



Gender, Patriarchy, and the Marginalisation of Women in *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father* by Binodini

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Abstract: Patriarchal designs deeply rooted in gendered biases are an inherent social construction that keeps women at the periphery of the social institutions and political involvements. This distinction correlates with their preconceived assigned gender-specific roles and expectations. This paper examines Binodini's *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father* (2015) within the light of this idea. The politics of gender supported by patriarchy becomes an ambience for the people within the Meitei society, relegating women to the periphery, ignoring their existence and importance. This paper uses Butler's gender performativity and Beauvoir's feminist concepts to find out how these socio-cultural aspects treat the binary genders and render women as subservient to their male counterparts. This work analyses and concludes the impermanence of gender specified roles that restrict women who are always measured by the patriarchy.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Marginalisation, Binodini.

1. INTRODUCTION

Known to the people of Manipur as "Imasi", Binodini (1922- 2011), was a princess by birth. She was a writer, poet, sculptor, playwright, essayist, scriptwriter and a leftist who believed in the equality of everyone. She was born at a time when women were not given much autonomy, even in education. Through her and a couple of women writers, Manipur witnessed a new wave of women writers. As the daughter of Maharaj Churachand, Binodini was brought up in the royal household and saw the insides of the royals that a commoner would never access. The lens through which to know these royalties, their predicaments, and emotions could not be more accurate than through Binodini's view. She was a writer not only for the royals but also for the common people in Manipur, as she had lived among them. She has to her credit the Jamini Sunder Guha Gold Medal-winning short story collection *Nungairakta Chandramukhi* republished as *Wari Macha Binodinigi* (2025), literally translated as *Short Stories of Binodini*, radio play *Ashangba Nongjabi* translated into *Crimson Rainclouds* (2012), Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel *Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi*, translated as *The Princess and the Political Agent* (2020) by her son, L. Somi Roy. Nahakpam Aruna, in her introduction to the memoir *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father*, quotes Binodini's own words: "I do not know how to write except from what I hear, from what I experience. I write from what I encounter in life, from what I hear around me." It is this characteristic of Binodini that helps in understanding the royals and the public through her perspective. The work considered for analysis is the memoir, *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father* (2015) translated from Manipuri by L. Somi Roy.

Gender and patriarchal control have long been an integral part of society, which cannot be undermined. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, gender is defined as "the state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones". This implies that differences in biological orientation have nothing to do with gender. It is entirely based on cultural and social customs and intensified by the superiority exercised by patriarchy. Socio-cultural practices indirectly boost the hegemonic control of men over women.



The societal structure of the Meiteis also has its socio-cultural norms, which specify roles and expectations for men and women, respectively. These norms were strictly enforced for the royals and have long governed in the Meitei society. Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), suggests gender as “a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time” (Butler, 353). This performativity highlights how Manipuri queens “perform” through their ranked titles and reproductive silence, sustaining the “heterosexual matrix” where women serve as “relational terms” in male kinship exchanges (38-41). The way society shapes individuals to conform to certain traits and behaviours defines being a man or a woman, as Simone de Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex* (1956) that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman ... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature ...” (273). In Binodini’s memoir, this “becoming” manifests as queens internalises passivity and otherness relative to the king’s transcendence, mirroring Beauvoir’s critique of woman as “incidental” to man’s “essential subject” (Beauvoir, 16).

2. ANALYSIS

This analysis on the literary representations of the life of the royal families explores how genderism plays in the internal affairs of the royal households, most importantly in the Meitei society, as the Meiteis believed and practised patriarchy, where one’s lineage is linked through patrilineal descent, and one’s root is traced through the patrilocal residence. The matriarch is significantly important in Meitei society as the mother or ‘ema’ plays a crucial role in the economic and household duties. However, it is interesting to note that the upper hand or control is still held by the patriarch, as a person’s identity and roots are often addressed from a patriarchal point of view.

With thirty-four chapters on different areas, this memoir by Binodini is an exceptional one, where one encounters characters from royal households that a commoner could only have heard about. The characters come to life as she writes about them, and one could not have done so as Binodini has justifiably done. Chapter one, “My Mother Tampak, Maid of Chongtham”, talks about Tampak, the maid of Chongtham, the fourth wife of Maharaj Churachand, who was a beauty with long tresses, but she could not give birth to a child of her own. The author asked whether she lived with this hurt all her life without letting anyone know about it and that too among her co-sister queens. The plight of such a childless woman in the Meitei society was a great defeat inside the royal palace. Only her laughter made known her presence in the palace. This Binodini questions: “But behind that laughter, did you sigh with the pain of being childless?” (3). Here, it is observed that Tampak’s enforced “laughter” exemplifies Butler’s performativity. Her silence on childlessness “creates the idea of gender” as fertile subservience, a “stylized repetition” masking pain to avert the co-queens’ mockery and uphold reproductive norms (Butler, 140). This also aligns with Beauvoir’s “other”, where childless women embody “defectiveness”, imprisoned by uterus-centric myths that reduce them to wombs (Beauvoir, 15). Tampak withdrew not from her biological constitution but tradition’s demand to perform motherhood, subverting yet reinforcing patriarchy.

The position of a married woman without a child in her husband's house is an unbearable agony and a shame. Not only this, but as the ‘other’ in the binary opposition of the sexes, she is the subservient who could not request her husband “to take a dip together in the sacred pools of Radhakunda and Shyamkunda” (3) so that “they would be blessed with an heir, they would have a child. It was said that you could not bring to bring this up to His Highness, your husband. You were unable to overcome the barrier of your step-queens’ mockery. Oh, the shame. And so the Lady Chongtham withdrew.” (3)

The preference for a male child has been going on for ages in every culture. This practice renders women into a mere reproductive mechanism for a man to carry on his lineage, and concerning the monarch of a kingdom, it carries more weight as Binodini expresses in Chapter Three, “Maharaj Churachand’s Daughters” that when her sovereign father heard about the impending delivery, he ran to the royal delivery room only to find the Lady Ngangbam had given birth to their fifth daughter which left both the Maharaj and the Maharani heartbroken. (10)

The heartbreak of Lady Ngangbam, who gave birth only to daughters, can be analysed from Beauvoir’s perspective, rendering her as “inessential” because her value is tied to male heirs in a patrilineal system echoing “patriarchal times” (Beauvoir, 106). As a result, Lady Ngangbam adopted her younger sister’s son, Prince Joysana, right from birth, as the king also married the younger sister of Lady Ngangbam. This adoption could have been possible only because the younger sister was also the consort of the Maharaj. Such kinship exchanges position women as “gifts” in the “heterosexual matrix”, their bodies as sites of male bonding (Butler, 39).



One fascinating tradition of the royal household was dividing the status of the consorts of the king by addressing them with different titles according to the importance of their marriage to the king, as highlighted in Chapter Two, “The Younger Queens”:

1. Leimarembi (Maharani)
2. Apambi Ahal (Rani)
3. Leimakhubi Ahal (Rani)
4. Apambi Naha (Rani)
5. Leimakhubi Naha (Rani) (5)

The king could have only five official wives, as “custom of the land allowed the king to have up to five wives” (5). The king, however, had ten wives, and this meant that as he was a king, he had the right as a man to marry as many as he wanted. Under the traditional laws of his time, it was acceptable for kings to marry up to five queens. Consequently, the Maid of Meisnam Subadani became his sixth wife without any title except that she was married to the king. All the first five wives had titles and rights associated with their relationships to kings, but the remaining wives could not enjoy such titles and privileges. This situation illustrates the difference that existed in the treatment of males and females because of the social and cultural structures that existed at that time in history. As a father, the king was also distant from his children, something that Binodini stated was part of the ancient tradition of the time. Experts suggested and advised that the king marry many wives as a political necessity. Thus, traditional and political necessity favoured males to maintain authority, both in terms of marital relationship situations and in political situations. Therefore, choosing to have ten wives displays male liberty by the king, while queens defer, by submitting to and respecting the system (Butler, 40-41). Beauvoir’s myths frame this as women’s “submissive otherness”, and her status is “defined relative to man” (Beauvoir, 16). Thus, political necessity excuses polygamy, naturalising asymmetry.

In Chapter Six, “Ibemcha, Maid of Chongtham”, one encounters the maternal grandfather of Binodini, Jugolsingh, who “did nothing but lived there, re-telling his stories of old, weeping and living in the past” (21) at the village of Khamran, where refuge was sought after the British seized Manipur in 1891. He was lamenting a bygone era to the extent that he stopped fulfilling his duties as a man of the house. At this moment, the Maid of Yumnam, Binodini’s maternal grandmother, took matters into her hands and looked after the household, earning a livelihood like any village woman. And her illustriousness made her “a wealthy woman of the village”. This posits clearly that, whatever the situation, a woman can never leave her duties and obligations. The author’s mother would narrate how illustrious her mother was by narrating that her “grandmother was blessed by the goddess Lakshmi... She owned a female buffalo that bore only female calves and so was able to fill an entire stable. Grandmother did her own milking, and by making yogurt that she sold to market women bound for Imphal, made a lot of money and ultimately became a wealthy woman of the village”. (21)

Binodini writes about her birth mother, Lady Ngangbam, Ibemcha, in Chapter Twenty-three, “When Dr. Bidhanchandra Roy Paid Tombiyaima a House Call”, that many people would misunderstand her because of her resolute nature, thinking it as “arrogance and pride” (127), for she was the maharani and the most loved woman of the king. Despite being the maharani and the most loved queen, she could not escape the contempt and stigma of society, where being childless or being unable to produce a male offspring was considered fruitless. The people thus remarked: “The Lady Ngangbam knows the black arts. She has cast her dark spells and ensnared the king”. (127) for the king shared every secret with her, took her wherever he went and took care of her daughters even when she could not give a male heir. Such is the society where a woman is never appreciated but censured for the little loopholes and incompetencies. Thus, the ‘resolute’ aspects of Lady Ngangbam’s character are labelled with disapproval.

In sadness, Lady Ngangbam tells her daughter Binodini that she was about to marry one of her daughters to the Maharaja of Tripura to be the Maharani of Tripura in Chapter Thirty-one, “When the Maharani of Tripura, the Rani of Dhaka Came to Request of Tombiyaima’s Hand”. However, her dream was destroyed because the king, Maharaj Churachand, changed his mind about marrying his daughter to the monarch of Tripura without providing any reason for his rejection or change of heart. Later, it was revealed that the king’s most intimate advisors warned him, “Be careful, child king. Your wife the Lady Ngangbam is very arrogant. If her daughter becomes the Maharani of Tripura, you



will never be able to control her” (164). The author may indeed be presenting this tale as a conspiracy or figment of the King's imagination, but it cannot be denied that a man must have dominion over a woman. A long-standing power rivalry between opposing forms of gender, becoming more entrenched, but more visible in the stories, is evident in the situation being described.

In "End Piece" or chapter Thirty-three of this delightful work, Maharaj Churachand's final days as a sick man in Nabadweep are chronicled. It is here that the author shows the disparities between gender roles as to how they are constructed within society. The queen, Lady Ngangbam, had spent all of her life in conjunction with her king, and had always played active roles in cultural events, including planning and executing various 'ras lilas'. However, she had been prevented from participating in any discussions related to the king's political office. Lady Ngangbam's husband, the king, discussed regarding the successor to the throne with his sons, Bodhachandra, Priyobarta, Lokendra, and the male children of his other wives. The king had also discussed about his next rightful heir with important members of his court. However, these discussions never included his first wife, the queen Lady Ngangbam, who is also known as Maharani Dhanamanjuri, as the author stated, “My mother was not in on the discussions at this time. This must surely have been because she did not want to be – perhaps because she had no right to be in the race for ruler of Manipur: she was the mother of daughters. It may also have been that this was the reason why father did not allow my mother to participate in these talks.” (175)

Lady Ngangbam was likely excluded from this discussion not because she chose to be, but due to her understanding or lack of interest in such matters, being that she is believed to have had no rights in the selection process about the ruler of Manipur due to the birth of female offspring. We observe a sweeping change in the conduct of the king, where he used to share every secret, discuss every matter with the most beloved queen, and take her wherever he went, even taking her with him when King George V, King of England and Queen Mary came to the Delhi Durbar, to the moment where she was not allowed to take part in the discussions regarding the succession and governance of Manipur. Despite Lady Ngangbam's unwavering commitment to the royal family and her cultural commitments, her exclusion from the discussions regarding succession is the result of the principles described by Beauvoir as the myth and reality of womanhood. As a mother of daughters, she does not have access to participate in political discussions concerning who the successor would be after Maharaj Churachand, her husband. Butler further critiques this by calling it the law's prohibition, which establishes the non-reciprocal nature of women in the patrilineal kinship system (Butler, 42). Women's status as inferior and 'other' is a universal constant in every patriarchal and traditional society. The British colonisation of Manipur introduced the western education model and ultimately caused the traditional and modern ways to intermingle, resulting in the formation of the Anglo-Manipuri culture. However, the deeply-rooted patriarchal mindset of this society will not go away. As a result, the King, who educated his female children and taught them male-dominant sports, has still allowed traditional culture and custom to dictate that he prefers the male line of descent.

In Chapter Thirty-three, “End Piece” of Binodini's memoir, she stated that in addition to the sadness and despair she felt in losing her husband, the king of Manipur, Lady Ngangbam also suffered a devastating blow from society when it ruled that a woman must grieve for the loss of her husband by taking off her gold bangles. When it could not be removed, “someone had to clip them off with a pair of scissors” (176). Such is the tradition and culture that frames the conduct of the genders. And as in all traditions, the woman is the fitting image of the culture, always rooted in patriarchy.

According to Unit 1.4, “Mothers and Wives” of Kelly Sylvia Basner's thesis *A Glittering Arsenal: Bangles, Duty and Transgressions in North India* that one of the primary goals of the pativrata is to protect and serve the husband-all the while serving as a reminder through the use of bangles and other ornaments to fulfil these responsibilities. When a woman loses her husband, she has to disown her ornaments and literally has her bangles cut off from her. The act of cutting off the bangles after the husband's death is one of the first actions taken to ritualise the loss ('death') for the widow. This act is done by hired mourners who literally strip the widow of her ornaments (the unwanted reminders of her husband). This need for a ritual removes the stereotypical view of the “patriarchal bride”, as a way for society to validate to others that a widow can no longer be a satisfactory partner because she does not have the same status as she did when married, creating her “object” femininity and providing her with a framework for phallic rivalry (Butler, 50-52). Beauvoir discusses the widow's “enforced immanence” (641) in her works regarding the “maturity to old age” cycle of life. Beauvoir's analysis provides insight into how the traditional norms that govern women ultimately validate women as the “correct representative” of culture, and demonstrate that gender is inherently



vulnerable. While the disowning and discarding of the bangles represent Lady Ngangbam's symbolic failure to fulfil the duty of protecting her husband, the act also represents the acceptance of her widow's status. Practically, Lady Ngangbam's disassociation from the bangles indicates her cessation of seeking male attraction or contact (Kelly Sylvia Basner). Due to her being the Leimarembi, a queen and goddess who embodies and mothers not only to her children, but all people of Manipur, Lady Ngangbam "held in all her emotions; she did not show anyone anything" (176). It is crucial to recognise that the patrilineal transference present in Meitei culture parallels Beauvoir's "Historical Materialism". A mother's or ema's economic role yields to patriarch's control, thus affirming that women are "afflicted with natural defectiveness" (Beauvoir, 15, 79). Butler's "nature/culture" dualism positions queens as "mute facticity", awaiting male signification (Butler, 38). The queens of Maharaj Churachand are recognised hierarchically according to their status and clan, but above all according to the order in which the marriage was conducted. Binodini's empathy reveals cracks, throwing light on how Lady Ngangbam's love transcends yet reinforces otherness, challenging universality.

3. CONCLUSION

In the chapters explored above from the memoir *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father*, the cultural constructions shape the customs and traditions regarding gender differences, their space, roles and expectations. Women are viewed as subservient and secondary to men as a result of the distinction between the two sexes. Because women, like Queen Tampak or her biological mother, Lady Ngangbam, the Maharani, bore no children or had no son, they were viewed differently. The introduction by Nahakpam Aruna to this memoir criticizes this treatment of women without children and, more specifically, the disapproval and punishment of women who did not produce a male heir in the realm of the palace that was filled with whispers of gossip and false rumours. The author illustrates the sorrow experienced by these women as illustrated through the eyes of the author, even how her birthmother, the Lady Ngangbam, who was also the Maharani, could not escape this censure (p. xvii). The memoir has its foundation with Binodini's father and mother in a painterly manner, as it documents the hidden stories of the royal family. Such hidden tales reflect how culture and gender influence the lives of royal families worldwide.

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