

## **Malsawmi Jacob, *Zorami A Redemption Song* (Morph Books, 2015)**

Malsawmi Jacob's novel *Zorami: A Redemption Story* is quite an engaging work of literary fiction. It is set against the background of the 1960s troubles known as 'ram buai' meaning 'disturbance in the land' (259).

Zorami is entering her teens and a growing turmoil of her own as she observes the unrest, the grumblings of injustice among her people, which is heading them toward a very dark period for Mizo inside and outside of Mizoram. Zorami has troubles of her own following a traumatic personal event that is causing this once happy, carefree girl to become a more than usually withdrawn, secretive, anxious teenager (43-44).

Using a non-linear structure the story unfolds through Zorami's reflections as she faces her fiftieth birthday. She is waiting for her husband Sanga to return from a period away on behalf of his work or at least a phone call to 'wish her happy' (23).

The interesting characters that people this novel reveal an engaging picture of life among the Mizo: their history, culture, folklore including events leading up to and during the insurgency.

The passages of song and poetry interspersed throughout the text, even a whole chapter devoted to Zorami's grandma telling her grandchildren some myths (45-52), are representative of the Mizo way of story-telling.<sup>1</sup> These stories set Zorami thinking about war and whether it is ever just or purposeful. 'And what good does any war bring?' she wonders (52).

Following the annexation of Mizoram to Assam State during the period of Indian independence from British colonisation, things remain much as they have always been. The Mizo continued living in autonomous tribal villages each with its own chief. However, at the time the unrest begins Mizoram is coming out of a long period of drought and a severe famine. They are angered by the poor provision of assistance from both the Assamese and Indian governments in response to a starving people's needs. Additionally, the lack of assistance that would allow Mizoram to develop an infrastructure enabling them to enter the wider world of trade and economic development is an ongoing grievance, further fueling the growing dissatisfaction. An edict that Assamese, not Mizo, must become the official spoken language as well as that taught in schools finally fans the anger to action. The Mizo fear the disappearance of not only their language, but also their culture, folklore and indeed their entire identity as a people.

During the British rule of India the arrival of English missionaries intent on conversion of the Mizo to Christianity brought schools and possibility for education to Mizoram. It is the missionaries who develop written script for the Mizo language enabling it to be used in education. This is the beginning of empowerment for the Mizo who today are an educated people with one of the highest literacy rates in India, according to the 2011 Census.<sup>2</sup>

Zorami's father 'believes education is of prime importance,' that it is 'the magic key that will unlock the door to a better world' (32) and something that 'shapes destiny' (36). He is educated, and encourages his children, including his daughter Zorami, to study hard, learn languages, especially English (41), in the belief it will open opportunities of employment for their future. However, in the early stages of Zorami's school life, her mother expresses concern that her

<sup>1</sup>Jaydeep Sarangi, 'In Conversation with Malsawmi Jacob', *Writers in Conversation* 4.1, February 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Mizoram Population Census Data 2011 <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/mizoram.html>

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daughter might become a 'tomboy'. Mizo women are expected to be modest (42-43). Feminist issues are not dominant as a theme in this novel, but are in evidence within the day-to-day lives of Mizoram's patriarchal society. Women are not the decision-makers in the home, or in the wider community or in politics. However they are able to gain an education. This is useful allowing them to work outside the home (77-78).

The author manages to convey the ugliness of war including very confronting descriptions of actions by both sides in the period. She portrays the idealism that can grab people, young men looking for a purpose, a cause to involve them. How it can descend into violence, a hunger for power for instance, which in turn may lead to betrayals, torture, looting, inhumane acts such as rape.

Currently Mizoram remains a mainly Christian society; their Presbyterian Synod playing a vital role in negotiations during the peace process (161-162). The Christian theme in the story and its reference to healing and redemption develop a climate for final resolutions for both Zorami and Mizoram. Perhaps having some spiritual awareness may assist readers in understanding the closing chapters although not essential to an enjoyment of the story.

When in Aizawl in May 2004, I visited a friend ... . There were several other visitors. As we sat chatting, I brought up the subject of the "*ram buai*" period and asked what they remembered about it. Most of them spoke up ... narrated their experiences, some horrifying, some funny.<sup>3</sup>

It was after this visit that Jacob decided to write about these experiences as a tribute to her people and their endurance during such a harsh period in their history. She hoped it might bring some measure of healing for them. As part of her research, she spent many hours listening to many individuals, in Aizawl and Lunglei; she also met with former Mizoram National Front Leaders and a pastor who started the peace movement. In this way she gained an ear for the idiomatic voice of her people, which she has sought to reproduce throughout the writing. What I initially thought to be errors in the editing process are a deliberate choice of phrasing. For example 'to wish her on her birthday' (24) or 'come to pick them' and 'Mother explained why she reached late' (154).

'I have used the English language to tell a Mizo story, and hope I have succeeded in bringing out the native flavour through it. ... Some parts may read a bit bumpy because of this approach, though I've also tried to not hamper its readability...'.<sup>4</sup>

The writing is carefully considered, with a style that is simple and easy to read. The chapters and their titles could in themselves almost be headings for stories complete in themselves. The use of short sentences at the end of some chapters almost provides a succinct summary of their own, 'Dead bodies tell strange tales' (p144) or 'The betrayer and the betrayed died together' (p127).

The inclusion of the many Mizo phrases throughout the novel gives an even richer sense of the voice of these interesting people. Provision of a Glossary aids in interpreting these phrases into English (254-263).

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<sup>3</sup> Sarangi 5.

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Few readers are likely to have heard of Mizoram, the Mizo, or Malsawmi Jacob. This, her first full novel in English, was written to broaden awareness of Mizoram in the outside world. Jacob is the first Mizo author to be published outside of India. The book is currently available in Europe, USA, several Asian countries, and Australia.

**Kay Hart**