

The Orphan Hero in Mizo Folklore

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Mizo society in the olden days had a very rich oral tradition and as such, stories, legends, myths, tales and folklores were very much a part of their social lives. Many such tales survives the test of time and is still passed on from generation to generation. Much of the lives, habits, beliefs and customs of the Mizos are deeply embedded and prominently displayed in their folktales and folklores. This paper will attempt to locate the harsh conditions and ill-treatment of children and orphan in Mizoram as reflected in Mizo folklores and folktales, particularly focusing on the pathetic conditions of the orphan and how the orphan heroes overcome these morbid and horrible situations in his life.

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS), and other groups label any child that has lost one parent as an orphan. In this approach, a maternal orphan is a child whose mother has died, a paternal orphan is a child whose father has died, and a double orphan has lost both parents (Wikipedia). And according to the American Heritage College Dictionary, 3d ed., an orphan can be a child who has lost only one parent. This paper will therefore essentially focus on selected orphans of mizo folklore pertaining to the above definitions.

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Mizo society though most often represented as a very loving, caring and giving society too had its share of criticism and drawbacks. As most societies known to mankind in its pre-urban or pre-civilized stage, Mizo society was also predominantly a male dominated society that is, a patriarchal society. As a result, woman folk had little or no voice whatsoever in the society and in the family (this aspect though intriguingly interesting is not the prime focus of this paper). Just as the woman folk were given no privilege in the Mizo society, so too were the children and especially the orphans. Surprisingly till today, this very interesting feature of ancient Mizo life has not been dealt with thoroughly if not at all by any Mizo scholars.

Children were sometimes not even considered humans as the saying goes in Mizo, “*Naupang leh hai-te te chu an rah leh mai alawm*” which is to say “Children and fruits will just grow back”. Children were often compared to dogs and they were sometimes forcefully asked to go away because they supposedly “smell like puppies”! They were also frequently encouraged to eat burnt food leftovers (mostly cooked rice) which were stale and hard to chew explaining to them that it will give them strength! Children were never taken seriously and their views and actions were often met with disgusted overtones of subordination and intolerance “*naupang te te*”. But children being children never really understood the gravity of their pitiable conditions. Such being the condition of normal children, orphans experienced a more wretched and horrible living conditions. Orphans were ill-treated, scorn upon, looked down, ridiculed, disrespected and laughed at in most primitive Mizo

societies. One of the greatest nemesis of the orphan was the step-mother.

The harsh living condition of the orphans in Mizo society is clearly depicted by the story of Liandova te unau, Chawngtinleri and Lianchea, Mauraungi, Ngaitei, Thailungi and Rahtea. All these orphans are mostly victims of a very cruel fate that overcome them. They are ill treated by their step-mothers (mostly) and village folks and were never allowed to live a normal life. The influence of the step-mother on their husbands (sometimes the biological father of the orphan) is also described in some folklore, and it is interesting to note that most of them dominated their husbands subsequently involving the father in making the life of the orphan more miserable. The pure physical existence of the father which naturally to every child is hope is sometimes diminished by the father's inability to perform his role as a father. But through successful journey or quest undertaken by them, the blessings and support received from their deceased parents through supernatural ways, sometimes purely through a turn of fate and sometimes supernatural interventions, these orphans often emerge triumphant at the end of their journey overcoming adversaries and eventually earning respect, love, acknowledgement and contentment.

The orphan hero is a very common motif or theme in many folktales and folklore all over the world. Stith Thompson's Motif Index classifies the orphan hero into five main categories;

(1) L111.4. L111.4 Orphan hero

(2) L111.4.1. L111.4.1. Orphan hero lives with grandmother

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(3) L111.4.2. L111.4.2. Orphan heroine

(4) L111.4.3. L111.4.3. Orphan brothers as heroes and

(5) L111.4.4. L111.4.4. Mistreated orphan hero.

Interestingly, all these five classifications of the orphan hero can be found in the mizo folklore, Rahtea, Ngaitei, Mauruangi, Liandova te Unau and Thailungi respectively. These classifications or sub-types of the orphan heroes in folklore are more or less common almost throughout the entire world. Similar orphan hero folklore or folktales can be found, for example in the folklore and folktales recorded by the Brothers Grimm of the popular story of Hansel and Gretel, Snow White and the seven dwarfs, Cinderella and many more.

Some of the popular key themes of an orphan hero throughout the world are alienation, estrangement, quest or journey, supernatural intervention, a blessing in disguise, and eventually a triumphant return from a quest or journey or pure victory. The orphan hero undergo all these and as cliché as it may sound always emerge victorious. And some of the major themes of orphan heroes in mizo folklores include alienation, abuse, journey and victory. These themes are always more less the same in every mizo orphan hero's life. In the case of Rahtea his life was made horribly insufferable by his step-mother whose sole intention was to get rid of Rahtea through every means possible. She would force him to work a lot, abuse him, punish him and used to beat him for no reason at all. Proper food was denied to him and it is said that Rahtea was so skinny that he resembled a walking skeleton. Rahtea's step-mother went to the

extent of persuading Rahtea's father to sacrifice Rahtea as an offering to the gods for her to become healthy and to rid her of her sickness. Rahtea ran away from home and eventually turned himself into a secada beetle, thus enjoying his freedom at the end, singing to his hearts content and never more to be under the bondage of his evil step-mother.

The story of Ngaitei has a historical importance in the history of the Mizos. The events that unfolded reveal the first ever recorded flood in Mizoram (though it merely is an assumption). This story also has a very peculiar resemblance or similarity to the story of Job from the Holy Bible who was thrown into sea to calm the sea. Ngaitei too was thrown into an oncoming flood, against her will, to prevent the raging water from flooding the entire village. Ngaitei therefore saved her village and thus became a hero. This particular story clearly depicts the love of a grandmother for her grand daughter and the journey she took to get her granddaughter back. It also clearly show the love a father has for his daughter and the effort he took to get his daughter, which though proved disastrous for Ngaitei, was a huge endeavor.

The story of Mauruangi is very touching and heart wrenching. She also was a victim of a merciless step-mother who much like Rahtea was denied proper food and clothes and made to work a lot like a servant or a slave and who after attaining better prospect was yet murdered by her step mother. The account of her resurrection and the manner in which she regained her life made her a hero in her own respect. The story of Mauruangi is fascinating for the unbelievable effort of the deceased mother of Mauruangi

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who in order to help her beloved daughter took the form of a fish and a tree. This story yet again clearly depicts the pathetic living condition of an orphan who is forced to live under a very hostile environment and who has to undergo many traumatic and heart breaking events. But like every orphan hero she emerged triumphant at the end. It is clear from the story of Mauruangi that even Mother Nature helps the orphan who almost always is denied love and security.

The story of Liandova and Tuaisiala or Liandova te unau is a classic story of orphan heroes overcoming hardships and emerging gloriously. This story is one of the most popular folklore among the Mizos. The story of Liandova and Tuaisiala is also remarkable in its consistency of delivering adventure appropriating the plot of the story. The love between Liandova and Tuaisiala is deeply and richly portrayed, displaying the intensity of the love shared through thick and thin and when almost all hope of survival is lost. Again many familiar elements plays an important role in this folklore like the element of fate, chance and the intervention of Mother Nature to aid the poor helpless orphans.

Thailungi is also another story of a poor vulnerable child who was traded to a merchant by her step-mother. It is said that the stepmother's sole desire was to get rid of Thailungi and she thought of every possible means and ways of getting rid of her until she eventually sold her off in exchange for a ball of steel-wires. This story also is a remarkable representation of an undying love between a brother and a sister, love overcoming the dictates and constraints of time and surpassing endless hurdles of trials and uncertainty.

The story of Chawngtinleri and Lianchea is yet another folklore which clearly illustrates the complex journey that an orphan has to undergo to achieve the status of a hero. The love between Chawngtinleri and Lianchea is undeniably rich and true and mostly admirable. Though orphans they both achieve what many could not and especially Lianchea, through the help of his sister and the spirits, achieved more than any normal man could. Though the beauty of Chawngtinleri is heavily stressed in the story, the journey undertaken by Lianchea to become a famous hunter and his encounters with different spectacular beasts is more fascinating and compelling.

As exposed by these five mizo folklores, the condition of the orphan in early mizo livelihood was clearly pathetic and miserable. Orphans were either treated as slaves or servants, denied love, and life was made very difficult for them either by their step-mothers or even the society at large. But like many orphan heroes in many folklores and folktales all over the world, they always survive their hardship and emerge victorious or triumphant. It is very interesting to note that these orphans always had the instinct to fight and an undying will and desire to overcome their miserable conditions.

These orphan heroes have a lot of similar characteristic traits and the developments of their characters are somewhat similar to a certain degree. Some of the similar characteristics of these selected orphan heroes are firstly their ability to withstand constant domestic humiliation and sufferings; almost all the five orphan heroes selected for this paper had to undergo harsh treatment domestically,

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mostly from the evil step-mother, but they always were able to overcome this. And secondly their relentless desire to survive. An orphan hero never gives up. He is driven by an immeasurable desire to survive his reality and challenges. Thirdly emancipation through a quest or journey, an orphan hero emancipates himself by going on a journey or a quest to fulfill his desires and dreams. And fourthly victory, an orphan hero always achieves victory either through sheer effort or with the help of some supernatural element.

Orphan heroes are found in folklores of every nation. Similar stories of orphan overcoming life threatening battles can be seen in the folklore of Africa, Europe, China, India and America. This therefore raises the question as to why such folklore exists. Why is it, that orphans are made or raised to the position of a hero in folklores? One is but tempted to think of the *Collective Unconscious* or *Racial Memory* theory of Carl Jung at this juncture. Alan Dundes however chooses to formulate another theory which he terms *collectivized fantasy*. Dundes is of the view that “a good portion of folklore is fantasy” meaning that fantasies all over the world could be somehow similar due to our local surrounding and place of habitat but that could also never be identical for the same said reason.

Melanie Kimball stated that the orphan is the “quintessential outcast, [who] operates in isolation, and thus makes the perfect hero figure.” This statement is proven true by the characters of Liandova, Rahtea and Mauruangi to name a few. Rahtea and Mauruangi especially were solitary child who had to fend for themselves in every spheres of life. Their adventures therefore seem

much more spectacular and monumental since their survival and struggles were borne by them and themselves alone. Terry Windling also observed that, “The orphaned hero is not, however, a mere fantasy cliché; it’s a mythic archetype, springing from some of the oldest stories of the world. This archetype includes not only those characters who are literally orphaned by the death of their parents, but also children who are lost, abandoned, cast out, disinherited by evil step–parents, raised in supernatural captivity, or reared by wild animals”. Windling continues, “We find them everywhere in fantasy fiction: the “orphaned heroes,” young men and women whose parents are dead, absent, or unknown, who turn out to be the heirs to the kingdom, the destined pullers of swords from stones, the keys to the riddles, the prophecies’ answers, the bearers of powerful magic.” Fantasy fiction heroes such as J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter, J.R.R. Tolkien’s Frodo are examples of popular orphan heroes of the twenty first century.

Melanie Kimball in her famous paper, *From folktales to fiction: Orphan characters in Children’s Literature* said “Orphan characters in folktales and literature symbolize our isolation from one another and from society. They do not belong to even the most basic of groups, the family unit, and in some cultures this is enough to cut them off from society at large. In other cultures, orphans are regarded as special people who must be protected and cared for at all costs. In either case, orphans are clearly marked as being different from the rest of society. They are the eternal Other.” This concept of the Other as suggested by Melanie Kimball cannot be differentiated with the concept of the Other in postcolonial

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discourse. The process of Othering in an orphan hero context is predominantly the central motive behind all their rivals. The orphan hero is alone and isolated, he is one who often cries alone at night, one who does not have a companion and one who never receives love from whom he expects. His sufferings reflect the hidden but hideous nature of society. As Alan Dundes rightly puts it folklore is an “autobiographical ethnography, a people’s own description of themselves.” So the sufferings, ill-treatment and the act of othering the orphan mirrors the life and attitudes of early society.

“The Other or Constitutive Other (also the verb othering) is a key concept in continental philosophy; it opposes the Same. The Other refers, or attempts to refer, to that which is other than the initial concept being considered. The Constitutive Other often denotes a person Other than one’s self; hence, the Other is identified as “different”; thus the spelling is often capitalized” (Wikipedia). This definition of the Other clearly states the act of differentiation suggested by the term *the Other* from *the Same*. The orphan hero therefore automatically becomes *the Other* as is often desired by society since he is not *the Same* as them. He therefore is an outcast, a misfit to the society he lives in. This concept of *the Other* is prominently used by literary theorist particularly the school of Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Gender Studies and Postcolonialism. Susan Domowitz in her essay *The Orphan in Cameroon Folklore and Fiction* said, “In the oral tradition of the Beti, Basaa and Bulu ethnic groups of Cameroon, the orphan is an important stock character and the hero of many tales” but she added, “Without parents, and especially without a mother, the orphan is thrown on

his or her own resources, cut off from familial support and protection.” Susan Domowitz clearly points out in this essay that the representation of the orphans in African folklores and fictions though sometimes honours the orphans as heroes, clearly brings out the true colour of the lives of the orphans in Africa especially in Cameroon, which is a very terrible state. So we can safely assume that the orphan is *othered* not only in most folklore and literatures all around the world but also in society.

Melanie Kimball again describes orphans saying, “Orphans are a tangible reflection of the fear of abandonment that all humans experience. Orphans are outcasts, separated because they have no connection to the familial structure which helps define the individual. This outcast state is not caused by any actions of their own but because of their difference from the “normal” pattern established by society. Orphans are a reminder that the possibility of utter undesired solitude exists for any human being. Orphans are at once pitiable and noble. They are a manifestation of loneliness, but they also represent the possibility for humans to reinvent themselves”.

Orphan heroes are still very much a part of our life in the twenty first century; we still are given the orphan superheroes such as Batman, Superman and Spiderman in the comic world and Oliver Twist, Harry Potter and Frodo Baggins in fiction to name a few. We love to love them, we empathies with them and we feel their pain. We know very well that they are going to defeat their enemies, yet deep inside ourselves as much as we love to celebrate their victories we never wish to become like them or be like them. Because

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the one thing missing in their life which, as human beings, we know is very important and crucial and which we so cherish as human beings is the existence of parents. These 21st century heroes are represented much in the same way folklore orphan heroes are represented; it therefore seems to be a never ending circle.

Societies all over the world still condemn and belittle orphans to a certain extent in some form or the other. Much like the days of *Oliver Twist*, orphanages though it exist seems to run out of false sympathies just to make money and to better one's own financial condition. But we know better, as history has warned us through folklores and tales that the orphan hero will defeat whatever trials and tribulations that are in his way, and no matter how miserable his life is made or constructed, he will emerge triumphant and victorious.

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