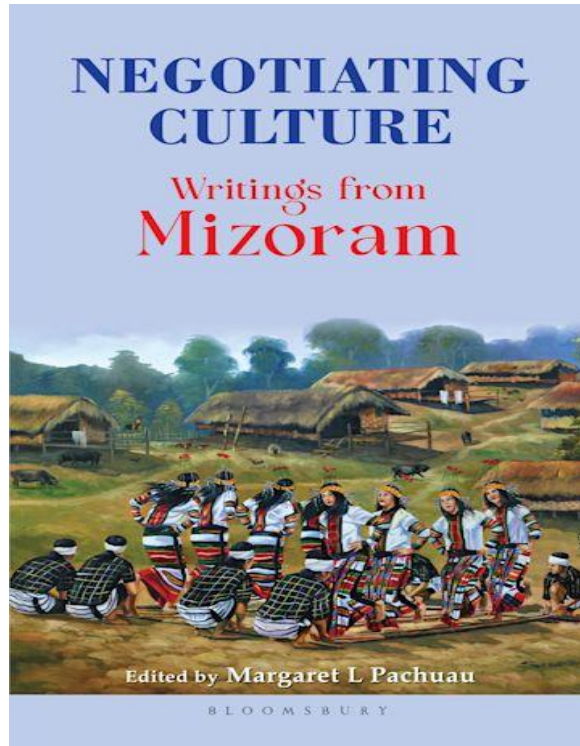


Margaret L. Pachuau (ed). (2023). *Negotiating Culture: Writings from Mizoram*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 285 pp. ISBN: 978-93-56400-17-7



Mapping a societal canvas requires a frame of reference for the placement of the chosen keywords, which *Negotiating Culture: Writings from Mizoram* expertly does by addressing the salient registers of the Mizo world. Studies of Mizo society and culture have often taken specific areas for evaluation, each encompassing history, folklore, customs, and practices, among others, with concentrated emphasis on them yielding specialised treatises on such subjects. *Negotiating Culture: Writings from Mizoram* is a remarkable feat of critically informed reading, especially evident in the marshalling of resources that serve to frame the arch of this book. “A notable feature of Mizo society is its strong community bonding,” (89) writes Lalrinsangi Nghinglova in the chapter on tribal justice system in Mizo folk tales. Inclusive in nature, but expansive in the way it looks at social realities rooted in

tradition, this sense of continuity is a crucial dimension of Mizo culture and society.

Divided into four broad sections, the book's extensively drawn map engages with different aspects of the Mizo world through the following registers of culture: boundaries, systems, lore, home, and identity. In her richly imbibed and informative "Introduction," Margaret L. Pachuau enumerates the contexts in which the various cultural trajectories have come to pervade Mizo society. Placing the circumstances in which the formative phase of social orientation moved on to traverse across the many tropes in its enriching journey, Pachuau writes: "[T]his book offers perspective, with insights from literary history, memory studies and cultural studies, and attempts to situate the ethos related to identity and Mizo located within the broad paradigm ranging from orality to writing" (1).

The first section of the book engages with the intersections of boundaries and narratives, a process that imbricates the question of memory with the *rambuai* imperative which pervades early Mizo cultural placement. In the essay on this issue titled "Remembering *Rambuai*: Trauma, Memory and Narrative," the implications are clearly laid out for a well-situated analysis: "The word *rambuai* means troubled land or disturbed land. *Rambuai* has become the definitive expression of the Mizos to denote the troubled times or the disturbed period of Mizoram's history." The context for this politically conditioned atmosphere and its firm entrenchment in the Mizo cultural ethos is analytically calibrated in the different essays in the opening section of the book. The essays on territoriality and colonial experience offer informed readings for a critical engagement with the deep-seated cultural circumstances in which the question of Mizo identity came to be formatted over the years. Pachuau's organising principle attends to the connecting threads by foregrounding the crucial cultural dimensions of Mizo society and culture.

Mizo society is not a monolithic system, but a spectrum with facets that have emerged from a richly endowed cultural history. The second section of the book addresses issues relating to tribal justice, patriarchy and gender, and satire and theatre. Focusing on the nuanced circumstances in which these dimensions articulate themselves, the chapters in this section draw attention to the societal frameworks that serve as the fulcrum for their manifestation. The discourses on patriarchy and gender, for instance, acquire mobility through localised registers of power in Mizo society. In this context, the historically engaging placement of such processes acquire significance, which may not quite be evident in all its intricacies when evaluated through the generic frame of feminism as projected in the West. The focus on such crucially located materialities shed light on the cultural formats which are at work in Mizo society. The following passage is a good example of critical historiography regarding Mizo society:

[T]he noble code of conduct such as *tlawmngaihna* ... was also predominantly a patriarchal discourse which emerged as a significant social and cultural marker of Mizo identity. A woman's *tlawmngaihna* was observed in terms of her excellence in domestic chores and courtesy towards men. (99)

Discursive yet rooted in the context of the writing space, enumerations of such order offer readers the opportunity to see aspects of the Mizo world through a lens that does not take recourse to description as a resource for dissemination. This concern for a balanced critique of the situations in which the social registers operate is one of the major features of this book.

In examining the lores and cultural practices of Mizo society in the third section, Pachuau grants space to discussions that are not just confined to the conventionally identifiable matrices. One instance of this expository dimension is to be seen in the way literature for children in Mizo serves a circulatory space for representation of food, Gothicism, and the carnivalesque elements in society. The chapter on children's writing examines the underpinnings of these layers which form part of narratives meant for a young adult audience. It is suggestive of a kind of openness which writings for children facilitate. Narration, thus, is a crucial mode of folkloric communication in Mizo culture. Whether it is oral history or contemporary cultural world-views, storytelling forms the bedrock of cultural transmission in Mizo society. In her chapter on Mizo folklore, Judy Lalparhawii Khiangte highlights this aspect, as she observes: "Storytellers are the community's teachers, a teacher of an ongoing tradition and culture and either consciously or unconsciously, they inculcate moral examples, ethnic imagination as well as fantasy through folklore" (171).

In the fourth section of the book, the focus moves to the integrated themes of home and identity. Questions of selfhood are closely related to the ways in which one is culturally spaced out within specific social frames. In examining the manifestation of such realities, the essays in this section locate the identity question through markers such as coloniality, ethnicity, sociability, memory, and resistance. Interestingly, the articulation of home and identity is more than a discursive practice that stands by itself, which is well accounted for in the discussions that form the essays in the final section of the book. Nostalgia, in its inclusive orientation, for instance, connects the people's collective identity, becoming thereby a repository of cultural resources, to be tapped into by generations across time. The book situates these registers for a considerably comprehensive mapping of Mizo culture and society.

This very well organised book is indeed a very commendable exercise. It has brought to the fore many less traversed dimensions of Mizo culture. It will enable a global audience to know the remarkable breadth and depth of a society which is so richly imbued with lore, tradition, and modernity. *Negotiating Culture: Writings from Mizoram* is going to be a major contribution to Mizo studies, as it

will facilitate further exploration of the field through the pathways it has opened up for its readers.

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