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Religion as Everyday Culture: Manifestation of Vaishnavism in M K Binodini's The Princess and the Political Agent

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Abstract: The historical, political and cultural dimensions of Manipur literature have been well explored in many scholarly works. However, MK Binodini Devi's The Princess and the Political Agent has been paid limited attention to the novel's portrayal of religion as a lived, everyday cultural practice. To mark the gap, this paper highlights the manifestation of Vaishnavism as everyday life by employing the theoretical framework of lived religion and everyday life studies. By applying qualitative textual analysis this paper analyses the way in which Vaishnavite beliefs, religious practices, ethical values, domestic rituals, kinship and gendered identities are depicted in the familiar experience of the novel's characters. Rather than a doctrinal system, the novel presents Vaishnavism as a lived cultural practice that informs ethical consciousness, social relationships and collective belonging in the historical context of colonial Manipur. The analysis further shows how everyday religious practices become sites of continuity, negotiation and contestation within the framework of political transformation and colonial intervention. By emphasizing the inseparability of religion with daily life, the study adds to the current scholarship on Binodini Devi's writings and intervenes into interdisciplinary debates concerning the interface of politics and culture, religion and society at both national and transnational levels. It claims that The Princess and the Political Agent shows Manipuri Vaishnavism in a lot of different way, showing it as a living tradition that keeps remembering the past and changing with the time politically.

Keywords: Religion, Culture, Vaishnavism, Manifestation.

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Introduction

A celebrated historical novel The Princess and the Political Agent (originally titled Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi) was written by Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi, an award-winning writer and princess of the Manipuri royal household. This work is considered her magnum opus, translated from the original Manipuri by her son, L Somi Roy.

The novel, set in Manipur in the late 19th century, narrates the story of the unconventional love between Princess Sanatombi, the lively daughter of the deposed Maharaja Surchandra and Lt Colonel Henry St Patrick Maxwell, the first British Political Agent of Manipur. Set against the backdrop of the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, an important period in the history of the kingdom when it lost its sovereignty and was annexed into the British Indian Empire.

The most important idea in The Princess and the Political Agent by Binodini Devi is the conflict between love, personal freedom, and political power. The novel tells the story of Princess Sanatombi and British Political Agent Lt. Col. Henry P. Maxwell, whose forbidden love unfolds during British rule in Manipur. Through their story, Binodini shows how colonialism, palace politics, social restrictions, and loyalty to one's kingdom can deeply affect personal lives. With all these key concepts of this novel, M K Binodini also depicts 'Religion' not just as a system of beliefs but as something lived through everyday rituals, festivals, clothes, cuisine, prayer, dancing and social conventions. Religion is not only about temples, rituals and formal acts of worship also about the everyday activities, values, connections and routines of people and their communities.

Through the lens of this novel Vaishnavism is one of the major tradition of Hinduism. Vaishnavism is the worship and devotion (bhakti) of Lord Vishnu and his avatars especially Krishna and Rama as the Supreme Divine. Manipur's religion, culture, traditions, art, music, dance and social life are all profoundly interwoven with Vaishnavism, which is pervasive throughout the state. It is particularly connected with the worship of Krishna and Radha and impacts festivals, ceremonies, temple activities and concepts of morality and devotion. Not simply a religious faith in Manipur, Vaishnavism has been woven into every component of Manipuri cultural identity and daily existence. In this work, this impact may be seen in the royal court, social norms, religious practices and standards of personal and familial conduct.

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The rise of Vaishnavism as Manipur's predominant religious tradition. It has drawn a lot of scholarly attention from academics studying religion, ethnography, and history. Most historians acknowledged that Vaishnavism had already spread over the area prior to the eighteenth century, its institutional consolidation occurred during the reign of Maharaja Pamheiba (Garib Niwaz), while its aesthetic and cultural flowering reached its zenith under Maharaja Bhagyachandra. These developments transformed not only religious beliefs but also the artistic, social, and political life of the kingdom. The study identifies that Lord Govinda in everyday ritual, an important example of worshiping Lord Krishna. The royal spring festival includes participation in the choir of the Lord Govinda temple (79). Princess Sanatombi has participated in Raas Lila since childhood. She sometimes performs as Radha and at other times as one of the principal dancers. Here, religion becomes part of education, art and social life. Sanatombi does not merely "believe" in Krishna, she expresses devotion through dance, music, performance and participation in communal worship.

As, for Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Krishna Charitra), Krishna was not simply a supernatural figure created by mythology he was a powerful leader who played an important role in the political and social history of ancient India. As an ideal human being, Bankim emphasizes Krishna's human qualities. Krishna is presented as intelligent, practical, courageous, politically astute, disciplined, compassionate and devoted to duty. Thus, Bankim's Krishna becomes an ideal human personality, rather than merely an object of worship (26).

The novel is set in nineteenth-century Manipur, where religious practices are closely connected with royal life and Meitei cultural identity. Binodini uses these ordinary practices to reconstruct the cultural world of Manipur before and around the Anglo-Manipuri War. Practices like visiting the temple as part of everyday life at the beginning of the novel, the royal women are shown going to the temple of Goddess Lairembi at Hiyangthang for prayer. Married princesses and their daughters travel to the temple on elephants or in palanquins. The important point is that Binodini does not give a long theological explanation of the worship. Instead, she presents going to the temple as an ordinary part of the women's lives. Here faith is expressed through physical movement, family participation, visiting sacred places and observing customary practices.

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Researchers have demonstrated that Manipur's cultural identity was significantly impacted by the adoption of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Vaishnava values were reflected in rituals, temple architecture, literature, classical dance traditions, Sankirtana performances, music, painting, festivals, and courtly manners. Vaishnavism eventually permeated Manipuri society's daily social customs rather than existing as a distinct religious organization.

Festivals as religious and social life, the novel refers to several Manipuri festivals. These festivals bring together the royal family, ordinary people, music, dance, clothing and religious observances like preparations for royal festivals involve: preparing special clothes for the king and princes, decorating elephants, gathering people from different villages, musical and dance performances, prayers and ceremonies. Therefore, a festival is not presented as something separate from ordinary life. It becomes a social event through which the whole community participates in religious culture.

Lai Haraoba and its cultural identity particularly Lai Haraoba is significant because it connects religion with Meitei cultural identity. Sanatombi questions Maxwell about the British restrictions on the festival. She explains its importance to him by comparing it to Christmas for the Meitei people (190). Maxwell eventually allows the festival to resume with its prayers and rituals unchanged.

Religion is also related to the lives of women. Sanatombi's involvement in temple worship and Raas Lila reflects the way in which women become active participants in religious culture rather than passive believers. At the same time, the expected behavior of women is shaped by religious and social customs. Sanatombi enters into married life and takes up the household activities such as cooking, cleaning and weaving.The way she went from being a princess to a housewife shows how cultural traditions, gender roles, and social norms all come together. In this novel, one of the most important ideas is how religious rituals relate to colonial power. The British presence in Manipur changed more than just the government. They also changed the people's religion and culture. The fact that Lai Haraoba was limited shows how colonial authorities can mess up native cultural practices. Sanatombi's answer makes it sound like the power to control rituals is also the power to control cultural identity. This is why religion in the novel has a political dimension: preserving a ritual becomes a way of preserving memory, community and belonging. Religion is shown rather than preached, a major strength of Binodini's technique is that she generally does not preach religion. Instead, she shows people performing it. For example:
Temple visits → prayer → festivals → dance → clothing → family participation → social customs. These practices make religion visible in daily life.

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The historical setting of Binodini's story is the decade preceding and following the Anglo Manipur conflict, which was a period marked by Hindu-centric values. Meitei Hindus combined Hinduism with ancient Meitei beliefs. Since the introduction of Hinduism in Manipur in the first part of the 18th century under the king-cum-religious reformer Garibaniwaza, the Meiteis had practiced a traditional type of Hinduism that places the monarch at its core. The idol of Govindaji was placed later, in 1776, under the reign of King Bhagyachandra, a devoted follower of Lord Krishna. As Lord Govindaji's trustee, King Bhagyachandra "devoted his kingdom to Lord Govindaji." (Kamei, 277). He himself composed the Ras Leela, which is a dance and musical performance used to glorify God. He was a major lover of art. Participating in the Ras Leela was considered a source of pride, good fortune, and a show of devotion to Lord Govindaji.

When the narrative is read against its cultural backdrop, which includes a native monarchy constrained by religion and a similarly conservative populace, as well as a violent, power-hungry colonial presence, its inward focus shows a female protagonist confronting tangled problems of patriarchy, colonialism, and selfhood. Greenblatt (2005, p. 12) argues that texts are cultural not merely because they refer to things beyond themselves, but because they have absorbed the norms and circumstances of their society. Binodini plays down Sanatombi's cultural setting to focus on her inner thoughts. To show how literature operates as one of a society's mechanisms of control, I will map out the Manipuri cultural framework, place Sanatombi within it, and argue that cultural context is built into the text rather than sitting outside it. Greenblatt (p. 13) adds that the relationship runs both ways: studying a culture deepens our understanding of the literature it produces, and reading that literature closely deepens our understanding of the culture.

Further historical studies show that Vaishnavism provided political legitimacy by giving a sacred dimension to the monarchy, thus presenting kings as the upholders of dharma and connoisseurs of devotion. Hence, political power and ethical principles became intertwined. Such sanctification of the king is relevant to Binodini Devi's novel where political decisions were often taken within a larger moral context inspired from Vaishnava principles. Anthropological studies also underline that Vaishnavism reformed domestic life by regulating food, marriage, and ritual, introducing ideals of purity and sexual differentiation. Fasting and festivities brought communities together, and Vaishnava plays created collective sentiments among the Vaishnava community beyond individual faith. These studies indicate that Vaishnavism was more a cultural system than a set of dogmas, yet few literary studies have tried to examine how these cultural practices were depicted in novels. Thus, the current study attempts to analyse

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the novel as a literary representation of Vaishnavism, with a view to filling up the gap between historical studies and literary criticism.

Recent trends in the field of religious studies have questioned the established understanding of religion as a set of doctrines and dogmas, institutionalized beliefs and rituals. The new approach views religion as something that happens within the everyday life of the people. This approach is often called as 'lived religion' or 'everyday religion'. Religion should be understood, argues Robert Orsi, as actually practiced by people in their day to day life milieu rather than as a set of doctrines or as a collection of institutions (pp. 3-9). Nancy T. Ammerman talks about exploring the 'taken-for-granted' aspects of religion and uncovering the meanings people make as part of their everyday life through stories, family rituals, feelings, etc. (pp. 4-7). The new approach questions the very premise of examining religion as just a set of beliefs and doctrines, dogmas and rituals, and opens up new vistas of understanding common domestic life, domestic rituals, family ties, professional ethics, language, etc., as part of religion.

Clifford Geertz's influential definition of religion as a cultural system provides particularly useful tools for literary analysis. Religion, according to Geertz, comprises symbolic forms that generate enduring moods and motivations as well as producing meaningful interpretations of reality (17). Religious symbols thus order not only ritual activity but also social behaviour, moral values and collective identity. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus throws additional light on the way religious values are embodied into dispositions through durable systems of perception and practice acquired in a particular cultural environment (pp.72-3). Religious practice thus becomes a matter of second nature, being performed through habitual actions rather than conscious theological reflection. This theoretical approach is especially productive for analysing Binodini Devi's narrative because Vaishnavism emerges frequently through ordinary behaviour rather than explicit religious instruction. Together, these theoretical approaches provide the conceptual framework for understanding Vaishnavism in The Princess and the Political Agent not simply as a religious institution but as embodied cultural practice that shapes everyday existence.

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By looking at the existing research there are three major bodies developed independently. Binodini Devi's ideas about history, feminist concern and portrayal of colonial politics. Researchers in the field of history and anthropology have written about how the influence of Vaishnavism changed Manipuri society. Reseaches come up with extensive theoretical models to help us understand the religion and how people practice it in everyday life. But these three discourses haven't been seen collectively in The Princess and the Political Agent. This paper fills the absent portion that is the integrated literary study that highlights Vaishnavism as a everyday cultural system. Existing criticism often focuses on the religion present within the novel but rarely but it rarely analyses that how religious values and practices are woven into every life, familial relationships, linguistic practices, ethical conduct, artistic traditions or political institutions.

As a result, contribution of Vaishnavism to the culture yet not sufficiently theorized. This study forms a bridge to understand it by combining literary criticism, cultural history and research on lived religion from various fields. This paper argues that Binodini Devi highlights the religion as the hidden language of everyday life, rather than just a historical Interpretation or dogmas. The most powerful depiction of this paper through its textual analysis that how ordinary actions can become powerful ways to protect collective memory, cultural identity and morals during the time of major political change. In this way paper adds the extended conversation about how literature, religion and cultural formation of identity in colonial South Asia were connected.

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