

Unveiling Identities: The Historical Tapestry of Princess Sanatombi and the Unchanged Role of Women in Manipuri Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into L. Romi Roy's exploration of the historic novel *The Princess and the Political Agent* (2020), a narrative originally penned in Manipuri as *BoroSaheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (1976) by M.K. Binodini. In recognition of her literary achievement, she received the esteemed Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979 for this particular work. The book offers a distinctive perspective into the societal landscape of Manipur during British rule. Its narrative focuses on the romantic entanglement between Princess Sanatombi and Lt Col. Henry St P. Maxwell, who serve as a lens through which the complexities of this historical period are brought to life. Binodini, skillfully unravels the intricate dynamics of gender, societal norms, class distinctions, and political upheavals that reverberated throughout Manipuri society. Grounded in historical events, the narrative sheds light on the treatment of women and the societal fabric against the backdrop of Manipur's history. This paper endeavors to elucidate the repercussions of the depicted love story on the broader canvas of Manipuri society. Moreover, it sheds light on the clandestine lifestyles and cultural nuances of the royal class in Manipur, providing valuable insights into forbidden aspects of their lives. In essence, this paper aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of Manipur's past by exploring the multifaceted dimensions of culture, politics, and identity as portrayed in *The Princess and the Political Agent*.

Key Words : Manipur, Women, Culture, Society, Political, Identity

INTRODUCTION

The historical backdrop of the romantic saga between Princess Sanatombi and Lt Col. Henry St P. Maxwell unfolds a year before the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. The narrative of *The Princess and the Political Agent*, therefore, uncovers a lost chapter in the history of British rule "A diplomatic storm that had pitted empress Victoria against Viceroy Lansdowne,....had been hotly debated in the British Parliament" (xx). While the romance between the protagonists is a work of fiction, it draws its instances heavily from real events. Princess Sanatombi's love for Maxwell is deemed forbidden, resonating with the poignant memory of 1891. "A date that still stings Manipuris today as the year when the kingdom lost its sovereignty and, with it, its identity" (xxi) falling under British rule. According to

Merriam-Webster, identity is "who someone is" or "the unique qualities that set a person or group apart", this paper aims to unravel the identity intricacies, particularly focusing on Princess Sanatombi and other female characters in *The Princess and the Political Agent*.

Situated in the northeastern region of India, Manipur comprises plains and hills, with the majority of Meitei residing in the valleys. The state Manipur was known by various names like Kangleipak, Tilli-Koktong, Poirei-Lam, Sanna-Leipak, Mitei-Leipak or Meitrabak however, "The present name of the state is of comparatively recent origin dating from the eighteenth century only and it lost its independence to the mighty British in 1891" (Singh, 3). Princess Sanatombi, daughter of King Surchandra, once ruled Manipur and married

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Manikchand, a businessman, at a young age. The narrative unfolds events during Manikchand's frequent travels, leading to Sanatombi's encounter with Mr. Maxwell, triggering town gossip and marital discord culminating in divorce. The union, though a brief source of joy for Sanatombi and Maxwell, rendered her a social outcast for marrying a white man, facing censure from both relatives and the people of the state.

The novel commences with the ailing Princess Sanatombi confined to her sickbed, accompanied only by her loyal maid Mainu. Notably, Maxwell is absent during the final stages of her life. Despite the fleeting nature of their whirlwind romance, she is described as *'She is greatly reduced but still beautiful- even today there are traces of her loveliness of the past'*(1). Sanatombi's robust and outspoken nature is evident from her early years; unafraid to express her feelings, she has been a witness to royal quarrels, fluctuations, and political intricacies since childhood. The concerns of Sanatombi's great-grandmother regarding her strong-willed and wishful nature are conveyed to Jasumati, *"My dear, keep a close eye on your daughter. She is wilful and is going to be a handful. It is not enough to be kind-hearted.... The astrologer also says your daughter is of strong birth"* (9). Described as *"unruly, strong-willed, and driven to win"* within the palace, Sanatombi is portrayed as *"someone unbothered by societal norms and expectations"* (10). An incident is recounted where she bit her cousin Prince Lukhoi for obstructing her while playing Kang, a traditional Manipuri game, *'There were countless incidents and uproars like this because of Sanatombi'* (15). Within the confines of the palace, Sanatombi finds it challenging to conform to the numerous rules and relationships, revealing a struggle to reconcile her independent spirit with the structured environment. Meanwhile, her mother, characterized as meek, stands as a contrasting figure in the narrative.

At night as she lay in bed with her daughter, and she said to her child, 'Sanatombi, what is Mother going to do with you? Where was that tantrum coming from? You seem to have forgotten that you are a girl. How can you be same as Lukhoi? He is a male offspring. He is going to be king.' 'It is because he is male offspring that I beat him up regularly. If he can ride, why can't I? 'I am going to come to a lot of grief on your account. How can boys and girls be same? We are called women with no burial place.... (53)

From the exchanges between Sanatombi and her

mother, it becomes evident that, despite their royal background, women faced similar challenges. In a polygamous setting where the king had multiple wives, the status and authority of women were largely determined by their ability to bear sons. Within the palace, women were relegated to mere spectators, their voices subdued, and preference given to male offspring. The historical context, shaped by a society where men were primarily engaged in wars, led to a preference for male heirs. The limited opportunities for women to showcase their valor and strength during that era underscored the unfortunate fate they faced. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of formidable women in history who fought for their lands, such as Lakshmbai, Rani of Jhansi; Mavia of Arabia; the Queen of the Tanukh; Nzinga, Queen of Ndongo; and Matamba, among various others not mentioned. Examining contemporary women's issues is incomplete without delving into our distant past. Princess Sanatombi, despite proving herself capable and daring, was denied the chance to explore her potential and was married off at a young age to circumvent potential issues within the palace. Expressing opinions by a girl, especially a child, was often dismissed as a 'tantrum.' Sanatombi, in numerous instances, found herself silenced, except for her great-grandmother who provided encouragement and support. When Maharaja Surchandra, Sanatombi's father, faced adversity *'run away and sought refuge with Grimwood, the Political Agent of the British Indian Empire'* (64), Sanatombi was still quite young. However, her father recognized her maturity beyond her years and entrusted her with significant responsibilities, stating, *"Sanatombi, listen to your father. You are now the eldest of my children. I won't be able to get your two younger sisters married. You must look into this. Help your mother"* (65).

Despite her youth, Sanatombi opposed her father's decision to leave Manipur, expressing her dissent with a question, *"Why should Sovereign Father leave Manipur? Do you want to give Kangla to other people?"* (65). As an outspoken and opinionated child, she could not tolerate injustice and was resolute in her stance against her father seeking refuge in another state. As a wife, she has performed all her duties. *'Sanatombi busied herself as a housewife. She mopped and wove and the house was sparkling clean. Not once did she show her unhappiness to members of the household'* (120). Following three miscarriages, she acknowledged

her inability to conceive further. In response, she selflessly suggested to her mother-in-law that Manikchand should find a new wife capable of bearing him a child. Despite her challenging circumstances, she never voiced complaints and sought to assert her position within the family.

Throughout the narrative, it is evident that Sanatombi harbors deep concerns for her homeland, Manipur, and her royal kin. The emotional disconnect she experienced with her husband played a pivotal role in bringing her closer to Maxwell. The love that blossomed between them was not instantaneous but evolved gradually over time and in response to their respective situations. Sanatombi never intended to betray her state by falling in love with its perceived enemy. The writer adeptly creates an environment for the characters to draw closer, recognizing that emotions like love defy logic and compartmentalization. Blaming Princess Sanatombi for succumbing to such emotions seems unjust given the circumstances; anyone in her position might have experienced a similar pull toward love. The political conflicts within the palace, including the struggles among the king's sons for the throne, power, and wealth, are portrayed with meticulous detail. The internal politics among the king's consorts add another layer of complexity. The competition for the throne and the interpersonal dynamics among the women echo common themes in royal households. While the women in the novel may project calmness on the surface, a subtle undercurrent of uneasiness and restlessness permeates the narrative. In contrast, Sanatombi stands out as a confident and outspoken figure amidst this intricate web of political intrigue. Queen Mother, Lady of Meisnam exercises authority commensurate with her position, "Dress my granddaughter in boy's clothes. *Right away, they prepared a turban and dhoti, and a full-sleeved shirt of velvet. 'This is taboo, it is not done, it is not good,' people said here and there. But the Grand Queen Mother had allowed it- and it was done by the king*" (51).

Jasumati, the Lady of Satpam and Sanatombi's mother, is a gentle and reserved woman, lacking an assertive voice. In contrast, Kouseswari, the Lady of Chongtham and Princess Sanatombi's step-grandmother, who was also Maharaja Chandrakirti's first love, is a formidable and independent woman. She refuses to yield to the whims and fancies of the King, understanding her influence over him and skillfully leveraging it. Mainu, the

companion of Princess Sanatombi, is portrayed as a silent and conventional woman, adhering strictly to rules and regulations even while residing in the residence of a white man. Numerous princesses in the palace served primarily as instruments for forging marriage alliances to extend the kingdom—a decorative presence without a defined role or voice, essentially regarded as state property. The prevalent emphasis on securing a male heir underscored the significance of perpetuating the lineage. It is undeniable that significant transformations occurred during Maxwell's sojourn in Manipur, encompassing both political and social realms.

The government of India further decided that it would administer the state during the raja's minority.... Maxwell was appointed political Agent of Manipur and Superintendent of the state...The period of regency (1891-1907) was fully utilized for making all the major decisions and also introducing several changes in the administrative setup of the native state which could not be changed by the Raja, even after his formal installation on the gaddi of Manipur with full power (Lal, 74-75).

Considering the historical context, an examination of women's roles reveals a prevailing expectation for them to fulfill the primary function of producing offspring. This echoes the sentiments of renowned feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir, who articulated, "*One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.*" Historically, women have often been relegated to a secondary status in comparison to men. Their perceived role has been primarily associated with childbearing and nurturing. Women have been confined to the private sphere, while men have traditionally dominated the public sphere. Importantly, this hierarchy is not a consequence of any inherent feminine qualities, but rather it stems from societal norms, education, and entrenched social traditions, all of which have been predominantly shaped and controlled by men (Dadawala, 1). In an article entitled, "What Is Identity (As We Now Use The Word)?" by James D. Fearon, He defines identity as having a dual significance in its current form. It simultaneously denotes social categories and the origins of an individual's self-respect or dignity. The crucial point highlighted is the lack of inherent connection between these aspects. In everyday language, the term "identity"

can encompass personal traits that don't naturally align with social categories. Additionally, certain categories may be termed "identities" in specific contexts, even if individuals don't consider them central to their identity. Nevertheless, the current understanding of "identity" suggests a nuanced relationship between social categories and the foundations of an individual's self-respect, as articulated by Fearon (1).

Princess Sanatombi endeavored to establish her own identity, yet delineating the entire identity of Meitei women proved challenging. While many women adhere to traditionalist perspectives and exhibit reluctance to challenge authority, there are exceptions. Regrettably, the prevailing scenario appears largely unchanged over time, with minimal progress. Despite strides in education and opportunities, the representation of women in top positions remains conspicuously limited. The deeply ingrained social mindset and attitudes persist, contributing to ongoing atrocities and crimes against women. The commodification of women is evidently on the rise, reflecting a disconcerting aspect of contemporary society.

Over time, Manipur underwent significant transformations, marked by the introduction of English education and its subsequent merger with independent India on September 21, 1949. These changes had far-reaching political, social, and economic implications. The peak of insurgency in the early '80s to the '90s brought about shifts in attitudes and behaviors, particularly towards women, coinciding with a disturbing rise in crimes against women and children. The advent of modern education during British rule also altered the roles and contributions of women, exemplified by a few outspoken figures like Princess Sanatombi and Imrom Sharmila. Despite educational opportunities, the roles and identities of women have not undergone substantial changes. The legendary character Thoibi from the Khamba-Thoibi epic is still idealized as the Meitei woman archetype, embodying qualities such as love, truthfulness, patience, and courage. Princess Sanatombi, possessing these qualities, struggled to make her voice heard. While class divisions have diminished since her time, lingering unclear rules contribute to conflicts within ethnic groups and a gap between hill and valley people. The evolving political landscape has led to developmental setbacks, and despite global influences like globalization, Manipur lags in societal progress. The crime rate has surged, aligning

with national trends. Notably, changes in cultural and traditional aspects, such as marriage ceremonies, reflect the impact of globalization, with some sacrificing traditional values for power and wealth.

Scholars and writers are increasingly focusing on these shifts in local newspapers and discussions. However, much like in the era of Princess Sanatombi, the status, position, and roles of women in Manipur have not seen substantial improvements. Bridging the gap of gender disparities requires women to traverse additional miles, and the plight of women remains consistent. Despite a handful achieving success in both their careers and personal lives, one cannot conclude that women are on par with men. For true progress, there must be a fundamental change in men's attitudes and perspectives towards fostering a more equitable society.

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