

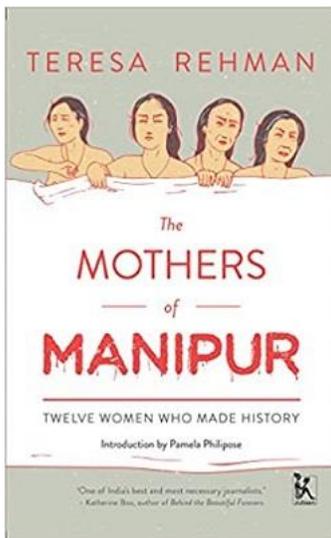
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## Book Review on Teresa Rehman's 'The Mothers of Manipur'

**Shubhangi Kansal**

*"What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me come on, counter me....."*

- Mahasweta Devi



In 1999 Mahasweta Devi, esteemed socio-political activist and Indian fiction writer penned down a startling tale of 'Draupadi,' a Bengali adivasi women taken into custody and raped by the soldiers of Indian Army. The story revolves around the fact that she, unlike most other women refused to stay mum and put on her clothes instead chose to confront the victim who then stood in a state of complete paralysis. Fast forward to.....2004, the plot turned out to be

even more far-sighted, an intuition thus marking the onset of a real event in the history of Manipur when twelve *Imas*, mothers, stripped off their *enaphi*, (upper garment of Manipuri attire) *phanek* (the lower garment) and shouted "*Indian Army Rape us, Eat our Flesh*" in front of Indian Army headquarters at Kangla Fort, Imphal to revolt the killing and suspected rape of a young girl Thangjam Manorama, who like Draupadi, was taken into military custody prior to her death.

### **Mother: Just a Birthgiver?**

Award winning journalist Teresa Rehman's book '[The Mothers of Manipur](#)' documents 12 narratives of *Meira Paibis*, the women torchbearers of Manipur, who pushed the envelope to provide a justifiable meaning to the word 'mother' and its usage in patriarchal structures. There has been no prior Manipuri literature that specifies the role of mother besides giving birth. This is partly because of the country's deep rooted gender inequality that disregards women's contribution despite their active participation.

Another factor has been the existence of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 that legitimizes Army to search, arrest, and shoot without a warrant. Manorama, well-known in the community for her hard work as a weaver acted as a financial pillar for her family ever since her father died. As Paulo Coelho said, "*I can control my destiny, but not my fate.*" Who imagined such an idol can be accused of being a militant, will be left to die with her vagina stuffed with cloth and bullets into her genitals?

Infuriated and horrified at Manorama's funeral, mothers and grandmothers realized that they no longer had a reliable support system; decided to display their own powers via *Nupi Samaj*, meaning women's war. '*Fireflies*,' a six-minute Manipuri documentary directed by Johnson Rajkumar exceptionally elaborates this rage amongst *Meira Paibis* who planned the popular uprising against the rigid gender norms and recurrent backfires of AFSPA, hoping that the future of their daughters might no longer remain the same.

### **Act of Defiance: Women in Conflict Ridden Zone!**

[Rehman](#) says, "*Manipur is full of opinions, angry discussions and incredibly touching stories.*" The statement does not only showcase the country's present day scenario narrates something deeper. Manipur has been a complete mess since the past few decades. Instances of conflicts, violence, and disagreement flag the daily news reports of the regional websites. What is more shocking is perhaps the courage and confidence with which women stepped out despite heated disapprovals from their family members and neighbours.

The act hence, portrayed the sufferings of *Meira Paibis* who had come prepared leaving their blouses, petticoats and fear behind. With their slogans ringing all around the air, all I could re-capitulate is the application of Eleanor Roosevelt's quote, "*A woman is like a tea bag. You never know how strong she is until she gets in hot water.*"

## **Sentiments of Sisterhood: Personal Tragedies Failed to Overwhelm Them**

In addition to the stated boldness and courage, *Nupi Samaj* was also filled with the sentiments of sisterhood bottoms-up. Personal tragedies such as great poverty, sickness stopped diverting their attention anymore. It was this collective sense that inspired *Meira Paibis* to shake off their obstructing family duties and stand up for the cause firmly. Jamini, an interviewee in the novel claimed, "*Once we are out of the house and are with women we don't care about our family and mundane affairs.*"

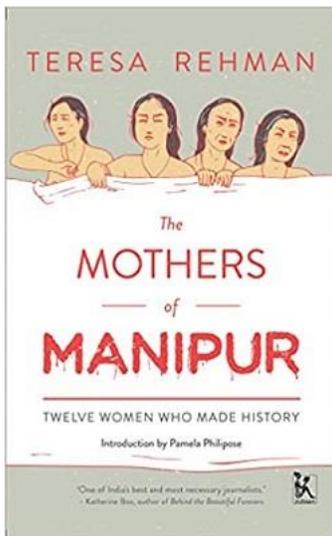
The most attention-seeking moment in the book has been [Rehman's](#) interview with Manipur's Iron Lady, Charu Sharmilla who went on a 16-year hunger strike to protest against the applicability of AFSPA. There are several other incidences in the book indicating the unbreakable bond between *Imas*, in the absence of which something as brave and grievous as a nude protest would have been a daydream.

## **Significance of Phanek: Redundant or No?**

Phanek, like Sarong, is a traditional lower garment for Manipuri women. Wearing a phanek, Manipuri's believe, brings good luck and prosperity with itself. However, if an agitated woman thrashes a man with her phanek, it is believed to bring misfortune to the man- as lethal as his demise! '*Bloody Phanek*' directed by Sonia Nepram discusses about the subject matter into much depth, details the journey of phanek from a personal jewellery to a symbol of protest in Manipur.

What concerns me as a reader, however, is the fact that given such divinity, why stripping off phanek did not bring misfortune for the Indian Army in this stance? More clearly, why has the act failed to scrap off AFSPA till now? Hence, a second draft of the book with tighter arguments justifying the concerns is much-needed to uphold the honour with which the term '*phanek*' has been used by Rehman.

In conclusion, Rehman gives a decent overview of the lives of *Imas* before and during the protest while encapsulating the troubled history of Manipur especially since the inception of AFSPA, 1985. The book provides a holistic understanding of Manipuri culture and women's voices deep rooted in history-highlights the need to inculcate humane perspectives to justify their regional decisions. To me, the book has left upon deep imprints of women heroism that will be cherished throughout my life.



Title: [The Mothers of Manipur: Twelve Women Who Made History](#)

Author: Teresa Rehman

Publication: Zubaan Books

Available: [Amazon](#)

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