

## Situating Identity in James Dokhuma

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**Abstract:** This article examines the politics of Mizo identity formation in the works of James Dokhuma with specific focus on *Rinawmin* ["Faithfully"] (1970), *Tumpangchal Nge Saithangpuii* ["The Wild Gayal or Saithangpuii"] (1981), *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung*<sup>1</sup> ["The Mores of the Mizo in Olden Times"] (1991), and *Silaimu Ngaihawm* [*The Beloved Bullet*]<sup>2</sup> (1995). Anchored on the standpoint that identities are constructed within discourse, the discourses within which Mizo identity is represented are located within three historical moments – the pre-colonial 'beginnings' in the oral past, the colonial period of negotiation and the post-colonial period of 'Mizo nationalism'. The socio-cultural forces at play in the construction of Mizo identity are examined within their historical specificities and juxtaposed with Dokhuma's concept of Mizo identity and the cultural resources through and within which it is conceptualized in his works.

**Keywords:** James Dokhuma, identity formation, politics, discourse, action

James Dokhuma is one of the most prominent writers in the Mizo language, and definitely one of the most prolific too. Dokhuma had written between 450-500 essays, and had composed 42 poems out of which 36 had been published. His literary output is numerous as well as diverse, and such work like *Chawngkhum Dan Tlang Huat Loh*<sup>3</sup> cannot be put into categorization in terms of genre since this work, though taking the form of a drama with characters and dialogues, is in actuality a collection of anecdotes shared by each characters. A recipient of numerous awards for his literary contribution including a Padma Shree, Dokhuma's most lasting legacy is his contribution in the area of Mizo culture and language. Born in Sialsuk village on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1932 to be the second youngest among thirteen siblings, James Dokhuma hailed from a family of poets/song composers – two of his elder siblings, Romani and Laltanpuia have made their names as folk song composers. Although he had received formal education only till Class – V, after which he joined the Indian Army at the

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of quoted texts and titles of works are done by me, unless noted otherwise, for the sole purpose of this study.

<sup>2</sup> *The Beloved Bullet* is a translation of *Silaimu Ngaihawm* by Margaret Ch. Zama.

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<sup>3</sup> The title is derived from an idiomatic phrase which roughly translates to "done in the manner of Chawngkhuma's antics against which no one takes offence," and is used to denote no offence intended.

tender age of fifteen, his experience in the army went on to influence and inform several of his literary works. He joined the Mizo National Front movement in 1961 and was one of the 64 signatories in the declaration of independence in 1966. After two years of guerilla life in the underground serving as a Member of Parliament in the underground government, he was critically wounded in an Indian Army ambush and was captured. He spent the next three years in jail, and it was during his incarceration that he started writing his novels. Writing, he believed, was the only way he could continue to serve his political dream of Mizo nationhood. After his release in 21 June 1971, while he did not go back to join the underground movement, he continued to 'perform' his beliefs through his writings as well as his participation in the political arena. The ideals of freedom that sustained Dokhuma's spirit during his incarceration is intrinsic to his ideal of what he termed '*Hnam<sup>4</sup> Politics*' which, he explains, is 'nationalism' which is "above and beyond partisan politics," in his essay, "*Ka Zalenna.*" ["My Freedom"] (*Rilru Far Chhuak* 72)

He believes that the thrust of *Hnam Politics* is the preservation and protection of four fundamental tenets of *ram lehnam<sup>5</sup>*, which are territorial

integrity, welfare and progress of the people, religion, and cultural identity. Of these four, he believes that he can leave a lasting legacy in the preservation and protection of Mizo identity, the other three being out of bounds for someone without political power, through his writings. Here he is reiterating the reason behind his decision to start writing as expressed in the first works ever written by him, and this sense of purpose informs most of his works. Thus, for Dokhuma, writing is first and foremost, political activism towards the cause of 'Mizo Nationalism'.

"Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture," according to Stuart Hall who continues that "it is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return." (Rutherford 226) Although the politics of Mizo identity construction draws heavily on the notion of such an essential Mizo primordial existence at various points, the study is grounded on the premise that Mizo identity is constructed through discourse, and treats the notion of an essential Mizo primordial existence as a discursive element within the history of Mizo identity politics. Thus, the following lines sum up the theoretical position that the study maintains throughout, that cultural identity

... is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or

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<sup>4</sup>*Hnam*- clan, tribe, nation, nationality, race. James Herbert Lorrain's *Dictionary of the Lushai Language* (henceforth *DLL*) 169.  
<sup>5</sup>*Ram lehHnam*- Ram = Forest, jungle; country, kingdom, territory, realm, domain, land, estate, place, homeland; *leh* = and; *Hnam* - see above.

suture, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental “law of origin.” (226)

The manner in which identity has come to be understood itself forms a long discursive tradition and the article briefly traces the historical development from the “orthodox account of identity” which locates the “self” as a subject which is “stable and independent of external influences” at least since Descartes in the seventeenth century to the questioning and rejection of such a stable subject in David Hume’s ‘bundle theory’ of the self to Emile Durkheim with the argument that “the individual was a product of society” and that “individual identity is not primary, but is a product of economic organisation” (Edgar and Sedgwick 166-168), highlighting the contributions of George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman, the influences of psychoanalysis through the works of Freud, Erikson and Lacan, the Marxist influenced ideas of the Structuralists and the role of ideology in the construction of identities and the works of Michel Foucault, to arrive at what Stuart Hall designates as ‘the post-modern subject.’ The “post-modern subject” is “conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity... formed and transformed continuously in relation

to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us... It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self.’” (“Questions of Cultural Identity” 275 – 277)

The enormity of the impact of colonialism on the whole Mizo cultural experience is immediately evident from the periodization of Mizo history into *Vailen<sup>6</sup>hma* and *Vailenhnun* (pre- and post-*Vailian*). The colonial experience, the forces of modernity and the introduction of Christianity have left a lasting impact on the ways the Mizo tribes define themselves. *Tumpangchal Nge Saithangpuii* and *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung* being set in the pre-colonial past are considered as the important acts of “imaginative rediscovery,” of the past, of a search for an essentialised Mizo identity. Yet the tribes who eventually come to adopt the collective ‘Mizo identity’ were, before the advent of the British, numerous tribes and clans, identifying themselves through their village-chief affiliations. Dokhuma turns to the oral past to ‘recover’ a ‘usable past’, since “the future of nations is always dependent on their members’ understanding and faith in their pasts, and on the conviction that there is no destiny without history, and no present and no

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<sup>6</sup>*Vailen*– modified form of *vailian*, literally ‘the upsurge/invasion of the *vai*’. It refers to both the British Expeditions of 1871-72 and 1889-1890 as well as the period of British rule, 1890 to 1947. (Scholar’s input)

future without a sacred and usable past.”  
 (*Chosen Peoples* 216)

For him, *Tlawmngaihna* is the defining factor, the essence of Mizo-ness, and the *Pasaltha* is the embodiment of this essence, although, he contends that *tlawmngaihna* is not confined to the male domain. *Tlawmngaihna*, as a Mizo code of life characterized by altruism, self-sacrifice, chivalry, valour and humility, is the code of ethics which governed the whole social functioning of the village. It is the “Mizo philosophy of life,” according to Vanlalchhuanawma who explains it as “a précis of the whole Mizo traditional discipline.” (55) Dokhuma’s concern with the ‘preservation’ of this ‘essence’ of being Mizo is most evident in his representation of Fehtea in *Tumpangchalnge Saithangpuii*. Fehtea is represented as the embodiment of *tlawmngaihna* and a *pasaltha* at the same time, and Dokhuma, while elaborating on the ‘essence,’ in a way acknowledges its temporality:

It is my hope in writing this story that, as a tangible representation of *Tlawmngaihna* which has been fundamental to the Mizoethos, it plays a role in the preservation of this admirable code, to prevent it from fading into obscurity.” (7-8.)

The centrality of the concept of *pasaltha* to Mizo identity becomes more indisputable in *Rinawmin* and *Silaimu Ngaihawm*, both set within the *Rambuaiera*. The nationalism we find in these works had their origins in the

notion of a collective Mizo identity that was formed during the colonial times, and the withdrawal of the British brought up questions of ‘belonging’ within the independent Indian union. Since cultural identities are historically defined, “far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.” (Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 225) Establishing a link between the *pasaltha* of old and the new *pasaltha* of Mizo nationalism, Dokhuma, in *Rinawmin*, aligns them with the idea of *pasaltha* as protectors of the people, their land, their customs, their religion and thus, Mizo identity. The slogans “Pathianleh Kan Ram Tan” (“For God and our Country”) and “Hnehnachu Mizote Pathian ta a ni” (“Victory belongs to the God of the Mizo people”) brings into sharp focus the changing ideals that the *pasaltha* stands for. “Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.” It is within this re-formulation of the institution of the *pasaltha* that we witness, more than in the works dealing with the historically older periods, that Mizo identity is as much a matter of ‘becoming’, if not more, than ‘being’. That ‘being’ Mizo is not enough, that it calls for a ‘becoming’ to sustain itself – “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of

‘being.’” (Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (223-225)

The *vailen* of 1890 brought the Mizo inhabited areas under British administration and though faced with pockets of resistance for several years, by the year 1894 when the missionaries arrived, the British had already set themselves up as the ‘rulers’. “Christian missions in Mizoram followed the tradition of “the cross follows the flag.”(Vanlalchhuanawma 97) While it may be debatable whether Christianity would make inroads without the enabling hand of the British administration, what is evident is that the introduction of this new belief system greatly ‘helped’ in the consolidation of the British colonial power, and vice versa the colonial set-up facilitated the spread of Christianity among the tribes. This synergistic force of the colonial administrators and the missionaries created ‘ambivalence’ in the ways the Mizo people eventually came to view themselves and their relationship to the *Sap*<sup>7</sup> since the missionaries ‘gave’ the Gospel and the script to the Mizo people. The impact of Christianity in the way Mizo people have come to understand themselves is one of the most striking features of the works of James Dokhuma. According to Margaret L Pachuau, “the contrast in terms of identity in the pre- and post-colonial parameters have been

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<sup>7</sup>*Sap* - a sahib, a white man, a government or other official.

vast because the colonized Mizo domains were previously under a culture that was inherently non-Christian and so subsequently had a different sensibility altogether, whether religious or secular.” (182) The religious practices, beliefs, festivals, sacrificial practices and their worldview, narrated in detail in *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung* highlights the centrality of the traditional religious beliefs and practices to the tribes and how it permeates all aspects of their lives, from their main agricultural preoccupation to diseases and ailments, to hunting and festivals. Each of the Mizo tribes had their own complex sets of rituals and taboos anchored on pre-colonial ethos where the religious-secular divide as it is understood today did not seem to exist. The term *Sakhua*<sup>8</sup>, understood as ‘religion’ in current usage had a much narrower meaning, denoting the household rites and rituals (Lalsangkima, 2006; 42), and was only part of the whole belief system. The decline of the *zawlbuk*<sup>9</sup> and the sovereignty of the *Lal* which herald the disruption of the traditional modes of self-ascription and belonging further leave a lasting impact on Mizo identity formation. If “the construction of identity” as contended by

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<sup>8</sup>*Sakhua*– 1.an object of worship, a god. 2. ancient ancestors who are worshipped by the Lushais. 3. the spirit who presides over the house or household. 4. religion, religious rites and ceremonies.  
<sup>9</sup>*Zawlbuk*– the large house in a Lushai village where all the unmarried young men of the community sleep at night. (DLL 562) Dokhuma points out in *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung* that even married men continue to lodge in the *Zawlbuk* until they move out of their parents’ home to set up their own house. (206)

Said, “involves establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from “us”. Each age and society re-creates its “Others”,” (332) for the Mizo, according to Joy L.K. Pachuau, the ‘other’ does not play “a significant role in constituting who they are. The story the Mizos write of themselves does not place their narratives against or in conjunction with the larger ‘Indian’ ethos.” She observes that “Mizo identity construction is”, to a large extent, “inward-looking, self-referential, with the ‘other’ being invoked only in cross-boundary contact.” (16) The centrality of the notions of the ‘self’ and ‘the/an other’ to identity will inform this article’s attempt to trace the significance of conflict in the formation and evolution of Mizo identity and its assertion of Mizo nationalism. Through such reconfigurations, Mizo identity, by the ‘Rambuai’ period, had taken on the form of ethno-religious nationalism. Thus, the notions of Mizo ‘nationalism’ as represented in Dokhuma’s works have been examined. In his oft quoted definition of the ‘nation’, Benedict Anderson proposes that the nation “is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” Justifying the term ‘imagined’, he goes on to say that “it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their

communion.” (*Imagined Communities* 6) To Anderson, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.” Thus, “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.” (6)

Anthony D. Smith states that “as there are many kinds of nationalisms, so concepts of the nation assume different forms and national identities are subject to considerable change over time,” (*Chosen People* 25), and based on this admission of plurality, he frames a ‘working definition’ of nationalism as “an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation’.” (24) To Joy L.K. Pachuau, it was “the political climate and events surrounding British proposals to withdraw from the region and Indian independence that made it possible for the Mizos to formalize the articulation of their identity.” She further adds that use of the term ‘Mizo’ in Mizo Commoners Union “was definitely a shift to new ways of perceiving themselves.” (125) the sudden surge in the passion for the Mizo Union was the appeal of the idea of the abolition of chieftainship. Thus, the ideals of democracy became another factor in the already fraught environment. The nature of their dilemma, the uncertainty of their future and the need to consolidate the *Mizohnam* identity to

‘claim’ their ‘nationhood’ became a serious concern. “Rather than seeing themselves as the inhabitants of different territories or as the subjects of different and contesting chiefs, Mizo now began seeing themselves as the inhabitants of a common territory that belonged to everyone.” (Joy L.K. Pachuau, 123-124) Chieftainship was eventually abolished, with the passing of the Acquisition of Chiefs Rights Act in 1954, two years after the Lushai Hills Autonomous District Council came into being in 1952 and nearly seven years since the withdrawal of the British. It became the legacy of the Mizo Union, that they had been the emancipators of the commoners in *Rinawmin* and *Silaimu Ngaihawm*. In *Rinawmin* and *Silaimu Ngaihawm*, the conflict undercuts a simple Mizo/*Vai* encounter. Other elements come in the form of differences in political ideologies between the MNF and the Mizo Union. Among the Mizo Union, furthermore, while there are those who do not support the movement but do not act in blatant opposition to the MNF, there are others who in many instances, act as ‘collaborators’ of the *Vais* – the Mizo Union activists who either act as *Kawktu* (“finger-pointer”, informant) or those who have taken up arms against the MNF army, as found in both novels. While many of the *Kawktus* belong to the Mizo Union, again, there are others who act as *kawktu* for other reasons as well, and these ‘enemies’ of Mizo *ohnamare* none other than their fellow Mizo people.

The Mizo people, at that junction of British withdrawal, were not unified when it came to the question of what type of self-governance they wanted to form. This question involves the formation of new power structures. More importantly, it becomes a question of reformulation of identity and belonging. Thus a flurry of political activity ensued. The two strands of Mizo nationalism found in *Rinawmin* and *Silaimu Ngaihawm* are conceived through several common contours of identification, yet the main point of divergence is seen in the way the notion of ‘independence’ is understood. While the Mizo Union conceived of independence in terms of modernist political ideology, the MNF’s interpretation of the same is situated within ethnic and religious paradigms. ‘Independence’ has been the moot point of Mizo political arena right from the period of the first political party, and it underpins the factionalism that ensued from the early stage until it culminated in the formation of the MNF, although the issue of abolition of chieftainship is imbricated in the ways in which the notion of ‘independence’ is imagined.

For Dokhuma, the very process of negotiation between the elements of culture and the political reality becomes Mizo identity – the negotiation with the ‘essentialized Mizo’ and the ‘instability’ which rests on the temporality and contractedness of Mizo identity. The seemingly paradoxical nature of these positions sustains the tension that the ‘search’ for identity is founded on. Since

Mizo nationalism, like all nationalisms, is anchored on an imagined community, imagined through Mizo identity which is a “becoming” – a continual process, one cannot think of the process of becoming as following a linear path towards some essential or permanent Mizo identity, a foreclosure, either by the same logic that we cannot conceive of Mizo identity as having an essence that can be recovered. Thus, the very process of becoming is what being Mizo is all about. Dokhuma’s own conception of nationalism confirms this position – he insists on ‘nationalism beyond party politics’, a nationalism which “seeks to reform the world in its own image, a world of unique and authentic nations,” (*Chosen Peoples* 15), he goes on to advocate a nationalism beyond party politics, which is not at odds with the idea of integration within the Indian nation-state. (*Rilru Far Chhuak* 114-119) It no longer is grounded on notions of sovereignty, territoriality but rather a fervent ideal based on the ideals of liberal democracy - Justice, liberty, equality, of the mind. The independence of the mind rather than political self-determination, not the ‘liberation’ of a territory but of the spirit, the eternal spirit of the chainless mind. Thus the *search* for an essential past, the *negotiation* of Mizoness through historical, political and cultural moments, and the discourses which aim towards *finding* Mizo identity – all these are ways of “becoming” Mizo, of performing Mizo-ness since there is neither an essential metaphysical substance nor a

‘finished product’- a complete, fully realized Mizo identity.

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