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AN ANALYSIS OF ZAWLPALA THLAN TLANG NOVEL: A WORLD WAR II NOVEL THROUGH CYNTHIA ENLOE'S CONCEPT OF SEXUAL POLITICS

Vanlaltana Khiantge^{1*}, Prof. Laltluangliana Khiantge²

^{1*}Research Scholar, Dept of Mizo, Mizoram University

²Supervisor, Dept of Mizo, Mizoram University

Email: Vanlaltanak@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT



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Cynthia Enloe's framework of 'Sexual Politics' is applied to examine the socio-cultural dynamics of Mizo society and the interactions between young women and male soldiers during World War II, as depicted in Khawlkungi's novel "Zawlpala Thlan Tlang." The analysis demonstrates that wartime conditions introduced 'militarized masculinity' into the domestic sphere, granting male soldiers entitlement and privilege over women. Focusing on the characters Vanthanga and Lali (Lalkhawthangi), the study reveals that female agency is systematically constrained through religious rhetoric and trivial material gifts. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the objectification of the female body as a reproductive resource and the imposition of moral double standards. The novel ultimately exposes the profound and often invisible psychological and structural harm experienced by women in the aftermath of war.

Keywords: Cynthia Enloe, Sexual Politics, Zawlpala Thlan Tlang,

Militarized Masculinity, Double Standards, Mizo War Narrative.

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Sexual violence against women during wartime is not merely an accidental consequence of war; rather, it has often been used as a deliberate weapon to defeat and dominate the enemy. Such violence reinforces patriarchal power by turning women's identities and bodies into instruments of war. Cynthia Enloe describes this phenomenon as "sexual politics." The concept of sexual politics is much broader than sexual relations alone. It includes unequal power and control between men and women, the relationship between masculinity and militarism, the objectification of women, the double standards applied to soldiers, different forms of manipulation, and how soldiers or those in positions of authority exercise power over women and other vulnerable people. Enloe discusses these issues extensively in her works, including *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: The Feminist Sense of International Politics*; *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*; *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*; *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War* and other books.

According to the United Nations, women are often among the greatest victims of large-scale armed conflicts. It describes the various forms of violence experienced by women as follows:

Conflict can result in higher levels of gender-based violence against women and girls, including arbitrary killings, torture, sexual violence, and forced marriage. Women and girls are primarily and increasingly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war. While women and girls are, in general, more predominantly subject to sexual violence, men and boys have also been victims

of sexual violence, especially in contexts of detention. (United Nations)

During wartime, soldiers generally receive great respect and admiration from society. Masculinity and soldiering are often regarded as inseparable. Men are commonly associated with strength, bravery, and the responsibility of defending the nation, while they are also perceived as having authority over women. This close connection between masculinity and war often leaves women as the invisible sufferers of armed conflict.

In *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II*, Stetz writes:

During World War II, the Japanese military recruited thousands of women from different parts of Asia to provide sexual services for frontline soldiers, with nearly eighty percent of them coming from Korea. These women became known as *comfort women*. The Japanese military established *comfort stations* throughout Asia and the South Pacific, where these women were confined. They endured every form of abuse, including rape, forced labour, and even death. (Stetz 19)

Similarly, Ramaj states that, "During World War II, Japanese troops forced hundreds of thousands of women from Australia, Burma, China, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, East Timor, New Guinea and other countries into sexual enslavement for Japanese soldiers; however, the majority of the women were from Korea" (Ramaj 22).

More than sixty years after World War II, survivors revealed that the Japanese military



had forcibly taken large numbers of women from occupied territories and confined them in military brothels. Referring to this issue, Cynthia Enloe writes, "Six decades after Japan's World War II loss, the 'comfort women issue' remains salient in Japanese politics. Japanese nationalists today fiercely object to efforts to document and apologize for the Japanese Imperial Army's 1930s–40s systematic enslavement of women to serve in its Asia-wide military brothel system," (Enloe 130).

War also creates significant differences in the way male and female victims are treated. This is evident in how war injuries are recognised and treated. Male soldiers who are wounded are generally honoured as heroes, whereas women who suffer because of war are often treated as though they are merely another form of damaged property. In this regard, Cynthia Enloe raises the important question, "Who counts as the 'war wounded'?" She asks:

Who counts as "war wounded"? Is a soldier suffering from PTSD officially counted among the wartime "wounded"? Is a woman soldier diagnosed with military sexual trauma counted as "wounded"? Does a soldier wounded by the "friendly fire" of his own comrades deserve to be listed among the war wounded? What about a woman civilian or a male soldier who was living or stationed downwind from an above-ground nuclear bomb test who later suffers a miscarriage or develops cancer: is she or he tallied among the "war wounded"? (89)

Through these questions, Enloe points out that many people who suffer because of war remain absent from official records, receive little or no assistance, and are rarely recognised despite their sacrifices. She argues that it is unjust to determine who deserves recognition based simply on gender or on the rigid distinction between military personnel and civilians. Therefore, it is essential to bring to light the experiences of all those who have suffered during war, regardless of their gender, social position, or the roles they played.

From the perspective of Mizoram, many women were drawn into situations of sexual exploitation during the war. Some soldiers, taking advantage of their military status and social position, behaved immorally toward women. Others viewed women merely as instruments for reproduction. Because of poverty and vulnerability, some women were forced to sacrifice their chastity and dignity in order to survive. Although these experiences were common in many parts of the world during wartime, this study focuses on how Mizo women experienced similar hardships as portrayed in Khawlkungi's novel *Zawlpala Thlan Tlang*.

The Second World War spread across almost every part of the world. At that time, Mizoram was under British colonial rule, and the Mizos made every effort to support the British Empire. As Thanga observes, "When speaking of the loyalty of the Mizos to the British Crown, the British referred to it as 'our King,' while we ourselves commonly referred to it as 'our Queen'" (Lalhmuka 91). During the war, Superintendent Major McCall sought to recruit as many soldiers as possible. He sent instructions to village chiefs throughout Mizoram, asking them to



send young men from their villages for military service. Eventually, the demand became so great that women were also encouraged to enlist. Consequently, many Mizos joined different branches of the military. According to Capt. L. Z. Sailo, "Young men from remote villages joined the Air Force, the Navy, the Engineers, the Supply Corps, and the Medical Corps. At the same time, young women also enlisted in the Auxiliary Nursing Service and the W.A.C. (Women's Army Corps)" (Sailo 6).

In Khawlkungi's novel, different groups of soldiers, including "British soldiers, Rajputs, Burmese, and Karens," are said to have entered Aizawl (Khawlkungi 41). During this period, rice became extremely scarce, and many people regularly travelled to places such as Tanhril, Sakawrtuichhun, and Sairang in search of rice (45). Alongside this food shortage, issues related to sexual exploitation also emerged:

Food and other necessities were extremely scarce in Aizawl at that time. However, those who knew how to associate with soldiers took advantage of the hardships brought about by the war, even though rice was scarce for the general public. While many people struggled because they did not even have a proper shelter, some attractive young women took advantage of the opportunity and spent time with British soldiers... While some people barely had enough to eat, others profited from the war, enjoying good food and earning money. (Khawlkungi 44)

This passage can be interpreted in two ways. The first is the interpretation suggested by Khawlkungi herself. Since the war brought hardship to many

people, those who were "good at associating with soldiers" found it to be a source of income. This suggests that financial need can weaken one's moral judgement.

However, the passage can also be understood differently. During the Second World War, food was scarce, whereas soldiers were among the few who were well provided for by the government. Although Khawlkungi describes the "attractive young women" as enjoying themselves with British soldiers (Khawlkungi 44), an important question remains: for what purpose did they earn money from these soldiers? If the money was used to support their families and secure their survival, then their actions were driven less by personal choice than by economic necessity. Since many people were suffering from hunger, these women were undoubtedly among them. Rather than seeking wealth or pleasure, they were more likely compelled to enter relationships involving sexual exploitation simply to survive. A Madrasi graduate serving as a soldier during the Second World War, Jisu Dess-a, reflected on this reality, "I once believed that women in India had already lost their chastity, but I found that in one corner, namely the Lushai Hills (Mizoram), it remained. Yet, before even a year had passed, I had to change my opinion. We soldiers ourselves are the ones responsible for corrupting them; civilisation has gradually consumed their innocence. It is truly regrettable." (Lalhmuaka 185)

The "attractive young women" described in Khawlkungi's novel were already living under difficult circumstances, and the war pushed them into situations where they had to do whatever was necessary to survive. Taking advantage of their



vulnerability, the soldiers exploited them and robbed them of their chastity. Therefore, the real beneficiaries of this situation were not the women described as "good at associating with soldiers" or "attractive young women" (Khawlkungi 44), but the soldiers themselves.

Among the Mizo soldiers who returned home on leave were also those who exploited the admiration and affection young women had developed for them. One such example is Vanthanga, a soldier serving in the IAMC, who used his military status to seduce a beautiful young woman named Lalkhawthangi from his village with little effort. Khawlkungi reveals his inner thoughts, "Deep inside, he thought that women were so easy to deceive. With these small and inexpensive gifts, we can easily turn them in whatever direction we want!" (Khawlkungi 72).

This episode presents Lalkhawthangi as someone whom men believe can be bought and manipulated through material gifts. It reduces a woman's dignity and identity to something that can be exchanged for inexpensive gifts. Furthermore, it suggests that once a man becomes a soldier, he believes there is nothing beyond his reach. Although military rank may not officially confer such authority, his privileged social position enables him to exercise power over those in more vulnerable circumstances.

During the Second World War, soldiers enjoyed a highly respected social status. As Khawlkungi writes, "Because it was wartime, soldiers returning home on leave were highly honoured throughout the village. Before they returned to the battlefield, young men and women organised farewell gatherings for them. Young women also accompanied them to the outskirts of the village, presenting them with hand-

rolled cigarettes. They were greatly admired and respected," (Khawlkungi 79).

Without being soldiers, or without it being a time of war, they would not have occupied such an elevated position in society. At the same time, the people of Mizoram were themselves living under constant fear and uncertainty. As Khawlkungi notes, "Air raids occurred frequently, sirens sounded regularly, and every household dug trenches. Whenever the siren sounded, everyone was ordered to take shelter in those trenches" (Khawlkungi 44). While ordinary people lived in fear because of the war, families whose sons had joined the army endured the additional burden of separation. In contrast, soldiers received sufficient food and supplies from the government, while many civilians struggled to secure even a single meal each day. Since everyone experienced the hardships of war differently, soldiers came to be held in exceptional respect and admiration for their military service. By contrast, the experiences of young men who did not join the army receive little attention in the novel.

However, the respect accorded to soldiers also enabled some of them to exploit young women. During one period of leave, Vanthanga reflects, "Since the war is still raging, I may die in a foreign land without leaving any descendants. I must act quickly while I am home on leave," (Khawlkungi 72). Driven by this determination, Vanthanga pursued Lalkhawthangi and, during his first leave, quickly achieved his objective. Although her brothers prevented them from openly meeting by assigning her household work, he eventually found an opportunity when she was alone at home:



Vanthanga pleaded, "Lali, please have some pity on me. I will soon be leaving again. The war is becoming more intense, and I truly fear that we may never meet again while alive. I will be far away in a distant land, spending my days longing to see your face. Will you remember me?" He held her tightly as he spoke... Lalkhawthangi no longer knew how to resist him. The most precious gift that a young woman could give before marriage was taken according to his own desire. (Khawlkungi 75)

Although Vanthanga presents his actions as an expression of love, his real intention is to ensure that he leaves behind an heir before returning to war. This becomes clear in a letter he later writes to his father, "Even if I should die in a foreign land, it would be less heartbreaking for you if I left behind a child. If you think she is suitable as my wife, I may return safely, and even if I do not, we will at least have a child," (107). The fear of dying without descendants created a deep anxiety among many soldiers during the war. This fear encouraged them to pursue women primarily as a means of reproduction. However, Vanthanga's actions are clearly driven not by genuine love but by self-interest and his own desire to preserve his lineage.

Although women possess the biological ability to bear children, their right to make their own choices should not differ from that of men. Yet, in Vanthanga's eyes, Lalkhawthangi's value lies only in her reproductive capacity, an attitude made possible by the privileged position he enjoys as a soldier. His true attitude becomes evident immediately after achieving his goal, "She is certainly very beautiful,

and I think she is already pregnant. But it does not matter. Even if I do not really want to marry her, the government is still paying us regularly, so why should I worry about paying child support?" (Khawlkungi 73). Vanthanga's willingness to treat child support as a minor financial obligation bears a striking resemblance to the attitudes of Japanese soldiers who forced countless women into military brothels during the war. Although their circumstances differ, both groups suffered as a result of war.

Vanthanga's lack of genuine commitment becomes even more evident after his relationship with Lalkhawthangi. Rather than considering her as his future wife, he continues to visit other young women at night, freely using his influence whenever he wishes. On one occasion, he invites Lalkhawthangi to accompany him to church, "Before they reached the church, he led her into a narrow path near the pig enclosure and toward the village's school. Lali tried to pull away, but she could neither resist nor refuse him. She was no longer in a position to protect herself. She simply followed him because he had already established complete control over her," (Khawlkungi 75). This episode demonstrates that Vanthanga viewed Lalkhawthangi primarily as an object for sexual gratification rather than as someone worthy of love and respect.

A further point worth considering is that, for Vanthanga, loyalty to a single woman appears less important than the number of women he could conquer sexually. Even during his leave, his thinking reflected the logic of what Enloe describes as sexual politics—measuring success by the number of women he could sleep with rather than by commitment or responsibility. Once women lost



what society regarded as their moral purity through relationships with soldiers, they often lost the power to make decisions about their own lives. They became subject to the authority of the very men who had exploited them. Although they were victims of war, their experiences were rarely recognised. They seldom appeared in official histories, received little public acknowledgement, and remained absent from the narratives of victory and national honour.

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