

Chapter 18

A Feminist Reading of *Panthoipi Khongkul*

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ABSTRACT

*The voices of women are often marginalised and silenced. In modern feminism, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) used the term "patriarchy" (rule of the father) to describe the cause of women's oppression. *Panthoipi Khongkul* is a myth narrative of Manipur, a state in Northeast India, detailing the rebellion of a legendary woman, *Panthoipi*, against the patriarchal society of the early Manipuri. The text details how *Panthoipi* bravely defied the social customs and chose to be united forever in bliss with her paramour. The myth narrative deals with the desire of a woman represented by *Panthoipi* to ascertain her dignity and identity in a patriarchal society. This chapter seeks to examine the feminist perspective of how "woman" has been represented in *Panthoipi Khongkul* in the context of the early patriarchal Manipuri society. It further explores on how the feminist reading of *Panthoipi Khongkul* will assist in striving to achieve equality of sexes.*

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a common goal to describe a political, social, cultural or economic equality of sexes. Feminism is defined by Brunell and Burkett in *Britannica* as the belief of equality of sexes in terms of economic, social and political affairs. Though originated in the West, feminism is evidently present in every corner of the world. As a literary movement, feminism seeks to rebel against the patriarchal society where the term 'masculine' is associated with superiority, domination, action and

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strength, conversely, 'feminine' or the 'other' is associated with inferiority, passivity, weakness and obedience (Bhat, 2017). Feminist writers highlight the predicament of women in a patriarchal society and look at how a sense of self-identity, rebellion and self-assertion will liberate women from the deeply rooted patriarchal societal constraints. Various institutions and organisations represent feminism to cater to activities pertaining to women's rights and interests. Furthermore, Nahal (1991) defined feminism as a form of existence where the woman gets rid of the dependence syndrome. A dependence syndrome exists whether in the form of the father, the husband, the community, the religious group or the ethnic group (Nahal, 1991). Nahal (1991) emphasizes that his idea of feminism materialises when women are completely free of the dependence syndrome and starts leading a normal life. Conversely, Beauvoir (1997) posits: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 301). She further asserts that psychological, biological or economic fate does not establish the presence of human female in society, however, civilization produces this human female which is somewhere, in the transitional phase between male and eunuch, described as feminine (Beauvoir, 1997). From the preceding discussions, it is apparent that feminism is a common goal to describe a political, social, cultural or economic equality of sexes. Feminism as a movement is greatly influenced by philosophers, thinkers and authors like Mary Wollstonecraft, Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Judith Butler, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and others. The movement strongly advocate protesting against male domination. Its main aim is to understand women's oppression pertaining to gender, class, race and sexual orientations and devise ways to uplift this oppression. *Panthoipi Khongkul* is a myth narrative of Manipur, in northeast India detailing the rebel of a legendary woman Panthoipi against the patriarchal society of the early Manipuri society. The paper seeks to explore the feminist perspective of the use of the term 'patriarchy' in the myth narratives of *Panthoipi Khongkul*.

FEMINISM AND THE TERM "PATRIARCHY"

In the year 1917 and early 1918s, American Feminist Critics, Annette Kolodny, Kate Millet, Carolyn Heilbrun and Judith Fetterley stressed on investigating literary text rather than philosophising abstractly about language. Many researches were done to re-examine the works of the male writers by investigating the portrayals of women characters thus exposing the inherent patriarchal dominance which has been observed in the literary traditions since time immemorial. An important phase in modern feminism could be seen when Kate Millett used the term 'patriarchy' (rule of the father) in *Sexual Politics* (1970) to describe the cause of women's oppression. Earlier, modern feminist writers like Kate Millett, Germaine Greer and

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