



## **MK Binodini's Bor Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi: An Agency for the Silenced Voices**

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### **ABSTRACT**

History has eluded women's voices as mainstream public history was written by men and for men. Traditional history writing focused on men's history and ignored women's voices, regarding them to be trivial. This particular research will look at history through a feminist lens and explore the voice of the marginalised women, which had been ignored by mainstream history. This study will focus on the famed Sahitya Akademi award-winning Manipuri novel, Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi (The Princess and the Political Agent) by Maharajkumari Binodini. Partly biographical and partly historical, the novel sways from the traditional male history and looks at a lesser-known historical character, Sanatombi. By analysing her personal life, the paper will bring forth the issues of subjugation, discrimination, and the oppression of women in the then Manipuri society, which were not documented in the public history of the period.

**KEYWORDS:** History, Women, Silenced Voices, Feminism.

### **Introduction**

“What we know of the past experience of women has been transmitted to us largely through the reflections of men: how we see and interpret what we know about women has been shaped for us through a value system defined by men.” (Lerner, 2005, p.127)

History has been written from the perspective of men. Traditional history writing has focused on men's history and had ignored women's voices, regarding them to be trivial. This particular essay will look at history from a feminist lens and explore the voice of the marginalised women which had been ignored by mainstream history. This study will analyse the famed Sahitya Akademi award-winning Manipuri novel, Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi<sup>1</sup> (The Princess and the Political Agent) by Maharajkumari Binodini. Partly biographical and partly historical, this novel is narrated from the perspective of a woman. The paper focuses on the female protagonist, Sanatombi, and the women in her life who had lived a life of restrictions and had

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their voices curtailed. Binodini analysed the various experiences and roles of women, reassessed their choices, and challenged perceptions that they were somehow unimportant.

There is little information regarding the history of Manipuri women. The few that could be gathered are views of Manipuri women through the perspective of men and "...what they portrayed is the women of the upper class, of high esteem, tradition bound and are living within the accepted norms of society." (Singh, 2013a, p.341) Manipuri society did not promote female education, and so Manipuri women had been represented inaccurately by the prejudiced patriarchal society.

"...in the early days before the 1960's women in Manipuri society were hardly allowed to have school education...educated ones were generally considered as polluted. Due to this reason elders did not send their daughters or female members to school." (Singh, 1996, p.340)

The few women who were fortunate enough to be mentioned in mainstream public history were mostly queens and women who made significant contributions to male history such as Maharani Linthoingambi<sup>2</sup>, Maharani Kuranganayani<sup>3</sup>, Maharani Kumudini, and so on. These women had made contributions that were crucial to the continuation of the patriarchal history, and therefore their names were carved into the historical account of their time period. Linthoingambi had saved the Manipuri kingdom by offering strong wine to the revolting Tangkhuls<sup>4</sup> when her husband, the king, had been away at war. Her quick wit helped in delaying the rebels from revolting during the absence of the king and his army. Maharani Kuranganayani, queen of the Ahoms<sup>5</sup> and a Manipuri princess, was instrumental in reviving the lost kingdom of the Ahoms from the hands of the rebels of the Moamoria<sup>6</sup> rebellion by playing a crucial role in the assassination of the rebel leader. Kumudini, wife of Maharaja Gambhir Singh and mother to Maharaja Chandrakirti, was a key figure in the politics of the kingdom of Manipur. Gambhir Singh died when his son was still a minor, and so she played a crucial role in handling the affairs of his son's kingdom and even took the step of killing the regent, Nara Singh, who was Gambhir Singh's aide and relative, due to her suspicion that he might usurp her son's throne. Maharani Kumudini played a key role in the administration of the Manipuri kingdom during the reign of her son. All of these women mentioned had made their contributions in ways that benefited the patriarchal society and made the continuation of male history possible.

The novel *Bor Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (The Princess and the Political Agent) chronicles the life of Princess Sanatombi, the eldest daughter of Maharaja Surchandra, king of Manipur (reign 1886-1890). It is a tribute to the obscure princess, a retelling of her life from her own perspective. This novel sways from the traditional male history and looks at a lesser-known historical character: Sanatombi. By analysing her



personal life, the paper will bring forth the issues of subjugation, discrimination, and the oppression of women in the then Manipuri society, which was not documented in the public history of the period.

History had eluded women's voices as mainstream public history was written by men and for men. History had never tried to assess the situation from the female perspective. Though Sanatombi was legally married to Maxwell, the people refused to recognise the marriage and referred to her merely as his "concubine".

"In 1892, Maj. Maxwell, later Political Agent of Manipur, took Sanatombi, daughter of Surchandra Singh, the former Maharaja and married to one Nongmaithem Manikchand, a small businessman as his concubine. This act was indeed a blow to the orthodox Hindu Manipuri society ..." (Singh, 1996, p.212)

In the preface, Binodini had mentioned how history had represented Sanatombi as the disgraced woman and never bothered to give a thought to her side of the story. She had been ostracised and neglected by her people, and the only record available in history was that she married the enemy, the coloniser who came to colonise her people. Devi had quoted Shri Birendra Singh, a critic who wrote a response to the novel, and in that he held Sanatombi accountable for her outcast status. He gave the same views that the then society had inscribed on her.

Since Sanatombi had no feelings for Manikchand and had an emotional intimacy with Maxwell, it was just a matter of time before she left the former for the latter. He does not want to call it independence but want of excessive freedom and feels that a married woman ought not to be so free to have a conversation with an unknown man. He uses slut shaming to criticise her, calling her frankness with the stranger that of a loose woman's behaviour and saying that she has no regard for societal norms. (Binodini, 2005, p.156, my translation)

However, her voice had been neglected, and nobody ever gave a thought to why she married the foreigner whom her people hated. Binodini tries to reassess Sanatombi's situation and her choice in marrying the then British political agent.

Married off early to a tradesman by the name of Nongmaithem Manikchand, Sanatombi had never experienced romantic love before her marriage and accepted her arranged marriage as a way of life. It was her family's choice, and she had no say in that matter. The situation was the same for Phandengsana<sup>7</sup>, Mainu<sup>8</sup>, Tenbi<sup>9</sup>, Ombisana<sup>10</sup>, and almost all the queens mentioned in the novel. All of them had absolutely no say over their choice of partners.



As a husband, Manikchand had failed considerably. Manikchand devoted all his time to his business, leaving his newly married young wife unattended. His trade made him take frequent trips abroad, which never left him hardly any time for his wife. Manikchand never paid much attention to his wife's emotional needs. He remained aloof from the desperate situation of his father-in-law, the king who had been dethroned by his younger brothers. He was not politically inclined nor had the intention to get entangled in the tense situation of the royal family in the midst of the Palace Revolution<sup>11</sup> of 1891. Despite Sanatombi's constant pleas to get in touch with her father in Calcutta, he refrained from doing so on one pretext or another.

After the altercation between the two regarding her constant meetings with Maxwell, she started questioning why she ever married Manikchand. She realised she never loved him and this was the turning point in her life. This self-realisation made her more accepting of Maxwell's affection, and she started to reciprocate his feelings. They had an emotional connection, which she never had with her husband, Manikchand. During her moments of despair, Maxwell was the one available for her and was her only source of comfort. She began to feel his genuine feelings for her and his concern for her well-being. Sanatombi's decision to elope with Maxwell is the most significant moment of the novel. She believed that he would be able to fulfil her desires and make her happy. He was her last chance at a life of happiness, which she never had with her former husband.

Manipur was a conservative and orthodox society and quite sensitive to any interracial relations between men and women. Apart from the racial difference, Maxwell was "the enemy" who had come to colonise and dominate her kingdom and her people. Her elopement degraded her to the status of a social outcast, and she was termed a fallen woman: "the outcast princess." Even though she was ostracised and scorned by her society for marrying the enemy firangi<sup>12</sup>, she always worked in the best interest of her people. Rebuked at and abused by her own people during the Women's Agitation<sup>13</sup> of 1904, still she was the one pressurising her then-husband, Major Maxwell, to revoke the decree that he had passed.

Love was what made her challenge everything that her society and tradition stood for. She is not to be blamed, for it is not her fault that she fell in love with Maxwell. Love is irrespective of caste, creed, colour, race and religion. Society failed to see her reason for marrying Maxwell, whom her people considered the enemy of Manipur. She was torn between her love and society's conservative and biased views, torn between patriarchy and colonial phenomena. This ultimately led to her death within a year of his departure from Manipur.

The female figures in the novel had no independence in choosing their choice of partner for marriage. Sanatombi's maid, Tenbi was married off early to a man she never knew, and the marriage did not last long.



She returned back to her parents, and the same case happened with Mainu. The only way these two women could retaliate was by leaving their husbands and seeking shelter in the household of Sanatombi. They were not ready to subvert the patriarchal order that suppressed women and their choices. Interclass marriage was frowned upon, and the monarchy made strict rules regarding interclass marriage. The romantic relations of Phandengsana- Meri Selungba<sup>14</sup> and Mainu-Khema<sup>15</sup> all ended up in tragedies. Meri Selungba was punished for loving a princess, as his status was not befitting enough to wed a princess.

On the other hand, looking at another aspect of marriage, almost all the kings and male members of the nobility mentioned in the book had more than one wife, while Sanatombi was frowned upon for marrying a foreigner by leaving her husband. Sanatombi's younger half-sister Ombisana was married off to a man who already had two wives just because he was an influential man. Ombisana is being sacrificed as an exchangeable commodity in the patriarchal institution of marriage. It is also to be noted how King Chandrakirti had five wives, and the youngest, Thokchom Chanu, was even younger than his own daughters. This was legitimate, but Sanatombi leaving her husband and marrying another was considered a taboo. She was ostracised and considered a disgrace to the society. This dual nature of Manipuri society, which is biased towards women, kept them chained in their oppressed state.

Right from her childhood days, Sanatombi was a strong-willed person and had never failed to voice her opinions. She never let others' opinion affect her choices. The instance of Kang Sanaba<sup>16</sup> where she had a physical altercation with her half-brother, Prince Lukhoisana, displayed this personality of hers. Her brother Lukhoisana forbade her from playing kang, and Sanatombi was determined to do what she wanted.

Sanatombi: Who are you to interfere in my affairs, and why should I follow your orders? It is none of your concern, and I will do as I wish.

Lukhoisana: You cannot do as you wish.

Sanatombi: Why not?

Lukhoisana: Because I am Lukhoisana.

Sanatombi: I too am Sanatombi.

Lukhoisana: I am a man, and you, a woman.

Sanatombi: So, what does it matter if you are a man?

(Binodini, 2005, p. 9, my translation)

Manipur being a kingdom that followed the primogeniture laws, a princess has no right to the throne of Manipur. Male members of the society were given much more importance than the women, but Sanatombi



refused to accept it. Sanatombi always questioned and challenged the discrimination between men and women.

Another instance where she challenged patriarchal norms was when she asked why she cannot take part in the Kwak Yatra<sup>17</sup> festival, which was a male-only ritual. Sanatombi questioned her mother, “if Lukhoisana can, why can’t I?” to which her mother replied, “A man and a woman can never have equal status.” (Binodini, 2005, p.40, my translation) She cross-dressed as a male and took part in the celebrations in the disguise of a man.

She voiced her desire to negotiate with the British and her relatives who had dethroned her father from his rightful position as the king of Manipur. She was against this view that her father had of her as a helpless female, a princess who could do nothing but embroil herself in her powerlessness. Strong-headed and fearless, Princess Sanatombi never gave in to the challenges that were thrown at her.

## **Conclusion**

The novel, being a women-centric narrative, focuses on issues that concern the women characters who were left out by public history. It emphasises Sanatombi as the hero of the novel and traces events that concern her, recounting her desperation, her helplessness, and her ostracism. The male characters in the novel receive a setback and are given attention only in relation to Sanatombi. Thus, Binodini subverts the patriarchal hegemony by giving more emphasis on the female characters and on female experiences rather than the achievements of the male characters. Sanatombi’s detailed experiences openly challenged the ideology of the period. Through this novel Binodini has restored the female voice, which had been silenced.

## **Notes**

1. The novel published in 1976 was based on the true story of Princess Sanatombi, daughter of Maharaja Surchandra (reign 1886-1890), and the title literally translates as “Sanatombi, the wife of the political agent.”
2. Maharani Linthoingambi was the queen of King Ningthoukhomba of Manipur who ruled Manipur, from 1432-1467.
3. Maharani Kuranganayani was a Manipuri princess who became the queen of the Assam kingdom.
4. A tribe of Manipur
5. The old name of the Assam Kingdom
6. The Moamoria Rebellion (1769-1806) was a conflict between the Ahom kings and the Morans.



7. Princess of Manipur, daughter of King Chandrakirti, who ruled from 1850-1886.
8. Childhood friend and companion of Sanatombi
9. Sanatombi's maid and daughter of a servant of the royal family.
10. Sanatombi's half-sister and daughter of King Surchandra of Manipur by his wife, Khoirom Chanu
11. It was an uprising by the younger brothers of King Surchandra, which resulted in the latter being usurped by his younger brother, Kulachandra.
12. A white foreigner
13. It was an uprising by the womenfolk against the order imposed by the British administration. It was a kind of forced labour where men between the ages of 17-60 would have to work for 10 days in every 40 day- period without any remuneration and rebuild the bungalow of the Assistant Political Agent which had earlier been torched by some unknown natives. It is locally known as Nupi Lan.
14. He was the lover of Princess Phandengsana and a commoner who worked in the royal court.
15. He was a Meetei and the lover of Mainu. Mainu, being a Brahmin lady was forbidden from having romantic relations with a Meetei man.
16. Kang Sanaba is an indigenous Manipuri game, "kang" literally means "a round object"; hence, pushing or throwing it over a smoothly levelled ground, is called "Kang Sanaba"
17. A religious sacrament with a state function carried out on the tenth day of Mera (October-November), where the crows are shot to drive them away for observation of signs of good and evil phenomena and calamities to happen in the following days of the year. (Religious Observances and Other Sacraments, pg. 107-108)

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