

## EXPLORING THE LIVES OF MIZOS: INVESTIGATING HEGEMONIC CONFLICT SUBTLETIES THROUGH MALSAWMI JACOB'S *ZORAMI: A REDEMPTION SONG*

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### ABSTRACT

Malsawmi Jacob's debut novel *Zorami: A Redemption Song* explores a rich Mizo heritage, with the plot set amid the Mizo insurgent years during the 1960s. The subject matter of the novel revolves around a little girl named Zorami and how political unrest affects her. Every individual community takes an interest in its constant existence. Mizos are one of the communities in Northeast India and their grievances during the Mizo insurgency are brought up in the novel. The purpose of the research paper is to speculate on the causes of the Mizo insurgency and India's actions to maintain hegemonic stability in the face of surgency. The hegemon in the novel's case is India which is always prepared to utilize its military force to ensure the system's security. This work expresses the Mizo land's culture quite vividly and one may argue that North East India is purportedly overlooked. It is always the historical narrative that has been corrupted by strong positions. Despite having fairness and rightfulness, the weak are not given the chance to tell their story. *Zorami* clearly examines all angles of the controversy and it contests the glorifying history. In general, we hear about the Indian government's viewpoint or the effects of insurgency on regular citizens. The Lal system also called as chieftain system, a residue of British colonial policy, treated Mizo-inhabited areas as "excluded areas," which resulted in separatist tendencies, a lack of basic civic facilities, economic stagnation, and regional hegemony of Assam and its apathy were some of the major causes of the Mizo conflict. The Mautam Front was founded by the Mizo culture society to challenge the government's disregard for the Mizos' needs, and it led the way in voicing those needs. The history of the Insurgency years is as important as the 1947 Partition because one can witness the agony of Mizo inhabitants. *Zorami* indeed stands as a souvenir of the victimized people. This paper accounts for the truth being told during the insurgency and India's attempts to hold hegemonic stability by outlining the subjective history of Zorami. On-stream North East writers like Malsawmi Jacob are interested in revealing reality through fiction. The paper also sincerely efforts to investigate the hegemonical struggles that triggered trauma infliction among Mizos.

**Keywords:** Mizo, Northeast, Insurgency, Hegemony, Conflict, Trauma.

### INTRODUCTION

India, which has a long history of tolerance, nevertheless has a darker side when it comes to desperate measures for stability and peace. India though possessing strong democratic principles completely grabs hegemony in contemporary times during a conflict. This hegemony is often concealed under the name of national ideology, the utmost interest any nation would immediately prefer. The topic of geopolitics that results in conflict is quite current and is being discussed all around the world. Geopolitics that lead to war is a hot discussion right now happening around the world. When one flips history, gaining an identity, claiming ownership among the majority, and pursuing justice resembles the effort of squeezing water from a stone. People with distinctive facial traits, languages, cuisines, and habits are sometimes labeled as odd and treated as outsiders. To prove their identity, they always have to put forth more effort than someone in regular circumstances. India contains a diverse population, and different cultures, religions, and practices which brings quite a challenge to the central government when promulgating certain laws and order. Although India has never overtly targeted any one race or group of people, it has never accepted unrest or revolution and has never shied away from using its iron fist to maintain peace. The research paper aims not to criticize the nationalistic effort of our country to maintain law and order, it attempts to showcase the collateral damages that were not intended to but unfortunately inflicted during the time of insurgency. Hegemonical conflicts in geopolitics are getting more serious. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, is currently out of control. When one country has a powerful military, the other country is immediately made weaker and victimized.

The collateral damages during war are faced by the harmless people who are stuck between two powers. Though the intensity of the war damage differs from one region to another, the reason for the conflict is basically the power play between the different orders of the hegemony structure. In context with the setting of the novel, the first significant power transfer occurred when Britain resigned its rule to India. According to the Mizos, the tribal dwellers of the Lushai highlands were promised fairness during British control, but the power transition did not serve them optimally. While it is true that the transition of power was poorly handled, Mizos claim that they saw no discernible differences in their way of life between Imperial British authority and the current liberated Indian rule. The Mizo insurgency was a significant revolt that took place in the northeastern state of Mizoram in India from 1966 until 1986. It emerged as a result of a confluence of sociopolitical and economic circumstances, and over the course of its existence, it significantly changed the sociopolitical environment of Mizoram.

Hegemony prevails in different levels in modern society. Though it's an age-old concept, hegemony has always been dynamic, redefining, and metamorphosing based on situational needs. In terms of political and relation stability, there should be a comprehensiveness between political and civilian society. During a period of crisis, a Supreme power ought to put the situation at ease. From a Humanitarian point of view, it is not fair to control or regulate anybody, but a moderator in institutionalized society is much needed to maintain peace and harmony. 20<sup>th</sup> century redefined ideas of Gramsci's hegemony give away the working nature of governance and hegemony in context with the conflicts all around the world. Hegemony is an environment in which a core class, sometimes the authority of an institution, assumes a political, intellectual, and ethical

leadership responsibility within a hegemonic system that is anchored by a shared worldview (Mouffe 186). During the execution, the Dominant power has to be careful in maintaining political ethics. The conflict arises when the people raise their grievances such as lack of maintenance, and negligence to the dominant power.

## **MAPPING INDIA'S SUBTLE HEGEMONY: INSIGHTS ON ITS AFFAIRS WITH NORTHEASTERN REGION AND DIPLOMATIC COMMAND**

Hegemony in India has been subtle down the ages, and one may know that it has been called the land of tolerance, and no community has been explicitly persecuted. But that was the case before independence. Every nation must have an ideology that elevates its place among worldly nations. As it is a known history, India had a hard time integrating all the states, satisfying the timely needs, looking out the grievances, and struggling to choose the prioritizing the immediate needs. A country with such a plural population will certainly have pressure in satisfying all the state's needs. India began displaying dominant traits after gaining independence. It was a desperate measure to promulgate law and order in this newly liberated country. The central government of India is the hegemonical authority under intense pressure to establish their hard-won democratic rule nearly 200 years after the independence movement began. However, the Democratic hegemony is not very dominant in India. In truth, the only time India used its air force against its own people was during the Mizo Insurgency in 1966. Though One could not witness the airstrikes, armed forces swiftly get into the scene when there is a threat to national ideology. In the early decades of its independence, India could not afford to lose any more time to establish sovereignty because it was already experiencing conflicts with neighboring countries such as China, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, which had recently been separated. The subtle employ of hegemony is to hold the central power and to regulate the states. In fact it is fundamental to showcase the country as the powerful one. Furthermore, Indian political elites ignored the distress of the northeastern provinces while already struggling to unite the princely kingdoms. During times of national instability, mainland India which holds the central power is entitled to demonstrate national predominance. It is an approach to settling disputes rather than a means of asserting one's dominance or assertiveness. While doing so, it harmed the region's vibrancy, practically diverting attention away from the main source of the problem's resolution.

The Northeast saw this as a case of Mainland India's cultural insensitivity. After independence, India had a lot on its plate, which is understandable, but it was not an excuse to overlook the northeast, which India may have considered unprofitable territory. The northeastern regions of India already felt cut off from the rest of the country due to their distinctive way of life. The rat population surge brought on by the bamboo blossom in 1959 resulted in the severe Mautam famine. The insufficient response from the state, Assam, and the central government caused serious disappointments to the Mizo people. As a newly liberated country, India majorly focused on its foreign relations and hegemonic stability within the country, leaving the Famine unmonitored. In addition to losing its territory during Partition, India also saw severe devastation and a major migration of people. It created a tension between the borders, and still one can sense

that occasionally. Hegemonic instability and India's secular status were both compromised when the partition took place and many. At that point, India decided to assert its dominance whenever there were possibilities.

The drive of the research paper is to venture into the causes of the Mizo insurgency and India's actions to maintain hegemonic stability in the face of insurgency. Since India is a democratic nation, the relationship between hegemony and democracy depends on whether hegemony can last, particularly when the hegemon is also a democratic country.

### ***Zorami: A Narrative that Unmasks the Unfairness towards Mizos***

Malswami Jacob's story *Zorami: A redemption song* allows readers to see Mizoram's actual nature through the perspective of a genuine Mizo. The narratives from the northeast writers are mostly around the challenging factors of identity, problems among northeast civil societies, and insurgency. Indian English literature has a lot of writing with partition as the backdrop, but just a few pieces have been published so far focused on the Mizoram insurgency. Following a string of political interrogations and military interventions, Mizoram became the 23rd state of India to attain statehood in 1987. The novel is a living memoir of 50-year-old Zorampuri, a clever English teacher without children, whose story alternates between the horrifying past and battling with the past trauma present. From the narrative of *Zorami*, one can see that, as a Mizo, she always feels excluded from the rest of the people for having uprightness. Generally, as a Mizo who was subjected to the hostile actions of the Indian government, then subsequently as a woman who was abused as a child. She was reminded over and over that she was tainted. Following a quiet, dreamlike upbringing, she reaches adulthood at a pivotal stage in the political turmoil and struggle for liberty movement, as events spiral out of control. *Zorami's* experiences and her being are a reflection of her people, country, and culture. From a Historical perspective, India's disregard for the Mautam Famine cannot be justified, and the formation of the Mizo National Front in 1961 began to draw attention from the Indian government, which began to see the MNF as an imminent threat to India's solidarity.

There would not have been a war of conflict if the central government's interest in MNF had been shown in the actual problems that were addressed earlier. On the other hand, the MNF movement planned strikes undermined not only the Indian Army but also the civilians. India being the hegemon here, should have treated all the states with undivided attention. It is more appropriate to describe that India's actions are of a novice who found it difficult to meet the intricate requirements of the various ethnic groups and locations rather than a lack of governance. India is generally not considered a rigid hegemon because it considers itself to be a secular nation having numerous cultural backgrounds. The story told by *Zorami* runs very counter to the general History. Through the views of her secondary characters, the author of *Zorami* achieves the localization of the big historical personalities in history by reconstructing the recent political history of Mizoram. In the novel, the stories of the individuals who are victims of past events are told along with Mizoram's history. The singular voice of Mizoram's history through the voice of *Zorami* might be a chance to voice out multiple individuals.

In the beginning of the novel, People begin to express their disappointments, “Our reservoir is empty. With the government supply not at all regular, Water is a big worry.” (Jacob 14). Regarding Mizoram and every other state in India, India is the dominant nation that controls state affairs. As the hegemon, the central authority serves as a regulatory body that is responsible for hearing the state's complaints and taking the necessary steps to resolve them. When this did not occur in the case of Mizoram, Mizo nationalists were emboldened and began to demand that Mizoram be given its own nation. Because it takes interest in its constant existence, a hegemon here in novel's case, India, is always prepared to utilize its military force to ensure the system's security. Hegemons are typically thought of being negative dominant powers, however, in modern times, a nation's central authority serves as a hegemon to uphold stability throughout the nation. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (as amended in 1972), or AFSPA, governs military action in the Northeast by granting special powers to members of the Armed Forces in disturbed areas in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura (Chenoy M30). The militarization of the Northeast and the ensuing terrorization of civilians are thus made possible by this Act. As the dominant power in this situation, India ought to have undercut the MNF which was upsetting the locals, but instead, the Indian army treated the locals like terrorists and destroyed their social lives in order to take control of the MNF.

India's persistent efforts to establish itself as a Hegemon are brought out in multiple instances throughout the Novel. Though it was for the cause of establishing national integrity, India is portrayed as the hegemon that handled state matters with inexperience. Enforcing the Military may cease the problem, but it will not lead to a permanent settlement. After only twenty years of experience, India is trying to project a strong national image, even though it had no time to prepare for the civil conflicts. A straightforward but meaningful conversation with MNF would have ended the dispute and put matters at ease. India, however, dispatched soldiers to take control of the situation. The Northeast's post-independence history is tainted by bloodshed, violence, and frequently unreported or biased accounts that failed to take the local population into consideration. India, a recently established democracy, mismanaged its obligation to listen to state matters. That resulted in a mishap that cost thousands of Mizo people their lives. Though a novel like *Zorami*, which is based on true events with the interference of Zorami's own victim tales, may call into doubt the authenticity of the events, the novel does not seek to convey the truth, or at the very least it challenges whose truth has been previously communicated.

It is possible to argue that the hegemon, or dominating narrator, tells history in most cases. They either applaud or absolve groups who already have power, or they condemn or blame those who are excluded. They are especially malevolent because they are often accepted and extensively disseminated without much thought or discussion given to them. One could argue that *Zorami: A redemption song* is a counterfactual narrative, that challenges the hegemon's version of events. Hegemon's history celebrates the way the governing body ended the conflict, whereas *Zorami* explains the circumstances leading up to it. The novel's period span ranges from the 1940s to the present day. Songs play a vital part in the healing process for both Zorami and the Mizos in the novel. The uprising during the traumatizing Rambuai time, when the Mizos were closely

monitored by the Indian army, is referred by characters in the book. Songs became a means of communication and self-healing from the wounds caused by the atrocities committed by the Indian armed forces and their policy of using Mizo spies. Every move was being watched which could result in death or retribution at the hands of the Indian army.

People hoped that the authorities would take care of the famine and drought conditions and restore peace at the beginning of the novel. "The Peace is not moving forward. After the new Government came to power at the center, it has slowed down and then stopped together" (Jacob 14). It is evident from this that Mizo people are dissatisfied with the resolution and that India has very little interest in it.

Along with the neglect of hunger and basic health treatment in the early 1960s, the Mizo people were imposed with the Assamese and Hindi languages. The Mizo people perceived this imposition as cultural insensitivity. The rage is expressed as follows, "It was a mistake to become part of India. We should have joined Burma instead. India is treating us like stepsons because we are a different race. It is nothing to them if we all die out. They will just come and occupy our land, that's all" (Jacob 38)

A significant uprising began when MNF carried out planned assaults on government-owned properties in Aizawl and other locations. Since the Assamese government had just mandated that Assamese be taught in all schools, people had begun to fight back against the language imposition forcefully. Zorami being a little girl also took part in it. "Assamese language has no connection with Mizo language at all. And it is impossible for us to learn the script. Why should they impose such a difficult language on us?" (Jacob 40)

Throughout the book, songs appear at various moments to express thoughts and emotions. Every one of these songs has a connection to Mizo culture and Christianity. Through their culture, they look for solace and resilience. Nevertheless, the biased arguments of the Indian government do not support Mizos, they continue to suffer. Every character in the novel had the opportunity to convey their story, including the MNF soldiers, civilians, and Indian army soldiers. The Mizos always lacked good communication with the Indian mainland, and now that they are a part of India, the country does not appear to be very concerned about their plight. They only send the army to subjugate them when they rebel.

In the recent work *Modern Mizoram*, in the chapter *The Postcolonial Interference of Puma Zai*, it is stated that

The Mizo insurgents often termed the Indian army as the Hindu army. Mizo cultural production, which was largely built around religious identity, slowly began to spill over onto an indistinct political identity. It was a moment where 'Being Mizo' was itself a politically charged position. (Thirumal, et.al 108)

Mizos generally now believe that India is showing favoritism not just because Mizoram is a north-eastern area, but also because they are not religiously inclined towards mainland India. A country like India, which has multiple cultures and identities, should be cautious while employing

military forces because civilians will misinterpret them. India moved militarily to take control of the MNF in order to restore hegemonic stability. The MNF initially served the cause of seeking proper treatment from the state and central governments, but it deviated from that cause when the Indian army employed Mizo people to trap the MNF movements. As a result, the MNF that served the civilian population began to lose faith in their own people. Anyone who gave them the benefit of the doubt was brutally murdered by them. The novel has an incident where the character Ralkalpa, who was once an enthusiastic MNF soldier, informs the Indian Army about the hideouts of numerous MNF soldiers and civilians who helped the victims out of humanity. One can see from the story that India used its iron grip against its own people to build that hegemonic stability. While only a small number of Indian Army soldiers were responsible for the brutal treatment of the Mizo people, the damage they caused was nearly unrepairable. The protagonist Zorami, her husband, her friends, and acquaintances are all repressed trauma victims in some way or the other. After several rounds of peace negotiations, the MNF eventually became a political party. The Mizoram Peace Accord, which was signed in 1986 by the MNF and the Indian government, and the occurrence of the peace accord, the insurgency came to an end and, resulted in Mizoram being established. One may conclude that the victims are ultimately just regular people who lost their lives, mental health, and financial resources, like Zorami and her friend Kimi. Near the end of the novel, readers learn that Zorami was raped and assaulted by a cruel Indian army man, which is why her own parents referred to her as "damaged goods."

## **THE TRAUMATIC FALLOUT OF MILITARIZATION AMONG MIZOS**

Trauma related to war causes a variety of psychological issues and disorders that can be extremely devastating for victims and their families. Victims of conflict, particularly war, often prioritize survival over healing during times of heightened conflict. That is what the characters did in the novel, Every Character chooses their own way of recovery, not completely recovered but they at least find peace with it. Zorami who was molested struggles with the inner psyche and is not letting her at ease. Only towards the end of the novel, she comes to the terms of recovery. Kimi her best friend who lost her father, forgives the person who is responsible for her father's death. One can see the extreme forms of patriotism and betrayal in the novel. Rakalpa who is extremely patriotic, a former MNF soldier, started betraying his own men for mere survival. While both survival and rehabilitation are crucial, in times of desperation, it is preferable to be alive than to yearn for healing.

In an interview of Malsawmi Jacob with Jaydeep Sarangi, for the question, "Why did you decide to write a novel with the insurgency as a backdrop?". She answered as follows

The insurgency affected every Mizo, whether in or out of Mizoram. We call it 'ram buai' which means 'disturbance of land', Our Family was in Imphal when the news reached us. Many years later, when we were in Guwahati, around 2002-220, the newspaper often referred to Mizoram among Northeast states. The Indian government and the MNF leaders had signed the peace accord in 1986, so Mizoram was generally peaceful while Militancy had started and multiplied in some states. The description 'island of peace' sparked off a question in my mind: The people suffered

so much during the insurgency. How do they feel that political peace has returned? How are they coping emotionally with all the trauma they went through? It was the very question that got me thinking of writing a novel. I didn't first think of writing a novel and what to write about, but thought of writing a novel only because the theme suggested itself. The novel gives the necessary large canvas for the rather complicated theme.( Jacob, Malsawmi. Interview. Conducted by Jaydeep Sarangi. 2017)

The Mizo insurgency exemplifies the intricacies of ethnic and regional dynamics in India. The ability of both the militants and the government to reach a peaceful resolution provides hope for future long-running conflicts. This Mizoram narrative emphasizes the value of communication, comprehension, and empathy in resolving disputes. India's attempts to assert its hegemony ultimately succeed but at the expense of the well-being of the Mizo people. They were in fact humiliated for their rage, their deep cultural affinities, and their desire to live respectable lives.

Although India received praise for bringing out national harmony, the victims' scars continue to cause them pain. Not only does Mizoram feel oppressed by language and culture, but other portions of India also feel this way sometimes, which causes them to harbour resentment toward the center. However, given the past, one need not make the same mistakes twice because India is performing better than ever in promoting national welfare. Each state has the same importance as the one with the best resources. India needs to have solid ties with the state government in order to maintain its democratic predominance. Regardless of which political party holds the central power, the mistakes made in the past cannot be repeated. Recently, Manipur saw ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki-zo populations, which was put down with the assistance of the military. There is a strong grievance that the police and military are collaborating with the Meitei Community while carrying out senseless partisan killings. People all around the nation can learn what is and is not credible thanks to the increased transparency of the media. People's desire for a better life and individualism are fostered by increased knowledge through Education, which also develops a questioning attitude. Since there have been fewer casualties than during the Mizo insurgency, civilian impairment still occurs. developments in the mass media swiftly call on the government to put an end to the violence.

## CONCLUSION

Victims never stop being victims, even in situations where things have improved. India, as a democratic hegemony, is thriving better than ever. It has a strong international alliance, a growing military, and a developing economy to maintain hegemonic stability. In today's institutionalized society, hegemony is crucial to policing the actions of state governments, therefore it is impossible to reject it outright. It is not necessary to view the central government as only the dominant hegemony rather, it should be viewed as the authority that oversees the many functions performed by the state governments. In contemporary times, the central government ought to use hegemony strategically to support state governments in preserving peace and stability. Still, one can suggest that there should be a humanitarian ethics to promulgate law and order. Through the novel's narration, one can see that things that are required to be done should be done on time. Things like



surgency will occur if obligations are not taken seriously. The war was ended by peace talks, much like mischief managed. However, it should have been done better before many lives and peace were lost.

This study does not just target the central government's unilateral activities during the insurgency, it also identifies the reasons for the Mizo insurgency and tries to explain why India is acting to preserve hegemonic stability in the face of surgency. All of these efforts are merely attempts to establish hegemonic stability, with civilians caught in between the conflict. Hearing the presumptive logical explanation may comfort the victims, even though it might not help them fully recover from the terrible past. To the greater good of all Indians, particularly those residing in the northeast, the central government ought to demonstrate a little more empathy and cultural sensitivity. The objective narrative of history is challenged by Zorami's subjective narration, which uncovers the truth entrenched in the northeastern figures. Thus, Zorami represents the anguish of every Mizo who lost their assets and well-being during the crisis.

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