

**NARRATING CULTURE:
A STUDY OF SELECT WORKS OF NUCHHUNGI RENTHLEI**

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2018

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement of the Degree of Master of
Philosophy in English of Mizoram University, Aizawl.**



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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled NARRATING CULTURE: A STUDY OF SELECT WORKS OF NUCHHUNGI RENTHLEI is the bonafide research conducted by Ms. Lalthangmawii Chhangte under my supervision. Ms. Lalthangmawii Chhangte worked methodically for her dissertation being submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English of Mizoram University.

This is to further certify that the research conducted by Ms. Lalthangmawii Chhangte has not been submitted in support of an application of this or any other University or an institute of learning.

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DECLARATION

I, Lalthangmawii Chhangte, hereby declare that the subject matter of this dissertation is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University or Institution.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to my Supervisor, Dr. Cherrie Lalnunziri Chhangte, whose involved guidance, patience, encouragement, and critical insight, have proved invaluable to me.

My sincere thanks to all the teachers and friends at the Department of English, Mizoram University, and my colleagues at Govt. J. Buana college, who have supported me at various stages of my research work.

I am deeply grateful to God who has been a firm anchor in all my endeavours, and to my family who have lovingly nudged me on to resume my unfinished business after a break of twenty four years.

(LALTHANGMAWII CHHANGTE)

CONTENTS	PAGE
CHAPTER I	1 – 21
Introduction: Situating Nuchhungi in Mizo Literary Traditions.	
CHAPTER II	22 – 42
Bringing Folk into the Classroom.	
CHAPTER III	43 – 64
Culture in the Playground.	
CHAPTER IV	65 – 88
Negotiating a Changing Culture.	
CHAPTER V	89 – 98
Conclusion.	
Glossary	99 - 101
Works cited	102 – 109
Bibliography	110 – 118

Culture is a slippery concept that may mean different things to different people. Many scholars in the field of ethnography, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and even literary criticism have attempted to define the word “culture”. Their definitions, not surprisingly, are as varied as their fields of study. Matthew Arnold, the nineteenth century poet and literary critic defined culture as a social force that is motivated by the “moral and social passion for doing good” (Arnold 45). To the social critic, “culture was the creative expression of a particular society through its symbols, literature, art, music and for some, its institutions and the values and experiences that shaped them” (Briggs 4). The creative expression of a people constituted a heritage that was transmitted from generation to generation. Edward Burnett Tylor, an English anthropologist and founder of cultural anthropology, defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1). Culture, therefore, may be said to comprise of shared attitudes, beliefs, values, goals and practices which manifest themselves in social and other activities and passed on over time from generation to generation.

Culture is transmitted over time through artifacts, symbols, through traditions, and in the case of literate societies, through written records. However, “it can be upset either from within, through atrophy or conflict, or from without, through contact with other cultures, including contact through trade, technology, war, invasion, or empire” (Briggs 10). In many cultures across the globe, the link between the past and present gets muddied or broken because of the interruption of more sophisticated cultures on the indigenous culture. The danger of cultural disintegration of the indigenous culture becomes very real, especially in countries that have at some point in their past been colonized. The process of cultural assimilation and social changes

that results from these cultural encounters, therefore, engenders the need to preserve and safeguard the indigenous culture. Narrating culture through the reassertion of folktales, games, music and other elements of folklore in their narratives thus becomes an important engagement for writers in the process of reclaiming their cultural heritage. The reclamation and narration of culture through collection of folklore and through creative and critical writings has become critically important especially in the postcolonial milieu. In African countries like Kenya and Nigeria which have been especially hard hit by the onslaught of imperial western cultures writers have taken up the task of decolonizing the mind of their people and re-acquainting them with their own culture and traditions using differing, sometimes even contrasting methods. Ngugi Wa'Thiang'O believes that a sense of ambivalence develops in people when the formation of ideas and thinking is done progressively in a language which is not one's own. Hence, he makes a conscious political decision to stop writing in English and adopts his own vernacular as a vehicle for his creative writing. To him the reclamation of his culture involves the rejection of the culture of the colonizers which includes a rejection of their language. Chinua Achebe, on the other hand believes that the English language is a useful tool that has been given to him by the colonial masters and appropriates it to teach his readers that "their past, with all its imperfections, was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (Achebe *Hopes* 45). In his essay, "The African Writer and the English Language", he asserts: "I have been given the language and I intend to use it" (Achebe *Morning* 102). Again, to the diaspora of certain ethnic groups which have been scattered across international borders, and have at different points in their history, been in contact with and at times subjugated by more powerful and dominant cultures, narrating culture through the

recounting of their myths, folktales, folksongs, and traditional practices becomes a means not only of cultural reconstruction but also of re-unification of the ethnic group.

The Mizos (people of the hills) who make up one of the many ethnic groups in the North Eastern region of India reside predominantly in the state of Mizoram which literally means “land of the hill people.” They are also scattered in the states of Assam, Tripura, and Manipur, and also in parts of the neighbouring countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh. The first problem one encounters in researching their ethnic background is the confusion one faces regarding nomenclature. They were given different names by their colonial masters and their neighbours; *Kuki, Chin, Lushai, Pawi, Lakher, Hmar, Dzo*, being the various names by which they have been referred. On the subject of nomenclature, Lalzarzoa says, “There is an unending debate regarding the common generic name among the various ethnic tribes of the Mizo up to this day” (Lalzarzoa 17). The problem of who constitutes the Mizos is still a much contested issue which historians and ethnographers are trying to resolve by re-defining the term ‘Mizo’ and also by suggesting alternate generic names. The present research will use the broad umbrella term to refer to the many tribes collectively called the *Kuki- Chin- Lushai* by the British administrators of the late nineteenth century, though these tribes are now divided by geographical borders and are now known by different names.

The origin of the Mizos is not definitely known. Since their written records are only roughly a hundred years old, attempts to reconstruct their origins through their material culture as well as through their folkways and folklore among which the Mizo origin myths feature prominently. These myths which have been retained in the ‘cultural memory’ of the different tribes point to a common origin known variously as *Chhinlung, Sinlung, Khul* or *Khulpi*. *Chhinlung*, according to Sangkima, is said to be somewhere in the Szechuan Province in

Southern China (Sangkima 20). Legends and folksongs that have been passed down through generations point to *Chhinlung* as their original habitat. Rochunga Pudaite, in his book, *The Education of Hmar People* cites the following folksong:

Ka sieгна sinlung ram hmingthang,

Ka Nu ram, ka Pa ram ngai,

Chawngzil ang kohkir theih chang sien,

Ka Nu ram, ka Pa ram ka ngai (Pudaite 21). which is translated as

My famed homeland Sinlung,

I miss the land of my mother and father;

If only it could be called back like Chawngzil,

I miss the land of my mother and father (Lalzarzoa 20).

However, the theory that explains the emergence of a whole tribe or race from a cave, a subterranean abyss is too simplistic to be credible. As such, historians have tried to translate the *Chhinlung* myth to more credible factual accounts based on their research on Chinese history. Liangkhaia mentions in *Mizo Chanchin* (Mizo Narratives) that there is a Chinese narrative in which is mentioned a king by the name of Chhinlunga who lived around 750 BC. Chhinlunga left his father's kingdom with a large group of followers due to strained relations with his father. They settled in a place called Awksatlang in Burma. The descendants of these people who scattered to different places called themselves *Chhinlung chhuak* (those who came from *Chhinlung*). Yet another explanation is given by Lalthangliana who believes the word

'*chhinlung*' is derived from the Chinese Qinglong (pronounced Chinglong) which is a place in Guizho Province, inhabited by the Buyi and Miao (Hmong) tribes whose languages are also part of the Tibeto- Burman group of languages.

The people's migration from *Chhinlung* to Burma has been documented by historians as resulting from the repercussions of the policy of the Chinese Emperor, Shih Huang Ti who ruled from 246 -210 BC, who abolished all hereditary rulers and self- governing communities and set up a centralized administrative system. This policy resulted in a mass exodus of tribal people towards the south and it is commonly believed that the Mizo forefathers were among those who moved towards the plains of Burma during this great exodus. According to Kipgen, they then settled near the Chindwin river and from there migrated westward to the Kabaw valley which is called *Kawlphai* by the Mizos. Lalthangliana asserts that the Mizo settlements in the Chindwin and Kabaw valleys covered a span of approximately eight centuries from 6 -13 AD (Lalthangliana. *India* 70). During this time they lived amicably side by side with the Burmese or the *Kawl* as the Mizos call them. Their further migration from their settlement in the Kabaw valley had taken place, according to Lalthangliana, upon the invasion of the Shans, a powerful and numerous race, which took place before the twelfth century AD. The onslaught of the Shans resulted in the Mizos leaving their settlements helter- skelter in different groups towards different directions, resulting in the scattering of the tribes (73). A number of tribes settled in *Thantlang* near the *Run* river around 1250-1400 AD. They left this settlement and migrated to *Lentlang* near the *Tiau* river around 1450-1700 AD (105). Some moved through the Chin hills to the present Manipur, some moved southwest into the Chin hills and settled there while others moved on to settle in the southernmost parts of present Mizoram, still others moved across present day Mizoram on to Cachar in Assam and Tripura, while the majority moved westward,

crossing the river *Tiau* and finally settling in the present Mizoram by the seventeenth century. It may be concluded that though time has shrouded in obscurity the original home of the Mizos, most writers on the subject of the origin of the Mizos “agree that the term *Chhinlung*, whether a place or a person’s name, originated from China and that all the related tribes claim to have originated from this” (Nunthara 39). Scholars are also of the opinion that in spite of the differences that had come about in their dialects and ritual practices due to their long period of separation, “these tribes retain certain elements of their original traditional costumes, language, legends and folklore; the similarity of which make them understand that they were of the same stock and ancestry” (Malsawmdawngliana 90). What is evident from different scholar’s research on the history of the Mizos is that the most important source of history of a pre-literate society lies in its oral tradition. The interpretation of myths, folklore, and folkways plays an important role in the reconstruction and recovery of the evolution of societies which do not have recorded history of their ancestors.

Although the Mizos came under the colonial rule only for fifty years or so, the coming of the colonial masters and the arrival of the British missionaries soon after resulted in two significant changes; the transitioning of their society into a literate society and their mass conversion to Christianity. Written literature came to the Mizos in the later part of the nineteenth century when the pioneer missionaries, J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge introduced the Roman alphabet to the Mizos. These missionaries began to teach the Mizos how to read and write. According to Pachuau, “one interesting development that emerged very early on [following the introduction of the Mizo script] was the need the Mizos felt to record their past” (J. Pachuau 108). In 1938, Rev. Liangkhaia published a book titled *Mizo Chanchin* which became the earliest published monograph on Mizo speculations of their origin and their past” (109). In the

same year, in the southern part of Mizoram, Nuchhungi, a teacher in the Girl's school at Serkawn set out to collect Mizo folktales from storytellers and began to document these stories thus setting a standard accepted version of folktales from the many versions that were there in the oral tradition where "the same story differs with the one doing the telling" (V. Pachuau 26). She later on documented a number of traditional games which have proved equally valuable in the reconstruction of the cultural history of the Mizos.

The Mizos' adoption of the Euro-centric world view also resulted in the loss of a number of cultural practices and traditions which had once been essential components of their folk culture. Hence, in the Mizo context, the need to narrate culture arises due to the changed social milieu where the oral tradition was all but dying out in the face of modern lifeways, and also due to the early Mizo Christians' rejection of certain aspects of their culture leading to the loss of these practices in subsequent generations. This process of reclamation of the cultural heritage is taken up in different ways, prominent among which is the reclamation of Mizo folk culture through literary works. This study attempts to examine the role of Nuchhungi in the reconstruction and reclamation of the cultural heritage of the Mizos.

Nuchhungi was born on 7th February, 1914 in Ralvawng which was a day's walk from Lunglei town. Her father died in 1917 when she was only three years old and shortly after, her elder sibling Chalhnuni died after a short illness. It became a struggle for Lalthanglovi, her mother to fend for her daughters. Though Nuchhungi's paternal grandfather was a village elder, and his family, with a big herd of wild oxen, was one of the most well to do families in the village, Lalthanglovi's struggling family received no support from her in-laws. To add to her troubles, Nuchhungi, her youngest daughter was a sickly child who suffered from frequent bouts of acute stomach pain. Though the village priest performed countless sacrifices for her recovery,

her illness persisted. Lalthanglovi, disillusioned with the folk beliefs made the big decision to become a Christian. Upon their conversion to Christianity their family met with great resistance. They were cajoled and threatened and were subsequently persecuted when Lalthanglovi refused to renounce her new religion. Learning of the plight of her family, Lalthanglovi's brother Dengdaia invited them to settle in his village where he could look out for them. So the family relocated to Chengpui in 1920. However, Nuchhungi's illness persisted and her desperate mother decided to take her to Serkawn, the Mission Station of the English missionaries, in order to find a cure for her stomach problems. The lady missionaries there persuaded her mother to leave her in their care so that they could educate her and also monitor her health. Nuchhungi was enrolled in the Girls' Boarding School at Serkawn where she stayed until the whole family relocated to Serkawn in 1923. So began Nuchhungi's personal encounter with the western culture.

Nuchhungi started telling stories and composing poems at a tender age. As a student in the Girls School at Serkawn she used to entertain her friends with stories that she had made up. Her friends loved listening to her tales and would make her retell her stories again and again. She began composing short simple songs around this time. She would teach her songs to her friends and they would sing them as *pawnto* songs. The first song she remembers composing was a simple two line verse when she was only eight:

Kan vengah hian tute nge ni awm?

Keimahni le, keimahni (Biaksanga 288).

Who lives here in our locality?

It is us, it is us (my trans.).

This song became a great favourite among her peers and they would often sing it during their playtime. They would divide themselves into two groups, one singing the first line which is in the form of a question, and the other group singing the second line, which is the answer to the question raised in the first line.

Nuchhungi's entry into the world of writing began when she was commissioned by Miss Chapman to prepare text books to be studied in primary schools. In 1938, when she was packing to move to Darzo Mission School she recounts that Miss Chapman gave her a number of exercise books and told her to write down as many folk stories as she could. So in Darzo, she spent most of her leisure recollecting and writing down stories she had heard from her own mother. She also wrote down stories that she herself had made up. These and a few poems composed by herself and the teachers at the Boys School at Serkawn became the contents of the books titled *Serkawn Graded Reader Book I, II and III* which were first published in 1940. She then prepared a Primer for classes A and B in 1941. This primer came to be popularly known as *Zovi Bu* after the name of the girl in the story, "Zovi Thu" which was the first story in the primer. Her next book *Mizo Naupang Infiamna* (Mizo Children's Games) was published in 1965. It was revised and enlarged and published under a new title *Mizo Naupang Infiamna Leh A Hlate* ('Mizo Children's Games and Their Songs') (1994). *Nuchhungi Renthlei Thu Leh Hlate*, (The Prose and Poetic Works of Nuchhungi Renthlei) published posthumously in 2010, contains a selection of her songs and articles along with the traditional games and songs that she had documented in her earlier book.

The narratives of Nuchhungi selected for this research are *Serkawn Graded Readers: Mizo Thawnthu* (2010), *Mizo Naupang Infiamna Leh A Hlate* (1994), and *Nuchhungi Renthlei Thu Leh Hlate* (2010).

B Lalthangliana in *History of Mizo Literature*, (2014) credits Nuchhungi and PS Dahrawka as the first Mizo documenters of Mizo folklore. They both began documenting folktales during the nineteen thirties. Nuchhungi's folktales were published in 1940 while PS Dahrawka's collection was only published in 1964. Nuchhungi's folktales are written in a simple but flowing hand which according to B. Lalthangliana, is "a delight to read" (107). Books designed for use in school have often been omitted from definitions of children's literature because of the consideration that educational literature could be considered a separate topic. But according to Deborah Stevenson, "the division between recreation and education is not always crystal clear, especially when we're looking back at eras when schooling and school books look different.... Educational materials merit inclusion in places and times when few other books are published for children...." (180). Though Nuchhungi's books were written for educational purposes, they delighted Mizo children everywhere who read and re-read her stories for pleasure.

Folklore centres round the lives of the folk. It passes on the customs, beliefs, and practices, the social norms by which individuals in the society are expected to live by. Therefore, it has performed a pedagogic function since the olden times, educating the children from a very young age on the social practices, traditions, and beliefs of their society. The myths, legends, and folktales of a society uphold the values and beliefs of the society and convey moral teachings which the folk try to abide by. In a society without formal schools, it was an important source of education for young people. In the modern society its importance lies in its role as a means by which the history and cultural practices of the folk can be retrieved. In the absence of documents, it becomes the vital link through which a people can look back and understand their past. In societies like the Mizos whose entry into the world of the written word coincide with their contact with a more dominant culture, it provides the crucial link with their undocumented past

which is in danger of being totally lost. Hence, bringing folktales into the classroom ensures the continuity of the past beliefs, traditions, and values.

The advantages of bringing folktales into the classroom may be considered from different angles. Folktales are based on the oral tradition and are therefore structured for listening. They are usually short and entertaining stories following a chronological order. The stories are easy to follow even for little children. Tracie Pullum is of the opinion that children learn the art of telling and writing their own narratives from their study of folktales because they are simply structured, their themes and characters are easy to understand and the morals they convey is clear (Pullum 386). In fact, the study of folktales has proven to be a great help in reinforcing a child's basic language skills, that of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Archetypal Criticism propounds the interpretation of literary texts by focusing on recurring symbols, images, and the character types found in a literary work. The archetypal critic believes that all human experience is linked through literature by recurring symbols and images which are called archetypes. These archetypes are rooted in myths and folklore since primordial times, and are stored in the collective unconscious. Seen from this perspective, folktales become useful tools for the study of more complex literature because they contain the archetypes that are found in all kinds of literature. Stith Thompson believes the folktale to be an important and living art, underlying all literary narrative forms. "We begin to see the oral tale as the most universal of all narrative form, and to understand its relation to the literary stories of our own civilization" (Thompson Preface vii). Walter Benjamin remarked, "The folktale which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is and will continue to be the teller of folktales. Wherever

good counsel was at a premium, the folktale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest” (Benjamin qtd in Hutcheon 2).

Since the olden times, folktales have been vehicles through which a society’s values and morals have been taught to children. Since folktales are the “mirrors of society” (Dundes *Folklore* 5), they reflect the moral values of a culture and reinforce the codes of conduct that are valourized by the society. The folk taught these moral lessons to the younger generation through the oral art of storytelling. In the formal setting of the classroom the teacher takes on the role of the storyteller, becoming an important agent through which moral education is disseminated to the children. The study of the moral structure that governed their ancestors along with the study of the contemporary moral values helps students understand the past traditions and also reflect on the present moral issues and practices.

Of foremost importance is the role the folktale plays in education in its representation of the beliefs and values, the wisdom and knowledge, of a particular culture in ancient times. In the classroom the folktale becomes a pedagogical device that helps students learn many aspects about their past. The passing on of tradition takes place through study of one’s folktales ensuring the continuity of the cultural memory.

The rising popularity of western education and lifeways among the Mizos had led to the belief that the folk culture was inferior to the western culture, resulting in the neglect of folkways, even the outright rejection of certain aspects of folk culture that were contravenous to western culture. Folk culture came to be seen by a large section of the people themselves as savage and therefore, not worthy to be retained or remembered. A case in point is the rejection of the folk animistic belief and the many rituals performed to appease the numerous spirits believed

by the folks to haunt their immediate environment. It also led to the vilification of certain folk practices like drinking rice beer. One unfortunate casualty, the *Khuang*, (Mizo drum) which was a vital part of all festivities was banned in the church for several decades before being welcomed back as a part of the worship service in the church.

The institutionalization of folktales in Mizoram appears to have started with F.J. Sandy's *Legends of Old Lushai*, (1920) written in English. Lalzama states that "it was used as a text book in the Middle School for many years" (206). Perhaps due to the fact that it was written in English it did not become very popular. The Mizo folktales documented by Nuchhungi in *Serkawn Graded Readers* became the text that was studied in primary schools across Mizoram for more than four decades, from the early nineteen forties till the late eighties. The folktales read by primary school students for many decades has ensured the perpetuation of these tales, and hence the remembrance of many aspects of folk culture in the collective memory of the people which otherwise would have been lost. These folktales have become an important source for a number of research works being carried out in the fields of anthropology, history, sociology, and culture studies.

Von Sydow comments that "the art of the folktale is in its telling" (160). In the olden times the success of a tale depended not so much on the tale but on the accomplishment of the storyteller. The same storyteller is the person from whose lips stories of ancient times have passed on to the written page. In the classroom, the successful teaching of folktales rests on a passionate and involved teacher since, the teacher takes on the role of the storyteller. In the same way that the role of the storyteller is vital in the passing on of oral tradition, the teacher plays a most important role in successfully passing on the tales of olden times. Nuchhungi as previously stated, was an accomplished storyteller and interviews with her former students throws new light

on her art of storytelling. Nuchhungi was able to captivate her audience with her storytelling. A former student who was interviewed in this connection recounts that it did not matter whether Nuchhungi told them a story they were already familiar with. Her narration was so mesmerizing that they would eagerly listen to the same story over and over again (Thanseii).

During Nuchhungi's lifetime, her culture transitioned from pre-literate to literate, from animism to Christianity, and from folkways to western lifeways. In that crucial period of her culture's history, Nuchhungi, in her capacity as a teacher -storyteller and collector of folktales, was one of the important keepers of her culture's traditions.

Play, which is one of the most important universal activities of children, took a long time to develop as a generic subject of study. Certain forms of play are documented in some early ethnological accounts but they are usually discussed under the religious heading and are not identified as play. The nineteenth century cultural evolutionary theory, which was an outgrowth of the Darwinian theory of evolution, tended to see childhood as an incomplete stage, a preparation for adulthood. Childhood was likened to the primitive stages in the process of human development. Therefore, children and their lore were not taken seriously. Their games and activities were not worthy of scholarly enquiry. This may account for the earlier dismissal of children's play as too inconsequential to merit scholarly attention. *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1894 – 1898) by Alice B Gomme, and *Games and Songs of American Children* (1883) by William Wells Newell may be considered the first serious attempts at collecting and documenting children's games and play. The few other notable documenters of children's games who may be mentioned are Robert Craig Maclagan, Paul G. Brewster, Brian Sutton-Smith, and Iona and Peter Opie.

Interest in human play is therefore, a comparatively recent development which has resulted in a number of writings that touch upon the biological, sociological and psychological significance of human play. In this connection, mention may be made of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Elements in Culture*, (1938) which focuses on the instinct for play as the central element in human culture. He propounds 'play' and 'earnest' (or seriousness) as the two cardinal moods of life which must be harmoniously balanced. This balance can only be achieved through the existence of appropriate form of play. The contribution of *Homo Ludens* is heuristically rich in many ways and the main theme of the book which may be read as an interpretation of human play in its relation to culture as a whole, becomes significant in the present study of children's games as bearers of tradition.

The early twentieth century began to witness a departure from the prevailing cultural evolutionary notion that childhood in itself is not a worthy subject of study, that it is only a preparatory stage, a prelude to real adult life. The study of children's games began to move along theoretical lines with emphasis on the psychological, structural, functional, and symbolic elements of games with the "the socializing function [being] the most frequently mentioned in the literature on games" (Middleman 45). Research on the important role of play or games in the socialization process began to be stressed in the beginning of the twentieth century for, sociability, the process through which a child learns to interact meaningfully, is learnt through play. The skills of cooperation, negotiation, and problem solving are developed by children through games. This in turn equips them with social skills they will need as members of a society.

Games are not only tools for socialization but they also serve as cultural indicators. To Huizinga, "all play has meaning, and all life is, in essence, play, since it involves social

interaction and role playing, which are also basic components of the voluntary activity which we call play” (Huizinga 53). He goes on to say that “play is a phenomenon that is integrated into culture, and that the factor of play is an integral part of the cultural process” (172). Today, anthropologists, ethnographers, and folklorists find in children’s folklore fertile ground for cultural studies. Play occupies a central place in children’s folklore; therefore, the playground is a hot bed of cultural activities. Based on the theory that the culture historian Huizinga has put forth, play is closely related to other elements of culture such as value, ideals, politics, ritual, law, and the like. It is necessary “not only for human existence but for the continued development of culture” (Norbeck 21), for culture is passed on not only in the tales and songs of yore but also in the playground.

As previously mentioned, Nuchhungi’s documentation of folklore was not confined to folktales. She also documented a number of Mizo indigenous games in her book *Mizo Naupang Infiamna Leh A Hlate*, which was published in 1994. Traditional games, a genre of folklore, contain a wealth of information about folk traditions, beliefs, and values. Nuchhungi’s collection helps in preserving many indigenous games which today’s generation has largely forgotten. These games are also cultural relics that inform the scholar of aspects of folk life like the representation of children in Mizo folk culture.

The indigenous children’s games and songs that have been collected by Nuchhungi offer glimpses into the world of Mizo children in the past. With no document to inform the present generation, a study of the traditional games and songs of children throws light not only on the games themselves, but on the place of children in the social hierarchy, the adult’s treatment of children, and on the Mizo folk’s worldview, their values, and their social norms.

Lullabies are usually simple songs, at times nonsensical, but they also tell of the folk's lifeways, worldviews, folktales, and their myths and legends. A number of Mizo lullabies in Nuchhungi's collection allude to past events, to the places they left behind in the course of their migration, the folk belief in the afterlife, and the rite of passage of a deceased soul. They also tell of the social customs and practices of the folk.

Life was not easy for the folk in the olden times. Adults in the family had to work all day in the *jhum*, and in addition to that women had the added task of doing all the household chores. They were fully occupied from early morning till late at night. Hence, Mizo children were mostly left to themselves most of the time. The older girls looked after their younger siblings and performed simple household chores. The young men in the *Zawlbuk* took on the education of the young boys by teaching them the basic skills needed for survival in the harsh world. Most of the time, however, children were left to their own devices. They learnt to fill these moments with recreational activities. One such activity is called *Pawnto*, the favourite pastime of Mizo children. Children would rush out of their homes to play soon after finishing their supper. They would call their friends to come out and play.

Pawnto is a special time for children since it gives them license to take part in their own cultural practices away from the watchful eyes of the adults. This cultural space shared exclusively by children has given birth to many games and songs which have become part and parcel of the Mizo children's folklore. *Pawnto* games are meant to be played by a group of children, so it no surprise that all the indigenous games that are in Nuchhungi's collection are group games. Nuchhungi has classified her collection of games in her own manner, taking into consideration the way in which the games are played, the number of players, the gender of the players, and so on. An analysis of the types of games that are included in the collection reveals

that individual games are uncommon among the Mizo children. However, some of the games are gendered, some are played within a certain age group, which suggests the validity of Jay Mechling's observation that children tend to organize themselves into folk groups on the basis of age or gender (Mechling 95).

The transmission of culture in the modern society takes place in the formal settings of the classroom as well as in the informal setting of the playground. It draws a great deal of its sustenance from folklore. The study of the folktales and indigenous children's games that have been collected and documented by Nuchhungi and their role in the narration of culture in the contemporary Mizo society will be focused upon in the second and third chapters.

The fourth chapter will focus on the original works of Nuchhungi, both in prose and poetry and analyze how the changes in her society are negotiated in her writings. *Nuchhungi Renthlei Thu leh Hlate* contains several articles she had written for magazines and periodicals, along with seventy-two songs she has composed for children over a span of many decades. Particular attention will be paid to the traditional as well as the modern elements in the works of Nuchhungi: folk lifeways and values posited alongside religious and feminist ideologies to find out how Nuchhungi has negotiated the cultural changes in her society brought on by the existence of different worldviews and ideologies in the modern Mizo society.

No culture is pristine, thus, faint traces of the influence of other cultures on the folk culture of the Mizos are seen in some Mizo folktales. References to *Vai lalpa* are seen in the tale of Mauruangi; Rairahtea's story depicts the splendor of *Reng lal*, and "Chepahakhata Thu" narrates a contest of wit between the *Vais* and the Mizos. However, until the arrival of the British missionaries in 1894, there was no substantial disturbance in the folk life of the Mizos that could

be attributed to the influence of alternate cultures. The impact of the western culture had far reaching consequences on the folk culture of the Mizos, resulting in their mass conversion to Christianity and their adoption of the white man's way of life. The ramifications of this shift in worldview and way of life are seen in the Mizos demeaning of many of their own cultural practices and values. At a time when the society was slowly but surely moving away from its own traditions and embracing a new way of life, there sprung up poets and writers who began to narrate the lifeways of the past in order to revive in the memories of the people aspects of their own culture that were being eroded by the influence of the new dominant culture. The nostalgia that these writers felt are seen in their poignant rendering of the folk practices and way of life.

The first generation of literate Mizos who grew up under the influence of the western missionaries had also participated in the agricultural activities of the rural folk. The poetic works of the teachers who worked in Serkawn *Sikulpui* (the big school) during the nineteen thirties and forties reveals the pull between the old way of life and the new western lifeways. Nuchhungi's longing for the bygone days find expression in many of her poetic works and intrude every now and then in her prose writings which are mainly didactic and written under the influence of the Judeo-Christian worldview. The poignant longing for the folk way of life are depicted in her songs that narrate the activities centred round the agricultural cycle. Songs like "Lo Vat", "Lo Hal", "Fur Hlo Thlo", and "Buh Seng leh Chil," give vivid descriptions of the various activities of the folk which are connected to jhumming. The hard but satisfying work of clearing and burning the jhum, planting and weeding it, and the joyful harvesting of the crops are recounted in these songs with a feeling of nostalgia. The folks lived a hard life, toiling from dawn to dusk, engaged in back breaking work. Yet they learnt to make the most of their hard life. The folks'

apparent enjoyment of their tasks and their attachment to the land is clearly discernable in these songs.

Nuchhungi's longing for the disappearing lifeways of the folks is mixed with her excitement and enthusiasm for the novel elements that were being introduced to her culture. Like an eager child she greets the coming of the motor car and marvels at the clock's ability to tell the time. Nuchhungi welcomes the cargo plane's dropping of ration to starving people and likens the aeroplane to a great beast with awesome powers. The influence of western epistemology is seen in a number of her songs. Her knowledge of geography, literature, and other fields of knowledge is conspicuous in songs like "Khawvel Hi", "Ram Hrang Hrang Te", "Vanlam Thilte", and "Vaimim".

Nuchhungi did not confine her teaching to the transmission of western epistemology but took on herself the task of re-acquainting the youth with past traditions that had sustained their forefathers. The colonization of the Mizos had resulted in their adoption of the imperial mentality which made them look upon the white British as a superior race. Though Nuchhungi herself was a proponent of the Christian ideology brought by the British, she perceived the danger of mimicking everything that the white men did. The disavowal of one's own traditions and slavish copying of a foreign culture becomes the start of a culture's disintegration. Her works therefore depict the combined effort to teach the new body of modern knowledge as well as the rich cultural heritage of her own tribe. The role of the writer as teacher is one that is commonly associated with African writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi Wa'Thiang'O. The didacticism of writers like Achebe, spring from their anger at the demolition of their cultural heritage by European domination which has created generations of black men trying to become white men. To counter the uneven contest between the modern outside

influence and the local tradition, Achebe believed that the African writer had a particular responsibility to shape the social and moral values of his society. He believed that any good story, any good novel, should have a message, and should have a purpose. Hence he situates his writings in the social, political, and cultural context of the Nigerian society and affirms the oral traditions of his people in order to improve and liberate their repressed mind. Nuchhungi's role as a narrator of culture like Achebe's, is a conscious role meant to impress upon the youth the richness of the tradition that had sustained their society in the past.

A study of Nuchhungi's works, therefore, brings to the fore the concepts of tradition and modernity which are most often than not projected in a binary of opposition. In this connection, mention may be made of *The Location of Culture* (2017) by Homi Bhabha, which contains his most important essays. Homi Bhabha puts forth a number of concepts that work to undermine the compartmentalization of the world into 'self' and 'other'. One of the oft quoted concepts is his emphasis on the hybridity of cultures. According to Bhabha, cultures are not pure, they are at all times in contact with one another, and this results in cultural mixed-ness or hybridity. Depending on the theoretical lens one wishes to use a study of the songs and prose works of Nuchhungi may reinforce the binary opposition between and the dominance of one culture over another or augment Bhabha's concept of hybridity which points to the possibility that differing cultural elements may co-exist without one necessarily being in opposition, and without being in a hegemonic relationship.

Cultures may be defined in many ways but the one characteristic feature that remains constant is the fact that they are always in a state of flux, prominently so in the modern world where different cultures meet and act on each other. Negotiating divergent, often conflicting interests in order to find a meaningful cultural identity remains the task of the narrator of culture.

“Who are the folks?” is a question that arises in any discussion of folk culture. This question has been addressed by scholars in different disciplines in various ways. According to the anthropologist folk, or folkways, are the regular practices and conventions of everyday life. They are the customary ways in which people act. The sociologist defines the folk as “the great majority of people, generally agrarian workers, who were non-literate and nurtured their own forms of culture in opposition to that of ruling classes and yet often reflecting the same ideology, even if from a different class perspective...” (Zipes 8). Hence, the exact definition of “folks” is a tricky one that can be attempted in different ways depending on the perspective which one takes. However, it may be inferred from the various definitions of “folk” that, “a folk” is any group of people whatsoever, who “share at least one common linking factor” (Dundes *Interpreting* 6). It does not matter what that linking factor is, it could be nationality, ethnicity, religion, occupation, kinship, or any similar factor. Folk is a flexible concept, and a folk can be “as large as a nation and as small as a village or a family” (6).

This chapter shall focus on the folk that may be described as the peasant illiterate, bound by their shared ethnicity, kinship, and traditional practices, the ancestors of the many sub-tribes known to the outside world today as “Mizo”. Mizoram, the land of the Mizos is situated between latitudes 20°20’ and 24° 27’ North and longitudes 92° 20’ and 93° 29’ East, and covers an area of 21087 sq. kilometers. Originally, the Mizos are descendants of the Tibeto-Burman language group of the Mongolian race. Though there is no written evidence to document their migration from place to place it is traditionally believed that the Mizos came from China and that they migrated to their present place of dwelling via Burma, now called Myanmar (Lalzama 12). According to J.H. Lorrain, the ancestral home of the Mizos appears to have been somewhere in

the neighbourhood of South East Tibet and Western China from where they had moved southward and westward to their present habitat by slow degrees through the centuries.

Roughly a hundred years have passed since the language of the Mizos was rendered into writing. The history of the Mizos can be traced back a few hundred years before the coming of the written word. The rest is obscured in time. However, Mizos have a rich repository of folktales which have become vital in reconstructing the life of the folk in the olden times. Although it is tempting to dwell on folk literature and its historical and anthropological importance, it would detract from the present topic which aims to focus on the importance of folktales as bearers of tradition.

According to Stith Thompson:

Although the term “folktale” is often used in English to refer to the “household tale” or “fairy tale” (the German *Marchen*), such as “Cinderella” or “Snow white,” it is also legitimately employed in a much broader sense to include all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years. In this usage the important fact is the traditional nature of the material” (4).

Thompson further adds, “however well or poorly such a story is handed down, it always attempts to preserve tradition, an old tale with the authority of antiquity to give it interest and importance” (5).

Folklore as a whole, has gained a lot of attention since the twentieth century, mainly because it is believed to be one of the main sources through which a people can connect with their past. Where once education and folklore had been put on opposite ends and educators actually believed that they were doing their students a service in “suppressing local customs,

superstitions, folk speech, and other folkloristic traditions” (Dundes *Folklore* 57), educators today have realized the importance of folklore in education. Folktales have been included in the school and college curricula of many Western countries. It is interesting to note that in Mizoram, the English Missionaries, the very people who introduced the Mizos to the western lifeways and educated them in the English public school manner were also the ones who introduced the Mizo folktales in the school syllabus. In the postcolonial world, though it has become comfortable to blame the interruption of dominant western culture on a culture’s history for all negative changes in a culture that has been colonized, it is worth noting that the western education that the colonizers brought with them to their colonies has equipped their subjects with the tool to break free of their oppression. The adoption of the Euro-centric worldview by the Mizos is no doubt the result of the colonial encounter and the missionaries have evidently played a part in the Mizos’ internalization of the White man’s ideology and their subsequent rejection of many folk practices. It is becoming fashionable today for scholars and writers to vilify the missionaries of teaching the Mizos how to read and write, to have basic elementary education only to serve their vested interests. There have been instances where writers have made outright accusations on the selfish motives of the missionaries. This is a debatable point that may be endorsed or refuted depending on the perspective one takes. It is not the aim of this study to enter into the debate. Nevertheless, in this context, a question arises, “How then does one explain the deliberate inclusion of Mizo folktales in one of the earliest text books in Mizo? Is it just an aberration on the part of the missionaries, or have their motives been misinterpreted?”

Though it is impossible to measure the extent to which the inclusion of folktales in the school textbooks in Mizoram has impacted the lives of the students who studied them, it would not be wrong to say that the institutionalization of the folktale has greatly increased its

popularity. As a result of these tales being part of the school curricula, almost every Mizo child today is familiar with some of the Mizo folktales because their parents and grandparents had been taught these tales in school. Today, educationists continue to retain folktales in the syllabi of elementary schools and secondary schools due to their awareness of their importance in the development of children. Folk materials are frequently included in elementary and secondary school courses in literature, social sciences and music. According to Sylvia Anne Grider, “Teaching is so fundamental to the function and process of folklore that tradition cannot exist without it,” that tradition cannot be passed down from one generation to the next “except by being taught by a member of one generation and learned by someone in the next” (Grider *Passed* 178). The main purpose of bringing the “folk” into the classroom, therefore, would be to re-introduce children to their heritage by acquainting them with their cultural tradition which may include behavioural aspects as well as values and attitudes.

The modern interest in folklore is explained by Siikala in the following manner:

The process of reviving and inventing tradition in order to establish a link with the past is the result of a national awakening in different parts of the world. Oral tradition connected to the mythical past is constantly being discussed, reinterpreted and recreated in the everyday life of peoples.... The increased interest in tradition today is part of the identity process of ethnic groups building their own capital. The word “tradition” itself brings to the mind something connected to the past, something which has vanished or is vanishing, and which must be saved or revived (Siikala 131).

The tradition of including folktales in the language textbooks of primary and middle schools has continued long after the first folktales were introduced in the school curriculum of

Mizoram for several reasons. In Mizoram, the State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT) which is the syllabus framer of Mizo text books has followed the guidelines laid down by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) which includes myths, legends and folktales among the core components to be kept in mind when making language and literature text books in the elementary and secondary schools. Hence in Mizoram, as well as in the rest of India, folktales are incorporated into vernacular text books with the objective of reviving students' interest in their own culture and tradition. Folklore is about common human values and they signify universal characteristics of mankind. Teaching folktales to children shows them that diverse cultures share important traditions. They offer a number of practical benefits including the sharing of cultural traditions between generations and exploring important life lessons.

A seminal question that arises is why this approach should be undertaken specifically using the folktale. Dan Ben-Amos comments, "As a particular genre, folktale, together with myth and legend, constitutes the primary European generic classification of oral narratives that has been adopted in scholarly discourse" (101-102). What Ben-Amos comments about the European situation, is true the world over. There are a number of reasons why folktales lend themselves so effectively as a pedagogical tool which brings about an understanding and appreciation of culture and history.

Firstly, folktales are stories based on the oral tradition. They are usually short, yet full of suspense and therefore, entertaining. Folktales also have a time-ordered story structure because they tell about certain events in the order that they happened, for the most part retaining a chronological structure. They do not have flashbacks and therefore, the plots are easy to understand even by the young child. They deal, among other things, with the relationship of man

to nature. Jack Zipes in *Breaking the Magic Spell*, writes about the folktale as “an oral narrative form cultivated by non-literate and literate people to express the manner in which they perceived and perceive nature and their social order and their wish to satisfy their needs and wants” (7). Since folktales are about relations of man to nature, education that incorporates folktales engenders a heightened consciousness of the environment in the students.

Folktales are also vehicles through which moral education is imparted. Folktales have a didactic purpose and teaching them in the classroom is an ideal way to acquaint children with knowledge that is indispensable for their social and cognitive development. The teaching of folktales inculcates certain moral values in the students like, the perils of foolishness, the merit of wisdom, the virtue of faithfulness, and so on. Folktales further mirror to a large extent, the moral values of a culture or society. There usually is a strong underlying moral or ethical message in a folktale which throws light on the society’s stand on various moral issues, such as, being truthful, keeping a promise, the eternal struggle between good and evil, and so on. They also provide a greater and deeper insight to life by raising existential questions like one’s duty toward the elderly, poor people, and the society as a whole.

From a study of folktales children come to learn about and even re-affirm traditional values, ethics, social norms, including prejudices, rituals, and behavioural patterns. In this context, Elliot Oring comments:

Folklore in general, and folk narratives in particular, does not necessarily represent all that is good, beautiful, or noble in the world. Folk narratives are reflections of the societies and individuals which create and transmit them; consequently, they reflect a wide range of human ideas and emotions. Often one must get used to the fact that folk

narratives do not just document the triumph of good over evil and injustice, the sacrifices and martyrdoms in the pursuit of a righteous cause, or acts of humility and charity for which supernatural rewards are bestowed. Certainly such tales exist, but we must remember that folk narratives represent themes of violence, hatred, cruelty, racism, prejudice, sexuality, obscenity, and scatology as well (133).

Folktales abound with archetypes, for example the archetype of the evil stepmother, the villain, the fool, and the orphan hero are found in diverse cultures across the world. The story of the orphan hero throws light on the early society's treatment of orphans. The representation of women, children, and orphans in Mizo folktales reveals the social hierarchy of the Mizo society, its social practices along with its deep seated prejudices. Children may be taught to use these traditional narratives not only to acquire an understanding and reflect upon the norms, values, and prejudices of past generations but also to reflect upon and critique various aspects of their own contemporary culture. Thus, integrating folktales into the school curriculum helps to bridge the knowledge, values, and actions of the earlier generations with the children's own experience in the present, helping them understand the past from their own perspectives through deliberation and evaluation.

Folktales assist children in learning language, for "language is a component of culture and is scarcely understandable without knowledge of the other components of culture" (Lopatin 543). The frequent repetition of themes, phrases etc. can be useful for language learning as vocabulary and grammar are enforced. The short sentences and simple grammar assist in understanding the story. Reading folktales helps reinforce the child's basic language skills like speaking, listening, reading and writing. ." Tracie Pullum, in her article, "Promoting Writing with Folktales", comments, "They are easy to read, and have clear understandable themes,

morals, and characters” (Pullum 386). She goes on to say that Folktales “provide excellent models for writing” (386). They help to develop the child’s ability to recall details and to describe people and events. Children develop a sense of imagination when reading and studying folktales, and retelling the tales to others helps them to practice important communication skills. They help too in guiding a child to learn to structure his or her own narrative.

R. Biaklawmi, a former student of Nuchhungi recalled that when she was in primary school in the nineteen fifties the folktales in *Serkawn Graded Readers* were usually used for reading and comprehension lessons. This was because the folktales made good reading material which could engage a child’s attention and also because in those days primary schools in Mizoram usually had only one or two teachers to mind five different classes. These teachers had to engage in what is known today as multigrade teaching. Hence, making children in the higher classes read the folktales while they went to mind the other classes made sense. (Biaklawmi)

Northrop Frye (1912 -1991), a Canadian literary critic, best known as a major proponent of archetypal criticism was interested in symbols and images found in literature which provide a common thread linking the diverse literary experiences of different people. He uses the term archetype to denote recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character types, themes, and images which can be identified in a plethora of works of literature, as well as in myths and dreams, and even in the rituals of societies. The archetypal critic suggests that all human experience is linked through literature and that this experience is expressed again and again using the same patterns throughout time and space. The archetypes found in all forms of literature have their motifs that predominantly have their roots in folklore, which essentially means that even the great works of literature are palimpsestuous, that they actually have the blueprints of oral narrative. In other words, the folktale lives on in the modern story. Hence, teachers can build on

the folktales to teach more sophisticated literature by identifying the recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character types, themes, and images as the archetypal patterns will help clarify individual texts by connecting them to the more universal patterns that often transcend literature itself. Moreover, archetypal images and story patterns can be used interactively to encourage students to participate in discussions of the basic beliefs, fears and anxieties of their age. Thus, “the tales can be actively utilized to stimulate critical and imaginative thinking” (Zipes xiii) and therefore, provide a greater and deeper understanding of life and living.

The institutionalization of folklore in Mizoram, as has been mentioned, dates back to the early Christian era when the first Mission schools were opened in Aizawl (1894) and Serkawn (1903). Due to the paucity of printed materials in the Mizo language, the need for good learning material was acutely felt in the Mission schools. Thus, in 1938, Nuchhungi, a teacher at the girls’ school in Serkawn was commissioned by Miss Chapman (Pi Zirtiri), a missionary teacher, to prepare a text book to be used in the school. In 1938, when Nuchhungi was packing to move to Darzo Mission School she recounts that Miss Chapman gave her a number of exercise books and told her to write down as many folk stories as she could. In Darzo, she spent most of her leisure recollecting and writing down stories she had heard from her own mother and from her colleagues. Nuchhungi wrote in the Introduction to the third edition of the *Serkawn Graded Readers*, (2010) that she collected and wrote down thirty one folktales and short stories which she then submitted to Miss Chapman. These were checked by Pastor Challiana, the most reputed Mizo man of letters in his time. Subsequently, the folktales were grouped into different categories to be studied in classes I, II, and III. She also wrote down stories that she herself had made up. These and a few poems composed by herself and the teachers at the Boys School at Serkawn became the contents of the books titled *Serkawn Graded Reader Book I, II and III*

which were first published in 1938. She then prepared a *Primer* for classes A and B in 1941. This primer came to be popularly known as *Zovi Bu* after the title of the first story in the collection which was called “Zovi Thu”. *Serkawn Graded Readers* became the text that was studied in Primary schools across Mizoram for more than four decades, from 1940 till the late eighties. Hence, the *Serkawn Graded Reader* series may be said to be one of the first written sources from which the present generation of Mizos have learned their folktales.

Prior to Nuchhungi’s collection, attempts had been made to document some Mizo folktales. According to R.L. Thanmawia, the first known documenter was T.H. Lewin, popularly known as Thangliana by the Mizos. He wrote *Progressive Colloquial Exercise in the Lushai Dialect* in 1874 when he was the Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong Hills. In this book he included three Mizo folktales, “Chemtatravta”, “Lalruanga”, and “Kungawrhi”. Ten Mizo folktales appeared in Major Shakespeare’s *Mizo leh Vai Thawnthu* published in 1898. F.J. Sandy in *Legends of Old Lushai* (1919), documented twenty two Mizo legends. The efforts of T.H. Lewin, Major Shakespeare, and F.J. Sandy are commendable but do not bring out the cultural ethos that Nuchhungi’s folktales have.

Commenting on the universality of the folktale Stith Thompson says, “The same tale types and narrative motifs are found scattered over the world in a most puzzling fashion” (Thompson 6). Folk stories around the world form a network of connections and tales with similar themes, symbols and characters can be found in many places. The folktales documented in *Serkawn Grader Readers* are varied and fall into different categories and an examination of these tales reveals that many of them are variants of tales found in other cultures across the world. The archetypal characters and situations common in folktales of different cultures are also found in Mizo folktales.

The story of Mauruangi parallels the story of Cinderella in western fairytale. Mauruangi, like Cinderella, suffers at the hands of a wicked stepmother who makes her work like a slave while she pampers her own child who is mean and ugly like Cinderella's step sisters. In spite of the ill treatment meted out to her she never loses her innate goodness and, like Cinderella she is rescued from her life of oppression when a king marries her.

In the orphan hero tales of Mizo folklore are found common themes of orphan heroes of different cultures across the world. The themes of alienation, persecution, reversal of fortunes are found in the orphan tales documented by Nuchhungi. Mauruangi is abused, starved, and finally killed by her cruel stepmother who cannot bear to see her fare better than her own daughter Bingtaii. But because good eventually triumphs over evil in the moral world of folktales, Mauruangi is magically resurrected, her fortunes take a turn for the better and finally she is reinstated as the rightful wife of *Vai Lalpa*. Similarly, in another tale, Rahtea escapes oppression and imminent death in the hands of his wicked stepmother by running away and turning himself into a cicada when his relatives try to bring him back. Rairahtea is mistreated and sold to "kawrpawlho" 'the men in blue' (my trans.) for a bowl of coins by his stepmother. His life, however, changes when he acquires a magic *bahhnukte* from the python that he rescues. He becomes rich and powerful and wins the hand of a princess. What is conspicuous in these tales is the absence of a father figure to protect these orphans. Rairahtea's father is not mentioned at all in the story, Rahtea's father is ineffectual, and Mauruangi's father is complicit in his wife's persecution of Mauruangi. Melanie Kimball in her essay "From Folktales to Fiction: Orphan Characters in Children's Literature" states that the orphan is the "quintessential outcast (who) operates in isolation, and thus makes the perfect hero figure" (561). She goes on to say that they are "the eternal other" (559). They do not belong even in the most basic family group. "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” (Lalmawizuala 70). These stories reflect the plight of the orphan in Mizo society of old. The place of orphans in the Mizo society, as in most early societies, is at the lowest rung of the social ladder. They are looked down upon, belittled, and their causes not championed by the society at large. Ngaiteii is another orphan in Mizo folktale whose story differs from the orphans that have been discussed. She has a loving grandmother who looks after her after her parent’s death. But her story takes on a tragic twist, for though she is spared the wrath of an evil stepmother she becomes the sacrificial lamb of the society. She is thrown in to the raging waters of the river against her will to prevent the river from flooding the entire village. This tale seems to suggest that orphans seem to be more easily dispensable than other people. These tales, by depicting the harsh living conditions of orphans, serve as a general commentary on the folk society’s treatment of and attitude towards orphans.

Elements of the fantastic abound in the folktales of different cultures. Encountering magic, fairies, heavenly beings, talking animals, and magical beings who can transform themselves into any kind of creature is a common occurrence in folktales. Ramdinsangi, in her essay, “Element of the Supernatural in the Mizo Folk Narratives,” argues that “the supernatural elements of folklores or myths are an integral component of a culture, it is ‘dynamic’, and it reflects the various aspects of a society and gives meaning to the study of the lives of the people” (Ramdinsangi 42). In most Mizo folktales, one encounters the supernatural or fantastic element in varying degrees. The intervention of supernatural forces to aid the struggling hero is a common theme in the folktales. Mauruangi would have died of starvation had it not been for the timely intervention of the spirit of her dead mother who, in the form of a fish and a flowering

tree feeds her with good food and nectar. When she dies after her stepmother pours boiling water over her, she is resurrected by a magical serow who takes her to his home to babysit his child. While supernatural beings are often portrayed in folktales as being sympathetic to the plight of good people, there are others who try to thwart the aspirations of humans and often cause them great harm and distress. The tale of Raldawna and Tumchhingi features one such malevolent creature, the *phungpuinu*. The newly wed Raldawna and Tumchhingi are returning to his village when Tumchhingi realizes that she has forgotten her bronze comb. Raldawna decides to go back for her comb but puts Tumchhingi on the branch of a banyan tree to ensure her safety while he is away. The *phungpuinu* chances by the tree where Tumchhingi is perched.

Mistaking Tumchhingi's shadow as her own she begins to sing,

Ka takin eng chawi lovin

Ka thlain ngun bun chhing chheng,

Thi awrh chhing chheng (Nuchhungi *Serkawn* 49).

“I myself wear no ornaments, but look!

My shadow wears bangles, jingle jangle,

My shadow wears necklaces, jingle jangle” (Chhangte 3).

When it is revealed that the shadow is not hers but Tumchhingi's, she cajoles Tumchhingi to tell her how she climbed up the tree. Once up the tree she asks Tumchhingi to take off her clothes and ornaments, one by one, after which she swallows Tumchhingi in one gulp and then impersonates her. The hapless Raldawna has to reluctantly take her home as his bride. The mischief that *phungpuinu* creates makes Raldawna's life very unhappy until he

chances upon the faithful Tumchhingi who had somehow been resurrected and had been faithfully cooking for him and his family everyday while they were out in the jhum. The tale ends with the happy reunion of the lovers after they defeat *phungpuinu* and kill her.

Jack Zipes opines that “the magic of the tales can be equated to the wish-fulfillment and utopian projections of the people i.e the folk who preserved and cultivated these tales.” (Zipes 8) Along the same lines, Dr. Franz Boaz is of the opinion that all the supernatural elements that we see in folktales are not a reflection of their everyday life but are the “wishes” of their everyday life. The Mizos lived in constant fear of the evil spirits which they believed could harm them and even bring them death. The projection of their victory over evil supernatural beings in their tales is a projection of their aspirations to be free from the clutches of the evil spirits that fill them with dread.

The tale of Lalruanga, the sorcerer is a tale of magic and witchcraft. The tale abounds in fantastic deeds performed by the hero whose magical prowess grows as the tale progresses until he meets his match in the sorceress Zangkaki who outwits and kills him. The contest of might between the sorcerer Lalruanga and his nemesis Zangkaki is political in nature and suggests the hidden class and gender struggles in the life of the Mizo folk. According to Jack Zipes, “relocating the historical origins of the folk and fairy tales in politics and class struggle, the essence of their durability and vitality will become more clear, and their magic will be seen as part of humankind’s own imaginative and rational drive to create new worlds that allow for total autonomous development of human qualities” (Zipes 27).

A study of Nuchhungi’s folktales also reveals a number of archetypal characters found in folktales across the world. Stories about wicked stepmothers who impose great hardships on the

hero or heroine, usually in the form of beatings, starvation, and hard work are common in folktales. Such stepmothers are found in “Mauruangi Thu” and “Rahtea Thu” whose lives become hellish because of the cruelty of their stepmothers. The wicked stepmother is a stock figure found in a variety of well-known Western fairy tales like *Hansel and Gretel*, *Cinderella*, and *Snow White*. Variants of children with wicked stepmothers are also found in Kashmiri, Tibetan, Armenian, African, and Native American folktales. The parallels that are noticeable in these stories is that these children have been maltreated, some have had to run away in order to survive, but they grow up to be good and virtuous people who richly deserve their just rewards at the end of the stories. Mauruangi silently endures the mental and physical abuse of her stepmother, often being on the point of starvation, but she never loses her innate goodness for which she is finally rewarded. Rairahtea is subject to all kinds of cruel treatments from his stepmother after which he is sold off to “kawrpawlho” ‘the men in blue’ (my trans.) for a bowl of coins. The orphan heroes and heroines in the folktales are not made to suffer forever. They are able to surmount their misfortunes and overcome the evil forces that try to snuff them out. These tales depict the archetypal conflict between good and evil. Often the tales witness the intervention of the supernatural in rescuing the orphan heroes from their dire straits. When Mauruangi is starved by her cruel stepmother the spirit of her dead mother comes to her aid and provides food for her. Rairahtea gains access to a magical pot from the python that he rescues. This helps him perform marvelous deeds and gains him the hand of a princess. Rahtea flees from his wicked stepmother who wishes to have him killed. He turns himself into a cicada and flies away in order to break free and thwart his stepmother’s evil plans. Sichangneii, the beautiful winged woman from the heavens closely resembles the winged beings of the Rengma Naga

folktale “Of Two Worlds” and a Korean folktale called “The Heavenly Maiden and the Woodcutter” (Fanai 198).

“Mauruangi Thu”, is a striking Mizo folktale that has for its theme the persecuted heroine who, after a long period of trials and suffering emerges victorious, a girl who silently and patiently endures oppression until she is unexpectedly rewarded for her virtue. “Mauruangi has been regarded as the epitome of the ideal Mizo woman” (V. Pachuau 28), not only because of her beauty and skill but also for her meekness and longsuffering. Though her story may seem purely fictitious it is actually reflective of the ideals that are valorized by the society. Meekness, docility, and chastity are virtues expected in a woman while strength and valour are qualities that define the ideal man. The story of Mauruangi also exposes the prejudices that exist in the Mizo society like the prejudice against the orphan as discussed earlier.

Stith Thompson, in *The Folktale*, comments:

This oral art of storytelling is far older than history, and it is not bounded by one continent or one civilization. Stories may differ in subject from place to place, the conditions and purposes of storytelling may change as we move from land to land or from century to century, and yet everywhere it ministers to the same basic social and individual needs (5).

Storytelling has been a part and parcel of life in any pre literate society and men and women have played a prominent part in this great tradition, “but there is frequently a local custom that relegates all the tale telling to one or other of the sexes” (Thompson 5). In the Irish society, storytelling was the prerogative of men while in the Mizo culture storytelling was the domain of the woman. Storytelling is an art that requires great artistic skill and therefore, the

storyteller's role is of utmost importance in an oral society. Von Sydow, the Swedish folklorist distinguished "active tradition carriers" from "passive tradition carriers." The active tradition carriers or bearers were the individuals in a community who actually told the tales or sang the songs" (Von Sydow 139). Von Sydow called them "traditors" (144) and their tales were told in informal settings involving a variety of techniques like changing tone and pitch, facial expression, movements, and mimicry. The tradition of storytelling in Mizoram did not disappear with the coming of the written word but as its role as entertainer, informer, and teacher has continued to diminish over the last hundred years today it has become a dying art. The tradition of storytelling in Mizo society has always been considered the domain of women and most Mizo women have at one time or the other told stories, though with differing degrees of accomplishment.

Nuchhungi's mother was a very gifted storyteller. When the family moved from Chengpui to Serkawn she was called on many occasions to regale the hostellers with her tales. She was also accomplished in various folk arts and crafts. She was the dominant influence on her daughter who inherited her gift of storytelling. Nuchhungi started telling stories at a young age. When she was a student at the girls school in Serkawn she would make up stories and tell them to her friends who loved listening to her and who made her repeat her stories again and again. When she became a teacher at the school, Nuchhungi taught her folktales to her young students who read and listened to her stories with rapt attention. She was a storyteller who could capture and hold the attention of her young audience. A former student of hers recalls how they were often left teary eyed after a particularly touching story. Her youngest daughter, Vanlalruati reminisces that she used to cry for her mother to tell her stories. She remembers that storytelling sessions were a routine they followed every night before bed time. Her mother would narrate

stories from Mizo folktales as well as stories from the Bible. She recalls that when they were in middle school her mother taught them the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She narrated the story of old Tom and the students were transfixed; when the story finally ended the whole class started crying (Vanlalruati). When Nuchhungi talked, children listened and she transported them to a world of long ago, a world with talking animals and magical beings, the world of the folktales which fascinated them. K Thanseii, another former student of Nuchhungi in the nineteen sixties vividly remembers the storytelling sessions with Nuchhungi. Nuchhungi taught them different subjects like Music and Domestic Science, but some days she would treat the class to storytelling sessions which were one of the highlights of their middle school days. Nuchhungi would change the tone and volume of her voice, chant or sing the short verses in the stories, mimic the characters gestures and expressions, and make the story come alive for them. They used to be so enthralled by her storytelling that they did not mind if she told them a story they had heard before. Thanseii concluded her ruminations of those storytelling sessions, saying, “A awka leh a chezia zawng zawng ka bengah leh mitthlaah la cham reng.” ‘the sound of her voice and her gestures remain vivid in my memory’ (my trans.; Thanseii).

Nuchhungi's folktales have an oral quality which the earlier documented folktales did not have because unlike her predecessors she was writing in her native language and could therefore elicit the right word for the right emotion and situation. Her simple but flowing hand documented folk stories in a precise and matter of fact manner so that children would be able to read and understand the stories for themselves. Her choice of words and her use of the verse form at crucial and heightened moments in the stories make the readers feel as if they are listening to an oral narration. Her poetic adaptations of folktales such as “Thlanrawkpa Khuangchawi”, “Liandova leh Tuasiala”, and “Pu Vawma Tuikhuap”, while following the constraints of form

and meter, give the readers the feeling that they are being told a story. Her narrative style, whether in prose or poetry, is fluent and rhythmic, simple, yet dignified.

In her paper “Passed Down From Generation to Generation”, Sylvia Anne Grider remarks, “Tradition bearers must be master teachers in order to ensure the continuity of their knowledge”(178). The transmission of culture between generations takes place through education, in other words, through “the deliberate act of teaching the young” and that “in literate cultures the process is fairly formal and usually takes place in separate organizations: schools, colleges and universities” (Bauman18). The essential ingredient in successfully bringing folklore into the school curriculum is the well-trained and passionate teacher, a teacher with the gift of storytelling who is able to resurrect the folk through her narrations. Nuchhungi’s success in bring folk into the classroom cements this fact.

During Nuchhungi’s time, the impact of the missionaries and their teachings had started to bring about certain changes in the Mizo beliefs and ethos. Christianity had brought about a different worldview resulting in the community’s rejection of many of their old traditions and beliefs. Their folktale which endorsed and propagated the lifeways that they had turned their backs on were replaced by stories from the Bible. Nuchhungi, being a Christian, navigated around this ideological clash between her own beliefs and the beliefs of the folks by teaching them as tales of fantasy which embody the deep seated wishes and aspirations, and the fears of the folks. K. Thanseii recalls that before beginning her stories, Nuchhungi would tell the children that these tales were fantastic tales that had been passed on by word of mouth through many generations and may contain incredible fictional accounts. Her personal belief or disbelief of the credibility of the tales however, does not diminish her significance as one of the pioneer folklorists of the Mizos.

During Nuchhungi's lifetime, her culture transitioned from pre-literate to literate, from animism to Christianity, and from folkways to western life ways. In that crucial period of her culture's history, Nuchhungi, in her capacity as a teacher, storyteller, and collector of folktales, was among the important keepers of her culture's traditions. Her significance as a folklorist is evident in R.L. Thanmawia's comment on her folktales:

Thil bul intanna, (Mizo mythology) te, Mizo te thil thlir dan (philosophy) te, serh leh sang thil te, hnamzia leh nunphung te, kan thil ngaihsan zawng leh kan ngaihsan loh zawng thlengin a lang a. Hman lai leh tun lai inkara leihlawn pawimawh tak, Mizo hnahthlak suiikhawmtu a ni a, a hlu hle a ni (Nuchhungi *Serkawn* vii).

(Her folktales reveal Mizo mythology, philosophy, religious rites and rituals, life ways, and values. They serve as a bridge between the past and the present and serve to unite the different sub tribes. my trans.)

Folktales are not merely archaic narratives of the simple folk of the past, suitable only for entertainment. Though they have in the past wrongfully been seen as too trivial to merit scholarly attention, their importance as a link between the present and the past has been realized especially in cultures that have been oppressed and displaced by more dominant cultures. The essential values, beliefs, and attitudes they depict remain today, relevant to a great extent, and will remain so tomorrow. The spirit of selflessness, the Mizo term for which is *tlawmngaihna*, a virtue which was the defining character of the Mizo forefathers remains a fine thread that holds the Mizo society together. On the flip side, the society's distrust of a strong independent woman, its condescending attitude towards the *hmeithai* (widow), seem to be remnants of the strong patriarchal mindset of the past generations. Folktales hold up to the contemporary society a

mirror in which it can reflect on and critique the past practices and values and evaluate its own immediate environment in the light of the past. They also fill the social need “to give meaning to our present by linking ourselves to a meaningful past” (Bauman 32). Duilearga, the famous twentieth century Irish folklorist observes that though “the day of the folktale as a living pulsating literary genre has gone” it continues to be relevant today in its preservation of memories of long vanished cultures with the echoes of many voices from the past, and because it tells of past cultures before recorded history, it remains significant to students today.

(Duilearga 176)

Nuchhungi’s folktales, and her children’s games and songs, which will be discussed in the next chapter, provide the present generation of Mizos a link to their past and gives them pride in their rich cultural heritage.

Anthropologists and folklorists have long gathered folktales and folksongs in order to study the tradition and culture of pre-literate societies. To these scholars, children were considered the receivers of oral tradition but not the bearers. The serious study of children as bearers of tradition is a relatively late venture. Most scholars regard the two nineteenth century collections of children's games' *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1894 – 1898) by Alice B Gomme, and *Games and Songs of American Children* (1883) by William Wells Newell to be the first serious studies on children's folklore. These early works were mainly concerned with the record of different games and their rules and origins. They reflected the interests and prejudices of the anthropological folklorists of their times who were influenced by the cultural evolutionary theory that equated the child with the savage. The perspective of these cultural evolutionary theorists was that childhood was a simple, uncivilized state, and much like a primitive society, it was an early stage in the human development. Childhood was an incomplete stage, a preparatory stage for adulthood. Children's lore, which is found in their songs and games was regarded as inconsequential, too insignificant to be taken seriously by social scientists and the academicians. Thus, for a long time childhood was trivialized, regarded merely as “an indication of the past or a potential for the future, not something whole and meaningful in its own right” (Mechling 92). It was therefore, not considered a valid subject for serious study. Cultural evolutionary theory “did not just overlook the complexities inherent in children's folklore, it denied them. To the cultural evolutionary theorist children's folklore was simple; it was a direct link to the lower, and therefore, simpler stages of cultural evolution” (Zumwalt 26).

However, by the beginning of the twentieth century there was an important theoretical shift from the nineteenth century search for origins to a search for meaning. Scholars began to approach the lore of children as a worthy area of cultural study, for their studies revealed that children's folk cultures were fully developed, complex, and autonomous. Children have their own separate culture "with its own rituals, beliefs, games and customs, and its own, largely oral literature." (Lurie 194) Scholars began to address the dynamics inherent in the play of children and thereby to theorize on the functional, psychological, structural, and symbolic elements of children's games.

Ruth Middleman in her essay, "Let There Be Games", says; "the socializing function is the most frequently mentioned in the literature of games" (Middleman 47). Many scholars tend to see children's games as mechanisms for socialization. Frank A Salamone believes that games are primarily a means for socialization, for it is through games that "carefully structured bits of reality are presented to participants" (Salamone 209). He goes on to say that,

Games clearly reflect patterns present in adult life. These patterns are both cognitive and behavioural. In other words, the games teach patterns of thought (conceptions of reality) and the interactional results, or consequences, of these patterns. The rules of the game, are on examination, rules for life (209 -210).

Playing with other children gives a child its first social contact outside the home. Hence, children learn the art of socializing through play. Children use their games to reinforce proper behaviour in a group setting and they learn the importance of co-operative effort. According to Ruth Middleman, "sociability is learnt through play. Play and art are joyful; both forms were

originally developed by the realities of life, and are permeated with life from which they draw their depth and strength” (Middleman 47).

Children acquire and develop social skills through their play where they learn to take turns and share, where they learn rules and the art of negotiation, cooperation and conflict resolution. They learn to make out behaviors that are inappropriate, such as hitting, and how to apologize and make amends. They often use their games to reinforce proper behaviour in a group setting and also learn the importance of co-operative effort. Children need the social skills learned during play to enter the adult world because games prepare children for actual interaction in the real world beyond games. While playing with others, children begin to develop characteristics such as kindness, empathy and self-control. They begin to develop morals and to understand more about consequences.

The playground is one of the most important settings where children learn to create a shared folk culture. According to Sylvia Grider, the playground is “a microcosm – a laboratory in which we can learn a great deal about processes and functions of tradition” (Grider *Study* 162). A society that values its children must first of all take interest in the things they like to do to fill their time and playing games is the most important activity of childhood. Play may be defined as “a voluntary and often spontaneous activity” whose main purpose is “recreation, learning, spending excess energy” (Furlan qtd in Kovacevic & Opic 97). Games are a prime outlet of the play urge in children, an urge which is universal. Hence, for children, games are, first of all, recreation, a way of passing time pleasantly and constructively.

But games are more than just recreation. They serve as “cultural indicators and active agents of socialization” (Christenson 51). Studies on children’s lore are revealing the universality

and the antiquity of the rhymes, jokes, games, and superstitions which make up children's folklore. They embody dominant cultural values and patterns of social behavior of different epochs in history. Hence, the process of collecting and recording games is valuable because it can tell us about the culture under study as well as about the meaning and activities involved in the games themselves (51).

Every culture has its own collection of children's songs and games. "These children's games and rhymes and jokes do not exist in isolation: they have echoes in history, anthropology, archeology, literature, popular culture, and art" (Lurie 189). Collectors of children's games and scholars of children's literature have found similarities or connections between games that are played in playgrounds today and customs of the pagan folks of long ago. The Mizos too have a variety of singing and non-singing games played by children. Among them, some have been handed down from generation to generation. Since in the olden times there were no schools, these games were the main engagements of children who were too young to work in the jhum fields. Some of the lullabies and singing games like *pawnto hla* (pawnto songs) and *pipu uai hla* (songs sung while playing on the swing) must have been some of the oldest songs of the Mizo culture. R.L. Thanmawia is of the opinion that these children's songs must have been sung by children in ancient times (Thanmawia 27).

The majority of Mizo children's games are group games and they may be divided into singing and non-singing games. The games are played in various ways. Some games involve holding hands and forming a circle, some are played by forming a line and following the leader, some games are played standing up while others are played sitting down. These games provide the growing mind and body with good exercise. They are also a means of learning social skills and passing on folk tradition.

Nuchhungi's book, *Mizo Naupang Infiamna*, which was a collection of games and their accompanying songs commonly played by Mizo children, was jointly published in 1965 by the Assam publication board and Mizo Academy of Letters (MAL) and printed in J.B. Press, Lunglei. An enlarged edition of this book was published in 1994 and the title was changed to *Mizo Naupang Infiamna leh a Hlate*. The collection contains more than seventy singing and non-singing games, forty three traditional children's songs, and fifteen lullabies. The songs and games collected in this book represent the popular pastimes of Mizo children at different times in history. They also provide insight into the life of Mizo children of the past generations who indulged in these pastimes, of the adults' treatment of them, and of their place in the social hierarchy. Some of the games that have been collected are mimetic representations of adult activities and so inform the reader of the folk way of life. For example, *Nauawih Hlate*, the Mizo lullabies sung by young girls who babysit their siblings while their parents work in the fields showcase many aspects of the Mizo culture and tradition. Young girls looking after their younger siblings take them along in their play and sing lullabies to them when they get drowsy. These lullabies were most probably composed by adults but because they were composed to be sung to little children, they are usually included in children's literature. Lullabies are sometimes nonsensical, other times they are also renderings of folkways, folk worldviews and folktales. An example is the following couplet which goes,

An lal fanu Chhingi Zathum an chhiar e,

Zathum man chu keiin lei rual em ni le? (Nuchhungi *Mizo* 82)

Their chief's daughter Chhingi is priced three hundred,

Can one such as I afford three hundred? (my trans.)

This couplet sung to lull babies and toddlers to sleep depicts the social hierarchy of the Mizo society. In Mizo tradition, bride-price is handed over as part of a marriage alliance. The daughters of Mizo Chiefs were priced much higher than other young women and it was very difficult for commoners to pay such an exorbitant amount of money as bride-price. Moreover, matches were usually arranged between children of Mizo Chiefs and it was only on rare occasions that exceptionally brave and handsome commoners could win the hand of the village Chief's daughter. In Mizo folktales are found tales of forbidden love between the daughters of Chiefs and handsome young commoners or the son of a Chief and a beautiful but poor maiden which end in tragedy.

Nostalgia for the past are a prominent feature of Mizo folk songs and this is also reflected in the lullabies. The folks had in the past settled on the banks of the river *Run* and the culture's memory of this past era is projected in their repeated mention of the river *Run*. The frequent invocation of the *Run* has caught the children's imagination that they invoke the river in their songs for the little ones:

Khawpui ri dur dur e, van rial a chim e,

Ka nauvi kal nan e, runtui a lian e. (Nuchhungi Mizo 73)

The roaring thunder brings, a storm of rain and hail,

The swollen Run is too strong to cross, my child. (my trans.)

In the course of their migration, the Mizo tribes had had to struggle not just against inhospitable terrains but also against invasion by other tribes or races. In such circumstances they looked to the strong, ingenious, and courageous warriors for their deliverance. As such, the

pasaltha (brave warriors who were accomplished in warfare and hunting) were held in high esteem. Hence, the valourization of the warrior finds its expression in the many folksongs of the Mizos and even in the lullabies sung for babies and little children.

A khi ah khian rammu an kal dial dial e,

Ka nauvi pa tel ve maw ral that ve maw. (Nuchhungi *Mizo* 82)

Up yonder the warriors go marching,

Is my child's father among them, killing the foes? (my trans.)

The apparently simple lullabies reveal the Mizo ancestor's belief in the immortality of the soul:

Mitthi an kal zo ve, an run an pel e,

Rihlang an liam zo ve, hring lam ngai ve maw. (Nuchhungi *Mizo* 82)

Gone are the dead leaving their earthly abode,

Gone beyond *Rih* mountain, do they pine for life? (my trans.)

The Mizos believed that the departed souls have to cross the *Rih* lake on their way to reach *Pialral* (Paradise for the Thangchhuah) or *Mitthi khua* (Abode of the dead), whichever afterlife the souls are destined for. The Mizo's preoccupation with the afterlife is depicted in this short musing on whether the soul longs for the life it has left behind.

The values and life ways of the folks oftentimes find expression in their songs:

A khi tlang sang puiah tiandar a ri e,

Laltea sai a kap an sai lu lam e. (Nuchhungi Mizo 82)

High upon the hill the gong reverberates,

Laltea has shot an elephant, the trophy is being feasted. (my trans.)

Sa lu lam is a proud occasion for a man who has killed a ferocious beast that would help him achieve *thangchhuah* and thereby ensure his passage to *pialral*. The kill is met with much fanfare and the whole community celebrates with a feast. Children look forward to these occasions as much as the adults and this is reflected in the songs they sing for the little ones.

The songs sung to put little children to sleep therefore, are not merely the nonsensical kind, for, as mentioned above, there are a number of couplets that portray the history, life ways, values, and the eschatological belief of the Mizo folk.

It was the custom for children to go out after supper in the evening to engage in playing and singing. This activity is called *Pawnto*. Among the pawnto songs that have been collected by Nuchhungi is one that goes;

Ka thian (hming) lo chhuak rawh,

Zu chu zu chu kan nei lo naa, lam kan thai dawn e.

Khuang kan beng dawn e (sumtualah)

Pim, pim, pim. (Nuchhungi Mizo 76)

Come out my friend, (name),

Though we have no *zu* (rice beer), we are going to dance.

We are going to beat the drum (in the courtyard)

Pim, pim, pim. (my trans.)

This call to play depicts one of the many ways in which children mimic their elders. An important practice of the Mizo tribes was *Ai*, or *Sa ai*, which was a feast or ceremony, a sacrifice connected with hunting and killing animals. “The practice was the result of a belief that if *Ai* sacrifices are performed it would enable the spirit of the slain animals to remain servants of the hunter in the afterlife. And if the *Ai* sacrifice is not performed the spirit of the deceased animals would haunt the hunter throughout his life” (Malsawmdawngliana 157). At first the *Ai* sacrifice was simple, involving only relatives and neighbours of the hunter. In time it developed into a grand feast for the entire community, and a night of drinking and dancing for the adults in the village. Children could eat at the feast but they could not participate in the revelry that followed so they would parody in their play the drinking and dancing to which they were forbidden.

Bravery and chivalry were qualities that were valourized in the Mizo society. When a baby boy was born it was customary to utter, “*Mi huaisen, sa kap thei*” which means “a brave man, a good hunter” so that the baby would grow up to be a brave and courageous man. The wish to be strong and courageous was so ingrained in the children that they despised cry-babies.

They would taunt their crying friends with the song:

Tah belh tah belh,

Arpuiin chu hlawk, chu hlawk,

A notein kaileng phar dawr dawr. (Nuchhungi Mizo 74)

Cry baby, cry baby,

May the hen peck and peck you,

May the chicks drag you around. (my trans.)

A number of *pawnto* games which are mostly singing games, have been collected by Nuchhungi and categorized into several types and sub-types.

In-Ulen is a series of singing games that can be played by two or more children. When playing this game children hold hands and stand in circle. Then they start singing and, still holding hands, they run with great speed. Some of the songs that are sung in accompaniment to this game are nonsensical while others are interspersed with folk customs and traditions, and folk worldview. For instance, lines from one of the songs go,

Khita hrui han chhat tang nge

Tu lu khai nan nan emaw

Chhimbuka lu khai nan nan emaw. (Nuchhungi Mizo 1)

Let's cut the vine up yonder

To hang people's head with it

Or to hang an owl's head with (my trans.)

These lines which in their context seem nonsensical reveal a cultural practice that was widely prevalent in the pre-Christian Mizo society. The practice of beheading animals and people they have killed and hanging them up as trophies was something that even children were familiar with. Further down a few lines, the song goes,

Ka pu'n sial a chhun,

Ni khatah se li se nga a chhun. (lines 4-6; Nuchhungi Mizo 1)

My grandpa has speared a mithun

Not one but four and five in a day. (my trans.)

These lines refer to the act of *Khuangchawi*, when a warrior prepares a feast for the whole village to celebrate his mastery over the animals by killing of certain prescribed ferocious animals. It is a matter of great pride and honour even for the children who can boast of relatives who have achieved such great feats. Another song sung while playing this game goes,

A tel dawn e,

Hnute um pui a tel dawn e,

Zak thei lo pui

A tel dawn e. (Nuchhungi Mizo 2)

She's joining,

The one with the growing breast,

The shameless one,

She's joining. (my trans.)

Jay Mechling believes that children tend to organize themselves into different folk groups depending on their age or gender, and that this is a “powerful, limiting force on who shall constitute the child’s folk peers” (Mechling 96). The division of folk groups based on age seems to have been prevalent in the Mizo society in the past. The above song, which taunts an older girl for trying to join the play group for younger children shows young children’s resentment of the intrusion of an older girl in their play because she does not belong to their play group.

Some *pawnto* games have songs that narrate historical events and epochs:

Ngur kan lal lai

Sailo ngurpui kan lal lai

Kan thlek lel lel kan thlunglu

Kan vai riai riai kan chawn ban

Kan per chhek chhek kan phei khawng

Khawng leh zual. (Nuchhungi Mizo 3)

Chiefs, we rule,

Sway our heads from side to side,

Wave our arms from side to side,

We stamp our feet the harder,

More harder! (trans. Lalthangliana. *Culture* 115)

To play this game, children form a circle holding hands. They sing the first two lines moving around in circles, clockwise and anti-clockwise. As they come to the third line, they halt and move their heads from side to side. They wave their arms from side to side as they sing the fourth line. In the fifth line, they stamp their feet on the ground as they sing and in the final line, they stamp their feet even harder.

Lalthangliana says, “Though this song was sung by children at play, the literature is of a high standard. The whole song describes the characteristics of the Sailo chiefs.” (*Culture* 116). The Sailos were a brave clan that had established their might over many other clans. It is said that the first Sailo Chief ruled Tualte village in 1600. Since that period they began slowly expanding their reign to other villages so that in the following centuries they became acknowledged by other clans as the dominant ruling clan. The deceptively simple song not only showcases the pride and confidence of persons belonging to the Sailo clan but also suggests a social hierarchy based on clan and conflicts between clans in attempts to establish superiority.

Special occasions in the community were, and still are a source of great excitement for children:

Ka kawmchhak leh chhawng a min,

Nghalpa zuksial an ai e.

Ruai theh kan dawng chek chek e,

Chibai. (Nuchhungi *Mizo* 8)

Just two rows above our house,

Cooks the boar, the mithun, and the deer.

The smell of feast comes wafting down.

Chibai. (my trans.)

Sa ai, as mentioned earlier was a ceremonial celebration of the slaying of dangerous beasts by killing domestic animals and feasting. Though deer were not included among the ferocious beasts, the folk believed that killing these animals brought good fortune to the hunter; hence their killing was also celebrated in the same manner as the killing of the ferocious predators. On the day of the celebration men would spend the day drinking rice beer after which the whole community would have a feast. This occasion is somewhat similar to *Khuangchawi* and differs only in the fact that *Khuangchawi* is an even more prestigious event. Children enjoy these occasions as much, perhaps, even more so than adults. Their excitement over the prospect of a feast is portrayed in the song above where children sing of the delicious aroma of a feast being cooked and their anticipation of a good feast.

To play this game children stand in a circle holding hands. As they start singing, they go in circles, skipping as they go, and still holding hands. When they get to the last word *Chibai*, they stop in their tracks, give a smart salute with their right hand and then begin the game again if they wish. This particular song appears to be an adapted version of an older song as the use of the word *Chibai* as a form of greeting seems to have made its entry only in the recent past.

A traditional game which is still popular among children today is *Tira mei kaiah* (Hold the mouse's Tail) . The players drape a *puan* over one shoulder or around their waist and tie it at the back. Each player holds the end of the *puan* of the player in front of him or her. They form a long queue with the older and bigger players in front and the little ones in the rear. The leader bangs on a *chhepchher* (clapper made of bamboo) to keep the rhythm and the players follow the leader who quickens or slackens the pace of the movement at will. As they happily hold on to the person in front and follow the leader, they repeatedly sing the song,

Tira mei kaiah ha ha

Chhintira mei kaiah ha ha

A hnuhung kha seh rawh,

Lailen te kha seh rawh. (Nuchhungi *Mizo* 16)

Hold the mouse's tail, ha ha

Hold on to mouse's tail, ha ha

Bite the last without fail,

Bite the little wagtail. (trans. Lalthangliana *Culture* 117)

Lalthangliana, in his book, *Culture and Folklore of the Mizos* refers to this as a game played by boys while Nuchhungi does not specify it as a gendered game in her collection. Today both girls and boys take part in the game. As the rules of this game demand that the players hold on to the *puan* of the person in front of them, and also to strictly follow the leader of the pack, it teaches the participants obedience to rules and to authority. According to Lalthangliana, “the game teaches the children to respect their elders.... to follow happily in the footsteps of their elders.” (*Culture* 117) In the traditional Mizo society young boys are taught and trained to wait on their elders and not to assume leadership unless told to do so. This game, therefore, is culturally significant as it reflects the code of conduct in the Mizo society.

Playing on the swing has always been a popular pastime for children around the world. The swing has been a prominent feature in the life of Mizo children since the olden times. Nuchhungi comments that Mizo children had two kinds of swings; the first kind which was meant for older children was a big sturdy vine tied to a tree branch, the other end of which hung down from the tree. The hanging end was looped big enough for children to put their foot in. Children would put their foot inside the loop and swing standing up. This kind of swing was called *sahchah pipu* and the highest point that children reached in this swing was called *avanvawr*. The other type of swing which was usually meant for smaller children was made of a strong vine whose ends were tied to branches some distance apart. As both ends were tied children could sit on the vine and swing. For this reason this type of swing was called *mawng uai pipu*. Playing on the swing gave children great pleasure. They would swing up and down, up and down, and sing along in keeping with their movements.

An extract from a popular song while playing on the swing goes:

Pipu kan suih, ram tinah kan suih,

A sat chat tu mi u duai ngai lo.

Ka zuk thlir a Theite thuam hnuaiah,

Phunchawng Lalngo a tha sensiar e. (Nuchhungi Mizo 83)

We make swings here, there, and everywhere,

But come the braver elders to cut them off.

From my vantage point I spy, the pretty red *phunchawng*

Beneath the branches of a plum tree. (my trans.)

Another popular game in Nuchhungi's collection which seems to have variants in many other cultures is called *Bingte Sairawkah*. This game has certain similarities with the game 'Drop the Handkerchief' which is played in a number of countries. The players sit on their haunches in a row, cupping their hands behind their backs. One player sits in front of the row of sitting children. His or her job is to guess who has been given the pebble. Another player paces back and forth behind the sitting children with a pebble in hand which he or she will try to put into one of the cupped hands in the row. This should be done as secretively as possible so that it will be difficult for the player in front to guess the person in whose hands the pebble has been dropped. This is a popular traditional game which has even in recent times been played by young children who sing the accompanying song with great gusto.

While this guessing game is in progress children sing a rather cryptic song:

Bingte sairawkah,

Sairawkah leh chang panah

Piring parang kai kum dim diam

Tuana tuana ka se hawl rawh

Kaikum rawh, dim diam taka

Dim diam takah, hre thei rawh. (Nuchhungi Mizo 22)

It is difficult to decipher this seemingly nonsensical song, much more to translate it, so the attempt at translation has not been made. Jay Mechling points out three elements that figure prominently in children's folk culture, parody, nonsense, and secrecy. These are used by children in the play frame "to establish a shared, expressive folk culture distinct from and often resistant to what they perceive as adult sense of order" (Mechling 102-103). The song *Bingte Sairawkah* may be purely nonsensical but at the same it may also be a coded message as secrets may be very important and meaningful to children who form a relatively powerless folk group in the society.

It is difficult to draw the line between play and games. Though some scholars tend to relegate play to activities that do not have any rules in contrast to games that are played under a set of rules and are usually competitive, having losers and winners, others tend to use the words interchangeably. Most of the games that have been discussed so far are played under certain set rules but they are not competitive. The few non-singing games that have been documented by Nuchhungi are competitive in nature and are played by children who have developed a good mastery over their motor skills.

Invawr is a game that is played using five smooth round stones. It is difficult to ascertain when Mizo children started playing this game which seems to be a variant of similar games played in other parts of the world which go by various names like Jackstones, Chuckstones, Dibs, Dabs, Fivestones, *Otadama*, Tally, Knucklebones and so on. In the villages of Tamil Nadu this game is known as *Kallangal* or *Anchangal*. In Malaysia it goes by the names *Batu Seremban*, *Selambut*, and *Batu Serembat*. This game is said to have originated in ancient Asia in 1184 BC. (Singapore infopedia) In all these variants the game is played with five round pebbles or with “five triangular or pyramidal shaped cloth bags filled with either sand, rice, or dried beans”.(Singapore infopedia) It is usually played by two or more players. The game is competitive and involves throwing up the stones in various ways and catching them before they hit the ground. The players take turns playing and the goal is to score the highest point by completing the most rounds without dropping the stones. A variant of *invawr* which is played with a bundle of sticks which are about five or six inches long is called *Inbuh vawr*. *Invawr* is a game that helps to improve concentration. It develops a child’s dexterity and hand-eye coordination. The fact that the game is also played in a number of neighbouring Asian countries could be an indicator of the Mizos’ close cultural affinity with these cultures. Further research on the game may yield useful information about the cultural history of the Mizos.

Inbah or *Inkawibah* is another competitive game played by Mizo girls. To play this game, the hardened seeds of a big, beanlike-plant are used. When the pod is hardened and dried they are cracked open and the hardened seed which is flat and circular is taken out. This is called *kawi* and is used to play the game *Inbah*. This game can be played in three ways: *Bahpui*, *Bahte*, and *Insal Man*. The rules of these games may vary from place to place. The game can be played by two or more players. The best way to play these games is in a big group. The players divide

themselves into two teams. One team make their *kawi* stand in a neat row, the other team, the team that is in play, try to knock down these *kawi* by throwing their own *kawi* from a starting line that has been made which is some distance away from where the row of *kawi* are made to stand. Once all the standing *kawi* are knocked down, the group that is in play may proceed to the next step and so on. A player who misses her mark is out but if other players from her group proceed to knock down all the *kawi* she is in again, and allowed to proceed to the next step. This game involves skill and a player with a good aim is very much in demand for one player can keep the whole team in play for a long time. The boy's version of this game played with *kawi* is called *Inkawihnawk*. It differs from the girl's game in its rules and coupled with skill mastery of the game rests on strength, the ability to throw the *kawi* with great force. Besides the skills developed by playing these games these games teach the players the importance of teamwork not just in the playing field but for living with others in society.

Inbihruk Siak (Hide and Seek) and *In Hming Hriat* (Name Guessing) are games that were and still are popular among Mizo children as they are among children of other cultures. These games seem to be common to most cultures and need not be explained at length.

The indigenous games that have been documented by Nuchhungi are mostly played in groups which suggest that since the olden times the Mizo society had always laid great emphasis on cooperation and team work. Individualism is a concept foreign to most tribal societies and in the Mizo society where kinship, fraternity, and selflessness are ideals that are valourized by the community, where the important events of an individual's life - birth, marriage, and death become community events, where the clearing and weeding of the *jhum*, and the harvesting of crops become a community effort, it makes complete sense that most of the games children engage in are games that teach the importance of these ideals they will live by when they reach

adulthood. Hence, the playground has, since the olden times been an important place where the passing on of culture and tradition has taken place. Children have always been active participants in the preservation and conservation of a culture's practices and traditions. Their lore which is found in their play remains a treasure trove for scholars involved in culture studies and merits a more intensive exploration than has been done in this chapter.

The final words on the importance of children's lore in cultural studies may be summed up with the following couplet:

Sem sem dam dam,

Eibil thi thi. (Nuchhungi Mizo 73)

Share, Share, live live,

Hoard, hoard, die, die. (my trans.)

This simple ditty sung by children in the olden times when sharing what they have with their friends sums up the whole ethos of the traditional Mizo society, that of sharing one's time, possessions, and skills with those in need. It was this tradition of selflessness and the prioritizing of the common welfare that had sustained the folks since ancient times, a code of conduct that still holds together the present Mizo society.

Knezevic believes that "traditional games are a part of the purest ethnological heritage which, with its archaic and original structure, are passed on from generation to generation. They present a very important segment of the overall traditional folklore" (qtd. in Kovacevic 9). Many traditional games of Mizo children have been lost and forgotten in today's world. There may be many reasons to account for the disappearance of these games, reasons which themselves stem

from the changed cultural milieu of the Mizos. In the contemporary Mizo society, *pawnto*, or the unsupervised play of children in the evening is no longer encouraged mainly due to safety reasons and lack of space for play. Nuchhungi's collection was first published in 1964, at a time when adults were beginning to frown upon the practice of *pawnto*.

This chapter has examined how culture is narrated through children's games and how the preservation of traditional games are vitally important for the perpetuation of culture. Growing up in the early colonial period and having played many of the traditional games as a child Nuchhungi had firsthand knowledge of the games. During her own lifetime, due to the changes in the way of living, she witnessed the traditional games slowly losing their popularity among the children. In order to ensure that these games do not die out, she compiled a collection of the popular traditional children's games thus providing future researchers with a sizeable amount of raw data and also created conditions for learning games by teaching them to her students in school as a part of their extracurricular education. Taking her cue, the Mizoram government and NGOs have revived these games at festivals and social gatherings. Had it not been for her foresight in recording and documenting a number of traditional children's games, most of them would have been lost to the present generation. Moreover, her contribution is commendable for her collection has provided a sizeable amount of raw data which may serve as a basis of new avenues of study for future researchers work on.

Culture may be defined as a set of shared attitudes, beliefs, values, goals and practices which manifests itself in social and other activities. Within that, folk culture may be described as local culture which has been passed on for generations through the lore of the folk. Alan Dundes believes that folklore is “a mirror of culture” (53) and that far from being savage, it is a mode of thought and a kind of art. Stith Thompson considers folktales as a living art underlying all forms of literary forms, that folktales are beyond stories and are the elements of culture. They unfold the world view of the society.

The Oxford Living Dictionary defines modernity as “a modern way of thinking, working etc. or the quality or condition of being modern.” The modernization of societies has resulted in the disappearance of many folk beliefs, traditions, and practices which has led many scholars to believe that folk culture is dying out under the onslaught of modern technology. As such, folk culture and modernity are usually interpreted as two opposing binaries.

This chapter will analyze selected prose and poetic works of Nuchhungi, examining the folk and modern elements in her works. It will explore the inherent ideologies in her works and also focus on the writer’s role as teacher in an increasingly hybridized society.

The Mizo culture has been sporadically flavoured with influences from other cultures they encountered in the course of their migration from central Asia to the present Mizoram. This can be seen from folk tales like “Mauruangi Thu”, “Rairahtea Thu” and “Chhawnabawraza” which have been documented by Nuchhungi in the *Serkawn Graded Readers* series. These tales “smack of a faint acquaintance with the Hindu mythology or the existence of some powerful Raja somewhere. It is presumed that such knowledge about other cultures was gained by them

through their contacts with the people of Tripura, Manipur, Cachar, and the Chittagong areas” (Thanzawna 34). Certain versions of Hindu mythologies have found their way into the lives of the Mizo forefathers long before Christianity made its entry into their society. In spite of these encounters there was no great change in the belief, culture and way of life of the Mizos until the coming of the British missionaries in 1894 which opened a new chapter in the history of the Mizos. The cultural encounter with the west resulted in a dramatic change in their religious belief with all of the Mizos converting to Christianity within a short span of time. As is the case in many cultures of the world, the impact of Christianity started to change certain aspects of the Mizo beliefs and ethos. It transformed the Mizo society in many ways, ushering in changes that were both good and bad. The Mizos all but flocked to the new religion more or less forgetting the treasures of their own folk culture. They began to believe that their culture held no challenge against the perceived superior culture of the white man. The adoption of the white euro-centric world view in the early Christian converts led to the trend of mimicking the dress, manners, and practices of the white man resulting in the Mizos’ rejection or negligence of their own folk culture.

The early Mizo Christians believed that many of their folk customs and practices were detrimental to their new found faith. They turned their backs on their traditional songs and music and embraced western hymns. The colonization of the mind of the early Mizo converts is seen in their belief that Christian songs should bear no traces of the folksongs they sang in their pagan revelries. According to Lalzama, the converts sang “only the new religious songs, giving up their folksongs of lilting tunes and they did not participate in the community festivals and other traditional amusements connected with folksongs” (224). Therefore, as Christianity gained ground among the Mizos, folksongs became muted and were sung only in the periphery of the

society. The *khuang*, (Mizo drum) without which the folk singing and dancing was incomplete suffered the same fate. This was again due to the early Mizo Christians' belief that because of the centrality of the *khuang* in pre-Christian traditions it was inappropriate to be used in church worship. The Christian hymns were very well for the church services but outside the church people had no song to sing. The silence of the *khuang* and the folksongs left a big gap in a society that loved to sing. However, when the revival came to the church the Mizos began to compose Christian songs "in ways that were indigenous to them" (Kipgen 270). The Mizos attempt at the reclamation of their culture in the face of colonial repression gave birth to a new type of songs called *Lengkhawm zai*. These songs had the same somber and haunting melodies that the pre-Christian songs had and they quickly became popular for they were well suited to the Mizo sentiments. Western hymns were also appropriated to traditional tunes. So, even in the early Christian era, the need to reclaim the cultural practices that had been lost with the interruption of the western culture had been strongly felt by the Mizos themselves.

Nuchhungi was among the first women to receive western education and be recruited as a teacher in the Mission School in Serkawn. Her contact with the missionaries came by after a series of misfortunes in her family and her own life. Nuchhungi was a sickly child who suffered from bouts of acute stomach pain. In order to find a cure for her, Nuchhungi's mother took her to Serkawn where the missionaries offered to keep her in the Girls' Boarding School where they would educate her and monitor her health at the same time. So began Nuchhungi's personal encounter with the western culture. Though educated in the western lifeways since she was a small child her works reverberate with stories from folklore. This may be attributed more to the influence of her mother who fed her childhood imagination with tales she herself had heard from her own mother.

Nuchhungi's attempts at storytelling and poetry composition began when she was still at a very tender age. The first song she remembers composing was a simple two line verse when she was only eight. As a young girl she would teach her songs to her friends and they would sing them as *pawnto* songs.

Nuchhungi called herself a children's poet by accident. However, in spite of her unplanned entry, her career as a writer of children's literature was long and fruitful. She composed more than seventy songs for children and it is in these songs composed for children over the years which are contained in *Nuchhungi Renthlei Thu leh Hlate* (The Prose and Poetic Works of Nuchhungi) that the folk and modern element converge, reflecting the ambivalent feelings that is common in writers who write in a period of transition. The book contains a collection of seventy two songs Nuchhungi composed during her long literary career. These songs are classed into three categories, meant for nursery, primary, and middle school children and are all set to music. Nuchhungi was fortunate to experience both the relatively pristine folk life of the Mizos as well as the new modern culture that was slowly replacing the folk way of life. As a consequence, she often lapses into reminiscences of folk life and folk practices that in her own time were giving way to new practices from the western culture. Her songs embody her nostalgia for the old way of life while at the same time they embrace the enlightenment and advancement that the new culture brought to the Mizos.

“Lo Vat”, “Lo Hal”, “Fur Hlo Thlo”, and “Buh Seng leh Chil”, are centred around the jhum field and portray an important aspect of folk life, mainly the traditional activities of the agricultural cycle. The traditional occupation of the Mizos is the slash and burn jhum cultivation which can be divided into four seasons mainly, clearing the field, seed sowing, weed clearing

and reaping or harvesting. These songs also reflect the attachment of the Mizo people to their land.

“Lo Vat” portrays the activity of clearing the forest to prepare it for cultivation. As the folk practised shifting cultivation, it was the tradition for able-bodied men to look for suitable plots to clear each year. As clearing the forest is a task that calls for physical strength, it was usually the men who cleared the forest. In the song, the able young men are likened to Lalruanga, the mighty sorcerer of Mizo folklore. The rich visual and imaginative quality of the song can be seen in the following lines:

Hmana Lalruang dawi tin thiam iang

Hnam an len e, tukram lentu zawng

An vai kiang zel e, hmatiangah. (Biaksanga 360)

Like Lalruanga, the magician of old,

Their daos they raise, and clear the foliage,

And the undergrowth before them. (my trans.)

The song concludes with the comparison of the clearing of the plot with the image of the *puan* (a sarong like traditional attire of the Mizos) being taken off. The taking off of the *puan* suggests nakedness and is an apt image to depict the naked land that has been cleared of all its green covering.

Puan ang an hlip kiang lentu zing ruai

An uai zo thin hnuchhawl zawnge. (360)

The overgrowth, like *puan*, is peeled off

Its leaves left to wither and and die. (my trans.)

Nuchhungi mentions in a footnote to the song that she had depicted this activity in verse so that the generations to come will learn how their ancestors farmed their lands. It gives the young reader an idea about the hard work involved in clearing the jungle for jhumming.

“Lo Hal” is a song about the annual burning of the plots selected for jhumming. This follows the clearing of the jungle for jhumming. The hard and dangerous work of setting the jhum fields ablaze and containing the fire so that it does not spread out of control is given a pictorial representation in the song. The comparison of the flaming fire consuming the foliage to a raging wild beast is a striking imagery that shows simultaneously, the power and might of the fire as well as the danger of the activity itself.

Zoram khuavel hring mi'n,

Chhermei chawiin tuan zai an rel.

Senmei rawn chhep zel, chappui rawn chawiin,

Senpan hran zai rel e, kawlkei sahrang iangin;

Hlap thum vung vung zelin,

Mualpui dung a rawn tuam duai duai.(333)

The dwellers of Zoram,
With flaming torches in their hands,
Light the piles of the sun dried overgrowth,
The raging red fire comes like a beast unleashed;
Roaring and breezing through.
Till it envelopes the entire field. (my trans.)

“Fur Hlo Thlo” describes the activity of clearing the weeds in the jhum plots. Fed by the monsoon rains, the rice plants grow fast and so do the weeds that grow among them:

Khua fur khuangruah lo surin,
Sawral zamualpui saw thlir teh u;
Kan thlawh sawmfangte ka rah,
Chawr tin lo duah tan leh ta. (341)

The monsoon rains have arrived,
Look now, on the paddy fields yonder;
Visible from a distance,
Are weeds among the paddy. (my trans.)

It is time to begin the work of clearing the weeds. All able bodied adults, both male and female, enthusiastically prepare to get to work. The second stanza of the song depicts young men and women getting ready their tools of sharpened hoes and daos.

Lawm duh zawng nen tuan turin,

Nui hiauvin zamual an liam. (341)

With a partner of their choice,

Happily they march away to the fields. (my trans.)

They pick a partner to be their *lawm* (a *lawm* is a partner with whom a person will work reciprocally, one day in his or her own jhum and the next in the partner's jhum and so on.) This practice of *lawm rawih* makes young people look forward to a difficult task that would otherwise have been a mere drudgery.

The next stanza enacts the way in which the young people go about their work. They start weeding from the bottom of the plot, moving forward, up and sideways, up and sideways, rhythmically chanting “*hei ha, hui ha, hei ha, hui,*” together. They work diligently together, talking and laughing as they work until the evening begins to cast its shadow. Then they decide to rest from their work.

They go back home cheerfully, laughing and joking on the way. The final stanza tells of the practice of leaving a leafy branch at the juncture where the jhums branch off to inform friends in the neighbouring fields that they have gone before them.

“Buh Seng leh Chil” is a song that depicts men and women engaged in harvest. The harvest season was to the folk, both young and old, the happiest time of the year. The ripened

paddy would be cut with sickles and deposited in a big heap in an elevated storage bin or a clearing in the jhum field. Men and women would dance and trample on them to separate the grains from the stalk, merrily singing and invoking a blessing for their harvest. The song gives the reader a glimpse of the laughter and merriment that accompanied the work of harvesting.

What stands out in the songs that portray the agricultural life of the Mizos is the folk's genuine enjoyment of the activities that revolved around the agricultural cycles. In the song, "Lo Ka Thlir", children who are too young to work in the jhum fields eagerly scan the horizon for a glimpse of the place where their parents spend most of their waking hours:

Zamualpui saw ka han thlir changin

Ka chun leh zua tukram an tuanna;

Sawmfang hring nghial a zing dumdur e,

Mualhawih iang bukthlam var nen ka hmu e. (335)

When I turn my eyes towards the fields

Where my dear mother and father toil;

The sight of green paddy stalks yonder,

And a white hut in the midst meets my eyes.(my trans.)

"Thlanrawkpa Khuangchawi", "Liandova te Unau" and "Pu Vawma Tuikhuah" are ballads Nuchhungi has adapted from folktales. *Thlanrawkpa* (grave robber) was a mythical character from the time the Mizo people had been sealed off under the gigantic rock called *Chhinlung*. He was half human, half *Lasi* (a nymph of the woods with powers over the animals).

He was big, strong, and brave and for his accomplishment of being the first to domesticate the sial (Indian bison), he was elected Chief by the people. *Thlanrawkpa* decided to host a ceremony called *Khuangchawi* which involved throwing a sumptuous feast for the whole community. Nuchhungi's poetic rendering of the *Khuangchawi* party is a feast for the mind's eyes and ears. "Thlanrawkpa *Khuangchawi*" (322) gives us the sights and sounds of the merrymaking taking place. The use of onomatopoeic words, "*Kut ben ri ngaiin, thep, thep, thep, thep, thep, thep,*" echo the sound of clapping as does the words "*pim, pim, pim, pim,*" the beat of the drum to which the party goes dance.

"Liandova leh Tuaisiala" is a poignant rendition of the pitiable life of the orphan siblings. Her song, however, confirms the old adage that mother Nature nurtures those that are motherless:

An hrilh khua nu lengin chun chawi lo riantge;

Sial ang a rawn chawi lian ve ta a,

Mal tin rawn sawm rairah lung lawm nan. (344)

They say Mother Nature took pity on these waifs,

Who never knew a mother's love,

Bestowing bountiful blessings to gladden their sad hearts. (my trans.)

Nuchhungi's poetic musings on the butterfly turns to a recantation of the tragic tale of the legendary lovers Tualvungi and Zawlpaala, who were separated in life, but whose spirits reunited as butterflies, in the song "Phengphehlep".

On seeing two butterflies joyfully fluttering by Nuchhungi likens them to the lovers from the old story she had so often heard and spoken of:

“Hman lai an hrilh Tualvungi leh

Zawlpala kha lungrual te’n,

Thangvan sang kai tum iang rengin;

Kumtluangin an leng rial rial.” (374)

The star-crossed lovers, Tualvungi

And Zawlpala, together glide

As if to soar to the heavens,

Reunited for all time. (my trans.)

A lone butterfly that chases after the two playful ones is likened to Phuntiha, the rich merchant from the plains to whom Zawlpala had unwittingly sold Tualvungi. She pictures him chasing after the lovers in the afterlife, but never managing to catch up with them.

Dawi tin thiam an hrilh Phuntiha,

Thinlai reng a lawm lo ve;

Tualvungi leng a tawng si lo,

Mahte’n a leng duai duai e. (374)

The ill-fated sorcerer, Phuntiha,

Unhappy with his lot

Never to meet with Tualvungi,

He glides and scours the lonely skies. (my trans.)

Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation*, (2006) points out that adaptations are everywhere because “art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories” (Hutcheon 2). The adaptor’s job involves “taking possession of another’s story and filtering it, in a sense, through one’s own sensibility, interest and talent” (18). Nuchhungi’s artistic sensibility recreates these well-known tales from folklore into something new by composing simple yet poignant narrative poems in short stanzas adapted for singing.

Her songs “Khawvel Hi”, “Van Lam Thilte”, and “Ram Hrang Hrang Te”, reflect the changing world of the Mizos. The folk knowledge of their limited immediate surroundings has given way to increased knowledge about the wider physical world and alternate cultures that exist beyond their immediate surroundings. “Khawvel Hi”, a song which traces the changing world view of the Mizos posits the Mizo forefathers’ inability to comprehend the workings of the universe,

Hmana pipu fam tawh te khan,

An hre thiam lo lungmawlin;

Kan chenna piallei pumpui leh,

Siar, chhawrthla, turnipui; (372)

Our forefathers of days long gone,
The simple folks, could not fathom;
The workings of our great wide world,
The stars, moon and scorching sun; (my trans.)

She juxtaposes this with the contemporary Mizo's understanding of the scientific workings of the universe;

Tunah erawh thang leh tharte,

Chung khuanu malsawmnain;

Thinlai khua ang a var ve ta,

"Piallei hi a mum" an ti; (372)

But now the youth of present day,
With blessings from above;
Upon their hearts new knowledge dawned,
"The world is round" they say; (my trans.)

These songs tell of Nuchhungi's efforts to educate the children about the wider world and hence expand their imaginative realms. "Ram Hrang Hrang Te", is a lesson in geography narrated in a delightful manner. It depicts the Mizo's increasing awareness of different races and lands. Being a teacher, her songs are focused on enlightening her students about different

branches of knowledge, but though she speaks of the wonder of the lands across the seas she exhorts her students to be proud of their own land.

Tual kan lenna Zoram hi,

Van hnuai khuavel ramah,

Parmawi tin leh thlifim lenna;

Zo tui thiang dam ten a luang si,

A mawi ber e, ZORAM. (378)

Zoram, the land where I live,

Among all lands beneath the sun,

With soothing breeze and beautiful flowers,

With fresh brooks gurgling as they flow,

Thou’rt most beautiful, ZORAM. (my trans.)

“Van Lam Thilte” sings about the beauty of the night sky, the wonder of the moon and the stars. The stars known to the Mizos are mentioned one by one, while the scholarship of the east and western civilizations, which record many more of these numerous entities is acknowledged by the poet.

Her songs reflect her own familiarity with western literature. The song “Vaimim” where she talks about the different varieties of maize has allusions to the Native American myth of Mondamin found in “The Song of Hiawatha XIII: Blessing the Cornfields”, written by H.W.

Longfellow. Mondamin, in Native American legend, is believed to have given humans the maize by turning into a maize field after being defeated and buried. Nuchhungi skillfully weaves this myth to her subject matter in a manner that only an accomplished storyteller can. Like many writers of children's literature Nuchhungi tries to entertain and acquaint children with literature from cultures across the world.

“Sangha Man Hla”, is a song about the pleasures of fishing with friends and selling their catch in the market, an activity undoubtedly familiar to her young audience. The second stanza, which begins with the line, “*Tunge ka sangha lei duh?*” ‘Who will buy my fish?’ (my trans.) has references to the activities of buying and selling. Nuchhungi makes actual reference to the market in the concluding lines of the first verse:

Dawrpuih kan va zuar a

Tangka, tangka man a lo ni. (364)

To market rushed we to sell

Fetching a good return in coins. (my trans.)

Though the date of this song is not given, the reference to the market system depicts a society moving away from the barter system practiced by the folks to a market economy as a result of contact with other cultures.

The cultural changes that were taking place with the coming of new technology are communicated in her narratives. New technology was a welcome intrusion in the lives of the Mizos for it made life easier for them in many ways. The coming of the automobile to Mizoram

is greeted with enthusiasm in her poem ‘Motor’, “motor” being the generic name given by Mizos to all kinds of four wheeled road vehicles.

A lo tut ruai ruai zalam kawiah;

An hrilh motor a lo lim zur zur, (325)

It comes hooting around the corner;

The famed motor comes prancing through, (my trans.)

The Mizos, like the rest of India, had come under the British rule and were going through hard times during the World War II. “Thlawhtheihna”, (Aeroplane) which conjures up the image of the cargo planes dropping rations to starving villagers, projects the social realities of Mizoram during the second World War days as well as during the insurgency in the late nineteen sixties. Nuchhungi witnesses the motor, the aeroplane, the clock make their entry into her society and marvels at their greatness with childlike delight.

She likens the aeroplane to an eagle scouring the skies:

Chung muvanlai iangin Thlawhtheihna,

A Thlawk rum vung vung thin e. (318)

The aeroplane, like an eagle in flight,

Soars the skies and loudly roars. (my trans.)

The intrusion of so called ‘civilization’ or modernity in the folk life of the Mizos also brought along with it undesirable by-products such as materialism and the thirst for power,

which if unchecked were liable to bring about moral degeneration and consequent degeneration of the whole tribe. Nuchhungi was aware of their capacity for eroding the spirit of kinship and selflessness which had upheld the tribal society for centuries. In her song, “Zirlaite”, which is an exhortation to students, the future of the tribe, she says,

Thatna tel lo finna mai chu

Ram hmelma ber a chang thei. (380)

Mere knowledge without goodness

Becomes a nation’s greatest enemy. (my trans.).

In this song addressed to students she indirectly voices her fear that encounters with other modern cultures, their great body of knowledge, and their material advancement would overwhelm the younger generation. So she exhorts them to temper their education with the values of goodness and selflessness that their ancestors had lived by. Her article, “Taima leh Thatchhe Dinhmun” (189-193) traces the society’s gradual change from a predominantly agricultural society to one that was slowly moving towards a modern commercial economy. Education has in a lot of ways improved the living conditions of the people. At the same time, Nuchhungi witnessed that in her society it was also creating a new breed of people who mistakenly believed that education gave them license to be exempted from all manual work. The article, which is an exhortation to students, warns of the dire consequences of sloth. Nuchhungi cites examples from folk life, saying that in the olden days a family that was lazy never reaped enough rice to sustain them through the year. They lived on the charity of the society and were looked down upon by the society. The folk’s industriousness was what had sustained the society of the olden times; their commitment to hard work and hence, their productiveness is a quality

that the present generation need to model their lives on. She tries to impress upon the minds of her students the dignity of hard work by reminding them of the practices, and the values of their ancestors. In another article titled “Mizoram a Lo Nawm Zual Theih Nan” (212-218), which was written when she was nearing eighty, she throws a challenge to the youth: “Ni e, hmana mahni intodelh thin kha, kan lo zir sang a, mi ram thiamna ten kan ram a rawn dai ta tih veleh hian ramdang khawngaihna hnuaia nung tawk tawkin kan khawsa chho dawn ta em ni le?” ‘Yes, we who have since olden times been self-sustaining, we have now become educated, is the knowledge we have acquired from the outside world to be only a tool to make us live in servility to other cultures?’ (my trans.; 217).

Nuchhungi was aware of the danger of mindlessly embracing all the novel elements and ideas her people were coming into contact with which could result in a complete rejection of their own culture as savage and inferior. The African novelist Chinua Achebe in his lecture on “The Role of the Novelist as Teacher”, at Leeds University in 1965, commented, “I would be quite satisfied if my novels did no more than teach my readers that their past, with all its imperfections, was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (45). Achebe believes that the modern African writer has a particular responsibility to shape the moral values of his society. Their ancestors created their myths and told their stories for a human purpose and these must be passed on to future generation. Like Achebe, Nuchhungi situates her writings in the social, political, and cultural context of the Mizo society and aspires to impress upon the young people the richness of the tradition that had sustained their society in the past. She embraces the conscious role of the writer as teacher. Combined with her effort to teach the new body of knowledge acquired from other cultures is her wish to re acquaint the Mizo children with their own cultural heritage and to

perpetuate in the children's memories the myths and legends as well as the folkways of her people. Nuchhungi was aware of the importance of folk culture and tradition. Knowing and caring about one's tradition gives a people a link with their past and also serves as a signpost for the future. The attempt to pass on the Mizo cultural tradition by frequently referring to myths and folktales remains a dominant theme in her songs for children.

According to McCallum and Stephens, ideology is implicit in all children's books. No matter how simplistic it may appear, no text is innocent of ideological implications. "Whether a text seeks to naturalize the belief systems of a culture or challenge them, it always places ideological imposition on its readers since ideology inheres in the very language and images from which it is made" (78). As has been mentioned earlier, some of the children's songs of Nuchhungi are seen to communicate a marked Christian worldview which is sometimes at odds with the folk practices and beliefs of the Mizo forefathers. Her many poems on animals and insects come with a plea to stop hunting birds and sporting with insects. Her own conversion is reflected in the Christian ideology embedded in her works. "Naupang Thianghlim" project Jesus as the role model which all children should emulate. In "Fanghmir", she puts forth the ant as an example of perseverance, honesty, and goodness. The following lines from "Fanghmir":

Thlir ngun teh u, fanghmir nun dan hi,

Thil tha zir tur in hmu ve ngei ang; (Biaksanga 340)

Observe closely the ways of the ant,

You'll surely find a lesson to be learnt; (my trans.) is reminiscent of lines from the Bible which read, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!" (Prov. 6:6).

While highlighting folk culture and practices so as to re-acquaint children with the richness of their folk beliefs, values, and way of life, her main aim as a children's poet was to teach moral values and ethical practices to her school children. Her works are deliberately didactic, often bearing the stamp of her Christian faith. Hence in her works she sometimes resorts to sermonizing in order to propagate her Christian beliefs and values.

The Mizo society has always been a fiercely patriarchal society which has in numerous ways oppressed its women. In "Mizo Hmeichhiate Khawvel" (Biaksanga 248-260) Nuchhungi points out that the place of women in the society was no better than that of a slave or a servant; "Mana lei, an thawhchhuah leh an fate pawh pasalte ta vek, chan hnuai ber chang an ni." "They are bought, the fruit of their labour, even their own children, belong to the husband, they are at the bottom of the social ladder". (my trans.; 248) She also mentions in her article, "Hmeichhiate Zirna Lamtluang" (235-241) that when the pioneer missionaries started a school for women, the handful of women who enrolled in the school soon stopped attending classes because of the ridicule they faced from the menfolk. Though the influence of the western culture in many ways resulted in the upliftment of Mizo women it is not to be forgotten that the western society was itself basically patriarchal and therefore, men still had the upper hand in the family. Nuchhungi, a modern emancipated woman encouraged her fellow women to improve their lot in life. She may not wear the label of a feminist, but in her subtle but sure way, she succeeded in carving a niche for herself, of creating her own space, while staying always within the confines of the limitations the patriarchal society imposed on its women. Having before her the example of dedicated women missionaries like Miss Chapman, who worked tirelessly for the upliftment of Mizo women, Nuchhungi took up the baton when they left. She realized that education was the key to the emancipation of women and exhorted girls and women to be informed and educated,

and to learn life skills that would empower them. Hence, it was with quiet assertion of her convictions, not by open resistance, that she worked to improve the lot of women in a fiercely patriarchal society that once proclaimed, “Hmeichhia leh palchhia chu a thlak theih.” ‘Women can be replaced like old fences’. (my trans.)

Nuchhungi was rooted in Mizo culture but was also open to progressive elements in other cultures. Though valourizing the folk ways and values, she did not shy from criticizing elements of folk life which she found harmful. Her indictment against the age-old practice of hunting and making a sport of small and harmless creatures can be seen in a number of songs that she has written about native birds, animals, and insects. What strikes the reader in these songs is her empathy with all living things. The song “Perhpawng” which depicts the cruel sport of preying upon crickets and making a sport of them, comes with a gentle criticism of one of the favourite pastimes of young Mizo boys. Nuchhungi’s empathy towards other creations and her indictment such practices comes to the fore in her poem, “Rannungte Khawngaih Tur.” In this poem she dwells on the beauty of Mizoram, of the rich fauna and flora and longs for the day it becomes a paradise for all living creatures. She urges the Mizo children to discard their cruel sport and learn to become stewards of these vulnerable creatures. The same theme is reiterated in her article “Nungchate Chungah Ngilnei Rawh” (207-211) where she condemns games that involve cruelty to animals. She recounts the popular boys’ play of enticing insects towards a fire where they ultimately burn to death, and the practice of putting a sticky gum at the end of a long stick to catch insects. She highlights how in the plains of India birds often come and perch very close to human beings. Animals and birds are not afraid of humans because they know that they will not be harmed. She mentions the names of the famed Francis of Assisi as well as the homegrown Chawngkhupa, as examples of men who were kind to all creatures, whom even the predatory

beasts never harmed. She urges Mizo children to learn from them to show sympathy to animals, birds, and insects. She concludes her article with a verse from the Bible, “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.” (Rom. 8:19)

Nuchhungi’s article “Mizo Naupangte”(Biaksanga 264-267), lauds the changing mindset of the Mizos regarding their treatment of children. Once upon a time, they roamed around naked until they reached puberty, they rarely washed and were therefore, very dirty and smelly. Parents never taught their children how to look after their bodies because they themselves were ignorant of the importance of hygiene. Childhood was trivialized by the folk who dismissed children with the words, “Uite rim in nam, kal bo rawh u”. ‘You smell like puppies, take yourselves off’ (my trans.; Biaksanga 259). Nuchhungi is very critical of these old customs. She encourages young children and their guardians to work harder to ensure that they grow up healthy, body, mind, and soul.

A study of Nuchhungi’s works, therefore, brings to the fore the concepts of tradition and modernity which are most often projected in a binary of opposition. In this connection, mention may be made of *The Location of Culture* (2017) by Homi K Bhabha, which contains his most important essays. Bhabha puts forth a number of concepts that work to undermine the compartmentalization of the world into ‘self’ and ‘other’. One of the oft quoted concepts is his emphasis on the hybridity of cultures. According to Bhabha, cultures are not pure, they are at all times in contact with one another, and this results in cultural mixed-ness or hybridity. Bhabha suggests that we need to rethink our conception of culture, not in terms of locations and roots, but more as hybrid and cultural routes in global space, a view encapsulated in his use of concepts such as mimicry, hybridity, and liminality. According to him, the encounters of different cultures results in the emergence of interstices and that “this interstitial passage between the fixed

identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). Opposing Edward Said’s concept of binary oppositions that pitch the colonizer against the colonized, Bhabha argued that since cultures are fluid the relationships between cultures are more complex. To him the colonized subject can never fully resist the colonizer but adopts the ways and manners of the colonizers to a certain degree. This ambivalence results in the destabilization of the colonial power and the consequent birth of a hybrid culture. A study of the songs and prose works of Nuchhungi reveals the confluence of traditional and modern themes and subjects which augment Bhabha’s concept of hybridity that points to the possibility that differing cultural elements may co-exist without them necessarily being in opposition, and without being in a hegemonic relationship. Nuchhungi’s songs that reminisce about the folk culture are set to the accompaniment of western tunes that were becoming popular during her own time. These songs, though taking on the form of western music, portray images and sentiments that depict the Mizo ethos. In the same way that western hymns are adapted to Mizo traditional tunes in *Lengkhawm zai*, her songs are adapted to western tunes reflecting the cultural hybridity resulting from the contact of the Mizo people with other cultures. The study of Nuchhungi’s songs for children reveals a relationship between the Eurocentric world view and the folk culture which shows a blend of indigenous and modern elements reflective of the hybridized cultural identity born of a culture’s encounters with alternate cultures, suggesting that folk tradition and modernity need not always be mutually exclusive, but complement each other in a number of ways.

Having posited that cultures around the world are in a constant state of flux due to encounters with other cultures, negotiating the changing values and way of life requires an understanding of the past traditions as well as the new traditions that are being born. Literature

plays a vital role in influencing the mindset of the masses and the enlightened writer has a seminal role to play in helping a culture negotiate the tricky bends. In a culture that is transitioning into a modern one, knowledge and appreciation of one's tradition becomes the anchor for a meaningful future. Cultures can never go back to how they were in the past. With the passage of time, some traditions become obsolete while some get adapted to new forms and ideologies. The recurrent theme in Nuchhungi's prose and poetic works is the exhortation to the younger generation to remember the values that had formed the bedrock of their society in the olden times and blend it with the good elements of the modern culture. Both in her capacity as a writer and a teacher she takes upon herself the seminal role of narrating culture in a changing cultural milieu through her folktales, indigenous games, and her own prose and poetic works.

The role that folk narratives play in deciphering and studying past cultures before recorded history cannot be overstressed. For the Mizos, whose language was rendered into writing only in the last century, reconstructing their history in the absence of written documents is no easy task. The main recourse that ethnographers and historians take is to look into the folklore of the Mizos, fit in the appropriate pieces in their historical records, as in a jigsaw puzzle. Hence, to an ethnic people whose entry into the world of the written word is relatively recent, it becomes a paramount necessity to collect and record all available folklore genres in order to reconstruct their history.

Among the various folklore genres the folktale, including myths and legends, constitutes the primary genre that has been adapted in scholarly discourse. Folktales are “tales people tell themselves about themselves, their fantasies, and their past” (Bauman 114) and hence, they are valuable primary sources about a society’s worldview, aesthetic standards, ethical values, and modes of thought. Folktales are tales that have been handed down through many generations and therefore, embody the cultural ethos, customs and traditions of that particular culture. In the oral tradition, folktales have been the sources through which moral values and social norms and prejudices are taught to the younger generations. In the literate world the foremost educational function of the folktale is in putting forth a “mirror of culture” (Bronner 5) of the past to feed “the social need to give meaning to our present lives by linking ourselves to a meaningful past” (Bauman 32).

The first Mizo folktales to be written down were included in *Progressive Colloquial Exercise in the Lushai Dialect* (1874) by the Chittagong Hills Deputy Commissioner, T.H.

Lewin whom the Mizos affectionately called Thangliana. Three folktales namely, Chemtatrawta, Lalruanga, and Kungawrhi, featured in this book. The next collection of folktales followed twenty four years later in Major. Shakespear's *Mizo leh Vai Thawnthu*, which had ten Mizo folktales. Then in 1919, F.J. Sandy, a Welsh missionary, published a book called *Legends of Old Lushai* which contained twenty two folk narratives. This was followed by the *Serkawn Graded Readers* where Nuchhungi's collection of folktales were included. Though the pioneering work in the collection of Mizo folktales was done by the British colonizers, Nuchhungi's collection retains a position of utmost importance as a pioneering work in the field of Mizo folklore collection which is done by the Mizo's themselves. A culture's stories are best narrated by the people themselves. Scholars like R.L. Thanmawia dismissed the earlier collections by the colonial masters as not really of use to the scholars as they wrote with a limited understanding of the Mizo language and of the Mizo ethos, and, therefore, do not succeed in bringing out the essence of a Mizo tale.

The formation of the colonial government and the coming of the British missionaries which followed each other in close succession, resulted for the Mizos in the formulation of their alphabet, and therefore, in their initiation into the modern, literate world. The ramification of their encounter with the British colonials was felt most prominently in their worldview. Their adoption of the Judeo- Christian worldview brought by the missionaries led to their rejection of their earlier beliefs, and a neglect of many of their old social practices which went against the Christian beliefs and practices. Many rituals and practices fell to disuse and the telling of folktales began to be replaced by stories from the Bible. After the colonial encounter no colonized culture can go back to being the way it was before colonization. The postcolonial situation in many cultures results in the problem of establishing a meaningful identity which in

turn propels the colonized to engage in the task of retrieving the remnants of their ethnic past. The problem is two-fold for ethnic people who do not have any written past records before colonization. This scenario is one in which the present generation of Mizos find themselves.

Nuchhungi published her folktales in 1940, a time in which the oral traditions of the Mizos ancestors was still fresh in the memory of the Mizo people. At the time of writing, she probably would not have known how important her folktales would turn out to be. The fact remains that these folktales have become invaluable in efforts to retrieve the past history and ethnic identity of the Mizos as well as forming a base for future research in a number of academic fields.

In the literate world where the passing on of traditions takes place in schools, colleges and universities, the pedagogical importance of folklore becomes manifold. The institutionalization of folklore has led to the perpetuation vernacular culture amidst the study of dominant discourses. The inclusion of folktales in the elementary schools also aids in developing children's language skills and helps children navigate more complex literature through their familiarity with the archetypes in folktales. Side by side with this, the passing on of culture takes place in the classroom. The fact that Nuchhungi's folktales were studied by primary school children across Mizoram for over four decades indicates that the dissemination of her folktales covered the whole of Mizoram and continued for nearly half a century since its inclusion in the school syllabi. This prominently underlines the importance of Nuchhungi as a narrator of culture.

Having reiterated the importance of folklore in preserving and perpetuating culture, and having established the role of Nuchhungi as a collector of Mizo folklore, the study focused on her role as a storyteller, a role which in the oral tradition was of great importance. The

storyteller, or the ‘tradtitor’ (Von Sydow 144) is central to the story for, “the art of the folktales is in its telling....It draws its breath of life from the lips of men and from the applause of the appreciative fireside audience” (Duilearga 160). In the modern world where the practice of storytelling as an informal pastime is becoming a dying art, the formal settings of the classroom become the platform through which folktales are transmitted and the teacher takes on the role of the storyteller. Nuchhungi, being a gifted storyteller, mesmerized her students with her tales. Interviews with her old students, most of whom are now in their middle ages, has yielded new insights into her role as a storyteller. The general consensus was that she could tell a story and tell it well. One of her old students, K. Thanseii said of her that she was like an actor, literally acting out the stories she narrated, the tone and volume of her voice, her every action served to keep them spellbound until the end of the story. (Thanseii) Nuchhungi was not just a collector of folklore but also a fine storyteller, an active carrier of the culture of her people.

Play or games is a genre of folklore that has received very little attention in relation to other genres like folktales, folksongs, myths, and legends. This may be attributed to the trivialization of childhood by scholars across different disciplines until the recent past. However, recent scholarship on children’s folklore has revealed indigenous children’s games to be a storehouse of cultural artifacts. Children have their own culture which is vibrant and autonomous and “Studying the child, therefore, has layers of motive and meaning often not present in other folk inquiry” (Mechling 91). Children, who in the past were only seen to be passive carriers of culture have now become potential traditors, or active bearers of culture.

In this respect, Mechling comments:

An old truism in anthropology and sociology says that “marginal” folks, people who stand near the border between the insiders and the outsiders, make especially good cultural informants. What is so taken for granted by people at the centre becomes problematic for people at the periphery. Marginal people often see the cultural paradoxes and contradiction invisible to most others. This suggests that children may be the most insightful commentators....They are “marginal” in many senses, lacking at the outset the power and knowledge they need to be at the centre (114).

Nuchhungi’s collection of the indigenous games of Mizo children is another pioneering effort in the documentation of Mizo folklore. Her book, *Mizo Naupang Infiamna leh a Hla Te*, records indigenous games played by Mizo children. These games as discussed earlier in chapter three, are group games, some without any formal rules while other have a definite set of rules. Some games are competitive while others are not. Most of the games in the collection are singing games and their songs are often revealing; depicting the social values and ethics that have been internalized by Mizo children, and the social norms of the folk society. *Pawnto* is a childhood recreation which in today’s world may no longer be practicable for a number of reasons, one being the changed social environment which is not conducive to such informal gatherings of children at night. However, educators have included some traditional games in the present syllabus of primary school children in Mizoram as a measure to preserve this cultural heritage. Though the classroom setting may not be the ideal place for certain games, a resourceful teacher may find new possibilities of teaching the games outside the classroom or include them in the co-curricular activities of the school children. The practice of *pawnto* itself could be adapted to take

place in school grounds and recreational gatherings for children organized by the church or other NGOs (Non- Governmental Organizations) What remains important is that these games are tools through which the present generation can learn about their ancestors and thereby link themselves to a meaningful past.

Nuchhungi's collection has laid the groundwork for further studies into the folklore of Mizo children. She has classified these games in her own manner as games that are played in circles, standing up or sitting down, games played by forming two opposing teams, and so on; she has also written down the rules and procedure of the games. During her lifetime, she had, with the help of her students, recorded some of these games on video. Her efforts in this field open up a fertile genre of Mizo folklore and there is ample scope for further research on the indigenous games played by Mizo children which moves beyond documentation and taxonomy.

Studies on her prose works and her songs also point to a writer who is very much preoccupied with the task of preserving and perpetuating her culture in the changing society of her time. While her narratives embody the western ideology to a large degree, the pull of the old way of life is reflected in a number of her songs. Her songs were written for children and were therefore, simple and straightforward. In her preface to her collection of songs she voices her concern for the lack of Mizo songs that could interest and excite children. She mentions that the songs in her collection are composed in simple language, and in a manner that would hold the children's attention. However, her simple songs unadorned with literary embellishments became the vehicle for passing on tradition to the younger generation. Her songs also became the means by which she inculcated moral and ethical values in young children that would stand them in good stead when they are grown.

Conscious of the many new elements, both good and bad, that were coming into her culture, Nuchhungi takes upon herself the responsibility of teaching aspects of their culture that many children of her time had forgotten. The changes in her society had brought in their wake elements that were capable of eroding the spirit of kinship and selflessness that had upheld the tribal society for centuries. Hence, a series of her songs are based on the cycle of the agricultural activities of the folk. These songs give one an insight into the life of the folks engaged in their daily labour. The obvious enjoyment of their labour by the folks in her songs suggests the camaraderie and selfless spirit with which they worked, which dispelled the drudgery of their work.

“Adaptations are everywhere.... Art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories” (Hutcheon 2). Folktales lend themselves well to adaptation, especially to the picture book form. In the contemporary world, many characters in comic books have been drawn from myths, legends, and folktales. Given the sparse tools she had in hand, Nuchhungi was able to recreate the familiar stories of her culture into new forms, adapting several folktales and legends to the metrical form. Her songs like “Thlanrawkpa Khuangchawi”, “Liandova leh Tuaisiala”, “Hmanlai Pi Hmuaki”, and “Pu Vawma Tuikhuap”, are not simple reproductions of folktales but recreations in a new medium which tells the same story and “yet says them differently” (Metz qtd. in Hutcheon 3).

Overlapping cultures tend to lend themselves to the binaries of superior and inferior cultures, with the dominant culture being exalted to the more prestigious position. The Mizo folk society was giving way to the modern western cultural practices. Children were losing their connection with their cultural roots which could prove very harmful to them. In this crucial juncture of the society’s transition from folk to modern society, Nuchhungi felt the need to

inculcate in the young children a new respect and love for their culture by teaching them the richness of their culture. She wanted them to know that what their society lacked in terms of material advancements, it made up for in its rich cultural heritage. She performs, like Achebe, the role of the writer as teacher of her culture's traditions. She justifies the inclusion of folk elements in her songs as deliberate acts of cultural reclamation and preservation.

No culture is totally good or totally bad. The Mizo folk culture, like all other cultures, is not perfect. There was a society haunted by fear and superstitions. They had their share of inhumane practices and prejudices. In the past many recreational practices that young boys indulged in involved cruelty to small creatures and insects. Young boys would play with live insects and kill them for their sport. The Mizo ancestors were hunters who considered the wild beasts as their foes. The Mizo boys' preoccupation with hunting and playing with insects stemmed from their wish to emulate the brave hunters in their community. They killed insects for their sport because they had internalized the hunter's instinct which had been valorized in their society since the ancient days and therefore, they knew no better. Nuchhungi appealed to children of her time to shun such cruel practices. This theme of showing kindness to all living creatures is reiterated again and again in many of her nature songs.

Representation of children in Mizo literature corroborates historical accounts that children occupied an inconsequential place in the social hierarchy of the Mizo society in the olden days. As the folks spent most of their waking hours working in their jhums, during the daytime, villages were empty of people except for children, old people, and the infirm. Children were left much to their own devices and the elder girls took on the task of looking after the babies and toddlers. The fact that they were not welcome in adult company is highlighted by the oft quoted dismissal, "Naupangte kha kal kiang rawh u,uite rim in nam." 'You children smell

like puppies, get yourselves off.’ (my trans.; Biaksanga 265) Children were dirty and smelly and were not considered fit for adult company. Nuchhungi took it upon herself to teach children the importance of hygiene.

Nuchhungi did not hesitate to speak out against practices that she thought detrimental to the development of the Mizo society even if they were the accepted practice of her own culture. Situated in a crucial period of Mizo history where the old way of life was yielding to the modern western way of life, she also she saw the danger of inadvertently embracing all the new things that were coming into their culture. Nevertheless, she was also aware of the improvement brought in the economic and social life of her people, and the freedom from fear of malevolent spirits which the Christian faith had brought about. Certain traditions disappear with the change in the cultural ethos while other continue to be retained as they are or in adapted forms.

This study takes up the challenge of situating Nuchhungi in the context of Mizo literary traditions. Studying selected works from the three primary texts written by her in order to examine her place her place in Mizo literary tradition and to analyze her various roles as a narrator of culture.

Critical analyses on works of literature can never be exhaustive nor can they be final and conclusive. Studies of Nuchhungi’s folktales, indigenous children’s games, and her original compositions may yield different results depending on the theoretical lens one uses. The findings of this present study point to the fact that her works may provide the springboard to the scholars of culture and children’s literature for they open up new areas for the study of Mizo culture.

The one conclusion that one may draw from this study is that in this period of new awareness and aspirations where a great deal of academic focus is shifting towards the preservation and restoration of ethnic culture and ethnic identity, folk narratives have become an important material for the reconstruction and portrayal of past folk culture. The folklorist occupies a position of great importance in the search for ethnic roots and identity. Hence, Nuchhungi, as a collector and documenter of folklore, and as an active carrier of culture will remain relevant for generations to come.

Glossary

Ai (also spelt) *aih*: 1. to sacrifice a domestic animal and perform a ceremony over or for a wild creature killed in hunting or a foe killed in fighting. This is done with a view to getting the spirit of the slain into the power of the slayer after death, and also to protect him from evil consequences during this life. 2. To kill a domestic animal and perform a ceremony of rejoicing over (such things as a good rice harvest, a bumper crop of a hundred red pumpkins, a popular song, etc.).

Chhepchher: clappers (generally made of bamboo); anything used for making a clapping noise.

Chhinlung: The name of the mythical rock from beneath which the progenitors of most of the present human race are said to have issued after the *thimzing* (great darkness).

Chibai: a word of salutation, greeting, or farewell, equivalent to: - Salaam, Hail, Good morning, Good day, Good afternoon, good evening (according to the time of day or night) *Kawi*: the large bean-like seed of the *Entada scandens* or *Entada pursoetha*. - a thick woody creeper known to the Lushais (Mizos) as *kawi hrui*. This *kawi* bean is used by boys and girls to play one of their favourite games with.

Kawl: the Burmese, a Burman.

Khuangchawi: the name of a public feast given by the chiefs and other well- to- do Lushais (Mizos). Also title given to those who have given such a feast.

Lawm: to assist a person in any kind of work or occupation in exchange for similar assistance or to be received.

Mitthi-khua: Hades; the abode of the departed spirits - (*lit.* dead man's village.)

Pasaltha: a person who is brave and manly; a brave, a hero; a famous or notable warrior or hunter.

Pawnto: to be out of doors in the evening or at night.

Phunchawng: the name of a thornless species of the cotton tree which grows to a great size. (A variety of *Bombax malabaricum*.)

Phungpuinu: (also phung nu) the mother of bogeys, spooks, ogres, goblins, hobgoblins etc.

Pialral: the Lushai (Mizo) Paradise – (*lit.* the further side of the Pial River)

Puan: (variant form *pawn*) cloth, a cloth. A garment, clothing apparel.

Reng lal: the Rajah of Tipperah (Tripura) state.

Salu lam: a dance and feast held to celebrate success in the chase, and to *Ai* the head of the animal killed.

Thangchhuah: the title given to a man who has distinguished himself by killing a certain number of animals in the chase, or by giving a number of public feasts. The wife of such a man also shares his title and they and their children are allowed to wear the *thangchhuah puan*. The possession of this title is regarded by the Lushais (Mizos) as a passport to *Pialral* or Paradise.

Tlawmngaihna: the practice of self- sacrifice, unselfishness, self-denial etc.

Vai: a foreigner, foreigners (excluding Europeans, and latterly the better known neighbouring tribes as well).

Zawlbuk: the large house in a Lushai (Mizo) village where all the unmarried young men of the community sleep at night.

(Source: Lorrain, James Herbert. *Dictionary of the Lushai Language*. The Asiatic Society, 1940).

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/j.ctt 46 nskz.8.

APPENDICES

NAME OF CANDIDATE : Lalthangmawii Chhangte
DEGREE : M. Phil.
DEPARTMENT : English
TITLE OF DISSERTATION : Narrating Culture: A
Study of Select Works of
Nuchhungi Renthlei.
DATE OF PAYMENT OF ADMISSION : 26/7/17
REGISTRATION NO. & DATE : MZUREG/17/0074 of
17/08/2017
DUE DATE OF SUBMISSION : 31.12.2018

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PUC	NEHU	1987	II	52.4
B.A	NEHU	1990	II	50.75
M.A	NEHU	1992	II	58
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M.Phil. Regn. No and Date: *MZUREG/17/0074 of 17/08/2017*

Other relevant information:

List of Publications:

Sl. No.	Year	Title of Research Paper/ Seminar	Name of Book/Journal	Publication details (place/publishers) with ISBN/ISSN
1.	2018	“The Confluence of Folk Culture and Modernity in the Children’s Songs of Nuchhungi.”	Nuchhungi Renthlei leh Naupang Literature (Understanding Children’s Literature of Nuchhungi Renthlei: Approaches and Systems) pp. 165-173.	Place: Aizawl Pub: K.L.Offset Printers, 2018. ISBN 978-81-938727-0-3.

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