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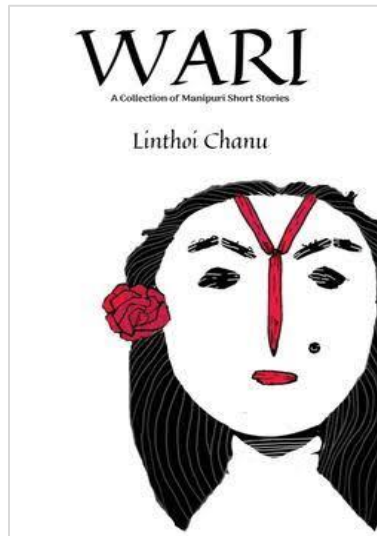
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Reviewed by	Adiba Faiyaz
Affiliation	Department of English at Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India
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Book Review

***Wari: A Collection of Manipuri Short Stories* by Linthoi Chanu**

Publisher: Notion Press. Date of Publication: November, 2019. Language: English. Pages: 143, Price: INR 299/-. ISBN 978-1-64661-788-3.



Reviewed by

Adiba Faiyaz

Department of English at Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

Email: adiba.english@gmail.com

Short Stories, as a genre, has remained popular among academics for their brevity and for their hard-hitting precise themes. Manipuri Short stories in recent times have drawn the attention of the readers even outside Manipur which has emerged as a more mature and powerful form of writing with its close association with Manipuri cultures and traditions. These stories dealt mainly with issues of class, caste, community, discrimination, dominance, hardships, and exclusion. Often these writings concentrate on the societal pattern of life depicting the struggle for survival. In the current trend of Manipuri Short stories, one would notice a clear and blunt depiction of every social and lived reality of the people of the region. All such crises and pressure that emerge in the realm of socio-politico-economic turmoil of the place find recognition in these works. The earlier depiction of the spirit of romanticism in Manipuri short stories soon got replaced by themes abounding in everyday fear and anxiety.

Wari: A Collection of Manipuri Short Stories by Linthoi Chanu is a collection of eight unique stories that introduce readers to the rich cultural traditions and nuances of Manipur. In her other book,

The Tales of Kanglei Throne, (2020) she writes about the mythological stories of Manipur. “Wari” in Manipuri means Story. The stories presented by Chanu are contemporary yet historical in taste, which is blended with tales of black magic, superstitions, and other cultural beliefs of the people of the region. For first-time readers, *Wari* offers a good insight into the socio-cultural fabric of the state. All eight stories are unusually driven and very different from one another. The stories are carefully handpicked to open a window into the terrains of the life situations that have been or are in practice.

The author opens her book with the first story titled, “Near Immortal”. It is a story of an old woman, Tharo, who outlives her younger generation. The story points towards the ancient belief of older citizens living life longer than they are expected to. The story has two different perspectives to offer— the voice of science and logic as advocated by the young doctor and the belief of the society in black magic and superstitions. The story has an open-ended dimension leaving it to the choice of readers to interpret. *Khoidouwa*, the theme of this story, is an urban legend based on a foul practice of black magic. This short story is also a tale of people across generations and their beliefs.

The second story on the list is called “The Hound.” Just like its title, the story revolves around two characters, Pirel, the young college student, and the dog. The story tells us about the harmonious relationship between humans and animals. It revolves around the occasion of ‘*Ekoukhatpa*’ ceremony. The story restores the age-old faith in the security and beliefs in ancestral deity worship. The divine guardian reappearing to protect their children in “the happy form of a hound...” (p. 33) talks about an integral faith of the Meitei community.

The third short story, “When in War”, starts with the depiction of a boat race festival on the shore of Kanglapat where the boat wailed as a sign of warning for any catastrophe. The protagonist, Kunjabihari being ignorant of the reason why he had to participate in this war is a reflection upon many innocent lives, adversely affected by war and its aftermath because of the political motifs of the powerful Kunjabihari taking care of the war captive, talks about human relationship based on empathy and respect. The captive is not just an enemy soldier but also a guest. Years later, when his grandson sings the same lullaby that the soldier used to sing while staying at his place, Kunjabihari finds ultimate solace. The reference to war is to the Second World War and to Imphal being the fierce battleground for the Japanese and the Allied Forces.

“Amity in Queue”, the fourth short story in the series, is an extremely sensitive story. Behind the landlocked state, sister bonding is starkly visible. Sakhi and her new acquaintance, Thabalei, struggling really hard to fill the petrol tank of their Activa, give us an insight into the life and happenings of the people of Manipur. Essential commodities were often brought by trucks and they would get over very soon. Chanu goes on to depict one such typical scene of the road blockades. Surviving with such limited means with hiked prices throws light on the everyday struggle. The story ends with Sakhi returning home with no petrol and with the thought that she might not be able to meet her newfound friend ever again.

The story “Hags of Mountain” uses the technique of story within a story to talk about a popular mythological creature, *Loudraobi*, from the legends of Manipur. This story about deep forest dwellers helps us understand the belief and system related to forest dwellers. Unlike the previous generation, the modern generation considers the myth of *Loudraobi* as a story of forest mammals

only. "Forbidden Passion", the next short story addresses the problem of drug abuse as prevalent in Manipur during the 1980s. Young college students, going to study away from home, often became victims of consuming drugs and getting addicted to it. This social crisis still persists.

"The Scarlet Haophi" and "Floating Dreams" are the last two stories in the book. The former highlights the indigenous faith of the Meiteis. In Manipur, water bodies such as canals, and lakes are considered to be the dwelling places of ancient Gods and hence, they are to be treated with love and respect. The last short story revolves around the lives of three children Senyenbi, Sarif, and Phajabi earnestly waiting for their teachers to keep their dreams floating.

Both chapter illustrations and cover illustrations have been skillfully done by Kaniska Mutum. Her pictorial representation at the beginning of each chapter raises the curiosity of the readers and leads us to hastily dive into the story. It also serves as a picture book where the book and the picture both seem to convey the stories. Thus, the book provides a polyphony of words and images. The eight short stories in *Wari* are a combination of written texts and visual images together juxtaposed together, a kind of representation that effectively delineates the nuances of Manipuri culture and traditions. How a picture is interpreted largely depends on cultural assumptions and hence a book like this demands a different degree of attention and observation on the part of the reader. This intersection of verbal and visual signs helps us imbibe a response that is an amalgamation of critical and creative perspectives.

The hallmark of Chanu's work rests on her understanding and sensitivity in using the Manipuri words in her short stories just to maintain close proximity with the larger body of Manipuri literature. Interestingly, the author's research on Manipuri literary traditions and concerns gets reflected in the vast array of subjects that ranges from the mythological to the contemporary themes. To me, these are the two different paths around which Chanu largely frames her arguments around.

In conclusion, it can be said that Chanu's stories would be of interest to the general readers as well as to scholars on Manipuri literature and culture, for her stories provide fresh insights into Manipuri society. The stories are easy to comprehend, written in a language that has ample use of the local terms adding to its charm. The terms are then well explained in the glossary provided at the end of the stories. The glossary is detailed and well explained. The book takes you on a ride to get introduced to the folklore and mythical stories of Manipur. This is also a book for those who are interested in the traditional folktales of the region. Significantly, Linthoi Chanu dedicates her book to "the seekers" (*Wari*, Chanu). Indeed, in her stories, the seekers are likely to find what they are looking for. In Chanu's own words from the author's note, "...we all carry the naïve wonders of our cultural and traditional credence in our heart as a part of our identity" (*Wari*, Chanu). The book faithfully captures the stories and beliefs that Chanu wants to showcase. The book is fairly priced and keeps our interest intact till the very end. One of the most popular Manipuri sayings tells us to give a watch to the one that tells stories. I would be happy to hand over the watch to Chanu, the storyteller, to enchant the listeners with her next 'wari'.