

NATASA THOUDAM:

**‘Collective Memory’ as an Alternative to
Dominant (Hi)stories in Narratives by
Women from and in Manipur**

Abstract

Theorizing in the context of France, Pierre Nora laments the erosion of ‘national memory’ or what he calls “*milieux de memoire*” and the emergence of what have remained of such an erosion as ‘sites of memory’ or “*lieux de memoire*” (7–24). Further he contends that all historic sites or “*lieux d’histoire*” (19) such as “museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders” (10) and even the “historian” can become *lieux de memoire* provided that in their invocation there is a will to remember (19). In contrast to Nora’s lamentation, in the particular context of Manipur, a state in Northeast part of India, there is a reversal. It is these very ‘sites of memory’ that bring to life the ‘collective memory’ of Manipur, which is often national, against the homogenizing tendencies of the histories of conflicting nationalisms in Manipur, including those of the Indian nation-state. This paper shows how photographs of Manorama Thangjam’s ‘raped’ body, the suicide note of the ‘raped’ Miss Rose, Mary Kom’s autobiography, and ‘Rani’ Gaidinlui’s struggle become sites for ‘collective’ memory that emerge as an alternative to history in Manipur.

Keywords: Manipuri Women Writers, Pierre Nora, Conflict of Nationalisms, Collective Memory, Sites of Memory

Theorizing in the context of France, Pierre Nora laments the erosion of ‘national memory’ or what he calls “*milieux de memoire*” and the emergence of what have remained of such an erosion as ‘sites of memory’ or “*lieux de memoire*” (7–24). He attributes this erosion of national past to “industrial growth” and “democratization and mass culture on a global scale” (7). Thus, for Nora, “the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de memoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, [and] to materialize the immaterial ... —all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs” (19). Further, he contends that all historic sites or “*lieux d’histoire*” (19) such as “museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders” (10) and even the “historian” can become *lieux de memoire* provided that in their invocation there is a will to remember (19). Nora also states that “[w]ithout the intention to remember, *lieux de memoire* would be indistinguishable from *lieux d’histoire*” (19). In contrast to Nora’s lamentation, in the particular context of Manipur—a state in the Northeast of India—there seems to be a reversal. It is these very ‘sites of memory’ that bring to life the ‘collective memories’ of different communities in Manipur that aspire to have a nation of their own. These ‘collective memories’ are thus often characterized as ‘nationalistic’ but are against the homogenizing tendencies of the histories of conflicting nationalisms in Manipur, including those of the Indian nation-state.

I have invoked the rhetoric of nationalism here in spite of the danger it entails, considering the complex relation that Manipur shares with the Indian nation-state (which is often seen as ‘colonial’ by the revolutionary/nationalist leaders) and the nationalist aspirations of these leaders who saw Manipur as a ‘nation’ in the making. Please note that the term ‘national memories’ of communities in Manipur is itself a

problematic category. It is different from the nationalist histories of different communities in Manipur, which are not only gendered but turning more ethnic being synonymous with the totalizing Meitei nationalist history. In contrast, ‘national memory’ is a more inclusive term, a heterogeneous, fluidic, and ‘conflicting’ category that looks at Manipur as a geographical category rather than a linguistic or a religious/ethnic one. There is no attempt to homogenize this category either, which is itself a site of conflict. In addition, the term ‘nation[alism]’ is a contested term here. What was nationalism for different communities of Manipur was seen as terrorism and insurgency in the eyes of the Indian State and by the ‘others’ of each of these communities.

During the 1970s, the “hills–valley divide” prevalent since colonial times in Manipur becomes “a site of conflict” as Manipuri nationalism turns more ethnic in character being “synonymous with Meitei nationalism and begins to conflict with Naga nationalism and Zo nationalism—the latter comprising Kuki, Chin, and Lusei groups” (Thoudam 352). Already in 1949 the freedom Manipur anticipated in 1947 was thwarted with the merger agreement (Thoudam 352). Moreover, I have also argued that “many Meitei nationalist scripts see Manipur’s merger with India as an extension of colonialism” (352). Further, Meitei nationalism became more ethnic in character as it finds itself endangered by the rising nationalisms of other ethnicities mainly Nagas and Kukis as well as by the larger Indian nationalism (352). According to H. Kham Khan Suan, in Manipur, there are 33 recognized Scheduled Tribes (STs) belonging to the ethnic Naga and Zo groups. The 2001 census had the Meiteis as “the majority group” making up 65.8% of total population and occupying 10.02% of total geographical area of the state. On the other hand, the Naga and the Zo people together occupied 89.98% of the geographical area and made up 34.2% of the total population.

The Meiteis inhabit the plain districts (Bishnupur, Imphal East, Imphal West, and Thoubal) and were surrounded by the Naga and Zo people scattered in the five hill districts (Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, Chandel, and Churachandpur). Suan calls it the “classic case where ethnocultural boundaries broadly coincide with territorial space” (268). Further, according to Suan, three totalizing projects by the three major ethnic groups in Manipur, namely, Meiteis, Nagas, and Zos conflict not only amongst themselves but also with the autonomy of the larger Indian state (271). The Naga’s aspirations for a ‘Greater Nagalim’ (espoused by NSCN-IM) conflict with the ‘territorial integrity’ of not only Manipur but Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Simultaneously, the hills of Manipur that are considered the Naga territories are also inhabited by the Zo people (predominantly Kuki). In addition, “the demands of the Naga and the Zo people carving out separate autonomous homelands for themselves have posited uneasy questions and challenges to the Meiteis’ totalizing project” (268). Finally, all three projects often termed by political scientists and historians as ‘nationalisms’ conflict with the autonomy of Indian state. It is in this sense that Manipur becomes the site of conflicting nationalisms.

This paper shows how photographs of Manorama Thangjam’s ‘raped’ body, the suicide note of the ‘raped’ Rose Ningshen, Mary Kom’s autobiography, and Rani Gaidinliu’s¹ notebooks become sites for ‘collective’ memory that emerge as an alternative to dominant (hi)stories in Manipur.

I

On July 11, 2004, a team of Seventeenth Assam Rifles raided the house of late Bihari Singh Thangjam and arrested the 32-year-old Meitei woman, Manorama

Thangjam. Next day, a bullet-ridden and allegedly sexually assaulted body of Manorama was found near Ngariyan Mapan Maring village in Imphal, Manipur. This led to a widespread protest against the army violence on civilians resulting in the naked protest of the *Ima Meira Paibis*² at Kangla—the then Indian Armed Forces headquarters in Imphal, Manipur—on July 15, 2004.

Two conflicting narratives weave the controversy that surrounds the incident of July 11, 2004. One is the Indian security forces' version, and the other is Manorama's family's. According to the Indian security forces, more specifically the Assam Rifles, Manorama was “a member of the banned People's Liberation Army (PLA)” (an armed opposition group) and “an expert in improvised explosive devices (IEDs)” as well as “an informer for the PLA” (Human Rights Watch, henceforth HRW; 25). They further added that on confirmation that she was at her residence in Bamon Kampu Mayai Leikai, they raided her house, took her into custody issuing an arrest memo, and recovered “one Singapore made Kenwood Radio Set and one Chinese made fragmentation Type Hand Grenade” (HRW 26–27). The Assam Rifles men intended to hand her over to the nearest police station. However, instead they went on a wild goose chase for almost two hours to capture “one of her militant colleagues” who possessed an “AK-47 assault rifle” (HRW 27–28). It was when she tried to escape that they shot at her leading to her death (HRW 28).

The family version describes the incident otherwise. Contrary to what the Assam Rifle claimed, her family insisted that “she was a peaceful activist and not involved in any criminal activities” (HRW 25).³ In their narration of the night of her arrest, they alleged that Manorama was tortured before her arrest and nothing was recovered from her at that time (HRW 26–27). Moreover, Justice D. Biswas of the

Gauhati High Court in his verdict observed many procedural lapses on part of the Assam Rifles. The raid was conducted in the absence of a female constable. Manorama was not handed over to the nearest police station; instead, she was interrogated and “moved from place to place in search of another lady cadre” (HRW 28). In addition, there was no FIR pending against her at the time of her arrest (HRW 28). Further, her family suspected foul play looking at the circumstances leading to her death. They doubted the Assam Rifles’ version of the events that led to her death. One pertinent question they raised was: how could the army make no attempt to run after her and stop her considering the fact that her hands were tied from behind and she was wearing a *phanek* (Meitei skirt or wrap around). Instead, the army fired at an unarmed Manorama. Also, “no empty cartridges were found in the area,” refuting the army riflemen’s claim that they first shot in the air to warn her; “no blood was found near the body despite the fact that Manorama had suffered at least six bullet wounds” (the forensic report confirms that it was eight not six); “the nature of the bullet wounds suggested that the shots were fired at close range”; and “a report from the Central Forensic Science Laboratory found semen stains on Manorama’s skirt”⁴ (HRW 29–30).

This one event brought all the suffering masses of Manipur together and provided an outlet for their pent-up anger—the masses, who either had been tortured, had suffered loss of family members, or had been humiliated at the hands of the Indian army in the name of AFSPA⁵—thus, uplifting the incident to a historic dimension it has attained now for the people of Manipur, the Meiteis in particular, and elsewhere. Paporri Bora contends that the protest, especially the one at Kangla, that followed was not only against the alleged rape of Manorama but also against the rape of a region, here in this case of Manipur. In “Between the Human, the Citizen and the

Tribal: Reading Feminist Politics in India's Northeast," Bora argues contextualizing the Kangla protest in the light of the civilizing mission first of the white colonial man and then of the brown postcolonial/neocolonial brown man. Bora's argument is a critique of the State which views its people in the Northeast as "incomplete citizens." In the Kangla protest, Bora sees "an inversion of the anti-colonial narrative of woman as nation requiring the protection of her valiant sons" when "the mothers of Manipur protect their children, both daughters and sons" (351). She provides a postcolonial alternative to the language of the law (and of the human rights) (356). While critical of the nationalist and the human rights discourse that view women as "rape-able," "vulnerable objects that need protection," and hence "victimized objects" with no "subject position," she suggest a re-reading of the language of the protest (356). By reading the statement on the banner of their protest ("Indian Army Rape Us") as "a command" and not "a descriptive statement," she shows how the lack of subject-verb agreement in the command breaks the subject-object binary (356). Moreover, for her, the "us" stands for "not just women but also the Northeast" (356). Here, she reconfigures the sexual power relationship in the state which goes "beyond the man/woman binary and signals the power relationships of the majoritarian Indian state with its minorities" (356). By doing so, she draws our attention to even stories of the less documented male sexual abuse (356–57).

In fact, Justice C. Upendra Singh starts his judicial enquiry report with these words: "This is one of the most shocking custodial killing [sic] of a Manipuri village girl so savagely, that also after inhuman torture" (127). Her dead body is described thus in the report: "She was found lying death [sic] having multiple gun shot [sic] and other injuries on various parts on her body, including her genital organs and thigh"

(C.U.Singh 127). According to the postmortem report, her body sustained eight bullet wounds; six of them were fatal, leading to her death (C.U.Singh 179).

However, it was the appearance of her partially blurred, half naked, and bullet-ridden dead body on the front pages of major local newspapers⁶ that touched the nerves of the masses as a collectivity, leading them to behave in the manner they did; consequently, leaving a mark on the history of women's struggle in Manipur. This photograph was significant as its appearance marked the beginning of a series of protests including the one at Kangla immortalizing her and the image of her dead body in the collective memory of the people both within and outside Manipur. In the meantime, her family refused to collect her dead body until they get justice for her death. As a result, the police cremated her by the order from the Government of Manipur on July 24, 2004 (HRW 29). Since then, every year, on 11 July, a memorial event is held at her residence organized by Th. Manorama Memorial Charitable Trust, Bamon Kampu Apunba Lup, Manipur. In contrast, the national media exercised caution and instead used a portion of a family photograph of hers taken in a sitting position (giving the appearance of an extreme close-up shot).⁷

Later memorial functions, from 2013 onwards, used the standing version of this photograph (see Figure 1), along with a photo-montage (shown in Figure 2) comprising three photographs: One was a version of the photograph used by the national media. The other two were photographs circulated by one of the local newspapers—*Hueyen Lanpao*, providing the frontal and the rear views of her dead body as it was found by the police at the time of the incident (versions of the photograph used by local newspapers).

Figure 1: Photograph Used in the 2013 Memorial Event



Source: "9th Death Anniversary of Thangjam Manorama held at Bamon Kampu :: July 11, 2013." *E-pao Net*. 11 Jul. 11, 2013. Web. Oct. 11, 2015. Photo courtesy: Deepak Oinam.

Figure 2: Another Photograph Used in the 2013 Memorial Event



Source: “9th Death Anniversary of Thangjam Manorama held at Bamon Kampu :: July 11, 2013.” *E-pao Net*. Jul. 11, 2013. Web. Oct. 11, 2015. Photo courtesy: Deepak Oinam.

Recently, bloggers (*Manipur Shining*, *Maoist Road*, *Namathu*, and *Vinavu.com*) from different parts of India began to circulate the most ‘disturbing’ yet powerful photograph of the incident.⁸ It showed a medium shot of her dead body, with her still, not-fully-closed eyes, showing her blood-stained white blouse pulled up to just cover her chest in order to reveal the fatal bullet wound on her navel. This photograph can be considered as the “decisive moment”—Henri Cartier-Bresson’s terminology that “fuses a notion of instantaneity in photography (the freezing of an instant) with an older concept from art history: story-telling with a single picture” (Bate 56)—that depicts the entire story or event within one picture or “the ‘pregnant

moment⁹ of the story, where the past, present and future of the story can be read, summed up, ‘at a glance’” (Bate 56). This photograph captured the moment of reversal, when the 12 *Ima* decided not to be mere spectators to the army’s disrobing of Manipuri women under the garb of AFSPA and they made visible this ‘invisible’ disrobing, bringing it out in the open with their own disrobing at Kangla.

Apart from the ‘collective’ remembering¹⁰ of the incident by members of her family and the people from Manipur and elsewhere, the making of this ‘collective memory’ happens at three different yet overlapping levels. They are: the local media, the ‘dominant’ national media hegemonic to the official version of the State armed forces, and the ‘unofficial’ blogs. It was the photograph used by local newspapers that was instrumental in generating such a huge public reaction. However, subsequently, later reportage used a less graphic photograph, which was also used by national media and in compliance with the official version. At the other extreme are the blogs that reproduced the most ‘disturbing’ photograph of her dead body. Different visual representations of the same event were used in order to generate differing versions of ‘collective’ memory. The dominant national media and later the local media probably wanted the public to remember the injustice of the killing of an innocent person; thus they frontalized Manorama’s ‘innocent-looking’ face through the photograph. In contrast, the blogs also reminded the public of the violence of the alleged rape, which is visible all over on her dead body in the photograph they have used. The photo-montage used in the memorial events since 2013 can be looked at as a bridge between these two extreme positions. It juxtaposes the photograph of Manorama taken during happier times with two photographs of her dead body in frontal and rear views. Hence, in other words, the innocent face of Manorama is juxtaposed with the image of violence done to her body, with the aim of highlighting the injustice as well as the

brutality done on her body. It also humanizes her thereby restoring her as a person as opposed to merely a body.

However, Manorama's body represented in these photographs like a 'real' *lieu de memoire*, 'real' in Nora's sense, refuses to be reduced merely into these significations. As Nora asserts that "*lieux de memoire* have no referent in reality; or rather, they are their own referent: pure, exclusively self-referential signs. ... In this sense, the *lieu de memoire* is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations" (23–24). He further adds that "*lieux de memoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications" (19). Here, Manorama's body is its own referent. To elucidate this point, let us examine her 'gaze' in each of these photographs. The photograph used by almost everyone apart from the bloggers shows that her gaze is not looking back at the camera even though she may be posing for the camera shot. Her eyes are shown to be shying away from any kind of confrontation with the camera. They are looking away, slightly closed but not fully. In sharp contrast to this photograph is the other photograph used by the bloggers, showing her dead body with her still, and not-fully-closed eyes. Here too, her eyes may not be looking at the camera but they are staring in a confrontational manner at something in front of them. Just as a camera freezes time and space for a moment in a photograph, death too freezes time and space eternally for a dead body. In the case of Manorama, her dead body is now eternally frozen to the moment just before her death. It appears as if her frozen gaze is fixed upon 'the murderer' who is most likely at that moment missing from the frame (this is when we consider the forensic report that claims that some of the bullets were shot from a very close range as true). One can read both victimhood

and defiance in those eyes. Her stare is a remnant of a frozen past moment of victimhood—as she waits helplessly and motionlessly for the next course of action (which is death in this case). Yet, the stare, in her eyes as we see it now in the photograph, is also defiant and confrontational to the ‘murderer,’ invisible from the frame, as she stares at the face of death and her eyes do not shy away from confronting at the inevitable approaching death. This contradictory ‘look,’ according to me, memorialized in this ‘decisive moment’, has indeed become the ‘real’ site of ‘collective’ memory for the people of Manipur in its refusal to be forgotten or suppressed by the authorized version of the story imposed by the Indian nation-state as well as the hegemonic national media and later the local media. The authorized version of her story sees her as a dangerous criminal and hence her killing is deemed justifiable. It denies the allegation of rape; here the national media and now recently the local media are co-opted, visible from the kind of images that accompany their reportage. The news report does not deny the killing but the rape is an ‘allegation’ and hence the use of the term ‘alleged’ along with rape in almost all of the reportage. Further, her contradictory ‘look’ also highlights the contradiction surrounding her links with the ‘nationalist’ struggle in Manipur: her family’s strategic denial and the Indian state’s imposition of the same. Both erase her participation from the nationalist struggle in Manipur differently for different reasons. For the Indian state, plainly she is a terrorist not a nationalist. For her family, in order to prevent branding her as a terrorist, they have to deny any links between her and the nationalist struggle in Manipur, which the state considered as militant. However, Manorama’s contradictory ‘look’ confounds both as it emerges as an alternative to both, refusing both versions of her story.

II

One of the earliest cases of rape by the Indian army was reported in 1974. In Ngaprum Khullen (Kumran) village of Ukhrul district in Manipur, a Tangkhul Naga girl, Rose Ningshen, was gang raped on March 4, 1974, by the Ninety-fifth Border Security Force (BSF) in the house of R. Khasung in front of helpless village elders who were held as witness to the event at gun point (*TNT*, n.pag). Two days later, she committed suicide on 6 March, leaving behind a suicide note in Tangkhul for her boyfriend, Stone, of the neighbouring village, Bungpa.

I provide here a brief introduction to Tangkhuls—the people and their language. They “are one of the 33 notified Schedule Tribes of Manipur” (Ningshen 49). The Tankhuls “belong to the Naga group of tribes” and “inhabit mainly in the Ukhrul District of Manipur” (49). They “are also found in the neighboring districts of Senapati, Thoubal, and Chandel” (49) as well as “in Nagaland and across the border in the Somra Tract of Myanmar [Burma]” (49). Maireiwon Ningshen describes the district and Tangkhuls thus:

It may be noted that Ukhrul District, the place where the Tangkhuls mainly inhabit was first marked out as a Sub-Division in 1919 during the British rule. Then in November 1969, it was upgraded to a full-fledged district, bearing the name ‘Manipur East District.’ In 1983, Tengnoupal District, now called Chandel District was carved out from the Manipur East District [...] After that the name of the district was also changed into Ukhrul District [...] The Tangkhul is the second largest Schedule Tribe of Manipur [...] They are also an educationally advanced Naga tribe. (49)

She further adds that “[t]he Nagas including the Tangkhuls belong to the Mongoloid race [...] Linguistically, they belong to the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of great Sino-Tibetan family” (55). According to Kiranbala Devi Pukhrambam:

The Tangkhul language belongs to the Naga-Kuki sub-group of the Naga group of the Tibeto-Burman family (Grierson, 2006). It is a surprise to note that every Tangkhul village has a dialect of its own. It is hard to communicate between the Tangkhuls of different villages. Manipuri [Meitei] used to be their lingua franca. William Pettigrew, the first missionary [,] is credited for refining the Tangkhul language with the publication of Tangkhul Grammar. He introduces the Ukhrul village dialect as a Lingua-franca among Tangkhul Nagas through his writings of Gospel translations, Hymns and Bibles. The Tangkhuls write following Roman script nowadays. (28)

Coming back to the suicide note, it was first translated into Manipuri and published in *Bharatki Loilam Manipur* by the Pan Manipur Youth League in 1993. Later on, it was translated into English by Rajkumari Smejita Hidam (www.morung.com, n.pag). The note is reproduced below:

Most beloved...

In a world seeded with envy, our love shall never bloom together like those lovely flowers in the same stalk but we will bloom radiantly in that pure everlasting place of our true love. That I am leaving this world should not bereave you to utter melancholy. A life driven by gale of sorrow and unrequited words mortify my soul and leave me to choose only this lone way.

For the days to come, we made promises to be one and together in our lifelong journey. But oh! My love I could not make for that moment! Oh! My life none is there to receive your lot. What a pity! Oh! My vanquished soul every second bears the brunt of bereaved feelings, bringing me to the threshold of defeat. Even the tears which flow like an eternal spring now dries [sic] up. Those tears were the only image of my life. I will be remembering in those looming darkness of hell the tale of you and I. From dust to dust let this body embrace its birthplace; let the earth dissolves my remains. Oh! How enviable for that last glance, to see one last time of my image in your eyes, but alas! Fate deceives me at this last hour. I choose my own disgraceful death and lo! I will walk as an outcast forever. My love when you remembers [sic] me, turn your eyes to those darkest horizon for I reside forever in the abyss of darkness. There, you will find me treading all alone with a heavy sigh of regrets in that long darkness.

Love of my life! Feeling of sweet remembrance of those long hearty laughs and sharing each other woes fills my memory. At the dead of this night, far from here my love a deep slumber will be taking you to pleasant dreams. My last wish to see your visage shall ever remain unfulfilled as you are far from me... far across these ranges of hills.

For my lovely friends, though I am unable to write each a parting letter I plead to you to tell them my last farewell. In this early morning, I am glancing over the distance of your lovely place Bungpa. Remember, my love how I wish to shower all my feelings and love, all I have for you like a cascade flowing down in your ocean of love. Have you ever received the letter I sent to you on

6-2-73? What could have happened for not returning any reply from your side? I have waited long and I am still waiting, but at the moment life steals away stealthily. Why and how did we ever get parted will only be known after you escape from this world. Oh Hell! Oh! Abyss of Darkness! I loathe going that dark passage. No one shall ever know who betrays whom. The secret is entombed forever.

The life of a maiden dries up from blooming into a lovely flower and lays in the heathen... unadorned, unaccepted, untouched. Only regrets on my part for I am choke with words which I [am] unable to tell you everything at this moment. What remains of the sad tale I will narrate to you closely in another lifetime, in another eternity. I will end with this note my love! That the only words that erupt from the truest, innermost part of me is the saddest part of our parting, the story of our failure to be together again.

Your Rose.

(“On March 4, 1974 a Naga Girl Was Raped ...” n.pag.)

This incident along with another incident of rape in Grihang involving the same 95 BSF men resulted in the constitution of East District Women Association (EDWA), also known as Manipur’s East District Women Association (EDWAM) (now Ukhrul District) on May 8, 1974, with Ms. Masophi Luithui as its first president (Ningshen 166–67). It was later renamed the Tangkhul Shanao Long (TSL) in 1981 (167). Its president N. Ruivane describes her thus: “Miss Rose (nobody remembers her full name) has become a semi-canonised [sic] figure in East District. ... People remember her a lot these days” (*India Today*, n.pag). On May 10, 1974, EDWA

submitted a memorandum to Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, part of which reads thus:

We come to you with tears demanding the immediate institution of a Parliamentary Enquiry or Judicial Enquiry into the matter for stern punishment of those BSF personnel. It is a very sad thing that the charge sheet against them has not yet been sent by the Police. Some of the high-ranking officers including Police have been heavily bribed to hush up the case. We earnestly urge your honour to take immediate action against those BSF officers who have been involved in the crime, for the restoration of human dignity and security of women.

(“Memorandum submitted to Shrimati Indira Gandhi by Miss Masophi Luithui and C. Mahala on behalf of EDWA” qtd. In Ningshen 168).

The memo had the following to say about Rose:

Miss Rose was the most beautiful girl in her village Ngaimue. ... She was chosen for their [BSF's] desire. The crimes of these officers were too much for her and she ended her life on March 6, 1974. She left letters to her dear ones before her death. But the most important letter was forcibly burnt by the BSF (*The Sangai Express*, n.pag.)

The suicide note first surfaced in the social media in *Facebook* on June 14, 2012, as a post by an account named, *My First Love Letter*. It was titled “Suicide note of Chanu Rose 1974.” Then on June 14, 2014, two websites *Nagajournal* and

Morung.com published the note with titles: “A Timeless Love Letter” and “On March 4, 1974 a Naga girl was raped by the Indian armies. This is the touching letter she wrote to her boyfriend before she committed suicide,” respectively. The Facebook account of *Nagajournal* reposted this note on March 28, 2015. On February 2, 2016, *The Northeast Today* also published the note with a title: “Touching letter by Naga girl to boyfriend before suicide. She was raped by Army personnel.”

Indeed, at that time, Rose had already found a place for herself in the ‘collective’ memory of the people of Manipur, specifically the Tangkhul people. Belatedly, media and social networking websites began to revive this memory of hers. Emphasizing on the fact that she was a Naga, another ‘collective’ memory was created, which was of the Naga community (of Manipur) sidelined in the ‘collective memory’ of the dominant Meitei community. This is evident in the use of the term ‘Naga’ either in the name of the website or social networking account that published the note, or in the title of the article or caption accompanying the note, with one exception in the first *Facebook* post of June 14, 2012—where a Meitei courtesy title ‘Chanu’ was added to Rose’s name and there was no mention of ‘Naga’ anywhere in the post. Thus, Rose’s suicide note in this sense can be looked at as a site of ‘collective’ memory for the Tangkhul Nagas in Manipur.

In the case of Rose, no memorial event is held every year nor any judiciary enquiry set up to probe into the circumstances leading to her rape. Tangkhul people remembered her nonetheless as one of the president of a Tangkhul women association remarked. Still, Rose merely remained a name in a list of rape victims put up by either a journalist in an article, an activist in a report, or a researcher in a project; until her suicide note first made a short appearance in 1993 and a longer one now since 2012. It

provided an occasion for the Tangkhul people to remember and re-member her. However, there is more to it.

First at the face value, Rose's suicide note is a regretful complaint against her boyfriend, with whom she could no longer have a future, evident in the following lines: "... our love shall never bloom together like those lovely flowers in the same stalk" and "For the days to come, we made promises to be one and together in our lifelong journey. But oh! My love I could not made for that moment!" and in whose eyes she wanted to see her own image for one last time, as this line tells: "Oh! How enviable for that last glance, to see one last time of my image in your eyes, but alas!" It is the same boyfriend whom she could not meet during her last hours, as these lines show: "My last wish to see your visage shall ever remain unfulfilled as you are far from me ... far across these ranges of hills" and who had not yet replied to her letter she had sent almost a year ago. She posits a very mundane query here: "Have you ever received the letter I sent to you on 6-2-73? What could have happened for not returning any reply from your side? I have waited long and I am still waiting" Next complaint is directed against the gendered violence she faced at the hands of army under AFPSA, which she describes as "a world seeded with envy" and that has driven her life into a "gale of sorrow" as "unrequited words mortify" her soul. She laments her present condition of being raped thus: "Fate deceives me at this last hour. I choose my own disgraceful death and lo! I will walk as an outcast forever." Her despair is evident in these lines: "Oh! My life none is there to receive your lot." Here, she is also complaining against the honour economy¹¹ of her patriarchal community that had conditioned her and consequently forced her to take the drastic step of suicide. According to Maireiwon Ningshen, the Tangkhul society was patriarchal even before the advent of Christianity, and in the *Ngalalong*, girls were taught "social

behaviour, manners, obedience, politeness, and most of all, how to behave towards the opposite sex” (72). She further adds that “according to Tangkhul culture, girls should always be modest and humble before the boy” (72). The terms “disgraceful” and “outcast” are used by Rose anticipating the ostracization she might have to face if she did not take her life then. In fact, the *TNT* version reports that her rape was witnessed by elders in the community. What would be called ‘her loss of honour,’ in the form of a gang rape, was turned into a ‘public’ spectacle thus.¹² Her shame was no more a personal shame but a public one—an ‘ignominy’ as Olufunke Adeboye describes while writing about the politically motivated suicides in colonial Ibadan. According to Adeboye, an honour economy was attached to such suicides that transformed ‘victims’ into ‘agents/heroes.’ Adeboye argues thus:

[T]he desire (which sometimes bordered on duty) to preserve personal and family honor [sic] in the face of impending ignominy was a major factor that moved public figures to commit suicide. The agency of these individuals in choosing death over exile is here acknowledged. Far from being ‘victims,’ they made the most of disadvantageous situations, turned them around and earned respect and esteem in death, instead of the ridicule that would have been their lot. Suicide, thus, served as [an] ‘honorable’ purpose for them.
(190)

However, along with the “idea of suicide as a means to honor [sic] (either of preserving ‘existing’ honor or earning ‘fresh’ honor),” he also acknowledged the contradictory “idea of suicide as a means of averting shame,” making him conclude that “the two ideas are, in fact, interrelated because it is in averting shame that honor is preserved” (190–1). He also accepted the fact that such an honour economy was

often imposed on the leaders of Ibadan people. Even when we are tempted to see Rose's suicide on these lines, as a means to honour as well as a means to averting 'further' shame, her suicide note in its complaint form resists being reduced to merely such a reading—complaining against not only the gendered violence under AFSPA but also against the AFSPA-infested patriarchal community of hers as well as such a gendered reading of the text. Katrina Jaworski in *The Gender of Suicide: Knowledge Production, Theory and Suicidology* tries to understand “how the knowledge of suicide is constructed through gender” (4) and comes to the conclusion that “the gender of suicide is masculine and masculinist” and “the character of the gender of suicide is in fact performative” (3). According to her:

Knowing suicide is not just a matter of exposing what already exists, as if it were self-evident, transparent and obvious. To borrow from Butler, knowledge is “implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meaning” (20). Gender is part of the parcel through which knowledge of suicide is produced. How gender ‘works’ is complicated. It occurs in multiple, heterogeneous ways. Sometimes suicide seems gender-neutral. Sometimes suicide is heavily imbued by gender. Sometimes gender assumptions are visible and invisible. The masculine and masculinist side of gender dominates. In doing so, it leads us to think that there is only a singular or homogenous way of reading suicide. (4)

Clearly, Rose's suicide note resists an easy reading of her suicide that is in line with the masculine and masculinist gender ascribed to suicides in general and also to the reading of it in such a manner. She problematizes her suicide note, which, in spite of using the clichés of the honour economy (use of words such as “outcast” and

“disgraceful death”), complicates it with its form of a complaint. Thus, even though the suicide note is writing about an attempt (a successful one though) to erase a life from this world (erase as in killing off); yet, the note itself by writing about the erasure (death here) is in fact resisting an erasure (as in forgotten). In fact, it has become the “monolith,” representative of a now extinct Tangkhul tradition, erected “as a form of remembrance for the deceased by their family, usually built after a year the person had passed away” (46).

Hanging precariously on a suicide note, the narrative of her death resists being forgotten and waits patiently to be re-read, retold, and re-membered (as if an outcast is finally turned into a member). The invocation of her suicide note recently in the social media bears testimony to it. It is an alternative response to the atrocities committed under the draconian AFSPA. Thus, it gradually emerges as a site for ‘collective’ memory for the Tangkhul Naga women in Manipur, presenting itself as an alternative (struggle) to the existing struggles in the gendered and dominant histories of both the Pan Naga nationalist struggle¹³ scripted in Nagaland and the Meitei nationalist struggle,¹⁴ both of which are participants in the conflicts of nationalisms in Manipur.

III

In this section and the section that follows it, I look at two Manipuri women co-opted into the history of Pan-nationalist movement of the Indian nation-state. In this section, I specifically focus on the gendered construction of Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom as a ‘national [female] hero’—a term used by Duncan McDuire-Ra for Mary Kom—of India as well as a ‘representative’ figure of the entire North East community. Born on November 24, 1982, in Sagang village, Churachandpur district, Manipur, Kom was the eldest daughter of Mangte Tongpa

Kom(father) and Sanakham Kom (mother). She is the “queen of [the Indian] boxing [ring]” (Kom 73), and has won five World Championships and an Olympic medal in 2012. Married to Onler Kom, she has three children with him. Amongst the accolades she received for her sporting feats are Padma Bhushan in 2013, Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna in 2009, Padma Shri in 2005, and Arjuna in 2003.

The Kom community into which Mary Kom belongs to is also one of the 33 recognized tribes in Manipur (L.R. Singh 17). The Kom villages are scattered between the districts of Chandel, Churachandpur, and Senapati. There is a bone of contention on whether the Koms are a Naga tribe as Benjamin Kom initially argues or a tribe belonging to the Old Kuki groups as observed by R. Brown, E.W. Dun, Grierson, and J. Shakespeare (L.R. Singh 19). However, Benjamin Kom concludes that the Kom-Rem group considered themselves separate from both the Nagas and the Kukis (qtd. in L.R. Singh 19). The Kom-Rem group is a collaborative association the Koms have formed with tribes such as Aimol, Chiru, Koirang, and Purum—all of which share a similarity on language and cultural and traditional practices (L.R. Singh 19). These tribes are, however, recognized as separate units by the Indian nation-state (19).

One can ask how does an individual’s memory come to represent collective memory of a community, in Kom’s case, those of the Kom community of Manipur?¹⁵ In his book *The Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs discusses the intricate relation between individual memory and collective memory. Here, Astrid Erll commenting on Halbwach observes, “Halbwachs unites—albeit not explicitly—two fundamental, and fundamentally different, concepts of collective memory” (15). One of the concepts sees “collective memory as the organic memory of the individual,

which operates within the framework of a sociocultural environment” (Erll 15). Halbwachs’s actual words were: “remembrances are organized in two ways, either grouped about a definite individual who considers them from his own viewpoint or distributed within a group for which each is a partial image” (50). Even though Halbwachs called the former individual memory or autobiographical memory and the latter collective memory (50), for him, as Erll argues, collective memory is contained within an individual’s memory. This is also evident in the heading of one of Halbwachs sections in *The Collective Memory* which reads thus: “The Individual Remembrance [Memory] as the Intersection of Collective Influences” (44). Even when the memory invoked in Kom’s autobiography may appear as ‘individual’ memory, her life struggles are representative of the community she belongs to and in this sense collective as the collective is contained in the individual. Conversely, through Kom’s memories from her past that form her experiences in the autobiography, we get a glimpse of lives of her community. It is in this sense that Kom’s individual memories constitute the collective.

Kom’s life story detailed in her ‘mediated’ autobiography is a typical rags-into-riches tale of how a daughter of a landless farmer becomes an internationally renowned boxer. Kom had written her ‘mediated’ autobiography title *An Autobiography: Unbreakable* along with Dina Serto. I have called it mediated because of two reasons. First, it was written along with Serto. In the Acknowledgments, Kom mentions that apart from Serto, Au Dina and her editor, Ajitha, helped her in writing this book. Second, it was written in English, a language Kom is not fluent in evident from what Kom herself mentioned in the book that “the only languages” she knew were Manipuri (Meitei) and Kom and she was very “conscious” of her inability to communicate effectively in either Hindi or English (55). James W. Pipkin calls such

an autobiography as “a kind of authorized biography rather than a true autobiography” (9) even though he reasons that “while the athletes may not write their books in the sense that they often lack the skills to craft them, their autobiographies are authentic because they are their stories” (11). Pipkin was writing in the context of autobiographies of American athletes. However, Duncan McDuie-Ra is critical of how her ‘successful’ life story was co-opted within the narrative of the Indian nation-state and of how she “has come to represent a Northeast that Indians can embrace,” while “figures such as dissident Irom Sharmila represent a Northeast that Indians wish to forget” (304). While I agree with McDuie-Ra when he speaks of the construction of Kom into a figure of “a national hero,” I am however wary of the way he discusses this construction—totally ignoring the violence, often gendered, associated with such a construction. The first problem I have is with the use of the term ‘hero’—which I see as an attempt to masculinize Kom. It is true that traditionally ‘boxing’ was considered a domain for men and the entry of women such as Kom has been successful in breaking the earlier stereotype. Still, when McDuie-Ra makes a gendered invocation of the figure of “a national hero,” he is actually, ‘unconsciously’ perhaps, feeding into the same stereotype. Further, McDuie-Ra claims that his arguments are based on how this figure of “a national hero” is constructed in her autobiography, apart from the role played by the national media. What he has ignored is the contradictions within the autobiography—the silences and fissures that indicate Kom’s ‘silent’ refusal to be constructed thus.

I begin with these sentences from the Prologue of her autobiography. The narrative begins with a description of her house. Kom describes it thus: “My house, a government quarter in Langol Games Village,¹⁶ is only a couple of hours from Kangatheh village”¹⁷(1). She further describes this place which houses her residence

thus: “There are policemen standing outside the campus. They have big guns. It’s a common sight everywhere in Manipur. Both the policemen and the army men” (1). It is understood that she is presently the Superintendent of Police, and in this role, she cannot speak openly about state’s forces’ violence on the civilians. However, when she says that it is “a common sight” to have policemen and the army men “everywhere in Manipur,” she is indirectly hinting at the growing militarization of Manipur. Further, if we read more between the lines, the phrase “both the policemen and the army men” points to a dangerous liaison between these two groups of men with “big guns,” who are under the common ‘protective’ umbrella of AFSPA. By the time she was born in 1982, AFSPA was already in place in the entire state of Manipur. In spite of knowing about AFSPA, there is no direct invocation of this draconian act not even once in the autobiography. In addition, since 1982 to 2013, so many incidents of violence by the state’s armed forces on the civilians have been reported along with violence perpetrated by what she calls insurgents. Still, none of them are mentioned even as a passing reference in this autobiography, except in Chapter 7 titled “The other face of Manipur,” which shows the violence of ‘insurgency’ in Manipur culminating into the violent killing of her father-in-law by “unknown insurgents” (75). It is the only chapter that speaks of the violence in Manipur. This three-page chapter further gets spliced in the middle with a 12-page gallery containing a montage of photographs depicting her journey as a sports person interspersed with some family moments captured on camera. Each one of these photographs is accompanied by a caption. This splicing is significant. While it is ‘insurgency’ that has interrupted her life waking her up “to the reality of the world” around her (74), it is the pictures of her life that breaks the narrative of insurgency in her autobiography. I see this intervention as important. This rupture also functions as

a narrative strategy to introduce a moment of suspense. When she says that “one incident woke me [her] up to the reality of the world around me [her],” it tries to build an anticipation in the reader about what that “one incident” would be (74). The reader has to go through 12 coloured pages before getting to this incident. Immediately, after saying these lines, she talks about Manipur as “an insurgent-torn state since 1980s.” Then, she goes on to lists the prominent “militant groups” in Manipur namely, “NSCN-IM, NSCN-K, UNLF, and KNO” (74). Interestingly, she lists at least one “militant group” from the three dominant communities in Manipur. NSCN-IM and NSCN-K are Naga groups; UNLF is a Meitei group, while KNO is a Kuki group. She is critical of the parallel governments these groups run. She clearly speaks like a policewoman when she describes these parallel governments in these lines:

People who live in remote villages with no police or army security are the most vulnerable. Chiefs of villages are given demand letters, and if they fail to fulfil the militants’ wishes, they are kidnapped, very often never to return. Sometimes the demand is for supplies, at other times that the village should arrange recruits for one or the other organization. (74)

This is followed by the incident: the news on 27 December of the kidnapping of her father-in-law and later the recovery of his dead body. Here, she gets a first-hand experience of the violence in Manipur with her father-in-law’s assassination. She calls it the waking-up moment. It appears as if she has already decided on who are her allies would be. The Annexure 4 titled “A word about my sponsors” confirms her stand as she shows the Indian army in a different light here: “The immense contribution of the Army towards my academy is praiseworthy. The Army’s encouragement of sports and their overwhelming support continue to inspire me. I

remain thankful to them” (152). In fact, the journalist Kishalay Bhattacharjee is critical of Kom’s lack of interest with Sharmila’s cause. This makes him ask this question: “What makes our sportspersons so cagey about standing up against injustice when the common person can stick their neck out” (n.pag.). In Chapter 16, Kom talks about her encounter with the world of glamour and announces that the caption “Our Kom-mitment to the Nation” is her favourite from her photo shoot (127). This choice reflects the need on part of Kom to reiterate her loyalty to the Indian nation. When the national icon is asked to prove her commitment to the nation here, she does it by choosing an advertising caption that speaks of that commitment. This burden is also visible in Chapter 9 titled “The comeback.” In spite of the fact that “the people of the Northeast are often mocked in other parts of India” on account of their oriental looks and are called Nepalis, Chinkies, and names like ching-ching chong-chong, she insists that “whether or not” she looks “Indian,” she is “Indian” and she represents India, “with pride and all my [her] heart” (91). Writing in the context of Muslim boxers in Bengal, PayoshniMitra talks about how sportspersons from minority communities in India are time and again compelled to prove their loyalty to the nation (1844–45). Agreeing with Mitra’s observation, Supriya Chaudhuri¹⁸ also asserts that “Mary Kom is not a political activist” (1770). Chaudhuri even justifies Kom’s “distancing” as “part of the way in which sport, like art, operates in society.” Comparing Kom to other women activists in Manipur, Chaudhuri argues that “if other women in Manipur have used their bodies to protest the actions of the body politic, Mary Kom has chosen, through sport, to achieve measure of freedom and detachment from the political turmoil surrounding her” (1770). Thus, for Chaudhuri, “the boxer in the ring, absorbed in her discipline, needs to shut out the world, and concentrate on the ends of sport” (1770).

This pressure on the minority to prove their ‘nationalism’ is an evidence of the mediated nature of Kom’s autobiography as much as the silences and fissures are an interruption to this mediation. I begin by arguing that these silences and fissures reflect the mediated nature of her authorized autobiography. It appears as if the world of sports and the world that Kom’s family inhabit both are untouched by the violence in Manipur except when her father-in-law gets assassinated. I see this absence of references to the political violence against the civilians in Manipur in the autobiography as a result of the mediatedness of the autobiography. Kom fractures the mediation through strategic invocation of violence which begins from the Prologue itself. I have already shown how the prologue indirectly points to the rising militarization of Manipur and the dangerous nexus between the army men and the policemen in Manipur. It is not clear whether Kom supported AFSPA or she was against it, but her own personal experiences made her condone “insurgency.” Hence, she has one full chapter on how “the political problems” of Manipur made her family into “victims of insurgency” (75). Her story is the less documented story of civilians suffering violence at hands of the “insurgents.” Apart from the Prologue and Chapter 7, the political situation in Manipur gets one more mention in Chapter 3 titled “Playing too was hard work” when she talks about “bandhs and blockades” as “frequent occurrences in Manipur”—Manipur, which she thinks, is “politically sensitive and disturbed” (28). She brings this subject up to discuss her journey home to bring some rice before a bandh and the financial constrains she had to face while training at Sports Authority of India (SAI) branch at Imphal.

The construction of Kom as a ‘national hero,’ McDuire-Ra observes, entails the violent suppression of dissenting narratives be it the rejection of the ‘undesirable’ protest of Sharmila Irom or the refusal to link the exodus of Northeast people from

major cities in India in 2012 with racism. Also, there is a line of men who need to be credited in the making of this ‘national hero.’ Further, media’s initial reluctance to report on her first international win points to the fact that it did not consider women boxing as a serious sport or a news worthy of reporting. In fact, the world of women boxing at least in India is still dominated and controlled by men—be it the coaches, the selection committees, the sports associations, or even the Association Internationale de Boxe Amateur (International Boxing Association) (AIBA). Moreover, Onler, her husband, whom Kom claims to be very supportive of her sporting career, also had this to tell her when she discussed her plans to participate in the Olympic in 2016: “it’s extremely hard to raise two young boys [now it is three] and manage a home without a wife, and so I [Kom] should consider hanging up my [her] gloves” (129). These attitudes of all these men trying to control a woman’s sporting career resemble the views expressed by her first coach, *Oja*¹⁹ Ibomcha, in his reply to her when she approached him for the first time: “You are a small, frail girl. With your earrings, you don’t even look like a boxer. Boxing is for young boys” (31). The irony here is that their job here is to help women with boxing, yet they feel that it is still not a sport for women. Moreover, the influential people in Kom’s life who were pivotal in ‘making’ her were predominantly men be it Onler, her father, her father-in-law, her coaches, the members of selection committees, and members of AIBA. All of them share credit in the ‘making’ of the ‘national hero’—Mary Kom. In fact, all these men are trying to make a ‘man’ out of her so that she could excel in a sport that they considered ‘masculine.’

Simultaneously, McDuire-Ra also highlights how “gender shapes the figure of Mary at the national level” (312). According to him, Kom’s success in “the ‘masculine domain’ of boxing, while at the same time being a wife and mother, has

cast her as a ‘supermum’ and an inspiration to other Indian women to succeed in male-dominated aspects of life without sacrificing their reproductive roles” (312). Even Sonia Gandhi in her letter congratulating Kom on her Olympic win emphasizes on this maternal role of Kom as Gandhi writes: “I hope you are enjoying a happy reunion with your family and your adorable twin sons” (148).

Altogether, there are four instances where the violence in Manipur gets a sporadic yet short appearance in her autobiography: the Prologue, Chapter 7, Chapter 17 titled “My vision for future” where she wished to do something about the rise of violence against women in India, and Chapter 3. As I have mentioned earlier, in the prologue, the presence of the army is a reference to the rising militarization of Manipur. It also reveals the dangerous liaison between police and army in Manipur. Chapter 7 refers to Kom’s personal encounter with the political situation in Manipur. Here, she speaks of ‘insurgency’ yet she is silent about counterinsurgency and AFSPA. Interestingly, she names this chapter as “The other face of Manipur” and yet she is silent about the other side of the AFSPA story. It is just one side of the AFSPA story, which in spite of its silences, entails within it the other side of the story. In Chapter 17, she writes:

Violent crimes against women are on the rise in India—a phenomenon that I have been observing with alarm. I have been considering adapting my training in boxing to self-defence courses. Perhaps I can provide such courses for women, and not just in Manipur, in the future.” (137)

This is paradoxical as, on the one hand, she wishes to train women to fight against violent crimes against them. On the other hand, she does not extend her solidarity openly with women, such as ManoramaThangjam, who were victims of gendered

violence in Manipur. Thus, it problematizes the politics within the autobiography. Similarly, in Chapter 3, the short interlude about the bandhs in Manipur was a deliberate insertion on her part. It speaks of a violence that is so much part of the everyday life in Manipur. When she speaks of a mundane everyday incident, she cannot help but slip into and talk about the ‘other’ everyday—the everyday which her mediated autobiography has tried so far not to speak about. However, time and again, it surfaces sporadically even if it is for a very short while creating a space for an alternative ‘collective’ memory entailed in this individual rendition of Komthat questions the dominant narrative of the ‘making’ of a ‘national icon.’

IV

This section shows how the case of ‘Rani’ Gaidinliu provides a critique of the Pan Naga nationalist movement. It particularly interrogates her erasure from the ‘collective’ memory of the movement and instead read her struggle as an alternative site for ‘collective’ memory for the Heraka followers. Simultaneously, it also looks at the violent as well as gendered co-option of her life struggle into the nationalist narrative of Indian nation-state.

Born on January 26, 1915, at Longkao, Rongmei (Kabui) Naga village of Tamenglong district, Manipur, ‘Rani’ Gaidinliu was the fifth child of Lothonang (father) and Kocotlenliu (mother). After the execution of Hapau Jadonong in 1931, she continued his fight against the British rule to establish a ‘Naga Raj.’ However, she was defeated at the Battle of Hangrum (Assam) in 1932 resulting in her arrested and life imprisonment. In 1937, Jawaharlal Nehru met her in a jail in Shillong and conferred the title ‘Rani.’ He even appealed for her release to the British. She was released in 1947. She stayed in Vimrap village, Tuenseng, Nagaland, till she moved to

Longkao in 1952. In 1972, she received the Tamrapatra Freedom Fighter and Padma Bhushan in 1982. She died on February 17, 1993, in Longkao.

She was the “more famous follower and successor” of Jadonong²⁰ under whom the Zeliangrong²¹ movement “was to be a challenge not only to the colonial power but also to an independent India, and to presage the later insurgent movements of the north east [sic]” (J. Parratt 44). Still, even after her significant contribution in the Naga nationalist movement, she is merely described as a subordinate to her guru and messiah Jadonong. In fact, because of its hostility towards Christianity, the militant Heraka or Araka movement she started in 1960s was not even recognized as nationalist by the Pan Naga nationalists.

According to Amit Kumar Nag quoting Ursula Graham Bower, the new religion founded by Jadonong and Gaidinliu was “a blend of Hinduism and Christianity, grafted on to a Naga Animist stock” (6). Hence, it became easy for the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) to take it under its fold in the 1970s. A similar observation is also made by the scholar Arkotong Longkumer who has written extensively on the Heraka and Rani Gaidinliu.²² Another factor that brought the Heraka movement close to the VHP ideology was its anti-Christian stance. Already, an article in the *Hindustan Times* had rightly stated that “after independence, she [Gaidinliu] became Jawaharlal Nehru’s poster girl of the northeast” (n.pag.). Now in the present time, the Bharatiya Janata Party is trying to build her as ‘a regional icon’ putting her in league with the like of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of Bengal and Rana Pratap of Rajasthan (*Hindustan Times*, n.pag.). An *Indian Express* news article headlines reads thus: “PM Narendra Modi honours legendary freedom fighter Rani Gaidinliu from North-East: Modi credited her with spreading the message of

Mahatma Gandhi in the North-East, thereby connecting the thoughts of the rest of India with the North-East” (n.pag.).

In 2015, the BJP government’s intention to build a museum-cum-library in her memory in Nagaland met with opposition from the local Christian civil societies. The Nagas are divided regarding Gaidinliu. Christian Nagas and organizations such as Nagaland Tribes Council are critical of her links with VHP, while the Heraka adherents and organizations such as Zeliangrong Heraka Association (ZHA) backed by the RSS (the militant wing of VHP) support her fully, including her religious stance (*Hindustan Times*, n.pag.). In between these two extremes is the Cachar Hills Tribes Synod of Haflong that openly states that “the Zeliangrong people regard Gaidinliu as a freedom fighter, but we do have reservations about her religious affinities” (*Hindustan Times*, n.pag.). Still, there are some missionaries who try to link Heraka with Christianity. They claim that it was “the church-inspired traits that went into establishing the first Heraka temple in the Zeliangrong region ... 30 years ago” (*Hindustan Times*, n.pag.). However, the president of ZHA dissociates the Heraka movement from both Christianity and Hinduism. This contradiction is even evident in Longkumer who on the one hand says that “[t]he Heraka Movement had come into conflict with Naga nationalist groups who had been demanding the creation of a separate Naga state” even when he explains that it was only during the 1960s and 1970s (“Religion” 501). Simultaneously, on the other hand, in the following sentence, he adds that “[currently], the Zeme support the demand of ‘Greater Nagalim’ (501).

The case of the Naga leader Rani Gaidinliu exemplifies the danger of the conglomeration of the many conflicts of nationalisms in Manipur.²³ The dominant Meitei Hindu nationalists marginalize her in the name of the ‘territorial integrity’ of

Manipur. She is the 'other' who has no place as an actor in the making of the history of Manipur which is now synonymous with the history of the predominantly Hindu Meiteis. Simultaneously, the Christian Pan Naga nationalists refuse to even acknowledge her as a nationalist on account of her anti-Christian Heraka movement. Finally, the Indian Hindu nationalists try to co-opt her as a representative figure from the Naga community of India's Northeast who had contributed in the nationalist struggle of India against the colonial British rule.

Both the marginalization and the co-option are gendered in Rani Gaidinliu's case. I have already shown how Meitei nationalism is ethnic in nature. It is also gendered as it has ignored the participation of the Meitei women. On a similar note, the Pan Naga nationalism is also gendered which frontalizes Muivah and Kaplang as leaders of the NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K), respectively, while looking upon women collectives such as the Naga Mother's Association and Tangkhul Shanao Long as merely a subordinate social or civil society organization as well as ignoring the contribution of women such as Rani Gaidinliu in the history of Naga struggle. Rani Gaidinliu's struggle against the British rule along with her opposition to Christian missionary activities brings out in open a rather 'uneasy' side of the Christian Pan Naga nationalist movement. Her struggle thus represents a collective memory that the history of the Pan Naga nationalist movement wishes to forget. Hence, there are attempts for a violent erasure, often gendered, of what she stood to represent.

The co-option story is also gendered as it focuses mainly on her 'passive' imprisonment by the British. Further, it feeds into the 'masculine fantasy narratives' of the 'male' nationalists such as Nehru who have a 'masculine' duty to 'rescue or save' her from the male colonizers. Recently, while attempting to revive her as a

regional icon representing the Naga community in the narrative of Indian nationalist struggle, what has been ignored is her repeated demand for the creation of a separate Zeliangrong administrative unit. Both in its erasure and in its co-option, the figure of Rani Gaidinliu along with her struggle thus becomes a site of collective memory for the Zeliangrong group, however divided they are, and refuses both the attempts of the three opposing gendered nationalisms.

The collective memory invoked by the followers of Heraka movement is divided even when it interrupts the linear histories of various nationalisms within and outside Manipur. In narratives of such a remembering, she is rendered agency-less even when the narratives speak up for her own struggle. In such a discourse, she is written and spoken about but never allowed to speak for herself, except when her speech is made to ventriloquize the position of the narratives within which she makes an appearance. She is reduced to a 'subaltern' figure whose voice is muted and rendered unheard by all the nationalist players wrestling in the arena of Manipur's politics.

It is here that I look at Rani Gaidinliu's notebooks which give voice to her and resist the subalternity imposed on her. J. P. Mills describe her notebooks thus:

Magic books of the sorceress Gaidiliu [sic] captured with her other property in March 1932. The writing is apparently nothing but meaningless scribbling. She is a Kabui girl of no education at all and taught herself to scribble. Her 'literary' power gave her immense prestige and she used to send written messages to her adherents – with verbal messages to say what they meant. (Mills qtd. in Longkumer, *Reforms* 99)

J.H. Hutton in his correspondence with the British philosopher Carveth Read discusses about a “curious case of the ‘child authoress’” thus:

There is a girl who produces sheets of scribblings representing the names of natural objects at the dictation of 10 familiar spirits, six male and four female. There is no doubt but this child, aged about 7, is very much in earnest. She got her mother to obtain writing materials from Kohima at the dictation of the spirits that reside in her and when they arrived fasted seven days of her own accord as a preliminary genna [no-working days—associated with taboos] before beginning to write. (Hutton qtd. in Longkumer, “Lines” 129)

Longkumer is critical of Read’s response to Hutton reproduced below:

Your letter about the inspired child who spoils so much writing paper has lain too long unanswered. ... Amongst ourselves it is a common occurrence for a child to announce its intention of “writing,” and to do so upon every scrap of paper obtainable for some time. But that is plainly imitativeness, and there is no claim to inspiration. This Naga girl cannot have got the idea of writing out of her own consciousness: She must have seen it done or heard it described. She may deny this (I suppose) without intentional deceit. As to the 4 female and 6 male spirits that direct her, does the local belief in “possession” account for such a delusion? ... What the local belief in possession is I don’t know. If it will explain her delusion, that is enough. That the girl should have undertaken to write without any knowledge of what it is to “write,” is impossible; and she herself, therefore, is logically non-existent [sic]. (Hutton qtd. in Longkumer, “Lines” 129)

Longkumer senses a “philosophical arrogance” with Read who “equates ‘writing’ with a particular kind of learned technique” and “anything outside this realm” is dismissed (Longkumer, “Lines” 131). Longkumer cites the example of this girl and the correspondence between Hutton and Read to show that “‘writing’ of this kind was known to exist in the region [India’s Northeast]” in order to explain the scribbling on Rani Gaidinliu’s notebooks (131). Even Longkumer in his early writing had dismissed her notebooks as “some pages had writing that resembled the Meitei (the language used in Manipur) and Bengali alphabets while other pages had seemingly random lines, circles, and drawings” (Longkumer, *Reform* 98 qtd. in Longkumer, “Lines” 131). This made Longkumer previously conclude that “overall, the writing was very cryptic” and “they represent a form of ‘literary power’ that was probably based on imitation influenced by the colonial state” (131). Later on, he traces the journey of her notebooks which were “confiscated in 1932 by British administrators and donated to the museum” and recent returned around 2005 by the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) to the Zeme Nagas²⁴ of Assam, India (“Lines” 123–24). He also argues that the textuality of the notebooks requires “one to examine the notebooks in relation to the unfolding of the kingdom (*Zeme: heguangram*), using notion of textuality [...] grounded in dreams, prophecy, songs, and visions” (123). He also emphasizes that “to appreciate the value and purpose of the notebooks, one must pay attention to the sonority of sound that manifests the words of the notebooks in song” (123), while simultaneously describing them as “untranslatable” (124). The colonial confiscation and the postcolonial return of her notebooks entails the return of a ‘collective memory’ which the British colonizers attempted to hide. Longkumer describes the confiscation thus: “Intriguingly, it could also suggest that he [Mills] took the power of Gaidinliu and the notebooks seriously: to prevent the spread of her influence, the

action by Mills forever imprisoned the notebooks, rendering them dormant in the colonial museum” (129). This comment was made in the context of the absence of any scholarship on the notebooks by Longkumer (129). In contrast, Longkumer sees the return of the notebooks as the fulfillment of a “prophecy” that is linked with the establishment of *heguangram* (the kingdom of the Heraka)²⁵ (126).

I now focus on one of the untranslatable Heraka songs translated by Longkumer and attributed to Rani Gaidinliu, *Cheham Rani*. According to Longkumer, this song was received by her on her first journey to Bhuban Cave²⁶ (Longkumer, *Reforms* 186). The song which Longkumer observes is clearly about “resistance and victory” is reproduced below:

When will God let us be free?

Even if others trouble us

I'll live free like a *heguang*

If other people dominate us

We can also dominate them

We can't overcome them by ourselves

But by the blessing of Herawang [king of gods] from the beginning

Now you are victorious

But by the blessing of Herawang, we'll be victors

Everybody calls on God

They call on Ram and we call on Herawang

And we can't stop calling Herawang

To rid us of a bad god, we can't stop praying to Herawang

(Longkumer, *Reforms* 186)

Longkumer aptly writes that “[t]he song also speaks of continuity, of a certain direction, as history comes through their voices and songs” (*Reforms* 187). For him, “[t]his history [of the Heraka] is embedded in the ‘Hangrum Parade,’²⁷ a nostalgic reminder of the time when Ranima [Rani Gaidinliu] and her soldiers hid from the British and later the Indian army and other Naga Christian nationalists, who saw her movement as conniving with the devil” (187). Longkumer further adds that “the ‘Hangrum Parade’ is also a reminder of a nascent nationalism” (187). This nascent nationalism is against all forms of totalizing nationalisms be it of the Britishers, the Indians, or the Naga Christians.

If, on the one hand, the Pan Naga nationalist movement rejects her in totality as she has no place in their ‘collective’ memory; then, on the other hand, in an attempt to posit her as a regional icon representing the Naga struggle in the narrative of Indian nationalist movement, the Indian nation-state have only accepted that part of her which makes no demand for the sovereignty of the Zeliangrong group. Her repeated demand for the creation of a separate Zeliangrong administrative unit still falls on deaf ear, even after her death. Here, attempts are made to revive another ‘collective’ memory of hers which fits into the national narrative of India. Both in its erasure and in co-option, Rani Gaidinliu’s struggle reflected in research by scholars such as Longkumer and in Rani Gaidinliu’s own songs from her notebooks thus become a site of ‘collective’ memory for the Zeliangrong group, however divided they are, and refuses both the attempts of the two opposing nationalisms.

Conclusion

Each of these women is articulating their own ideas of memories, often collective, from their own unique locations. The legal battle over Manorama's raped body throws into relief a very pertinent question about nationalism—about who can or should define nationalism. The two opposing camps for different reasons have erased her from the very history of struggle in which she was a participant. Rose's suicide note and its invocation provide an alternative site of struggle against the atrocities committed in the name of AFSPA. Her suicide notes lend agency to Rose, allowing her to assume a position of authority and to refute the official as well as dominant versions of her death. Along with the struggle of Rani Gaidinliu, Rose's suicide note critiques the gendered Pan Naga nationalism in Manipur. The gaps and fissures in Kom's 'collaborative' authorized autobiography in its mediatedness tells an alternative narrative, invoking a collective memory of Mary Kom which is different from the one valorized in the national media. The silences in the autobiography speak of the gendered violence that accompanied the making of a national icon called Mary Kom. It shows how Kom has turned a co-option story back to itself with a clever deployment of silences that speak and speech that points back to silences. Kom's autobiography silently resists the gendered violence of the imposition of the tag of a 'national hero' on her, while Rani Gaidinliu struggles against both erasure from the Pan Naga nationalist movement and co-option into the Indian nationalist movement. All these sites of 'collective' memory in their own respective context reiterates Anne McClintock's observation that: "All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous—dangerous ... in the sense that they represent relations of political power and to the technologies of [gendered] violence" (352).

Still, these sites of memory attempt to provide an alternative to such a gendered history of gendered nationalisms in Manipur.

Works Cited

“A Timeless Love Letter.” *Nagajournal*. Jun. 14, 2014. Web. Mar. 5, 2016.

Adeboye, Olufunke. “‘Iku Ya J’esin’: Politically Motivated Suicide, Social Honor, and Chieftaincy Politics in Early Colonial Ibadan.” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 41.2 (2007): 189–225. Print.

Bate, David. *Photography: The Key Concepts*. Oxford: Berg, 2009. Print.

Bora, Papori. “Between the Human, the Citizen, and the Tribal: Reading Feminist Politics in India’s Northeast.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12 (2010): 341–60. Print.

Chaudhuri, Supriya. “In the Ring: Gender, Spectatorship, and the Body.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29.12 (2012): 1759–73. Print.

Diamond Oinam. “Fake Encounter.” *Manipur Shinning*. Jul. 23, 2012. Web. Aug. 13, 2013.

Divya A. “PM Narendra Modi honours legendary freedom fighter Rani Gaidinliu from North-East: Modi credited her with spreading the message of Mahatma Gandhi in the North-East, thereby connecting the thoughts of the rest of India with the North-East.” *Indian Express*. Aug. 25, 2015. Web. Mar. 12, 2016.

Erll, Astrid. *Memory in Culture*. Trans. Sara B. Young. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *The Collective Memory*. Trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr., and Vida Yazdi Ditter. New York, Cambridge, Hagerstown, Philadelphia, San Francisco, London, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Sidney: Harper & Row, 1980. Print.

Human Right Watch (HRW). *'These Fellows Must Be Eliminated': Relentless Violence and Impunity in Manipur*. New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2008. Print.

Jaworski, Katrina. *The Gender of Suicide: Knowledge Production, Theory and Suicidology*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2014. Print.

Karmakar, Rahul. "Rani Gaidinlui: A Naga Queen and BJP's Spin Machine." *Hindustan Times*. Jun. 14, 2015. Web. Mar. 12, 2016.

Kom, Mangte Chungneijang Mary. *An Autobiography: Unbreakable*. With Dina Serto. Noida: Harper Sports, 2013. Print.

"La Voie Maoïste-La Via Maoïsta: Maoist Road—International Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Review." *Maoist Road*. Mar. 8, 2015. Web. Mar. 3, 2016.

Longkumer, Arkotong. "'Lines That Speak': The Gaidinliu Notebooks as Language, Prophecy, and Textuality." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6.2 (2016): 123–47. Print.

—. *Reforms, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement in Northeast India*. London and New York: Continuum, 2010. Print.

- . “Religious and Economic Reform: The Gaidinliu Movement and the Heraka in the North Cachar Hills.” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 30.3 (2007): 499–515. Print.
- . “The Power of Persuasion: Hindutva, Christianity, and the Discourse of Religion and Culture in Northeast India.” *Religion* (2016): 1–25. Web. Dec. 25, 2016.
- McDiue-Ra, Duncan. “‘Is India Racist?’: Murder, Migration and Mary Kom.” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38.2 (2015): 304–19. Print.
- Mitra, Payoshni. “Challenging Stereotypes: The Case of Muslim Female Boxers in Bengal.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26.12 (2009): 1840–51. Print.
- My First Love Letter. “Suicide Note of Chanu Rose 1974.” *Facebook*. Jun. 14, 2012. Web. Mar. 2, 2016.
- “Mōṭi eppōtu jaṇanāyaka kāvalar āṇār?” [When Modi Became the Democratic Guard?] *Namathu*. Aug. 21, 2014. Web. Mar. 3, 2016.
- Nag, Amit Kumar. *Rani Gaidinliu*. Silchar: Tribal Mission Publications, n.d. Print.
- Nagajournal. “A Timeless Love Letter.” *Facebook*. Mar. 28, 2015. Web. Mar. 5, 2016.
- Ningshen, Maireiwon. “Political Participation of Tangkhul Naga Women in Manipur: 1972–2005.” Diss. Manipur U, 2010. Print.
- Nora, Pierre. “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*.” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24. Print.

“On March 4, 1974 a Naga Girl Was Raped by the Indian Armies. This Is the Touching Letter She Wrote to Her Boyfriend Before She Committed Suicide.” *Morung.com*. Jun. 14, 2014. Web. Mar. 5, 2016.

Pan Manipur Youth League. *Bharatki Loilam Manipur (India's Colony Manipur)*. Imphal: Lamyamba Press, 1993. Print.

Parratt, John. *Wounded Land: Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2005. Print.

Pipkin, James W. *Sporting Lives: Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies*. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 2008. Print.

“Revisiting Armed Forces (Special Power) Act in Manipur.” *Sangai Express [Imphal]*. Jun. 8, 2015. Web. Mar. 2, 2016.

Singh, C. Upendra. *Report of the Commission of the Judicial Inquiry (Manorama Death Inquiry Commission)*. N.p.:n.p., 2004. Print.

Singh, L. Romeo. “The Kom Tribe of Manipur: Their Demography, Culture and Bio-anthropology.” Diss. Manipur U, 2002. Print.

Suan, H. Kham Khan. “Hills–Valley Divide as a Site of Conflict: Emerging Dialogic Space in Manipur.” *Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India*. Ed. Sanjib Baruah. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2009. 263–92. Print.

Thoudam, Natasa. “Fiction or History in the Making of the Past: A Dialogue between the Public and the Private in Maharaja Kumari Binodini Devi’s *Boro Sahib Ongbi Sanatombi* (The Princess and the Political Agent).” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 23.3 (2016): 349–75. Print.

“Touching Letter by Naga Girl to Boyfriend Before Suicide. She Was Raped by Army Personnel.” *The North East Today (TNT)*. Feb. 2, 2016. Web. Mar. 5, 2016.

¹ Also spelled as Gaidinlui. However, for consistency, I have used Gaidinliu throughout unless it is in quotation or in titles of already published works.

² A women’s collective formed around the 1970s predominantly from Meitei community. For details, see my paper titled “Fiction or History in the Making of the Past: A Dialogue between the Public and the Private in Maharaja Kumari Binodini Devi’s *Boro Sahib Ongbi Sanatombi* (The Princess and the Political Agent).”

³ A problematic claim is made by her family by refusing any link between Manorama and the ‘nationalist’ struggle in Manipur. Here, her erasure from the movement starts from her family itself. However, it can be justified that the family has adopted this strategic denial, which would otherwise feed into the army’s case of vilifying Manorama as a criminal and hence justifying their killing of her.

⁴ A correction: According to the forensic report it was found in her petticoat not skirt.

⁵ “The AFSPA gives the armed forces wide powers to shoot, to kill, arrest on flimsy pretext, conduct warrantless searches, and demolish structures in the name of ‘aiding civil power.’ Equipped with these special powers, soldiers have raped, tortured, ‘disappeared,’ and killed Indian citizens for five decades without fear of being held accountable” (Working Group on Human Rights 5).

⁶ Due to issue of copyright, the photograph could not be reproduced here. However, two versions of this photograph are used in the photo-montage used in her memorial event since 2013.

⁷ This photograph also could not be reproduced here because of copyright issue. Another version of this photograph is used in the photo-montage of 2013 onwards.

⁸ Because of issues of copyright and considering the graphic nature of violence depicted, this photograph is not reproduced here.

⁹ Another term used by the eighteenth-century German dramatist and critic, Gotthold Lessing. The term ‘pregnant moment’ (“otherwise known as *peripeteia*—from the Greek, meaning ‘dramatic moment’ or sudden change of fortune”) is “the instant when the future of the story will be determined; the moment of ‘anticipation’ when the story is in the process of being decided” (Bate 56).

¹⁰ In this paper, I have used collective memory synonymously with collective remembering.

¹¹ Symptomatic of the Christianization of the Tangkhul community of Manipur.

¹² Gang rape involves a spectacle as much as her rape is a spectacle to the elders.

¹³ How the Naga nationalist movement is gendered is discussed in the section on Rani Gaidinliu.

¹⁴ I have discussed the gendered nature of the Meitei nationalist history in detail in another paper by me titled “Fiction or History in the Making of the Past: A Dialogue between the Public and the Private in Maharaja Kumari Binodini Devi’s *Boro Sahib Ongbi Sanatombi* (The Princess and the Political Agent).”

¹⁵ The Kom community straddles between the conflicting demands by both Naga and Zo groups to assimilate them as one of their own.

¹⁶ The venue of the XXX National Games held in Imphal in 1999. This complex was built to house the participants from rest of India.

¹⁷ A village in Moirang district where Kom grew up.

¹⁸ She was writing in the context of modern boxing and its modern and postmodern literary representations.

¹⁹ Literally, ‘sir’ or ‘madam’ (*Ojaibema*): a courteous address for a teacher.

²⁰ A Kabui prophet who inaugurated the Jadonong movement. During the Kuki rebellion against “the raising of a labour corps for the First World War,” the worst sufferers were the Kabuis, the Tangkhuls, and the Koms (J. Parratt 42–43). J. Parratt saw the violence during the Kuki rebellion as “one of the factors which brought about the Jadonong movement” (44). Even though, this movement was an attempt to seek “a common political identity as Zeliangrong,” J. Parratt contends that the movement had “deep religious roots” (44–45).

²¹ Zeliangrong clans—comprising of the Rongmeis or Kabuis of Manipur, the Zemeis of Cachar, Assam, and Liangmeis of Nagaland.

²² See Longkumer’s paper titled “The Power of Persuasion: Hindutva, Christianity, and the discourse of religion and culture in Northeast India.”

²³ Religion does play a role in the hill–valley divide in Manipur but it was not the only motivational force behind the conflict. The conflict was rather mainly over land and territory. The qualifiers “Hindu” and “Christian” are thus merely descriptive and definitional.

²⁴ Followers of Heraka.

²⁵ In Zeme, “‘*heguangram*’ means *heguang* (a state of freedom or ‘one who is the agent of this freedom’), while *ram* literally refers to a village or community having territorial connotations” (Longkumer, *Reforms* 160 qtd. in Longkumer, “Line” 126).

²⁶ A sacred cave of the Heraka.

²⁷ “A ritual of the *heguangram*” commemorating the martyrs of Hangrum, one of the Zeme village in Assam (Longkumer, *Reforms* 167).