

Malsawmi Jacob, *Four Gardens and Other Poems* (Authorspress, 2017)

## *River of No Coasts*

Malsawmi Jacob marked her arrival on the literary scene in 2015 with the publication of the first Mizo novel in English, *Zorami: A Redemption Song*. The poems in her latest collection, *Four Gardens and Other Poems*, are instilled with a rich mosaic of imagery, cultural matrix, social ethos, group laments, angst and reconciliation. Ranging from the lyrical and sensual to the harsh and plucky, from the personal to the political, and to nature, they confront both particular and imaginary circumstances in the daily acts of life of the individual and the community. Her earliest exposure to poetry was in the Mizo language, her mother tongue. Later, when studying English literature, some of Malsawmi's favourite poets were Blake, Keats, Shelley, Yeats and T.S. Eliot. As an adult she grew to like Emily Bronte, G.M. Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath and Pablo Neruda.<sup>1</sup> The fact that Indian English literature is a product of a multilingual, multicultural and philosophical *mélange* cannot be overlooked. Today, Indian literature is at its apex of creation with the contribution of both regional and national writers such as Malsawmi Jacob.

Like the poems of Pablo Neruda and his counterparts, Malsawmi Jacob's shimmer with an atypical sweet touch of simplicity, openness and lucidity that mark her poetic idioms as subtle, specific and razor-sharp; the poetic corpus contains an inviting discourse. Echoing the 'Song of Solomon' in her novel, Malsawmi drums up optimism:

The flowers appear on the earth;  
The time of singing has come ...

Spiritual epiphany is a key factor in the protagonist's inner healing. Malsawmi has a poem entitled 'Zorami' in this collection, where a link to the novel is established. In the poem, 'Zorami', she vigorously asks, 'Waiting for another *thim zing*?' (a time of total darkness in Mizo myth) ('Zorami', 49). A couple of months ago I had an opportunity to read Malsawmi's novel *Zorami*, set in the peak of the Mizo National Front movement that began in the mid-60s and ended in the mid-80s. The insurgency affected every Mizo, whether in or out of Mizoram. They call it '*ram buai*', which means 'disturbance of the land'. Violence erases our shared humanity; however, *Zorami* ends with a prophetic note of hope and renewal of humane feelings.

Malsawmi's poems address the crisis of identity and the continental trials and tensions that are an integral part of contemporary living in cultural spaces irrespective of physical geography and cultural positions. Her musings range from identity crises to peace in the land; dislocation to rehabilitation; death to life, and life's small acts to roadside roses. She doesn't give up dreaming, even when she accounts for the river of life passing through a gutter.

There are seven sections in this series of 'moments of passion'; all parts are planned and organised so that the entire corpus looks like a well-knitted exotic fabric. The titles of sections are loaded with meaning. She blurs territorial engagements with the state and looks to the stars.

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

Malsawmi is an avid lover of territorial peace and in-group fraternity:

No hurting no killing in this country  
the place only for lovers of peace. ('Peace Land', 106)

In Section 5, 'Angst', some poems are functional:

Why have you gone political?

they ask,

Why don't you just do  
your thing? ('After Sunset', 81)

Malsawmi Jacob is aware of her literary and cultural roots, and that poetry benefits societies. She is a socially committed artist who refers to her land and people, and the trauma her people experienced during the days when vultures had a full meal, to 'keep up continuity'; in the political context of Mizoram, it is the vultures that can be relied upon to clean up the dead bodies (or the ills of society).

For Malsawmi, love is a companion of the poetic soul. The poet wants to sign in the 'peace accord' of minds:

The green river watches us  
scattering pearls born out of pain ('A Dance of the Muse', 31)

She aims at envisaging a beautiful nation-state where people can live safely celebrating life's feast together. The cultural identity of a person is a marker for one's overarching sense of self-concept and identification. It is an affiliative construct. It is the image of self we develop from membership of social groups. Many poems in the collection are rich in the aesthetic responsibility towards life, contexts and manners of the time. Her poems are 'roses, tar and blood' ('Roses, Tar and Blood', 82).

Malsawmi consciously leaps into the pool of the nostalgic past, creating a sense of 'presence' through the poetic metaphors of 'absence'. The haunting presence of the metaphor of 'death' invests her poems with a sense of mystery, a sense that is indefinable and non-negotiable through embodied experience. She, like many other poets from North East India, discovers magic in nature, verdant with myth and dense with longing; the river has a soul. Her poetic sensibility calls on hearts to come out of the rain and into the sunshine, in search of poetry in the world:

The rain came down  
it poured and poured  
Neruda's tears? ('One Tuesday', 30)

Rain and rivers provide the vital dose that the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda bestowed to overcome all kinds of solitude and anxiety. Malsawmi is an ardent lover of rain and rivers which

bring a promise of renewed vitality in life. Her aim is to achieve the cleansing of minds through the purgation of pent-up emotions: we feel our breathing rise and fall in every receding moment, we listen to the pitter-patter of rain, to a shower on the window pane, and feel the wetness in everything.

The past flows through the veins of Malsawmi's poetic lines: 'He's an old kite, positively past his prime' ('Old Kite', 74). When we whisk from one poem to another we listen intensely to the self-same message of loss. Malsawmi registers her unflinching faith, hope, dreams and cultural memories again and again through subtle imagery, metaphors and folk myths of her homeland. Nothing charges the imagination more actively than poems on the beauty that poets of all ages have found to be haunting the purlieu of thoughts, on the banks of the 'river of no coasts':

Gem of rarest beauty  
calls in waking dreams  
morning sunset moonlight  
still black night  
so I must set out in quest  
leaving all I own. ('Quest', 25)

Malsawmi is a member of a rare and wealthy heritage from North East India. She is all set to blaze the trail of splendour and majesty with ethereal and magical poems which turn the tides of human hearts. For Malsawmi, tiny flowers adorn our crowns.

### **Jaydeep Sarangi**

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### **Works Cited**

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