
Reimagining the Royal Woman in M. K. Binodini Devi's *The Princess and the Political Agent*

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Abstract

This paper explores M.K. Binodini Devi's *The Princess and the Political Agent* (1997; trans. 2020) as a nuanced reimagining of female subjectivity and agency within the intersecting contexts of Manipuri royal life and colonial history. As one of Manipur's pioneering feminist voices, Binodini revisits the silenced narratives of royal women, uncovering how they negotiated identity, emotion, and authority amid the pressures of patriarchy and imperial rule. Through the character of Princess Sanatombi based on a real historical figure, Binodini dismantles the binaries of duty and desire, tradition and transgression, and emotion and power. Anchored in feminist and postcolonial literary frameworks, this study interprets Binodini's text as both a critique of gendered silencing and reclamation of the female interior voice. By situating the novel within the socio-historical transformations of late nineteenth-century Manipur, the paper highlights how women's affective lives become political sites of resistance.

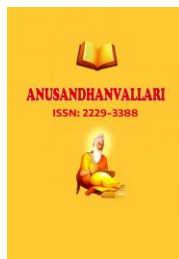
Keywords: M.K. Binodini Devi, Manipuri literature, feminist reading, colonialism, royal women, postcolonial feminism, female subjectivity

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how M.K. Binodini Devi redefines the figure of the royal woman through Princess Sanatombi.
2. To analyze the negotiation of female agency and voice within patriarchal and colonial hierarchies.
3. To explore how the novel reclaims women's subjectivities within the socio-historical context of Manipur's transition under British influence.
4. To contribute to feminist readings of Manipuri literature as a space for cultural resistance and gendered self-expression.

Scope and Methodology

This qualitative study is confined to M.K. Binodini Devi's *The Princess and the Political Agent* (1997/2020), examining its representation of Manipuri royal women during the late nineteenth century. The methodology follows feminist literary and postcolonial analysis through close textual reading. Secondary sources include scholarly works on Manipuri literature, gender studies, and postcolonial feminism.



The theoretical framework draws on feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2010), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), particularly their ideas on subalternity, female agency, and decolonial subjectivity. The study also incorporates insights from Judith Butler's (2006) concept of gender performativity and Marianne Hirsch's (1997) notion of postmemory to interpret Binodini's literary reclamation of women's silenced histories.

Literature Review

Critical engagement with M.K. Binodini Devi's oeuvre identifies her as a transformative voice in Manipuri and Northeastern literature. Roy (2010) describes Binodini as a writer who "allows women to live within history but speak from its margins," highlighting her capacity to re-center marginalized experiences. Hazarika (2012) acknowledges her unique vantage point as a royal descendant, whose insider perspective enables both empathy and critique of monarchy and patriarchy.

Scholars such as Devi (2014) and Nongmaithem (2022) note that *The Princess and the Political Agent* functions beyond romance, it articulates a historical consciousness through female experience. However, most readings have emphasized its political and historical aspects rather than its feminist subtext. As Spivak (1988) argues, the challenge lies in recovering subaltern voices erased by imperial and patriarchal narratives. Binodini's project echoes this by reclaiming the Manipuri royal woman's silenced voice through fictional imagination.

The novel also resonates with what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) calls "writing the body and the silence," positioning emotional truth and cultural memory as sites of resistance. By humanizing Princess Sanatombi, Binodini offers a counter-narrative to colonial historiography, transforming historical absence into a feminist presence.

Dr. Anuradha Nongmaithem, in her article "Politics, Class, Women and Society: A study of '*The Princess and the Political Agent*'" (2022), attempts to trace the identity issues that surface through Sanatombi the main protagonist of the novel. The novel uncovers a lost chapter in the history of British rule in Manipur. Through the love story of Princess Sanatombi and Maxwell the life style of the palace was revealed, in particular the norms and restrictions that the women had to put up with as the society demanded.

In "*Binodini Devi and the Melancholia of Modern Manipuri Identity*," Thounaojam Pradip explores the complex intersection of colonialism, gender, and identity through the life of Binodini Devi, a prominent figure in Manipuri literature and theatre. The article highlights how Devi's personal and artistic struggles reflect the broader melancholic experiences of modern Manipuri identity, especially in the context of colonial and post-colonial transformations.

In her scholarly article "*Royal Women and Political Identity in Manipur: Reading M. K. Binodini Devi*", Lairenlakpam Bino Devi examines the intricate ways in which M.K. Binodini Devi negotiates the intersection of gender, royalty, and political consciousness in her writings. Focusing on the representation of royal women, the study reveals how Binodini's narratives challenge the stereotypical portrayal of aristocratic femininity by foregrounding the personal struggles, emotional conflicts, and political awareness of royal women in a transitional Manipuri society.

Results and Discussion

Reconstructing Female Agency within Royal and Colonial Contexts

The Princess and the Political Agent dramatizes the entanglement of gender, monarchy, and empire. Princess Sanatombi, inspired by a real historical figure, emerges as a woman negotiating autonomy in a world where her emotions and body are political currency. Binodini's narration humanizes Sanatombi through psychological depth: "Sanatombi looked at the palace walls, high and cold, as if they were the walls of her own heart guarded, silent, and full of echoes" (Binodini, 1997, p. 43).

This metaphor conveys her emotional confinement, a recurrent motif symbolizing women's double imprisonment, physical and psychological. Her relationship with Lt. Col. Henry St. P. Maxwell, the British Political Agent, embodies transgression and vulnerability. "Love is not rebellion; it is surrender but not the kind the court wants" (Binodini, 1997, p. 101) encapsulates her ambivalence between emotional authenticity and social conformity.

Binodini's prose reframes female silence as strength: "They called her a princess, but she was a woman who had learned to command herself when no one else would listen" (Binodini, 1997, p. 152).

Here, inner self-command replaces the throne as the locus of power. Such portrayal aligns with Butler's (2006) notion that gendered identity is performative and negotiable within structures of domination.

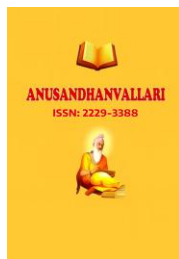
Memory, Voice, and Subjectivity

The novel begins and ends with Sanatombi's sickbed, framed by two photographs, her own and Maxwell's. "She is greatly reduced but still beautiful- even today there are traces of her loveliness of the past. The ailing woman is lying on a bed made of brass. Burnished with metal polish, it gleams like gold. There is not a blemish or stain" (Binodini, p.1). As Roy (2020) observes, this device signifies that her story is mediated through memory and loss. Hirsch's (1997) theory of "postmemory" helps interpret this narrative structure as a descendant's imaginative recovery of erased lives. Binodini reconstructs her great-aunt's silenced experience, fusing oral histories and colonial archives into empathetic fiction (Roy, 2020).

Sanatombi's fragmented monologues marked by ellipses and pauses dramatize her inability to speak freely within patriarchal structures. Silence, in Binodini's narrative, becomes a coded form of speech. "Mainu, is it today that little Majesty is coming? What happen today? Oh, its Bor today... so today is Bor, Mainu". As Spivak (1988) notes, the subaltern's attempt to speak, even partially, disrupts hegemonic narratives.

Intersection of Gender, Royal Status, and Colonial Constraint

Sanatombi's identity is shaped by overlapping hierarchies, royalty, gender, and colonization. As Nongmaithem (2022) argues, Manipuri princesses were often "mere state property... a decorative piece with no role and no voice" (p. 13). Binodini subverts this by granting her protagonist emotional depth and self-awareness. Sanatombi's outspoken nature "quite confident and outspoken" (Nongmaithem, 2022, p. 38) challenges the expected passivity of royal women. For instance when she was upset with her step brother who stopped her from riding the horse she say, "can he do as he pleases just because he's a male offering? I will beat him, I will keep on beating him" (Binodini, p.14). Another instance when a group of women went to meet the Saheb only Sanatombi had the guts to make their request, "Do not stop us from developing paddy field in our own country" (Binodini, p.150).



Sanatombi is against her father leaving Manipur, ‘Why should Sovereign Father leave Manipur? Do you want to give Kangla to other people? (Binodini, p. 65). She is very opinionated child and cannot bear to see injustice done to anybody. She was against her father fleeing to another state.

Her relationship with Maxwell, though forbidden, transforms into a site of self-definition. Binodini turns colonial romance into a metaphor for female desire and defiance. “He thought he ruled the land, but she ruled his silence” (Binodini, 1997, p. 127) exemplifies how emotional agency undermines political hierarchies.

Cultural Resistance and Feminine Symbolism

Binodini situates Sanatombi within the broader tradition of Manipuri women’s resistance from the Nupi Lan (Women’s Wars) of 1904 and 1939 to everyday defiance in domestic spheres (Dutta Chowdhury, 2020). Manipuri mythology, where goddesses embody compassion and power, informs the novel’s feminist aesthetic. As Nongmaithem (2022) notes, the reverence toward female deities like Goddess Tulsi signifies the inherent dignity accorded to women in Manipuri cosmology. Binodini channels this ethos, portraying Sanatombi not as a victim but as a reincarnation of cultural endurance.

She demonstrated her abilities whenever the opportunity arose and refused to adopt the role of a victim. “Sanatombi walked around instructing as she was actually very good at her job; she put her heart and soul into her work. To which Maxwell exclaimed, “Good heaven, I never knew you were so efficient” (Binodini, p.265)

In Manikchand’s house, as a wife she has performed her duties. “Sanatombi busied herself as a housewife. She mopped and wove and the house was sparkling clean. Not once did she show her unhappiness to members of the household” (Binodini, p. 120). After three miscarriages she couldn’t give birth to child anymore. To that also she told her mother-in-law to find a new wife for Manikchand who can bore him a child. She has never questioned her faith and consistently strives to assert her place within the family.

The Politics of Silence and Confession

Sanatombi’s silences are not passive but strategic. Her refusal to confess or her fragmented recollections signify resistance against forced narratives. As Spivak (1988) cautions, the subaltern woman’s speech is often mediated, yet the very act of narrating from within such constraints is revolutionary. Binodini, therefore, transforms Sanatombi’s “silence” into a mode of storytelling—a language patriarchy cannot translate (Binodini, 1997, p. 204).

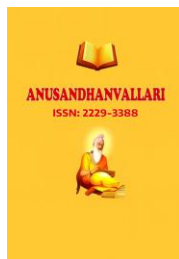
Findings

M.K. Binodini Devi redefines royal femininity as an active site of negotiation rather than passive nobility.

Sanatombi’s story mirrors the predicament of Manipuri women silenced by historical and patriarchal discourses.

Emotional introspection becomes a mode of political resistance and self-assertion.

Binodini’s lyrical prose transforms history into herstory, re-inscribing erased female subjectivities.



Limitations and Research Gaps

Existing scholarship on *The Princess and the Political Agent* is limited, often emphasizing historical detail over feminist depth. There is a notable lack of comparative studies situating Binodini's text alongside other postcolonial women writers like Mahasweta Devi or Indira Goswami. Further interdisciplinary research could examine intersections of gender, royalty, and coloniality across regional literatures of India's Northeast.

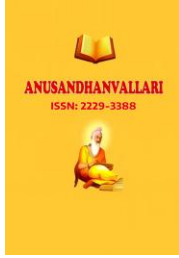
Conclusion

M.K. Binodini Devi's *The Princess and the Political Agent* transcends its historical frame to become a profound meditation on voice, agency, and affect. Princess Sanatombi emerges as a woman who, though constrained by lineage and empire, reclaims her narrative through empathy and introspection. "History forgot her, but stories remember" (Binodini, 1997, p. 189) this line epitomizes Binodini's feminist vision: restoring the silenced royal woman as both subject and storyteller.

Through Sanatombi, Binodini situates Manipuri women's experiences within broader postcolonial feminist discourse, asserting that the personal is political, and silence can be subversive. Her novel thus contributes significantly to the decolonization of women's histories and to the evolving field of feminist literary studies in Northeast India.

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