

***Liandova leh Tuaisiala* and the Reality of Traditional Mizo Society: A Study**

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Abstract

It is difficult to trace the early history and culture of Mizo people due to their semi-nomadic life, the consequent absence of a settled form of cultural and social establishment, and the lack of interaction with other cultures prevented the creation of permanent markers or monuments which led to the absence of historical accounts and records documenting their history, origin, culture and migratory trail to their present permanent settlement. Moreover, for cultures like the Mizo culture which had no written records of the past until recent times due to the absence of script, it is essential to take their folklore into account if one is to study their historical and societal past. The different genres of folklore including folktales are the embodiment of cultural heritage, left by the fore fathers. The rich trove of Mizo folktales, myths, legends and songs that reflect their traditional social structure are the main sources from which researchers make a study of the social reality of the traditional Mizo society.

Key words : Mizo, Folktale, Social reality, Traditional society.

Liandova leh Tuaisiala is the Mizo folktale selected to be studied here to understand the social reality of the traditional Mizo society. This folktale is reflective of the Mizo traditional social structure while at the same time reflecting the urges and desires of the less privileged such as orphans and widows who are often discriminated against and who belong to the fringes of society. The setting of the tale is a pre-literate tribal society, and the tale focuses on the sad fate of two brothers, *Liandova* and *Tuaisiala* who as young children were abandoned by their mother after the death of their father.

According to the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1994), “the reality of a situation is the truth about it, especially when this is unpleasant or unwelcomed” (1196). Lily Kong and Elaine Go assert in their article “Folktales and Reality: The Social Construction of Race in Chinese Tales” that “while folktales are generally thought of as being borne of the imagination, there is in fact a strong relationship to be drawn between folktales and reality” (265). Scholars of folkloristic study do not deny the assertion that there are elements of reality in folktales. V.I. Lenin in 1962 said, “In

every folktale there are elements of reality” (quoted in Propp, 17). Also, Jack Zipes, in his book *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* states:

Originally the folk tale was (and still is) an oral narrative form cultivated by non-literate and literate people to express the manner in which they perceived and perceive nature and their social order and their wish to satisfy their needs and wants. Historical, sociological and anthropological studies have shown that the folk tale originated as far back as the Megalithic period and that both non-literate and literate people have been the carriers and transformers of the tale... the tales are reflections of the social order in a given historical epoch, and as such, they symbolized the aspirations, needs, dreams and wishes of common people in a tribe, community, or society, either affirming the dominant social values and norms or revealing the necessity to change them (7).

Every folktale bears the imprint of the historical moment in which it had originated. The social dimension found in a folktale is the social reality of that time. Folktales are also seen as something that embodies the ethos of peoples and that provides evidences of their continuity and national

distinctiveness. In demonstrating the usefulness of oral narratives including folktales, Lynwood Montell states that he “was able to set down in print an account that could never be written by most historians who are accustomed to doing research solely in libraries and archives” (quoted in Georges, 84). It has always been believed that the Mizo society was egalitarian by nature with no class hierarchy or social discrimination. Yet, some of the folktales reveal otherwise: the treatment meted out to different sections of the people within the same village structure, such as women, orphans, widows, show discrepancies and uneven treatment, thus showcasing this facet of their social reality.

The traditional Mizo society was “primitive” with no pejorative intended in the sense that it was simplistic and non-industrial. The primary source of livelihood was *jhumming* cultivation and buying and selling was in barter system. Each village strove to be self-sufficient and self-administered. Such a society may be considered to be similar to the “folk society” Robert Redfield writes of:

The folk society is an isolated society. Probably there is no real society whose members are in complete ignorance of the existence of people other than themselves... Nevertheless, the folk societies we know are made up of people who have little communication with outsiders... (Redfield, 296).

In the selected tale, a great chief named Lersia visited Liandova's village. The chief disguised himself as a leper and nobody recognised him. He and his followers were the only outsiders seen in the folktale. Also, when Liandova's mother eloped with her lover they settled in another village and she came to visit them only once in the course of the tale. Liandova left his village only twice, when he went to get the mithun offered by Lersia, and when he visited his in-laws towards the end of the tale. The whole tale covers the span of Liando's lifetime but little is seen of communications with outsiders during the whole of this period.

Mizos had a well-organized polity system at village level under the rule and guidance of a council of elders which was presided over by the village chief. They helped enforce the well-established system of customary laws and practices which applied to all the villagers. When the British administrators arrived they used these traditional institutions as the basis upon which they formulated measures and methods of governing the Mizo, only making minor changes in them.

During that period, the social position of a person was not acquired by birth but more by fate, this was exclusive of the chief which was hereditary. In most cases, the chief inevitably remained the wealthiest and the supreme power holder in his village. He lived by the taxes paid by his subjects. But this depended upon the number of households in a village. The logic for this was that the chief spent his

time administering and maintaining the welfare of his subjects and could not spare time for work and in turn he was paid taxes by each and every household of his village. Therefore, the chief's income totally depended on the size of his village; the more the household the wealthier the chief and vice versa. Very much aware of this situation, it was least desired by a chief to lose his subjects. However, at the same time, a household who could not produce its own livelihood like, Liandova and Tuaisiala, was an unwanted family.

Since *jhumming* cultivation was the primary source of their livelihood, a family that consisted of more men capable for cultivation was a privileged family, a wealthy family, and so held a respectable position in the society. On the contrary, a widow with young children, orphans, physically disabled men and others who are incapable of doing hard work were considered a burden to others. The economic condition of a family determined its social position; in short, a man was respected and despised according to the wealth he possessed.

Similar to what Marx and Engels had asserted, that "the whole society must fall into the two classes – the property-owners and the propertyless workers" (652), it is seen in the Mizo society where the land tenurial system was communal ownership, but the chief held the power in the distribution of land to each household for cultivation. Therefore, as pointed out by Guite, the land upon which their life fundamentally depended upon

was indirectly the chief's property. Each household was under obligation to pay every year a certain specified quantity of paddy and surrendering certain share in every animal shot or trapped within the chieftainship and also rendering free labour to the chief. And in turn the chief was to help the villagers in overcoming their difficulties, rewarding them for their outstanding achievements and punishing them when they were found guilty of misdeeds or infringement of established customs (53).

However, once the institution of chieftainship was established, the chief held the supreme power in all matters within his jurisdiction wherein his council of elders were normally appointed by the chief from a wealthy and influential group of persons, kinsman and close friends of the chief who were also senior members of various sub-clans. They were exempted from forced labour and were also free to choose the most fertile jhum-land before the other villagers. This means power was concentrated within the circle of the Chief and his council members who constituted the privileged group. And when there is concentration of power among the few elite there is exploitation. Thus, according to Lal Dena, this elite power group tended to serve their narrow and vested interests (70).

As poor orphans, Liandova and Tuaisiala represent the class who belong to the periphery of the society, that is, they are the socially outcast, downtrodden and marginalised section of the society. From the beginning of the story, the two brothers

were treated not as individuals but as orphans, unwanted and a burden to others. In the tale, they are not given any physical description and they are situated in a space without any identity, they are the "subaltern" in their society. Therefore, Liandova and Tuaisiala being poor and unproductive do not appear to belong to the proletariat and bourgeoisie as defined by Marx.

After their mother abandoned them, Liandova and Tuaisiala began their sad life as hungry wanderers. Liandova somehow managed to earn enough to feed himself by working as a hired hand, but Tuaisiala being too young for hire burdened his brother for the latter had to always include him which "was not agreeable to his employers." When Liandova worked as a hired hand to tend cattle or watch over paddy fields he was given supper at his employer's house which was the term of payment in those days. When supper time came Liandova often hid his brother under the house of his employer. The houses then were made of bamboo and stood on stilts so he would then quietly drop cooked yam between the openings of the bamboo floor. He was compelled to take such measures as he knew that no one was willing to feed Tuaisiala for free.

Once, Liandova was caught dropping cooked yams between the openings of the bamboo floor for his brother. The angry employer reprimanded him saying, "so this is why you have been consuming more than your share! I refuse

to feed your twin mouths, so get out at once.” From that incident onward, though Liandova had to continue to look for work, he was refused because he had an extra mouth to feed. The society turned a deaf ear to their constant hunger pangs and miserable plight. They were not seen as objects of sympathy, their existence was not acknowledged, and they were exploited and despised by the community. They often accompanied hunting parties, but whenever a game was killed, they were given only the bones and leftovers. On these occasions there was no guilty feeling on the part of the others, this was because the brothers were not considered as one among them.

Even after they acquired their new found wealth in the form of gongs and precious beads, which of course they found from the discarded stomach of a python, they had to keep the fact a secret and not reveal it to anyone because “if they did so they would lose everything.” They had no means of resisting or opposing the treatment meted out by those better off than them. Therefore, exploitation of the marginalised section of the society which is reflected in this tale proves the existence of a very stringent class hierarchy in the traditional Mizo society.

Up to this is the social reality of the traditional Mizo society found in the narrative of the tale. Another side of the reality of the Mizo society is often seen by reading beyond what the narrative reveals of women characters. This is because the status of women in Mizo society in the old days was in the form

of subtle discrimination. There was no outright bigotry over women. This is what made early writers on Mizo women like N. Chatterji to say, “the status of woman in their society was in no way inferior to that of man and she suffered none of those derogatory and discriminatory treatment as may be found in some of the more advanced societies,” (5) even though the traditional Mizo society was predominantly patriarchal in construct. Josephine L.B. Zuali believes that patriarchy in the Mizo society is necessitated by the concerns of safety and survival, she writes:

The old Mizo society of the pre-Christian period, that is, prior to 1894, was a patriarchal construct and such a system of patriarchy was perhaps necessitated by the concerns of safety and survival, with constant threat of war from other clans, the need for protection from wild animals and the struggle for survival in a difficult terrain where cultivation of crops was carried out for sustenance with much struggle and hardship...(13).

Moreover, agrarian society worldwide is found to be patriarchal by theorists like, Warren Motley and Briffault. Regarding the evolution of patriarchy, Motley writes:

Patriarchy evolved when primitive economies passed from hunting and gathering to the pastoral and agricultural stage and men gained predominate economic power.

The domestication of animals, and the later development of advanced agriculture, gave men economic strength... (400).

When men started practising agriculture, Briffault asserts that, “woman, instead of being the chief producer, become economically unproductive, destitute, and dependent” (quoted in Motley, 6). Since the primary source of livelihood of the old Mizos was *jhumming* cultivation and protection and survival of the village community were regarded as the most important concerns of the village, men were given the agency through which they could constantly assert their supremacy over women.

The Zawlbuk or the male dormitory in Mizo traditional society, unquestionably the most powerful institution, introduced in the first place as a requirement for defence and protection, was a space where a young man underwent their rites of passage to become a Mizo man. The inmates were taught useful arts and handicrafts, sports and wrestling, singing and dancing, discipline and the mores of the society, matters concerning the defence of the village and enemy raids were planned in this space. It was located at the centre of the village often close to the Chief’s house and it was the cultural, communal and educational centre of the village. However, there was nothing of that sort for the young women, therefore their sole education was at home where they were taught of the workings of household duties by their respective mothers.

It is safe to say that the whole establishment in the traditional Mizo society had overtly and covertly asserted male hegemony over women. Women were indoctrinated to believe in what patriarchal ideology had affirmed. Of the functioning of patriarchy Gerda Lerner in her seminal book, *the Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) wrote:

The system of patriarchy can only function with the cooperation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; ... by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women (217).

As a patrilineal society, the line of descent was strictly based on the male members only. Man as the head of the family always held a higher status than woman in the family as well as in the society. In general, the position of women in the family as well as in the social life was subordinate to man. Before she married, a woman was owned by her father and after by her husband. A woman did not have any legal claim on the family property except a small share at the time of marriage which she carried with her to her husband’s house. Lalmuaka states that woman had no voice in the family administration; even if she did her words were never accepted just because they were the words of a

woman. And R.L. Hnuni also asserts that the burden of women in the primitive Mizo society knew no bounds and they simply had to surrender themselves to these as their lot (quoted in Lalrinawma, 32).

The tale of Liandova and his brother is male-centered in a predominantly patriarchal society. The women characters in the tale are marginal character who play minor but vital roles. They represent the subordinated voiceless characters who lived under the constant domination of the male folk. However, the space occupied by them is no less important than those occupied by male characters. They are instrumental in showcasing the social reality of a patriarchal society.

Wicked stepmothers in folktales are universal: *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, amongst others, including *Mauruangi*. Mauruangi's step-mother often starved her, feeding her with grain husks only. Even when she finally married the Raja, her jealous stepmother called her home on the pretext of preparing a feast in her honour, and killed her by pouring boiling water over her. Interestingly, the tale *Liandova leh Tuaisiala* had a wicked mother and not a wicked stepmother. Their mother abandoned them when they were young children. This is an unusual and rarely to be found in Mizo folktales. Liandova and Tuaisiala's mother left them as young children when they needed her most. Throughout the tale the exploitation and marginalization of the brothers by others can be seen as the outcome of the

cruelty of their abandonment by their mother.

The woman, their mother, was well aware of the circumstances of being a widow with two very young sons in an agrarian society. As all the productive works by men and secondary duties by women had been practiced for generations and ingrained in the people could not be changed over-night, she comprehended the pathetic situation of single mothers and the impracticality of raising two young boys on her own. Leaving her own children to their own fate may seem "inhuman", however, the inhuman treatment meted by the mother cannot be judged on moral or ethical grounds. She might have been doing it for both herself and her children's survival.

An important point to be made in this case was the silence of the in-laws. In the traditional Mizo society if a man died leaving behind small children, his wife returned to her parents and his children were taken care of by their late father's family.

Also, the above tradition wherein the community looked to the welfare of the needy show that their mother did not leave them alone rather she left them in the hands of others who were more capable than her. Even if there were no relatives to help them, it was the duty of the chief to look after the orphans. In the traditional Mizo village community, one fundamental duty of the chief was to look after the wellbeing of orphans. Orphans who had no one to take care of them were

taken by the chief as his slaves. The practice of slavery in the traditional tribal societies existed for a very long period of time. P.S. Dahrawka (1896-1978), a renowned Mizo folklorist was freed from his servitude in the year 1910, he was then only thirteen years old and he was taken to be the chief's slave because he was a poor orphan (Thankhumi, xiv). Slaves consisted of different kinds of people. Among them, widows, orphans others who were unable to support themselves and had no relatives willing to do so were looked upon as part of the chief's household and they worked for the chief in return for their food and shelter. The institution of slavery was practiced even after majority of the Mizos converted into Christianity. The duration of servitude was lifetime, however, it was possible to be redeemed by payment of a certain amount of money or one mithun which was likely to be impossible for a slave. The slaves worked as free labours and in turn they were fed by the chief. They also lived in slave quarters inside the chief's house. Being a slave was never a desirable position; however, a slave in a way had a secure life. Therefore, the fact that Liandova and Tuaisiala were left alone shows the failure of a community which was believed to have the welfare of its people as its fundamental responsibility.

Again, Tuaichawngi, the chief's daughter in the tale is an example of a strong woman in the tale. As the chief's daughter, Tuaichawngi had the right to select a husband of her choice. In those days "the eligibility of young men was

measured generally in terms of physique, honesty, diligence, valour and sense of self-sacrifice for others" (Lal Dena, 170). Liandova might have possessed these qualities but to the others he was a poor orphan and nothing more. Liandova and Tuaisiala were very aware of their status in the society, but still they participated in Tuaichawngi's selection of a husband only because it was expected of all unmarried young men in the village to be part of the line-up. She chose Liandova among all the other eligible bachelors of the village. The chief was enraged with her choice and scolded her, "You could have had your choice of the best, but you chose the poorest and the most common of the lot! Tuaichawng, you will not be blessed," and with these words he cut off the finger with which she pointed at Liandova. After that she was afraid to return to her father's house and she followed the two brothers and remained with them as Liandova's wife.

In the traditional Mizo society, the chief had the power to interfere in his children's selection of spouses. In the Mizo legend of Laltheri and Chalthanga, the chief ordered the killing of Chalthanga, a commoner for falling in love with his daughter, Laltheri. "During that period, the chief had the power to banish or kill a commoner for falling in love with his daughter" (Thanmawia, 111). In *Liandova and Tuaisiala*, it was not Liandova who pursued Tuaichawngi but rather Tuaichawngi herself. Therefore, the chief could not take action against Liandova and

instead he imposed an extreme bride price for his daughter which he thought would be impossible for the brothers to pay. However, the two brothers could pay the bride price without any difficulty, with the help of their hidden treasure. Tuaichawngi showed her strong and far-sighted personality during the 'Khuangchawi'¹ occasion: "she threw precious beads into the crowds and when she saw her father, she brandished her disfigured hand and called out, "Father, take a look at the finger you chopped off."

In spite of her courageous conduct, Tuaichawngi, is portrayed otherwise, depicting that she "secretly knew of their wealth and was in love with Liandova and wished to marry him." This can be considered an example of how patriarchy undermines women in narratives. Her daring decision in choosing Liandova is portrayed in such a way that makes her look greedy for wealth. The portrayal of women characters in the tale reflects their subordination and the dominance of their male counterparts in the traditional Mizo society.

Note

¹ Lalthangliana, B. *Zoram Encyclopedia (ZoramTinreng Bu)*. (Aizawl: RTM Press, 2003) 274-276. *Khuangchawi, n*. It was a traditional feast given only by chiefs and prominent persons. It was the greatest and highest accomplishment a Mizo could achieve during his lifetime in a traditional Mizo society. It was a symbol of social status.

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