

Zorami A Redemption Song by Malsawmi Jacob – A Literature of Trauma

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ABSTRACT

Malsawmi Jacob, a well-known Mizo poet, journalist and novelist taught English for more than twelve years in Bangalore and Aizawl and has contributed many publications in various subjects as a freelance writer. Her novel *ZORAMI A redemption song* (2015), as the first novel ever written by a Mizo writer in English brings different aspects like Mizo identity and culture, political upheaval and the resultant clash between Mizo National Front cadres and Indian Army. Malsawmi portrays all the characters' travel through darkness – physical and mental.

Keywords: Mizo, War, Trauma, Redemption

The Northeastern part of India with multitudinous tribal sects speaking a variety of languages exuding resplendent oral tradition has been treasure cache with mountains, rivers and rivulets. For nearly twenty years from 1960s – 1980s Mizoram faced a long – standing armed struggle fought between the Mizoram Nationalists and the Indian Army. The Mizoram Nationalists sought Independence and greater political freedom. The widespread famine and the neglect by the Indian Government resulted in the formation of Mizo Nationalist Famine Front evolving into political group in 1959. The group brandished itself as Mizo National Front taking arms against the Indian government in 1966. John Vanlal Hluna his book

Church & Political Upheaval in Mizoram states “History and culture played very important roles in the formation of ethnic nationalism among the Mizos, who by political consciousness recalled their indigenous tribal survival, ethno-historical memories, history and cultural difference” (90). When the armed struggle was intensified the Indian government garrisoned the state. Violence was rampant. Women and children were targeted by militia and insurgency groups.

This paper aims to bring out atrocities perpetrated on Mizo women and children in general and Zorami in particular specifying the novel *Zorami A redemption song*, a Literature of Trauma. People living in war/ambush zones are invariably tortured, maimed and killed. In case of young girls and women they are raped however young or aged they maybe. Body of a woman and its mutilation become a discourse of success to all insurgent movements and the Army’s attempt to put down insurgency. As body is treated as arena of violence, Landzeliuz in his article “The Body” published in *A Companion to Cultural Geography* states “body as a particular site of inquiry” (280). The novel sees the protagonist Zorami’s life in various stages. The novel opens showing Zorami as a middle-aged woman married to Sanga. The Gospel reading in the prologue of the novel brings in peace and understanding towards the end of the novel. Resonance, coherence and balance is brought between Zorami and Sanga as both met with psychological setbacks in their life during insurgency. Though the novel is strewn with atrocities to the land and people, it brings in the symbolical redemption of Mizoram and empirical redemption of the protagonist Zorami. The intertwining of the life of Zorami and nationalist rising of Mizoram is very effectively portrayed by Malsawmi Jacob. Sreedharan in his *A Textbook of Historiography: 500 BC to AD 2000* appreciates the raising of historical consciousness, “Filled with legitimate national pride, a rising generation of Indian scholars sought to vindicate their national culture against the unfounded charges of European writers” (429).

Zorami’s father Thanchhunga serves in the Indian Army and is often posted in different parts of the country. He marries Lahnunmawii after completing English and Hindi courses taught for jawans in the army

with good grades. Thanchhunga's dream is that "Education shapes destiny" (Jacob 31). Even during school days Zorami becomes ashamed of sharing the continued bullying of a boy and about "the dirty man with the dirty touch." Her mother's instruction that girls should not talk too much further makes her withdrawn and unable to share her liking for Spenser's 'Farie Queene' when she is a post graduate student. From the novel *Zorami*,

"Thus, such dark, horrifying spectres keep dancing their war dance in the dim recesses of her being, causing havoc to her soul.

The power of ghosts lies in the dark" (Jacob 38).

The non-linear, fractured structure of the novel brings the inner turmoil of Zorami and her obsession with physical appearance. The shopkeeper's comment that she looks like a plain girl lacerates her soul and is unable to retort making her to think that she looks like "A tattered coat" (Jacob 16) even at the age of fifty, as mentioned in the novel. Her close friend Kimi has the courage to face charges thrown at her as "that liquor vendor's daughter." Zorami lacks strong willpower to quell loss of confidence.

The novel is full of characters suffering from physical and psychological problems. The ambush by the MNF cadres and the retaliatory attack by Assam Government and the Indian Army results in the displacement and killing of civilians. C. S. Pachhunga states in *Lunglei Operation* "It was no different with the World War II" (3). Some MNF men are on a mission to capture the Quarter Guard of the Assam Rifles in Aizawl, and they storm the Assam Rifles' camp at night. The retaliation is severe. Bombs are dropped in villages and houses start burning. Zorami's family, Kimi's family, Pu Luaia's family, Thanpari a young girl's family, run into the forest. Children and elders find it unbearable. From the novel, "The Mizo people began to experience genuine terror for the first time in their national history" (Jacob 89). The colleges, schools, offices are closed. Hearing aeroplanes people crouch under bushes and children are advised not to look up as their eyes would be detected by Army men in aeroplanes. The non-linear narration helps the author to

emphasize the intensity and magnitude of the sufferings of Mizo people. In an interview to Jaydeep Sarangi, a bilingual writer, editor, reviewer, translator and author of number of books, Malsawmi Jacob ascertains this.

JS: Do you consider your narration as 'linear'?

MJ: No. The narration is non-linear, weaving back and forth, in keeping with the portrayal of a people whose lives were disrupted and had fallen into chaos. (Sarangi).

Each chapter narrated in the novel records the pain of Mizo people during the struggle. Nikhuma teaches Hindi, is married to Mani and has three young children. He enjoys his job. From the novel, "But he gave up the job to pursue a dream- the dream of a self-governing, independent Mizoram. He had joined the Mizo National Front..." (Jacob 71). Nikhuma is elected block president of the area in his village. When he is summoned by the MNF chief, his wife Mani knows it is inevitable. She is upset when he resigns his job. When he is arrested and put in Guwahati jail, he writes his first novel *Chhumpui Zing Karah* which narrates the story of a man born to a cultivator's family before World War II. In his village his house is burnt down, his wife and children are sent to Jorhat jail in Assam. The Army starts hunting MNF cadres and orders civilians to evacuate the forest. People start living together. One night Pu Biaka's house is knocked. Siami, his pregnant daughter-in-law, opens the door. Two army men try to molest her. But a kind Army officer orders them to leave and Siami is left unharmed. From the novel, "But fear never left" (Jacob 93).

Dangliana, the commander of MNF volunteer unit, with fifteen volunteers ties the hands of six Assam Rifles men guarding food supplies, loot six guns and many bullets. The Army starts shooting men at sight and finds a strategy to identify MNF cadres. Unable to bear the torture of the Army, Ralkapa turns informer. From the novel, "He had to inform on more and more men and women to stop torture... he resorted to accusing innocent ones also" (Jacob 99). Ralkapa plots revenge on a girl who rejects him and marries Hminga, a government employee. One night, Hminga is arrested, and he dies leaving his wife

Muani and two little children. Pu Lianhminga, Kimi's father, is an officer in the Mizo army and close to the leader, Pu Laldenga. He sends some money through two cadres, Laia and Mana, whom Ralkapa recognizes. Subedar Sinha arrests them, and unable to bear the torture, Laia reveals the hideout of Pu Lianhminga and Pu Khuma. The other man Mana dies a slow painful death. The villagers come to know about the three dead bodies. From the novel, "The bodies were full of torture marks with deep wounds in many parts and their bones broken" (Jacob 113). Dinmawii and her mother live alone. She loses her father when she is one year old, and her mother is a vegetable vendor. She works in a Mizo-medium government school. In her childhood days she and her mother eke out a living. Working in a school, she loves teaching poor children. She loves Pu Thangliana, captain in the MNF and wants to marry him. Pu Thangliana and his two escorts visit her. On Ralkapa's information, Pu Thangliana and his bodyguards are shot dead. Dinmawii is arrested by the Army and seeing this, her mother falls down dead. The next prey of Ralkapa is Pu Lalawmpuia, an MNF cadre who is against Hindi films, songs, outsiders and Assimilation. From the novel, "Assimilation' was a frightening word to him" (Jacob 131). MNF commander T commands him to murder either his best friend Khama who they suspect of becoming an informer or his maternal uncle, who is the President of the district council in Aizawl. As the council is a legal body of the government, the MNF suspects them of being agents. Lalawmpuia cannot bring himself to shoot his maternal uncle and is teased as a *tuai*, effeminates. He escapes from the camp only to be arrested by Subedhar Singh and languishes in jail for his refusal to reveal the hideouts of MNF cadres. Ralkapa's parents, when they come to know of his position as betrayer, die of shame, pain and anger.

Rohmingmawii Pachau in her article "Impact of Memory and Post-Conflict Reconstruction Efforts in Mizoram" opines "The population also suffered a great deal at the hands of the MNF army" (126). The MNF would threaten villagers to feed them with rice, chicken and eggs. Nikhuma repeatedly reminds the Mizo soldiers not to take anything by force. From the novel, "Remember they are our people. We are fighting for

their freedom. We will be acting against our own goal if we oppress them” (Jacob 81). They kidnap pastor Siamkunga who speaks against the violence spread by MNF and refuses the donation given by them to the church. He is released at the last moment. When the MNF suspect their own cadres, they kill them without hesitation as in the case of Dula whom they doubt to have informed of Thangliana’s visit who holds the captain’s rank in the underground army. They do not spare newspapers editors who do not support MNF and its activities. Pu Lalrinmawia, editor of a daily newspaper is killed by MNF cadres, and his body is left on the roadside.

Rajkumari Nonibala Devi & P. C. Joshi in their article “Effects of Insurgency Related Violence and its Emerging Health Symptoms among Women of Manipur, North-East India” opine, “While state is invariably the target, such violence may express itself against people deemed outsiders to the perpetuating party/parties” (49). The MNF issues notices threatening people from other states to leave Mizoram. George is a science teacher from Kerala, who teaches class X students. He is reluctant as he thinks that the students may suffer in his absence. Fifteen-year-old Sangteii and her classmates are shocked to see their science teacher George being hacked to death by MNF cadres. The shocked children do not return to school.

To curtail the activities of MNF cadres and to segregate them, the army puts people from three villagers into ‘grouping’. After that the Army storms Darman village as one of their patrols is shot from the nearby jungle. Ch. Suprawnga in his article “*Ka zin kawng*” states, “The Government action was (Indian Government) based on three objectives- to annihilate the Mizos or civilians; to bring about poverty in the hills or make the Mizos famine stricken people; and grouping of villages” (216-17). The army arrests nine persons at random and a woman teacher. They burn down houses. Vanlalfima in his book *Ka Hmangaih Zoram Tan* states, “... after every ambush of the army patrol by the MNF, the army in retaliation and in anger had the habit of burning of villages” (4).

The villagers are not allowed to go out and to work on the farms. Elderly people and children suffer from hunger. Eight-year-old Rina gives his mother a handful of rice or chapatti. Within a few months she dies of hunger. Many die of hunger as they are not allowed to work outside. Dr. Orestes Rosanga in his article "Economic Problems Caused by Insurgency in Mizoram-A Study" opines, "The effects of Grouping brought about untold depressions and miseries to the people. The tribal ways of agriculture could no longer be pursued as the villagers were all the time under surveillance" (134). The International Organization on Migration (2022) report indicates that 77% of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) are food insecure and lack adequate medical services, shelter, drinking water, basic items like sleeping mats, blankets, hygiene kits, mattresses, soap, mosquito nets and cookware. The 'Grouping Centres' are a great punishment for Mizo people who love to socialize. Since there are no toilets inside the house, at night, some creep out. They are caught and hung upside down over the latrine pits till they become unconscious. Abiama, Ifeagwazi and Chukwuorji in their article "Rates of occurrence and influence of trauma exposure on posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms among survivors of terrorist attacks in Northeast Nigeria" state, "The squalid conditions of the IDPs and the unmet needs are risk factors for psychological and emotional problems like functional impairment, stigma, low self-esteem, humiliation and shame" (1-15).

Another method of punishing Mizo people is the introduction of 'Convoy System'. Lalsawia in his book *Zoram Hming-Hmel* states, "The Army introduced a Convoy System where the civilian vehicles were made to run in between the army armoured car (for their safety perhaps). The army vehicles would stop whenever they like, even for long hours...since this was the case there was always a problem of food supplies" (151).

Mary and her cousin Carol, a native of Mizoram, study in Shillong, the capital of Assam. On their return to Aizawl their car is to be tucked behind Army Convoy. Reaching home Mary finds that her house is burnt and that her father's printing press is also destroyed during air attack. Mary's father, Pu Vanmawia,

was a business man and highly respected in the community. Mary understands, "*Her father was embarrassed. He was ashamed of himself*" (Jacob 141).

Violence was an ongoing phenomenon everywhere. Zorami is also not spared. She can never ever forget and is haunted by the disaster. From the novel,

"The thirteen year old fixes her eyes on the dripping water, willing it to hurry up. Then she feels someone watching her from behind and turns around, she freezes...With an evil grin the big *vai* man in army uniform comes forward. He clamps a big hand over her mouth and carries her into the bushes" (Jacob 224-5).

To molest a woman is to challenge the man's pride in the family. Zorami feels herself to be dirty. From the novel, "And the dirt, the dirt!" How she wanted to wash herself clean..." (Jacob 177). She becomes terrified, wrecked, without spirit. She is seized with terror, and her mother soothes her. From the novel, "... the wounds on her body healed, leaving scars. But her wounded psyche festered" (Jacob 178). Her father is deeply hurt by such a heinous crime forced upon his daughter. Their family hires a jeep to Silchar in Assam and travels in a convoy. Zorami freezes seeing Indian soldiers.

At Shillong, Zorami enjoys her schooling and college. From the novel, "she could sleep without nightmares" (Jacob 183). Though she tries to become normal, on their family's return to their native village, Zorami is again seized by terror. She avoids going out alone. At twenty-four, when Sanga proposes to her, she remembers her father's taunt as a damaged girl". She tells the truth to Sanga. Sanga is ready to marry her, but she cannot become close to him. From the novel "... she stays frozen" (Jacob 57). However much Sanga tries to help her, Zorami cannot relax. She is troubled by the injustice done to her. Vallières, F., Hyland. P & Murphy. J. in their article "Navigating the who, where, what, when, how and why of trauma exposure and response" state "The duration of the traumatic event (one-time / short time versus multiple traumatizations versus chronic traumatization) and the severity of the traumatic event (i.e prolonged armed

conflict, displacement, sexual and physical abuse) can lead to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other trauma related psycho pathology" (1-7).

The injustice done to Zorami makes herself seem normal, but she becomes an introvert. She suffers from PTSD (i.e.) Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. From the novel, "She walked with head bent, looking at the ground. She avoided everyone and kept to herself, hardly talking even to Kimi" (Jacob 177-8). When Sanga proposes to her and wants to marry her, she is hesitant. Even during daytime, she dreams. "The snake crawls and catches her (Jacob 54). Robinson. L, Smith M and Segal.J in his "Emotional and psychological trauma." state, "Other symptoms and characteristics of traumatic experiences include: intrusive thoughts of the event, flash backs, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, hyper arousal, disorientation, shock, denial, disbelief, confusion, difficulty concentration, anger, irritability, mood swings, anxiety, excessive fear, guilt, shame, self- blame, withdrawing from others, depression and feeling disconnected or numb".

Zorami suffers from unwanted intrusive thoughts as memories re-experiencing the traumatic event and has disturbing dreams both at daytime and night. Once Zorami and Matae go to fetch water. Nearing the water point, she remembers the place as a potential sight for injustice. From the novel "A feeling of horror crawled up Zorami's spine, ending in a sharp stabbing pain on the top of her head" (Jacob 190). Sanga marries her for her difference from other girls. He thinks he can make her happy. From the novel, "She was aware of the conjugal duties of a woman. It now filled her with dread... She made up her mind to fulfill those duties. But, the black Snake undid her. She cried out in terror" (Jacob 192). Zorami suffers from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder which typically focuses on future uncertainties. The trauma resulting in PTSD and OCD overlap one another.

Zorami's anxiety intensifies when she comes to know of Sanga's first love Dinpui. Sanga and Dinpui studied in the same class. She was very pretty, the best student, interested in discussing socio-

economic political conditions of Mizoram, and liked hockey. Sanga initially wants to marry her. The informer Ralkapa calls Dinpuii and tries to recall her loyalty towards MNF cadres. In the beginning the Army is not ready to arrest Dinpuii and she goes underground. Then the Indian Army discovers Blue Valley Camp and a badly mutilated corpse of a woman near an army encampment. It is generally believed to be that of Dinpuii. Sanga too suffers from the memories of Dinpuii. This hurts Zorami. She is reminded that, from the novel, "Romance was missing between them...once, and only once... had Sanga said he loved her Never again, yet" (Jacob 170). The intense distress and fear made her feel lost and repeatedly think about her own past traumatic event. From the novel, "Two broken lives brought together. Can they ever become whole" (Jacob 177).

Hyper arousal is a core symptom of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) often triggered by traumatic memories often manifested as irritability, difficulty concentrating, sleeping problems, increased alertness and anxiety and being hyper vigilant. Zorami, unable to express her love to Sanga, in her constant worry starts to believe that Sanga has extramarital relationship with his colleague Julie. Being hyper vigilant, she always looks for threats or danger. "Tied to an aged wife who lacked many things: No social skills, no good looks, introverted, emotionally stunted. The other woman young, attractive, open and inviting" (Jacob 210). Being childless adds to her fear. However much consoled by Sanga, Zorami is not pacified. She suffers from symptoms of Disorientation which include confusion, memory problems, misperceptions of Reality like hallucinations and delusions, behavioral and emotional symptoms like restlessness, withdrawal, rapid mood swings, depression, and acting out of character. Zorami's depression makes her get withdrawn from Sanga for many months. She has a delusion that students in college are making fun of Sanga and her. She finds it difficult to sleep and has changes in sleep-wake cycles. She suffers from hallucinations also. From the novel, "... the moment she was alone, they would rush back and start their offensive running commentary on her" (Jacob 214).

Dina, MNF'S chief's wife Rami and her sister Mawii are arrested by Major Kohil leaving a two-month-old baby boy. They are molested and released. The baby boy becomes unconscious and dies a few days later. Repeated arrest of Rami and her sister Mawii by the Army becomes a routine. Major Kohil repeatedly rapes Mawii and Rami by the soldiers. Eventually they too suffered from disorientation symptoms of difficulty focusing not knowing where they are or who they are, struggling to remember things, not knowing the current time and place. Theorists such as Michel Foucault, Franz Fanon, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Elaine Scarry, and Iris Mario Young talk about strategies of war and violence and their connection between bodies and treating them as tools of violence. War constrains bodies to passivity as objects, and such embodied bodies can be manipulated by outside forces. Rajkumari Nonibala Devi & P.C. Joshi in their article "Effects of Insurgency Related Violence and its Emerging Health Symptoms among Women of Manipur, North-East India" state, "... the anthropology of violence becomes part of a new anthropology of the body, in which the body becomes a privileged site for the inscription of signs of power" (50).

Children exposed to prolonged war, torture, gunfight suffer from PTSD and drug abuse. The horror stories of 'grouping center' travels to Aizawal and its suburbs. From the novel, "Zorami often heard the terrible tales and broke out into cold sweat, unknown to anyone" (Jacob 104). Kimi's youngest son Valpuia is on drugs. Family members watch upon him always. Chrisman and J.G. Dougherty reviewed literature detailing increased exposure of millions of children to wars, terrorism and other disasters leading to heightened mass trauma. The clinical impact of such exposure is influenced by a child's social ecology which is understood in a risk and resilience framework. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, US also report on normal coping system and results in functional, psychological, physical, social and/or emotional impairment.

In her interview to Jaydeep Sarangi Malsawmi Jacob replies

JS: Why is it a 'redemption song'?

MJ: This subtitle is taken from Bob Marley's popular song which calls for freedom. It was chosen by my editor. The lyric in a sense describes what the people of Mizoram went through. It also suits Zorami's spiritual and emotional experience towards the end. I think it's an apt subtitle for the novel.

JS: Is *Zorami* a trauma novel? Do you suggest any healing support for the trauma victims?

MJ: I should think so. The protagonist's personality undergoes a drastic change after her traumatic experience, and she is coping with the effects of that all through the novel. Her marred self-perception negatively affects her relationships, particularly with her husband, until her crises experience towards the end. The same is true for the people of whom she is a kind of prototype. Trauma victims need every possible support that can be given by society. I have no particular suggestion on how to do it, except that it should come out of genuine care (Sarangi).

Zorami's disorientation is intensified when Sanga and Julie go to Delhi. He is not with her to celebrate her birthday which coincides with New Year. Outside her house children enjoy the advent of New Year. Kimi, her best friend, celebrates Zorami's birthday and presents her with a novel. She starts reliving the injustice done to her. From the novel "...the word 'Indian' stands for an olive green clad giant with an evil grin pasted on it...She feels giddy and nauseous" (Jacob 220). She experiences mood swings like she is unworthy, ugly, and well-deserved to be deserted by Sanga. She feels, "she knows the demon of depression is on its way to torture her again" (Jacob 221). She gets into a self-destructive behavior of trying to commit suicide by using a knife, cockroach spray and by hanging herself. From the novel

As she tries to go out the door, an excruciating headache seizes her. Her head feels about to explode. She staggers back inside. Her stomach churns. She totters to the bathroom and throws

up, her chest and back hurting badly as she does so. She goes on throwing up till her whole body feels empty. With an effort she shuffles to bed and flops down, pulling up the quilt (Jacob 223).

Zorami, in a split second realizes that God wants to save her, help her. She understands God's resurrection. She is blissful, feels weightless, and her face beams with life and colour as she listens to the song sung by boys and girls returning from midnight service. She experiences happiness and Sanga returns from Delhi and presents her with a silver chain. He wishes her belated birthday wishes. Zorami undergoes peace and warmth in his presence. She revives her faith in Christ after psychological turbulence and relational crisis.

Like James Joyce who used epiphany as a literary device in his short story collection *Dubliners* (1914) Malsawmi Jacob uses revival of faith in God in bringing peace to Zorami. Epiphanies can be felt in many different forms rising out of a combination of experiences, memory and knowledge. One cannot predict when one's subconscious can play a significant role in bringing a solution for long term suffering/effort. In her interview to Jaydeep Sarangi, Jacob ascertains, "Spiritual epiphany is the key factor in my protagonist's inner healing. I honestly could not find another way to mend her shattered psyche. And for a people still hurting from the atrocities they suffered, a genuine spiritual experience is the need. Spiritual, not merely religious. The verse is actually taken from the Bible. I just applied it to Zorami's mental and emotional condition when her problems are solved. Yes, she certainly is in a state of spiritual bliss when her heart 'sings' these lines. It also points at the possibility of such healing for the land itself" (Jacob 5).

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