaries" (2013, p.99). However, a sweeping observation of the colonial encounter as being 'beneficial' ignores the fact that the colonial masters, for their administrative convenience, had drawn boundaries where there was none and clubbed together regions which had very different cultural and political structures and historically had never shared affinity, and finally left behind an impossible mess for the new rulers to clear. Having said that, it is also a truism that the 'pain and humiliation' that produced the 'intense bond of solidarity' among the Mizos— the quintessential of ethno-nationalism— came not from the foreign invader but from their own countrymen. Malsawmi Jacob, in her discussion about her book *Zorami* (2015) with Jaydeep Sarangi, succinctly states, "the way I see it, the real subordination of the Mizo people was what the Indian Army did to them in the aftermath of the uprising. The deprivation of power and voice was also most acute then. The air raids and Army atrocities were hushed up. The people of Mizoram became voiceless victims. Yes, *Zorami* has spoken out for the people whose voice was stifled."^{iv}

The MNF movement for self-determination, which began with half-hearted support from the people had spiraled off into the most violent and darkest period in Mizo history known as *Rambuai* (1966-1986) which, when translated into English, means 'troubled land'. This was the period which witnessed the 1966 aerial bombing of Aizawl that remains a blight in the nation's history. Sanjoy Hazarika gives an account of the aerial bombing:

Four days after the rebel assault erupted on 1 March 1966, fighter jets of the Indian Air Force came screaming over Aizawl...Indian bludgeoning was not wholly unexpected by the MNF. It 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. (2018, pp. 96-98)

It was this historical catastrophe of the aerial bombing of Aizawl, now the capital city of Mizoram, that Jacob is referring to when she describes the post-bombing scene. Aizawl lay in shambles and those houses that survived the air-raids were burnt down. The experience of distraught citizens who begged for mercy and yet were denied human compassion is lucidly expressed in *Zorami*.

"His home...escaped the fire and was still standing after the air-raids. The Assam Rifles men came and burned it down. He stood at the door begging them to spare his home, but they pushed him aside and torched it, laughing loudly as the flames rose." (2015, p.155)

The Mizo District was declared a "disturbed area" by the Government of Assam under the Assam Disturbed Area Act of 1955. Law and order were entrusted to the Indian army and though martial

law was not officially declared, the army was armed with the draconian Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA), 1958^v and vide Rule 32 of the Defence of India Rules, 1962, they also proclaimed emergency in the area under article 352 of Indian Constitution (V.L Hluna & Tochwawng, 2012, p. xviii). Thus, the juridical order that governed a democracy was no longer valid to a people who were still part of the democratic country. Within the framework of the law is created what Agamben calls a 'state of exception' that "gives power to eliminate certain categories of citizens" (2005, p.1). Agamben's idea is developed from Carl Schmitt's conceptualization of sovereign power as possessing the monopoly on the ability to decide on what calls for a state of exception, on what it considers as a threat to its integrity.

Agamben, in his *State of Exception*, explains this concept of a "state of exception" under which the juridical order becomes invalid as "the legal form of what cannot have legal form" (p.1). His idea of modern totalitarianism is significant to an understanding of how the state mechanism works in contemporary politics to wield control: "modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system" (p.1). In the face of threats, the 'state of exception' is seen as the dominant paradigm of government. Agamben's study of the "state of exception" becomes relevant when it comes to the state of affairs in relation to the AFSPA. Under the "disturbed area" tag, the people of Mizoram became a "category of citizens" who were governed by a state of exception in the form of the AFSPA: "The AFSPA under which the Army was operating in the Mizo Hills empowered officers to shoot even unto death where it was considered needed, requiring only that due warning be given as deemed necessary" (V.L Hluna & Tochwawng, 2012, p.161). The people's pleas for help fell on deaf ears and their sufferings were seen as a necessary consequence. In his reply to the plea against military outrages on innocent Mizo civilians, the Home Minister of India, Y. B. Chavan, in Delhi is reported to have said: "I have to punish my children severely if they behave badly" (Nibedon, 1980, p.118). The horrendous suffering undergone by the people is brushed aside by callous and lackadaisical observations such as "There must have been some amount of psychological suffering and physical torture when the villagers were asked to shift from places where they lived for ages. But of course, this cannot be escaped. Security is far more important than the bodily sufferings of *some people*" [emphasis is mine] (V. Venkata Rao quoted in Pachuau & Schendel, 2015, p. 308). Unfortunately, "the bodily sufferings of some people" have far reaching consequences that affect beyond the physical to the psychological and has the potential to affect generations.

With overall responsibility of army operations given to Major General Sanghat Singh, the first battalion of Indian soldiers (the 8th Sikh Bn.) made their way into the Mizo Hills on the 3rd of March, leaving behind a trail of tears and cries of women that rent the air. The 4th of March, the day this battalion entered Kolasib, is reported to have been the single day with the highest incident of rape in the entire history of the hills (Hluna & Tochwawng, 2012, p.163). It is important to note here that the advance of the troops was marked by 'rape' of the enemy women. It is pertinent to distinguish what happened in Mizoram from what happened in other war-torn regions, where rape accompanies atrocities of the armies. In Mizoram, military aggression began with rape and the army posts that surrounded the villages continued to represent sites of sexual aggression (Hluna & Tochwawng, 2012, p. 162) and it was brought to the notice of the Assam Assembly that

not even children or pregnant women were spared from the sexual atrocities (Hluna & Tochwawng, 2012, pp.170-71).

Rape as a concomitant of war violence has to do with the demonstration of power to have the desired effect of terror, used as a military strategy. Since the Second World War, the use of rape as a weapon of war had assumed strategic importance. Yasmin Saikia's statement in the context of Bangladesh War in 1971 can be applied in the NEI context as well,

"Raping women in Bangladesh was a rite to assert the power of men's ability to destroy the vulnerable and make it impossible for a woman to find a whole self after the war. Rape was a tool to destroy women's link with the past. They were doomed to live without their collective memory; their personal history became a secret that could not be disclosed." (2011, pp. 60-61).

There can be no clearer example of the sexualized aspect of military conflict than when the advancing human machines are utilized by the state to discipline and punish. Since patriotic honour is often tied with women's sexual respectability, enemy women are often seen as legitimate targets of rape. The horror of rape has been described in varied ways as an intent to depersonalize the victim (Mertzger, 1976); as an attack that affects the victim's physical but also psychological and social identity (Weis and Borges, 1973); and as a weapon of terror (Sheffield, 1987).

Though rape as an aspect of militarized conflict is the most painful, it is at the same time the most silenced because "the memories survive only in the private sphere and are dealt with as private matters by the victims' families and often solely by the victim who hides in 'shame' (Saikia, 2011, p. 63). The ordeal of a rape victim, whose suffering is doubled by her need to hide the truth, is seen in *Zorami* when the narrator tells us that Zorami "kept her mouth shut", "she never spoke out" because "such a thing is not for telling". (p.43) Zorami, who according to the author, is drawn as the 'prototype' of all victims who suffered the same kind of fate, "learned to be ashamed. And to keep quiet. So, she did not tell anyone about the bully. Neither did she talk about the dirty man with the dirty touch". (p.42) Therefore, this aspect of terror inhabits the silenced zone of the private sphere and much as it caused psychological injury to the Mizos, it has not been able to share the same space as the other forms of military aggression whose memory has formed the 'bond of solidarity' in the Mizo consciousness. In the nationalist "becoming" of Mizoness persists, borrowing Yasmin Saikia's phrase, "the hierarchy of men's truth and women's silences" (2011, p.12).

What has impacted the Mizo consciousness most is the brutal experience of the village re-grouping. The village re-grouping that was carried out in Mizoram and Nagaland was a military strategy that was modeled on colonial counter-insurgency methods of the British in the Boer War in South Africa (1899-1902) and later against communist insurgents from 1948-1960 in the Malay Peninsula to crush a Communist insurgency (Hazarika, 2018, p. 98; Pachuau and Schendel, 2015, p. 306). In Mizoram, it was done in full vengeance with an objective to break the Mizo spirit. According to Joy Pachuau and Schendel, the forced resettlement directly affected 87 per cent of Mizoram's rural population and 82 per cent of its total population (2015, p. 308). Margaret Ch. Zama and Vanchiau give the human dimension of what happened:

Horrendous military action was initiated whereby the inhabitants of villages located throughout the length and breadth of Mizoram, were herded overnight with just only a few hours' notice, to leave their all except what they could carry, and have their beloved homesteads burnt to the ground before their very eyes" that made even "the elderly [cling] to their doorposts, weeping openly. (2016, p. 68)

Brutalities inflicted on a population become memories not only of the victims but also of those who were tasked with the duty. V.S Jaffa, who had to carry out the village grouping in Mizo Hills as the Addl. District Magistrate, recalls with regret: "The grouping exercise carried out over 1967-70 has left a huge scar in the Mizo psyche. The romance of the Mizo village life disappeared forever" (Nag, 2012, p.12). The feeling of desolation and helplessness is best articulated in a song composed by Suakliana in 1968 titled as "Khaw Sawikhawm hla" which is said to be the saddest song that could make its listeners weep openly when it was aired on the All India Radio, sung by Siampuii Sailo. The poet compares the entire population of Mizoram to a faded cloth and a *riakmaw* bird, homeless and hungry (Zama & Vanchiau, 2016, p.65).

It is recorded that, as part of the army atrocities, the security forces engaged in different forms of punishments, from putting their prisoners into sacks filled with burning hot chilies, forcing villagers to kneel in confined spaces for endless hours in the scorching sun or rainy nights to tying them to a *change* tree (a species of banana plant) to be burnt alive (Hluna & Tochwawng, 2012, p. 162). The Mizos were dispossessed of their rights not only in terms of their citizenship in a democratic nation but as human beings. In the Assam Assembly debates, Gaurishankar Bhattacharyya described the sufferings endured by the Mizos as a result of the re-groupings in metaphors of the Holocaust, referring to the village groupings as 'concentration camps'^{vi}. To be able to comprehend such an experience by the human imagination, according to Mbembe (citing Hannah Arendt), is never possible "for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death" (2019, p.66) because as Mbembe puts it, "its inhabitants have been divested of political status and reduced to bare life" (p.66) and therefore it is a life with no parallels. And this place, which is created by the state, is "the ultimate expression of sovereignty" by the power invested in it "to dictate who is able to live and who must die" (pp. 66-67).

Sexual violence was the order of the day and as disgusting as it may sound, there are some who, like a certain Major Pritam Singh, indulged in extremities in pursuance of the horrid act and he was known to have kept a list of all his victims (Hluna & Tochwawng, p.163). In her historical narrative, *Zorami*, Jacob perhaps draws the character of Major Kohli from this figure: "The Major had fallen across the bridge with a forefinger on his revolver trigger. When they searched his pockets, they found a diary among other things" (p.132). When it was suggested that the diary should be preserved as a "memorial of *vai* (Indian) army's dirty deeds" (p.133), the leader of the 'ambush party', Dina replied that it was better to "wipe it out" (p.133) and so the pages were torn out and burnt. The phrase 'wipe it out', when understood in terms of memory, suggests erasure. Given the unwillingness to "preserve" it in memory, and also because, as is pointed out in *The Mizo Uprising*, "a lot of Literature written before and during the years of Insurgency was burnt either by the soldiers or by the writers themselves..." (Hluna and Tochwawng, 2012, p.xii), it is not surprising when Margaret Ch. Zama and Vanchiau argue that Mizo writers have been 'reticent' about memories of the period for subjects of literary works. They imply that it is perhaps because of the pain being so hurtful that it becomes "inexpressible", quoting Easterine Kire—"In the worst

of the war years, the horror has taken us beyond words into silence; the deep silence of inexpressible pain" (2016, p. 66).

Although the memory of the *rambua* seems to have imposed what Tom Segev calls a "posthumous identity" (1993, p.11) that has formed part of the cultural memory, the memories are disjointed or sometimes incoherent recollections as survivors try to remember after twenty-five years. They have kept their stories suppressed for so long not only because of fear but also perhaps because they were too raw and painful. Stories of those years are fragmented memories that "cannot be substantiated by written records on most accounts" because "for twenty years, the Mizo people had lived in fear of being branded as rebels, and for twenty years, they refrained from writing diaries, creative outpourings or records of experiences because of the dreaded soldiers who could not read the language were wont to brand them as "MNF documents" (Hluna & Tochwang, 2012, p. xi). Such experience is dramatized by James Dokhuma in his novel *Silai Mu Ngaihawm* (2012) when the love letter sent by Sanglura to Ramliani falls into the hands of the Security Forces. Since the Indian soldiers are unable to read and understand the contents in the letter, they immediately brand it as an MNF document which provokes them to escalate their atrocities.

The state commemoration of the aerial bombing of Aizawl on the 5th of March, observed as *Zoram Ni* (Zoram Day) to commemorate the fateful day on which many innocent lives had been lost, started only since 2008, forty-two years after the attainment of statehood. The overlapping of forgetting and remembering is what proves to be an obstacle confronting especially women's dimension in the reconstruction of coherent narratives. When one has for so long been reduced to silence, a sort of being in stasis, one is faced with the difficulty of regaining one's voice and one's subjectivity. One way of looking at the cultural repression of women's memories might be the fear, not so much as the lack, of empathizing with the victims. This phenomenon is best described in the words of Susan J. Brison when she speaks about the difficulty in recovering from the trauma of "Nazi death camps":

"Intense psychological pressures make it difficult...for others to listen to trauma narratives. Cultural repression of traumatic memories comes not only from an absence of empathy with victims but also out of an active fear of empathizing with those whose terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own" (1999, pp. 48-49).

In *Silaimu Ngaihawm*, it is the 'inexpressible' pain of Ramliani that ultimately leads to her death. She internalizes the pain of losing her beloved who is killed by a bullet fired during an encounter and ironically, that very bullet becomes the only souvenir she has of her beloved. It was as if her grief consumed her whole until she gave up existing. Ramliani thus becomes reduced to an indistinct human form as a result of her inexpressible 'memory'. The bullet becomes the symbol of pain and it is so deeply entrenched within the Mizo consciousness that it becomes part of the Mizo identity. Although it was the very bullet that killed her beloved, it becomes part of Ramliani and she is made to carry it to her grave. Likewise, the Mizoness that was produced after the *Rambuai* cannot be seen in isolation from the pain and humiliation suffered by the Mizos as a people. And it was this traumatic experience that left the people with a collective inability to tell their story. In the absence of collective response to the dehumanization experienced, individuals are left with what Rosenblum and Minow call either "too much memory" or "too much forgetting"

(2002, pp. 1-13) and for the Mizos, it was the latter that produced, borrowing Paulo Freire's phrase (and re-used by Sanjoy Hazarika in his introduction to *After Decades of Silence* (2016) in the Mizo context), a "culture of silence".

The traumatic experience of the *rambuai* becomes part of the collective memory which affects not only those who were there to witness but even those who were not there. The idea of traumatic memory extending beyond the victims is not particular to the Mizos. Speaking of the Cherokee relocation, Woodward had recorded, "Alluded to as "the Trail of Tears" by Indians of all the Five Civilized Tribes, the journey west was a tragic event that could not easily be erased from the emigrants or their descendants" (1982, p.218).

In order to understand the impact of the historical catastrophe undergone by the Mizos, it is important to take into consideration ways in which transgenerational trauma, or what Susan Sontag powerfully calls "the pain of others", can shape a people's identity. The phenomenon of what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory" (in the context of the children of the Holocaust victims) involves transgenerational transfer of catastrophic collective memories to what has been termed as the "postgeneration" (Hoffman, 2004) or "generation after" (Hirsch, 2012). Toni Morrison uses the term "rememory" to describe the intergenerational transmission of traumatic experience:

"Some things you forget. Other things you never do. . . Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place— the picture of it— stays, and not just in my rememory but out there, in the world. . . . "Can other people see it?" asked Denver. "Oh yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Some day you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else." and the memory belongs as much to the witnesses as to those who came later "Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm— every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there— you who never was there— if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will" (2005, p.43).

Sajal Nag in his essay "A Gigantic Panopticon: Counter-Insurgency and Modes of Disciplining and Punishment in Northeast India" (2012) suggests that the contemporary phenomenon of trance-like dances in the church, very prominent among the Mizo women, may be the impact of women's traumatic memory which has been repressed and unaddressed and in turn, produces an intergenerational transmission of trauma.

In reconstructing Mizo identity post-*rambuai*, it becomes important to facilitate the process of healing in ways that could help regain the ethno-nationalist pride of being Mizo. While it is agreed that it was the shared experience of pain and the memory of that pain that had been central to forming a collective Mizo identity, it is the 'imperative to forget' through spiritual reconciliation that aids in 'becoming' Mizo after the troubled years. Two factors play important roles in facilitating the "becoming" of a Mizo – religion, and recovery of the heroic and mythic past. While religion aids in "forgetting" a difficult past, the mythic past offers a form of collective memory that facilitates regaining nationalist pride.

Although celebrating a mythic and heroic past and ignoring “difficult pasts” holds less legitimacy in the contemporary mnemonic landscape (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010), it is the ability to forget which is considered by Christian Meier to be considered the cultural achievement rather than the act of remembering and that the process of forgetting after civil wars is the only tried-and-tested solution for social peace.^{vii} However, Assman and Shortt challenge Meier’s “tried-and-tested solution” by questioning the validity of categorizing the two terms- forgetting and remembering- into rigid polarized concepts. For Assman and Shortt, ‘remembering’ or ‘forgetting’ are rarely mutually exclusive practices and therefore more attention must be paid to crossovers such as selective forgetting and partial or transitional remembering because that brings us to two crucial questions:

“who profits, who suffers from forgetting? Can a fresh start really be achieved on an equal basis or is the price too high which one group has to pay?” (2012, p.68).

While the emotional charge of the collective memory of pain and humiliation during the *rambuai* is central to the construction of Mizo identity, the nationalist “becoming” of Mizoneess builds its narrative through a masculinist imagination of the cultural past that glorifies masculine traits of a *pasaltha*.^{viii} In fact, the Mizo National Army (MNA), which consisted of eight battalions were named after legendary heroes of the past: “The first four – Chawngbawla, Khuangchera, Saizahawla and Taitesena – formed the Lion Brigade, which operated in the northern half of Mizoram, and the other four – Joshua, Lalvunga, Vanapa and Zampui Manga – formed the Dagger Brigade, operating in the south” (*Camera as Witness* 318). The appropriation and glorification of cultural heroes continue to hold in the Mizo ethno-nationalist identity that may be discerned in contemporary politico-religious institutions like the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), Young Mizo Association (YMA) and the Kohhran Thalai Pawl (KTP) who were formed through missionary initiatives (Hluna, 2009, pp., 400-408) and continue to function as important bodies. The several sections of the YMA and the KTP are named after different *pasaltha(s)* like Chawngbawla, Taitesena, Vanapa, Khuangchera and so on.

Merged with cultural identity is the religious element. The religious dimension in constructing a new Mizo identity finds its best manifestation in the state anthem of Mizoram “Ro min rel sak ang che” (composed by Rokunga). The song is a prayer to the Christian God addressed as *Pathian* to guide and protect the people and the land against all enemies. The adoption of Rokunga’s poem as the state anthem not only forges connection with the Christian faith but also with the uprising. It was Rokunga’s poetry that stirred the revolutionary spirit and awakened the Mizos to rise up in defense of Zoram. R.L Thanmawia says that Rokunga was “responsible for the uprising of 1966” (1998, p.125) through his poem “Harh la, harh la” (Awake! Awake!) in which he exhorts the people to be brave and rise up to the call of Zoram (the land of the Mizos).

Forging connections with both the religious and the cultural dimensions, a new Mizo man, who inherits all the traits of the cultural heroes as well as those of the Christian faith, is constructed. This new Mizo man takes birth in one of the most popular literary works published after the *rambuai*, *Nunna Kawngthuam Puiah* (1989). In this novel, through the character of Chhuanvawra, K.C Lalvunga has been able to create a sense of masculine dignity and pride in being a Mizo for a generation who was yet to recover from the deepest humiliation as a people. According to Achebe, regaining the lost dignity and pride in his people was the most important

role of a writer. The protagonist, Chhuanvawra (the nation's pride), as the name suggests, is the quintessential of a Mizo man. In strength of character as well as in intelligence, there is none to surpass Chhuanvawra, even among the *vais* (the plainsmen). While Chhuanvawra succeeds in becoming an IPS officer, the female protagonist, Ngurthansangi is forced into marriage with Colonel Ranade who sells her into prostitution. It was Chhuanvawra who later rescues her from the "depth of debauchery" (*suahsualna khu*). When Chhuanvawra meets Sangi at the hotel where she was trapped as a sex slave, her first reaction was shame:

"I am so ashamed. Oh why have you come here, U Chhuan?...I am unclean, I am undeserving of your love" and she repeats "I am no longer worth saving... I am unclean" (pp.176-77).

She is made to feel ashamed although she is a victim against her wishes. Sangi finds healing only when she comes in union with her homeland and God. Chhuanvawra is painted as the most honourable man as he takes Sangi to be his wife and becomes her protector. The pastor, Pu Lianzuala prays for them at the altar, "Dear God...they have been through a great misfortune...we ask that they may forget these painful memories". Therefore, healing comes through spiritual reconciliation and through 'forgetting'. Going by the observations of Siamkima Khawlhring, one of the first Mizo critics, *Nunna Kawngthum Puiah* has been able to fill the Mizo heart with a sense of pride and dignity. Although the novel succeeded in restoring the lost pride and dignity in Mizo men, it failed to do the same when it comes to bequeathing a similar place to women in the reshaping of Mizo identity. While Chhuanvawra is painted as a flawless character, Ngurthansangi's weakness and vulnerability is intended to remind women's failings and therefore their need for protection by Mizo men.

The new Mizo Christian religio-ethnic identity is problematic because in it, the gendered paradigm does not find equal space. When the nationalist discourse relies on masculinist ideals and ignores the marginalized narratives, it faces the danger of privileging selective memories while silencing others and this issue is well articulated in Jacob's re-telling of the *rambuai* experience from a gendered dimension. Zorami's story is not only an individual trauma but is representative of the trauma faced by all rape victims during the Mizo conflict. Zorami's inability to talk about her traumatic rape foregrounds the reason why there is no immediately accessible knowledge of violence: the victim is not allowed to speak of the crime against her. For Zorami, the experience of sexual violence is so traumatic that it is written on her body and she needs to come to terms with that. Zorami's narrative takes us into the excruciating past, the memory of which is so painful that recalling that cannot but be a 'bruising experience', borrowing the phrase Adichie used when she talked about her experience of writing *Half of a Yellow Sun*, in which she recollects the traumatic memory of the Biafran War of 1966. For Adichie, the process is so painful that she "often wondered whether to stop or to scale back" because writing about her people's experience of the war places a responsibility on her.

Either in the memorialisation of the humiliation endured or in the commemoration of the war heroes of the Mizo Movement, representation of women is markedly absent. As Mary Vanlalthanpuii asserts, "scholars dealing on [the] insurgency focus exclusively on male activities" although "female volunteers in the MNF Movement...fought alongside the men and suffered with the men" (2019, p.5). And despite the gendered nature of atrocities, how far the individual

memories of the female victims are allowed to be written in the state sanctified commemoration of the uprising is an uncomfortable question. It is important to remember that "collective memory is an instrument and an objective of power," which like history, is socially constructed, collectively shared, and selectively exploited. Thus, the politics of memory in contemporary Mizoram should be understood in relation to the social construction of Mizoness post-*rambuai*. The memory of atrocities and victimization during the troubled years forms the psychological bond which seeks spiritual consolation through religion while the valorization of a culturally "imagined past", to use Benedict Anderson's term, provides the ethno-nationalist consciousness. The reconstruction of Mizoness, however, seems to resist gender differentiations. Most of the recent literary works have also avoided to analyse how representational paradigms of Mizoness might be gendered and it might be because of the fear of being seen as divisive. However, to conclude, in the national becoming, recovering the silenced story of women is essential because, as Morrison, concludes in *Beloved*, "disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her" (p.323).

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Notes:

- i. Cyclical bamboo flowering in Mizoram that causes a boom in rat population. Food grains are attacked and exhausted by the rats, causing famine in the region.
- ii. The first Lushai expedition of 1871-72 was led by General Bronlow and Brouchier. See T.H. Lewin (1912).
- iii. On 18th April 1952, the Mizo Union leaders met with the Constituent Assembly Advisory Committee under Gopinath Bordoloi, they submitted a memorandum in favour of an autonomous district council with a change in the name of Lushai to the more inclusive Mizo).
- iv. In Conversation with Malsawmi Jacob. Jaydeep Sarangi. *Writers in Conversation* Vol 4. No.1, February 2017. Retrieved December, 2021 from researchgate.net
- v. Armed Forces Powers Act, 1958 empowers security forces to open fire, conduct operations and arrest anyone without warrant in 'disturbed areas'. See "AFSPA Factsheet: The Act and its Extension in India". *Outlook*. 8th Dec 2021. outlookindia.com
- vi. Assam Assembly Debates, 7 June 1967, Vol II No.16. In Sanjoy Hazarika (2018), *Strangers No More*, p.103.
- vii. 7. Christian Meier (2010), *Das Gebot zu vergessen und die Unabweisbarkeit des Erinnerns* (The Imperative to Forget and the Inescapability of Remember). Cited in Assman and Shortt, 2018.

- viii. The word signifies all qualities that define manhood- being fearless, skilled in hunting and warfare and unflinching on the face of danger and pain. Simply translated, the word *pasaltha* stands for 'a braveheart'.

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