

Mizo Poetry: A Voice Rising from the Margins

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolution and distinctive features of Mizo poetry, tracing its roots from oral folk traditions to its contemporary expressions in English. It highlights the significant role of missionaries in the development of the Mizo script and literature, while also acknowledging the deep cultural and historical foundations of the Mizo people. The study examines key thematic concerns such as Christian faith, nature, love, social realities, and cultural identity that shape Mizo poetic expression. Through an analysis of selected poets and poems, the paper underscores the simplicity, lucidity, and emotional depth that characterize Mizo poetry. It also draws attention to the marginal position of Mizo poetry within Indian English literature and calls for greater scholarly engagement to recognize and promote this rich yet underrepresented literary tradition.

Keywords: *Mizo poetry, oral tradition, nature, Christian faith, marginal literature.*

The history of Mizo poetry or Mizo Literature cannot and should not be considered as to have ‘begun with the day when the Duhlian dialect we now call the Mizo language was reduced into writing in the Roman script, but in fact, started with the history of the Mizo people.’ (Thanzawna) However, with laudable contribution of “pioneering missionaries” ‘their earlier converts and to subsequent generations who brought this full bloomed offshoot of Indian writing in English to light from the dark caves of namelessness and oblivion’; one may even marvel at the fact to know that- ‘Ninety three years ago, not a single Mizo could read or write the Mizo alphabet as we know it today, was codified by the pioneer missionaries, Rev. F.J. Savidge and Rev. J.H. Lorrain who landed in a small hamlet near Sairang by the banks of the river flowing in Mizoram in the chilly winter of 1894.’ (Thanzawna) The earliest Mizo poetry was in the form of “folk songs” which were “then orally passed on from generation to generation” and later recognized as “Nursery songs” or “cradle songs,” chiefly non sensical repetitive mnemonic rhymes, yet revealing the ‘imprint of the simple milieu of Easter years of Mizo society’. There was also a time when mother carrying their babies on their back used to sing a lullaby like this to sleep their darling daughter or son, “*A Khiah Khian lungpui a lo lum*

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Received 20 January 2016; Accepted 01 July 2016. Available online: 25 August 2016.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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dawn e,/ Ka navvi kha a del hang e, suan rawh u". (High up from the hill is a rock rolling dawn, remove my little darling, lest the rock will crush him) (Thanzawna) Then cradle songs were the exhibition of the ‘primitive-animistic beliefs and their head haunting proclivities and their admiration of those who vanquished their enemies.’ (Thanzawna)

Before adopting Christianity by all the Mizos in 1894, there are presumptions that Mizo were faintly acquainted with Hindu mythology also but the dearth of research in this field does not leave anyone to any conclusive evidence. However, when the first book in Mizo language was the *Bible* (translated in Mizo language) and later when the first Mizo primer –Mizo Zirtir Bu (1903) were published, people and literature of Mizoram could come in print.

Mizo poetry attained ‘considerable maturity and depth from the thirties onwards with poets’ and writers’ ‘producing works of a lasting value on secular subject.’ (Thanzawna) At first, ‘under the leadership of headmaster Lalmama and Rev. H.W. Carter’ many poems were produced that put considerable impetus to the growth of Mizo poetry. Later, such songs Hla Lenglawng (Community songs) contributed handsomely to it. After Second World War, many poets emerged with the feeling of nationalism and many poets got inspiration to pen more and more. Especially when Mizo Academy of Letters in 1978 and Padma Shree was awarded to many poets and authors like Rev. Liangkhaia and others to James Dokhuma, people of literary circle came to know and realize the identity of Mizo Literature.

The Mizo poets writing in English are though few in numbers but no less in quality so they have now become a matter for serious research. Besides, no exhaustive or wide anthology by any poet or editor is brought out in Mizo poetry in English. There has always remained a scarcity of printed books and journals for the researchers of Mizo poetry so are researchers like me had to bank upon the web, blogs and few websites, where I stumbled upon many jewels sparkling in the innermost surface of the ocean of web. One of such blogs that I found was moderated by Zualteii Poonte who had translated many poets and authors of Mizo literature. Zualteii’s blog has given room to new and fresh voices, which have carried elements of hope, nature, aspirations, desires and optimism. However, few poets have also laid bare the realities of everyday and hence become grim and pessimistic.

The first and foremost characteristic of Mizo poetry is its unflinching faith in Christianity. Poets have written enough to exhibit their Christian faith in their poems. Lalrinmawii Kiangte’s poem ‘Causatum’ exhibits her optimism, which is born out of her Christian faith:

Dying I live
Losing I gain
Such profound death and life
Loss and gain. (Khangte)
She becomes vibrant when she adds:
I have not lived in vain
To experience this
Resurrection from ...
The peace after the tempest
The joy after the pain
The light after darkness. (Khangte)

The simplicity and lucidity runs like blood in the veins of Mizo poetry. Mark out a short but forceful poem written in a conversational manner by Lalnunsanga:

Are you well?
I am well.
Are you not well?
I am not well.
Do you breath?
Yes, I breath.
Do you not breath?
I do not breath.
Do you love?
Yes, I love.
Do you not love?
I still love. (poem Lalnuunsanga)

Being too close to nature, specially hills, rivers, trees and jungles weave the corpse of Mizo poetry. The poets experience nature in all its colours and so their poetry becomes as colourful as the Mizo milieu:

Up here on these hills
Time moves
At snail's pace
On winding roads
Wind passing through
Scented pines conducts
Needle orchestra
Cuckoos' call beyond
Joins the symphony. (Jacob)

Few poets of Mizo poetry develop an immaculate synchronicity with nature that it looks they have emptied the nature to the drains. Natural sceneries sometimes seem to have been in the background while at the other time, nature appears to be the soul motivator. Few poets breathe in and breathe out nature in their poems in such a way that one cannot distinguish or separate their real beings from their natural, which they have used in their poems. Joshep Dulhian's poem "Hope, Despair and Immortality" is one of such poem in which the poet has assimilated philosophy and nature and presented in a graphic manner:

Dawn breaks
Then the vains come
And mosquito too
Ants creep into every crack
Biting my nails, I sit and stare
Entering my very door
Shutting out the joy within.
The poet adds further:
After the rainbow shows
Noah's flood flows into my senses
Shooting my soul up unto heaven
Like a ball point pen without ink
Just a roll on into the black space. (Duhlian)

Local colours of Mizo life and society are also reflected in the poetry of Mizo poets who portray Mizo myths and make the readers peep into Mizo culture. In Mesjay's poem 'Locust Years', the poet talks of Lunglo stream which is much similar to Mansarovar in Hindu mythology or Lethe of Greek mythology. The poet says:

Honey is broken for
Summer breeze caught in a net
Flowed blown away
Towards lunglo stream.
Treasured glowing golden dreams
Sunlit days and star lit nights
Rolled rerolled away
Never will return. (Mesjay, The Hills are Calling)

The Mizo poets find joy and sorrow mingled into nature and they seem to have involved in a conversation with natural elements:

A winter tree
Bare branched, I stand
Naked, shivering in
Cold wind. Birds have
Deserted me. (Mesjay)
The Mizo poet also celebrates, hope and joy in the vicinity of nature:
But spring is on its way,
New leaves will clothe me,
I shall bloom again. (Mesjay)
Similarly, another poet Dankima Sailo exhorts to sing a song of joy as:
Sing again, the song you sang
Lovely in the field
With swaying women
In crimson and pink. (We Will Rise Above)

In the poetry of few Mizo poets, one can witness a delicate invitation to return to nature. The poets feel the changes in the seasons and express them with emotive zeal. The colours of spring, autumn and winter all can be seen in Mizo poetry. 'The Hills are Calling' by Mesjay is an exquisite poem of nature in which the poet invites the reader to enjoy the beauty of the spring in Mizoram. Mesjay is the same poet who in her earlier discussed poem 'Winter Tree' waits for spring season "But spring is on its way." According to same poet- during the season of

spring when tender new leaves on trees/ peach blossom’ and ‘plum flowers’ are the common scene, it is the time when ‘the sky is blue/winter clouds have sailed away and breeze sooths, not bite...’ The poet feels elated in this pink season and says:

Its spring
My heart flies to the hills
On wind’s wing
It dances
To pine music
Cukoo’s song
For the hills are calling, calling.” (Mesjay, The Hills are Calling)

The element of love is tackled by Mizo poets in the most charming manner. In their usual simple manner, they have written about love in kaleidoscopic form. Love poem titled ‘Besotted with Love’ by Lalbiakdiki Pachuan in conversational tone is worth noticing:

Like a bird without its chant
Like a flower without its scent,
Oh, where thou art my strength is!
Like a feather floating in the air
My aimless heart follows you everywhere. (Pachuan)

Dawngi Chawngthu’s poem ‘Motherhood’ mirrors the purest form of love in the relation of mother and her children. In this poem, the poet commences from the best part of a woman’s life i.e. ‘the beginning of the pregnancy/ the pleasure of anticipation/ even though short lived’ to which a woman cherishes throughout her life and then she relates the entire story of mother’s constant care to her children as they grow year by year. And lastly, she appears to be very human when she says:

But maybe my time is up now
Their needs and my capacity
To fulfill them have been exhausted
Yes, perhaps in this process
I had started raising voice
Does one begin to shout
When one starts to lose control. (Chawngthu)

A peculiar type of innocence in the ideas of Mizo poets is discernible which separates them from other Indian poets. Andrew Ruolngul who is only 18 years old Mizo poet writes with immaculate charm and simplicity on a window from where he sees multitudinous and mixed feelings of joy and sorrow. When the poet asserts:

Open the windows
And let me see
What the world wishes

For me to see. (Roulngul)

The first scene that comes before his eyes is:

Smiles, yes, smiles

I see children

Coming back from school

Swinging their bags

Back and forth,

And also on the swings

Their faces alit with glee. (Roulngul)

And instantly the second scene that flushes before the poet is:

I see two lovers

Sitting next to each other

With that look

Of utter solace and

Not a care in the world. (Roulngul)

After seeing these two pleasing scenes, the poet urges:

So now close the windows,

For I have seen enough. (Roulngul)

But contrarily, the second time when he wishes to ‘open the windows’ with a hope to know what the world wishes him to see, he finds:

Clouds, a dark haze

The blinds my eyes.

I see a black raven

Perch itself on the sill.

It stares at me

As if trying to read me,

Like I would a book.

It stood motionless.

As if struck by fear. (Roulngul)

And the second scene is equally disappointing when the poet says:

I see man.

Sulking in his solitude.

Embracing a single black rose.

An emotionless face. (Roulngul)

And he adds:

A tear rolls down his cheek.

I sit still

As the dark figure passes.

And disappears into the mist. (Roulngul)

Mizo poets have not only witnessed the cozy and lovely surroundings and articulated them in their verses but also they have depicted the social reality and indiscrepancy through their emotive and creative pens. The unpleasant, ugly and utterly obnoxious image is reflected by them too. Poets strongly protest against the factors of disharmony when we read such lines, the fact grows firm, “Terrorism by militants, political or religious extremists, communalists, government forces--- is growing and growing, why is there ... sight of an end? Because violence begets violence, and more violence. It keeps multiplying.” (Mesjay, The Hills are Calling) In addition, the plight of common person who suffers the most remains their prime concern. The poets have “portrayed the life of boy who has just ‘turned seven’/looked forward

to future/ to do grown up things-/ ride a bike, fly a plane, bring mummy and daddy presents'
get dashed to the ground with a bomb blast and things are upturned:

A loud burst
Silenced
The spirited chatter
For ever.
Only
A bloody mess
And deep pain
Remain. (Mesjay, The Hills are Calling)
Similarly in another poem "Drowned" the same poet exhibits the heart's pain as
Our homes are drowned in
Flood of blood
And tears. (Mesjay, The Hills are Calling)
The poet writes the mute powerful people who 'on higher grounds/ watch it all in a mirror' and writes
realistically:
They cluck or chuckle
While our homes are drowned in
Flood of blood
And tears. (Mesjay)

But these protest poets are pure patriots who are 'scared of these who/ silence songs with/
guns'. In an atmosphere when 'sound of bomb is/ louder than music and when "louder still are/
cries of orphans and ravaged women, the poet wishes to celebrate/ fly the flag---"

The Mizo poets have never adopted the way of obscurity, verbosity redundancy or
thoughtlessness but they have chosen simplicity, spontaneity and ease in their expression. Their
language is competent enough to leave a message, which they actually want to relay. Mizo
poets are perfectly Indian in the sense as they are deep rooted in their Indian culture and
tradition and their poems are the mirror of their thoughts and emotions. However, the
contribution of Christian missionaries and their influence should also be taken into account
long before Christianity; the genes of Hinduism had been in the consciousness of the soul of
these poets. These poets write in a manner which is human and humane and which is more a
direct impact of ancient Indian wisdom. Unfortunately, this shoot of Indian English poetry is
not wholly recognized by academic scholars or researchers who can motivate promote and
guide the poets who write, anthologize, edit or even publish books with their own funds
selflessly. The efforts of government, NGOs or publishers may bring talents to light as well as
succeed in the true service of literature.

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