



Reading Magic, Superstition, and Meetei Folk Beliefs in Selected Stories from Linthoi Chanu's *Wari*

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Abstract

In her world of fiction, the emerging Manipuri author, Linthoi Chanu, offers a vivid description of the rich folk traditions of her native community and the role of magic and superstition in sharing the folk imagination of her people. Through her works, Chanu enables the readers to engage in a serious dialogue with the cultural past of her native state, Manipur in Northeast India, which has often been misrepresented or largely ignored in the mainstream Indian cultural imagination. In her works, Chanu skilfully highlights the contemporary socio-political issues through the symbolic prism of folklore and local myths. This becomes particularly evident in her first collection of English short stories, *Wari* (2019). The stories in this collection not only interrogate our conventional understanding of reality but reveal the deep interconnectedness between superstition and folk traditions in the collective consciousness of her community. In that sense, Chanu's stories contain elements of magical realism, thereby blurring the line between reality and magic and representing a folk worldview beyond the scientific yardstick imposed by western epistemology. In accordance with this idea, Chanu's stories in the collection, *Wari*, defy a strictly logical interpretation and transform the readers to a magical realm. The aim of the paper is to explore the lesser-known world of Manipuri folklore through the lens of magical realism in selected stories in Linthoi Chanu's short story collection, *Wari*.

Keywords: Meetei, Manipuri, Magical Realism, Myths, Folk, Culture.

Introduction

The emerging author Linthoi Chanu is notable for her deep interest for Manipuri/Meetei folk culture and tradition as

evidenced through her oeuvre of creative works published so far. Whereas her book *The Tale of the Kanglei Throne* skilfully deals with the mythical and legendary accounts of Manipur,

her work of fantasy fiction *Wayel Kati* (The Scissors of Justice) provides a modern rendering of different folktales from Manipur. The present paper focusses on Linthoi Chanu's first collection of short stories, *Wari* and tries to appreciate the Manipuri folk beliefs depicted in the book through the prism of magical realism. Especially, how the concept of magical realism is applicable in regards to the non-western native society and how it conveys a native, localised form of "reality" is analysed in this study.

Folk Beliefs, Superstitions and Magical Realism in Linthoi Chanu's *Wari*

It is widely accepted that Magical Realism as a literary genre began to gain prominence with the works of Latin American writers in the early twentieth century. Elaine J. Lawless, in this connection, observes that the fictions of several Latin American writers are characterised by a kind of supernatural or surreal writing that requires a willing suspension of disbelief in the readers and this writing style is often termed by literary critics as magical realism ("Folklife in Louisiana). Lawless suggests that the very function of magical realism is to achieve a connection between the oral world and the literary one. Hence, what is termed as magical realism is nothing but an enactment of the oral art upon the written page and in the process to "perform" the folklore for the reader (Lawless). Accordingly, it is folklore that remains at the heart of magical realism and serves as a living belief force within communities and among human beings (Lawless). Therefore, folklore and magical realism are inseparable from each other, especially in regard to those native communities which have strong and deep-rooted oral traditions.

The state of Manipur in Northeast India is known for its ancient folk traditions and oral literature. Local myths, legends and folktales abound in both the hills and plains of the state. This rich body of local folk literature serves as

the raw materials for Linthoi Chanu's stories in the collection, *Wari*. Whereas Chanu's stories potentially fit into the genre of magical realism when seen from the western literary approach, they are also an honest rendition of the Manipuri folk culture and oral tales popularly narrated across generations, forming a part of the community life to this day.

One feature of the works of magical realism is their realistic setting which is intended to keep the readers grounded in the text and to give them a sense of familiarity with the world depicted in the text. Chanu's stories are woven on the familiar social canvas of day to day Manipuri society where she introduces uncanny or supernatural events as a means to transport the reader to the mysterious world of the folk beliefs. The first short story in the book titled "Near Immortal" is about a popular Manipuri urban legend of a type of black magic performed by elderly people known as *Khoidouwa* which literally means navel art. Chanu describes *Khoudouwa* as "a foul practice of black magic by a greedy human who is afraid of dying that leads them to extracting or stealing the healthy souls of people around them to keep themselves alive" (17). Such a magic is performed by manipulating a spirit linked to the navel (Chanu 16). In the story, an old woman named Tharo is held responsible for killing many of her near ones and relatives by practising the black art of *Khoidouwa*. Tharo is described as being accompanied by an invisible spirit who stays inside her navel and whom she must serve to retain her youth. The story depicts how her *Khoudouwa* is also challenged by others with the help of black magic and certain spiritual practices. Thus, in one particular instance, when Tharo approaches a house to cast her spell and harm the residents, she is met with resistance from a certain spirit:

There were three candles, three red flowers, three colour rice grains, and three small fruits being offered near the gate. The house was protected. Someone had outsmarted her. She

looked around and saw a child gesturing at her to leave. The child clad in a white dress was sitting on top of the tallest tree in the grove and seemed to warn off Tharo. Her foul vermin churned inside her navel and Tharo walked away as fast as she could. (Chanu 6-7)

The description of the child clad in white dress, which is supposedly a guardian spirit protecting the household, is expressive of the harmonious blending of magic and realism in the Meetei folk worldview. While narrating these surrealistic and magical events, Chanu does not break away from the realistic frame of reference. In fact, there seems to be conscious attempt on her part to reveal to the readers the unseen world of the spirits and black magic which have lost credibility among the rationalistic modern generations.

Through the story, Chanu skilfully drives home the idea that black magic exists in reality and that it can affect our lives in serious ways. She shows the conflict between rationality and superstition and concludes that there are certain things yet to be explained by modern science. Towards the end of the story, Doctor Thoiba, who represents the voice of rationality and science, examines Tharo and touches her body only to be eventually killed by the woman through her black magic. The death of the doctor symbolises the defeat of the modern material world to the folk spirit-world. In this way, the story, "Near Immortal," depicts the idea that in the Meetei folk worldview, humans and spirits co-exist side by side and that humans frequently take help of the mysterious spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, to meet their ends. The story transports the readers to another dimension of existence which is beyond the constraints of the rational western mind.

The folk belief in the co-existence between humans and spirits is even more prominently depicted in another story titled "The Scarlet Haophi." This story focusses on the

importance of sacred groves in the Meetei folk belief system. It revolves around the magical experiences of a seven-year old girl, Ebehaibi, whose parents buy a plot of land in an area which has been a part of a sacred grove since the ancient times. Events take a serious turn when one day the family is visited by a mysterious "middle-aged tribal woman with a striped black and red robe, a reed basket slung across her head and carried on her back" (Chanu 113). Apparently, she was a seller of *haophi*, i.e., a traditional winter shawl made by Manipuri tribes. The family buys a *haophi* for the little girl and from then on a series of fantastic and supernatural events start happening. The girl starts playing with the *haophi* but it turns out to be magical. As soon as she slips inside the *haophi* her small room transforms into a vast open field, her bedspread turns into grassland and she saw the sun shining on her brightly. In a dreamlike sequence of surrealistic events, she is visited by the same tribal lady who takes her on an adventurous journey to another dimension of existence. In other words, the tribal lady takes her to the spirit world where Ebehaibi sees many otherworldly beings including her recently deceased maternal grandmother who now had a pigeon body similar to the other thousand faces smiling at her. It is later found out that the tribal lady is none other than the guardian deity, *Haoreima Ema Shampubi* who is protecting that sacred grove. Further, the readers come to know that Ebehaibi had been missing for the last two days under the spell of the deity. Such an incidence is known as *Laina Chenba*. In the Meetei folk belief, 'Laina Chenba' refers to the spiriting away of children and people by wild spirits or deities (Chanu 130).

The story teaches us to respect the sacred groves as dwelling places of guardian spirits. According to a recent data, there are a total of 166 sacred groves in the state of Manipur ("Sacred Groves in Manipur"). Protecting these groves from human intervention is also importance from the ecological perspective. The present story, thus, skilfully interweaves

ecological concerns with folk elements and provides a surrealistic experience to the readers.

Chanu tries to present before the reader a sincere picture of her native homeland and its natural landscape which is mesmerisingly charming and beautiful and is home to many popular folk legends that have shaped popular imagination since generations. These legends are reminiscent of a time when scientific knowledge had not yet penetrated the superstitious belief systems ingrained in native people's minds. The legends also represent a primitive attempt of the part of these people to explain and give meaning to unexplained phenomena or cryptic natural objects. This idea is particularly expressed by Chanu in the story, "Hags of the Mountain."

In order to lend an outsider's perspective to the narrative, Chanu centres her story around the personal experiences of a white foreigner, Dr. Roderic Ferdinand, who visits Manipur for an ethnographic trip. Manipur is presented as one of the "notorious parts of the country" (Chanu 69) and a "mysterious place" (Chanu 73) about which written records were available only through the scarce British accounts. Such a representation of the state serves to further mystify the place making magical realism a suitable style to describe its oddities and secrets. He comes to the village of Chingshu where he encounters a story about a mythical creature of the deep swampy forests, called the *Loudraobi*. These creatures, it was told, captured only males and licked the feet of their victims till they bled and lost the ability to escape (Chanu 75).

One of the interesting aspects of the story is that it presents a folk legend through the western scientific perspective while retailing the essence and suspense of the folk experience intact. Thus, even though Dr. Roderic knows that scientifically it is impossible for a creature to exist in reality, the inner child in him still wants to believe the story of the creature to be true (Chanu 75). The element of magical realism

is present in the character's real encounter with an unknown creature deep inside the forest whose identity he is unable to confirm. Although his scientific mind tries to rationalise this chilly experience by trying to identify the creature as a slow loris or a monkey or even a human being, he cannot forget the fear that he feels at the sight of what he saw. There is a subtle representation of a western or colonial mind unable to come to terms with the "reality" of a post-colonial society where fact and fiction become juxtaposed. This type of magical realism can be termed as "anthropological magical realism" in which the narrator makes use of "two voices": one grounded in rationalism and realism, while the other willing to accept magic as a part of reality (Aldea 3).

It may be said that the style of magical realism is particularly concerned not only with the marginalised voices but with postcolonial writings as a whole (Reeds 213). This is because this style challenges the very idea of reality or truth as defined by the western logic. By depicting the unexplainable and embracing the uncanny as a part of day-to-day existence, magical realism destabilises the western notion of absolute truth. In the same context, Chanu's story, "Hags of the Mountain," employs magical realism not merely to put forward a native folk version of reality but in order to shock the western mind into believing that not all things are rationally explainable. Towards the end of the story, Dr. Roderic's words, "The myth was alive and he had lived to tell the tale" (Chanu 81) very well sums up the triumph of magical realism as a mode of postcolonial aesthetics.

Conclusion

In view of the above, it can be said that Linthoi Chanu's *Wari*, through its use of the elements of folk beliefs, magic and superstitions, reintroduces the native readers to the age-old traditional worldview of the Meetei community and enables them to rediscover their folk heritage in a new light. On the other hand, for the non-native readers, these stories serve as a

prelude to the lesser-known world of folk beliefs, myths, legends and superstitions which have been part of the Meetei folk consciousness since the earliest times.

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