

Bodies that Matter: Politics of the Naked in *Mothers of Manipur*

JASMIN C.U

M.Phil Scholar, The Gandhigram Rural Institute, Dindigul
E-mail: jasmincu4@gmail.com

Abstract—Beyond the corporeality, body has different expression, experience and situation. It is possible to explain body in these three levels because it is inclusive of all its extension. Body is socially, politically, culturally and linguistically defined material and every performance beyond the definition is a counteract. Body is inseparably part of creating binaries in which body is in two extremes of haves and have-nots: the politics of exclusion and inclusion, the divide between space and performativity. Beyond this, the defining mechanism cannot completely control body. This disparity is the possibility of counter performance. The naked protest of 12 elderly women in Manipur, Northeast India, on 15 July 2004, in front of the 17th Assam Rifles' headquarter, on the custodial rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama by the Indian army, is an alternative performance. It is counter hegemonic and a powerful representation. *The Mothers of Manipur* by Teresa Rehman is a book based on the interviews of the twelve women who participated in the protest. It explores their life, experiences, and socio-political conditions of North-East which simultaneously illuminates the radical movement of women from a silenced part of India and the alternative performance of women which challenged the narratives on body in different levels. The proposed paper tries to analyse the politics of body, nakedness and its performativity as a counteract against hegemony and its unilateral definitions.

"...We will need to consider more closely the bodily dimensions of action, what the body requires, and what the body can do, especially when we must think about bodies together in a historical space that undergoes a historical transformation by virtue of their collective action: what holds them to gather there, and what are their conditions of persistence and of power in relation to their precarity and exposure" (Butler 73-74)

Body is the center of every human affair. It is not limited as a corporal material, but body embodies many other categories, possessions and tangled meanings of society, of culture and of politics. Among these 'categories of body', which of the sections have the privilege to appear? to perform? then what is body? The politics of body begins from here; its history of definition and the history of decision, the body and its being. The 'categories of body' is a complicated expression, especially when with the word 'categories', it may sound like

confirming the so-called positions of the body and the polarized determinants. If we think about the politics of body, about its defined performance and undefinable performativity, it goes beyond and it is already beyond where 'category' is only an indication for an institutionalized situation of body and it is not the absolute. On 15th July 2004 Imphal, the capital of Manipur, witnessed a naked protest of twelve women in front of the Kangla fort occupied by the Assam rifles, protesting on the rape and murder of a native woman Thanjam Manorama by Army personals. It is significant in the history of protests because it challenges the subduing power and its categorizing mechanisms. Here, the unfixable performativity of the body and the politics of nakedness are simultaneously experimented and explored.

Judith Butler in her book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* says that "performativity describes both the processes of being acted on, and the conditions and possibilities for acting, and that we cannot understand its operation without both of these dimensions" (63). Performance and performativity are two possibilities of the body sets on its expressive and signifying outcome. Different objectives of the body or its attributed ways of performance and performativity, accepting the social norms or rejecting the same, are the consequential aspects which give body the meaning. Body is always a constructed field, categorized, in which the individual subject is instituted under the regulations of social and political dogmas where body and individual confines to its social and political situations. Accordingly, body becomes a part of social constructivism and a field for political involvement. Therefore, the action and performance of the body is conditioned by those who are in power, by means of discipline and surveillance.

Foucault's concept of 'biopower' is an explanation of the operation of power as a governing and defining mechanism by totalization and individualization of the population. In this regard, body is an object of information but never a subject in communication. From the basic level of life, 'biopower' operates in the bodies as a regulatory mechanism where

people undertake self-disciplinary and self-regulatory practices. This disciplinary mechanism is the basis of all institutions, from family to governments where the determinants are different in priorities. However, beyond all these determinations, body has a capacity of performance and performativity which is unexplainable. Any historical idea of performance is popular only through the collective performance or, which Judith Butler termed as “stylized repetition of acts”. Through a series of disarticulation and re-articulation the subordinate groups can counter or overthrow hegemonic attempts. Here performance and performativity has a floating effect which cannot be sustained without collective actions. Consequently, there is a kind of “undecidability”, as Derrida called it, because of this arbitrariness between alternative performativity and the general idea of performance. Body can be considered as the center for counter hegemony and alternative performances where it is used in social, political and economic movements through mobilizing individuals and groups together to challenge hegemonic power relations.

In the book *Notes toward the Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler opines that “the very term “mobilization” depends on an operative sense of mobility, itself a right, one which many people cannot take for granted” (3). Mobilization and the space for gathering is a controversial matter, especially in the contemporary context where everyone cannot mobilize. There are categories and all of them cannot appear due to certain restriction arriving from different reasons. Ultimately, the questions about the categorization and its basis reach in to the history of performance. Body is modulated by different regimes and it is a realm of the play of power. In *Power/ Knowledge*, Foucault says that power “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (39). According to him power is relative, there are power relations and that are productive relation because they imply resistance. Power is coextensive with resistance (*History of Sexuality*, 36). He claims that power is inherent in our self and it is self-reflexive. Thus, through conducting people’s conducts it becomes ‘counter-conduct’. Hence, the resistance through public demonstrations of the body in streets and public spaces are powerful representations because it is a strong question towards the violence or discrimination itself which breaks the socially imposed norms of private and public.

Mothers of Manipur: Twelve Women Who Made History by Teresa Rehman is a book which includes the interviews of twelve women who performed naked protest before Kangla fort on the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama. It is a book that gives detailed account on twelve mothers, their life and social, political and historical milieu of Northeast India. On 10th July 2004, a woman named Thangjam Manorama Devi was arrested by the troops of 17th Assam rifles in Manipur on the charge of relation to a militant group, the People

Liberation Army (PLA) and her bullet-ridden body found from a field in the next morning. After the rape and murder took place, the authorities refused the autopsy report or conduct an inquiry. Protesting against this injustice and violence, twelve elderly women came forward with a radical naked demonstration outside the Kangla fort of Assam Rifles on 15th July 2004. It was a new kind of protest India never witnessed before. This protest is significant in the history of protests in many levels.

The public demonstration is very determining because it is an explicit expression that cannot be suppressed easily by the Assam rifle force. The nude protest in Manipur can be seen as an ultimatum to patriarchal modern democratic political discourse and their hegemonic intervention on body and land. North-East India had an independent existence and self-rule before it merged into Indian union after the independence of 1947. Even though the area was under British administration (for giving self-rule British had different agendas including exploitation and the indention of keeping them away from the ongoing freedom struggle of that time). The tribes of North-East region have diverse culture, tradition and history which are distinct from each other and from the mainland India. The merging of North-East into Indian union made great impact on the socio-political scenario of the land which made massive uprising because majority of the people was against the decision and some of the regions were forcefully merging. By considering the following socio-political condition and geographical situation of the region, India continually militarized North-East and bought it under the law “Armed Force Special Power Act”(AFSPA). The act was passed on September 11, 1958, and first applied to Naga Hills, and then Assam and Manipur respectively. In the following decades, the law enforced on seven states of North-East in which Manipur is the most militarized region comparing to other states. The later assessment made on the law AFSPA and military rule which proved it as a violation of human rights even though it is still in force without repealing except in some of the regions such as Tripura and Meghalaya. The nude protest of women bears the weight of this historical, cultural and political context.

The naked protest of mothers questioned different issues ranging from socio-political climate of North-East India, power hierarchies, questions of identity, and above all gender issues. North-East is a marginalized region in India. Politically and economically it is in a state of underdevelopment. The massive militarization of the land, insurgencies and counter insurgencies, less consideration from the center and political role-plays are the dominant image of North-East which break the political-economic system and social balance. AFSPA created a constant fear and anxiety in the minds of people, the fear of surveillance, death, rape and disappearance. The authority provides no proper evidence, report or investigation about the people who disappeared, dead or raped. Manorama’s murder is not an isolated incident. According to the estimation published by Hindustan Times, there are 1,528 cases of extra-

judicial killings in Manipur which put under hearing of SC on July 2017. The protest of mothers exposed the human rights violation in the implementation of AFSPA and exposed the futility of governing system in the North-East. In an essay, "Restoring Order in Manipur: The Drama of Contemporary Women's Protest", Deepti Priya Mehrotra says that "in this one radical moment, the women contested patriarchal definitions of womanhood and of rape, challenged the state power, and reinforced the demand of repealing AFSPA. They exposed the state and its conception of security as patriarchal and hyper-masculine: rather than protect vulnerable women, it poses a series of threat to safety and survival" (223).

In the act of assembling of body in a particular space, there is a 'politics of revealing' which is an act of creating a space through the manifestation of the actuality of body in its present situation. When considering the naked protest of women, the unity and self-liberating act by stripping off the cloths and challenging the authority, whose naked body 'revealed' the realities of governance and gender questions. It revealed that the concept of security itself is patriarchal and the security forces particularly destroyed women in every aspect of their life. Women is being targeted during search operations and they were raped and tortured, especially women's sexuality being is exploited and used as a strategy to subjugate people and community. Laishram Gyaneswari, one among the woman protesters says in an interview with Teresa Rehman, "it was a general feeling that we, the women of Manipur, were virtually naked. We could be easily molested or raped. Why then should we not walk in the street naked? Why not tell the whole world about our helpless situation?" (Rehman 136). She adds, "we challenged them to come out and rape us before everyone. We urged that they tell us what they were stationed here for: to protect our people or to rape our women" (137). The crucial thing is that the women who participated in naked protest are from highly conservative social background and they are housewives, mothers, traders, workers and middle-aged women. This implies different levels of meanings to the protest.

The women remember the day of protest and the compulsive events which prompt them as a do or die situation. They were all mothers and they themselves considered as mothers of Manorama, and mothers of every girl in Manipur. Motherhood in a society, as woman being a central point for all myths and tradition, is always treated as an easy apparatus to subjugate female body and objectify their position. In Manipur, even though there is a conservative cultural background, motherhood turns out to be a collective responsibility. It is a responsibility taken by women for the society to safeguard its members. The women's group Meira Peibis in Manipur is such a collective social responsibility of women. Meira paibis literally means torch bearers who patrol all the nights to save people from army's search operations and drug abuses. They are not political members but ordinary women who have decided to take the traditional responsibility for the safety and peace of the community which handed to them through

generations. The women in the naked protest are Meira Peibis and elderly mothers. Angom Jibanmala remarks, "I saw the dead body of Manorama. I was very disturbed. It was terrible. We are all Manorama's mothers" (Rehman 126). Ongbi Jamini Devi says, "as mothers, we belong to both the parties. We can think of plausible situation" (101).

Manipur has a history of powerful women's protests, Nupi Lan or 'women's war'. The first remarkable protest was in 1904 when British ordered Manipuri men to cut timber and build colonial offices. On 12th December 1939, women did another historical protest which was against famine due to the British policy of exporting paddy. Women protesters assembled at the Telegraph office and on 13th December Maharaja send a telegraph to instant ban on export of rice. Later in 1970, they fought against the government policy of liberally licensing liquor and formed Nisha Bandh and Meira Paibis. In 2000, Irom Chanu Sharmila, a Manipuri woman, began hunger strike for repealing AFSPA condemning Malom massacre, the murder of 10 innocent people by security force without any provocation. She was arrested by the police and sentenced under Indian Penal Code, section (309) for 'attempting suicide'. After sixteen years of fasting she ended up the strike on 2016. It is the longest political fasting in the human history. And now, on January 19, 2019, the women vendors of the Ima Keithel Khwairamb and Bazaar staged a sit-in to protest against the citizenship bill that seeks to provide Indian citizenship to Hindus, Jains, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsis from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan after six years of residence in India. The protest is against the amendment bill which proposed an inclusionary/exclusionary strategy that may wipe out the indigenous people of North-East India which made massive controversy.

As a surface inscribed with culturally and historically established practices and subject to political and economic forces, body is very significant as being as a center to explain any human affairs. Specifically, two dynamic protests in Manipur need to be revisited which used body as locus to dissent against the hegemonic culture. The naked protests of mothers and hunger strike of Irom Sharmila can be identified as a protest which uses body as a notion of resistance which is a powerful formative event in post-colonial North-East India. In a broader sense, in both these protests, they translated their body into a political determination of the act of 'denial'. It is an alternative way of articulating the existing patriarchal narratives of the nation and society and its exclusionary attempt to dismantle the voices of women. The allegation charged by the government against Irom Sharmila as a 'habitual offender' can be seen as a further explanation of such mainstream narrative. In the naked protest of mothers, they denied the norm 'clothed body', as adult female body is an important social norm. In fact, from cultural center to political level, the 'nakedness' made a shock because the protest put things on surface for a public glare. In the essay, "Restoring Order in Manipur: The Drama of Contemporary

Women's Protest", Deepti Priya Mehrotra says that "women's bodies, in this radical paradigm, are not others to possess. They are not objects of male gaze or male violation. Rather the body is a woman's own means of expression- of intelligence, anger, dissent, resistance, fearlessness. the women consciously created a collective expression of rage, challenging concentrated, brutal hyper-masculine power" (224).

Resistance is a counteract against shaping, guiding, disciplining and oppressing. Hegemonic powers cannot subjugate or objectify the body completely because body has an existence separate from all the conventions. There is a disparity visible in the conditions of power engagements between dominant systems and the body. The women who participated in the nude protest were ordinary mothers representing the minority North-East Manipuri women with everyday experience of AFSPA. They are not the so-called privileged sections in mainstream. When they assemble in a space to express and expose the situation, it could lift the issue of Northeast into an international level and it enforced the center to review their involvements in North-East India at the time where all the human right activists and organization striving for years. Here, above all, the body becomes center, power and language of being and becoming.

Acknowledgment

My heartfelt gratitude to my teacher Akhilesh Udayabhanu, Sree Sankar acharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, for his valuable guidance and support.

References

- [1] Butler, Judith. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard University Press, 2015. pp. 63-3.
- [2] Choudhury, Snigdha. "If You Remember Manipuri Women Only for Nude Protest Against Army, Think Again". *India Today*, 22January2019, www.indiatoday.in/india/story/if-you-remember-manipuri-women-only-for-nude-protest-against-army-think-again-1436411-2019-01-22.
- [3] Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, edited by Colin Gordon, Harvester Press, 1980. pp. 39.
- [3] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Pantheon. 1978. pp. 36.
- [4] "Manipur fake encounter cases: SC directs SIT to lodge 30 more FIRs by Jan 31". *HindustanTimes*, 16 Jan 2018, www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/sit-registers-12-firs-in-manipur-fake-encounter-cases-sc-directs-to-lodge-30-more/story-SkGvp42vVF9eXOdi3R6HpL.html
- [5] Mehrotra, Deeptipriya. "Restoring Order in Manipur: The Drama of Contemporary Women's Protests", *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*, edited by Preeti Gill, Zubaan, 2010, pp. 223-224.
- [6] Rehman, Teresa. *The Mothers of Manipur: Twelve Women Who Made History*. Zubaan, 2017.