



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Hawilopari: Reflections of Mizo Folklife and Society

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Abstract: The novel, as a genre of literature, serves as a reflection of life as experienced and lived by human and nonhuman characters. This paper, as its main focus, looks at the reflection of folklife, customs, societal dynamics, and traditions of Mizo society in *Hawilopari*, the first Mizo novel. This paper explores the delineation of culture, community, and folklife elements, which aid in cultural preservation, provide insight into social dynamics, and allow representation of multiple voices of the society. By analysing these nuanced portrayals, this study underscores the role of *Hawilopari* in the preservation of cultural heritage and the depiction of the interplay between culture, society, and tradition.

Keywords: novel, folklife, society, Mizo, *Hawilopari*

Introduction

Until the arrival of the British in Mizoram, there was no written documentation of the social life, beliefs, practices, and traditions. It was through oral transmission that the Mizo epistemologies were passed down from one generation to the next. The arrival of the missionaries on 11th January 1894 led to the establishment of schools in the same year. They taught the Mizo alphabet in the month of March, introducing extensive changes to the society. With the introduction of the Mizo alphabet, the Mizo people also witnessed the transformation of their oral literature into written forms. Accordingly, the Mizo literature has also developed from that moment till the present.

L. Biakliana, the first novelist among the Mizo, was born on 26th August 1918 and died on 19th October 1941 at the age of 23 years. His esteemed novel, *Hawilopari*, was published in 1936 at the age of 18. The period, as calculated between the coming of the missionaries, and hence the Mizo alphabet A Aw B, to the publication and spread of popularity of the novel in Mizo literature, was calculated to be exactly 42 years.

Biakliana was well-informed about the real life of the Mizo society, like traditions, rituals, beliefs, and practices of the people. His novel, *Hawilopari*, finds relevant delineations of different aspects of Mizo culture and society, as the novel is one of the first in Mizo literature. The onset of education and Christianity in

Mizoram altered the folk life of the Mizo society in several ways. With the consideration of literature as a significant reflection of human life, this paper explores the nuanced delineations of folk life in *Hawilopari*.

According to Dr. Zoramdinthara, Biakliana's novel was set around the years 1870-1872. In his extended analysis of the novel, he states,

The main plot deals with Liana and his brothers, who were miserable under their cruel stepmother. These two brothers were helped by Chhana and Zema, enabling them to leave their home. Later on, they joined the army, and after ten years, they returned to their house, and this is the main plot.

Then the sub-plot revolves around the protagonist Hawilopari, and during the ten years' absence of Hminga, Pari suffered untold emotional misery. Besides, their village chief's son, Khuala, tries to marry her. Since he did not succeed in marrying her, Khuala tried to defame her by saying he had slept with her and brought the matter to the chief's court. In the judgment of the chief's court, Pari was condemned. Pari's father was so angry and agitated against the partial judgment of the village chief. Because of the injustice done to them, the angry family shifted to another village. The main plot and sub-plot are skillfully intertwined in the end by the writer Biakliana. When they returned home, Hminga learned of the absence of Pari and set out in search of her. Zema secretly followed Hminga, and it was all because of Zema that Pari and Hminga could finally marry (A Study of Mizo Novel, 10,11).

This novel not only deals with romance, but also presents multilayered delineations of folk life based on village life through different lenses, such as,

Social life

In *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, Richard M. Dorson states, "Certain scholars welcome the use of folklore and folklife materials to recapture vanished historical periods for which other evidence is scanty". With this perspective brought into view and considered from a folkloristic standpoint, the folklife delineated and explicated by Biakliana in this novel proves relevant for observing and studying the lived experiences of the Mizo.

An important aspect of Mizo society, as depicted in the novel, is the *Zawlbuk* (Bachelor's dormitory). In Mizo society, *Zawlbuk* played a significant role in several ways. Biakliana presents the different functions of the *Zawlbuk* in the novel. His delineation affirms the real-life experience of *Zawlbuk* by the bachelors and its significance in the socio-cultural sphere.

Another aspect of Mizo social life depicted in the novel is the relationship between young men and women of the society. In *Hawilopari*, Biakliana portrays how the young men and women used to help each other out in the field during shifting cultivation and harvesting, which was called *lawm*. At night, the young men visited the young women of the village in their houses to court them in the presence of their families. They spent the night chatting and enjoying the healthy spirit of courtship. This affirms that in Mizo society, young men and women had a close relationship, positing that gender-based segregation was not prevalent in social settings.

Additionally, another significant aspect of the society delineated in the novel is the portrayal of social duties and responsibilities. Biakliana explicates the various duties assigned and performed by community members, categorising them by age groups and gender roles. The women of the families were assigned the duty of carrying firewood, which was considered the duty of women. Handloom and handicraft were also extensively portrayed in the novel, as a duty and work associated with women. Meanwhile, the duty of supplying firewood to the *Zawlbuk* was done by young boys as depicted in the story.

The character of *Zualko* was also mentioned in the novel. *Zualko* means a messenger who delivers important messages from one village to another. The duty of being a *Zualko* was generally done by young men of the village.

Biakliana also portrayed the significant role played by neighbourhoods in Mizo society. In *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, Galit Hasan-Rokem states, “The proverb is used by members of a cultural (ethnic, regional, professional) group to communicate an interpretation of a behavioural or interactional situation.” (128,129). One of the Mizo proverbs says that, ‘=henawmte do aiin khaw sarih do a thlanawm zawk’, which means, ‘better to be at war with seven villages than to conflict with your neighbour’. This proverb guided the interrelationship within the neighbourhood in significant and positive ways. Biakliana presents multiple instances where members of the neighbourhood are seen helping each other like “Buh den te, thing phurh te leh tui chawi engkim maiah chuan an \henawm fel tak takte chuan an \anpui \hin a” (Biakliana Robawm 192). This means that in times of need, neighbours helped each other for threshing raw rice grains, carrying firewood and water, exemplifying communal compassion and good intentions. When Hminga’s father was ill, he called Pari’s father to visit him. Pari’s father immediately went to Hminga’s father’s house, helping him and giving him company. This shows that a close relationship of friendship and neighbourhood strongly existed when in need.

One aspect of their social life presented is the village children playing in the neighbourhood. In folklore studies, children's play has a significant role and is one of the genres of folklore. In folklife, there are several children's games popularly played among folk children. In the novel, it is portrayed that Liana played ‘*inhnawk*’ (a kind of boys' game) when he was a child. Another children's game depicted was children making ‘*saihlum hrual*’, meaning ‘making small spherical clay balls for killing birds’, and ‘*inselem chaih*’, which means ‘to pull another child with a rope like a gayal’, which was popularly played by Mizo children in olden times.

Beliefs and Practices

Biakliana employed several folk beliefs and practices in *Hawilopari* to delineate Mizo folklife as experienced and lived by the people. Shifting cultivation was the main method of farming and is extensively depicted in the novel. In folklife, agricultural practice was the primary source of occupation through which the folk people satisfied their primary needs for food. Biakliana used and highlighted the process of shifting cultivation through the characters who worked in the field of jhum many times. It shows that jhum cultivation was commonly practised by the Mizo people.

Another common practice found in the novel is the handling of marriage and marriage proposals. Every society has its own traditions on the marriage system. At first, we see both the main characters' parents' marriage, one married a local woman and the other married from another village. It shows that marriage can take place locally within the village and also among different villages. Another marriage system that we found in the novel is re-marriage. When Hminga’s mother died, Hminga’s father remarried. Their stepmother was immensely cruel, recalling the popular aspect of the cruelty of the stepmother in Mizo folktales. This remarriage, which we found in the novel, shows that it is an actual and accepted practice in Mizo society. According to Khuala’s father and Pari’s parents’ discussion on the way home from jhum, it is evident that Khuala’s father indirectly asked Pari’s parents to marry their daughter to his son. It shows that arranged marriage was also a common practice in Mizo society. In formal marriage, there are a group of elders and friends called ‘*Palai*’, who represent the groom’s side for proposing to the woman through their parents. This type of marriage proposal through *palai* is also there in the novel, where we see that Khuala proposed Pari through his *palai* in the novel. However, a marriage proposal can be rejected by the woman's side in any case. These different aspects of marriage, like arranged marriages, love marriages, remarriages and such are common practices found in real life and exemplified in the novel with life-like depictions. Another significant delineation of Mizo folk beliefs and practices is the depiction of folk medicine. When Hminga’s father suffered from a disease, Pari’s father gave him folk medicine. Pari’s mother also asked Remi’s father whether Remi’s mother was going to call the *Puithiam* (traditional healer) or not. In folk life, folk medicine plays an important role. Don Yoder said that,

Of folk medicine, there are essentially two varieties, two branches: (1) natural folk medicine, and (2) magico-religious folk medicine. The first of these represents one of man's earliest reactions to his natural environment, and involves the seeking of cures for his ills in the herbs, plants, minerals, and animal substances of nature... The second branch of folk medicine is the magico-religious variety, sometimes called "occult" folk medicine, which attempts to use charms, holy words, and holy actions to cure diseases... (Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction. 192).

Another folk practice presented in the novel is the festivals of Mizo society. The novel delineates several instances in which *Chapcharkut* is celebrated by the characters in the novel. In Mizo society, Chapcharkut is a grand festival celebrated in Mizo folklife. Festivals play an important role in the folk society and persist in their many forms even to date. Beverly J. Stoelje said that,

An ancient and resilient cultural form, richly varied in organization and function across the world's societies. For all their diversity, however, festivals display certain characteristic features. They occur at calendrically regulated intervals and are public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex in structure, and multiple in voice, scene, and purpose. (Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments. 261).

Display of animal head on the front house is also exemplified in the novel. In Mizo society, when someone killed animals, they commonly displayed the animal's head on the front door. This kind of practice by the folk people is common, and it shows the legendary bravery of the folk people.

Moreover, the novel also depicts different wars and their effects on the people. The wars mentioned by Biakliana in the novel are the war between Pari's old village and their new village, the war between Mizo and the British, and the war in which Pari's new village was invaded by the Pawi invaders. When the Pawi invaders invaded Pari's new village, they captured many people to become their slaves. This depicts that there was a slavery system (Sal) in Mizo folklife. Every civilisation and culture has a war story. So, in this regard, Mizo people also faced many wars in olden times, and an analysis of these wars can give us much insight into folklife and practices.

In the novel, Biakliana also points out certain ritualistic practices. Before they left their village, they saw eagles fly in the sky; later, they flew away to the north and south sides. The Mizos consider this to be ominous as they think there will be death for a married couple. Another ritual used by Biakliana in the novel is that when Pari and her family tried to shift to another village, Mr. R^{la} said to Pari, "Kal rawh khai, a naupang ber hnunzun zawng laikingin chil a chh^k duh ngai an ti a nia, i nuin hnungrawn dal rawh se", which means that when they venture outside the village for any purpose, they believe that the younger ones should not go behind to keep them safe from any harm or problems in any situation. These ritualistic practices and beliefs used by Biakliana in the novel also reflect that the Mizo society was also controlled by ritualistic practices and beliefs in many ways. The feature of ritual is explained by Roy A. Rappaport: "Ritual includes both words and acts". In a folk community, ritual holds great significance, and the people also deeply believe in it in several situations. So, the ritual used by Biakliana in the novel also shows that Mizo society followed ritualistic practices and beliefs in many ways.

Chieftainship

The novel also depicts some of the roles of the Chief in the village and their system of inheritance. When Hminga and Liana tried to escape from their cruel stepmother, Zema tried to help them. When they planned to go away, their village chief's son Chhana tried to join them. According to their conversation, Chhana will inherit chieftainship, which shows that the inheritance system is practised in the Mizo society.

The chief was the most powerful person in the folk life of Mizo society. Biakliana also highlights the chief's power when Pari's mother tried to convince her, she talked to Pari, "Lal te lah chuan an thu an awih nasa si a, an duh pheichuan an khua a^{angin} min hnawtchhuak mai ang a", which means, "The chief is convinced by them, if they want, they can deport us from their village". It shows that the chief can deport his

villagers in any case. When Zema and Pari had a case, it is also delineated that in the chief's court, the chief is the top in his court. However, sometimes, their court also made a wrong decision or did an injustice to their villagers. So, these chieftainship used by Biakliana in his novel shows that Mizo had their own chief and chieftainship, which was inherited, and they had full power in their village. These were the practices of the Mizo folklife in the past.

Conclusion

In any society, and especially in a tribal society, those who had oral literature in the past use their folklore to study their history. Folklore is primarily used for studying the habitual practices of people in the past. Therefore, in this regard, studying the first novel of a community is a relevant means for exploring and investigating their society due to the widely accepted practice of collecting data from oral literature or folklore. Being the first novel among the Mizo, it can also be a reflection of many aspects of Mizo society, proving that the first novel among the Mizo is relevant for studying the folklife of the Mizo.

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