

## Embodiment of Values in Female Archetypes: A Reflection from the Indigenous Meitei Worldview

**Irom Aneela  
Thokchom Shantilata Devi**

### Abstract

Value makes mankind worthy and unique. It is an indispensable quality that defines and shapes human character, behavior, attitudes, and personality; affirming and sustaining our being. Delving into the cultural ethos of the meiteis, the paper attempts to explore the values embodied in the female archetypes as manifested in goddesses and mythological figures of indigenous meitei worldview, particularly with reference to goddess Ema Imoinu Ahongbi, goddess Panthoibi and legendary figure Khamnu, that are believed to represent different values embodied in a meitei woman. The paper further argues that the values embodied in these three female archetypes are not just mythological in nature but they symbolize fundamental and core values that make them pivotal figures of the meitei mythology and literature. They also exemplify values that can serve as ethical and philosophical yardsticks for the meitei woman, thus ensuring cultural continuity and fostering the unique identity of the meitei woman within the indigenous meitei worldview.

**Keywords:** Female Archetypes, Meitei worldview, Indigenous value, Cultural continuity.

### INTRODUCTION

The Meiteis mainly inhabit the Imphal valley of Manipur State, located in the northeastern region of India. They constitute one of many communities that inhabit this region, that are deeply rooted in their indigenous worldview. The name Manipur was introduced in the early eighteenth century during the reign of King Garibniwaz (1709-48) as recorded in Sanamahi Laikan, a historical Manipuri text (Oinam 50). The origin of the ethnic name Meitei,

according to B.H. Hodgson was “combined appellate of Siamese ‘*Tai*’ and Kochin Chinese ‘*Moy*’ (*Moy Tai*= *Moytai* =*Moitai*=*Meitei*) and that Meiteis belong to the *Moi* section of the great *Tai* race (Hodson 10). T.C. Hodson opined that the word was derived from the blending of two words, ‘*Mei*’ means man or people, and ‘*Tei*’ means separate: *Meitei*= separate people. Another scholar is of the view that *Mitei* (not *Meitei*) is derived from observing how God created man from His image = *Meitei* (C.B Singh 26-35). Also, it was suggested that this ethnonym is a synthesis of the two tribes of ancient China: *Mei* and *Ti* = *Mei* = *ti* =*Meitei* = *Meitei* (C.B.Singh 26-35). The word ‘*meitei*’ has several interpretations and derivations as noted by scholars and academicians. However, it may be said that the present day Manipur society is an amalgamation of many communities.

Despite being a patriarchal society there are prominent female archetypes, taking up foundational and significant positions in meitei society. They are believed to possess extraordinary qualities, namely, upholders of moral and ethical order, nurturers and symbols of resilience, independence, courage, bravery, virtue, selflessness, and, endurance. These moral values and qualities extend beyond the individual realm and have broader implications in terms of shaping and building the Meitei worldview across generations.

Among the female archetypes, goddesses *Ema Imoinu Ahongbi*, and *Panthoibi*, and legendary figure *Khamnu* deserve special mention because of their diverse characteristics and the moral values they exemplify. The values possessed by them are not merely symbols or relics of the past but are solid manifestations of archetypes that continue to influence, inspire, and function as moral, ethical, and philosophical yardsticks playing a cultural role in shaping and nurturing a value-oriented and dignified society. Within the overall context of this Indigenous worldview, the paper explores the values embodied in the three female archetypes and their roles in influencing and moulding the moral dimensions of the meitei society.

#### **EMA IMOINU AHONGBI: THE EMBODIMENT OF MORAL AGENCY AND PROSPERITY AND ABUNDANCE.**

The goddess *Ema Imoinu Ahongbi* is said to have originated from the part of the Supreme God, *Tengbangba Mapu* to inculcate the art of good conduct, the right attitude, and behavior in a cultured manner in every woman (Sairem 92). *Ema Imoinu Ahongbi* is believed to be one of many

manifestations of *Leimalel Sidabi*, the Supreme mother (L.B.Singh 53). Further, she is considered parallel to the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity (L.B. Singh 53).

In a Meitei house, the goddess is worshiped near the fire hearth. Traditionally, cooked foods are offered to Her before one has the daily meal. It is also believed that the goddess herself moves from one household to another teaching the moral values and promoting domestic harmony and prosperity (N.J.Singh 51) and laying out codes and conduct to be followed especially by the womenfolk. During the reign of King *Khunjaoba* (1632-1666 A.D.), the celebration of goddess Ema Imoinu Ahongbi became a religious household celebration (Sairem 94) in every Meitei family on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the month of November-December i.e. *Wakching* (LB.Singh 53). It is celebrated by cleaning every nook and corner of the house and in the evening a fish, preferably white colored is offered to her along with certain seasonal vegetables, seeking blessings from her to endow the family with harmony, peace, prosperity, wealth and abundance.

The goddess Ema Imoinu Ahongbi is believed to have laid down a certain code of conduct to be followed especially by the womenfolk, and when such a code of conduct is followed, it is believed that the goddess endows manifold blessings for a well ordered and prosperous family. It can be said that prosperity, abundance, and wealth are not to be understood in a materialistic sense but as one that follows from righteous and compassionate living. It emphasizes how one should lead a disciplined and moral life that can be transmitted to generations to come. The worship of Ema Imoinu Ahongbi signifies not just observation of basic household duties but embodies paramount values that are essential for maintaining harmony and tranquility of the family and the sustenance of the meitei culture.

Today, the goddess continues to influence the life of meitei womenfolk for she represents not merely a mythological figure but a living symbol loaded with significant values that are not limited to domestic and household spheres but even those outside of it. The values embodied by goddess Ema Imoinu Ahongbi serve as a foundational and moral principle that offers a practical way of living, an ethical and disciplined life within the family and in society.

The values embodied in goddess Ema Imoinu Ahongbi reflect a deeper philosophical meaning in the life of the Meitei society, especially amongst the womenfolk. Her place and role continue to remind the meiteis that it is not a grand celebration but rather the small and simple daily act of following basic moral and ethical codes that leads to a prosperous life, that can sustain the family and society. The goddess Ema Imoinu Ahongbi is thus not a mere abstract divine figure but an embodiment of moral values, prosperity and abundance.

#### **PANTHOIBI: THE EMBODIMENT OF RESILIENCE, INDEPENDENCE, AND COURAGE.**

According to historical text and literature, since ancient times, the goddess Panthoibi possesses remarkable values. It has been said that she was the beginner of all living beings and the head of all humans as a divine personality (M.C.Singh 1). She was considered the daughter of the King of Fire who was born in the natural maternity process (M.C.Singh 3). Also, it was said that she was the daughter of one Lairen Taoroinai Tubi Thingkok Lairema (father) and Malem Tampak Lairemhanbi (mother) (Sharma 27).

According to Panthoibi Khongul, an ancient literary text which is dedicated to her, she is portrayed as a divine woman with many extraordinary values. She is also regarded as a woman with knowledge of the sword and even considered as a goddess of warfare possessing astonishing courage and a fearless soul. The idol or figure of goddess Panthoibi is portrayed with a tiger as her own mount, reflecting fearlessness and bravery.

Interestingly, the Panthoibi Khongul mentions her romantic story with Nongpok Ningthou. However, Panthoibi was already a married woman when she met with Nongpok Ningthou while she was assisting her father in jhuming cultivation (Parratt 13). Panthoibi was married off to Khaba according to her parent's wishes. Eventually, she left her husband to be with her destined lover. During those earlier times, when women were strictly bound to obey their parents and families and married women to be under the commands of their husbands, Panthoibi defied all, clearly reflecting her will to choose the person suitable for herself, thereby displaying strong resilience and independence in her character. And in due course of time, Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi became husband and wife (Sharma 28).

Considering all the above- mentioned descriptions of Panthoibi, it may be said that the values embodied by the goddess Panthoibi were not merely symbols of love but were symbols of independence, resilience, bravery, and, courage. In addition, she is also said to be moral and strong, in the sense that she steps forward to combat the wicked to save her people. She is often compared with the goddess Durga of Hindu religion.

Goddess Panthoibi is more than a mythological figure, she is a testament embodying many values and virtues. Her story reflects many inspiring values, challenging stereotyping thoughts, and thus provides a deeper reflection on the roles of women. The values that the goddess exemplifies; particularly independence, freedom, resilience, and courage continue to be relevant even today in the contemporary fast-paced society.

#### KHAMNU: THE EMBODIMENT OF MATERNAL NURTURANCE, ENDURANCE, AND SELFLESSNESS.

Khamnu, the sister of Khamba, is a character in the legendary epic, *Khamba-Thoibi* of the Meitei literature. She was the daughter of Purenba (Roy 28). After Khamba was born their parents died, leaving them as orphans at a very young age. Even though Khamnu was not the main protagonist in the epic, without her the whole epic would lose its wholeness and essence.

After the untimely death of their parents, Khamnu provided the role of a father and mother to her brother. Being poor and having no one to look after them, Khamnu herself endured many challenges and hardships to protect her brother Khamba from all sorts of mishaps and dangers.

One of the famous episodes in the *Khamba-Thoibi* epic is the account of Khamba ‘taming a wild bull’. It is said that he sought advice from his sister as to how to tame the bull. When Khamnu told him “Brother! This bull once belonged to our father. If you utter the name of our father before it, and show this silk rope, it will recognize you and come under your control.” (Roy 29) Thus, on following the direction and instruction of his sister, Khamnu, he came out victorious in taming the wild bull. This act symbolizes and reflects the transfer of wisdom and heritage.

Besides this episode, there are many such episodes in the epic that show the qualities and attributes of Khamnu. The legendary epic of *Khamba-Thoibi* is not merely about lovers, enmity, and heroism, but portrays profound narratives illuminating relationships, the bonding of siblings, and

the endurance and sacrifice a sister can go through for her brother. Being an orphan and a young girl, her responsibilities were enormous, but despite difficulties and hindrances, she challenged herself with the values embodied within, behaved like a responsible mother, and displayed strong endurance.

Khamnu disowned pleasure, comforts, and dreams of her own to attend to Khamba's needs without having a thought about her happiness and desires. This very act of hers embodies the value of selflessness and altruism in its purest form, often ignored but vital for sustenance, whether it was fleeing to the hills to protect Khamba from political enemies or facing the daily grind of survival.

Khamnu is undeniably the heart and soul of the great epic. She may not be a goddess that one worships but she was certainly a woman endowed with a divine character. Her story, though plain and simple, yet, carries and transmits values that are timeless and eternally relevant.

Further, the character of Khamnu reflects the foundational element in society viz. nurturer, and caregiver, without which no civilization can sustain itself. She does not seek any titles and fees yet continues to serve diligently and selflessly. Her story and role in the epic *Khamba Thoibi* is a strong reminder of the fact that it is not always the strongest or mightiest person that stands tall but it is those who hold one up, through ups and downs, guide, nurture, sacrifice without any expectation.

Moreover, as we delve deeper into the embodied values of Khamnu, we can say that the epic of *Khamba Thoibi* does not merely narrate their imaginary stories as an ordinary sister but as a character who serves as a custodian of deepest value who can take up challenges and fight for a good cause that influences and shapes a life with formidable values and virtues.

## CONCLUSION

The embodiment of values in these three female archetypes of the indigenous meitei worldview reflects not just a mythological and legendary figure but a figure that possesses significant virtues and righteous qualities. The values they embody are not personal attributes only but essential and indispensable values that sustain community and collective consciousness, amongst the meitei women. These values are deeply rooted in the psyche and minds of the meitei women.

The values embodied in these three female archetypes such as nurturer, custodian, resilience, sacrifice and wisdom etc., have inspired and motivated countless and unnamed meitei women, and have helped in maintaining a moral code that governs the everyday life of meitei women. Further, it can be affirmed that the feminine values as embodied in these three archetypes are not only revered and celebrated but also continue to function and serve as a cultural vessel through which these moral values are transmitted and manifested.

The values embodied in female archetypes of indigenous meitei worldview reflect deeper philosophical underpinnings and serve as ethical guides that are essential and indispensable for cultural continuity and sustenance. These values also serve as a pedagogical tool that can be transmitted to younger generations and inculcate in them the significance of living with values. It is through these archetypes that the deepest cultural values of the meitei women are vividly expressed,- values that form a living, dynamic, and multifaceted articulation of the indigenous meitei worldview. These female archetypes are not mere archaeological relics or idolatry, but powerful vessels and custodians of values, that continue to inspire, shape and influence the psyche of the meitei women in the meitei belief system..

However, it is to be noted that these three female archetypes are just a few among many diverse archetypes. This particular focus on the values embodied in these three female archetypes offers only an initial exploration, an opening thread in the much larger tapestry of female archetypes woven within the indigenous meitei worldview.

## Works Cited

Chongtham, Budhi Singh. Meitei Ethnonym, Journal of Manipur University Imphal, 1984

Hodson, T.C. The Meitheis. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1908

Oinam, Bhogeshor Singh, editor. Sanamahi Laikan (in Manipuri), Imphal, 1973

Parratt, Saroj Nalini Arambam. The Religion of Manipur. 2nd ed., Spectrum Publication, 2013

Roy, Jyotirmoy. History of Manipur. Firma KLM Private Limited, 1958

Sairem Nilbir. Laiyingthou Lairemma Anigi Wari Sinbgul, 2017

Sharma, B. Kullachandra. Pawari-Puwarigi Meitei Chanu Khara, 2016

Singh, L. Bhagyachandra. A Critical Study of The Religious Philosophy of The Meeteis Before the Advent of Vaisnavism in Manipur. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., L. Momon Devi, 2008

Singh, Moirangthem Chandra. Panthoibi Khongkul (Khongul). 3rd ed., np., n.d.

Singh, Naorem Joykumar. Women in Manipuri Society. Akansha Publishing House, 2024