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19

Between Pre-Modern Roots and Early Modern Manipur: Modern Self, the Birth of Novel, Religious Contest and Bhakti in Hijam Anganghal's *Jahera* (1964)

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Page No.134-159

Abstract: *This paper approaches Jahera through five interconnected perspectives. First, it situates the narrative within 1930s Manipur, a time when pre-modern religious and feudal structures coexisted with emerging currents of rational thought, empirical inquiry, and individual autonomy. Second, it considers how British colonial rule, through the spread of English education, introduced modernist ideas that gradually weakened the theocratic monarchy and nurtured a literary culture attentive to the lives of ordinary people, thereby establishing the novel as a popular form. Third, it examines the love story between the Hindu and Muslim protagonists, whose relationship—hemmed in by rigid orthodoxy—becomes emblematic of the clash between irreconcilable traditions. Fourth, it contrasts Chandidas's reformist vision with Kunja's corrosive ego, illustrating how individuality, when severed from devotion and ethical responsibility, can devolve into destructive force. Finally, Jahera's unwavering devotion to Kunjo is interpreted as an expression of Bhakti, embodying a spirit that transcends imposed identities and affirms a deeper human impulse toward freedom and unity, challenging sectarian and hierarchical boundaries.*
Keywords: *Pre-modern roots, mangba-sengba, individual autonomy, novel, cultural contest, bhakti.*

I: At the Intersection of Pre-Modern Roots and Early Modern Manipur: *Jahera* in Context

Hijam Anganghal (1892–1943) completed his education up to Class V but was unable to pursue further studies due to financial constraints. Despite this limitation, he made remarkable contributions to the development of early modern Manipuri literature, which have been widely recorded in numerous Manipuri publications. His notable work *Jahera*, published posthumously in 1964, reflects the socio-cultural milieu of the 1930s. *Jahera's* story centers on the theme of forbidden inter-caste love. Kunjo (Kunjabihari), a Hindu Meitei youth, visits the home of Jahera, a striking fourteen-year-old Pangan (Muslim) girl, to collect medicinal plants. Jahera lives with her widowed mother in poverty. Though no words of affection are exchanged, a quiet bond begins to form between them. Yet, the gulf of religion and caste renders their love seemingly impossible, and those aware of it attempt to intervene. Kunjo, determined to draw closer to Jahera, seeks the assistance of his friend Gopal. Just as their feelings begin to deepen, Kunjo is compelled to leave for Jorhat to care for his ailing brother-in-law. Meanwhile, Jahera's fondness for Hindu customs complicates her position within her community. Her beauty attracts the attention of a Muslim suitor, but she firmly rejects him. Humiliated, the suitor retaliates by exploiting her Hindu leanings, inciting hostility against her

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family, and attempting to drive them out. To further tarnish her reputation, he spreads a rumor that Jahera is romantically involved with Amir, a wealthy landowner. This falsehood provokes Amir's wife, who joins the campaign against Jahera, intensifying her plight. Some members of the Meitei community come forward to support Jahera and her mother, sheltering them in a hut at the brickfield. Others attempt, unsuccessfully, to abduct Jahera. Meanwhile, her uncles from Thoubal are away in Cachar for cattle trading. Fearing for their safety, Jahera and her mother travel to Sadia (Sadiya) in eastern Assam to stay with her aunt. On the journey, at Mao, Jahera and Kunjo—who is returning to Imphal with his elder sister and sick uncle—catch sight of each other through the windows of their vehicles. In Sadia, Jahera encounters another difficulty: her aunt's husband, a tailor, indirectly expresses his wish to marry her, as the couple is childless. Jahera remains silent, but she confides in Gopal through a letter. Gopal relays this to Kunjo.

Upon learning of Jahera's whereabouts, Kunjo resolves to go to Sadia alone, even though his mother is unwell. Protective as ever, Gopal insists on going in his place. Eventually, Jahera's uncle from Thoubal arrives to escort Jahera and her mother back to Manipur. At the Sadiya railway station, Gopal meets them along with the eldest Thoubal uncle, and together they return home. After spending one night in Imphal, Jahera and her mother continue to Thoubal, accompanied by Gopal, Kunjo, and the eldest uncle. This journey offers Kunjo and Jahera a fleeting chance to see one another, though no words are exchanged between them. Kunjo makes several secret trips to Thoubal, hoping for a chance to meet Jahera. His repeated visits stir anger among the local Pangans, who vow to harm him if he appears again. With the assistance of a Meitei woman—an old friend of Jahera's mother—Kunjo arranges a clandestine meeting. Under the cover of night, Jahera disguises herself as a young man to protect Kunjo, guiding him to safety. Once alone, she reveals her true identity, and the two finally share a personal conversation. Their only previous exchange had been brief and impersonal, when Kunjo once visited her house in search of herbs. In this moment of intimacy, Jahera confesses the impossibility of their union, reminding him that no precedent exists for a marriage between a Hindu and a Muslim in their society, nor is one likely to be accepted now. Kunjo offers no clear reply. Jahera, overwhelmed by her feelings, voices her desire to die in his embrace. In a devastating turn, Kunjo fulfills her wish by ending her life with a knife. Thus, the pursuit of forbidden love, constrained by the rigid boundaries of conservative Manipuri society, concludes in tragedy and murder.

The Jahera-Kunjo narrative, set in 1930s Manipur, reflects a period of colonial rule marked by political calm and cultural continuity. Despite British control, the story notably omits references to colonial authority or monarchy, suggesting a populace largely unconcerned with external governance and focused instead on everyday social dynamics. Anganghal, born the year after the British conquered Manipur in 1891, was a child of the colonial period. In 1918, Raja Churachand was elevated to the rank of Maharaja by the British Raj, a moment that coincided with Anganghal being 26 years old. Years later, in 1934, the king received the honour of Knight Commander of the Order of the Star of India, by which time Anganghal was 42. The characters in the story continued to endure the struggles of ordinary life, largely detached from the wider political currents, even as Manipur itself underwent a profound transformation. The construction of a motorable road fit for one or two vehicles, replacing the old Dimapur cart track, symbolized the arrival of modernity in the region. This infrastructural change not only facilitated faster communication and trade but also integrated Manipur more closely with India, reshaping its economic and social rhythms. The road became a conduit for cultural exchange,

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exposing the people to new ideas and institutions, while simultaneously serving as a tool of colonial and later national consolidation. Although political consciousness among the populace remained limited at the time, the new connectivity laid the groundwork for future awareness and participation, marking the uneven yet undeniable entry of Manipur into the modern age. One significant social institution that permeates the narrative and unsettles the protagonists' lives is the Brahma Sabha, a religion-based administrative organization that sought to obstruct the penetration of modern ideas. The Maharaja was the head of the Sabha, supported by his royalty and the senior Brahmins. It is believed that on numerous occasions, the king exploited the Brahma Sabha to oppress his political adversaries and extort illegal taxes from the general populace. Furthermore, the Brahmins within the royal palace were said to receive considerable royal patronage. Although this practice isn't mentioned specifically, characters like Jamini and Ibemcha are aware of and hold in high regard the authority of Brahma Sabha, especially regarding the matter of *mangba-sengba* (pollution-purity). Ibemcha said to Jahera, 'If anyone reports to the Brahma Sabha that a Muslim girl has been taught how to put Chandan mark' (66). The apprehension experienced by Ibemcha regarding the seemingly innocuous action of applying Chandan tilak is rooted in the fear of potential excommunication from her community. Jamini and Gopal consistently urge Kunjo to adhere to the law, fully aware that his ailing mother is dependent on him. They recognize that his potential excommunication could have devastating consequences for both him and his mother. The Brahma Sabha in the Hindu Meitei society was governed by a set of rules and regulations that dictated social behavior. Among these was the issue of untouchability and the status of untouchables within the community. Among the Untouchables were the hill people like tribes, Meitei Muslims, insane persons, and Yaithibis (the outcasts considered to have descended from an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister). The level of orthodoxy was so stringent that individuals from outside the state were prohibited from partaking in the smoking pipe with the Hindu Meiteis. Additionally, any interaction or contact with non-Meiteis (Mayangs), including entering offices, hotels, cinema halls, and drama venues, was strictly considered *mangba* (polluted). (Premi Devi 82) In a traditional social setting like this, the idea of two people from different cultures falling in love seems pretty far-fetched in reality, but it makes for an interesting subversive idea. Anganghal aims to dive into the emotions of unrequited love while also challenging the traditional (pre-modern) beliefs that do not align with the evolving world.

The choice made by Anganghal to envision a Muslim girl as the central character, who expresses admiration for Meitei Hindu culture, reflects his own self-adoration for his Hindu heritage. Alongside, he employs her character to develop a romantic relationship with Kunjo, a Meitei Hindu, thereby critiquing the orthodox practices of Meitei Hinduism. Anganghal's decision to place a Muslim girl at the center of his narrative is a deliberate literary strategy that simultaneously affirms and interrogates Meitei Hindu culture. By allowing her to express admiration for Meitei Hindu traditions, he projects his own pride and self-adoration for his heritage, using her outsider's gaze to validate the cultural richness of his community. Yet, this admiration is not presented in isolation; it is woven into her romantic relationship with Kunjo, a Meitei Hindu, which becomes the narrative's critical axis. Through this relationship, Anganghal dramatizes the tension between personal desire and the rigid orthodox practices of Meitei Hinduism, exposing the ways in which conservatism and ritualistic rigidity obstruct genuine human connection. The Muslim girl thus functions as both a mirror and a critique: she reflects the beauty of Meitei Hindu culture while simultaneously destabilizing its oppressive structures by crossing boundaries of religion and tradition. In this dual movement, Anganghal

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achieves a paradoxical balance—he celebrates the cultural identity of his community by making it attractive to an outsider (at least, religion-wise), while also using that outsider's perspective to highlight the need for reform and to question the suffocating aspects of orthodoxy. This narrative choice situates his work within the broader modernist impulse of Manipuri literature, which sought to preserve cultural pride while interrogating its limitations, thereby opening space for dialogue, reform, and a more inclusive vision of identity.

Kunjo's growing affection for Jahera, a Meitei Muslim, becomes more than just a personal romance—it acts as a catalyst for a deeper social and spiritual awakening. His love compels him to confront the entrenched practice of untouchability, which traditionally separated communities and reinforced rigid hierarchies. Anganghal, considering the strict orthodoxy of his era, does not permit Kunjo to express his thoughts freely; however, his silence and actions reveal his dissent and defiance. As his feelings intensify, Kunjo sees the injustice of these divisions, and this realization extends to questioning broader structures of authority. He challenges the supposed divine legitimacy of the king, the dominance of the Brahma Sabha (the council of religious elites), and the superiority complex of the brahmins who upheld orthodox Hindu practices. (26) In this way, Kunjo's relationship with Jahera symbolizes a rebellion against oppressive traditions: love becomes a lens through which he critiques caste exclusivity, religious orthodoxy, and political authority. What complicates Kunjo's character is the tension between his progressive questioning of orthodoxy and his simultaneous internalization of the very superiority he critiques. While his affection for Jahera pushes him to challenge untouchability, caste rigidity, and the authority of religious elites, he also embodies the ingrained sense of Meitei Hindu dominance. This duality means that even as he seeks intimacy with Jahera, he may view her through a condescending lens, positioning her as the "minority other" whose admiration validates his culture but whose difference reinforces his own sense of superiority. In this way, Kunjo becomes a paradoxical figure: both a critic of oppressive traditions and a participant in them, embodying the contradictions of a society negotiating between inherited hierarchies and emerging desires for reform and inclusivity. The narrative thus uses Kunjo's emotional journey to dramatize the possibility of reform, showing how personal desire can spark resistance to institutionalized inequality and inspire a vision of a more inclusive society.

It is useful, at this stage of the discussion, to recall Stephen R.C. Hicks's distinction between pre-modernism and modernism. According to Hicks, pre-modernism is characterized by elements such as supernaturalism, mysticism, religious authority, the doctrine of original sin, submission to divine power, collectivism or altruism, feudal structures, and other features of the medieval world. By contrast, modernism emphasizes liberal capitalism, objectivism, naturalism, and enlightenment ideals. It privileges reason and empirical knowledge, while also embracing the technological, scientific, and commercial advancements of the twentieth century, and upholding the values of autonomy and individualism (Hicks, 8). Additionally, Roy Baumeister states that the idea of individuality—so central to modern society—was largely absent in pre-modern contexts. In those earlier societies, people were not understood as unique beings with personal potential waiting to be realized. Instead, identity was defined almost entirely by external, inherited markers such as family lineage, gender, and social rank. These attributes were fixed and predetermined, leaving little room for personal choice or self-expression. In medieval Europe, for example, life was structured around rigid hierarchies and institutionalized processes: one's role in society was assigned at birth and reinforced through customs, religion, and feudal obligations. Movement through different stages of life—

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childhood, adulthood, marriage, or work—was governed by collective norms rather than individual aspirations. As a result, the individual's role was passive, subsumed within the larger social order, in stark contrast to modern societies where autonomy, self-realization, and personal identity are emphasized as defining features of human existence. (Baumeister, 1986)

Pre-modern Manipur adhered to an imperial ideology characterized by sacred kingship and the concept of governance rooted in an inherent theocracy. Trying to keep a race uncorrupted by outsiders or outside forces has always been a practice of pre-modern kingdoms. These kingdoms often implemented strict borders and surveillance to maintain their cultural integrity and prevent foreign influence. In doing so, they believed they could preserve their traditions, values, and social structures from the encroachment of external powers. *Mangba-shengba* represented a component of the religio-political framework that governed the state during that era, likely established in response to concerns regarding cultural decline and economic recession. Individuals experienced distress as a result, and in contrast to pre-modern eras, they no longer perceived the monarch as an embodiment of sacred kingship, leading them to express their dissatisfaction openly. Although numerous individuals misused this practice capriciously and unjustly, leading to its eventual abandonment, the king remained at the heart of the situation. It's often unclear whether the author's critique of *Mangba-shengba* is limited to its bigoted conservatism. Kunjo's increasing awareness of modern ideas stems from his education and the new books he has been reading. From the very beginning, there's an ideological clash between Jamini, who represents the pre-Modern man and goes along with tradition, and Kunjo, who embodies the spirit of modernity by questioning and pushing back against those traditional norms, particularly the new *mangba-sengba* rules. Kunjo opens up to Jamini about his feelings for Jahera, but Jamini warns him that he is only asking for trouble. 'Know that law and truth are at a great distance from each other. You take it as fun, but you don't know it will ruin you.' (27) But Kunjo said, ''I do not at all think too much of untouchability.' (28) Jamini, a tradition-abiding, worldly-wise man, tells him, 'You who have never ventured out late at night, like a young new crab just toddling and like an unroofed hut with unplastered walls, begins to look down upon others just after reading one or two books having about one hundred pages each… Hundreds of thousands of your books are produced from a single leaf of this world. You have only passed out of a small school. But I have passed out of the school of the world.' (28) Jamini believes that Kunjo will falter before fully crossing the boundary of untouchability. Kunjo's character is portrayed through metaphors that emphasize his fragility and incompleteness. Like a young crab just toddling, he is unsteady, inexperienced, and vulnerable, still learning to navigate the complexities of love and social hierarchy. Similarly, as an unroofed hut with unplastered walls, he lacks stability and protection, leaving his emotions and ideas raw and exposed. Together, these images capture Kunjo's transitional state—hesitant yet awakening—symbolizing both his personal vulnerability. He lacks the social and psychological "covering" that would make him resilient against external pressures like orthodoxy, caste hierarchy, and communal prejudice. Later on, Jamini again cautions him that 'If a man follows customs, traditions and... without deviation, there are means always to save him when he is in trouble.' (130)

Jamini, a student of the 1905 Entrance, was barely educated in the colonial sense of the term, while Kunjo, much younger, was a matriculate—a rare achievement then and a source of pride. His views on untouchability thus carry weight. Modern education in Manipur began with Sir James Johnstone's English school in the late 19th century, though its impact was limited. After the 1891 downfall of the king, British India appointed Raja Churachand, who, with his

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half-brother Dijendra Singh, studied at Mayo College (1895–1901), becoming the first royals to receive a modern education. In the early 20th century, Manipuris gradually embraced schooling, with "minor" schools evolving into "high" schools and female education beginning under Churachand's reign. Calcutta University recognized Manipuri as a vernacular for the Matriculation exam in 1924 and at the I.A. level in 1931. The education department functioned under Churachand's supervision, while British India directed broader political reforms. (Jyotirmoy Roy 142) In the early years of British rule, both Indians and Manipuris resisted English education, fearing it threatened cultural identity and tradition. Over time, however, its benefits for social and economic advancement became clear. Education proved essential in fostering change, cultivating democracy, and encouraging individual freedom through critical thinking and dialogue. Despite setbacks, English education introduced liberal Western ideologies, diminishing superstition, and promoting rational thought. It reshaped political, social, religious, and personal life, empowering people to question norms, embrace new ideas, and participate more actively in democratic processes, thereby challenging entrenched hierarchies and inspiring innovation.

During this period of expanding education, a figure like Jamini voices sharp resistance to English. To him, the language feels utterly alien—like moving north while everyone else goes south. He despises it, claiming it upsets his stomach, causes indigestion, and makes him recoil from even reading a letter sent by Kunjo's brother-in-law. For Jamini, English is nothing less than poison: a tongue of duplicity, full of double meanings and dishonesty, so distasteful that he insists on bathing after any contact with it. (129) Jamini's exaggerated dislike of English reflects a broader cultural stereotype rooted in colonial encounters with language and power. His metaphor of "going north while they go south" captures the sense that English pulls people away from their cultural direction, estranging them from familiar rhythms of life. By describing English as causing indigestion and bowel discomfort, Jamini humorously translates cultural unease into bodily rejection. This stereotype portrays English as not just foreign but physically harmful, dramatizing resistance to colonial imposition. Calling English "a language of dishonesty" reflects a stereotype that colonial languages were tools of manipulation, bureaucracy, and deceit. For many, English symbolized contracts, laws, and administrative orders that undermined indigenous autonomy. His insistence on bathing after exposure to English invokes cultural notions of ritual purity. Here, English is imagined as contaminating, requiring cleansing—a stereotype that frames modern education and colonial language as pollutants to traditional life. Jamini's remarks are humorous exaggerations, but they encode a serious critique of modernity. By mocking English as poison, he voices the anxiety of communities who saw education and colonial language as eroding cultural identity. In short, Jamini's humorous rejection of English dramatizes a cultural stereotype of colonial language as alien, dishonest, and polluting. His bodily metaphors and ritual cleansing highlight how resistance to modernity was expressed not only in political terms but also through everyday cultural anxieties.

The exchange between Jamin and Kunjo on untouchability (26-27) reflects rising democratic awareness and challenges to entrenched hierarchies. Influenced by the Bengali Renaissance and English education, educated Manipuris like Kunjo absorbed reformist ideas from figures such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and Rabindranath Tagore. This cultural revival, blending rational thought, social reform, and literary creativity, fostered a new national identity that encouraged Indians to question tradition, embrace rationalism, and lay the groundwork for democratic and reformist change. Nevertheless, it is

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not entirely appropriate to equate the issue of untouchability in Manipur with its presence in other regions of India, where it is deeply embedded in historical customs. The Manipuri king's modern education barely altered his traditional outlook, as shown by his repeated Hindu pilgrimages that reinforced ancient customs. Though exposed to contemporary thought, he remained rooted in cultural heritage. Used by the British as a stand-in ruler, he recognized the limits of his power and the empire's global dominance. Over time, he grew detached from his people, widening the gap between royal facade and popular struggle, torn between duty and genuine connection. The king promoted education but failed to foresee that modern ideas would lead the educated minority to question the sanctity of hereditary monarchy. Seen as a puppet of the British Raj, he lost the fear-based authority of the pre-British era. In this new political climate, his attempt to revive conservatism through the Brahma Sabha—meant to restore old norms and enrich the royalty—proved counterproductive.

A portion of Kunjo's defiance is rooted in his affection for Jahera, and it would not be an exaggeration to assert that some of it arises from a modern mindset that stresses individualism. This moment reflects how the rise of individual consciousness—shaped by modern education and reformist currents—begins to collide with entrenched social hierarchies. By questioning untouchability, he challenges one of the most rigid pillars of caste-based orthodoxy. His refusal to accept the Brahma Sabha's authority, which symbolized both religious conservatism and royal power, signals a rejection of inherited structures in favor of personal conviction. Psychologically, this marks a shift from collective conformity to self-determined identity. Culturally, however, such defiance destabilizes the traditional order: the family, bound by custom, experiences tension as his ideas threaten their social standing; the community, invested in orthodoxy, views his stance as rebellion. Thus, his individuality becomes both liberating and disruptive—liberating because it asserts rational autonomy, disruptive because it undermines the cohesion of a society built on hierarchy and ritual. In essence, his silent resistance embodies the clash between modern democratic ideals and feudal conservatism, showing how the assertion of individuality can fracture familial bonds and provoke communal hostility.

As people's voices began to matter more, the rigid authority of the king and the Brahma Sabha increasingly clashed with the new democratic consciousness. Hijam Anganghal, writing his manuscript before his death in 1943, likely observed the Nupi Lal (Women's Agitation) of 1939, where Manipuri women protested against economic exploitation and colonial policies. That event symbolized a power shift: ordinary people, especially women, asserting agency against both monarchy and colonial structures. For Anganghal, this would have revealed a profound transformation—the monarchy's authority was waning, and the populace was beginning to claim political space. In this way, his work reflects the broader historical moment when Manipuri society was moving from feudal and colonial control toward democratic ideals, with collective resistance replacing passive obedience. Hijam Anganghal, while composing *Jahera*, must be aware of the shifting political landscape around him. He likely observed how the Manipuri king's authority had weakened under British rule, with the monarch reduced to a symbolic figure while real power rested in colonial hands. At the same time, the spread of modern education created a minuscule but influential class of Manipuri intellectuals who were exposed to reformist and nationalist ideas circulating in Bengal and the rest of India. These educated voices recognized the growing momentum of the Indian freedom movement, which challenged colonial dominance and inspired democratic aspirations. Anganghal's awareness of these changes would have shaped his writing, embedding in it the tension between fading

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Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

feudal authority, the assertive presence of colonial power, and the rise of a new consciousness among Manipuris who were beginning to imagine themselves as part of a broader struggle for independence and social reform. The initial hint of this changing reality is visible in the life of Kunjo in *Jahera* during the 1930s, where his struggles embody the tension between feudal orthodoxy and modern consciousness. Through Kunjo, Anganghal reflects how the educated minority began to question hereditary monarchy and communal authority, signaling the broader transition from royal dominance to popular awareness and democratic ideals.

II: Early Modern Consciousness and the Birth of Manipuri Novel

With the collapse of Manipur's feudal kingdom under British rule, modernism—mainly in ideals—entered through English education, introducing new ideas that gradually weakened the theocratic monarchy. Society began shifting from limited democracy toward autonomy, as even traditional Vaishnava families abandoned superstition and pursued scientific studies like Zoology and Medicine (Roy 103–4). During this time, the Manipuris, discarding their medieval stagnation and cultural seclusion, began to explore the broader world. Signs of a revival were first noticeable in the realms of education and literature. In the literary domain, both Dr. Kamal and Hijam Anganghal emerged as pioneers. In the preface to the first Manipuri novel, *Madhabi* (1930), Kamal observes that the period was marked by an abundance of plays, poems, newspapers, and other literary works in multiple languages. However, there was a notable lack of publications in Manipuri, as the Meiteis had not yet experienced the compelling allure of writing books. Administrative Report of 1935-36 states that the State Office library was selling around twenty thousand textbooks annually (…), on average 90 per cent of them printed by the State Press and 10 per cent indented from Calcutta. (p46). The number of readers engaging with books primarily composed in Bengali and English has been on the rise. English literature significantly influenced Bengali literature, which in turn contributed to the modernization of Manipuri literature.

Modern colonial education in Manipur, introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was a transformative force, unsettling the structures of its feudal society and initiating a profound cultural and intellectual shift. Traditionally, Manipuri society was organized around hierarchical feudal relations, ritual authority, and agrarian labor, with knowledge largely transmitted through oral traditions, court chronicles, and religious institutions. The arrival of colonial schooling, however, brought English literacy, exposure to Western rationalist thought, and access to print culture, opening new avenues of intellectual engagement beyond the confines of feudal and ritual authority. This education system created a new class of educated elites who began to question entrenched hierarchies, caste practices, and patriarchal norms, while also engaging with reformist and nationalist currents circulating in Bengal and other parts of India. The cultural shift was visible in literature, theater, and public debate: Manipuri writers and intellectuals began to experiment with modern genres such as the novel and the essay, often embedding reformist themes that challenged feudal rigidity. At the same time, colonial education fostered a spirit of debate and critical inquiry, sharply contrasting with the feudal expectation of obedience and manual labor. For many elders and traditionalists (Jamini, for example), this new intellectual culture seemed disruptive, as it threatened to erode communal cohesion and the agrarian work ethic. Yet for younger generations (Kunjo, for example), it represented empowerment, a means of negotiating identity in a rapidly changing world, and a way to situate Manipur within broader currents of Indian modernity and anti-

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colonial consciousness. Thus, colonial education in Manipur was not merely a technical introduction to literacy but a cultural rupture: it created fault lines between tradition and modernity, manual labor and intellectual pursuit, feudal obedience and critical debate. These tensions reshaped Manipuri society, producing both resistance from traditional structures and the emergence of new cultural forms that would define its modern literary and political imagination.

Dr. Kamal's *Madhabi* reflects his modern outlook as a physician, which made him both critical and cautious toward theocratic monarchy. Through characters like Birendra and Dhirendra, who leave for Calcutta to pursue higher studies, he highlights the value of education and rational progress. The scene where Birendra Singh reads *Folk Tales of Bengal* in English while the elderly, uneducated man dismisses education as futile captures the cultural tensions of early 20th-century Manipur, a society negotiating between tradition and modernity. The old man stated that he compelled his son to abandon his studies due to the latter's inability to generate income even after three years of education, asserting that education rendered them argumentative and reluctant to engage in manual labor. (3) Birendra's engagement with a text in English — itself a product of colonial pedagogy and Bengal's literary renaissance — reflects the penetration of modern education and print culture into Manipuri intellectual life. This act situates Manipuri youth within a wider Indian reformist and literary continuum, where English education was both a tool of colonial control and a gateway to new ideas, narratives, and debates. In contrast, the elder's skepticism embodies the resistance of traditional society, which valued manual labor, communal cohesion, and ritual continuity over abstract intellectual pursuits. His critique that education merely fosters debate and diminishes willingness to work with one's hands points to a broader anxiety: that modern schooling might estrange younger generations from agrarian and artisanal livelihoods, destabilizing established social hierarchies and economic practices. This clash dramatizes the "fault line" of cultural transition in Manipur — between religious tradition and new culture, subsistence labor and intellectual modernity, indigenous values and colonial educational frameworks. The juxtaposition of Birendra's literary curiosity and the elder's pragmatic suspicion thus mirrors the broader societal negotiation of identity, where modern education promised empowerment and reform but also threatened to erode traditional structures of labour, authority, and cultural transmission.

In *Jahera*, Kunjo is seen rehearsing for a role in a Bengali play titled *Chandidas*. In Bengal, the Brahmo Samaj has been engaged in socio-religious reform efforts since the mid-19th century. In *Jahera* (1964), the moment where Kunjo rehearses for a role in the Bengali play *Chandidas* becomes a powerful symbol of Manipuri society's encounter with reformist currents emanating from Bengal, particularly those shaped by the Brahmo Samaj movement. The Brahmo Samaj, active since the mid-nineteenth century, sought to dismantle rigid caste hierarchies, challenge idol worship, and promote rational spirituality, education, and gender equality, thereby creating a cultural renaissance that deeply influenced Bengali literature and theatre. By engaging with *Chandidas*, a play that itself dramatizes resistance to orthodoxy and celebrates love and devotion beyond caste boundaries, Kunjo embodies Manipuri society's own rehearsal of modernity, absorbing reformist ideals from Bengal while negotiating their fit within local traditions. This act of cultural borrowing highlights the fault lines of Manipuri identity in the mid-twentieth century: the tension between feudal rituals and modern nationalist consciousness, between patriarchal structures and emergent feminist impulses, and between indigenous practices and pan-Indian reformist narratives. Kunjo's performance is not merely theatrical but emblematic of a society in transition, dramatizing how Manipuri literature and

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Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

culture were dialoguing with broader Indian reformist movements while simultaneously rearticulating their own unique identity. In this way, *Jahera* situates Manipur within a larger continuum of cultural clashes and transmissions, showing how external reformist scripts like those of the Brahmo Samaj were internalized, contested, and transformed into new literary and social imaginaries.

In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt argues that the novel developed in 18th-century England as a literary form uniquely concerned with the individual self, reflecting broader cultural shifts toward empiricism, capitalism, and Protestantism that emphasized personal experience and autonomy. Unlike earlier literature that celebrated collective ideals or heroic figures, the novel focused on ordinary people, portraying their private emotions, moral struggles, and inner consciousness with unprecedented realism. Works like Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, Richardson's Pamela, and Fielding's Tom Jones exemplify this turn, presenting detailed accounts of everyday life and subjective perspective, thereby making the novel the dominant modern genre precisely because it aligned with society's growing preoccupation with individuality and the value of personal identity. "The daily lives of ordinary people (…) depend upon two important general conditions: the society must value every individual highly enough to consider him the proper subject of its serious literature; and there must be enough variety of belief and action among ordinary people for a detailed account of them to be of interest to other ordinary people, the readers of novels." (Ian Watt 59) The novel emerges from a society defined by 'individualism', a concept from the mid-19th century, that encompasses more than just egocentricity and uniqueness. It reflects a governance structure allowing individuals' independence from traditional social norms, supported by unique economic and political systems, as well as an ideology that grants people wide freedom of choice and focuses on individual autonomy regardless of social status. Modern society embodies this spirit largely through the rise of industrial capitalism. (Watt 60)

As discussed in the preceding section, in Manipur, the historical influence of British imperialism and the introduction of modern education diminished Manipur's imperial religio-ideology, which was defined by sacred kingship and a governance model based on an intrinsic theocracy. The new political discourse was pushing the ordinary individual towards the centre. Though Manipur did not experience the rise of industrial capitalism that Ian Watt identifies as central to the novel's emergence in Europe, its incorporation into the British Empire positioned it within a colonial economy that treated the region as a source of cheap labor and raw resources. This imperial context created conditions parallel to Watt's framework: the pressures of exploitation and subjugation foregrounded questions of autonomy, survival, and identity, allowing Manipuri literature to engage with the individual self in ways shaped not by capitalist ideologies, but by the lived realities of colonial dependency. In this sense, Manipur's literary modernity reflects both alignment with Watt's emphasis on individualism and divergence through its unique historical experience under the empire. Under its monarchy, Manipur had a theocratic system where religion and governance were tightly bound together. British imperialism disrupted this by introducing Western-style education and creating a small class of educated Manipuris with middle-class ambitions. These individuals began to challenge the old feudal and religious structures, leading to shifts in the economy (greater specialization of labor), changes in social hierarchy, and the beginnings of a new political framework. Even though Manipur remained under colonial rule, the seeds of modern consciousness—especially the idea that individuals could exercise freedom of choice and autonomy—were taking root among the educated minority. In other words, while the majority of society was still bound by

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

colonial and traditional constraints, a small group was beginning to embrace modern, democratic, and individualist values, laying the groundwork for broader social change in the future. In Europe, Ian Watt notes that capitalism shifted focus from collective groups to the individual, who became responsible for shaping personal roles. In Manipur, between the World Wars, educated people began seeking greater control over their lives, and after World War II—when the monarchy was dissolved, and Manipur joined Indian democracy—modern individual aspirations grew stronger, reflected in the rise of Manipuri novelists and the emergence of a middle class.

Earlier literature celebrated collective ideals, but the novel shifted focus to ordinary individuals, emphasizing realism and inner life. It became a medium for exploring personal emotions, moral dilemmas, and psychological depth, highlighting the cultural importance of the self as an autonomous agent. There is a shift in focus from collective, elite-centred narratives to individual-centred narratives in Manipuri literature. Traditional texts like *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle, recorded dynastic histories and the deeds of kings, while an epic like *Khamba-Thoibi* celebrated legendary figures rather than ordinary people. In contrast, the novelistic form marks a turning point: it places everyday individuals and their lived experiences at the center of storytelling. This change reflects the rise of a middle-class consciousness in Manipur, where readers and writers became increasingly interested in the psychology, choices, and struggles of ordinary people. The novel embodies a secular and empiricist worldview, meaning it is less concerned with divine or mythic explanations and more with the tangible realities of daily life. By focusing on the particular—specific individuals, their emotions, and their social circumstances—the novel signals the decline of older, monarchical identity and the emergence of a modern Manipuri identity shaped by individualism, social diversity, and democratic values. In essence, the novel becomes both a mirror and a catalyst for this cultural transformation, documenting how society moved from collective traditions to the recognition of personal autonomy and psychological depth.

Madhabi (1930) by Dr. Kamal and *Jahera* by Hijam Anganghal represent a turning point in Manipuri literary history. Unlike earlier texts that celebrated kings, warriors, or mythic heroes, these novels shift attention to the ordinary individual, portraying everyday struggles, desires, and conflicts. This change reflects the gradual rise of a middle class in Manipur during the early 20th century, shaped by modern education, reformist ideas, and exposure to wider Indian intellectual currents. Though small in number, this emerging class played a crucial role in questioning traditional hierarchies, engaging with democratic ideals, and voicing personal aspirations. By foregrounding common people rather than feudal authority, these novels mark the early stages of middle-class consciousness, showing how literature became a space to articulate modern identity and social transformation in Manipur. Hijam Anganghal's literary choices also reflect both his personal struggle for identity and the broader cultural tensions of early modern Manipur. As a Manipuri writer, Anganghal was aware of his marginal position in relation to dominant Sanskrit and Bengali traditions, which inspired both admiration and resentment among local authors. Harold Bloom's idea of the *Anxiety of Influence* helps clarify this dynamic: instead of simply drawing strength from earlier literary models, writers often feel pressured or overshadowed by them, leading to unease and a desire to assert originality. For Anganghal, this anxiety seems to have motivated him to turn away from external traditions and engage deeply with local, pre-Hindu narratives such as Khamba-Thoibi and folk tales like *Yaithing Konu*. By grounding his work in indigenous stories, Anganghal was not only affirming his freedom and individuality as a writer but also strengthening cultural ties with his

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

community. His storytelling thus becomes both a personal act of self-definition and a collective act of cultural preservation. In this way, Anganghal's narratives embody the dual role of literature: they help the writer negotiate his own identity while simultaneously keeping local history alive and fostering a shared sense of belonging.

III: Faith and Friction: Religion as Cultural Contest

Jahera narrates the story of two young lovers from distinct cultural backgrounds, confronting the harsh truth of a forbidden romance. 'The characters are not from a homogeneous society but from two irreconcilable stocks – one, a Hindu and the other, a Muslim, at a time when the Meitei society was in the hold of stern orthodoxy.' (Manihar 232) Jahera and Kunjo's relationship embodies the clash between personal desire and the rigid boundaries of Meitei society, which at the time was steeped in stern Hindu orthodoxy. Jahera, a Muslim, and Kunjo, a Hindu, come from two communities considered irreconcilable within the cultural framework of the period. Their union is not merely a matter of individual difference, but a symbolic confrontation between two religious identities that society insisted could not coexist. The phrase "not from a homogenous society" underscores how their love story unfolds against a backdrop of division, where orthodoxy dictated strict rules of purity, caste, and communal separation. Thus, their bond becomes a metaphor for resistance (or its failure) against entrenched social barriers, dramatizing the tension between the liberating force of love and the oppressive weight of tradition. Some may blame the *mangba-shengba* restrictions of the Brahma Sabha for their sad ending. Maybe the author cannot offer a way to escape their fate. Another point to consider is the stern orthodoxy of the Muslim community. Further questioning reveals that the Muslim community appears unconcerned about the *mangba-shengba* ban. In discussions among the Meitei Pangans, this topic is never mentioned. When they prevent Jahera from embracing some of the ways of the Meitei Hindu faith, it's not out of fear of *mangba-shengba* or any backlash from the Meiteis. They, too, are strongly anchored in their religious convictions, possessing a sense of superiority over the Meitei Hindus; if not in terms of financial status, then certainly in their dedication to their faith.

Regarding the settlement of Muslims in Manipur Valley, Syed Ahmed wrote that the origins of the Islamic revival movement in Manipur can be traced back to the early 19th century. At that time, Manipur was a small, independent kingdom ruled by the Meetei people, who also had a significant Muslim community, locally known as Pangan or Meitei Pangan. Muslim settlement in Manipur began in the 17th century, when a failed attempt to overthrow Khagemba (1597-1652) led to the capture of a thousand Muslims. The Muslims in question were originally from Taraf, which is currently situated within the Habiganj district of the Sylhet division in Bangladesh. The later influx of a small number of Muslims from the West contributed to the growth of this community's population. Over time, these Muslims became fluent in the local tongue and became assimilated into the socio-cultural landscape of the Manipur valley. (344) In the broader context of British Manipur, while the king and the Brahma Sabha were looking towards the pre-colonial past and working to guide their community through religious governance tools like *mangba-shengba*, the minority Muslim group was also seeking its own forms of revival. When looking at the educated group, one finds one Meitei Muslim for every ten Meitei Hindus. The Muslims were engaging in English education alongside their traditional Madrasa teachings. The certificates they earned opened doors to new job opportunities created by the colonial government. By the 1930s, according to the

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

Administration Report of Manipur (1935-36), in upper primary schools, 'there were 203 teachers. Of these, 4 were Matriculates, 164 were holders of Middle English or Middle Vernacular or Upper Primary Certificates, 11 lower Primary Certificates, 18 Persian Certificates, and 6 had no certificates; the last 6, 2 passed the Second, and 1 passed the First Examination of the Assam Sanskrit Board. There were 172 Hindus and 31 Mahomedans.' (27) Even among High School teachers, CC High School, 11 masters, 10 being Manipuri Hindu and 1 Manipuri Mahomedan. 6 graduates of Calcutta University, 3 I.A, 3 Matriculate, one I. A passed Shastri of the Benares University and one matriculate with special training for Mahomedan languages. (27-8) In their personal lives, they were becoming more engaged with Islamic teachings. 'Their maulavis are Manipuris, who have been sent to Cachar to be instructed in the principles of their faith by the maulavis from Hindustan.' (Allen 64-5) They were also becoming more aware of their history and building more connections with other Muslim communities around the world. Despite being a minority in Manipur and facing economic challenges, the Meitei Pangans hold a strong sense of pride in their heritage. Their cultural ties to other Muslim countries help them feel confident about their history, so they do not see themselves as lesser in any way.

The revival of the Islamic consciousness and the sense of pride it gave the Pangan community is seen in Fatima Bibi, who is planning to give Jahera in marriage to Tomba Mian, but does not approve of Ibemcha (a 36-year-old Meitei widow) getting close to Jahera. 'Jahera will be ruined because of his association with Ibemcha.' (29) She attributes Jahera's interest in specific aspects of Meitei Hindu culture, such as bathing before cooking or abstaining from eating eggs, to Jahera's association with the Meitei widow. She expresses her concerns to Amir, the affluent Muslim man, noting that Jahera's friendship with the Meitei widow has led some Meitei youths to visit her home, resulting in a decline in their social standing. (31) Amir does not give any reply. Amir thinks that the root causes of the quarrel between the Hindus and Muslims are food habits. He further thinks that there aren't two distinct Creators, one for Hindus and another for Muslims. Hindus worship idols because it's easier to see and worship them than to hear. The world cannot be made by multiple Creators. The beliefs of Hindus and Muslims differ. If they were the same, why would they argue with each other? A person's character is defined by their actions. Is religion separate from character? Valuing life is always positive. What harm does non-drinking and non-meat-eating cause to humans? Bathing daily and avoiding meat, what impact does that have? (31) While it reflects a liberal idealism, the author intriguingly prevents Amir from expressing his thoughts to his fellow Pangals. It remains solely a personal reflection that could not be taken well by the Pagal community. It seems more like the writer's own ideological statement, but the fact that it occurs in the mind of Amir, a Pangan, not Kunjo, Jamini, or Ibemcha, makes it more significant. Amir's thought that 'Root cause of quarrel between Hindu and Muslims is food habits' (31) further underscores how everyday practices like diet became symbolic markers of irreconcilable difference, not some big issues, thereby intensifying their orthodoxy.

Samuel P. Huntington observes that (his remark was originally framed in relation to the post–Cold War world, it remains equally applicable to the pre–World War II era) the most profound divisions among human communities arise not from ideology or economics but from culture. Nations and groups define themselves through ancestry, religion, language, history, and values, identifying with tribes, ethnicities, religions, nations, and civilizations. Identity often emerges in contrast to others—we know who we are by knowing who we are not, and sometimes by knowing whom we oppose. (29) His claim that cultural identity is defined less

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

by ideology or economics than by ancestry, religion, and tradition also helps illuminate the social tensions in 1930s Manipur as depicted in *Jahera*. The revival of Islam on one side and the restrictive codes of the Brahma Shaba on the other were not merely religious movements but mechanisms of cultural self-definition, each reinforcing boundaries of belonging and exclusion. In Huntington's terms, both communities were answering the question "Who are we?" by drawing on their deepest traditions, and crucially, by defining themselves against the other. This mutual opposition sharpened cultural distinctions and shaped the dynamics of Manipur's society, showing how identity often emerges most forcefully in contrast and conflict. As societies evolve, the tension between cultural identity and modernization shapes their trajectories, and in the 1930s, in Manipur, this interplay is vividly evident in *Jahera*. Christianity was slowly gaining ground among the hill communities, yet within the valley, Islam distinguished itself as the most prominent counterpoint to the dominant Meitei Hindu order. Administrative Reports of the period reveal the limited presence of other hill tribes in higher education, underscoring uneven access to modern institutions and foreshadowing the later rise of Nagas and Kukis as political actors. At this stage, Meitei Hindus had not yet begun to critically reassess their conversion to Hinduism, leaving their identity bound to orthodox codes. Thus, the cultural connections and tensions between Hindus and Muslims were shaped both by shared practices and by sharp distinctions, reflecting Huntington's insight that identity is defined through similarity and opposition. This dynamic of revival, restriction, and gradual modernization laid the groundwork for the region's subsequent political transformations.

While in the past history of Manipur, the minority Pangan community did not openly challenge or resist the authority of the Manipuri king—meaning they remained politically compliant within the valley's hierarchical order—their sense of identity and historical consciousness extended beyond the immediate local framework. Tombi Bibi tells Fatima that Jahera is going to Ibemcha's place to learn weaving, as they are poor. Fatima reasons — 'Is there any Meitei woman expert in weaving rich enough to build buildings? I would like to be born as a pig instead of being born as an expert Meitei woman weaver.' (89) During a confrontation connected with Jahera's new habits, Jahera's mother used a knife to protect herself from Munshi. Subsequently, in the presence of Amir, she justifies her actions by questioning, 'What sort of bravery is exhibited by Muslims who have ruled India for countless centuries? Is there any dignity for an honorable man to treat a helpless, impoverished individual with such disdain?' (97) Although most Hindu Meiteis regarded Pangals as a powerless minority in Manipur, Pangans had begun to see themselves as part of the Muslims who have governed India for centuries.

The initial issue—'Jahera acted like a Hindu would' (30)—leads to the fact that 'The state belongs to the Hindus,' (98), then to food sanctioned and not sanctioned by Sharia. But others do not like it when Amir tells them that what really matters is character. One argues—'Only flesh-eating lions and tigers become the kings of animals. Religion does not permit grass-eating bulls to be the kings of animals. In this world, are we men born to be dependent on others and be ruled over?' Amir responds that carnivorous animals such as lions and tigers are facing extinction due to a lack of offspring, whereas herbivorous cows are successfully increasing their progeny in this world and are contributing to their nourishment. Subsequently, the discussion shifts to the larger issue concerning India. One asserts that India is a land of Muslims, once belonging to the Hindus before being conquered and later taken over by the Christians. Amir responds that, though it may have been conquered in many different ways, its original ownership lay with the Hindus. (99) Amir further states that the nation is shared by

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

two groups, Hindus and Muslims, who are now akin to siblings cohabiting harmoniously under the same maternal India. This notion of a sovereign nation is influenced by the ongoing freedom struggle in various regions of India during that period, specifically the 1930s. He urged others to renounce meat and beef if they wished to live as an independent nation, insisting that they must strive to revive Mother India, long imprisoned and unable to stand on her own, or else freedom would remain unattainable. He further cautioned that ruling through violence, simply because the land was once conquered by violence, would perpetuate endless conflict. True unity and peace, he declared, could only be sustained through governance rooted in non-violence and sacrifice (the Gandhian non-violent discourse). His statements cannot persuade his fellow Muslims. Rather, they believe that Amir is aligning himself with Jahera by advising them to refrain from consuming beef, and that Amir has developed a soft spot for Jahera.

It is not that if it were not for the restrictions imposed by mangba-sengba, the Pangans would permit fellow Pangans to convert to Hinduism. Their community would prohibit any efforts to convert to other faiths. The first attack Tom Mian and Fatima built up against Jahera and her mother is 'They want to convert themselves into the religion of the Meiteis. They are unbelievers and therefore should not be allowed to stay, should be boycotted.' (122) Later on, Pangans create an uproar over the fact of Jahera planting a Tulsi plant and keeping the picture of a Hindu god and worshipping it. (144) This situation attracts the attention of some Meities, leading to a significant altercation between the Meities and the Pangals, resulting in multiple injuries. (145) Some Meiteis help Jahera and her mother, keeping them in a hut in the brickfield. Some Pangals try but fail to abduct Jahera. Amir's liberal integrationist ideals collapse under the weight of rumor, as accusations of an affair with Jahera isolate him socially and render him powerless to defend her, exposing how communal suspicion neutralizes reformist voices and deepens her marginalization. Afterward, Gopal found Jahera and her mother in a hut used by Meitei day-labourers in the compound of a brickfield. (146) 'Both Mother and Daughter caused the enmity of the Muslims to the extent that they are untouchables to them. They are also untouchables to the Meiteis. They have been out of their home.' (146) This passage highlights the double marginalization faced by Mother and Daughter, who become socially excluded by both Muslims and Meiteis. Their actions—whether interpreted as defiance, transgression, or simply difference—provoke hostility from the Muslim community, rendering them "untouchable" in religious and cultural terms. At the same time, the Meiteis also reject them, reinforcing their isolation. The phrase "out of their home" signifies not just physical displacement but symbolic exile: they are denied belonging within either community, stripped of the cultural and social anchors that define identity.

The episode underscores how women's bodies and choices often become contested sites of cultural and religious tension. By being rejected simultaneously by two dominant groups, Mother and Daughter embody the precarious position of those who cross or blur boundaries in a society rigidly structured by cultural codes. Their exclusion dramatizes Huntington's insight that identity is often defined by opposition—here, both communities consolidate their sense of self by casting the women outside the circle of belonging. Jahera's mother said that they could not live among the Pangans, and they were not allowed to go among the Meiteis. (160) Her mother's statement reveals that they were rejected by both Pangans (Muslims) and Meiteis (Hindus), leaving them without a community to belong to. This double marginalization forced them into exile, as they could neither remain among the Pangans nor seek refuge with the Meiteis. The decision to move to Sadia in eastern Assam, to live with Jahera's aunt, reflects both fear and necessity: they had to escape a hostile environment where survival and dignity

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

were no longer possible. Symbolically, this exile dramatizes how rigid cultural boundaries and communal rejection can strip individuals of home and belonging, pushing them to the margins of society.

IV: The Bhakta and the Murderer: The Fault Lines Between Devotion and Destruction

It is striking to note that the entire romantic narrative between Jahera and Kunjo rests on only four encounters, and throughout these meetings, they exchange little to no meaningful conversation, with genuine dialogue occurring only in their final meeting. Kunjo and Jahera's first encounter takes place when he comes to her home in search of medicinal plants. Their second meeting follows as he cares for her wounded toe. The third occurs during their shared journey to Thoubal. The final and most dramatic interaction unfolds at night, when Jahera, disguised as a young man, saves him from the Pangal youths and then discloses her true identity. Then, Kunjo's characterization as a reticent and reserved figure deliberately limits the reader's access to his inner thoughts, compelling interpretation through external signs such as his behavior, mannerisms, and the responses of those around him. This narrative strategy transforms him into an enigmatic presence whose identity is constructed less by direct description than by the projections and perceptions of others. The author provides little detail about his physical or psychological attributes, yet Kunjo radiates an aura of uniqueness that is underscored by the protective instincts of his mentors, Gopal and Jamini, who treat him as someone worth safeguarding, thereby suggesting latent potential or moral gravity. His appeal is further validated by Jahera, whose devotion and willingness to risk herself for him indicate that his magnetism lies not in conventional beauty or overt charm but in subtler qualities—perhaps integrity, quiet strength, or an aura of destiny—that inspire loyalty and affection. In this way, Kunjo becomes less a fully fleshed-out realist character than a symbolic figure, a silent center around which the emotions, desires, and sacrifices of others revolve. His mystery compels readers to fill the gaps with assumptions, making him a locus of meaning rather than a transparent personality, and the narrative's refusal to disclose his inner life heightens his symbolic weight, turning him into a cipher whose silence amplifies the voices and projections of those who surround him.

Once Jahera asks Ibemcha the meaning of Kunjabihari. Ibemcha explains, 'Well, the Hindu God Krishna used to play with his beloved in the forest groves known as Kunj. Bihar means play. As he plays in the Kunj the name of the God is known as Kunjabihari.' (88) Kunjabihari, meaning "the one who plays in the groves," derives from the image of Krishna delighting with his beloved Radha and the gopis in the secluded forest bowers (*Kunj*), where *Bihar* signifies play or joyous wandering. This name is significant because it encapsulates Krishna's essence as the playful, enchanting deity whose divine love transforms natural spaces into sacred realms of intimacy and devotion. The groves symbolize not merely physical settings but spiritual landscapes where the soul encounters God through joy, spontaneity, and surrender, and Krishna's playful presence becomes a metaphor for the sanctification of the human heart. Thus, the name Kunjabihari is more than descriptive; it conveys the theological and literary fusion of nature, love, and divinity, reminding devotees that Krishna's identity is inseparable from the eternal dance of divine play that elevates ordinary experience into spiritual bliss. After Jahera and her mother's return from Sadia to a village in Thoubal, Kunjo's love for her resurfaces with renewed intensity. Drawn by this awakening, he begins visiting Thoubal in secret, his quiet journeys reflecting both desire and hesitation. Yet his devotion is shadowed

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

by the reality at home, where his mother remains bedridden, embodying the weight of duty and sorrow. This contrast—between the pull of love and the burden of responsibility—deepens Kunjo's enigmatic character, showing him as a man caught between longing and obligation. To divert his thoughts from Jahera, Jamini involves Kunjo in a local drama company, where he is set to portray the character of Chandidas in the play "Chandidas."

Chandidas recounts the story of a Brahmin from the upper caste who falls in love with Ramitara, a lower-caste washerwoman. Their relationship encounters significant societal opposition, resulting in Chandidas being shunned by his peers. Nevertheless, his devotion to Ramitara endures steadfastly. Rather than succumbing to despair or self-destructive tendencies, he opts for life, elevating his affection for her into a bhakti, a form of divine or impersonal love, and transcending all man-made boundaries, he proclaims, "Humanity is the ultimate truth above all, and nothing is beyond that." Their bond is characterized as a "virgin love," as they neither marry nor engage in physical intimacy. The play serves as both a critique and a call for social reform regarding the practice of *mangba-shengba* that was widespread in Manipuri Hindu society during that period. A comparison between Chandidas and Kunjo reveals significant contrasts in their romantic pursuits, particularly regarding their attitudes toward love. Both characters are enamored with an untouchable, yet their responses diverge markedly. Chandidas successfully channels his longing into bhakti, representing a shift from self-centeredness to selflessness. In contrast, Kunjo is unable to achieve this transformation. His affection for Jahera deteriorates into mere desire, which ultimately ensnares him. This unbridled desire, devoid of any elevation to a more virtuous state, drives him to commit acts of violence even if it is done at the appeal of Jahera herself.

Anganghal's use of the *Chandidas* play to question orthodox pollution-purity rules situates *Jahera* within a reformist tradition that sought to dismantle caste hierarchies and emphasize human dignity, yet the irony lies in Kunja's failure to embody the bhakti ethos that Chandidas represented. In the bhakti tradition, love is understood as devotion—an act of selfless surrender to God that can be mirrored in human relationships, where the beloved is revered as both divine and personal. Kunja, however, does not approach Jahera with this sense of devotion; his love is stripped of transcendence and reduced to possession. His feelings are egotistic, self-centered, and deeply possessive, driven by the belief that if he cannot have Jahera, no one else should. This lack of bhakti or spiritual humility marks him as a modern individual, but one defined by ego rather than selflessness. Psychologically, Kunja embodies the contradictions of modernity in Manipur: educated and exposed to reformist ideas, yet emotionally bound to patriarchal possessiveness. Culturally, Anganghal juxtaposes Chandidas's reformist spirit with Kunja's destructive ego to highlight how modern individuality, when divorced from devotion or ethical responsibility, can become corrosive. Kunja's "modern self" is not liberating but tragic, asserting individuality through domination rather than devotion, and revealing how the transition from orthodoxy to modernity in Manipuri society was fractured—embracing reformist ideals intellectually while failing to embody them in practice.

The disjunction between the symbolic meaning of a name, Kunjabihari, and the lived reality of the person who bears it can be read as a commentary on shifting cultural values—from a past steeped in spiritual longing to a present dominated by modern individualism. A name like *Kunjabihari*, for instance, evokes Krishna's divine play in the forest groves, a metaphor for selfless love, surrender, and transcendence of worldly desire. It carries with it the weight of a spiritual tradition that celebrates giving up possession and embracing devotion as the highest form of fulfillment. When the person who bears such a name does not embody these

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

ideals, the gap becomes significant: it signals how the symbolic resonance of names rooted in spiritual heritage is eroded by contemporary realities. Instead of reflecting selflessness, the modern individual often embodies desire, possession, and personal ambition, which stand in stark contrast to the renunciatory ethos implied by the name. This tension between the ideal and the real illustrates the gradual decline of collective spiritual aspiration and the rise of individualistic values, where names remain as vestiges of a sacred past, but their meanings no longer align with lived practice. In this way, the gap itself becomes a subtle critique of cultural transformation, exposing how spiritual metaphors are hollowed out by modernity's emphasis on self-centered desire.

This tension reflects the writer's deliberate positioning of Kunjo within a complex cultural and ideological crossroads. On one side, the path of bhakti, exemplified by Chandidas, represents a spiritual ideal of devotion that transcends worldly prohibitions and embraces love as a sacred force. Yet, as history shows, Chandidas's ascent into bhakti did not dismantle the entrenched hierarchies of Hindu society; it remained a poetic and spiritual gesture rather than a transformative social act. Allowing Kunjo to follow this same path would risk reducing his struggle to a repetition of an idealized but ineffectual model, one that does not challenge the lived realities of caste, hierarchy, and prohibition. On the other side, if Kunjo were permitted to embrace Chandidas's bhakti, it would not signify rebellion against his emerging modern identity but rather a return to validating Vaishnavism and its strict ritualized framework—what the text calls *mangaba-shengba*. In this sense, Kunjo's dilemma is sharpened: his refusal or inability to walk the bhakti path underscores the writer's critique of devotional traditions as insufficient for addressing modern social fractures. By withholding bhakti as a solution, the narrative insists that Kunjo's struggle is not merely spiritual but deeply social and psychological, exposing the inadequacy of inherited religious ideals to resolve the conflicts of modern individualism, desire, and prohibition. Thus, Kunjo's trajectory dramatizes the impossibility of reconciling devotion with modern identity, highlighting the writer's skepticism toward both the spiritual ideal of bhakti and the rigid structures of Hindu orthodoxy.

In the initial stages of his affection for Jahera, Jamini thinks about Kunjo as "a young crab" or "an unroofed hut with unplastered walls" who looks down on others because he has read a couple of books with one hundred pages each. (28) Together, these metaphors portray Kunjo as someone not yet fully formed, vulnerable, and somewhat pretentious. Jamini criticizes him for looking down on others simply because he has read a few short books, implying that Kunjo's intellectual pride is shallow and unearned. The author uses these metaphors to show that Kunjo's early love is marked by immaturity and arrogance rather than depth or wisdom. Kunjo tells Ta-Jamini that he is apathetic about the possibility of his downfall and exhibits minimal concern regarding untouchability. (28) Ta-Jamini labels him a mad fool, unaware of his own madness or foolishness. Ta-Jamini speaks rationally, considering Kunjo's ailing mother, and warns Kunjo that the frail patient could have endured severe suffering or even died, and warns that the dilapidated house might have collapsed, leaving her buried beneath its ruins. (28) Kunjo's personality and eventual choices are shaped by the intense conflict between two opposing pulls: his duty toward his ailing mother and his consuming desire for Jahera. On one side, his mother's sickness embodies responsibility, care, and the weight of familial obligation, demanding his presence and selflessness. On the other hand, Jahera represents passion, longing, and the possibility of fulfillment beyond the confines of duty. This tension creates a psychological fracture in Kunjo, where devotion to family collides with the urgency of desire. His decision to go to meet Jahera with a knife dramatizes the culmination of this

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

inner struggle: the knife becomes a symbol of desperation, aggression, and the breakdown of balance between responsibility and passion. It suggests that his inability to reconcile these forces pushes him toward a violent, self-destructive act, revealing how the unresolved conflict between love and duty not only defines his enigmatic character but also seals his tragic trajectory. In this way, Kunjo's final decision is less an isolated event than the inevitable outcome of the dual pressures that have shaped his personality throughout the narrative.

Right after this short chat between Kunjo and Jamini, there is a weighty authorial comment, 'It is a time when the doors bolted are pushed as if pressed by a man, and the bolt is about to fall.' (28) The authorial comment about the "bolted doors" functions as a layered metaphor. On one level, the house with its firmly secured doors represents the traditional Meitei Hindu community, a structure of inherited customs and values that resists intrusion or transformation. Kunjo, the figure pressing against these doors, embodies the individual who dares to challenge the rigidity of this order. Yet the bolt does not fall, signifying that his attempt to disrupt or reform the collective tradition is ultimately thwarted, and the community remains closed to change. On another level, the image can be read inwardly: the bolted doors symbolize Kunjo's own inner barriers, the locked chambers of selfhood that he struggles to open in pursuit of personal transformation. His effort to push against them reflects a desire to break free from restraint and redefine himself, but the intact bolt underscores his failure to achieve that change. Thus, the metaphor captures both the futility of resisting entrenched social structures and the difficulty of overcoming one's own psychological limitations, making Kunjo's struggle emblematic of the tension between tradition and modern individuality, between aspiration and resistance.

There are indeed options for Kunjo to marry Jahera. In fact, there are two possibilities. The first is for him to submit an application to the Brahma Sabha for an intercultural marriage. Gopal, concerned about Kunjo's loneliness, considers encouraging him to apply to the Brahma Sabha for an intercultural marriage. But arranging a marriage that society forbids might bring two people together, yet it does not erase the underlying restriction. The prohibition against intermarriage remains firmly in place, and because of it, Kunjo and Jahera are destined to suffer. If Kunjo truly wishes to marry Jahera, he must first confront and dismantle the barrier of social taboo itself, rather than simply bypass it. In other words, the act of marriage alone cannot overcome the entrenched prohibition; only by challenging and breaking down the wall of social resistance can such a union be genuinely possible. (178) After this marriage, he will be categorized as a member of the untouchable community, and the Brahma Sabha will likely provide evidence to obstruct his reintegration into the community. Once, Ibemcha shares with Jamini the sad and lonely life of a Meitei who lost his caste by marrying a Kabui girl. (39) That's why Jamini warns Kunjo that he will not let Kunjo's weak mother die as an untouchable and be buried. (170) And secondly, he can convert himself to Islam and be a part of the Pangan community. Anganghal, of course, does not go into this area. The greatest irony lies in how the Pangans respond at the end. After Jahera and Kunjo have disappeared, Jamini and Gopal arrive in Thoubal searching for Kunjo. Jahera's mother explains that "they are merely foolish children, hiding themselves out of fear of everyone" (236). Meanwhile, the Muslims of the large village raise their hands and declare to Gopal and Jamini that it is only the Meiteis—who claim purity though they are not truly pure—who despise the Pangans. They assure them that the Pangans will take care of the two children, treating them as precious, "wrapped in gold" (236). Observing the scene, Mukhi—likely reflecting Anganghal's idealistic vision—interpreted it as a true instance of love between the Meiteis and Pangans, marking the

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

emergence of a new social but unrealistic trend. But Kunjo is not ready to choose either of the two paths. He is afraid to take the difficult path. Unlike the poet Chandidas, who boldly accepts social rejection in the name of love, Kunjo is unwilling to renounce the privileges and superior standing attached to his identity as a Hindu Meitei, even though he deeply loves Jahera. His situation is further complicated by the presence of his sick mother, whose fragile condition demands his constant care and binds him to the duties of family responsibility. At the same time, his longing for Jahera remains strong, leaving him torn between devotion to tradition and the pull of desire. As he confronts this tension, Kunjo gradually realizes that the barrier of social prohibition is not an abstract idea that can be dismissed with liberal notions learned from books, but a concrete and immovable reality that governs his life. This recognition pushes him into a state of despair and helplessness, where he finds himself unable to reconcile love, duty, and social expectation, and ultimately withdraws into isolation, cut off from both community and personal fulfillment.

The last lines of the novel, after killing Jahera, go like this: 'Kunjo wiped off the blood on the blade of the knife on his left palm. He did not look at Jahera in particular. He looked at the knife, raised his head towards the sky and smiled as an insane (…) He just remained standing.' The word "mad" and "insane" occur a couple of time. When Jahera is at Sadia, Kunjo passes his days like a "mad man," oblivious to everyone as he endures an illness that is known only to Jamini and Gopal.(191) Kunjo's final gesture after killing Jahera encapsulates the paradox at the heart of the novel, dramatizing the fault line between devotion and destruction, between the figure of the bhakta and the murderer. His act of wiping the bloodied knife on his own palm rather than on any neutral surface signifies an internalization of violence, as though he has absorbed the act into his very being, binding his identity to destruction rather than love. His refusal to look at Jahera's body underscores the collapse of Eros, the life instinct, for she ceases to be the object of his desire; instead, the knife itself becomes the focus of his gaze, symbolizing Thanatos, the death drive, and the triumph of annihilation over union. When he raises his head toward the sky and smiles "as an insane," the gesture mimics the upward gaze of the bhakta, who seeks transcendence through devotion, but here it is rendered grotesque, a parody of spiritual ascent, where madness replaces bhakti and violence masquerades as transcendence. His immobility—remaining standing, frozen in the aftermath—conveys paralysis, a suspension between worlds, neither redeemed nor punished, but emptied of resolution. In this way, Kunjo embodies the impossibility of reconciling devotion with modern individuality: he cannot follow Chandidas's path of bhakti, for that would validate Hindu Vaishnavism and its ritualized hierarchy, undermining his modern identity, yet he cannot escape the pull of desire and prohibition, which drive him toward Thanatos. The novel's ending insists that Kunjo is neither a saint nor a rebel but a fractured figure caught in the fault line where love collapses into violence, devotion into madness, and the bhakta becomes indistinguishable from a murderer.

It dramatizes a psychopathology of fractured subjectivity, that unresolvable conflict that defines his tragedy, showing how the impossibility of reconciling love, duty, and prohibition leads to catastrophic self-destruction. Kunjo's fate after killing Jahera is framed as tragically inevitable, with no path leading to redemption or constructive resolution. His possible outcomes—suicide, lynching by the Meitei Pangals, or lifelong imprisonment—each represent forms of annihilation, underscoring that his violent act has severed him from both community and future. The act is thus portrayed as utterly futile, producing no beneficial outcome, only destruction. What deepens the tragedy is the collateral consequence: his

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

critically ill mother, already dependent on his care, is left without support. This abandonment highlights Kunjo's failure not only as a lover but also as a son, showing how his obsession and descent into madness eclipse his filial duty. Jamini, the traditionalist figure, perceives this reality clearly, recognizing that Kunjo's choices have doomed his mother to suffering and isolation. Unlike Kunjo, who is consumed by desire and self-destructive impulses, Jamini embodies the voice of social responsibility and continuity, pointing out the devastating cost of Kunjo's actions. In this way, the narrative contrasts the blindness of passion with the clarity of tradition, emphasizing that Kunjo's tragic trajectory leaves behind only ruin—for himself, for Jahera, and for his mother. Additionally, Kunjo's final act of murder must be understood as an individual choice rather than something dictated entirely by external circumstances. The fact that he carried a knife, whether for protection or otherwise, indicates a preparedness that cannot be dismissed as accidental. Even if societal pressures and rigid rules shaped his environment, they did not compel him to act in that precise moment; the decision to use the weapon was his alone. To attribute the act solely to social constraints would be to deny his agency and moral accountability. Responsibility lies in acknowledging that, despite oppressive structures, individuals retain the capacity to choose differently. By blaming society, Kunjo would be attempting to evade the ethical weight of his own decision, but true responsibility requires him to confront the fact that he acted deliberately and must bear the consequences of that choice.

Jamini's advice to Kunjo—"If a man follows customs, traditions… without deviation, there are means always to save him when he is in trouble"—articulates the protective function of orthodoxy. Tradition, in this worldview, is a safety net: adherence ensures communal support and divine sanction. Kunjo's refusal to conform, however, severs him from this network of protection. His fate—death, arrest, suicide, or madness—becomes the logical consequence of stepping outside sanctioned boundaries. Kunjo challenges the authority of custom, refusing to accept its promise of salvation. By rejecting communal norms, he forfeits the possibility of rescue or redemption within the social order. His refusal to be "saved" is paradoxically an act of agency. He embraces destruction as a form of freedom, rejecting external discourses—religious, cultural, or communal—that dictate identity and destiny. His autonomy is defined not by survival but by the refusal to submit. In Hicks's terms, Kunjo embodies modernist autonomy and individualism, rejecting pre-modern reliance on divine or communal authority. His death (if killed by Pangans later on, or suicide, or imprisonment, or madness) is not merely tragic but symbolic of the collision between tradition's safety and modernism's perilous freedom. Jahera's devotion, read as Bhakti, contrasts with Kunjo's ego-driven autonomy. Where she seeks transcendence through surrender, he seeks transcendence through refusal. Together, they dramatize two divergent responses to oppressive orthodoxy. Kunjo's end illustrates the paradox of freedom in a conservative society: by rejecting the protective embrace of tradition, he gains autonomy but loses the possibility of communal salvation. His final act is both a critique of rigid orthodoxy and a testament to the destructive potential of unmoored individuality.

V: Jahera as a Testament of Devotion and Inner Freedom (the Autonomy of Self)

Hijam Anganghal describes Jahera as a "leafy peepal tree" whose single touch can clear a man of his sins. (13) His portrayal of Jahera as a "leafy peepal tree" whose touch can absolve a man of his sins elevates her to a symbolic, almost sacred figure within the narrative. The peepal tree, revered in Indian tradition for its longevity, fertility, and spiritual purity, becomes a metaphor

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

for Jahera's vitality and sanctity. By emphasizing her "leafy" abundance, she embodies shelter, renewal, and life-giving energy, qualities that make her more than just a beautiful woman. The idea that her single touch can cleanse sin positions her as a redemptive presence, capable of transforming and purifying those around her. Yet this exalted image stands in stark contrast to her lived reality: Jahera is condemned by society for loving across religious boundaries. The metaphor thus intensifies the tragedy of her fate, underscoring the disjunction between poetic idealization and social ostracism, and highlighting how a woman celebrated as sacred in metaphor is simultaneously marginalized and destroyed in practice. Jahera's character embodies the tragic consequences of crossing rigid social and cultural boundaries. Her beauty, which should have been a source of joy, instead becomes a burden, attracting unwanted suitors who impose suffering upon her. More profoundly, her choice to embrace a different culture and give her heart to Kunjo—a man from another religion—places her at odds with the expectations of her community. This act of love, which in a more open society might have been celebrated, instead leads to **ostracism and dislocation**, cutting her off from the security of belonging. Jahera's suffering is not simply personal but emblematic of the larger social prohibitions that punish women for transgressing cultural and religious boundaries. Her devotion to Kunjo thus becomes both an act of courage and the source of her downfall, showing how love in a divided society can transform into a site of pain, exclusion, and ultimately tragedy. In this way, Jahera's fate highlights the destructive power of social taboos and the vulnerability of women who dare to challenge them.

Gopal tells Jahera that a Hindu cannot marry a Muslim girl, insisting that such a union has never been heard of in history. He reminds her that Kunjo is his mother's only son, and with her frail health she would not survive the shock. For this reason, Kunjo must not be ruined. (149) Jahera tells Ta-Gopal, 'I will not marry anyone. It is not that I do not love Kunjo but I do not like to do anything in this life to ruin him.' (149) This moment reveals Jahera's selflessness and the purity of her devotion. Although she lacks Kunjo's formal education, her emotional clarity and moral strength are unmistakable. By telling Ta-Gopal that she will not marry anyone, she affirms her unwavering love for Kunjo, yet she also acknowledges the harsh social realities that make their union impossible. Her refusal is not born out of indifference but out of concern: she does not want to cause harm to Kunjo's life or reputation by defying societal prohibitions. In this way, Jahera's love is portrayed as sacrificial—she chooses personal suffering and loneliness over the possibility of ruining the man she loves. The statement highlights her dignity and moral courage, contrasting her lack of education with a profound wisdom of the heart, and underscores the tragic paradox that her devotion, instead of leading to fulfillment, becomes the very source of her isolation and pain.

Jahera emerges as a figure of authenticity whose choices reflect her inner convictions rather than calculated defiance of tradition, yet these very choices are misread and politicized by those around her. In a heartfelt conversation with her mother, she insists that she has done nothing dishonourable, neither to her family nor to society, and her habits—such as refusing to eat eggs or meat—are rooted in personal sensibility rather than religious rebellion. She explains that she dislikes beef, cannot eat without bathing, and is unable to bear the sight of animal slaughter, which makes her abstain from meat altogether. (55) These preferences, born of her genuine nature, draw her closer to aspects of Meitei Hindu culture, leading her to plant a Tulsi tree in her courtyard and place a Hindu idol on her wall, or putting Chandan mark on her nose, gestures that could easily be seen as harmless expressions of a young girl's inclinations. Yet, when she rejects Tomba Mian as a suitor, Fatima and Tomba distort her personal decision into

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

a political act, accusing her of undermining Muslim culture. Thus, Jahera's private authenticity and innocent gestures are transformed into public controversies, revealing how her individuality is trapped within rigid communal frameworks that refuse to accept her choices as personal, instead branding them as acts of cultural betrayal. During her exile in Sadia, Jahera is overwhelmed by sorrow, not only because she is parted from Kunjo, but also due to her separation from Ta-Gopal and Ibemcha, her lifelong friend. The prolonged anguish of this estrangement gradually wears her down, leaving her diminished and frail, her once vibrant complexion faded, and her features reduced to a skeletal outline. She has no one with whom she can share her grief. Years later, while watching a Hindi play about the love between a young Rajput general and a Muslim girl, memories of her own life in Manipur resurface. Overcome with emotion, she weeps in solitude. Unable to contain her feelings, she (she studies up to class four) decides to write a letter to Gopal. Meanwhile, her childless brother-in-law subtly reveals his affection for her and expresses his wish to marry Jahera. When her brother-in-law receives a letter from Manipur, he learns that Jahera worships a Hindu deity, associates with Hindus, and is considered a Kafer (non-believer)—a perceived insult to the Muslim community. (199) Yet, despite this, he is willing to overlook it.

Jahera confides in her mother that she longs to return to Manipur, even though it was the land that once cast them out. Her feelings have evolved to the point where she claims to love even those who have wronged her, insisting that love is the ultimate truth. For her, exploitation by those she loves cannot truly be called exploitation, but rather a form of happiness. She laments not seeing a single son of Manipuri around her and declares that she cannot continue living in exile. With passionate resolve, she tells her mother that even if they must endure hunger many times over, it is better to live and suffer in Manipur than to die away from it. (201) When Jahera tells her mother that "love is the ultimate thing," her words outwardly appear to express a yearning for Manipur, the homeland she longs to return to. Yet beneath this declaration lies a more personal truth: her thoughts are centered on Kunjo. Her statement blends the idea of love for place with love for person, but what truly drives her passion is not merely the land of Manipur—it is her deep, unshaken affection for Kunjo. In this way, her longing for home becomes inseparable from her longing for him, and her philosophy of love as the highest truth is both a reflection of her attachment to Manipur and, more profoundly, an articulation of her devotion to Kunjo. In the Bhakti tradition, love is regarded as the highest and most transformative force, surpassing ritual, fear, or duty, because it embodies complete surrender to the divine. To say "love is the ultimate thing" echoes the Bhakti belief that devotion rooted in love dissolves the boundaries between self and God, turning suffering into joy and exile into belonging. Saints like Mirabai and Kabir emphasized that true bhakti is not measured by external practices but by the intensity of love that accepts hardship as sacred. In this sense, Jahera's words resonate with Bhakti philosophy: her willingness to embrace even those who wronged her reflects the bhakti ideal that love sanctifies pain, redefines exploitation as happiness, and becomes the ultimate path to union and fulfillment.

In the concluding section of the narrative, Jahera, now residing in Thoubal after her return to Manipur, becomes the focal point of Kunjo's clandestine visits. Drawn by what is described as "the silent and flowless current of love and desire" (219), Kunjo seeks merely a glimpse of her, despite the risks. The Pangans, aware of his repeated presence, plot to either assault or kill him. At this juncture, Kunjo demonstrates a decisive abandonment of fear and self-preservation; he has transcended the restrictive boundaries of caste and religion, motivated

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

solely by the pursuit of emotional and existential fulfillment. Jahera is on the verge of being engaged to a wealthy sibling of her second aunt. Only Jahera's ultimate consent is pending. But, in a moment of solidarity and courage, Jahera disguises herself as a man to aid Kunjo's escape from the Pangan village under the cover of night. Then, Jahera poses a dilemma to Kunjo: is it preferable to live apart with love and desire left incomplete, or to live together and experience their fulfillment? Kunjo remarks that if his only concern were love and desire, he could have stayed content at home. What drives him instead is the pursuit of deeper fulfillment. (231) This exchange between Jahera and Kunjo highlights the tension between longing and fulfillment, and it reveals Kunjo's deeper philosophy of love. Jahera frames the dilemma in simple terms: separation means desire remains unfulfilled, while togetherness promises satisfaction. Her question emphasizes the emotional pain of distance versus the joy of union. Kunjo's response, however, shifts the focus. He insists that if mere love and desire were enough, he could have remained at home, content with longing. What compels him to act is not just passion but the search for a more profound fulfillment—an existential completeness that goes beyond desire. In other words, Kunjo views love not as an emotion to be passively endured but as a force that demands realization in lived experience. His pursuit of Jahera is therefore not about satisfying desire alone, but about achieving a deeper wholeness that transcends social boundaries and personal comfort.

This distinction underscores the narrative's exploration of love as both a spiritual and existential quest, where fulfillment becomes the ultimate truth rather than desire itself. Yet, Kunjo's final act of killing Jahera, even with her consent, embodies the central conflict between his pursuit of fulfillment and the destructive reality of his choice. Throughout the narrative, he insists that love and desire alone are insufficient, that what he seeks is a deeper realization beyond passion. Yet the culmination of his quest in Jahera's death reveals the tragic collapse of that ideal: fulfillment is transformed into annihilation. Her approval complicates the moral frame, but it does not absolve him of responsibility, since the act remains his deliberate decision. This paradox underscores how cultural and religious constraints distort human agency, pushing love into impossible circumstances where the pursuit of meaning becomes inseparable from violence. Ultimately, Kunjo's act exposes the irony of his philosophy—what he claimed as the highest truth of love ends in loss, showing how oppressive structures can twist devotion into tragedy.

Jahera-Kunjo story highlights how rigid cultural and religious boundaries can entrap individuals, shaping their desires and decisions in ways that ultimately lead to tragedy. Her love, which she sees as pure and transformative, is branded as betrayal, leaving her isolated and vulnerable. Kunjo, on the other hand, becomes ensnared in the same web of constraints: his final act of violence, whether born of desperation or defiance, reflects the crushing weight of societal rules that deny him the freedom to love openly. Yet, both characters must still bear responsibility for their choices, even when those choices are distorted by external pressures. Their fates demonstrate how cultural and religious strictures do not simply regulate behavior but can intensify inner conflict, pushing individuals toward decisions that carry devastating consequences. However, Jahera's death at Kunjo's hands can be understood in two distinct but interrelated ways. On one level, it signifies the triumph of an irrational, patriarchal possessiveness, where male desire manifests violently and reduces her to an object of domination. On another level, however, her acceptance of this fate may be read as an act of agency, a choice that transforms the violence into a paradoxical expression of devotion. By willingly submitting, she reframes her death as a testament to love and free will rather than

sheer victimhood. Taken together, these perspectives reveal the tension between coercion and consent, bondage and devotion, making Jahera's fate not simply a tragic end but a site of ideological struggle where questions of power, autonomy, and identity converge.

Even in the most crucial moment, Jahera embodies the spirit of bhakti through her compassion and selflessness. Rather than focusing on her own suffering, she reminds Kunjo that he is the beloved son of a frail, bedridden mother who has no one else to care for her. This appeal reflects the bhakti ethos of love as service and devotion, where empathy and responsibility are elevated above personal desire. Jahera's words reveal her capacity to transform love into a higher moral and spiritual duty, showing that true devotion lies not in passion alone but in the willingness to protect and nurture others. In this way, she becomes the voice of reason and empathy, grounding the narrative's exploration of love in the bhakti ideal of selfless surrender. Jahera tells him that she cannot fulfill the role of being his wife, but if he wishes, she is ready to give her life for him. (239) Jahera's words reflect the essence of devotion as selfless surrender, a principle that resonates strongly with the Bhakti tradition. By admitting that she cannot serve Kunjo in the conventional role of a wife, she acknowledges the social and religious barriers that prevent their union. Yet, her willingness to die for him if he asks demonstrates the depth of her love and loyalty, elevating it beyond worldly duty into the realm of spiritual sacrifice. In Bhakti philosophy, true devotion is measured not by ritual or social recognition but by the intensity of love that erases the self in service to the beloved. Jahera's statement embodies this ideal: she places Kunjo's happiness and choice above her own existence, showing that her devotion is absolute, unconditional, and transcendent. Her words transform love into an act of worship, where sacrifice itself becomes the highest form of fidelity and fulfillment. At the beginning of the story, Jahera declares that her "inborn will" stands in opposition to the norms of Muslim society (107). This resistance, however, extends beyond a single community—it challenges any social order that enforces divisions based on caste or religion. In other words, Jahera embodies a spirit that refuses to be confined by boundaries of identity imposed from outside. Her will represents a deeper human impulse toward freedom and unity, one that exposes the arbitrariness of sectarian and hierarchical structures. By positioning her defiance as innate, the text suggests that such resistance is not merely circumstantial but essential to her being, making Jahera a figure of protest against all forms of social stratification and exclusion.

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