

Christianity and Self Image: A Study on Hmar Women of Manipur

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Abstract: Hmar tribe inhabits over a vast areas of North East India covering states of Manipur, Assam, Tripura and Mizoram. Christianization of the Hmar started during the colonial period. Today, they, irrespective of their inhabiting States, become Christian. Since then, the Hmars had celebrated the coming of the gospel for a century year old. The present paper tries to highlight the impact of Christianity on Hmar Women. Some feminists charge that Christianity, the Bible, and the Church are anti-female and oppressive to women. The paper examines the Biblical texts which relates with women and to locate the biblical meaning on Hmar context.

Keywords: Bible, Christianity, Hmar, Image, Status, Women

“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord” ... Colossians 3:18

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I. INTRODUCTION

Christianity was the biggest external force that changed the Hmar people during the last century. Christianization of the Hmar started during the colonial period transforming the entire people from the head hunting tribes they once were. Hmar tribe inhabits sparsely over a vast areas of North East India covering states of Manipur, Assam, Tripura and Mizoram. Today, they, irrespective of their inhabiting States are Christianized. In Manipur among Hmar, Christianity was first introduced by Watkin Roberts a Welsh missionary, along with his two guides *Lungpau* and *Thangkhai* (Laldena 2010) in 1910 and other porters who set out on their journey at *Senvon* a Hmar village, situated on the southern part bordering with the state of Mizoram. Since then, the Hmars celebrate the coming of the gospel for more than 100 years.

The missionaries also brought western education. Initially, education was confined in teaching alphabet so that people can read the Bible. The first word of the Bible ever to reach the people was written in *Lushei* language. Since that day onwards, with the efforts of the Missionaries, the people took their first step of education through learning of the gospel.

Mrs. Lalrinawmi Ralte (2002) had also stated that “*Mizo* education was based on the Bible and once the *Mizo* people became educated they customarily become Christian because their education was based on Bible.” The rise in literacy indicated that Christianity became wide spread among the Hmar people (Thelma 2014).

In the context of Colonialism, Christianity and spread of western education, it is important to study and examine Hmar life after celebrating the Gospel that shaped a new world-view. The introduction of Christianity among the Hmar in 1910 exercised a profound impact in their traditional tribal society. The new religion which was preached had its own values and practices.

Some feminists like Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) spoke their mind freely within the context of a male hierarchy, unaccustomed to outspoken women and was cast out of the Puritan colony of Massachusetts for teaching on the dignity and rights of women. Marie Maugeret and Katherine Bushnell who were from the 19th-20th century also charge that Christianity, the Bible, and the Church are anti-female and oppressive to women. These women who were campaigning for their rights began to question their inferiority both within the church and in other spheres justified by church teachings.

It is notable here that in Genesis 2:18 from the Bible it says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him” (Bible). It is seen that God made a woman for the rightful need of man and to assist him in each way possible. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430A.D) who was an early Christian Theologian and Philosopher and probably the most famous theologian in the church history believed that God did not create woman for any reason other than procreation. Explicitly he said, “I cannot think of any reason for woman’s being made as man’s helper, if we dismiss the reason of procreation. “-He felt that companionship was no part of God’s plan for the relationship between sexes. For the purpose of conversation, he argued, “how

much more agreeable it is for two male friends to dwell together than a man and a woman!" Different kinds of thoughts and theory from different perspectives are brought up by different scholars and theologians.

Understanding the role of women in contemporary religious practices is an overwhelming task. Unlike men, however, many women are allowed only an internal spiritual or religious experience and are often denied leadership roles or roles that foster any form of externalization of their faith. While a small number of religious practices, not remarkable ones have begun ordaining women as ministers, most "continue to place women in a subservient role that demands their silence and obedience (Gray, 1994)."

The paper thus tries to highlight the impacts of Christianity it had on Hmar Women and the analysis begins with the status of woman enshrine in Christianity and how it projects the morality, value and the deviations in course of time. It focuses on the Biblical text or script related to women and tries to study and analyze their living status in the changing society. The text and practices relating to women are analyzed with the principles of study area among the Hmar which focuses on the Biblical Hermeneutics of evangelism. The theory of Biblical hermeneutics is applied and taken up for the analysis of the present paper as it would show light on the concept of bible scripts or principles especially the area about women, its impacts in the lives of the people and how far it has inspired them in connecting with the changing society.

Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpretation of the Bible. It is a part of the broader field of hermeneutics which involves the study of principles of interpretation for all forms of communication, non-verbal and verbal.

Various methods of higher criticism sought to understand the Bible purely as a human, historical document. The concept of hermeneutics has acquired at least two different but related meanings which are in use today. Firstly, in older sense, Biblical hermeneutics may be understood as the theological principles of exegesis which is often virtually synonymous with 'principles of biblical interpretation' or methodology of Biblical exegesis. Secondly, the more recent development is to understand the term 'Biblical Hermeneutics' as the broader philosophy and linguistics underpinnings of interpretation. The Bible scripture is the first analysis text which human beings try to understand and by choosing this theory for the present paper will bring out the importance and meanings of the Bible script as perceives by the Hmars and its analysis on Hmar women in the present society today.

II. WOMANHOOD IN CHRISTIANITY

In Genesis 2:21-23 it says God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof: and the rib, which God had taken from the man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And the man said "this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (This is how they believed God had made a woman). Christian views (attitudes and beliefs) about women varied considerably from one doctrine to another. But every believer of Christianity accepts the new faith in which they abide with the promises as well as acknowledges the womanhood embodied in the Bible. She is his counterpart: his companion and friend who complement him in exercising dominion over the earth. She fulfills him so that together they can be fruitful and care for the earth.

Like many other Christians the Hmar converts also accept the fate bestowed upon them in their holy scripts. They also accept the cause and fall of the evil in the world is because of a woman where woman is the root cause of all evils. In the Bible it is so written, about the woman's role in the fall, she believed Satan's lie that she might become as God, and hence, was "beguiled" (Genesis 3:13; 2 Corinthians 11:3) or "deceived" (1 Timothy 2:14); whereas Adam, laboring under no such deception (1 Timothy 2:14), merely sinned due to his weakness for the woman (Genesis 3:12). Accordingly, woman's subjection was increased after her fall (Genesis 3:16). To relate with this matter, one of the Church leaders during the 20th century St. Augustine of Hippo (354 to 430 CE) commented and wrote to a friend: "What is the difference whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman.....I fail to see what use woman can be to man, if one excludes the function of bearing children." But, even though it is all being said and heard, Christians especially the Hmar Christians viewed the theory as a different dimension leaning towards the love of God instead. To them the love of God saved them and focused more on the unconditional love they received from him.

According to a Pastor of a well-known Hmar Church "even if it is believed that a woman is the root cause of all evil, it is not about the doer or the fall of the sin, it is about the forgiveness of the sin by God and the purity of his faithfulness towards his believers. He further adds that they have never viewed woman as the cause of all evil, instead she was being tempted by the Devil. If evil had not fallen in this world they would had not known the love of God and his forgiveness through his son Jesus Christ. Christianity is all about the relationship with God and had never put women in their church ministry as the inferior ones or gives them the lesser image but rather treat them equally. He also says that they have been equally made in the eyes of God and bind them

together under one platform. He also Cite from Galatians 3:28, and explains that neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus". From this, it is clear that Hmars enjoy more freedom within the Christian domain. They believe that before the eyes of God, all human are equal.

This idea of equality is reflected in the writings of Wayne Johnson (2005) a Christian writer. He writes that men and women are both dependent upon each other in every spheres of life. He stated that the facts in the Bible do not suggest that woman is inferior to man, but they do mean (to those who respect the testimony of Scripture) that she is subordinate in rank to man. It ought to be emphasized that as Christ's subjection to the Father involved no deprivation of dignity (Philippians 2:5-11), so there is none in woman's subjection to man. So, as we shall presently observe, because of these historical facts, the sphere of woman's activity has been divinely circumscribed. Also to cite from the book of 1 Corinthians 11:8, 9, 11 "For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man: for neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man". Nevertheless, neither is the woman without the man, nor the man without the woman in the Lord. Neither is complete without the other.

Many other Hmar women think that men and women are both inter dependent upon each other.

Mrs. Mawii (57yrs old) with aconfidence expresses her views by quoting a Hmar saying '*Nu in khawvel a siem*' ('mother/women made or give the world life'). She thinks that no man can establish a house or a family without the help of a woman which is why God madea female to help the single handed male(as in responsibilities) and made them double handed by supporting them. No man can live alone without a wife or a womanwhen there are many widows looking after their children. This prove how strong God has specially made a female, she further added.

III. CHRISTINITY AND HMAR WOMEN TODAY

In the history of Christianity, the Virgin Mary, who was the mother of Jesus Christ, was the turning point for all Christian's women. "God sent forth his Son, born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4). Virgin Mary became therole model of all women and was also taken as an example to women in the Christian sphere. The image of Mary as a virgin woman and she, of all thewomen, was chosen to bear God's child became one the best inspiring stories in the history of Christianity. This is why Virgin Mary has set an example to Christian followers to follow her step and maintain an image like her which is purity both in physical and spirituality. Also characters like humble, soft, faithfulness and righteousness are demanded on the part of a woman and she should possess these characters.

According to Samuel Butler (16121680) who also had studied on this matter had written that the Church's position on this matter followed the biblical text such as Genesis 3:16 which say, "Where God tells Eve that her husband will rule over her, and passages where wives are listed along with man's other goods and chattels. This view is comprehensively confirmed in the New Testament: Wives, Submit yourselves you're your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord (Colossians 3:18). Submitting to husbands can mean so many things in Christianity. It might mean submitting physically or submitting as to have respect towards men; which might be more fitted in the eyes of the Lord.However, it is understood that Scripture never implies that men are in any way superior to women. Both are created in the image of God.

One of the 20th century writings and sayings on the role of women in the Reformation Fellowship of the East Valley, AZ Mesa (circa 1995) is of the opinion that "In the beginning God made man male and female. He made Adam first, and then made Eve from Adam's rib. This order of creation subordinates wives to their husbands in marriage, and women to men in the church. As an act of submission to their Creator women are commanded to submit to their husbands and to male leadership in the church. Women are not allowed to teach or have authority over men in any formal capacity in the church."

Again another verse from the Bible which relate to woman can be taken out from the book of 1 Corinthians 11:3 which states that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man. The meaning of this sentence is considered by Hmar women differently.

Mrs. Kimi (49 yrs.), an informant, says, "*It is said that the head of the woman is the man and again the man to Christ. According to the script, a woman should put her queries and demand to the man which in turns will put it up to Christ (if according to the hierarchy mention in the Bible).But this is not the case, whenever we have a family devotion, it is me (woman) who shared and chaired the service.It is me who calls for the children to come sit around for devotion. On top of that, I take the charge of the family worshipwhere my husband's just cooperates with my arrangement. Aren't man supposed to doall this if it is what the scripture meant? Instead it seems I am closer in relation to God she continued*". Her opinions are based on the authoritytaken during the family devotion which is a holy time for the family. Leadership plays big meaning to her which clearly shows that Hmar women are more in connection with God spiritually.

Another informant Mrs. Chawngi(52 yrs.)is alsoof the opinion that Hmar women are good believers of Jesus Christ and are more spiritual than Hmar men. She narrates, "*Whenever we had a family worship time, I*

preached and lead the worship. But one day, one of my sons told his father that he should also often stand up and lead the worship. On top of that his father is the Pastor of a well-known International Christian based organization.” Does this means that men are to preach or take responsibilities inserving the public only? And kept the responsibilities of the house to his wife?

Hmar men think that it is the duty of a Hmar woman to lead and take leadership of the family devotions and also other family interaction even if men can do it. They claim that it is the correct path for women to be spiritually strong in life where men are to support and guide them. They also accept that families are made with the Lord and husband/wife relationships are also built only through God.

In Hmar society, women tend to lead a good spiritual life away from home as well as at home where one of the main parts is taking charge of family devotions. Men too are not meant as spiritual (religious). They seem to lack their expressivity towards the involvement religiously, than found in women. Hmar women tend to express what they believed in to the outside world and are found to be more emotional than Hmar males. So, the heavier weight goes to women which may be because of their so called image like to be “Mary”, they seem to be found more in connection with God. But in spite of all that, women are barred from holding any positions in Church other than the women department where they are supposed to. Let your women keep silence in churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; But they are commanded to be under obedience, as also said the law. (1 Corinthians 14:34.). Of course women are not allowed to hold any positions in the main church committee but in the Hmar churches Women too are not kept silent, they are given equal opportunity to speak out their ideas and beliefs. There is a get together service every once September in a year, where all the Hmar churches had worship service known as “*Beiruol*” and the month of September is regarded as “*Beiruolthla*” (the month of gospel service). It occurs for one whole month every night and a topic or theme is prepared to be learned or discussed about it during this said period. When it is time for discussion, there are no obligations of who will stand up and share their ideas; every member is given equal opportunities starting from the Pastors to a simple member. In this session Hmar women are seen standing up consecutively without hesitation and shared their thoughts about the given theme or topic. This gives equal platform to both men and women thereby widening the opportunities for Hmar women in the sphere of Christian worship.

IV. IMPACTS OF CHRISTIANITY ON HMAR CULTURE

With the advent of Christianity, the old ways customary practice of the Hmar tribe emerges into a new dynamic society which means that their old tradition changes and transforms. Customs and traditions are found to shift and evolved as the society changes. A new beginning for the tribal Hmar people arises with the introduction of Christianity. As time fades, the belief in all the multifarious spirits was replaced by the new faith.

In the pre Christian tribal society, the position of women was predominantly negative. There are phrases and sayings among the tribal which indicate that women were not given the same status as men. With the advent of Christianity and education the status of the tribal woman has been considerably lifted. Gender roles in the church, as is practiced in our tribal society, are based on the universal conflicting concept of the role of men and women in the church. These conflicting concepts are based on the diverging interpretation of scripture. As the church is an institution which relies on its function upon the foundation of scripture, the interpretation of the role of women and men as found in scripture is the basis of defining their role. The tribal church shares the universal Christian belief that men and women are equal before God and both men and women are gifted of God to participate in many forms of ministry in the church (Shakum, 2017).

The Hmar people adopted the new ways of living and their dresses started to change in accordance with the western impact. New ways of teaching totally transformed the entire Hmar people mode of life and their social structure completely transformed. This transformation also made the Hmar women to become more hygienic thereby keeping them cleaner and more discipline. Since the Hmar adopted the Christian teachings in their life, their traditional ways and norms now deviates from the once they used to practiced long back.

One of the most drastic changes that can be seen in the Hmar culture is the form of marriage. During ancient times, the Hmar ancestors performed traditional marriages where it is either arranged or eloped (Keivom, 1982). Sometimes it can be with or without the agreement of the girl. However this form of marriage is no longer practiced within the Hmar tribal society. Let me take an example on one of the early forms of marriage among the Hmar known as the *Intlun*. It is the form of marriage where a girl can operate her rights without any external force within the traditional Hmar marriage to anyone whom he is in love with. But the coming of Christianity wiped out the only rights where a girl can fully exercise her rights over the boy she wants to marry and the only agency where women shared with men in the Hmar tribal forms of marriage. Yes, indeed Hmar women are still given the opportunities to express their views and their wants in choosing a partner but the form of marriages totally changes. Today, marriage ceremony is done at the church before a whole congregation and vowed in the name of the God they believed.

During the pre-Christian period drinking of rice beer was indispensable in any of the merry making such as wedding. But the profound impact can be seen where the substitution of rice beer is now considered by a simple tea and transforming into western culture like. With the wave of colonization, bride wealth of the traditional Hmar society is changing i.e. *mothilsawm*. Now the bride wealth has been modernized and rich people have started to give cars, washing machine, land, expensive bed and cupboard etc. when the simple society was sufficient enough with a few cloths and traditional materials. This situation arises a lot of competition between the becoming brides in the Hmar society where Laldena (2008) has also stated, thereby, widening the gaps between the rich and poor. As a matter of fact, women, in the Hmar society especially from poorer family are victimized in the status of life. In Addition, the traditional bride's dress has been also westernized. In Hmar society, it almost becomes a competition regarding the dress worn by women in holy matrimonial ceremony. The Christian marriage is another form of building up class hierarchy between the poor and rich within the Hmar women. The Hmar thinks that everything western is beautiful, civilized, good and culture as taught by missionary in the yore (Thelma, 2014). As such the Church becomes the platform for fashion and Hmar women imitate the outlooks of western tradition and their attitudes towards life started to change. The works of missionary started to reflects .in the life of Hmar women socially and materialistically. Just like the interpretation of Laldena (2010), the Hmar women forgets their sense of tribalism and think and act as other urbanized people do, beginning to imposed upon themselves heavy bourgeois values. They are thus placed in a contradictory situation, the simultaneous adaptation to two mentally contrapozing elements: one traditional and the other western.

V. THE ROAD AHEAD

Even as the Hmar society advances with the introduction of Christianity, there is no acceptance that the patriarchal system is broken and abolished. Even if a woman play a crucial role and involved in the church ministry full time they are not allowed to hold any position in the administration of the church. The issue of sexism still remains intact in the life of Christian sphere. The doctrines and structures of Christians still hold back and perceived women as inferior to male sex as quoted previously. Women will never get the chance to involve in the administration of the church and hence gender prejudiced is still maintained by the church. Traditionally there are some oldsayings in the Hmar society which adds to the fate of a woman that had been prevailing from the ancient years such as) *the wisdom of a woman does not extend beyond the bank of a river*, ii) *A wife and an old fence can be replaced at any time* iii) *Women and crab has no religion* etc. All this sayings reflect the status of the women and this mind set has been passed on through generation. The determination of women's value by culture resulted into low status of women and again it further resulted into low or limited role of women in the mainstream. So all these sayings of the Hmar tribeare still presenteven after the colonization and it cannot be said that Christian religion breaks free the social statuses of Hmar women rather it still upholds the inequality. Just as Ralte (2002) states, what seems to have influence Christianity is the prejudice against Mizo women. Again, it is in appropriate to break the moral laws of Christian. So the Hmar women even though influenced by the western outlook still lives under the hierarchy of the church in addition to the patriarchal hierarchy they already dwelled in. However, Christian teachings are growing rapidly within the Hmar community.

But from the study, Hmar women are found to be more spiritual in the Christian sphere. Their contributions towards the church and family in having devotion seem to be more than the male members. They are found to be more in connection with God in the daily life they lived. Hmar women accepted that although it is mention in the Bible that Man is the head of the house, it is women who look after the house and the strength of the family lies in her hand. They are of the opinion that God gave them the ability of planning things according to the right path in setting up of a family.

In the church, Hmar women or the women's wing are doing the best they can to mobilized and empower women in different spheres. Seminars, conferences and programs are organized in order to educate women in living their life with the changing society. The women's wing in the church is mainly run by the women and they have a separateadministration. They work for the upliftment of the church and contribute the best they can. One of the Seminars for women conducted by one of the biggest church among the Hmars known as the Evangelical Free Church of Indiaat Imphalwas entitled "*Duties and Responsibilitiesof Ordainedwives*". In this seminar all Hmar women of all ages came together to listen to the word of God and get inspiration. They learned about the different responsibilities they had and the fate they live today. The seminar was conducted in order to empower and uplift women and acknowledged their contribution towards the society and in thechurch. So, many awareness and programs are conducted to educate women in different spheres where the church is one of the platforms in the Hmar society today. And as far as equality is concerned, Churches among the Hmar treated women equality but moreover they are not allowed to hold any positions in the main church administration. One of a great Hmar woman speaker opined that "*God did not made women from a man's feet in case shemight be step upon nor from a man's head or else she might over ruled him but instead from a man's*

ribs where it's close to his heart". This shows that God wants us to be Equal". From the Bible it can also be seen that, in the beginning, God created man and woman to have oneness in marriage. In the body of Christ, God intends for us to have community with one another. In eternity in heaven, we will be praising God together. God's will is for men and women to be together side by side. His heart is oneness.

VI. CONCLUSION

For the Tribals of Manipur, lifestyle is transformed as Christianity hits their culture since the far end of the 19th century. The spread of the 'modern Tradition' had also a profound impact on their socio economic condition. So the coming of the religion and how it has survived in educating and shaping the life of the Hmar people during the many years seems very important and in fact plays the biggest force of change. The impact of modernization and western education enabled the Hmar people to take advantage of new opportunities in course of time. Dr. Horam writes, "Truly, it was the Christian missions which introduced the tribal to the comity of nations. The missionaries were responsible for both the good and bad effects of the modern civilization on the tribal life." On the other hand, K.P Guite opines, "Had not Christianity been introduced in the hills areas of Manipur, the conditions of the tribal would be very much otherwise and would be all the more an uphill and colossal task for their development. But now....., the tribals have been virtually transformed traditionally, culturally, socially, educationally, economically and religiously.

Contextualization of Christianity by the Hmar people varies from one person to another. But as far as churches and Christians organizations are concerned, Hmar perceives women as a stronghold that can contribute a lot religiously. Women are given the rightful opportunities, the rightful voice and equal understanding of a rightly individual. There are no such obligations that forcedly barred women in the administration of the churches other than taking part in the main administration when menfolk are around. Widows are given the equal status along with other women in the Bible. In fact, an adulterated woman is found to be forgiven by Jesus Christ in the Bible during his time and told her to repent and start a new life. Hmar women are found to be very spiritual in serving the Lord with all their heart. To them being spiritually Born again and leading a life according to the word of God is very important. Being a mother to her children means a lot to her and they thought it is their responsibility to train up a child in the rightful path. Nevertheless Men are not less important but according to them women which in local dialect "Nuhmei" light up the world and a good housewife brings joy to the family.

Among the various churches of the Hmar, the hermeneutical approach of how the intervention of gender according to the Bible is found to be different. But to many Hmar women, they regarded themselves as an instrument of peace in the family as well in social life. The sayings of the society to cite some examples comprises like 'women should pray a lot' as well as 'woman who is a true believer of prayer always fulfills what she desires and blessings are showered till her many line of generations' are often found to be in many. According to Hmar women being a good woman of faith is very much necessary and belief that prayers do wonders. Although there are some women whom are disgusted in the society and do not lead an admirable life. They are regarded as not a very good spiritual lady and an unworthy woman. According to Hmar one should be considered a "Nuthling" which in simple English translates "a worthy mature woman" who deserves enough to cope up with all kinds of consequences she faced.

Many of the women in the Bible are taken as an example in the church to teach the young adults girls in leading a good life and get inspiration from them. Naming one amongst the many is Queen Esther who is a brave and a loyal queen in ruling her kingdom with the help of God. So, many of the Hmar women focus their lives to be circled upon the biblical script and the sayings which guided them to be morally good and be a peaceful instrument towards God and the people. It is also found that the Hmar people as influenced by Christianity seems to contextualize mainly on scripts and women tends to lead a life according to the written records of the holy bible. This shapes the image of the so called loyalty to be possessed by the many Hmar women in leading a good and quality life as per the law of religion in the society.

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