

“Indian Army Rape Us” : The Female Body as a site of Political Defiance in Teresa Rehman’s *Mothers of Manipur*

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore Teresa Rehman’s *Mothers of Manipur* as a narrative that amplifies the unheard voices of North East Indian women and their resistance against systemic violence. It examines how the novel challenges dominant power structures, critiques existing feminist and political discourses and offers a new paradigm of non-violent resistance. By analysing the shift in the conceptualisation of women’s protests, the study seeks to highlight how *Mothers of Manipur* reframes the discourse on rape, honour, and resistance, positioning women as active agents of change rather than passive victims. This study employs a qualitative approach, combining textual analysis and feminist critique to examine Rehman’s representations of women’s resistance in *Mothers of Manipur*. Using feminist theory, particularly postcolonial and intersectional feminist perspectives, the paper interrogates how the narrative redefines the notions of power, honour, and collective resistance. It also engages with historical and socio-political contexts to situate the protests within broader movements, such as Gandhian non-violence and contemporary struggles like the Farmer’s Protests. This analysis demonstrates how personal testimonies unite to form a powerful collective voice of resistance.

Keywords: Northeast, Meitei Narrative, Insurgent groups, Women’s Advocacy, Gendered Violence, Militarisation, Resistance, Peacemakers.

Introduction

The state of Manipur in the northeastern region of India has endured numerous conflicts, including inter-ethnic territorial disputes, ethno-nationalist separatism, and counterinsurgency operations. The boundary between the armed forces and paramilitary groups further complicates the situation. Inter-ethnic territorial disputes, ethno-nationalist separatism, and counterinsurgency operations have led to the armed forces, civilian government, and underground groups—including insurgent groups and ethnic organisations beginning to control the state, resulting in a fragmented landscape in Imphal City. Violence against women has been accepted throughout our history.

Women have been involved in the historical struggle for independence, labour rights, and other forms of oppressive struggle. Teresa Rehman’s *Mothers of Manipur* documents the painful oral histories of women whose lives have been shaped by violence and state oppression. The book centres on the collective resistance of the Imas—the mothers of Manipur—who staged an unprecedented protest against the abduction, rape, and murder of 32-year-old Thangjam Manorama by security forces. Their act of stripping naked before Kangla Fort, home to the Assam Rifles, was not just a response to a singular atrocity but a direct challenge to the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) of 1958, which has long facilitated unchecked military power in the region. “From time to time acts of sexual violence on Somen (activists as well as relatives of men suspected to be militants) are allegedly carried out by members of the Indian state’s armed forces.” (Menon, 2012, p.164).

Rehman highlights how the AFSPA, under the pretext of national security, has enabled grave human rights violations, disproportionately affecting women. Through a feminist narrative lens, she foregrounds the Imas’ resistance as a paradigm shift in protest movements that redefines power by rejecting patriarchal notions of honour and shame. The women’s banner, reading “Indian Army Rape Us,” symbolised their refusal to remain silent in a system where rape is weaponised to subjugate both individuals and entire communities. By presenting these testimonies, Rehman not only exposes the intersection of militarisation and gender-based

violence but also questions dominant feminist frameworks that privilege Gandhian non-violence as the ideal mode of protest. "In India, Sexual violence against women (by police and army) and the culpability and impunity of the state, has been addressed in significant ways," (Menon, 2022, p.164).

The defying sisterhood of the Meira Paibies resonates in her narrative: "Once we are out of the house and are with women, we don't care about our family and mundane affairs. Ours is a community in itself. We don't care what husbands, sons or our daughters-in-law will think ." (Rehman, pp.101) The Imas' act of stripping, as Rehman notes, was a deliberate, voluntary act—one that subverted the very structures meant to control their bodies. The women's demand—voiced by Ima Gyaneswari, who asked the forces, "Are you here to protect us or to rape our women?" reverberates beyond Manipur, critiquing the complicity of the state in sustaining gendered violence. Ultimately, *Mothers of Manipur* offers a critical intervention into the discourse of women's movements in India, illustrating how resistance in conflict zones challenges hegemonic understandings of victimhood, agency, and political struggle. The Imas' protest not only confronted immediate military violence but also redefined the language of non-violent resistance, influencing contemporary movements such as the Indian farmers' protests.

Teresa Rehman's *Mothers of Manipur* represents female body as both a site of violence and a tool of resistance. The book foregrounds the horrific brutality inflicted upon Thangjam Manorama, whose bullet-ridden and dismembered body became a testament to the cruelty exercised under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). Rehman repeatedly evokes the image of her mutilated body—"Her bullet-ridden corpse, allegedly from a sexual assault, was found in a field" (Rehman, 2017, p. xvi)—highlighting the dehumanisation that military violence imposes upon women. The visceral nature of this violence fuelled the Imas' unprecedented act of resistance, compelling them to strip before Kangla Fort as a symbolic indictment of the state's brutality.

Historically, women's bodies have been wielded as battlegrounds in conflicts, with sexual violence used as a tool of subjugation. Rehman situates the Imas' protest within this legacy, demonstrating how the women rejected the patriarchal notion of shame attached to their bodies. In using nudity as a form of defiance, they subverted military dominance, confronting the forces with the very bodies they sought to control. As Ima Ramani powerfully asserts: "By stripping, we wanted to send a message: you can see whatever you want, whenever you want" (p. 24). The act was not one of submission but of reclamation, transforming the vulnerability imposed upon them into an unyielding force for justice.

Rehman's narrative also underscores the deeply personal stakes involved in this protest. The Imas—many of whom came from conservative backgrounds—deliberately chose to break societal expectations, understanding the profound consequences of their defiance. Their bravery, however, was met with both admiration and criticism, reflecting the societal tensions surrounding women's bodies and agency. As Ima Nganbi declared, "We did it for the people of Manipur—we are not prostitutes," challenging those who sought to discredit their resistance. Similarly, Jamini articulated the protest's larger significance: "We held the protest to ensure that similar things do not happen again. Such a protest should not happen again" (p. 103).

By juxtaposing the brutal violation of Manorama's body with the Imas' strategic use of their own, Rehman reframes women's agency in the face of structural violence. The protest was not merely a moment of spontaneous outrage but a historically significant act that demanded justice, not just for Manorama, but for all women subjected to militarised violence. Ultimately, *Mothers of Manipur* disrupts the dominant discourse on non-violent resistance by illustrating how women, through radical acts of defiance, challenge both state-sanctioned violence and the patriarchal narratives that seek to silence them.

Rehman's twelve female roles illustrate the societal pressure on women to marry at a young age. All twelve women married between the ages of 15 and 16 while still in their early teens. Thus, we glimpse the challenges women face regarding menstruation: many women are still embarrassed to buy sanitary pads, and others look at them as if they are breaking the law. Through this, Rehman (2017) aims to convey to women that they have nothing to be ashamed of. The line "Let's celebrate the red droplets" (p. 83) from the book exemplifies this. Following the event, their lives unfolded with various experiences, ranging from familial rejection to community admiration. One common aspect was that their worries and fears persisted, now extending to the safety of their daughters and grandchildren. After the protest concluded and they returned home, they also felt

terrible about themselves. Still, this did not discourage them. Instead, they felt proud and happy that they had at least done something for their people. “The protestors were no ordinary women; they were images (mothers) belonging to the sacred and revered Meira Paibis (a mother’s group), and Imphal is no ordinary city; it is the only city subject to the draconian AFSPA (Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act)” (Ray, 2018).

The dominant idea is rooted in violence, and it manifests consistently. India has normalized violence against women, turning it into a habit rather than an accidental occurrence. Organizations and structures sanctioned by society and culture facilitate patriarchal power and privilege, allowing violence to persist as a means of achieving desired outcomes. Men from all castes and classes dominate and abuse their women, even when those men face abuse from men of higher castes and classes. “Gender has been entwined with class and caste in shaping the life chances of both men and women” (Nite and Dash 412)

The women's group in Manipur inquired about their mobilization. Their mobilization and demonstrations challenged the government's use of force against tribal women following the gang rape and violent retaliation against lower caste women by wealthy perpetrators, along with issues of sexual violence in armed conflicts and state-sponsored violence. Organizations and security personnel have stripped them of their freedom and safety.

The worst aspect of their region is that the media is indifferent to the average person. The fear of rape creates an environment where men can dominate women sexually. This means that men exert control, instilling fear and subjugating women. In India, many view rape as a patriarchal entitlement and a political issue. National campaigns and group protests, including street rallies, plays, flag-folding, songs, and performances, focus on sexual violence against women. Patriarchs perceive rape as a crime against a family's honour and consider it worse than death. Rehman states that, according to certain views on sexism, any way a woman crosses a line is equated with rape. For the women's movement in India, the recognition of rape as a political weapon is a significant part of its politics (Menon, 2022, p.164). If we were to hold raped women accountable for their circumstances, the answer would be yes. Feminists, however, view rape as an assault on a woman's autonomy and physical integrity, and they advocate for stopping the blame directed at victims.

Rape has been committed by security forces multiple times, yet the state has refused to acknowledge its culpability. Thus, the women used 'nakedness' to reveal the truth to everyone, demonstrating their desire for a peaceful land. Thirty-two local organizations formed an umbrella group called Apunba Lap after the news of Manorama's death. This initiative began as a movement calling for the repeal of the AFSPA. There was a widespread perception that women in Manipur were essentially nude, and they spoke out against this violation. The term 'violation' reflects their feelings. Rape became their badge of shame and a marker of life. The protestors refused to be silent and spoke on behalf of all women, particularly the younger generation. They advocated for daughters and younger women like Manorama, who are more central to globalized patriarchal fantasies. Supporting initiatives within communities to bring about reform (Menon, 2022, p.176). Their deliberate expressions were a reaction to generations of violence, carefully controlled and orchestrated. They viewed the public protest as their response. Gyaneswari recalled her moment during the protest when she shouted at the Indian army to 'rape us and take our flesh.' It displayed their years-long rage and sorrow. Their question to officials and the public is whether the Indian army is meant to protect the people or to violate our women. The atrocities against women—numerous incidents of rape, molestation, and torture by army personnel—deeply troubled Ima Gyaneswari. It was shocking to learn that even pregnant women were not spared. Mothers in Manipur have also faced violations, as their young sons were taken away by army personnel. These mothers could not see their children; they were merely taken away by the army. Her statement conveyed a message of enduring and relentless resistance. This unimaginable choice came from humiliation beyond their endurance. Numerous instances of atrocities committed by security forces compelled women to engage in naked protests as a form of resistance, showcasing remarkable courage in defying established codes of honour and womanhood. Anjom Jibanmala, also known as Ima Jibanmala, declared that the armed forces are worse than the villains. She is both a shopkeeper and one of the twelve mothers who protested.

For the women's group in Manipur, activism is almost like a post-retirement vocation, with their retirement encompassing household chores and day-to-day responsibilities. She stated that her way of killing Manorama represented the affront to women's dignity in their state. Consequently, they decided to undertake actions that would rattle the establishment. She expressed concern about how a woman could be so brutally violated by

someone who is supposed to protect people. After witnessing Manorama's death, stripping was no longer difficult for them. They did it with great courage. They took pride in the fact that their extreme nude protest had partially raised awareness. Their bodies, serving as weapons, were the primary focus of their protest. She felt violated when she saw the newspaper showcasing their photo on the front page. However, she also recognized the inappropriateness of the action, which had brought their cause into the media spotlight. Women protested by using their bodies as a unique form of resistance against rape and sexual violence, turning their bodies into symbols of protest. Their naked demonstration illustrated that the violation of one person's rights also infringes upon all our rights. Keisham Ongbi Taruni Devi, also known as Ima Taruni, emphasized the patriarchal influences present in their community. She articulated how Manipur transformed from a tranquil land of gems into a bloody region. She also pointed out the hierarchy: a woman can marry only once, while a man can marry a hundred times.

They viewed the demonstration as an effort to draw attention to the disfigured body in the RIMS mortuary, engaging the local community and the entire country. This act highlighted how women are opposing the government. Gender inequality was reflected in this context, focusing on social movements that promote peace and development. It has significant implications for feminist advocacy against gender-based violence.

Rehman's use of stories from the older mothers as literary material is a feminist act. On their signs, the women wrote, "The Indian Army rapes us; we are all Manorama's mothers" and "Kill us." Could you exploit us? "Flesh us" by leaving the fort naked and letting our hair hang loose. Imas's depiction of loose hair symbolizes Draupadi from the Indian epic Mahabharata. Draupadi declared she would neither oil nor tie her hair until she could wash it with Dushasana's blood. This illustrated that women have always protested by utilizing their bodies as a form of defiance for freedom and justice. Their inquiry about the armed forces revealed the true nature of the Indian nation-state. The Imas reflect the model of benevolent patriarchy. They draw strength from religious and sacred practices that endorse their role as peacemakers. Victims of rape are marginalized by society due to patriarchy. They have been instructed not to conform to this male-centred ideology. In this manner, they advocated for all women, especially younger women. They fought for their children, younger women like Manorama, and the next generation. The Manipuri mothers stripped naked in front of Kangla Fort and demanded that Manipur abolish the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. The historical record of Manipur primarily chronicles the women's movement in the state, framed by a series of invasions and victories. Consequently, men in society were perpetually engaged in war, leaving their survival uncertain. It fell upon the women to nurture their children, care for their families, and uphold peace in society. Many people migrated during the seven years from 1819 to 1826. While men battled, women worked to resolve disputes and maintain order. During that period, motherhood was regarded as a social duty for all women.

In most Southeast Asian cultures, particularly those of the Burmese, Javanese, Malaysian, and Northeast Indian, women's strength enables them to be self-sufficient in material matters and collaborate with men in social contexts. Generally, people in Northeast Indian and Burmese societies believe that a woman's role as a mother shapes her sense of self-worth more significantly than her role as a wife because motherhood affords women greater standing and safety. The Meiti held that the female body was the source of all life, thus placing the responsibility of sustaining and enhancing society on women. However, the same Phanek is now viewed as a symbol of shame. Behind the notion of a special role for woman in peace and conflict resolution lies the assumption that across all identities, 'women' have a common bond-writers are mothers, women are nurturing, women want peace (Menon, 2022). The feminist response to Manorama's death not only employs the female body as a means of resistance but also challenges societal narratives about rape by subverting the prevailing tropes. Meira Paibis have come forward to report that armed forces troops are sexually assaulting them. Protests against the army have escalated with the naked march. Residents of Manorama's neighborhood initiated a protest after they could no longer endure the severe torture. The Nisha Bandhi women's movement is one of the most prominent women's groups, originating in the late 1970s as part of the Mother's Movement, focusing on issues related to drug and alcohol abuse in the community. Initially, the group was named Nisha Bandi, representing the community's birth mothers. Collectively, the women chose to confront the challenges posed by alcoholism and violent, intoxicated husbands. They also aimed to protect young people from drugs and alcohol. Across various regions, Meira Paibi groups are active. Due to the nature of the abuse and the context, the

group's name was changed to Meira Paibis. In response to shifts in the state's politics, economy, and society, the Nisha Bandhi movement evolved into the Meira Paibi movement.

The female body, once thought to possess the power to create, is reduced to a fragmented understanding of gender. Rape was perceived as a political tool by a significant segment of the Indian women's movement during that era. The government commonly employs mass rape as a method to suppress groups of tribal individuals, peasants, workers, and political dissidents. Momon recalls the terrified feeling in front of the Kangla gate. "Could she do it?" She did not feel ashamed after disrobing; rather, she felt empowered. She exhibited strength as she shook the iron gates and shouted, "Come rape us!" Thus, the narrative of shame is inverted.

To protest, the Imas of Manipur went naked, setting a precedent for the 2018 Farmer's Protest against the unjust conditions faced by farmers. It is possible in certain kinds of contexts for Somen to use their conventional identity to be peace activists in quite creative ways (Menon, 2022). For Indian feminists, this became a distinctive example of resistance. Meria Paibis, Irom Sharmila, and women's groups in the Northeast stood resolute against state violence, laying the foundation for others to intervene and combat sexual violence. Meiti women articulated their identity struggles through the lenses of race, gender, class, and regional state issues. Their incarceration following the protest brought numerous challenges to their personal lives. They actively engage with women's groups and protest against injustices. A sense of alienation from their families is evident in their narratives. Teresa Rehman viewed the Ima's protest as their means of constructing a new Manipuri State, envisioned as a land of a blessed life, reclaiming their power to demand recognition of their rights. Women's groups and advocates assert that the government must not infringe upon their rights. Rehman's storytelling is a potent method for reviving the voices of the Manipuri Imas that have been silenced.

Conclusion

Teresa Rehman's *Mothers of Manipur* serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of women in the face of state-sanctioned violence. Through a critical analysis of the Imas' unprecedented protest, this paper explores how their act of defiance challenges conventional understandings of power, resistance, and feminist activism. The Imas not only expose the brutalities perpetuated under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) but also redefine the language of protest by rejecting patriarchal notions of honour and victimhood. Their decision to strip before Kangla Fort is not an act of surrender but a radical assertion of agency, reclaiming their bodies as instruments of political resistance rather than symbols of shame.

This study highlights the intersection of gender, militarization, and resistance by examining Rehman's narrative through the lens of feminist and postcolonial theory. The Imas' protest challenges dominant narratives of Gandhian nonviolence, presenting an alternative paradigm of resistance that refuses to conform to state-sanctioned frameworks. Their struggle also resonates with contemporary movements, such as the Indian farmers' protests, where collective mobilization persistently confronts oppressive power structures.

Ultimately, *Mothers of Manipur* highlights the limitations of legal and institutional frameworks in addressing gendered violence, demanding a reevaluation of how justice is conceptualized for marginalized communities. The Imas remind us that women's resistance is not only about survival but also about reclaiming political space, challenging structures of domination, and reshaping the discourse on human rights and justice. Their protest remains a landmark moment in India's socio-political history, offering a model of defiance that inspires movements for gender equity and social change.

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