



REVISITING GENDER, TRADITION AND FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH'S MANIK: A PLAY IN FIVE ACTS: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND FEMINIST READING OF WOMEN IN THE KHASI SOCIETY

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Abstract

Khynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *Manik: A Play in Five Acts* offers a significant literary intervention in the understanding of Khasi society by revisiting the legendary narrative of Manik Raitong and Queen Lieng Makaw through the lens of gender and social structures. While Khasi society is often identified with matriline, the text exposes the contradictions between inheritance-based female status and actual social authority. This paper examines the representation of women in the play through feminist literary criticism, gender performativity, and socio-cultural theories of power. Special attention is given to the character of Queen Lieng Makaw, whose position reflects emotional isolation, restricted agency, and the burden of social expectations. The article argues that Nongkynrih reconstructs inherited folklore not merely as cultural memory but as a critique of patriarchal elements embedded within Khasi social institutions. The study contributes to literary discussions on gender in Khasi literature by demonstrating how modern Khasi texts engage with indigenous traditions while interrogating issues of power, identity, and women's lived realities.

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Introduction

The representation of women in Khasi literature has increasingly attracted scholarly attention due to the unique social organization of Khasi society. The Khasi community follows a matrilineal system where descent and inheritance pass through women, especially the youngest daughter (*Ka Khadduh*). However, several scholars have argued that matriliney does not necessarily translate into female dominance in political, ritual, and administrative spheres (Bareh 112; Mawrie 84).

Khynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *Manik: A Play in Five Acts* revisits the well-known legend of Manik Raitong and Queen Lieng Makaw. The play moves beyond folklore and becomes an exploration of power relations, emotional oppression, and gendered expectations. The portrayal of Queen Lieng Makaw illustrates how women remain constrained by social codes despite their symbolic status within the community.

This paper examines the play through feminist and socio-cultural frameworks to understand how Nongkynrih negotiates women's identity within Khasi traditions.

Theoretical Framework

1. Feminist Literary Theory

The study draws upon feminist literary criticism, particularly the ideas of **Simone de Beauvoir**, who argues that woman is socially constructed as the "Other" rather than existing as an autonomous subject. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir states:

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283).

This idea becomes relevant in understanding Queen Lieng Makaw's identity, which is shaped not by personal choice but by social expectations and royal obligations.

2. Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that gender identities emerge through repeated social performances rather than biological determinism (Butler 25). In *Manik*, female behaviour is regulated through expectations of obedience, emotional restraint, and preservation of social honour.

3. Socio-Cultural Theory of Power

The study also employs **Michel Foucault's** understanding of power relations. Foucault argues that power functions through social institutions and discourse rather than direct coercion (Foucault 93). Khasi traditions, customary rules, and collective morality become mechanisms through which women's conduct is monitored.

Women and the Contradictions of Khasi Matriliney

Khasi society has often been celebrated for granting women inheritance rights and central family roles. Scholars such as Hamlet Bareh observe that women occupy an important position within domestic structures (Bareh 115). However, political and ritual authority historically remained with men through institutions like the *Dorbar* and clan leadership.

Mawrie explains that despite matriliney:

"Administrative and public responsibilities traditionally rested largely upon men" (Mawrie 76).

This contradiction appears prominently in *Manik*. Queen Lieng Makaw possesses status and visibility, yet lacks emotional freedom and social independence. Her role reflects what scholars describe as the paradox of Khasi matriliney—symbolic empowerment combined with practical restrictions.

Queen Linga and the Politics of Emotional Isolation

One of the central dimensions of the play is the emotional confinement experienced by Queen Lieng Makaw. Although she occupies a privileged position, her life is governed by royal expectations.

The queen's relationship with Manik emerges as an act of emotional resistance rather than rebellion. Nongkynrih presents her not simply as a romantic figure but as a woman negotiating loneliness within institutional structures.

This reflects Beauvoir's argument that patriarchal systems frequently reduce women to roles rather than recognizing individuality (Beauvoir 301). Queen Lieng Makaw becomes an example of this tension between social identity and personal desire.

Her emotional isolation also reflects broader concerns about women's experiences in traditional societies where collective obligations often overshadow individual aspirations.

Folklore as a Site of Gender Critique

Traditional Khasi narratives have historically functioned as repositories of cultural memory. Works such as *Khasi Myths, Legends and Folktales* by Bijoya Sawian demonstrate the significance of oral narratives in preserving social values.

Nongkynrih transforms folklore into critical literature by revisiting the Manik Raitong legend through contemporary perspectives. Rather than merely retelling the story, he interrogates gender relations embedded within it.

This literary strategy aligns with postcolonial feminist approaches which argue that indigenous narratives should be examined not only as heritage but also as spaces where inequalities become visible.

The text thereby performs a dual function:

1. Preservation of Khasi cultural memory.
2. Reassessment of women's representation within that memory.

Gender, Social Expectations and Female Agency

Another significant aspect of the play concerns agency. Queen Lieng Makaw's choices are limited by social norms, illustrating Butler's argument that gender operates through performative repetition.

Her actions remain under surveillance by:

- Royal authority
- Community expectations
- Cultural morality
- Gendered roles

Foucault's theory helps explain how such control becomes internalized. Women often regulate their own behaviour because societal expectations become normalized.

Thus, *Manik* portrays oppression not through overt violence but through subtle mechanisms of duty, honour, and collective values.

The queen's struggle therefore symbolizes wider experiences of women negotiating identity within traditional structures.

Literary Style and Contemporary Relevance

Stylistically, Nongkynrih combines dramatic narration with poetic expression and oral traditions. The blending of folklore and modern concerns enables the text to bridge past and present.

His treatment of Queen Lieng Makaw demonstrates that contemporary Khasi literature no longer treats women merely as cultural symbols but as individuals with emotional depth and agency.

The play becomes particularly relevant for gender studies because it challenges simplistic assumptions that matriliney automatically guarantees equality. As Shadap-Sen notes, Khasi society contains complex intersections of culture, kinship, and authority that continue to shape women's experiences (Shadap-Sen 58).

Conclusion

Khynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *Manik: A Play in Five Acts* represents an important contribution to Khasi literary discourse by reinterpreting folklore through gender-conscious perspectives. The character of Queen Lieng Makaw reveals the contradictions between symbolic status and lived reality within Khasi society.

Using feminist literary criticism, Butler's concept of gender performativity, and Foucauldian power theory, the study demonstrates that the play critiques emotional isolation, restricted agency, and social expectations imposed upon women.

The text therefore moves beyond cultural preservation and becomes a literary interrogation of gender, identity, and power. It highlights how modern Khasi literature participates in broader conversations concerning women's representation while remaining rooted in indigenous traditions.

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