



GRIT AND DEFIANCE OF IROM SHARMILA

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“Nowhere in India does one feel more of an outsider than in the northeast – in any of the seven states. And this has nothing to do with the people or their attitude, for they are invariably friendly and hospitable“. This opening line in “Where the abnormal is Normal” written by Minnie Vaid defines the feeling of alienation faced by the north-east people from the rest of the country.

Manipur is one of the northeastern states of India covering an area of 22,327 sq. km., with the city of Imphal as its capital. It borders Myanmar (now Burma) to its east and southeast and Nagaland to its north, Assam to its west and Mizoram to its southwest. It is also in close proximity with China in the north and Bangladesh to the west and southwest. It is also known as the western gateway of Southeast Asia. Manipur consists of hills and valleys. The Manipur valley may be called a valley of the valleys. It is a landlocked isolated hilly state having a distinct geographical entity. It is almost rectangular in shape with a valley spreading over an area of 2,007 sq. kms. The Loktak Lake, the biggest freshwater lake in north-eastern India is the southern part of the valley. The average elevation of the valley is 790 meters above the main sea level. Manipur has a tropical temperate climate depending upon elevation. The hill ranges are the offshoots of the Himalayas which constitute the northern boundary of India. The highest peak, i.e., Koubru is the lowest point of the Himalaya range, the hill range while proceeding from it diverges to the north of Manipur but completely converges to the south of Manipur. The hill ranges in the south extend as far as Mizo Hills and the Arakan Yomas till they meet the Bay of Bengal at Cape Negrais in Burma. The Imphal valley is a plateau with an elevation of about 2,600 ft. above the sea level.

It is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious state; a land of indigenous peoples and tribes, sometimes referred to as a microcosm of India. Manipuri is a member of the Kuki-Chin group of the Arakan-Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. Meeteilon prominently known as Manipuri, is the language spoken in Manipur dominantly, apart from other tribal languages that exist in the state. Meeteilon is the only language among Tibeto-Burman languages of India, which has long and profound literature, and cultural heritage which is more than 2000 years old. The Meitei’s community had its own story about the creation of universe, as mentioned in the Puyas (sacred books of the Meteis). According to the local legend and manuscripts

the Meteis were believed to be the descendents of Lord Chingngu Khoiyum Yaibirel Shidaba (the Almighty of the Universe). Manipuri consisted of seven different clans, in Manipuri known as salai, namely Ningthouja/Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Moirang, Angom, Salang-Leishangthem and Khaba-Nganba. Among which Ningthouja clan was the most powerful one from 33 A.D. when 'Meidingu Nongdaa Lairen Pakhangba' became the first king of Manipur by establishing "Kangla" as their seat of power, and then the rest of the clans dissolved one by one into it through the ages by war or compromise. "Cheitharol Kumpaba" royal chronicle began this year onwards which gives the account of years. It sets out briefly in a solemn diction, the reign of kings from 33 AD, important events, eclipses of the sun, the moon, earthquakes, epidemics, etc. The actual keeping of it has been a familiar one to the kings since the fifth century A. D. It is accepted that writing in Manipuri began by the middle of 7th to the beginning of the 8th century A.D.

Meidingu Pamheiba took over the throne in early 18th century. He was a great religious and social reformer; under his royal patronage Cheitanya's school of Vaishnavism was propagated in Meitrabak. "Cheitharol Kumpaba" records that in October 1717. Santidas Gosai, also known as Gopal Gosai, the Brahmin missionary brought Hinduism to Manipur. The Manipur King Pamheiba, latter known as Garib Niwaz converted to Hinduism in 1711 through the influence of the missionary. The king's attitude toward the Meitei traditional religious belief system and practices became hostile. The Puya of the Meitei sacred literatures became most hindrance to his newfound Brahmanical faith and burnt them on 23rd Wakching (december), 1729 at Imphal. The day is known Puya Meithaba and Hinduism became a state religion of Manipur ever since. With the Sanskritization process of Meiteis, after conversion to Hinduism, Meitei Gods were transformed to align with the Gods of the Hindu mythology. So, Pakhangba became Siva Mahadev and the representation of the Dragon God was dubbed to the snake god, Ananta of Hindus, Panthoibi who is the God of prosperity and of war became Durga, Thangjing who is the Supreme God of the Moirang Kingdom, was attempted to be personified as Vishnu and Nongpok Ningthou, at the eastern hills of Imphal, was substituted for Barun, the rain god of Hindus. Ras Lila, a celebration of Gopis devotion towards Krishna and Krishna-Radha love story, became a part of Manipuri classical dance form. The process of Sanskritization and Hindunization among Meiteis reached its peak between 1890 and 1930 AD. Meitei meiyek, the original script was replaced with Bengali script. With the revival of the Sanamahi faith among some Meiteis in the 1930s, the desanskritization process, supported by Meitei Marups (groups) began and continues till present day. Nevertheless, the battle continues between the Vaishnavite scholars who cling to their passion for belonging to a larger Hindu religion and society, and the ethnic conscious Meitei Marups of the Sannamahi and Pakhangba faith to resurrect their forefather's religion and scriptures.

In between, Manipur lost its independence and was ruled by the Awa of Burma (now Myanmar) from 1819 to 1827 AD. This period was known as "Chahi Taret Khuntakpa" (Seven Years" Devastation). Manipuris still recall this period with horrors. The Burmese took many prisoners of war. Imprisoned women had to pound paddy by

day, and reportedly submit to forced sex with soldiers by night. Though the king Gambhir Singh made every effort to liberate Manipur, his army could not find a way into the heavily garrisoned camp of Kabow valley. With the help of the British, Manipur regained its independence from the hands of the Awas after signing the Treaty of Yandaboo, by which the Kabow valley was given to Burma. From this time Manipur established its relation with the British. It is believed that genocide during the Indo-Burmese war reduced the population of the Imphal valley to just about 10,000 people, with substantially more women than men. Following the 1891 Anglo-Manipuri war, Manipur came under British rule till 1947. Taking advantage of internal disputes, British forces entered Kangla on the night of 23 March, but the Manipuris gathered and routed the British army and beheaded five highly placed British officers. The British immediately declared war. With the takeover of Manipur, the British completed their conquest of the Indian subcontinent. Manipur was declared a princely state under British rule. They completely destroyed the royal palace at Kangla, and members of the royal family were forcibly scattered in different directions. It was closed to the public, a deliberate act demonstrating and symbolizing colonial power. Kangla Fort, was in fact, the most sacred spot of Manipur with a large number of shrines situated within the compound. The British regime played havoc with Manipur's economy. They encouraged an influx of Marwari merchants and businessmen who unscrupulously exploited the local populace. After World War II, the movement for democracy, led by Hijam Irabot and Manipur Congress continued to gain ground, finally gaining independence on 11 August 1947. Manipur later merged with India in 1949 as a part of Indian Union as a Union Territory under the Treaty of Accession during the reign of then king Maharaja Budhachandra and later became a state on the 21st January, 1971. Such an agreement had not been discussed by the newly formed legislature, and was not ratified by it. Instead, the assembly was dissolved and Manipur placed under the direct administration of New Delhi. Many Manipuris believe that Indian government actions in 1949 justified an armed response. One elderly woman, referring to the events of that year, described her outrage as, "What happened in Manipur was a denial of rights. They tried to snatch what was left to us by our ancestors. What do you do then? If you have guns, you use guns. If you have knives, you use knives. If all you have is a spade, then that is what you will use".

This only led to popular discontent and fumed resistance movements ever since; resulting in a long record of insurgency including the ethnic conflicts in the state. Because of separatist activity by Naga tribes that spilled over into Manipur, the Indian government enacted the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in 1958, which provided troops with extraordinary powers during counter insurgency operations. This law became applicable in the areas of Nagaland and in the hill areas of Manipur. Later, when armed groups from other ethnic communities started their own insurgencies, the law was extended to the remaining parts of Manipur and remains in effect today. With the formation of United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the first separatist group active since 1964 declared their motto to form Manipur as a new country. Over time, many other groups were formed, each with different goals; such as People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) in 1977, People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1978, Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) in 1980. These groups began to rob banks, attack police officers and

government buildings, and demand ransom from bureaucrats. The government of India responded by implementing the colonial Armed Forces Special Powers Ordinance on 16 April 1950 and by 1958, Manipur being declared as one of the disturbed areas was brought under the Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958. This AFSPA Act 1958 rather than combating the terrorism became another form of terrorism over time. This Act passed by the Indian Parliament is an avatar of the existing British ordinance of 1942. The 1958 law inherits the same powerful political potency of the 1942 law that was imposed to counter the Quit India Movement; it was a piece of colonial emergency law to legitimize and continue British colonialism in India. Using the power as given by the Act, the army violated human rights. The Act created a culture of impunity and, in extreme cases, gave security forces the ability to commit rape, torture, carry out custodial killings, fake encounter. This Act proved more inhuman and beastly rather than fulfilling the responsibility of countering terrorism and protecting the lives of the citizens. With the Act granting extraordinary power to the army, they are allowed to “fire upon or otherwise use force, even leading to death, of any person who is acting in contravention of any law” or against an “assembly of five or more persons”, arrest without a warrant and with the use of “necessary” force anyone who has committed or is suspected of certain offenses; enter and search any premises if suspected. No trials are given to the suspected person and no legal actions can be taken against the armed forces, the victim is the only one who loses. It led to numerous protests from different sections of the society. Women of Manipur enjoy a special status in society and have always taken an active role in shaping the history of Manipur. Since the ancient era, women often used their right to appeal to correct state policies. The king was bound to give the women a respectful hearing. They did not hesitate to confront the monarch, for promotion of the general interest. “Nupi-Lan” which means women’s war in Manipuri, is an important movement in the history of Manipur. The Manipuri women folk waged two historic wars against the British imperialists; the first ‘Nupi-Lan’ launched in 1904 which forced the British to stop using forced labor after the Anglo-Manipuri war in 1891 when the British colonized the state. The second ‘Nupi-Lal’ in 1939 was against the policies of the Manipur Maharaja and his British agent. They burgeoned into a demand for democratic government. Women have been in the forefront of many social movements, they are quick to rally and hold vigils as soon as news of atrocities reaches them; such as rape, torture, deaths, disappearances of persons, etc. One such old association is “Meira paibi”, which means ‘the torch-bearers.’ One famous protest happened in 2004 when around 30 middle-aged women walked naked through Imphal to the Assam Rifles headquarters, shouting: "Indian Army, rape us too... We are all Manorama’s mothers." Manorama was an activist who was picked up from her home by the 17th Assam Rifles on uncertain allegations of being associated with People's Liberation Army. The next morning, her bullet-ridden corpse was found in a field. An autopsy later revealed that she was raped and murdered. This fearless quality is inherited notably by the longstanding 15-year hunger strike of Irom Sharmila in opposition to the AFSPA Act, widely known as “icon of public resistance”, “The Iron Lady of Manipur” and “Mengoubi” in Manipuri, meaning ‘the fair one’. The incident which triggered Irom Sharmila was on 2nd November 2000, the day when ten civilians waiting at a bus-stop in Malom near Imphal were gunned down by the security forces.

Apart from militants' conflict, Manipur also tackled ethnic conflicts such as the Meitei-Pangal clash of May 1993, the Kuki-Paite clash of 1997 and the Naga- Kuki violent clash went on and on for nearly a decade. The Naga-Kuki clash affected Manipur to an extent. This violent conflict took away hundreds of human lives; many were mercilessly and inhumanly butchered. This conflict also left thousands as refugees, some uncared for and attended.

II

Literature is the body of written works of a language, period or culture. Therefore, it has played an important role in the armed and political struggle of the people. Generally, the term "resistance" is defined as disinclination to accept, the act or an instance that tends to oppose something that the person disapproves or disagrees with. The term "resistance" was first applied in a description of Palestinian literature in 1966 by the Palestinian writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani in his study "Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966". He wrote in his study, the literature of occupied Palestine (Israel) was, because of official repression and censorship inside Israel and studies neglect within the Arab world, largely unknown outside the borders of the 18-year-old state of Israel. According to Kanafani; "The attempts at a history of the resistance literature of a given people are usually, for reasons that are self-evident, accomplished after liberation. With respect to the literature of resistance in occupied Palestine, however, it is necessary that the Arab reader in general and the Palestinian emigrant in particular study its persistent continuation, because it is fundamentally to be found in the language itself and the speech of the Arabs of occupied Palestine. The resistance springs from these linguistic initiatives, working together with the rigidity of the conditions of the situation". In referring to Palestinian literature as "resistance literature", he is writing within a specific historical be most immediately situated within the contemporary national liberation struggles and resistance movements against Western imperialist domination of Africa, Central and South America, the Middle and Far East. Resistance Literature is engaged with an individual or an organization that struggles for national liberation in a country under military or totalitarian occupation. Barbara Harlow explains in her *Resistance Literature* that the assertion at the center of Resistance Literature is straightforward: literature represents an essential "arena of *struggle*" for those peoples who seek liberation through armed fighting from oppressive colonialism. She also talks about how Resistance writers are imprisoned as much for their political writing as for their role in a liberation or resistance movement. *Resistance Literature* demands that the study of literature should have everything to do with the material world, the obtaining of civil and human rights, the throwing off of hegemony, and "the active reconstruction of interrupted histories."

Similarly, India's Northeast has been considered as one of the most conflict-ridden regions of India and South Asia, the easternmost region of India consisting of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. This area is ethnically distinct from the other parts of India. The region is distinguished by a preponderance of the Tibeto-Burman languages. In short, these states form a special category. In 1947, the decolonization of the Indian subcontinent and partition made this region entirely landlocked, intensifying the

isolation With 98% of its borders with China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal, India's Northeast is home to many ethnic groups, which are engaged in self-preservation and movements for autonomy in many cases. Sometimes, these struggles have turned violent, leading to proliferation of armed insurgent groups. Territorial and power conflicts erupted sporadically, when it comes to North-east states. The problem of insurgency in the hills of North-East India has defied solution for half a decade or so. The transition from a tribal polity to a parliamentary democracy left the hills communities losing their political foothold within their own territories. The accession to the Indian state and the having the plains people as their new political masters bred discontent in these communities. The resulting insurgence for self-determination was dealt by the state through military means with an overdose of integrationist policies.

Thousands of people are estimated to have been killed in the last three decades by the armed forces of the Union and other law enforcement officials. Overtime, Manipur became the most violent theater of conflict in the North East region of India. Intensification of armed struggle in Manipur has made a profound impact on contemporary literature. Poetry has plunged deep into this conflict and notable poets like Laishram Samarendra, Yumlembam Ibomcha, Thangjam Ibopishak, and Shri Biren explore the sordid reality, informed, shaped and distorted by the conflict. Contest at the political level with the emergence of armed resistance movements fighting against the merger with India has created the articulation of a conflict at various levels of existence. The struggle of the people and state of the land has been the major context of several works written by Manipuri writers. Elangbam Nilakanta's first published poem *Manipur* raises fundamental questions that foretell the shape of things to come. Shri Biren's *Asibagi Lamdamda*, In the Land of Death aptly captures the decadence that has eroded the social fabric. Yumlembam Ibomcha's *Shingnaba*, The Challenge documents the extreme note of anger in contemporary Manipuri society. R.K Bhubhansana's *Marup Ani*, Two friends expresses the stark and sordid reality of life under the draconian laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. The poem "Manipur, Why shouldn't I love your hills?" written by Thangjam Ibopishak Singh. The vision of his poem is dark; it embodies the state brutality, ethnic conflict, the indictment of a region gripped by insurgency, the political turmoil, moral desiccation, violence and fear- as in Manipur. The poetic persona personifies Manipur from the very first line. Using different metaphors such as insects like "mosquitoes" "flies" and "leeches" to show the exploitative nature of humans. He also talks about the hypocrite leaders who promise to bring a change but they don't. Further there are many forces that enforce violence, create disturbance over years yet there is no solution to all such practices. The persona juxtaposes the inhumane political scenarios that exist within the land of Manipur and the infinite beauty of nature that gives spiritual solace. Women poets have attempted to scrutinize contemporary life and society in a radical tone. Questions of identity, freedom and status figure prominently in many of these poets whose female sensibilities offer another dimension of social analysis and critique. Broadly, the types of conflict that are being encountered by the state can be analyzed into *Internal conflict* and *Conflict between state and society*. Both affect normal life and educational environment in the state, directly or indirectly. *Internal Conflict* includes inter-community and

intra-community conflicts for resource dominance, power and identity reconciliation. As the state is inhabited by many communities, the issue of dominance over economic and political power by dominant communities and revolt against them by the weaker communities are the regular affairs. On the one hand, during the colonial period, hill communities have polarized into two broader groups, Naga and Kuki for economic and political benefits and this movement has been intensified in the post-statehood period, especially to face the dominant community Meitei. On the other hand, at the same time, the dominant community 'Meitei' living in the valley started two main movements such as revivalist movement to preserve Sanamahi religion, Meitei script, culture and tradition; and revolutionary movement to revive pre-merger status of the state. In this manner, protection of their own identity, culture, economic and political power of almost all the communities in the state has been given impetus. As a consequence of it, many insurgent groups have been formed, and often at least one fraction of the groups. With the varying ideologies of the groups and most of them are often found to be blurred, they are acting independently for their own benefit without taking into the interest of the others. A few of them are fighting for sovereignty and some are negotiating with the government for separate state or greater autonomy within the state and at the same time, other smaller groups are struggling for their survival. As a consequence of it, internal conflict has increased significantly and led to prisoner's dilemma in the recent years in the state. This condition is preferred by the government for their convenient administration and control over the groups. On other hand, *Conflict between state and society* implies conflict between insurgent groups and state for greater autonomy, secession or sovereignty of Manipur. It is associated with the conflict directed against the state by the armed groups. The Indian army, including the Assam Rifles, the Border Security Force, the Central Reserve Police Force and the Manipur Police, are currently engaged in fighting against armed rebels. There are allegations of the very Act (AFSPA) being misused by the members of the state forces, as the Act allows them to kill anybody in mere suspicion of being anti-national and no complaint can be made against them. Besides killing, there have been a number of cases of forced disappearances of young children by the state forces in Manipur.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth turns to literature and literary forms of interpretation to further her exploration into the structure of traumatic events and belated experience. Literature, she argues, enables us to bear witness to events that cannot be completely known and opens our ears to experiences that might have otherwise remained unspoken and unheard. She further argues that trauma disrupts the ordinary mechanisms and representations of consciousness and memory, instead the traumatic event, dissociated from cognitive and representational processes, returns in the form of flashbacks, repetitive phenomena, and traumatic nightmares. According to this view, testimonies of trauma occur through the breakdown of representational forms, and the unleashing or transmission of a traumatized and traumatizing otherness. In *Feminist Theory: Margin to Center*, Hook states that sexism, of which women are most affected by, like other forms of oppression are institutionally perpetuated by social structure, by "individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo."

Hooks uses some strong language here, continuing that it is male supremacist ideology that encourages women to feel valueless, and further only able to obtain value in relation to, or in bonding with men. Women are taught that other women are “natural enemies”, with a goal to ultimately keep women from forming cohesive bonds with each other. Hook urges women to overcome and create bonds, but states this will be difficult, as women are divided by their own sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and many other prejudices, only once they have been faced, can these walls be knocked down. Hooks states that feminist movement must align under a common banner, that “Sisterhood” will strengthen and increase feminist exposure, without this unified front, there can be no movement to end sexist oppression, solidarity Hook states “strengthens resistance struggle.” Moreover, it is upon women that this power of solidarity is ultimately thrust, and must be pushed forward by women, by showing that the aforementioned barriers separating women can be destroyed, this will show society as a whole that women can come together, under the banner of solidarity to transform and change established and oppressive paradigms. Hooks believes feminist movement to be about, and reflects the kind of competitive in-fighting seen most often in women’s groups operating under patriarchy.

III

Irom Sharmila, by 2004 was known as an “icon of public resistance”. Many writers wrote on life and struggles based on her. To mention few works; IronIrom: Two Journeys: Where the abnormal is normal by Minnie Vaid and Tayengjam Bijoykumar Singh, a mono-play titled “Le Mashale” (“Take the torch”) by Ojas S.V and Deepti Priya Mehrotra’s “Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the struggle for peace in Manipur” and the poem “Birth” written by Irom Sharmila herself. “Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the struggle for peace in Manipur” is an existing portrait of a heritage that has been brutally violated. It explores the struggle of people of Manipur and of Irom Sharmila, between the crossfire of militants and insurgents. It describes the lives in Manipur whose peace has been disturbed. Irom Sharmila, the ‘Iron Lady of Manipur’ stands evident to the conditions of the ravaged land of Manipur as she staked her life to bring peace to the land. Delhi-based writer and researcher Deepti Priya Mehrotra, after getting to know Sharmila on the latter’s first, momentous visit to the Indian capital in 2006, subsequently traveled to Imphal to understand the context of the campaign of the Iron Lady. Mehrotra provides a detailed backdrop of the history of Manipur, from the times of the first Meitei king and queen, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and Leima Leisna, who established their capital in Kangla in the Imphal Valley during the first century AD. Ironically, that same Kangla Fort was, until 2004, the headquarters of the Assam Rifles. It was only following the public outcry surrounding the 2004 rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama by Assam Rifles personnel that the historic site was handed back to the people of the state. In the protests that followed the rape, the entrance to the Kangla Fort was immortalised on national and international television broadcasts by the infamous ‘nude protest’ by the imas (mothers) of Imphal, carrying banners with slogans like, Indian army rape us, drawing attention to the vulnerability of women to atrocities by security personnel. The author effectively conveys Sharmila’s uncompromising stance, refusing to be taken in by the promises of politicians. For instance, despite failing health

during her fast on the footpath near Jantar Mantar in Delhi in October 2006, she refused to be mollified by the release of the report by Justice Jeevan Reddy's official committee, which recommended the repeal of the AFSPA. It is also likely that she is equally unmoved by the current ministerial differences at the Centre – between the Home Ministry, which wants to reform the law, and the defense establishment, which does not. Instead, Sharmila says she is willing to call off her fast only after the law is actually repealed. Unfortunately, to concede this single vital point remains too risky a step for New Delhi, for legislation that ensures impunity for security personnel is integral to the use of military might to suppress dissent and rejection of rule by the Centre. The book is divided into 21 chapters with different titles, showing the phase of Irom Sharmila's life.

The first chapter *Murder of Innocence* describes the incident that triggered Irom Sharmila. Ten civilians at Malom bus-stop were shot dead without any warning in the year 2000 by the Assam Rifles. The victims include 5 young men, 4 middle-aged men and 1 old woman. They were not insurgents or militants. She was twenty-eight years old then when she took a unilateral decision to go on hunger-strike until AFSPA was repealed. This act of killing innocents was highly condemned by the state. They built a memorial and inaugurated it on 2nd November 2000, naming it *Ten Innocents Park* honoring those who died so tragically. This shows how the people of citizens are the forefront in between the conflict of insurgents and armed forces.

Irom Sharmila was born on 14th March 1972 to Irom Nanda Singh and Shakhi Devi, the year when Manipur was granted statehood after a long-drawn struggle. She was the youngest of the nine children. She was thoughtful and observant, learned the troubled legacy of her homeland through her grandmother's stories, newspapers and books. Since her childhood, she found her school studies very inconvenient and found it more difficult to cope with the heavy, meaningless courses. She always hated the impersonal, drab, bloodless histories that offered no illumination about the world around her, its politics and history, which were supposed to educate her. Sharmila was almost interested in social work and worked with different human rights organizations, gaining exposure and experience after completing school in 1991. As Babloo Loitongbam, director of HRA recalls, Sharmila was completely serious. She was the only intern who did not miss a single day of work. She would cycle in, right on time in the morning, and accompany the team wherever they went-often cycling behind their car. She became very dedicated to the team members'. The picture grew clear as she read and heard about various international protocols, UN conventions, India's own commitments and actual events on the ground. It was not only the incident that made her take the decision too fast but the long records of conflicts leading to the death of many civilians she witnessed in her life. The Malom massacre was the incident that ultimately broke her silence and she stood up for the benefit of the civilians. Apart from the long insurgency records, the State-legalized armed forces worsened the plight of the people. Though she had participated in various social actions, she found them insufficient to meet the challenge. She sought something direct and irrefutable. She was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's method of non-violence and the method of indefinite fast appealed to her, a non-violent dissent rather than retaliatory violence. Thus, she made a vow, 'I will not eat until AFSPA is withdrawn from Manipur.' It resulted in a Psychic trauma, which is generally defined as a reaction to an overpowering event resulting in psychological damage. She began her fast at the site of

the Malom massacre accompanied by Meira Paibis and a number of human right activists. Several attempts to dissuade her from taking such an action ended up in vain.

The writer also described the predicament of north-eastern states in mainland India. The clear distinction is drawn between mainland India and the eight sister states by constructing it as exotic, barbaric and savage. They are labeled with different racist names and treated as an outsider. The writer recalls how once a Delhiite asked her where Imphal is and began raving about headhunters, terrorists, dog-eaters, cannibals. This is also true in the context of the North East as the region has been ignored by the academic community till recently. She brings forth the role of women in Manipur society. Tonsija Devi, grandmother of Irom Sharmila was an active member of 2nd Nupi Lal. She explains how women carried their tems with them during the war as a weapon of defense. The tem is a wooden implement used in weaving. It symbolizes the lives of women of Manipur who are indulged in weaving clothes and seek to weave peace too, within the social fabric. These women's war against imperialism are still recalled and honored with pride. As recounted to Sharmila by her grandmother Tonsija Devi, the stories of gods and goddesses, royalty and ordinary brave women and men, come alive through Mehrotra's intimate style. Sharmila was influenced by her grandmother to a certain extent as she grew up listening to various tales. In Manipur, women's organizations consistently drew attention to the deteriorating condition of women in families and societies. Women in Manipur still fight against the injustice. They protest against the center if any crimes take place. All over the world Manipuri women have been known for their valor, skill and active involvement in many social, economic, political and cultural activities. The prevailing conflict situation in the state has resulted in the killing of many innocent people, the case of rape, molestation, abduction, extortion is so high that women feel the need to bring into an end such a kind of human rights violations. They keep a strict vigil at their own locality at night by holding a burning torch in their hands. When any incident occurs in the state as for instance a bomb blast, killing of innocent civilians they would take strong condemnation and protest in the form of sit-in-protest, dharna, mass rally, general strike, social boycott and bandh. This shows how women in Manipur are quick to act if any discontent problems take place.

As Bell Hooks in "Feminist theory: From Margin to Center", states that feminist movement must align under a common banner, that "Sisterhood" will strengthen and increase feminist exposure, without this unified front, there can be no movement to end oppression, solidarity Hook states "strengthens resistance struggle..." To develop political solidarity among women, feminist activists cannot bond on the terms set by the dominant ideology of the culture. We must define our own terms. Rather than bond on the basis of shared victimization or in response to a false sense of a common enemy, we can bond on the basis of political commitment to a feminist movement that aims to end sexist oppression. Insurgency is not a new case when it comes to Manipur or any other northeast states. Everyone, including Sharmila, are well aware of these powerful forces. The insurgency groups are violent in nature though they demand for dignity and development. Right from 1949, Manipur stayed to be a mere Union territory for another 10 years when they had separated Nagaland into a separate state. The youth were unhappy

about it and began to use violence as a tool of asserting their voices as the government neglected their demands. Insurgent groups have diverse aspirations. Overtime, they became powerful and began to support candidates from different political parties for their benefit. Neither the state nor the insurgents have shown much sensitivity to the sufferings of ordinary people. When insurgents act, the state wreaks violence not only on insurgents but also on ordinary people. As of 2015, Manipur remains the most violent state in the region with over 20,000 killed. Over 20,000 women became widows as many young men from the state were killed in conflict. Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network was launched in 2007 to respond to the humanitarian crisis that has engulfed the state's widows. Manipur's women and children are traumatized by the deaths of family members. They bear the brunt of the emotional and socio-economic impact of violence. Apart from that, women themselves are particularly vulnerable to violence and intimidation at gunpoint, often used as a deliberate military and political tactic. Also women and girls continue to be tortured, raped and killed at gunpoint. The implementation of Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958 resulted in the State witnessing an unprecedented civic uprising, including the infamous "mothers' nude protest" against the Act in July 2004 on the discovery of the mutilated body of Thangjam Manorama, after she was picked up by the Assam Rifles and later found dead. The AFSPA is still embroiled in controversy and the people of Manipur are continuing their protest against the Act. AFSPA failed to eliminate the insurgents, rather adding up to the fear of the civilians to continue their profane lives. The civilians become the victims in between the clash of armed forces. This ACT is a colonial legacy. It was implemented during the British reign to quell the Quit India Movement. The ordinance granted special powers to commissioned officers of the rank of captain and above to issue, in writing, shoot-to-kill order to soldiers under their command if the situation demands. The criteria under which the Act was imposed in Manipur still remain vague. The Act resulted to terrible atrocities, such as the rape of Ms. Rose of Ukhrul on 1974 and Ms. Luingamla on 1986, several disappearances of men on 1980, 1989, 1994 and massacre in fake encounter on 1980, 2000. Irom Sharmila could not stand in silence as she witnessed the atrocities brought to the civilians by the armed forces. Irom Sharmila is held as political prisoner under Section 309 - attempt to commit suicide. She is force fed through slim nasal tubes to help her survive physically despite her denial. She is re-arrested every year after being produced before the magistrate where she refuses to quit her fast. She is confined to a small room at Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital, Imphal, heavily guarded by Sajiwa Central Jail. Irom Sharmila is rooted to the traditional indigenous wisdom, she critiques the paradigms of modernity and development. She questions the model of profit-led development which over exploits nature. Her stand makes clear that the violence her state is experiencing is a part of a pattern of neglect, marginalization, exploitation and underdevelopment. She seeks to influence contemporary policy and bring forth an alternative path. Rather than development, Manipur experiences development of underdevelopment, as the writer mentions. It shows how the center marginalizes the state and fails to pay adequate resources for development. The restoration of Kangla Fort which was barred from the entry of the civilians finally opened in November 2004, as the Director General of Assam Rifles handed over the key to the Chief minister, in presence of the Prime Minister. AFSPA was repealed from Imphal city though it is still implemented in most of the areas of Manipur. This was believed to be the

beginning of a new world. The book ends with an epilogue titled *Inside the Labyrinth* which describes a ritual sacred dance performed by elderly priestesses Maibis during Lai haraoba, a traditional festival when Manipuris worship their deities for days and cleanse the society and protect the state from harmful influences. People are bound to sit for the ritual and no one should get up in the midst of the dance and it would break the magic as believed by the people. It is a dance that tests the limits of human endurance. The writer puts Irom Sharmila's fast in parallel to the sacred dance which began years ago. The audience are the witness to the dance, similarly the people are witness to the struggle of Irom Sharmila. Her hopes to make a difference in the human world and to bring peace is a process that is going on. She becomes a touchstone of hope and a reminder that a better world is possible.

Overall, the book is a hard-hitting account of a people caught between the crossfire of militants and security forces; of a once- sovereign kingdom whose culture has been brutally violated; of the many voices of dissent from underground groups to the Meira Paibis, women's movement opposed to all forms of violence whether by the state or insurgents and a moving portrait of 'the Iron Lady of Manipur'. Irom Sharmila has continued her fast in that tiny, ignored corner of India where democracy is a sham. She represents the agony of a people held captive in an independent country, and has hence been viewed as a deity. Sharmila's love for the land of her birth is as unflinching as is her devotion to justice and truth. Using her body as a symbol of protest, Irom Sharmila continues to be recognized as an emblem of public resistance primarily because she uses the natural characteristics and specificity of the human body for prolonged periods in order to reach political results. Her nearly fourteen-year long hunger strike (from November in the year 2000 to the month of August in 2016) would make her an internationally known martyr for nonviolence which resisted the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA act) in Manipur, India.

IV

Irom possessed a lively mind, and was thirsty for knowledge. She loved the lilt and rhythm of poetry, the drama and mythology. After joining a course in journalism, her hidden talent emerged. She began writing poems and prose. Her poetry highlights her subconscious feelings. Through her poetry, she connected with people and grew more confident.

The poem *Tonight* begins with the line 'this adjoining night of two centuries', it can signify the New Year's Eve of 1999 and beginning of 2000 when she had started her struggle against AFSPA. She goes on describing how she can hear heart touching sounds, implying the sound of shots being fired and the call of the torch-bearers for help. It can also possibly imply to helpless mothers' cries whose children had been taken away by armed forces. She calls herself a poor girl who is stressed and prays to goddess of time, an indication of her silent prayer when will these evil times end and finally the people can breathe peacefully. She is being helpless at this hour since she is confined in a prison. This late night she defines, shows the restlessness as she is left in a condition where she could

not be of any help to the people who weep for their loved ones. Her captivity is a constant reminder of her helplessness. Bringing in the image of a bird, she is talking about the space she is limited in. Though she struggles for the state, she is kept in isolation and often cries alone. She bears the burden of the state on her, by representing the state alone with the desire to bring a change. Though she is normal, she is abnormal in one way. She is unable to walk freely though she has walkable legs and her eyes are defined as useless as she remains cramped in a room. She wishes for the prison to be vanished as the bars and chains of the prison seem to be breaking her spirit. It is clearly evident that she desires to walk freely as a normal person rather than being a political prisoner who gets to see the world once a year after she was produced at court. This poem shows that she is anxious about being unable to help the people directly as she is captivated in a confined prison room. She laments and curses the prison chains and bars which locks her away from the world. She can only be a spectator and observing the cries of the people, she wishes to take more steps which the prison does not allow. Helpless and mute like the sufferer in the outside world, she observes and can only empathize with them since she is locked away from the world heavily guarded by officials as she continues her protest.

18

The poem *Victorious worm* is written in an ailing state, it brings out the ethical dimension of power and authority where the rule of the state in the wrong hands would only breed torture, violence and disruption of peace. Since she's alive even in this infirmed state, she reflects Kanglei, an archaic name of Manipur. In the blood smeared history, she can only see darkness in the years to come. The red ink here can also mean monumental moments or it can be history written in bloodshed. The dirty worm refers to activists like her who are continuously stomped down, ignored and placed in the lowest stature in the society. The man of integrity here refers to the people who have influential power and end up considering themselves to be almighty God. With this attitude, they meddle with the life of ordinary people. Like a worm, the lives of the activists are as wretched. She draws a clear distinction between activists and those who benefit by sinning against the true humanity. She wonders and questions why these unfit people do not reap the consequences of their deeds. Rather, the activists like her always teared down and disdained society. In this poem, she criticises the blind eyes of common masses who are unable to notice the injustice and the future destruction that's almost to forecome in Manipur. She is visionary in this poem and anticipates the future of Manipur in a prophetic way. Her vision seems to mirror the future of Manipur as well as the present state of the state. The poems end in pessimism providing no hope for a betterment. She is critical of the powerful man's passivity and lack of legislation. She calls for a change. A change in perception and inner understanding of common people of Manipur. This poem can also be related to many other trajectories of history like holocaust, Jewish oppression, the world war and many more. The title itself is ironic, the worm here ends up losing but here it is victorious. She is sarcastic of existing social convention. She pours out her anger and indignation against the power and hypocrisy, which resolution is poignant in the end. She is addressing the mass and the government officials. She is bold and daring when she talks about her vision. In her poem *Fragrance of Peace*, the persona talks about the idea of territorial belongingness and her desire for a peaceful world. It expresses

her anxiety over the land of Kanglei and her visualization of her land as infested with death, conflict and violence due to insurgency and counter insurgency operations. The poem exemplifies her protest and role in the peace process and conflict resolution. She uses her body as a weapon to achieve peace and arouse patriotic fever, similarly in the poem, she requests that after she dies, her lifeless body to be placed at Father Koubru, a sacred lofty hills at Manipur.

19

Her desire to rot on the soil of Father Koubru shows her closeness to nature. She illustrates the fate of human beings like her who will die eventually. She subverts the traditional norms for cremating the dead. Here she wishes to get involved in the soil of nature and become an epitome from whom the future generation benefits. Her present struggle is to bring peace to her motherland, but here it is not only to her state she addresses, she hopes to spread peace all over the world even after her death. Her mission is clear in this poem. She resents the idea of disturbing the ecology to cremate her dead body. The outer cover is sure to dry out, the body though will be preserved and transformed into ore in the mine overtime which will be of some use to the future generations. This poem consists of a unique blend of passion and hope. Despite bearing the cross of suffering on their shoulders, the common people can only think of peace. The concluding stanza of the title *Fragrance of Peace* captures the poet's desire to spread peace from Kanglei to all over the world. Her poems highlight the fact that peace is the ultimate demand above all strives and that it is worth fighting for peace, rising above terror or violence.

The poem *Untitled* is addressed to an anonymous audience. My hand be given to you Dear friends, symbolize her stretching her hands out to the people for support. She is anxious about the struggle and asks the people to join her. Her strength is imbibed from the support that people give. Her struggle and desire to bring a change in society is unexplainable. She gives a call to all the ordinary people and goes on explaining how even the words cannot express her inner turmoil. The fuse of a bomb which generally kills the innocents here is juxtaposed and the bomb here burns out all the dirt leaving behind a peace. The costless tears on every face due to the loss of loved ones and degradation of moral values yet wants to glitter, which symbolise hope for a new 20 era. Even a single step can make change but with her being confined to a space and no strength, her desire to transform her homeland will only come from the ordinary people who will walk with her in this struggle. The courage here she talks about comes from collectiveness. The collective can transform the corrupted world. She ends with a hypothetical statement, saying possessing head and mouth, which symbolize that the silence is to be broken by opening the door. Passion is much required in order to make a change. She exhorts the oppressed to fight against injustice.

The poem has a tone of existentialism; she questions the society to make use of their courage and come out of their house and tackle the imperialistic attitude of the centre. It is evident that she is against the hegemonial attitude of the oppressed people who bear the oppression silently. The mood she evokes in this poem is not militant, rather it is a non-violent and peaceful approach. She motivates the people to join the struggle and bring a positive change to their homeland. She attempts to invoke in them the sense of patriotism.

The poem *Wake Up* is a revolutionary call to all the people. Addressing both the gender, she attempts to invoke the sense of brotherhood and sisterhood in people. The way she advocates moderation in her approach is by restraining violence. By calling the people savior of the nation, she evokes the notion of oneness. She also restrains on the cycle of human life. Knowing we all will die, the fear should not overcome the heart. They should be able to come together as one and rebel against prejudice and oppression. She motivates the people to stand together in harmony against the political and social injustices. The poem is a mixture of passion, protest and hope. The impact of the hard step of struggle results in overwhelming anxiety and fear. She attempts to wake the people up from the fear and joint hands against the powerful law and fight for the desired cause. She questions why there is a fear when we know that death is inevitable. They cannot progress unless they fight for their rights which have been subverted by the center on various levels. It is also like a sermon saying in God you'll find peace and happiness. Though it is a hard step she knows with firm belief in almighty and spirit of truth, she longs to succeed her goal though she bids farewell from her frail body. She does not long for death rather she longs for life and she is eager to accomplish the desired mission of repealing AFSPA and bringing peace to her homeland. The poem is a call to the people to rise against the dreadful law enforced by the centre in the veil of protecting the people and gives power to the armed personnels to shoot anyone at mere suspicion.

Beyond this Tangled Visible World is a poem in which the poet talks about an afterlife. The title symbolizes the egalitarian and utopian world she envisions. She begins by saying she flew to heaven in an airplane, which shows that it is just a vision that she aspires to reach. She accepts her fate and thinks that God has put her on such problems to test her determination. She is deeply occupied as she meets eye to eye with the gods, with the cosmic nature of her struggle and the aura gives a vibration as it is a spiritual void she steps in. She marvels with excitement as she escapes from the vicious cycle of an illusionary world. The afterlife void is a space the sightless can see and even the deaf can hear. There is no hierarchy, no despair or dissatisfaction, no profit or loss in this space. Her vision is a heavenly world, principled and pure, where truth and justice prevail contrary to the dystopian world she belongs to. They move freely in their duties, the truth is lucid and pure as she describes. The human wrongs are punished and justice prevailed without binary. The visionary utopian world is a complete contrast to the situation of her homeland. This can also be symbolic of the world in future she envisions and also the goal she is struggling for. She is overwhelmed with the harmony of the people in the spiritual space. She is determined to overcome the struggle and make sacrifices for the people. She perceives the inherent possibility of harmonious life, which seeks to actualize through her non-violent protest.

Despite all the beauty and scenic landscape, Manipur has had a long record of insurgency and violence. First reason is how the Centre treats Manipur and other North-eastern people as second class citizens and how they are labeled as outsiders. Second reason is the Draconian Law of AFSPA that has been burning the state since 1958. Though India has attained independence of its own, what the centre practices through AFSPA is Neo-colonialism. Army

forces are associated with only positive qualities, like protector, saviour, guardian, superior, safety, security and sacrifice. The insurgents on the other hand are associated with activities such as explosion, abduction, killing, torture, exploitation, rape and attacks. But in the context of Manipur, we cannot distinguish between an army and insurgents. This does not mean that personally, I am supporting or glorifying the insurgents or presenting the Indian Army as the villains; but in the midst of a collision between the two powers, it is always the common innocent souls that suffer the most. It is the innocent civilians that end up being the casualties of war.

The poem "Birth" concludes "Iron Iron Two Journeys - Where the Abnormal is Normal," a book written by Minnie Vaid. The poem is a long narrative poem written in simple words. Her lines run freely, without any punctuations and does not reflect remotely the reason for her fast. She has painstakingly painted a picture of an ideal world where men can live as friends. Characters of different personalities as she sees in the present day society are sketched with meticulous care. If being poor is a crime then one who fights for human justice and justice is a master criminal. Public leader is one who can amass as much wealth as he can by illegal and unjust means. She has done a comparative study of two persons, one an indolent and the other a hard working one. She begins with a description of her birthday, which marks the new year of Manipur. She calls herself a coward as she steals time from leisure. She questions her existence and the mission for which God had sent her. She is unable to relate to reality as she is in a limbo state where she can't rest her head as she struggles to bring change to her homeland. Though she wants to be a normal human being, her mission is not her. She accepts her fate and stands firm to her principles. She brings forth the primordial nature that is inherited by all human beings, the survival instinct being the most important of all. She describes people who work hard and achieve certain dreams while the powerful use every means to achieve their goals. She talks about the cycle of human lives, right from birth she lies on the lap of mother earth. She romanticizes nature, further describing the beauty of the moon, rainbow, creatures like worms and vicious snakes. The leaders of her native land who are not ashamed of their shameful actions since birth, as she describes in the poem. The greed to gain more wealth pollutes society. They fail to look into their inner self, rather they find solace in attaining more wealth for themselves. They are corrupted to such an extent that it becomes an infectious disease. While the poor and hardworking people stay devastated with no progression. The rich progress and become successful overtime neglecting the other side of society which needs advancement. The greedy occupy the society and hold the reins of using unfair means. The greed for more power does not harm only those who pine for it but destroys the small strata too. The rich children are educated in highly expensive institutions and the families pray for their son's victory while the poor are starved and are forced to beg in order to survive. The greed for power also changes the role of women in society. She is not only graceful and protector of mankind, but prepares strategies of war by packing war dresses.

This shows the degree of contestation that prevails in every sector of society. While there are different sectors where men had to work for everyday meals. He would buy a used vehicle and generate income for each day as their income is low and their occupation depends on their skills. They trade things in neighboring villages from which the seller and the buyer are benefitted. She keeps on describing lives of the rich and poor living in the same

society. A clear distinction is drawn between the rich and poor. In contrast to selflessness of nature, he also describes the loss of inhumanity and moral degradation among the people. By referring back to God and His creation, she portrays the unethical, self-centered and inhospitable world which is a total contrast to what the Almighty would have desired for. She talks about the degradation of moral ethical values in society. She gives different instances of human lives and idealizes nature in the poem. Overall she envisions an ideal world free from corruption and injustice.

V

Sharmila`s non-violent resistance has become a nucleus for collective protest against AFSPA, which allows security men to even kill a person on suspicion without the fear of facing a trial in court. As we observe many of her poems speak of death, Sharmila clearly has no death wish. Her intense desire to live and work for just causes continues to define her existence. Irom Sharmila is today recognized internationally for her work on the issues related to empowerment of women, peace and human rights as well as for her long dedicated non-violent means of protest in a region where guns make the rules. Inevitably, her determination, sometimes bordering on stubbornness, constitutes the backbone of Burning Bright. The author effectively conveys Sharmila`s uncompromising stance, refusing to be taken in by the promises of politicians. Sharmila says she is willing to call off her fast only after the law is actually repealed. Unfortunately, to concede this single vital point remains too risky a step for New Delhi, for legislation that ensures impunity for security personnel is integral to the use of military might to suppress dissent and rejection of rule by the Centre. Sharmila`s love for the land of her birth is as unflinching as is her devotion to justice and truth. The stereotypes we associate army with are protector, saviour, guardian, superior, safety, security, sacrifice while insurgents are allied with activities such as explosion, abduction, killing, torture, exploitation, rape and attacks. To differentiate between the two armed forces in the context of Manipur, it becomes impossible. The atrocities brought by the insurgents have not decreased with implementation of AFSPA Act. The Act failed to eliminate the insurgents' activities even after decades. Rather they add up to atrocities and the plight of the people. The center failed to resolve all such practices. This does not mean personally I am supporting or glorifying the insurgents/terrorists or presenting the Indian Army as the villains; but in the midst of a collision between the two powers, it is always the common innocent souls that suffer the most. It is the innocent civilians that end up being the casualties of war. The problems as well as the answer remain logical but disappointedly unsolved. If A woman who has not met her mother in the last 15 years and has been suffering for the sake of her people, there is a need to take some actions. The seeds of resistance have grown among the minds of a large section in the world during the last ten years of the hunger fast of Irom Sharmila. Since she has planted these seeds on fertile, morally superior humane ground, no weapon of destruction can destroy their growth. Only people's action can facilitate the meeting of Shakhi Devi and Sharmila. In my opinion, the power given to the AFSPA should be limited and they must be taught to combat insurgents without violating human

rights. She could have led a life of her dream by the exercise of a single choice. In spite of this she resists authority as she knows that her decision affects millions of people.

Irom Sharmila has emerged as the towering icon for long term people's movement despite her failure to win her battle against AFSPA, because she left an unmatched legacy of her 16 year hunger strike against AFSPA in Manipur. In choosing to use her body as the mode of protest, Hume's act was obvious and profoundly philosophical in terms of its adherence to the nonviolent tenets. Sharmila's long-term hunger strike depicts not only her passion towards justice but also elevated her status becoming a signpost symbolizing resistance. The fight continued to draw the world's attention and showed what Manipur marginalized masses went through day by day. Having sacrificed on a personal level herself, she wanted to point out the necessity and urgency of striking down this law by contrasting it with what many people felt were overshadowed human rights abuses. The symbolic strength of the hunger strike was not confined to the state borders, resonating with human rights activists and supporters from all over the world. Her fasting was the language of protest which inspired bonds of solidarity, and it made people aware that communities are harassed in all countries by laws that are draconian. Sharmila's iconic stature is thus not only characterized by her personal sacrifice but also what she catalyzed – a global discussion on human rights, on governance and the consequences of military occupation in areas of conflict.. Sharmila's iconic stature is thus not only characterized by her personal sacrifice but also what she catalyzed – a global discussion on human rights, on governance and the consequences of military occupation in areas of conflict. In 2016 Sharmila started her journey of transformation from hunger striker to political activist which served as another dimension into the legacy. Her shift to the political arena represented a pragmatic awareness of the need for large-scale transformation and also demonstrated how advocacy groups interact with establishment institutions. Sharmila's story illuminates public resistance which is transformative in its trajectory, including how an individual symbolic protest may turn into a political strategy of state disruption required for achieving social and political transformation. Irom Sharmila's unwavering drive is a symbol of the powerful indomitability and resistance that defined her commitment to social justice and human rights. For a stretch of 16 years, Sharmila personified an unmatched level of perseverance by turning her personal sacrifices into a representation of indomitable fortitude in the face of oppression. Her resistance, inspired by non-violence, was echoed across the world and called for reform in areas under draconian laws and accused of gross human rights violations.

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