

ACTS OF SILENCING: MARGINALISED VOICES IN HIJAM GUNO'S SHORT STORIES

Wangkhem Soniya  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Dhanamanjuri University  
Imphal, Manipur  
&  
Dr. Loiya Leima Oinam  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
D.M. College of Arts  
Dhanamanjuri University,  
Imphal, Manipur

**Abstract**

*The Manipuri writer Hijam Guno Singh, in his short stories "Sarkargi Chakri" (Government Service) (1969) and "Lambida" (On the Road) (1981), presents the helplessness of marginalised voices in exploitative and oppressive societies. Chaoton, in "Sarkargi Chakri", embodies the exploitation faced by the common people under the educated elites occupying positions of power. He has no authority and only responds to the command of his saheb, whose authoritative power is symbolised by the office bell that keeps Chaoton on his toes. Correspondingly, the protagonist in "Lambida" is an unnamed lawyer, whose defence of a murderer and initial apathy to the dead victim's mother, exposes the incapacity of the judicial system in dealing with oppression and injustice. These short stories, written two decades apart, expose societies in Manipur which were transitioning towards modernity and grappling with issues of class divide. The paper examines Guno's critique of the dehumanisation and marginalisation of the oppressed section of society by drawing on the fraught nature of the agency and autonomy of the subaltern voice. It is either silenced, as seen in Chaoton's case in "Sarkargi Chakri", or reduced to mere spectral voices that are mediated through the interior monologue of the protagonist lawyer in "Lambida". These stories thus prise open the complexity of representing marginalised voices and alert us to the insidious ways in which power not only silences them but precludes even the prospect of enunciation.*

**Keywords:** Hijam Guno, marginalisation, subaltern, short story, silencing

## Introduction

Hijam Guno (1926-2010) was a significant figure in Manipuri Literature whose works consistently highlighted the challenges faced by the marginalised section of society. He published several short stories and eight novels out of which mention can be made of *Laman* (1958) (Debt), *Khudol* (1964) (The Gift), *Eikhoi Tada* (My Brother) (1966), and *Bir Tikendrajit Road* (1983), for which he won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. He also published three volumes of short stories namely, *Phijang Marumda* (Behind the Screens) (1969), *Langjin Mangkhraba Kisi* (The Unanswered Riddle) (1981) and *Khadangi Sambru* (The Mole on the Chin) (1985). Notable short stories from these three volumes include “Sarkargi Chakri”, “Tollachou Girani” (Tollachou Clerk), “Achumba Thiba” (Seeking Truth), and “Khutnaiba Angaoba” (The Mad Artisan). Most of his writings dealt with the grim realities of class disparity, impact of World War II in Manipur, insurgency, oppression, etc. According to Ch. Manihar, “Guno is much concerned with the economically stricken and down-trodden people. A man of wide experience and further equipped with legal knowledge from long association with a court as its incumbent, his stories amply testify to all this despite being a little old-fashioned in diction.” (278).

The paper focuses on two short stories – “Sarkargi Chakri” (Government Service) (1969) and “Lambida” (On the Road) (1981), which reflect contemporary social issues related to class exploitation and the failure to articulate one’s own subjugation under a status quoist society. “Sarkargi Chakri” revolves around Chaoton, a simple peon in a government office, who is entangled with his official job and the domestic responsibilities dictated by his officer, referred to as ‘Saheb’. Due to his subordinate post, Chaoton is questioned, mocked and subtly threatened by the saheb, often blurring the lines between duty and servitude. The other story, “Lambida” captures the hollowness of the agents of justice meant to protect the common people. Narrated in the first person, it depicts a lawyer, who, blinded by greed and wealth, ends up saving a murderer. Haunted by his action, the story presents the guilt and regret of the lawyer and exposes the dark side of the justice system. Guno gives psychological insight into a guilt-stricken lawyer who succumbs to the unspoken societal norm of siding with the elites. The paper looks at how the voice of the underprivileged are not only silenced but distortedly appropriated by the protagonist. Thus, the paper highlights the different ways in which the subaltern voices are muffled and are almost always mediated through others’ voices, sometimes leading to misrepresentation. The paper draws insights from Guha’s idea of the subaltern class as dominated groups by either the colonial or indigenous elites (1982). In Guno’s “Sarkargi Chakri”, the protagonist Chaoton, who belongs to the rural peasantry in a remote village, is coerced into subservience that goes beyond his job’s requirement as a government peon. Isolated from his bearings in the developing urban confines of the government office, Chaoton (literally

translated as ‘the grown-up youngest’) and his father’s aspiration for the son to have a ‘sarkari’ job tethers him to his boss’s commands.

In “Lambida”, the first-person narration presents an ethical conundrum that not only comes belatedly but subsumes the voice of the wronged mother and sister of the murdered victim. The paper thus highlights the pertinent question raised by Spivak regarding the agency or its absence when it comes to subaltern expressions and position (1985). In “Can the Subaltern speak?” (198), Spivak argues that the subaltern forms the largest sections of the society, yet they have very little political power and are mostly excluded from official history and political decision making. She further emphasises on the subaltern’s silencing by dominant groups, be it colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism and uses the term “subaltern” to refer to people who are socially, politically and economically marginalised.

After the integration of Manipur with the Indian union in 1949, many social issues emerged. Citing Bimal Dev and L.K. Lahiri (1987), John Parratt observes that “(p)etty party squabbling, and personal ambition and greed—though certainly present in 1947—had escalated. Its results were chronic instability, corruption, and status seeking, and above all a lack of integrity and the political will to put the development of the state and the welfare of its people above personal gain” (130). Writers from Manipur have addressed this socio-political scenario through their works across genres and generations. Leimapokpam Damodar also notes that the “(n)ovel and short story are important genres in which the Manipuri writers give their expression to their aspirations and ideals keenly. Right from the pioneers like Kh. Chaoba, Dr. Kamal, H. Anganghal, R.K. Shitaljit down to H. Guno, Chitreswar Sharma, A. Biren and others the genres have been portraying intensely their ideals and responses to the constantly shifting situations of the society.” (Damodar 153).

By the 1960s, Manipuri literature marked its most significant phase in the history of literature, wherein works of writers such as, “M.K. Binodini, N. Kunjamohon, Kh. Prakash, Shri Biren, H. Guno, E. Dinamani, Chiteshwar Sharma, Nilabir Shastri etc... gave new color and direction to the Manipuri short story as a full developed art form” (I.R. Singh 332). Moreover, the writers of this period capture the turbulent atmosphere of the state through their works and bring to light the exploitation and sufferings of the common people. Nahakpam succinctly puts the changing trend in short fiction as follows:

With a fertile ground already set during this phase, short story writing in Manipuri sprouted as a matured genre. It was also the phase of Manipuri short stories where the writers could pull themselves out of the rubric of romanticism and straight away deal with social realism...

Witnessing the decadence that characterized public life and the growing economic disparity, the writers were catapulted towards these realities unlike the first stage where

the spirit of romanticism triumphed. Most short story writers lamented the breakdown of traditional morality and the attempt to replace the same with materialistic values. Dominant themes were the fear and anxieties of the times, corruption in economic life, the widening gap in relationships and cyclic dilemma of the poor. (2008 n. page)

These concerns are realistically depicted in the short fiction of Guno, which captures the unforgiving circumstances in which the marginalised figures, oppressed by class and denied accessibility to social and political institutions, are expected to conform.

### **The Bell of Oppression**

“Sarkargi Chakri” begins by highlighting the tension, urgency and enforced obedience in Chaoton’s life, symbolised by the shrill ringing of the office bell. The omniscient narrator deftly depicts the way the inanimate office bell, a symbol of class aspiration, authority and respectability, can render humans into subservience and clockwork servility:

Even without a wristwatch Chaoton could tell that it was past four o’clock. It was almost half past four. Since ten in the morning, he had been diligently waiting at the door for the bell to ring so that he could go inside the office. Sometimes he is asked to send for Hongba, to look for Chaoba, at other times he is sent on an errand to carry the work files to Tomba or Chaoba. And when the bell stops ringing, one asks him to “order tea”, to “buy a paan”, or to “deliver these papers”, and so on...

It was half past four now, but today the bell meant for him does not ring that often. It worries him. Because on the days the bell sparingly rings, his saheb’s work does not end. Actually, trouble awaits him on such unlucky days. (translated from the Manipuri by the authors, 115-116)

Besides managing his task at the office, Chaoton is also compelled to perform menial domestic tasks for the officer, like collecting firewood and running private errands. The harsh realities of exploitation are evident in Chaoton’s life when the saheb orders him: “Chaoton, you have to go to my home today. I almost forgot there are logs to be chopped” (Guno 1969: 117). Despite Chaoton’s stubborn silence, the officer bullies him into performing tasks that go beyond his duty or working hours. The story reflects multiple instances of exploitation in his workplace and Chaoton is never given the chance to express his reservations about being mistreated in this manner. When he shows the slightest resistance, he is reprimanded and reminded of his subordinate position, “I know, when faced with a task you leave no stone unturned to find an excuse. I can easily show you the consequences of such behaviour.” (118). Caught between the saheb’s unsubtle threat to abuse his power and his own wife Tathot’s (meaning ‘soft one’) wrath at home, Chaoton chooses to face the latter. The bruises on his hands after chopping logs is a

brutal reminder of his servitude and symbolises the silent suffering of his class under merciless employers.

At one point, Chaoton admits to his wife his lack of power and voice by revealing that he rushes off to work early in the morning just to drop off the saheb's son to school. Besides chopping logs, he is expected to clean cobwebs in the saheb's residence or toil during the harvest season (121). The unpaid labour piles up just as the debts do and yet, Chaoton fulfils his share of social obligations by giving ceremonial gifts to his colleagues. When it comes to him, "the babus in his office find it inconvenient to come all the way to his home in a remote rural corner" (119).

Thus, Chaoton epitomises the downtrodden section who only responds to summons or commands. Even when he possesses a voice, for he does express his frustration to his wife, the story shows that he has reconciled to the futility of speaking up against his oppressor. He can only shake his head as a response to Tathot's query, "But didn't you say yours is a government job? You aren't exactly your saheb's servant—why can't you voice yourself?" (122). This gesture not only symbolises the meaninglessness of asserting his unacknowledged autonomy but also his inability to freely articulate his subjugated condition to his own wife. Chaoton has a voice but *cannot speak*. Moreover, his saheb has prevented Chaoton from representing himself even in the safety of his home. Such is the extent of servitude instilled in the oppressed protagonist of Guno's story, who is controlled and dehumanised by the saheb through the use of a tiny bell. The bell is thus a symbolic character, representing control, surveillance and authority of the saheb. Although a mechanical object, it is capable of overpowering and determining the actions of people like Chaoton. It is the absent presence of the elite and ruling class, for whenever it rings, Chaoton must respond immediately without questioning.

### **Whispers of the Silenced**

If Chaoton's saheb is the absent presence, wielding authority and silencing him, then in "Lambida", the equation is inverted, wherein the silenced voices of the dead victim's family—his wife and mother—haunt the protagonist. Narrated in the first person, the story presents the life of a lawyer defined by moral bankruptcy. The story begins with the protagonist being followed by a figure on a dark lonely night during his walk back home. Trembling with fear, he tries to recall the voices and soon realises those are the echoes of the real voices he had heard at his chamber some days ago. The ghostly figure turns out to be the imaginary figure of the victim's mother who asks him for the unreturnable, namely her now dead son - "Piro haimi!" (give it back) (Guno 1981: 43). He replies to the voice, "Is it money you are asking for?" (43), only to realise that it is the familiar voice of the woman who had come to plead for justice – thereby showing that the language of justice can be steeped in a mercenary one. The haunting figure and voice following him makes him confront his own complicity in the exploitation of

and injustice towards the poor. Blinded by greed and money, he had saved a perpetrator, the son of a rich family who is charged with the murder of the poor woman's son. However far from rejoicing upon winning the case, he was troubled by the woman's voice –

“Piro haimi!”

“Piro haimi!” (ibid)

This ghostly voice evokes the chamber scene in which the innocent victim's young widow had come to the lawyer to plead for justice after the trial, having also brought their entire meagre savings with her. The narrator recalls shoving the money back into her hands and then pushing her out of his chamber. The distraught mother who was waiting outside begs him – “My child! Give me my back my child, lawyer babu! Since you are saving the murderer, I dare you to bring back the dead!” (46). Eventually, the narrator is taunted by his guilty conscience and the suppressed truth. Admitting to his guilt and wilful silencing of not just those who deserve justice but himself too, he says, “But not just I, my whole self, including my lips, have tumbled down into the pit laid by the rich.” (45). The remark reflects how justice for the socially and economically weaker sections are always compromised.

In Franz Kafka's famous parable, “Before the Law”, from *The Trial* (1925), the man from the country is doomed to a perpetually deferred entry into the gates of the Law. However, in “Lambida”, the two helpless women are turned away despite having ‘reached’, pleaded with and ‘accessed’ the law, as it were. The lawyer-narrator is like one of the many doorkeepers that Kafka's first doorkeeper warns the countryman about: “From hall to hall, keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other.” (Kafka 197). In Guno's socially realistic portrayal of the law's (in)accessibility for the marginalised, the justice system is shown to evade them, just as the Law as one ‘understands’ it remains shut to the countryman in Kafka. As the narrator reflects upon his own unethical practice, it becomes clear that even those within the legal system are reconciled to the elusive and arbitrary nature of justice and law. The search for justice is futile just as it is pointless to seek the truth about the perpetrator he has saved, “In today's world where the government functions only on paper, discussions occur only on paper, the idea of law and justice exists for name, what would be the point of my seeking the real truth about that man? In the eyes of the law, he is innocent.” (46). The mistake in Kafka's countryman, just as in Guno's marginalised women, is to have believed that “the Law...should be accessible to every man and at all times.” (Kafka 197). However, contrary to this belief, the law is defined by its inaccessibility, that ‘the law is not to be seen or touched but deciphered...the gate is not shut, it is “open as usual” (says the text), but the law remains inaccessible.” (Derrida 197). This is the paradox of the Law that is everywhere and surrounds everyone, but *knowing* it is always a postponed act, just like the countryman keeps postponing it, deciding “that he had better wait until he gets permission to enter.” (Kafka 197).

Such is the misplaced sense of justice the women in Guno's "Lambida" harbour, as they fail to recognise that the prosecuting lawyer who saved the murderer is just a cog in the judicial wheel, who is indifferent to whether justice is served or not. Towards the end of the story, Guno brings the reader back to the pitch-black night when the lawyer-narrator is being followed by the voice. In order to escape the crying voice, the narrator takes long strides, but remains sceptical of his own ability to escape the corrupt "maze of the legal system". (46). The story thus exposes the dark side of the judicial system that can be bought by the rich and privileged. The women's agency to question the injustice is robbed, but further, their voice is modulated and re-presented through the internal monologue of the narrator who caters to the oppressive system. Moreover, the spectral voice is but illusory, is filtered through his guilty conscience, and thus roams the night seeking redressal. The women in this story experience a compounded exclusion: they are at first oppressed by the socio-economic power structures, which prevents their voices from being heard, and second, they are further marginalised by the legal institution that sideline their truth. Their request of being granted justice for their loved one is muted in the dark chamber.

### **Conclusion**

Hijam Guno's two short stories, "Sarkargi Chakri" and "Lambida" are centred on the experiences of oppression and dehumanisation of weaker sections by the privileged and elite class. It reflects the societies of 1960-80s Manipur which was moving towards an era of modernity and saw a widening gap between the rich and poor. "Sarkargi Chakri" powerfully highlights the complex nature of power dynamics where common people are exploited by the educated elites and those in positions of power. The extent of Chaoton's subjugation by the Saheb is such that he is prevented from freely voicing his condition to anyone. On the other hand, "Lambida" exposes the murky truth that power and privilege can sway the course of justice. The story depicts the haunting, silent cry of the underdogs through the lawyer's guilt-ridden internal monologue. Moreover, it also shows the complex nature of the (in)accessibility of the law to the common people. Though the women in the story do not lack a voice, their voices are unheard and at worst mediated through the voice of the very entity that denied them a just sentence for the perpetrator.

The paper has thus explored the apathy towards various marginalised sections of society in Manipur—a simple peon, and a young widow and an old mother—all of whom occupy the fringes. Guno's two short stories powerfully reflects social realities and depict how institutions that are meant to protect the people end up being exploitative and even thrive by maintaining the hierarchy of power and status quo. The two stories have been interpreted through the lens of subaltern theory which deals with the predicament of the agency, audibility and silencing of marginalised voices. Both "Sarkargi Chakri" and "Lambida" explore the themes of oppression, exploitation, injustice and corruption, while also highlighting the harsh realities and struggles of

those in the margins. Ultimately, these short stories offer a rich insight into the socio-economic inequality and the intricacies of power and dominance in Manipur during 1960-1980s. As social fiction, both stories breathe life to the voiceless and downtrodden people, shedding light on deprivation and the unfortunate absence of respite from the same. In conclusion, “Sarkargi Chakri” and “Lambida” serve as a testament to literature’s ability to inspire and transform, and to represent the subaltern voices, however silenced or distorted they may come across in literary representations.

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