



Private Bonds, Public Ruptures: Colonial–Colonized Intimacy and Gendered Agency in M.K. Binodini’s *The Princess and the Political Agent*

Viola Kshetrimayum¹ and Prof. Sanamacha Sharma²

- 1) Research Scholar, Department of English
- 2) PhD Guide, Department of English, Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal West, Manipur, India

Page No. 93-116

Abstract: *M.K. Binodini’s The Princess and the Political Agent blurs the line between historical record and imaginative fiction, producing a narrative that is at once historical fiction and fictionalized history. By recuperating Princess Sanatombi from the margins of Manipur’s royal chronicle—where she would otherwise remain a silenced figure condemned for marrying the British Political Agent—Binodini resists patriarchal and colonial erasures that reduce women’s lives to scandal or silence. Her narrative reconfigures Sanatombi as a subject of cultural and emotional complexity, dramatizing the contradictions of colonial intimacy. The relationship between Maxwell and Sanatombi embodies the tension between colonizer and colonized, husband and wife, private desire and public belonging. Their union, marked by affection in private yet rejection in public, situates them in a liminal space—belonging fully to neither Manipur nor England. To examine the complexity of this relationship, the paper employs theoretical perspectives from Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Sonya Andermahr, Cathy Caruth, Philippa Levine, Durba Ghosh, Ann Stoler, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, among others. Through these lenses, their intimacy becomes emblematic of the impossibility of reconciling colonial power with indigenous belonging, exposing the fragile intersections of love, stigma, and empire.*

Keywords: *Entangled Histories, Gendered Trauma, Colonial Gendered Histories, Colonial Intimacy, Indigenous Negotiation, Colonizer–Colonized Intimacy*

M.K. Binodini’s narratives operate at the intersection of Manipuri history, ethnic identity, and gender politics, reflecting a profound historical consciousness shaped by colonial encounters, princely state politics, and postcolonial restructuring. Her works foreground the roles of Manipuri women in nationalist movements, cultural revival, and the broader tension between tradition and modernity. Central to her writing is the theme of ethnicity and cultural identity, which emerges as a defining force in women’s lives. Women are depicted as custodians of collective heritage—through dance, rituals, and folklore—where cultural responsibility functions both as a source of empowerment and as a mechanism of patriarchal regulation. This paradox underscores how ethnic preservation often relies on women’s bodies, behavior, and social roles, simultaneously elevating and restricting them. Within this framework, Binodini’s female characters negotiate agency within patriarchal structures, resisting subtly through cultural participation, voice, and self-expression, even as the limits of empowerment remain evident in traditions that both valorize and confine them. At the same time, her depiction of colonial–colonized intimacy, particularly in the hybrid space of Maxwell and Sanatombi’s relationship,



dramatizes how empire infiltrated the most personal domains, producing entanglements that blurred boundaries between domination and desire, politics and affect. Viewed through a postcolonial feminist lens, her work illuminates the silences and struggles of subaltern Manipuri women, revealing how ethnicity, gender, and colonial intimacy intertwine to shape female subjectivity. Binodini demonstrates how historical and cultural forces define the contours of women's agency in Manipuri society, situating their lived experiences within the broader dynamics of colonial history, cultural identity, and gender politics.

I: Narrating Manipur: The Intersections of Colonial History and Literary Imagination

The convergence of historical and imaginative consciousness marks the point where factual memory and creative vision intertwine, producing narratives that are both grounded in lived experience and enriched by symbolic possibility. History provides the archive of events, dates, and collective struggles, while imagination reshapes these fragments into stories that carry emotional resonance, mythic depth, and cultural meaning. When the two meet, the past is not merely recorded but reinterpreted—trauma becomes allegory, resistance becomes myth, and silenced voices find expression through metaphor and narrative invention. This fusion allows communities to reclaim agency over their histories, challenging dominant accounts and opening space for alternative truths that blend documentation with dream, continuity with rupture, and closure with ambiguity. MK Binodini's *The Princess and the Political Agent* intertwines imaginative storytelling with historical reality, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. It stands simultaneously as history written in the form of fiction and fiction shaped by history—a work that is both historical fiction and fictionalized history. The novel draws on real historical events and figures from Manipur's colonial past, but reimagines them through fictionalized dialogue, characterization, and narrative structure. This creates a hybrid text where documented history is dramatized. As Hayden White argues, historical writing itself is shaped by narrative form and imagination, never a neutral record (White 21).

Binodini reconstructs historical episodes not as dry records but as lived experiences, giving them emotional and psychological depth. History becomes a story, with characters embodying the tensions of colonialism, gender, and power. At the same time, her fictional narrative functions as a historical account. Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction explains this blurring of boundaries, where fiction questions how history is told while dramatizing its fragments (Hutcheon 105). It preserves cultural memory, offers insight into Manipuri society, and critiques colonial politics. In this sense, fiction itself becomes a vehicle for historical truth. Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us that imagination and cultural memory reshape historical narratives, allowing communities to reclaim agency and provincialize dominant accounts (Chakrabarty 97). Historical fiction usually means a novel set in the past, using imagination to fill gaps. Fictional history suggests that the narrative itself reshapes or reinterprets history, offering an alternative perspective that challenges official records. Binodini's work does both: it dramatizes history while also questioning how history is told.

From Alliance to Interference to Political Annexation: The British Arrival in Manipur

In *The Princess and the Political Agent*, one of the central figures is Henry Maxwell, the British Political Agent in Manipur, who embodies the authority of the British Crown. Henry Maxwell's presence in Manipur exemplifies the contradictions of colonial authority, intimacy, and resistance, making him a figure through whom the entangled realities of empire can be understood. As Political Agent in the aftermath of the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, Maxwell attempted to reorganize local structures by reviving forms of forced labor, a policy that provoked widespread opposition, particularly from Manipuri women in the markets who resisted the imposition of colonial economic burdens. This episode dramatized the limits of colonial governance, as grassroots resistance exposed the fragility of imperial control and ultimately led to Maxwell's transfer. Yet his legacy is not confined to administrative missteps; his personal relationship with Sanatombi, a Manipuri princess, has been reimagined in literary and historical narratives as emblematic of the paradox of colonial intimacy. On one hand,



Maxwell's recognition of Sanatombi's dignity—rescuing her from a violent marriage and shielding her from poverty—suggests genuine emotional investment, complicating the image of the colonizer as merely an oppressor. On the other hand, his departure and inability to sustain their bond reveal the asymmetry of colonial intimacy: for him, the relationship was elective and reversible, cushioned by the privilege of returning to a secure domestic life in England, while for Sanatombi it was existential, defining her identity and leaving her vulnerable to stigma and isolation. Maxwell's story thus intertwines political failure with personal attachment, dramatizing how colonial authority and desire intersected in ways that were both humanizing and destructive. His actions reveal the paradox of empire: affection that crossed boundaries yet collapsed under the weight of structural inequality, leaving behind a legacy of resistance, abandonment, and fractured subjectivity. In this sense, Maxwell becomes a symbol of the contradictions of colonial modernity in Manipur, where intimacy and domination were inseparably bound.

1835: Establishment of the Political Agency's Office.

The establishment of the Political Agent's office in Manipur in 1835 holds considerable historical significance, as it marked the formal beginning of British political penetration into the kingdom. Although framed as a diplomatic necessity, the office in reality functioned as the first institutional foothold of colonial power, laying the groundwork for eventual subordination. Initially conceived as a neutral mediator and liaison, the office soon expanded its influence beyond its original mandate, exploiting the internal instability of Manipur—particularly succession disputes and factional conflicts among princes—to justify deeper intervention. This shift exemplifies a common colonial strategy in South Asia, whereby local divisions were manipulated to facilitate imperial control. By interfering in domestic affairs, the Political Agent effectively assumed the role of shadow ruler, blurring the line between external diplomacy and internal governance and thereby undermining the sovereignty of the Manipuri monarchy. Manipur's experience mirrors that of other princely states, where British Residents or Agents gradually assumed administrative power under the guise of "protection" or "mediation," reflecting the broader model of indirect rule that maintained the façade of native authority while ensuring British supremacy. The presence of the Political Agent weakened indigenous institutions by fostering dependency on British arbitration, eroding the legitimacy of local rulers, and normalizing external interference in domestic governance. Over time, this contributed to the long-term diminution of autonomy, culminating in full colonial subjugation. Thus, the establishment of the Political Agent's office in 1835 was not merely a diplomatic arrangement but the institutionalization of colonial control, transforming Manipur's political landscape by exploiting internal divisions, shifting from mediator to administrator, and embedding the state within the larger framework of British imperial strategy.

The Anglo-Manipur War of 1891

The Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, though brief, represented a decisive confrontation between a small, landlocked Asiatic kingdom and the expansive machinery of the British Empire. It marked a rupture in Manipur's historical trajectory, closing the chapter of sovereign independence and inaugurating colonial subjugation. While the kingdom's conversion to Hinduism in the eighteenth century had already initiated a process of cultural integration into the Indian subcontinent—reshaping its rituals, social hierarchy, and identity—the war introduced a distinct and external dimension of political conquest. In this juxtaposition lies a historical paradox: Hinduization bound Manipur culturally to India, while Christian English power ultimately subsumed it politically into British India. The war thus stands as both a local turning point and a global milestone, completing the British conquest of India while redefining Manipur's destiny. It dramatizes the intersection of two trajectories: a gradual cultural assimilation through religion and a sudden political subjugation through empire. Together,



these processes produced a dual identity—Indian in cultural and religious orientation, yet British in governance—that shaped Manipur’s modern integration into India after independence. In this sense, the Anglo-Manipur War was not merely a military defeat but a watershed moment where cultural transformation and colonial domination converged to alter the kingdom’s political and cultural future.

Chandrakriti’s proclamation as king in 1850, followed by the formal recognition of his authority by the Governor-General, illustrates the growing dependence of Manipur’s monarchy on colonial validation. This moment marks a critical transition from indigenous sovereignty to a system in which legitimacy was mediated by British power. Within this historical framework, Sanatombi—Chandrakriti’s granddaughter and the central figure of *The Princess and the Political Agent*—emerges as a symbolic character whose personal struggles dramatize the entanglement of dynastic continuity and colonial interference. As a princess, Sanatombi occupies a position at the intersection of gendered vulnerability and political negotiation. Her agency is constrained by patriarchal structures, yet her narrative foregrounds the extent to which colonial politics penetrated the intimate spaces of family and kinship. Her life becomes a metaphor for the erosion of indigenous autonomy, as the expanding influence of the British Political Agent mirrors the intrusion into her personal and dynastic world. Thematically, Sanatombi embodies the tension between inheritance and dispossession: she inherits the legacy of Chandrakriti, a monarch validated by both local tradition and colonial authority, but she also inherits the precariousness of a dynasty whose survival increasingly depended on external sanction. Her struggles highlight the binary opposition between native sovereignty and colonial domination, between familial continuity and political rupture. In this way, the novel uses Sanatombi’s character to dramatize how colonial power was not merely a matter of diplomacy and administration but a force that reshaped identities, gender roles, and dynastic legitimacy. She becomes the literary vessel through which the broader historical reality of Manipur—caught between its own traditions and the encroaching authority of the British—is vividly explored. In Binodini’s novel, this historical trajectory is dramatized through the character of the Political Agent, whose authority illustrates how colonial power infiltrated everyday life, reshaped local politics, and ultimately subordinated Manipur’s autonomy to imperial interests. The novel thus situates personal and political narratives within the broader context of colonial intrusion, reminding readers that the presence of the Political Agent was both a literary device and a reflection of the historical processes through which Manipur’s sovereignty was gradually eroded.

II: Entangled Histories: Gendered Vulnerability and Political Authority in Colonial Manipur

The act of writing about Sanatombi by MK Binodini is itself a radical intervention in the politics of memory and representation. Had Binodini remained silent, Sanatombi’s existence would have been reduced to a marginal note in the Royal Chronicle—merely the princess who married the British Political Agent, a figure condemned and boycotted by her people. Such a record exemplifies the patriarchal and colonial mechanisms of erasure, where women’s lives are flattened into scandal or silence. Binodini’s narrative, however, recuperates Sanatombi from this historical obscurity, transforming her from a passive footnote into a subject of cultural and emotional complexity. This recovery aligns with feminist historiography, which insists on reclaiming voices silenced by patriarchal archives. By foregrounding Sanatombi’s inner life, Binodini destabilizes the male-centered chronicle and re-inscribes female agency into Meitei cultural memory. At the same time, her work resonates with adaptation theory: Binodini adapts fragments of history into a layered narrative, performing what Linda Hutcheon terms a “palimpsestic” act of rewriting (Hutcheon 6) where the past is not erased but re-



inscribed with new meaning. In this oscillation between archive and imagination, Binodini reframes Sanatombi's stigmatized marriage as a site of negotiation between colonial intimacy and indigenous resistance. Binodini's writing functions as counter-history. It challenges both colonial and patriarchal silencing, while opening space for female subjectivity within the broader discourse of cultural identity. Sanatombi's story becomes more than a biography—it becomes emblematic of how literature can recover suppressed voices, reconfigure historical memory, and resist the reduction of women to mere symbols of scandal or shame.

The narrative placement of Maxwell in MK Binodini's text is marked by his introduction first as a static image—"a photograph of a middle-aged foreigner" on page 2—and later as a character actively entering the story in Chapter 6. This dual introduction highlights how colonial presence is both visual (a photograph, a symbol of authority) and textual (an active agent in the unfolding story). As Manipur's first Political Agent after its conquest, Maxwell—locally remembered as "Major Mesin Saheb"—embodied the symbol of colonial authority, his very presence signaling the intrusion of imperial power into the intimate sphere of Manipuri royal life. The photograph functions almost like a reminder of surveillance—an emblem of foreign control looming over the domestic sphere. After Maxwell's brief introduction, Binodini deliberately shifts the narrative away from him. The story centers instead on Sanatombi: her palace life, her marriage to Manikchand, and the turbulent years leading up to the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. This shift suggests that while colonial figures like Maxwell are historically significant, Binodini's priority is to foreground Sanatombi's lived experience—the intimate, gendered, and domestic dimensions of history. The literary strategy of placing Maxwell first as a photograph allows Binodini to reduce him to an objectified presence, a colonial marker rather than a fully fleshed character. In contrast, Sanatombi's life is narrated with depth and continuity, emphasizing the insider's perspective: the palace, marriage, and war as experienced by Manipuri women. This strategy subtly critiques colonial historiography, which often centers foreign agents, by reclaiming narrative space for indigenous voices. Binodini uses Maxwell as a colonial signpost—a reminder of conquest and foreign intrusion—but she refuses to let him dominate the narrative. Instead, she centers Sanatombi's personal and domestic world, showing how the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 was lived and remembered from within the palace. This is a deliberate act of reframing history through insider memory, privileging indigenous voices over colonial authority. Binodini's narrative strategy, reflecting a feminist-postcolonial lens, introduces Maxwell first as a mere photograph and later as a marginal presence, thereby reducing the colonial agent to a symbolic intrusion rather than a central character. In contrast, she devotes sustained attention to Sanatombi's inner life, her marriage, and her experience of the Anglo-Manipuri War. This displacement of colonial authority in favor of a woman's lived perspective reclaims history from the margins, foregrounding domestic, gendered, and insider memory over the dominant colonial record.

In the early phase of their relationship, Maxwell remarked to Sanatombi: "In England, a woman may reign. If such a custom existed in Manipur, I would have recommended you. (...) I am your enemy, but not a greedy one." (196) Maxwell's statement acknowledges Sanatombi's capability and dignity, implicitly contrasting the gendered norms of England with those of Manipur. By suggesting she could reign if customs allowed, he positions her as a figure of authority, thereby recognizing her royal lineage and personal strength. This reflects a paradox: while colonial officers often reinforced patriarchal hierarchies, Maxwell momentarily imagines a space where Sanatombi could exercise sovereign power. His self-description as her "enemy" underscores the structural reality—he is a representative of the empire, inherently opposed to indigenous autonomy. Yet, by qualifying himself as "not greedy," Maxwell distinguishes his personal stance from exploitative colonial agents. He frames himself as an adversary bound by circumstance, not by malice. This duality reveals the ambivalence of colonial intimacy: affection and care coexisting with domination and political opposition. Yet embodying the contradictions of empire, he recognizes Sanatombi's worth and even imagines her as a ruler, but simultaneously reminds her of the irreconcilable divide between them. His remark illustrates Ann Laura Stoler's thesis that intimacy was central to colonial power—here, intimacy becomes a site where



admiration, domination, and contradiction converge. The tone is both admiring and melancholic. Maxwell elevates Sanatombi symbolically, yet admits the impossibility of her sovereignty within Manipur's customs and colonial structures. His phrasing suggests genuine respect, even as he acknowledges his role as an agent of imperial constraint. His statement to Sanatombi encapsulates the ambivalence of colonial intimacy: he admires her strength and imagines her as a sovereign, yet reminds her of the structural enmity between them. His words reveal both the human dimension of affection and the inescapable reality of imperial domination, situating their relationship at the intersection of care, admiration, and political contradiction. Maxwell's remark to Sanatombi—imagining her as a ruler if Manipur allowed female sovereignty and calling himself “her enemy but not a greedy one”—shows a paradoxical mix of admiration and acknowledgment of colonial enmity. He recognized her dignity even while bound to imperial duty. By contrast, Frank Grimwood's photography of Manipuri girls reflects a more objectifying mode of engagement: intimacy mediated through the colonial gaze, turning women into visual subjects rather than partners. Together, these examples highlight two divergent colonial registers—Maxwell's verbal respect and emotional care versus Grimwood's visual possession and surveillance—revealing how the empire negotiated power through different forms of intimacy.

Gendered Histories: Sanatombi's Grief and Mrs. Grimwood's Survival

Sanatombi's existence as a princess, situated at the turbulent crossroads of precolonial and colonial Manipur, is portrayed through a narrative that intertwines historical record with imaginative storytelling, blending fact and fiction into a single frame. Sanatombi's life embodies the instability of a society shifting from indigenous sovereignty to colonial subjugation. She is both a royal figure and a witness to the erosion of dynastic power. The narrative does not remain strictly historical; instead, it fuses documented events (wars, succession disputes, exile) with fictionalized or dramatized elements that capture her inner world and emotional suffering. This blending allows the text to highlight both the external realities of political upheaval and the internal psychic injuries she endured. History provides the skeleton, while fiction fleshes out the human dimensions of grief, loss, and resilience. By merging these modes, the story situates Sanatombi not just as a historical figure but as a symbol of the broader trauma of transition—her personal suffering mirrors the collective dislocation of Manipur at the threshold of colonial rule. The conflict between the British and the independent Manipuri kingdom arose not from the actions of women but from the internecine power struggle among Manipuri princes, compounded by the opportunism of colonial authority; yet in the aftermath, it was women and common people who bore the brunt of suffering, reduced to symbolic figures or expendable lives while elites and colonial agents negotiated power. This perspective highlights the asymmetry of historical violence: while princely rivalries and colonial opportunism drove the conflict, its consequences fell disproportionately on those with the least agency—women and ordinary citizens. Their suffering underscores how both nationalist and colonial narratives often erased lived experiences, relegating women to allegory and commoners to invisibility, even though they endured the deepest wounds of war and domination.

Sanatombi's trajectory after the war reveals a layered psychic injury that is both personal and **collective**, rooted in bodily trauma, familial loss, and political dispossession. The inability to conceive again is not only a biological injury but a psychic rupture. In patriarchal and dynastic contexts, a woman's reproductive capacity is tied to lineage, continuity, and social worth. Her body becomes a site of absence—she is denied the possibility of maternal fulfillment, which in turn fractures her sense of identity and belonging within the royal household. Displacement into domestic labor is marked by her learning to weave at the loom, a shift from royal privilege to subsistence work that symbolizes descent, where weaving—though culturally significant—represents survival rather than artistry. It signals her internalization of diminished status—her life is reoriented from dynastic continuity to household maintenance, a narrowing of horizons. Political dispossession is marked by the enthronement of Bhubon Singh's grandson, which bypasses her brother Lukhoi and underscores the erasure of her immediate family's claim to power. This exclusion intensifies her sense of futility—her lineage is politically silenced, leaving her with no symbolic stake in Manipur's future. The accumulation of bereavement is



marked by Lukhoi's death from smallpox, which extinguishes her last familial anchor in the political sphere, and by Surchandra's passing in Calcutta exile as a "government refugee," compounding the humiliation as her family is reduced to dispossession and exile. Her reaction—"couldn't hold it anymore"—signals psychic collapse, the breaking point where grief overwhelms resilience. There was nothing more to think" (120) crystallizes her psychic injury as permanent, not a temporary grief but a foreclosure of thought, hope, and futurity. She enters a state of psychic numbness, where mourning ceases to be active and becomes a static condition—an injury that cannot heal because it is tied to irretrievable losses (child, fertility, brother, father, dynastic claim).

Her injury exemplifies trauma as an unassimilable event—losses arrive in succession, overwhelming her capacity to narrativize or process. Her psychic injury is intensified by her gendered position—her inability to reproduce and her relegation to domesticity mark her as precarious within both family and polity. The exile of her father and the imposition of colonial authority fracture her psychic landscape, leaving her suspended between personal grief and collective disempowerment. Sanatombi's permanent psychic injury is the convergence of bodily trauma, dynastic erasure, and cumulative bereavement. It manifests as a collapse of futurity—she loses the ability to imagine continuity, whether through children, family, or political lineage. Her statement, "There was nothing more to think," is not resignation but the crystallization of trauma into permanence: a life emptied of possibility, where memory itself becomes a wound. Her injury exemplifies trauma as an unassimilable event, a rupture that overwhelms the psyche and resists narrative integration. As Cathy Caruth argues, trauma is defined by its belatedness and its refusal to be fully assimilated into consciousness, leaving the subject caught in repetition and fragmentation (Caruth 4). This inability to narrativize is compounded by the gendered dimensions of her experience. Judith Herman underscores how women's social positioning—particularly reproductive incapacity and relegation to domestic roles—renders them precarious and intensifies psychic injury (Herman 33). Read together, Caruth's theorization of trauma's unassimilability and Herman's account of gendered vulnerability illuminate how her losses arrive in succession, overwhelming her narrative capacity while simultaneously marking her as precarious within both family and polity.

At this juncture, Mrs. Grimwood's *My Three Years in Manipur* becomes relevant, as it provides a lens through which to compare and contrast two historical figures positioned on either side of the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. Sanatombi, the fifteen-year-old daughter of Maharajah Surchandra, often visited Mrs. Grimwood with other royal girls. Escorted by the Senaputti, they explored the house, especially enjoying Mrs. Grimwood's bedroom where they tried on her clothes and hats, brushed their hair with her brushes, and admired themselves in her mirror—amused that her dresses were far too small for their waists. (Grimwood 42) The colonial encounter is captured in the intimate, playful interactions between Manipuri princesses and Mrs. Grimwood, highlighting the blending of local royalty with colonial domestic space. Gendered curiosity is reflected in the girls' fascination with European fashion and grooming tools, embodying both youthful play and cross-cultural curiosity. Body and difference are underscored by their surprise at the small size of Mrs. Grimwood's dresses, highlighting embodied cultural contrast—Western slenderness versus local physiques—and revealing subtle negotiations of identity. This moment illustrates hybridity and boundary crossing: indigenous royalty engaging with colonial material culture, turning the residency into a site of both amusement and cultural comparison. At Mrs. Grimwood's residency, local Manipuri princesses joined a joyful water-party on the lake. Boats brimmed with children and princes as they playfully tossed pink water-lilies, laughing and getting drenched. Though caste rules forbade food or drink, they were delighted with flowers, Japanese fans, and beads. The scene situates Manipuri royalty within the colonial residency, highlighting a moment of cultural encounter and leisure. Lighthearted and festive, emphasizing play and shared enjoyment across social boundaries. The caste restriction underscores the persistence of local customs even within colonial spaces, shaping the modes of hospitality. Mrs. Grimwood's substitution of gifts (flowers, fans, beads) for food reflects negotiation between colonial etiquette and



indigenous norms. The episode embodies hybridity—royal children engaging in playful games within a colonial setting, where joy coexists with cultural difference and subtle negotiation of boundaries.

This cheerful scene of Mrs. Grimwood at the outset of her stay in Manipur contrasts starkly with the harrowing crisis she endured three years later, culminating in the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. While her husband and other four British officers were being beheaded by the angry Meitei soldiers, she was ducking bullets and “flying for (her) life, enduring privations of every kind, lonely, wretched, and weary.” (Ethel Grimwood 151) She writes, ‘I was ignorant of my husband’s fate. Had I known, when we left the Residency that night, that he (Mr Grimwood, her husband) and I were never to meet again on God’s earth, I could never have faced that march. It had been hard enough as it was to go and leave him behind me; but thinking that he was safe helped me in the endeavour to preserve my own life for his sake.’ (151) She was honoured with the Red Cross for her bravery by Her Majesty. She further wrote, ‘But sometimes the thought of the future, and the fate in store for me, seems very dark and dreary. Few of us are without ambitions, and I had mine in the days that are gone; but when they have all been destroyed at one blow, it is difficult to raise up new ones to take the place of the old—difficult to battle for one’s self in this eager, hurrying world, when one has grown accustomed to having someone always ready and willing to battle for one; and difficult to accustom myself to a lonely, solitary existence, after four years of close companionship with one whose sole wish was to make my life happy.’ (165-66)

The juxtaposition of Sanatombi and Mrs. Grimwood reveals two women caught in the vortex of the Anglo-Manipur war, each embodying distinct but intersecting forms of psychic injury and resilience. Sanatombi, as a Manipuri princess, experiences trauma that is simultaneously personal and collective: her bodily violation, the loss of familial bonds, and the dispossession of her political world mark her as a figure whose suffering is inseparable from the colonized community’s rupture. Her trajectory dramatizes how colonial intrusion destabilized indigenous structures of kinship and sovereignty, leaving her wounded not only as an individual but as a symbolic bearer of Manipuri identity. In contrast, Mrs. Grimwood, the wife of the British Political Agent, narrates her ordeal in terms of personal bereavement and survival under siege. Her memoir emphasizes the terror of flight, the loneliness of widowhood, and the collapse of her ambitions after her husband’s violent death. While she is honored by the imperial state with the Red Cross for bravery, her writing conveys the fragility of a woman suddenly thrust into solitude, forced to navigate a hostile landscape without the protective presence of her husband. Placed side by side, their experiences illuminate the asymmetry of colonial gendered suffering. Sanatombi’s injury is rooted in dispossession and the collapse of her cultural world, making her a figure of collective trauma whose body and fate are entangled with the politics of conquest. Mrs. Grimwood’s injury, though deeply personal, is framed within imperial recognition and valorization, her suffering transformed into a narrative of British endurance and feminine courage. Sanatombi’s silence and erasure in official colonial accounts contrast with Grimwood’s memorialization in print and honor by the Crown. Yet both women articulate the precariousness of female existence in wartime: Sanatombi through the symbolic wound of violated sovereignty, Grimwood through the lonely endurance of widowhood. Together, they embody two sides of the same historical rupture—one colonized, one colonizer—each marked by loss, vulnerability, and the struggle to reconstitute meaning in the aftermath of war.

Mrs. Grimwood’s reflection at the end of the book—“if we can say, ‘It was all for the best,’ then the lesson will not have been learnt in vain, and it will indeed be well with us”—is a striking attempt to impose meaning and moral order upon devastating personal loss. Her words reveal the psychological strategy of transforming trauma into a narrative of providence and endurance. On one level, this statement embodies the Victorian ethos of resignation and moral uplift: suffering is not



meaningless if it can be reframed as a lesson, a test of character, or a step toward spiritual growth. By insisting that her ordeal must be “for the best,” she aligns her grief with a larger teleology of divine will and imperial duty, thereby making her private bereavement legible within the moral framework of empire. At the same time, the phrase exposes the tension between lived pain and imposed consolation. Grimwood acknowledges the destruction of her ambitions and the loneliness of widowhood, yet she seeks to neutralize despair by insisting that the experience must yield a lesson. This is both a coping mechanism and a cultural script: Victorian women, especially those tied to colonial service, were expected to embody fortitude, to turn suffering into moral capital, and to uphold the dignity of empire through personal sacrifice. Her statement thus oscillates between genuine resilience and ideological containment. It suggests that psychic injury can be endured if it is narrativized as purposeful, but it also reveals the pressure to silence grief by subsuming it into a collective story of progress and providence. Grimwood’s attempt to moralize her bereavement exemplifies this duality: her private grief is refracted through the ideological demands of empire, transforming injury into moral instruction. In contrast to Sanatombi’s trajectory, which dramatizes dispossession and bodily violation without the consolations of imperial recognition, Grimwood’s words show how the colonizer’s wife could reframe trauma as moral capital, thereby securing honor and symbolic recompense. The line crystallizes the asymmetry of colonial suffering: for the colonized, wounds remain collective and unresolved; for the colonizer, wounds are narrativized as lessons, dignified by empire, and transformed into a story of endurance that “will indeed be well with us.”

Mrs. Grimwood’s experience in Manipur exemplifies the way British women were not merely passive observers but active participants in sustaining imperial authority. Her suffering during the 1891 uprising, followed by the award of the Medal of Courage from Queen Victoria, transformed her private ordeal into public imperial capital. As Mary Procida argues, British women’s roles in India were deeply political, with domesticity, violence, and race serving as key arenas through which they reinforced colonial power (Procida 45). Grimwood’s memoir did more than recount personal trauma—it functioned as an imperial text, narrativizing her resilience and loyalty to the Raj. In doing so, it aligned her suffering with the broader narrative of British endurance and moral superiority, legitimizing colonial presence. Her recognition by Queen Victoria further illustrates how women’s experiences were appropriated into imperial discourse, turning vulnerability into symbolic strength for the empire. Thus, Grimwood’s suffering, medal, and memoir together embody Procida’s central claim: that British women were integral to the politics of empire, their personal narratives serving to uphold and perpetuate colonial authority.

While trauma theory has illuminated the relationship between psychic suffering and cultural representation, postcolonial critics have long argued that it has not fulfilled its promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement. As Sonya Andermahr observes in her introduction to *Decolonizing Trauma Studies*, rather than forging relationships of empathy and solidarity with non-Western others, trauma theory has often produced a narrowly Western canon privileging the suffering of white Europeans while neglecting the specificity of non-Western and minority traumas (Andermahr 2). This imbalance is dramatized in the contrast between Mrs. Grimwood and Sanatombi. Grimwood, the colonial woman, is articulate—her memoir narrativizes suffering, transforming personal loss into moral capital and imperial resilience. Her voice is preserved and legible within the archive. Sanatombi, by contrast, embodies the silenced subaltern: her fractured intimacy with Maxwell and her stigmatization within Manipuri society remain largely unspoken, erased from dynastic and nationalist histories. She represents the “silent” trauma that resists assimilation into dominant narratives, her suffering mediated through others’ accounts. The juxtaposition of Grimwood’s articulate resilience and Sanatombi’s silenced vulnerability thus exemplifies Andermahr’s critique: trauma theory, when confined to Western voices, risks reproducing colonial hierarchies of speech and silence, dignifying the colonizer’s wounds while marginalizing the colonized woman’s precarious subjectivity.

Sanatombi and Mrs. Grimwood occupy different but parallel positions within the imperial order. Sanatombi, as a colonized princess, is subordinated by both colonial authority and patriarchal



structures; her intimacy with Maxwell is stigmatized, her voice silenced, and her agency constrained by dynastic politics. Mrs. Grimwood, though a colonial woman, is also marked by gendered limitations: her memoir narrates suffering but does so within the boundaries of imperial discourse, transforming her vulnerability into moral capital for the empire. As Philippa Levine notes, “Levine draws parallels between the subordination of colonized populations and the constraints on British women, highlighting how both were positioned as inferior within imperial hierarchies” (Levine 12). This observation helps us see that while Grimwood is articulate and Sanatombi silent, both are caught in structures that define them as secondary—Grimwood to colonial men, Sanatombi to both colonial and indigenous patriarchies. Their experiences thus reveal a shared, though differently inflected, marginality: Grimwood’s voice is preserved but instrumentalized, while Sanatombi’s voice is erased, her subjectivity precariously remembered. Together, they dramatize how empire produced hierarchies of gender and race that subordinated women across divides, even as their modes of articulation—memoir versus silence—underscore the asymmetry of colonial trauma and representation.

III: Prophecy and Scandal: Colonial Intimacy as Cultural Script

Sanatombi’s marriage to Maxwell is far from a private choice between two individuals; it embodies a negotiation between external colonial culture and indigenous colonized culture, dramatizing the asymmetry of power in which the conqueror’s authority and values intrude upon local traditions, while the colonized elites attempt to reframe intimacy as a survival strategy. Maxwell represents the British imperial order, carrying with him the authority of conquest, punishment, and the imposition of foreign norms. His presence embodies the intrusion of colonial power into the intimate sphere. Sanatombi and the Queen operate within indigenous frameworks of survival, ritual, and memory. Their strategies—whether reframing marriage as an opportunity or practicing ritualized forgetting—show how colonized elites negotiated trauma and humiliation by selectively adapting colonial relationships. The marriage becomes a site where colonial culture seeks dominance and colonized culture seeks continuity, producing a paradoxical union that is both contaminating and potentially restorative. For this reason, before Maxwell (a British colonial white) is formally married to Sanatombi (a princess, already married, a brown-skinned, colonized woman), there is a lot of discussion among the local natives. A scholar comments,

There is nothing much to the union itself, Royal Dowager Queen. There have been many princesses in the past who became queens of Burma and Assam. Even now, the royal daughter of Maharaja Debendra is the queen of Tripura. Princess Sanatombi is a female offspring, so it is not as if she is bringing him into the lineage. Moreover, it has been clearly predicted in the manuscripts that the royal blood would be defiled by the white man. Please do not worry, Your Highness; who can predict the destiny of a man and a woman? (245)

Here, Maxwell, a British colonial officer, embodies the intrusion of imperial power into indigenous royal structures. The scholar’s reassurance to the Dowager Queen reflects a resigned acceptance of colonial inevitability: the “prediction” in manuscripts that royal blood would be “defiled by the white man” suggests prophecy as a way of rationalizing colonial domination. The union is framed less as romance and more as a political and cultural contamination, underscoring how colonial marriages were perceived as threats to lineage and sovereignty. Princess Sanatombi’s gendered precarity is evident in her description as “a female offspring,” a phrase the scholar employs to diminish her role in dynastic continuity. Unlike male heirs, her marriage does not “bring him into the lineage,” highlighting patriarchal structures where women’s unions are seen as secondary or non-threatening to succession. Yet, paradoxically, her body becomes the site of colonial penetration—her marriage is symbolically charged as the defilement of royal blood, even if it doesn’t alter succession lines. This reflects how colonized women were often positioned as both powerless and hyper-symbolic. The invocation of past precedents—princesses marrying into Burma, Assam, and Tripura—situates Sanatombi’s union within a ritualized continuum of cross-border alliances preserved in cultural memory. However, the colonial



difference is stark: those earlier unions were intra-Asian, maintaining cultural parity, whereas Maxwell's whiteness marks rupture and contamination. The manuscripts that foretell defilement operate as ritualized memory, transforming prophecy into a cultural script that casts colonial encounters as predetermined fate. In doing so, they strip agency from both Sanatombi and the Queen, rendering the colonial marriage not a choice but an inevitability—one marked simultaneously by catastrophe and inevitability. The scholar says "there is nothing much to the union itself," yet simultaneously invokes prophecy of defilement. This contradiction reflects aporia: the union is both trivial (no lineage impact) and monumental (symbolic contamination). The Queen is told not to worry, but the reassurance is hollow—destiny is invoked precisely because agency is denied. This passage exemplifies how colonial texts stage gendered precarity: Sanatombi's marriage is not about love or lineage but about the symbolic collapse of cultural purity under colonialism. The scholar's words embody resignation, rationalization, and denial, showing how ritual prophecy and patriarchal logic combine to normalize colonial intrusion while masking its violence.

Manipur's Big Saheb eloped with Princess Sanatombi. "It was a national scandal; on the other hand, there was defilement." (243) The use of the term "defiled" to describe Sanatombi's consummation with Maxwell (239, 242), underscores the cultural, moral, and colonial tensions embedded in the narrative, as the word itself conveys impurity, pollution, and violation. Rather than framing the union as love or intimacy, it is marked as a transgression against Meitei norms, reflecting how colonial intimacy was perceived as contamination. Maxwell, as the Big Saheb and embodiment of foreign authority, becomes the figure through whom colonial power intrudes upon Meitei society, turning Sanatombi's body into a contested site. In patriarchal contexts where women's sexuality is tied to honor, her choice to cross boundaries of caste, kinship, and cultural propriety renders her "defiled," a judgment imposed by society rather than her own experience. This contrasts sharply with Hayainu's metamorphosis into hornbill life, which is narrated as liberation, while Sanatombi's sexual escape is stigmatized, revealing how female departure through sexuality is condemned rather than valorized. The term "defiled" thus encodes cultural anxiety about colonial intimacy, expressing fears of Meitei purity corrupted by foreign touch. Although Sanatombi chooses Maxwell, her agency is denied as her desire is overwritten by cultural condemnation. Her union dramatizes the clash between tradition and modernity, with her body becoming the battlefield where cultural purity and colonial intrusion collide. The word is not neutral; it reflects patriarchal and colonial anxieties by marking her choice as a violation, in contrast to Hayainu's mythic transformation, which is celebrated. In both cases, female departure from normative roles is narrated as dangerous, but Sanatombi's is stigmatized through sexual language, while Hayainu's is mythologized through transformation.

But from Maxwell's perspective, the language of "defilement" that dominates Meitei cultural judgment is replaced by imagery of innocence, beauty, and forbidden desire. He romanticizes Sanatombi as a "bright spark" and a "flower among thorns" (236), metaphors that elevate her above her social environment and frame her as pure, luminous, and exceptional. Unlike the community's view of her as "defiled," Maxwell perceives her as rare and precious, a figure of illumination rather than pollution. His awareness of cultural boundaries is evident in the phrase "forbidden to touch, forbidden to get close to," which underscores both the allure and the transgressive nature of his desire. The prohibition itself intensifies his attraction, revealing how colonial desire thrives on the forbidden. Maxwell's gaze, shaped by colonial ideology, positions him as the outsider who discovers beauty hidden in a "thorny" cultural landscape, thereby exoticizing and idealizing Sanatombi as a symbol of purity trapped within oppressive tradition. In sharp contrast, Meitei society interprets her sexual union as contamination, loss of honor, and cultural transgression. The resulting tension dramatizes a double vision: for Meitei society, Sanatombi's body is a site of pollution, while for Maxwell it becomes a site of transcendence and forbidden beauty. Yet his romanticization is itself problematic, reflecting the colonial impulse to claim purity from within a culture that marks it as taboo. Thus, the narrative reveals how the same act is stigmatized as contamination by one side and cherished as transcendence by the other, exposing the clash between internal cultural condemnation and external romantic idealization.



Accordingly, a dual narrative emerges from this Maxwell-Sanatombi scandal. From the Manipuri side, it is mythologized and transformed into prophecy, suggesting that local cultural memory interprets colonial intimacy not as random or contingent but as part of a larger, fated script. It reflects how communities often absorb disruptive events into symbolic narratives, turning scandal into destiny. From Maxwell's side, his involvement is framed as agency and desire—a conscious choice rooted in attraction that highlights the colonial gaze, where the native woman is exoticized and objectified, reinforcing orientalist tropes of the “princess” as alluring and available. Maxwell's fascination stems not only from Sanatombi's personality—her liveliness and boldness—but also from the symbolic aura she carries, which often marks a woman as intriguing, even threatening, because it disrupts expected submissiveness. Sanatombi's identity as a native princess imbues her charm with an exoticism that layers cultural difference onto her allure. For Maxwell, this “otherness” becomes part of the attraction, reflecting how colonial men often romanticized and fetishized local women as exotic figures. Ann Laura Stoler's argument that intimacy was central to imperial politics resonates here, underscoring how colonial power was enforced not only through administration but also through the regulation of sexuality, marriage, and domestic life. ‘European men should “take on” native women not only to perform domestic work but to service their sexual needs, psychic well-being, and physical care. European manhood in the colonies, whether measured by “character” and civility or by position and class, was largely independent of the presence of European women.’ (Stoler 1) ‘... how frequently the political and the personal were meshed, to identify what was created as private and public, and to ask what affections were perceived as cultural defections on colonial terrain.’ (Stoler 7) For the Manipuris, intimacy becomes cultural prophecy, embedding colonial intrusion into collective fate. For Maxwell, intimacy is personal indulgence, but one that carries political weight—his agency is not neutral; it is backed by colonial authority. By transforming scandal into prophecy, Manipuri culture resists colonial reduction, reclaiming agency through narrative even in the face of domination. The scandal operates on two registers: as prophecy and cultural script for the Manipuris, embedding colonial intimacy into destiny, and as agency and desire for Maxwell, reflecting the colonial gaze and orientalist attraction. This duality exposes the asymmetry of colonial encounters, where intimacy is simultaneously mythologized and politicized, revealing the entanglement of fate, desire, and power.

Here, a third narrative of Sanatombi's free will emerges amid the tension between agency, accident, rumor, and desire in her movement toward Maxwell. If her arrival at Maxwell's residence is read as a “mistake,” the act appears circumstantial rather than deliberate, stripping her of agency and portraying her as a passive figure caught between colonial intrusion and domestic crisis. Yet even a “mistake” can be reinterpreted as agency through refusal: she chooses to leave Manikchand's house after being beaten and insulted, making her departure intentional even if her destination is accidental. This act of leaving constitutes resistance against patriarchal violence, a refusal to endure both physical abuse and symbolic dishonor. Her agency lies not in choosing Maxwell but in rejecting Manikchand's authority, an act of self-preservation and dignity despite its social precariousness. Once linked to Maxwell, however, rumor transforms her flight into scandal, recoding her agency as seduction, witchcraft, or madness, and destabilizing her honor. The Dowager Queen's warning to Maxwell underscores this danger, as gossip already undermines Sanatombi's position. The question of whether she harbored feelings for Maxwell is precisely what rumor speculates, but the text suggests her refusal to return is less about romantic desire than about resisting patriarchal violence. Her agency is exercised in saying “no” to Manikchand, even if society misreads that “no” as “yes” to Maxwell. If desire exists, it is secondary to the structural conditions of precarity—widowhood, royal demotion, colonial intrusion, and domestic abuse. Thus, Sanatombi's act embodies ambiguous agency: intentional in departure, accidental in arrival, re-coded by rumor, and precarious in meaning. Her resistance destabilizes patriarchal



and colonial expectations of female obedience, showing that her agency lies not in choosing Maxwell but in refusing Manikchand, even as her survival is scandalized and appropriated by rumor.

But then, unlike the acceptance of the scandal as destined by the Royal Dowager Queen and the local scholar, Sanatombi's mother, Jasumati, could never forget the sobriquet Sanatombi, the defiled, native wife of the big Saheb. After Sanatombi was married to Maxwell, her sisters, Princess Khomdonsana and Princess Ombisana came regularly to her. (281) Sanatombi's mother, Jasumati, never visited her daughter or sought her help, even though she lived in poverty after the British conquest of Manipur and the death of her husband, former King Surchandra, in Calcutta. The pain Sanatombi had caused remained with Jasumati until her death, yet her refusal to approach her daughter was not simply neglect but a subtle form of resistance and agency. By keeping her distance, Jasumati rejected the colonial entanglement embodied in Sanatombi's marriage to Maxwell, preserving her dignity and refusing to legitimize her daughter's role as the "native wife" of a British officer. Her silence upheld traditional codes of honor and memory, sustaining cultural values against colonial disruption. Choosing poverty over compromise, Jasumati asserted pride and autonomy, embodying agency through withdrawal, endurance, and refusal rather than overt rebellion. This estrangement dramatizes the cultural faultline of colonial intimacy: Sanatombi represents hybridity, caught between tradition and colonial modernity, while Jasumati embodies resistance, clinging to traditional codes even in decline. Her refusal thus becomes a quiet but potent act of resistance, a way of preserving honor and dignity against colonial intrusion.

IV: The Politics of Native Negotiation in Colonial Intimacy

Sanatombi's estrangement from Manikchand dramatizes the fraught intersection of colonial authority, domestic violence, and gendered vulnerability, highlighting how intimacy, rumor, and precarity intertwine. Manikchand's return from abroad culminates in a violent quarrel, where his insults against Sanatombi's dethroned father expose the erosion of royal dignity under colonial rule, and his physical assault forces her into flight. Seeking refuge with her Grand Queen Mother, Sanatombi finds herself displaced once more, as Maxwell's occupation of the residence symbolizes the intrusion of colonial power into indigenous sovereignty. The Dowager Queen's warning to Maxwell—that Sanatombi is both a king's daughter and a married woman—underscores the precarious balance between female honor and political scandal. Yet despite this admonition, rumor proliferates: among the Meiteis, gossip transforms into discourses of witchcraft and madness, framing Sanatombi's refusal to return to her husband as evidence of colonial seduction or psychological instability. Such narratives reveal how rumor functioned as social control, policing women's mobility and reinforcing anxieties about colonial intimacy. Sanatombi's resistance—her refusal to resume wifely obedience—marks a rupture in normative expectations, but Manikchand's rejection of her, citing scandal and contamination by association with the Saheb, exposes the gendered double bind in which women's honor is simultaneously vulnerable to rumor and irretrievably tainted by it. In this way, the episode illuminates the entanglement of colonial power, patriarchal violence, and the precarious position of elite women, situating the narrative not merely as a domestic quarrel but as a microcosm of colonial intimacy and social precarity.

While discussing the possibility of Sanatombi marrying Maxwell, the Dowager Queen makes another statement: "If Sanatombi is clever, she could even be able to be of much use to Manipur" (245), which is layered with colonial, gendered, and political implications. The Queen frames Sanatombi's potential usefulness not in terms of her royal birth but in terms of her cleverness. This shifts the discourse from passive victimhood (being "defiled" by colonial marriage) to active agency: Sanatombi could manipulate or strategically navigate her position. "Cleverness" here implies political acumen, adaptability, and perhaps the ability to turn colonial intrusion into leverage for Manipur. Sanatombi's marriage exemplifies the instrumentalization of the female body, imagined as a tool for the state, in which her personal life is subordinated to the political needs of Manipur. As Gayatri Chakravorty



Spivak has argued, the subaltern woman is often reduced to a figure of political utility, her body spoken for and appropriated by patriarchal and colonial discourses (Spivak 284). This reflects a broader patriarchal-colonial logic: women's bodies and marriages are sites of negotiation, sacrifice, and political utility. Ann Laura Stoler similarly demonstrates how colonial regimes regulated intimacy and marriage as instruments of governance, turning women's relationships into tools for managing political alliances and imperial authority (Stoler 6). Read through Spivak and Stoler, the Queen's remark crystallizes how Sanatombi's personal desire is subsumed into a political calculus, her "cleverness" imagined as a resource for both family and polity within the colonial order.

The Queen's statement acknowledges Sanatombi's symbolic vulnerability but reframes it as potential strength—if she can act strategically. Rather than resisting the union outright, the Queen entertains its potential utility, embodying a pragmatic acceptance of colonial reality. It suggests that indigenous elites were not only fearful of contamination but also calculating: alliances with colonizers could yield material or political benefits. The Queen's tone is not defeatist but opportunistic, hinting at survival strategies under colonial domination. The Queen's statement is ambivalent, empowering Sanatombi by suggesting she could be "useful," yet simultaneously reducing her to a mere function of state survival. It reflects the paradox of colonized women's roles: simultaneously diminished (as "female offspring") and magnified (as symbolic bearers of cultural survival). The Dowager Queen's remark reframes colonial marriage from inevitable defilement to potential opportunity, highlighting Sanatombi's gendered precarity in which her cleverness is demanded precisely because her body is already compromised by colonial intrusion. Colonial negotiation allowed indigenous elites to seek advantage in imperial relationships, while Sanatombi's ambiguous empowerment granted her agency only within the narrow frame of usefulness to the state. This position dramatizes the double bind of colonized women, whose marriages are cast as both contaminating and potentially salvific, with their agency simultaneously acknowledged and instrumentalized.

One might further ask why the Dowager Queen appears to forget that Maxwell is, after all, a British officer of the British Empire who defeated Manipur and sentenced Sanatombi's mutinous uncles to death only the previous year. This sharp observation suggests that her apparent "forgetting" of Maxwell's colonial violence is not genuine amnesia, but rather a calculated rhetorical and political maneuver. Colonial Realpolitik is evident in the Queen's awareness that Maxwell, the British conqueror, had punished Sanatombi's uncles. Her statement about Sanatombi's "cleverness" reflects pragmatic survival: once Manipur has been defeated, resistance is no longer viable, so accommodation becomes the strategy. Forgetting here is a form of political forgetting—a deliberate silencing of trauma to imagine usefulness in the colonial present. Gendered mediation is evident as the Queen reframes Sanatombi's marriage as potentially beneficial, even against its violent backdrop. This shows how women's bodies and marriages were used as mediating instruments between colonizer and colonized. By focusing on Sanatombi's cleverness, the Queen displaces the memory of punishment and defeat, turning a site of humiliation into a possible site of negotiation. Ritualized forgetting, in many royal and ritual contexts, functions not as absence but as a deliberate strategy. The Queen invokes a future-oriented logic: rather than dwelling on the past violence (the mutinous uncles' execution), she imagines how Sanatombi might secure Manipur's survival. This is a form of ritualized memory management—choosing which events to emphasize and which to suppress to preserve dignity and continuity. The Queen's contradictory stance—knowing Maxwell as the punisher yet imagining him as a potential resource—embodies an aporia that reflects the colonial double bind: indigenous elites had to negotiate with the very agents of their subjugation, oscillating between memory of violence and hope for utility. The Queen's "forgetting" is not naïve—it is a calculated act of colonial accommodation. By suppressing the memory of defeat and punishment, she reframes Sanatombi's marriage as a possible tool for Manipur's survival. This reveals how colonized elites managed trauma through selective memory, while women's agency was instrumentalized as a bridge between humiliation and pragmatism. How colonial power forced indigenous rulers into paradoxical positions of both remembering violence and imagining usefulness in alliance. The Dowager Queen's forgetting operates as a political strategy of survival,



dramatizing the paradox of colonial rule in which the conqueror must be simultaneously feared and courted, remembered as a punisher yet reimagined as a potential benefactor.

Just as the novelist allows the colonized subject to perceive colonialism as part of an inevitable destiny and thereby arrive at an internal resolution, Maxwell, too, is drawn into this rhetoric of fate. He frames his presence in Manipur—and the suffering it entails—as something ordained beyond human agency. Upon his transfer back to Manipur—having earlier been removed in the wake of the scandal involving Sanatombi—he reflects: “Fate has brought me here again to suffer and to see suffering” (311). Separated from her husband, Sanatombi endures a life of poverty in her mother, Jasumati’s, modest household. While Maxwell’s words may allude to her suffering—an anguish for which he accepts partial responsibility—they cannot be disentangled from his broader role as a colonial agent, whose presence perpetuated domination and hardship in Manipur. Maxwell’s invocation of fate functions as a rhetorical strategy to naturalize colonial domination, absolving himself of direct responsibility by attributing suffering and displacement to destiny and thereby presenting colonial violence as inevitable rather than deliberate. This fatalism masks the asymmetry of power by embedding it within a metaphysical framework. The novelist’s gesture of allowing the colonized subject to see colonialism as destiny parallels Maxwell’s self-molding. For the colonized subject, destiny becomes a means of reconciling trauma; for Maxwell, it becomes a justification for perpetuating it. This duality highlights how the discourse of fate operates differently depending on positionality—internal resolution for the oppressed, external rationalization for the oppressor. Maxwell’s phrasing—“to suffer and to see suffering”—positions him as both participant and witness. This dual role allows him to claim empathy while simultaneously reinforcing his authority. Maxwell’s reliance on destiny resonates with Homi Bhabha’s notion of colonial ambivalence, where domination is cloaked in empathy and violence is narrated as inevitability (Bhabha 86). His words exemplify how colonial discourse oscillates between benevolence and coercion, producing a rhetoric in which suffering is naturalized as part of imperial destiny.

Moreover, his regret at leaving Manipur further complicates the narrative: it suggests attachment and sentiment, but one steeped in paternalistic control rather than genuine reciprocity. In the Epilogue, Binodini mentions Maxwell’s letter to Mr. Kirti dated 27 May 1906, in which he reiterates this fatalistic stance: “However, fate had ordained otherwise; she had left many sad hearts behind” (311). He concludes with a note of personal regret: “I greatly regret leaving Manipur...” The letters reveal how colonial figures negotiated their presence through emotional registers—regret, sadness, destiny—rather than through acknowledgment of exploitation. This emotional discourse creates a veneer of intimacy with the colonized, but ultimately sustains the structures of domination. The language of fate and regret can be read as a performative script that normalizes precarity, echoing Judith Butler’s idea of how discourse frames vulnerability as natural rather than political. The novelist’s parallel construction—colonized subject and colonial agent both bound by destiny—functions as a narrative adaptation of historical trauma, layering perspectives to show how fate is mobilized differently across power divides.

The Dowager Queen’s prediction that Sanatombi might one day be of use to Manipur finds partial fulfillment during the women’s uprising against Maxwell’s order to rebuild a burned house. When the Manipuris refused to comply and Maxwell threatened punitive police action, nearly five thousand women stormed the Residency compound in protest. In this moment of crisis, Sanatombi intervenes, urging Maxwell to rescind the unreasonable order and instead “look for the man who burnt the house down.” Her attempt to influence him reflects her effort to mediate between colonial authority and the grievances of her people, yet Maxwell, bound by his role as Political Agent of the British



Empire, refuses to yield, unwilling to let native resistance undermine imperial authority. Sanatombi's distress lies in her dual position—caught between loyalty to her people and her marriage to Maxwell—and in response to the women's call, she boldly enters the room where colonial officers deliberate, voicing her opposition in front of them all and demanding the order's removal. Binodini thus gives Sanatombi a role as mediator, situating her at the faultline of colonial power and native resistance. Her intervention demonstrates female agency, not through rebellion but through negotiation and advocacy, dramatizing the tension of colonial intimacy in which her marriage ties her to imperial authority while her cultural identity binds her to the people's suffering. Speaking out in a male-dominated colonial space underscores the precarious agency of elite women, who could influence but not overturn imperial decisions. In this episode, Sanatombi fulfills the Dowager Queen's prophecy by becoming momentarily useful to Manipur, attempting to soften colonial imposition and channel the voice of the women's protest into the halls of power. The narrative frames her intervention as a poignant moment of agency, where her voice bridges the gap between native resistance and colonial authority, even if her efforts ultimately fail to alter the imperial order.

V: Between Madness and Desire: Paradox of Sanatombi's Agency in Colonial Intimacy

In the epilogue, the writer points out that Sanatombi passed away a year after Maxwell departed from Manipur. The elders claimed that “the Big Saheb gave her medicine to shorten her life and then left,” and further alleged that “he cast a spell on her, driving her to madness.” Such accusations reveal the community's deep mistrust of the colonial man. This superstitious discourse functions to displace Sanatombi's personal choice in her relationship with Maxwell, reframing her fate as the result of colonial manipulation rather than her own agency. It reveals how colonial intimacy is refracted through indigenous suspicion and superstition. “The Big Saheb gave her medicine to cut her life short,” suggests that Maxwell's departure is reinterpreted as an act of betrayal and harm. Rather than seeing Sanatombi's death as natural or self-determined, the community frames it as caused by the colonial man. “The Big Saheb cast a *spell* on her, he made her go *mad*” invokes supernatural discourse, positioning Maxwell as a dangerous outsider whose influence is uncanny, destabilizing, and destructive. The elders' suspicion reflects a broader distrust of colonial figures. The “Big Saheb” embodies power, distance, and exploitation, and intimacy with him is seen as perilous, so by attributing Sanatombi's death to Maxwell, the community expresses its anxiety about colonial intrusion. The foreigner's presence is imagined as toxic, even when no direct evidence exists. Sanatombi's own choices—her affection for Maxwell, her vulnerability, her precarity—are erased. Instead, her fate is narrated as the result of colonial manipulation, denying her autonomy. Superstitious discourse as social strategy: By framing Sanatombi's death as caused by Maxwell's spell, superstition allows the elders to reclaim interpretive authority, reassert communal values, and warn against intimacy with outsiders. Moral policing functions as a cautionary tale that stigmatizes cross-cultural love as dangerous, thereby protecting social boundaries. Erasure of personal choice: The supernatural explanation strips Sanatombi of agency, rewriting her relationship with Maxwell as victimhood rather than volition and reflecting patriarchal and communal anxieties about women's choices in colonial contexts. Colonial love as contamination: Maxwell's affection is reimagined as poison or sorcery, underscoring the perception that colonial intimacy corrupts indigenous women. Sanatombi as a boundary figure: Her death becomes a symbolic closure, as she cannot survive the crossing between native and colonial worlds. Community resistance: The elders' discourse resists romanticizing colonial love. It insists that such relationships are destructive, even if Sanatombi herself embraced them. The elders' superstitious accusations reveal a deep lack of trust in the colonial man, reframing Sanatombi's death as the inevitable outcome of colonial intimacy and stripping her of personal choice and agency. In doing so, they both protect communal boundaries and perpetuate patriarchal control, turning her story into a cautionary myth rather than a record of her own desires.

Through the lens of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sanatombi's “Bewitchment” and “Madness” dramatize how female desire is systematically pathologized and displaced within colonial and patriarchal discourses. Much like Bertha Mason, whose



passion and rebellion are cast as insanity rather than legitimate subjectivity, Sanatombi's acceptance of Maxwell is interpreted not as consensual desire but as "madness induced by colonial witchcraft." This framing denies her autonomy, transforming her emotional life into pathology and aligning her with the figure of the "madwoman" whose resistance is silenced through medicalized or supernatural explanations. The local community's displacement of blame—attributing her relationship to Maxwell's bewitchment rather than acknowledging her choice—mirrors Gilbert and Gubar's observation that patriarchal culture externalizes women's creativity and desire onto monstrous figures, thereby protecting normative structures from disruption. The metaphor of "colonial witchcraft" further underscores how empire infiltrates intimate spaces, rendering cross-racial desire unnatural or dangerous, just as Bertha Mason's presence in *Jane Eyre* embodies colonial anxieties. Sanatombi's desire is thus doubly silenced: by patriarchy, which fears female autonomy, and by colonial discourse, which fears intimacy across racial boundaries. In this aporia, desire becomes both defiance and wound—resisting dynastic duty and patriarchal control while simultaneously being erased through its redefinition as madness. Sanatombi's love for Maxwell is stripped of agency and recast as pathology, dramatizing the intersection of gendered precarity and imperial power, and exemplifying Gilbert and Gubar's broader feminist insight that women's emotional lives are politicized, pathologized, and silenced.

Shifting the focus to Henry Maxwell, one can explore how he responds to and manages his relationship with Sanatombi. He was a Political Agent in Manipur for three terms: 1891–1892, 1898–1905, and 1904–1905. In 1892, Princess Sanatombi eloped with him, and they lived together for thirteen years. Maxwell left Manipur in February 1905, and on 27 April 1906, Sanatombi's final years are marked by a striking image of her agency captured by the novelist. Maxwell enjoyed morning rides on horseback, and Sanatombi often accompanied him as his consort. After long rides, the two would return together, with Sanatombi sometimes dressed in men's clothes, her hair tied loosely behind. As she entered the Residency driveway, she would flick her head so that her hair fell free across her shoulders, riding ahead of Maxwell with a commanding presence. She would halt the horse in the courtyard but remain mounted, refusing to dismount until Maxwell himself carried her down. (256) The horse here becomes a symbol of mobility, autonomy, and power, as riding allows Sanatombi to step beyond the domestic and gendered confines of her role, and her choice to wear men's clothes while riding ahead of Maxwell underscores her transgression of social norms, embodying freedom through both attire and movement. Maxwell does not curtail Sanatombi's freedom; instead, he accompanies her, riding behind as a subtle gesture of deference that allows her to lead, and his willingness to carry her down from the horse reflects care and respect rather than dominance. It frames Maxwell as a supportive consort rather than a controlling figure, suggesting that he recognizes Sanatombi's agency and accords her dignity even in situations where social convention might expect him to assert authority. Sanatombi's refusal to dismount until Maxwell lifts her down dramatizes her control over ritualized gestures of dependence. On one hand, she asserts independence by riding boldly, dressed as a man. On the other hand, she stages dependence in a way that requires Maxwell's participation, making him complicit in her performance of power. This interplay reveals a mutual respect: Maxwell does not diminish her symbolic authority but instead reinforces it through his actions. The horse also embodies strength, vitality, and sovereignty, and Sanatombi's command of it mirrors the command of her own identity, becoming an extension of her freedom, whose movement and energy amplify her defiance of gendered restrictions. By riding ahead, hair loose and flowing, she projects an image of uncontained power, almost regal, with Maxwell positioned as her respectful follower. The horse symbolizes her liberation from social constraints, while Maxwell's gestures—riding behind her, carrying her down—signal his acknowledgment of her autonomy. Rather than diminishing her, he becomes the facilitator of her freedom, embodying a rare dynamic of mutual respect and gendered inversion in a colonial setting.

Her choice to wear men's clothes while riding ahead of Maxwell is a continuity of symbolic acts across Sanatombi's life. As a young girl, Sanatombi was granted rare permission by the Grand Queen Mother to dress in a boy's clothes and join the king in the Procession of the Crow, a royal festival.



This act was not merely playful—it was a sanctioned transgression of gender norms, legitimized by royal authority. It foreshadowed her later ability to inhabit masculine roles while retaining her feminine identity, marking her as exceptional within the royal household. Years later, Sanatombi again dons men's clothes, this time not under the Queen Mother's sanction but through her own choice. On horseback, she leads Maxwell, her hair flowing loose, asserting both freedom and power. The horse amplifies her autonomy, while Maxwell's respectful gestures (riding behind, carrying her down) affirm her agency rather than curtail it. In childhood, her freedom was granted by authority (the Queen Mother). In adulthood, her freedom is claimed and enacted by herself, with Maxwell's respect reinforcing it. Both moments highlight her ability to cross gender boundaries—first as a symbolic participant in ritual, later as a rider commanding space and movement. The horse becomes the adult counterpart to the boy's costume: both are symbols of masculine-coded power that she appropriates to expand her sphere of freedom. The Procession of the Crow situates her within ritualized, royal power, while horseback riding situates her within personal, relational power. Together, these episodes show Sanatombi's lifelong negotiation of gendered precarity and autonomy: she moves from being permitted to transgress to actively embodying freedom, with Maxwell's respect ensuring her authority is recognized. This integration shows how Sanatombi's early sanctioned transgression evolves into a self-directed assertion of freedom, with the horse as a living symbol of her power and Maxwell as a respectful witness.

Sanatombi's horseback riding in men's clothes is indeed symbolic of her self-directed freedom, yet it gains sharper meaning when placed against the broader cultural context of Manipur. While Manipuri society is patriarchal, women were not entirely restricted to domestic spaces; they historically participated in markets, wielded economic independence, and mobilized collectively in times of injustice. This makes Sanatombi's act less an isolated rebellion and more an intensification of a cultural pattern where women claimed visibility and agency. Her horseback rides dramatize individual autonomy, while the women's protest against Maxwell's order exemplifies collective courage. Together, these moments highlight a continuum of female agency in Manipur—Sanatombi embodies it through the symbolic transgression of gender norms, and the women of Manipur enact it through organized resistance. The juxtaposition underscores how her personal assertion resonates with, yet also differs from, the broader social autonomy of Manipuri women.

A further example is Mrs. Grimwood's observation of Manipuri women, which offers a striking ethnographic glimpse into the social and economic roles of Meitei women in late 19th-century Manipur. Her observations highlight both the labor structures and the gendered cultural distinctions that set Manipuri society apart from much of colonial India. Grimwood notes that women wove clothing for themselves and their husbands, cooked, managed households, and worked in the fields, showing that they were not confined to domestic labor but were central to both subsistence and economic production. The description of women selling goods in the Ima Keithel (Mother's Market) underscores their central role in commerce, and the exclusion of men—except Bengalee traders—highlights the unique female monopoly over trade in Manipur. Even princesses participated in the bazaar, showing that market work was not stigmatized but rather embraced as a normalized, collective female responsibility. (Grimwood 41) Grimwood explicitly contrasts the visibility and freedom of Manipuri women with the seclusion imposed on women elsewhere in India under the purdah system, interpreting this openness as a mark of "enlightenment" and "intelligence." (43) The imagery of women hurrying with wares and babies reflects a society where female mobility in public spaces was accepted and celebrated. Grimwood's picturesque description of Manipuri women—babies on their backs, wares on their heads—as a "pretty sight" reflects the colonial tendency to aestheticize indigenous practices, and by labeling them "more enlightened," she situates them within a comparative framework shaped by colonial values, measuring their visibility against both Indian patriarchal norms and European ideals of female agency. The bazaar system institutionalized women's economic power, creating a rare example of a matrifocal public sphere in South Asia. Resilience and precarity: While Grimwood admires their industriousness, her account also reveals the heavy burden of labor borne by women—domestic, agricultural, and



commercial—suggesting both empowerment and exploitation. Meitei women embodied both traditional roles (weaving, childcare) and progressive agency (market control, public presence). Grimwood’s account, though filtered through a colonial lens, provides valuable testimony to the distinctive gender dynamics of Manipuri society, where women’s visibility and labor were structurally central rather than marginal. Mrs. Grimwood’s observation highlights the dual reality of Meitei women—extraordinary economic agency and visibility in public life, coupled with immense labor responsibilities.

Moreover, Sanatombi’s marriage to Maxwell can be read as a layered act of self-assertion, where love and desire become the grounds for her individual agency, yet without severing her ties to cultural identity. As a conservative native princess, her choice to marry a colonial master may appear to signal assimilation into colonial structures, but in reality, it demonstrates her capacity to negotiate between two worlds. On the level of her individual self, the marriage is a declaration of autonomy—she asserts her right to desire, choose, and define her life beyond the rigid expectations of her community. Yet, her cultural self remains intact, for she continues to embody and carry forward Meitei traditions, devotion, and memory. The union does not erase her roots; instead, it situates her at the threshold of cultural hybridity, where she can both embrace intimacy and resist erasure. Homi Bhabha’s theorization of hybridity underscores this liminal positioning, where colonial subjects negotiate identity in the “third space” of cultural encounter (Bhabha 112). Gayatri Spivak reminds us that even within structures of constraint, subaltern women articulate agency, their choices refracting both resistance and complicity (Spivak 284). Partha Chatterjee’s notion of the “inner domain” of culture further illuminates how colonized women safeguarded traditions while engaging with colonial modernity, ensuring that cultural continuity persisted despite external pressures (Chatterjee 130). Read together, these perspectives highlight how Sanatombi’s marriage embodies both autonomy and cultural resilience, situating her at the intersection of desire, tradition, and colonial negotiation.

For this reason, Sanatombi’s performance as the lead dancer of *Nitya Ras* in the courtyard of the Political Agent’s residence becomes a profound act of reclaiming both her individual self and her cultural self, a moment where personal agency and collective continuity converge. On the level of her individual self, she asserts her identity by stepping into the center of attention, refusing to be reduced to a colonial subject or a passive performer, and instead embodying devotion through her body, gestures, and presence. This act of selfhood is not alienation but reclamation, a refusal to let colonial authority define her being. At the same time, her cultural self emerges as she channels the collective memory of her people, carrying forward the Meitei spiritual and historical past into the present through the *Ras* dance, which is rooted in *bhakti* and devotion to Krishna and Radha. The audience’s tears, the communal singing of Surchandra’s prayer, and the shared mourning of an age-long past reveal that Sanatombi is not dancing alone but is embodying the cultural self of her community, binding them together in devotion and resistance. The colonial courtyard, a symbol of domination, is transformed into a sacred stage where memory and spirituality eclipse authority, and Sanatombi bridges her individual self and cultural self, showing that personal identity and collective memory are inseparable. Her dance becomes both a personal ritual of selfhood and a communal act of cultural survival, reclaiming feminine devotion and cultural agency within the very heart of colonial power.

VI: The Complex Paradox of Coloniser–Colonized Relational Entanglement

Following the crisis surrounding the rebuilding of Junior Saheb’s house and the subsequent agitation of women, an order for Maxwell’s transfer was issued, signaling the end of his tenure in Manipur. Aware that he would not be reassigned to the region, Maxwell informed Sanatombi of his intention to take a year’s leave before retiring and requested that she accompany him. Sanatombi remained silent. Her inner conflict revealed the complexity of her position: to leave or to remain was equally fraught. She recognized the hardships Maxwell had endured and the deep bond that tied him to his homeland, yet she, too, was bound by cords of attachment to her own land and culture. Fear restrained her—fear of severing the ties that anchored her identity, even as she struggled to imagine life without Maxwell. In



her silence lay the realization that this foreigner had come to occupy an immense space within her existence. No longer a child, nor merely the princess daughter of Surchandra, she now confronted life as a woman compelled to make choices that would define her future. The challenge before her was profound: whether to embrace intimacy across cultural boundaries or to remain within the fold of her community. Maxwell himself acknowledged the impossibility of easy resolution, remarking that orthodox Manipur would never accept her, while England too would not receive her warmly. Their relationship thus became a crucible of colonial intimacy, where love and desire collided with cultural rootedness and the harsh realities of belonging.

This moment represents the culmination of the intimate and political contradictions that have defined Maxwell and Sanatombi's relationship, dramatizing the tension between colonizer and colonized, husband and wife, private desire and public belonging. Maxwell's transfer order signals the collapse of his authority in Manipur, a displacement that underscores the limits of colonial power when confronted with indigenous resistance. His personal desire to retire and take Sanatombi with him collides with structural realities: he knows that orthodox Manipur will never accept her, and that "mighty England" will not receive her warmly. In this recognition lies the paradox of colonial intimacy—his marriage to a Meitei woman has crossed boundaries of race and culture, but this very act isolates him from both colonial peers and native society, rendering his retirement not liberation but exile. Sanatombi, in turn, is caught between two worlds. Her silence reflects the impossibility of choosing between cultural belonging and personal love. She feels the pull of her homeland and kinship ties, yet she cannot imagine life without Maxwell. This moment marks her awakening to adulthood: no longer a child or princess-daughter, she confronts life as a woman facing existential challenges. To leave Manipur would mean severing the cord that ties her to her land, yet to remain without Maxwell would mean losing the man who has come to occupy her life. Either choice risks a form of self-erasure. Together, the couple becomes a symbol of colonial intimacy's contradictions. In private, they share affection and dependence; in public, their union is marked by rejection from both Manipur's orthodoxy and England's exclusivity. They belong fully to neither world, forming a liminal pair whose intimacy creates a private space of connection but cannot be validated by collective culture. Their situation dramatizes the impossibility of reconciling colonial power with indigenous belonging. For Maxwell, retirement is an admission of defeat, as intimacy estranges him from empire. For Sanatombi, silence is the only response to a dilemma that tears her selfhood between love and land, private desire and collective culture. Their bond, though genuine, exists in a void—a private love that neither society will accept, exposing the fragility of intimacy under empire and the structural reality of double exile.

Before he leaves Manipur, Binodini makes Maxwell think like this: "Sanatombi, I love your Manipur; even if Manipur does not love me, I will not be able to stop loving it. The ties you have bound me with are not only the bond of happiness, but also the bonds of defeat." (302) This passage is marked by irony, ambivalence, and the tension between colonial authority and personal intimacy, particularly in Maxwell's declaration, "I love your Manipur; even if Manipur does not love me..." which reveals an emotional attachment to the land mediated through his relationship with Sanatombi. His bond is framed simultaneously as happiness and defeat: happiness through intimacy, defeat through political failure and rejection by the people. This duality encapsulates the paradox of colonial intimacy—love for the land and its people, yet experienced through domination and resistance. As Edward Said reminds us, colonial discourse often oscillates between affection and domination, producing ambivalence in representations of empire (Said 25). Maxwell's departure "without saying anything" underscores the limits of colonial empathy, as his silence reflects the impossibility of reconciling personal sentiment with the structural realities of empire. His unfulfilled promise to return exposes the emptiness of colonial assurances, intensifying Sanatombi's isolation while confirming the transient and unreliable nature of colonial presence for Manipur. Ann Laura Stoler has shown that intimacy in colonial contexts was inseparable from political authority and regulation, making personal bonds fragile under the weight of imperial politics (Stoler 6). The meta-commentary—"Is it simply a native writer's imagination with a soft corner for this British officer?"—further complicates the colonial binary by suggesting that



Maxwell's romanticized attachment may be a literary construction, humanizing the colonizer within the narrative. Durba Ghosh emphasizes that colonial narratives often romanticized the colonizer's emotional ties while simultaneously disciplining indigenous women and families, exposing the contradictions of empire (Ghosh 14). Yet this "soft corner" also highlights the paradox of colonial intimacy: Maxwell's love is inseparable from his defeat, his intimacy marked by resistance, rejection, and exile. His silence and broken promise dramatize the fragility of colonial intimacy, revealing that affection cannot overcome the structural violence and rejection inherent in imperial politics. For Sanatombi, this abandonment crystallizes her fractured selfhood, suspended between private desire and collective belonging, while for Manipur, it underscores the futility of colonial love—an intimacy that produces moments of attachment but ultimately collapses under the weight of political defeat and cultural rejection.

He goes away, saying to Sanatombi he will come back (303), but he does not. In the Epilogue, the author recounts a friend's remark that Maxwell had returned to India once more, but upon learning of Sanatombi's death, he turned back at Silchar and never proceeded into Manipur. Maxwell's departure with an unfulfilled promise to return encapsulates the paradox of colonial intimacy, oscillating between genuine emotional investment and structural limitation. His absence can be interpreted as abandonment, indifference, or the impossibility of sustaining a bond across colonial and cultural boundaries. Yet the friend's remark complicates this impression, revealing that Maxwell did attempt to return but was halted by Sanatombi's death. His turning back at Silchar suggests that his connection to Manipur was inseparable from her presence, and without her, the land lost meaning. This decision not to enter Manipur after her death indicates that his bond was not casual; he could not face the territory without her, signaling an authentic emotional attachment. At the same time, his love appears conditional, as he does not remain to mourn, honor her memory, or engage with her world beyond her life. His retreat underscores the asymmetry of colonial intimacy: for Maxwell, Sanatombi embodied Manipur, and once she was gone, the territory reverted to foreignness. His affection crossed geographic and cultural boundaries, but his inability to enter Manipur after her death highlights the precarity of such relationships—fragile, easily undone by mortality and circumstance. His silence and withdrawal testify to a love that was sincere yet unspeakable, unable to be fully articulated or sustained within the colonial context. Maxwell's turning back at Silchar functions both as a gesture of grief and an admission of defeat, dramatizing the limits of colonial love: strong enough to draw him back to India, but too fragile to survive Sanatombi's death.

Moreover, Maxwell's concern for Sanatombi extended beyond the ordinary expectations of a colonial officer. He urged the king to take her to Calcutta for medical treatment and even sent a substantial check to cover expenses. His advice that she occasionally travel abroad reflects a genuine desire for her well-being. Despite the geographical distance and the limitations of communication in the early 20th century, Maxwell maintained contact through letters and telegrams—small but significant acts that underscored his continuing attachment and responsibility toward her. Maxwell's actions reveal care within the empire, standing in striking contrast to the typical detachment of colonial administrators. His financial support and medical concern suggest that his relationship with Sanatombi was not merely symbolic or opportunistic but grounded in genuine care. By encouraging her to travel abroad and ensuring her treatment, Maxwell positioned Sanatombi within a transnational sphere, bridging the local world of Manipur with the wider colonial network. This reflects how intimacy could complicate imperial hierarchies, granting a Manipuri woman access to spaces usually reserved for colonial elites. The letters and telegrams, modest in form, carry immense weight given the technological and logistical constraints of the time. They signify continuity of care across distance, reinforcing that his bond with her was not severed by imperial duty. While Maxwell remained an agent of British authority, his gestures toward Sanatombi destabilized the rigid binaries of ruler and ruled. His care embodies the paradox of colonial intimacy—where affection and domination coexisted uneasily. Maxwell's financial, medical, and emotional support for Sanatombi illustrates how intimacy could soften the hard edges of empire, even as it remained entangled in structures of power. His letters and gestures of care



highlight the human dimension of colonial encounters, complicating the narrative of imperial agents as detached enforcers of rule.

Maxwell's position as Political Agent in Manipur, marked by his marriage to Sanatombi and the tension between imperial duty and personal care, placed him at the intersection of representing the British Empire's interests—maintaining order, enforcing treaties, and ensuring loyalty to colonial governance. His correspondence reveals a tone of melancholy and empathy, suggesting that his role was not merely bureaucratic but deeply entangled with emotional and human concerns. His "fate has brought me here..." also conveys a sense of reluctant duty—he perceives his posting as a burden, marked by witnessing hardship. The caring Maxwell one finds in the fiction resonates with his words in the real letter, as he acknowledges loss and grief not only his own but also that of the community, with his recognition of shared suffering standing out as unusual for colonial officials who often distanced themselves emotionally. "I greatly regret leaving Manipur." (311) This regret signals attachment and care, both for the land and its people, and specifically for Sanatombi, his Manipuri wife. Intimacy within Empire is revealed in his marriage to Sanatombi, a cross-cultural union that complicates the colonial binary of ruler and ruled. While he served the Empire, his marriage embodied a personal bond that transcended imperial hierarchies. The tone of his letters suggests genuine concern for her well-being and sorrow at separation. Unlike many colonial officers who treated local women as temporary companions, Maxwell's words reflect emotional investment and respect. His marriage illustrates the ambivalence of empire, embodying Ann Laura Stoler's thesis in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* that intimacy was not outside empire but central to its functioning. Maxwell's care for Sanatombi reveals both the human vulnerability within colonial structures and the contradictions of imperial power. Maxwell embodies the paradox of being both an agent of imperial control and a man capable of empathy and love. His suffering is not only administrative but personal—caught between loyalty to the empire and attachment to Manipur. His regret and sorrow complicate the stereotype of colonial officers as detached rulers, showing how intimacy destabilized imperial authority by humanizing the agent. Maxwell's letters reveal a man torn between imperial duty and personal affection, and his marriage to Sanatombi situates him within the intimate politics of empire, where love and care coexist uneasily with domination and control. Though he worked for the British Empire, his words suggest that he truly cared for her, and through that care, he acknowledged the emotional costs of colonial rule—both for himself and for the people of Manipur.

One cannot deny that Maxwell's affection for Sanatombi may indeed be sincere, yet his position remains comparatively less difficult since he has a wife and two children awaiting him in England, whereas for Sanatombi the circumstances are starkly different: she endures isolation, remains unforgiven by her community, and cannot let go of Maxwell, for it is he who restores her dignity as a princess, rescues her from a negligent and violent husband, and shields her from the poverty she faced while living with her destitute mother after leaving Manikchand. Maxwell's departure, accompanied by his unfulfilled promise to return, illuminates the profound asymmetry of colonial intimacy, wherein emotional bonds are entangled with structural inequalities. His words—"I love your Manipur; even if Manipur does not love me, I will not be able to stop loving it. The ties you have bound me with are not only of the bonds of happiness, but also the bonds of defeat" (302)—suggest sincerity, acknowledging both personal joy and political failure. Yet his position is softened by the security of a wife and children in England, allowing him to retreat into a stable domestic life and social acceptance. Colonial privilege is evident in his ability to leave without consequence, walking away from both defeat and intimacy, while Sanatombi remains condemned by her community and unable to escape the stigma of betrayal. Maxwell's recognition of her dignity as a princess, his rescue from a violent husband, and his shielding her from poverty bound her to him emotionally and materially, making him the source of her survival and self-worth. For Sanatombi, this



attachment was existential, defining her identity and leaving her vulnerable to isolation once he departed. The asymmetry is stark: Maxwell's bond as colonizer was elective and reversible, while Sanatombi's as the colonized was irreversible, shaping her entire existence. His intimacy was one chapter in a larger life, cushioned by privilege, whereas hers was survival, dignity, and identity, culminating in abandonment and unforgiveness. Their relationship dramatizes the unequal stakes of colonial intimacy: the colonizer can leave, but the colonized woman is left to bear the cultural, social, and emotional consequences alone. Sanatombi's tragedy lies in the double bind of exclusion—unable to return to her people and unable to hold onto Maxwell—her fractured selfhood exposing the structural inequality of their bond, where his defeat is political but hers is existential.

By presenting Maxwell in a sympathetic light, Binodini demonstrates a willingness to view colonial figures not merely as oppressors but as individuals with redeeming qualities, reflecting a certain acceptance of colonial presence. Many princely states in India maintained cooperative or even deferential relationships with the British, often seeking favor or stability by supporting colonial administrators, which explains why Binodini's stance resonates with their attitudes (Chatterjee 130). At the same time, the dominant historical and nationalist narrative frames the British Raj as exploitative—draining resources, enforcing subjugation, and perpetuating inequality—so her sympathetic representation of Maxwell stands in tension with this broader critique of imperialism. Binodini's portrayal thus reflects a dual positioning: she echoes the pragmatic loyalty of princely states while simultaneously resisting the nationalist critique that views colonialism only as exploitation. Crucially, however, her narrative also recovers the silenced and stigmatized story of Sanatombi from the shame of royal history, giving voice to a woman whose intimacy with a colonial officer was erased or condemned within her community. Durba Ghosh has shown how colonial narratives often romanticized administrators' ties to local families, humanizing the colonizer while exposing contradictions of empire (Ghosh 14). By re-inscribing Sanatombi's experience into literary memory, Binodini not only complicates the colonial binary but also challenges the erasures of patriarchal and dynastic discourse. Gayatri Spivak reminds us that subaltern women's voices are often silenced in nationalist and dynastic histories, and literature becomes a crucial site for recuperating their precarious subjectivity (Spivak 284). Binodini's layered stance thus makes her representation complex, simultaneously sympathetic to the colonizer and recuperative of the colonized woman's silenced history.

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