



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

IJDR

International Journal of Development Research

Vol. 15, Issue, 04, pp. 68176-68182, April, 2025

<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.29504.04.2025>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

MEMORY, GENDER, AND FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN M.K. BINODINI DEVI'S *TUNE*

Dr. Elangbam Hemanta Singh^{*1} and Rashmi Elangbam²

¹Head, Department of English & Research Guide (MU), Ideal Girls' College, Akampat, Imphal East, Manipur

²B.A (Hons.) English 4th Semester-2025, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 18th January, 2025

Received in revised form

20th February, 2025

Accepted 27th March, 2025

Published online 28th April, 2025

KeyWords:

Tune, M.K. Binodini, feminist resistance, gender performatives and postmemory

*Corresponding author:

Dr. Elangbam Hemanta Singh

ABSTRACT

The gendered limitations imposed on female artists in traditional Manipuri society are profoundly reflected in the short story, *Tune* by M.K. Binodini Devi. This article will examine the story from the perspectives of memory theory, gender theory, and feminist resistance, focussing on how *Tune* expresses the inner and outside challenges of a woman whose creative ambitions are suppressed by patriarchal norms. The protagonist of the story, Tampha Ibemba (Abok Ibemba), is a musically once talented woman who carries both inherited grief and personal longing, making her a site of cultural memory. The article will make the case that the protagonist's memories, especially those related to music, are influenced by both societal silences about women's creativity and familial inheritance, drawing on Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory. At the same time, Judith Butler's theory of gender performatives shows how the protagonist's identity is created by the repeating social roles that are placed on her as a mother-in-law, wife, and daughter. Her quest for self-expression clashes with these roles, highlighting the contradiction between one's own identity and socially acceptable gender performances. Additionally, the study will employ bell hooks' feminist resistance paradigm to emphasise the protagonist's small yet important forms of agency. Her need for music and the emotional upheaval it produces represent a psychological and symbolic challenge to patriarchal dominance, even though her resistance does not manifest as overt revolt. This paper will argue that *Tune* is a symbolic act of remembering, fighting, and reclaiming the repressed voices of women artists in Manipuri society, rather than merely a personal lament, through a thorough reading of the text enhanced by critical discussion on Binodini's collection of works. By doing this, it turns memory into a potent tool for feminist critique and may restore narrative space for women's experiences.

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Citation: Dr. Elangbam Hemanta Singh and Rashmi Elangbam, 2025. "Memory, Gender, and Feminist Resistance in M.K. Binodini Devi's *Tune*". *International Journal of Development Research*, 15, (04), 68176-68182.

INTRODUCTION

The people of Manipur referred to Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi (1922–2011) as "Sana Ibemba, or Her Highness, or, Imasi"¹ because she was the youngest daughter of Maharaj Sir Churachand Singh, the former ruler of the kingdom of Manipur (from September, 1891 to 1941)², and his queen, Maharani Dhanamanjuri Devi³. Her novels, short stories, radio dramas, film scripts, poems, and essays that critically analyse gender, culture, and history have made her a trailblazer in Manipuri literature. Imasi's contributions extend beyond literature, as she was also an advocate for women's rights and cultural preservation in Manipur. Through her work, she inspired generations, encouraging many to explore their own identities and engage deeply with their heritage. Her legacy continues to resonate, as contemporary writers and activists draw inspiration from her unwavering commitment to amplifying voices that have long been silenced. The impact of her work is evident in the vibrant literary scene of Manipur today, where discussions around gender and cultural identity remain at the forefront. These conversations not only honour her memory but also challenge prevailing narratives, fostering a community that values diversity and inclusivity.

As new talents emerge, they carry forward the torch she lit, ensuring that the struggle for recognition and representation remains a central theme in their storytelling. This ongoing dialogue inspires a generation of writers who seek to reflect the complexities of their identities and experiences. By embracing the richness of their heritage while addressing contemporary issues, they create a tapestry of voices that resonate far beyond the borders of Manipur. She offered a sophisticated feminist viewpoint on the challenges faced by Manipuri women by using her privileged position to criticise the very structures that restricted women. She was born into the royal family of Manipur. In 1979, she received the Sahitya Akademi Award for her seminal book *Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (1976). In 1976, she was also awarded the Padma Shri. Her son, L. Somi Roy, translated a few of her books into English, such as *Crimson Rainclouds* (2012). *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father* (2015), *The Princess and the Political Agent (Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi)*, and She has created screenplays for films including *My Son, My Precious* (1981) and *Ishanou* (1990). *Nunggairakta Chandramukhi* (A Chrysanthemum Grows in Gravel), a collection of 19 short stories, is thought to have been her debut book, and was published in 1965 (Roy, 2022: 30). In this context, L. Somi Roy

observed that “Manipur hailed a new writer of short stories” (Ibid, 30). Similarly, according to Nahakpam Aruna, “The stories in this book, graced with a distinctive beauty in their prose, introduced a good storyteller, with flair...used flash back techniques to vividly bring her scenes to life her readers” (Ibid, 30). In particular, her collections of short stories demonstrate a profound connection with topics of patriarchy, colonialism, and women’s autonomy. Her writings try to exhibit a specifically Manipuri feminist consciousness, fusing collective and personal memory to explain women’s experiences. Binodini, who is regarded as one of the most important writers in Manipuri literature, frequently examined the intricacies of gender, custom, and social transformation in the Manipuri setting. As stated by Ch. Manihar Singh, MK Binodini Devi doesn’t claim to be an idealist or prefer one to get sentimental but rather brushes close to feminine psychology with a deft hand that notes all the minute bubbles that a man can hardly feel and in a language that is soft and familiar, something both ordinary and extraordinary, close to the fireside gossip, leading away the whole creation, the quality of the feminine nature. Besides, the short story in her grip has developed a certain degree of maturity, shaking off the heaviness and wobble that characterised the writings of her predecessors. (2003:276-277)

Through its protagonist, Tampha Ibemba, a woman battling social restrictions on female creativity, M.K. Binodini’s *Tune*—a short story translated into English by Irom Babu Singh and originally published in *Contemporary Indian Short Stories—Series III* by Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1959, reprint 2016, pp.105-113—explores the complexities of gender, memory, and artistic aspirations. The narrative demonstrates how memory can be a source of resiliency as well as a weight, influencing the protagonist’s identity as an artist. The protagonist’s desire to sing a song is an act of rebellion against the patriarchal systems that govern women’s duties in Manipuri society, in addition to being a creative venture. The protagonist’s mental struggles and external constraints are the main emphasis of *Tune*’s intensely reflective narrative structure. Through a fractured, nearly stream-of-consciousness narrative style, Binodini Devi reinforces the psychological effects of patriarchal oppression while capturing the suffocating nature of societal expectations. The protagonist’s introspective recollections of her early years of music and artistic freedom, contrasted with the limitations placed upon her in the present, constitute a pivotal point in the narrative. Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory, which holds that past experiences continue to influence a person’s identity and resistance, is consistent with this use of memory as a narrative technique (Hirsch, 2008). According to the narrative, *Tune* is consistent with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performatives, which holds that women are compelled to conform to the fixed norms that limit their capacity for creativity (Butler, 1990).

A moving examination of the gendered challenges faced by female artists in Manipuri society can be found in *Tune*, one of M.K. Binodini’s most well-known short stories. Tampha Ibemba, a once celebrated singer, is at the heart of the narrative. Her artistic endeavours are continuously influenced by her family obligations and shifting cultural perceptions of traditional art forms. As the narrative illustrates, Tampha Ibemba’s great passion for music is juxtaposed with the duties of her roles as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. The narrative illustrates how Tampha Ibemba’s artistic aspirations are frequently eclipsed by her domestic chores, illustrating the gendered limits that women artists must manage within Manipuri society. The narrative explains, for example, how Tampha Ibemba’s daughter-in-law, Nupimacha, attends to her mother-in-law’s needs by encouraging her musical aspirations and assisting her with her appearance: “Being very busy, she did not have even time to do her hair.” She is also constantly consulted by her mother-in-law, “Nupimacha! Which chaddar will suit me?” (107). The story also examines the conflicts that exist between generations about Tampha Ibemba’s creative legacy, as her grandkids reject her “uncivilised” musical endeavours in favour of more contemporary pastimes. According to the text, “Her grandchildren talk about ping pong tournament, cycle race and hockey. She listens to them with a blank expression without anything striking her ears. Waves of tune start

surging her heart” (109). This comparison draws attention to how cultural norms and objectives have changed in society more broadly, undervaluing the work of female artists like Tampha Ibemba. Binodini’s subtle depiction of Tampha Ibemba’s hardships and tenacity makes *Tune* a potent critique of the gendered forces that have influenced women’s artistic lives in Manipuri culture throughout history and in the present. The narrative’s examination of these subjects has solidified Binodini Devi’s reputation as a pioneer in Manipuri literature, whose writings are still admired by both readers and academics.

Tampha Ibemba’s social and personal memory, as well as how this past shapes the protagonist’s gendered identity, are central to the tale of *Tune*. The collective memory of Tampha Ibemba’s family and community can be used to analyse how her experiences are mediated, drawing on Marianne Hirsch’s work on *The Generation of Postmemory* (2008). This is clear from the story’s many allusions to Tampha Ibemba’s distinguished musical career, like in the passage that reads, “Tampha Ibemba, the daughter of princess of a NaraSingh lineage was gifted by Providence not only with a sweet voice but also a beautiful appearance. As much as Tampha Ibemba was beautiful, people liked her voice and her beauty was greatly admired.” (106) As a woman artist, Tampha Ibemba’s identity and position in Manipuri society are shaped by these shared memories. Hirsch contends that although postmemory is “post,” it approximates memory in its affective force, which is “so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” of those who came after (2008: 107-109). The idea of memory also implies that Tampha Ibemba’s identity as a female artist is significantly influenced by the expectations and recollections that have been passed down through generations of her family and community. Tampha Ibemba’s steadfast dedication to her art, despite the obligations of family, throughout the narrative can be seen as a mode of feminist resistance that transgresses patriarchal structures that would inhibit her creative agency. Judith Butler’s gender theory also articulates that the performance of gender can be a site of subversion. Butler further argues, “The performative construction of gender within the material practices of culture, disputing the temporality of those explanations that would confuse “cause” with “result.” ” (1990:34). Tampha Ibemba’s insistence on keeping and playing music, despite her family’s indifference to her musical activities, is a subversive performance of gender that demonstrates resistance to the expectations society places on her as a woman. This is illustrated in the excerpt, where Tampha Ibemba responds to the question, “Where have you been dear?,” by reporting, “I went out to meet a few people, Abok Ibemba⁴, as many of the daughters-in-law have not learnt the music so far; they would come to learn from you” (109). Tampha Ibemba states, “I am not free at all. I am too busy with many engagements” to suggest that she has no intention of shirking her artistic obligations (109). This suggests Butler sees the performative construction of gender as a site of subversion and disruption of normative understandings of gender and sexuality (1990:34).

In both collective and individual memory, Tampha Ibemba’s legacy is questioned and the art is examined. According to bell hooks’ ideas of “sisterhood between women,” it is important for women to care for and respect each other’s unique humanity and life experiences while “unconditionally loving one another; that they were to avoid conflict and minimise disagreement; that they were not to criticise one another, especially in public” (hooks, 1984: 46). Tampha Ibemba’s musical endeavours are a mirror of her family’s and the community’s collective memory, as well as her memories as a woman artist in lived experiences. For a while, these directives created the appearance of togetherness by stifling competitiveness, antagonism, and constant disagreement. The story’s portrayal of the conflicts between generations over Tampha Ibemba’s creative legacy, like when her grandchildren write off her musical pursuits as “activities of your uncivilised time,” (107) emphasises the intricate relationship between personal and societal memory in determining the course of her artistic career. It also draws inspiration from the text’s discussion of the shortcomings of the modern feminist movement, which frequently fell short of elevating the realities of under-represented communities and

fostering transformational consciousness. An alternate strategy that opposes hierarchical gender dynamics and promotes "To build Sisterhood" (hooks, 1984:58) is provided by the idea of sisterhood, which fosters a cooperative, dialogical learning environment. Researchers can provide a complex and multidimensional understanding of how *Tune* addresses the links of gender, memory, and creative endeavour within the Manipuri cultural context by interacting with these theoretical frameworks: feminist resistance (hooks), gender theory (Butler), and memory theory (Hirsch).

The short tale, *Tune* by M.K. Binodini Devi, tells the narrative of a woman artist who fights against patriarchal norms in a way that is both socially relevant and intensely personal. It looks at three major scholarly fields that are pertinent to *Tune*. In the Manipuri socio-cultural context, it has examined its feminist relevance, the function of memory in recounting women's experiences, and the intricate relationships between gender and artistic suppression. The author has continuously underlined her responsibility to draw attention to the gendered challenges faced by women in Manipuri society. She was greatly impacted as a writer by both contemporary feminist ideas and traditional Manipuri culture. Because she depicts women's interiority and resistance in ways that subvert prevailing narratives, her paintings offer a unique feminist critique of Manipuri patriarchy. One school of thought has taken a feminist approach to studying Binodini Devi's work, placing *Tune* in the larger framework of her writings. The conflicts between a woman's artistic goals and the public expectations placed on her are depicted in the novel in a sophisticated manner. Some of M.K. Binodini's works, especially her short stories, have been translated into English. For example, *Tune* (1959) and *A Flower among the Rocks* (1996) (Nunggai-Rakta Chandramukhi), *Itamacha* (2004) (Imphal Turelgi Itamacha), and *A String of Beads* (Charik Pareng) (2007) highlight the marginalisation and gendered restrictions faced by women in Manipuri society, while also showcasing their tenacity and acts of resistance. The narrative's portrayal of Tampha Ibemba's steadfast dedication to her musical endeavours in spite of the demands of her familial obligations serves as an example of this: "performed the role of mother as *Sutmdhari*⁵ in *Rasas*⁶, *Jalakeli*⁷, and all that." She surprisingly paid attention to her husband's responsibilities and domestic chores on a daily basis. When she had free time—"pastime", she enjoyed playing music (107). The protagonist's wish to express herself artistically serves as a metaphor for women's fight for independence in the narrative. *Tune* is a prime example of how Binodini Devi's stories challenge the stereotype of women as helpless victims. bell hooks' theory that feminist resistance can take many forms, such as "understandings of power that are creative and life-affirming, definitions that equate power with the ability to act, with strength and ability, or with action that brings a sense of accomplishment," is reflected in the way her protagonist manages oppression through artistic creation. (1984:88–89).

In *Tune*, memory is essential since the protagonist's gendered identity is shaped by the intersection of her previous and present experiences. The "postmemory" hypothesis developed by Marianne Hirsch helps us understand how women's memories—particularly those passed down from previous generations—continue to influence their challenges and experiences. According to Hirsch, "postmemory" refers to the second generation's connection to significant, frequently horrific events that occurred before their births but were nonetheless ingrained in them so strongly that they appear to be memories in and of themselves (2008:103). The idea of "postmemory" is especially pertinent to comprehending how the traumas and experiences of earlier generations of women can be transmitted, and continue to influence the lives of women in later generations: "The result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation combined with structures of mediation that would be broadly appropriable, available, and indeed" (2008:115). The generation of postmemory and its reliance on photography as a primary medium of transgenerational transmission of trauma summarises Hirsch's theory, which emphasises how the memories, traumas, and struggles of earlier generations of women can have a significant impact on the lives and experiences of women in the present, even if they were not directly involved in those events. It

explores the function of gender as an idiom of remembrance and the role of the family as a place of transmission, identifying the tropes that most effectively mobilise the work of postmemory. (2008:103).

Memory functions on several levels in *Tune*. Though these recollections are sometimes clouded by pain and social repression, the protagonist remembers times when she was inspired to compose music. The story's examination of Tampha Ibemba's memories of her previous victories and the diminishing appreciation of her musical heritage makes this clear: "Waves of tune start surging her heart. / Hai hai ki haila ye sukha rajani..." (109). The story emphasises how Binodini uses memory as a political instrument in addition to a literary element, showing how patriarchal norms consistently impede women's creative ambitions: "My presence cannot be helped...since you have learned the music all through already," Her son, Madhumangol, proposes, "please be present tomorrow at the earliest opportunity and today remain at home as a kind of rest..." (112). According to trauma theory, it is not just an outcome of destruction but also, at its core, an enigma of surviving. This suggests that trauma is an "enigma of survival," the incomprehension of having survived a life-threatening experience. We can only acknowledge the legacy of incomprehensibility at the core of catastrophic experience if we see traumatic experience as a contradictory relationship between destructiveness and survival. (Caruth, 1996:58). A deeper cultural memory of Manipuri women's historical reliance is also shown in the protagonist's difficulties to participate in "*Rasas*, *Jalakeli*." It goes on to say that Binodini Devi's literature regularly incorporates societal recollections of loss and desire, so integrating personal tragedy into a larger feminist conversation. A recurrent issue in *Tune* is the repression of female artists in Manipuri society. Judith Butler contends that gender is not an intrinsic or stable identity but rather is performative, moulded by recurrent cultural practices and societal expectations. Butler further clarifies it that the linguistic measure of the political conflict between the sexes is gender. Since there are not two genders, gender is used in the singular here. The feminine, or "masculine," is the only one that does not belong to a gender, because the general is what is masculine, not the masculine. (1990:27). The cultural constraints around gender in *Tune* limit the protagonist's ability to freely occupy the space of an artist, preventing her from fully immersing herself in her artistic endeavour. The sentences from the story that follow make this clear:

Everywhere Tampha Ibemba, performed the role of mother, as Sutmdhari in Rasas, Jalakeli and all that. Surprisingly, she paid regular attention to household chores, the duties to her husband and when she was free from all these, music was her pastime. (107)

This quotation demonstrates how Tampha Ibemba's singing career is marginalised as a "pastime" in favour of her expected responsibilities as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law in the home. According to the narrative, Tampha Ibemba's cultural standards in Manipuri culture impose gendered expectations on her, which prevent her from completely immersing herself in her artistic production. This excerpt demonstrates how the story further examines the conflict between Tampha Ibemba's creative goals and the home duties she is required to perform:

Without confiding in anybody else, she kept concealed the agonies of her mind within herself. Sometimes, she would ask her grandsons and grand-daughters, 'Children! Don't you like to join dancing and singing?' Now the grandchildren snubbed her back, "Granny! those are activities of your uncivilised time and we hate them.... Better spend the money for visiting pictures than waste in such pursuits." (107)

This conversation demonstrates how Tampha Ibemba's difficulties in pursuing her artistic interests are made worse by the younger generation's rejection of them, which they perceive as "uncivilised." Since Tampha Ibemba's family does not appreciate or support her artistic legacy, cultural conventions and changing societal attitudes towards traditional art forms limit her ability to freely occupy the

space of an artist. With the use of these linguistic examples, the story *Tune* effectively illustrates how Tampha Ibemmma, the protagonist, is unable to reach her full artistic potential and freely express herself due to Manipuri traditional restrictions surrounding gender. The investigation of artistic suppression by Binodini Devi is consistent with more general feminist criticisms of gendered labour and creativity. In patriarchal societies that view artistic achievement as a male realm, feminist scholars have long maintained that women's artistic contributions are often marginalised or dismissed: "If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?" Gubar and Gilbert (1979:7). This is seen in *Tune*, as the protagonist's hardships represent the structural obstacles that keep women from reaching their full creative potential: "Granny! those are activities of your uncivilised time and we hate them.... Better spend the money for visiting pictures than waste in such pursuits." (107) Additionally, the story has highlighted how *Tune* subverts idealised ideas of creative brilliance that frequently marginalise women. By featuring a female heroine whose artistic aspirations are just as powerful as those of her male colleagues but remain unfulfilled because of gender based prejudice, Binodini's story challenges the stereotype of the man artist. The short tale, *Tune* by M.K. Binodini Devi examines the relationship between gender, memory, and artistic restriction in a profoundly introspective manner. The narrative challenges patriarchal restrictions on women's artistic ambitions from a feminist perspective. The protagonist's gendered identity constructs in large part through memory, and gender theory draws attention to the socio-cultural norms that restrict women's creative agency. In order to show how *Tune* articulates a complex web of oppression and resistance, this analysis integrates feminism, memory, and gender theories into the text's main themes, character development, and narrative structure.

Patriarchal cultures often stifle women's ingenuity by imposing them into household roles that restrict their ability to express themselves artistically, as Gilbert and Gubar contend in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They also contend that Freud's theories of male and female psychosexual development and Bloom's male-oriented theory of the "anxiety of influence" view women as "anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider" (1979:48). Similar to this, the protagonist's music in *Tune* is still an unrealised fantasy, signifying the structural social exclusion of women from artistic fields. Tampha Ibemmma, the protagonist of the story, can be viewed from a feminist standpoint as a symbol of the conflicts that exist between a woman's artistic goals and the expectations of society places on her. Tampha Ibemmma's family obligations act as a continual mediator of her unwavering dedication to her musical endeavours, as the narrative illustrates: "Everywhere Tampha Ibemmma, performed the role of mother, as Sutmdhari in Rasas, Jalakeli, and all that." She surprisingly paid attention to her husband's responsibilities and domestic chores on a regular basis. When she had free time, she enjoyed all these, music was her pastime." (107). The gendered limitations that women artists must deal with in Manipuri society are reflected in this portrayal. It is evident that the protagonist Tampha Ibemmma's battles to preserve her artistic identity while juggling household responsibilities are an example of feminist resistance that opposes the patriarchal systems that aim to restrict her artistic independence.

"Most women active in the feminist movement...are reluctant, even unwilling, to acknowledge that supporting capitalist patriarchy or even a non-sexist capitalist system...fears the loss of their material privilege... 'hard times have a remarkable way of opening your eyes,'" according to bell hooks' theory of feminist resistance. (1984:101) is applicable to *Tune* since the protagonist's desire for artistic expression turns into a defiant act. However, Tampha Ibemmma, the protagonist, is stuck in patriarchal restraints, demonstrating how deeply ingrained gender conventions stifle women's freedom, in contrast to typical feminist heroines who escape them:

Waves of tune start surging her heart. Hai hai ki haila ye sukha rajani...Tampha Ibemmma looked askance at her daughter-in-law to remind her that it was none of her business. She snapped back,

"I am not free at all. I am too busy with many engagements."
(109)

Another important component of the story is how memory shapes Tampha Ibemmma's identity and experiences. By using Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, it is possible to analyse how Tampha Ibemmma's family and community's collective memory significantly influenced her sense of self. "People say that her song had the warmth of pleasure of a cradle, sometimes producing excitement. It is also said that in the early hours of morning when the moon hides herself behind clusters of bamboos if she happened to hum a tune in her verandah, it appears as if the wind even stops to listen to her" (105-106). Nevertheless, the family has not shown any respect for Tampha Ibemmma's musical heritage. As a result, the protagonist experiences agony while simultaneously witnessing and surviving "massive historical trauma," and living as a child may serve as a kind of recompense for unimaginable "loss of...feeling of belonging." (Hirsch, 2008: 112)

According to the textual analysis of *Tune* through the lens of gender theory, specifically Judith Butler's performative subversions of gender, gender is a performative construct that is created and forced "of female and male, woman and man...within the binary frame" (1990:31) by recurrent social norms and regulatory practices rather than an intrinsic or stable identity. Within the framework of constructed identity, this conceptualisation of gender as performative creates opportunities for subversion and resistance: "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (1990:179). As the examination of the story of Tampha Ibemmma's negotiating of social expectations, it sheds more light on it. According to the story, Tampha Ibemmma displays a slight smile and visible indications of "apparent disapproval." Then she continues, "Where is it . . . let us examine it once. . . . Not so deep red, this one. . . . Nupimacha, are you sure that people will not laugh at this advanced age. ..." (108-109). Despite her daughter-in-law's urging, Tampha Ibemmma's reluctance to wear the "waist bands of different colours" might be seen as a performative act of defiance against the gendered conventions that limit her ability to express herself artistically, even as she ages.

The story's thematic examination of memory, gender, and artistic constraint is further enhanced by *Tune*'s narrative framework. A layered, non-linear temporality that illustrates the fragmented nature of memory and the ways in which the past continues to influence the present is produced by the use of flashbacks and the comparison of Tampha Ibemmma's former glory—"people liked her voice and greatly admired" (106)—with her current hardships. As demonstrated by the line "Granny! those are activities of your uncivilised time and we hate them...." (107), the story's emphasis on the conflicts between Tampha Ibemmma and her uninterested grandchildren in "music⁸" also comments on the larger cultural values and erasure of women's artistic contributions. Spending the money on "visiting pictures" is preferable to wasting it on pointless activities. (107). Scholars have shed light on the complex examination of Tampha Ibemmma's experiences and the broader socio-cultural framework in which she negotiates her artistic identity by incorporating feminism, memory, and gender theory into the textual analysis of *Tune*. This multidisciplinary approach adds to the larger academic conversation on how women's life and artistic endeavours are portrayed in Manipuri literature by providing a deeper understanding of the story's themes, character development, and narrative structure. The influence of memory on the protagonist's gendered identity and artistic goals is one of the main themes of M.K. Binodini's short story *Tune*. Important insights into the socio-cultural factors that have shaped Tampha Ibemmma's life and artistic endeavours are provided by the narrative's examination of her memories and the interaction between individual and collective memory. The protagonist's memories are intricately linked to the gender norms and societal conditioning that were ingrained in her from a young age. For example, the family's commitment to fostering Tampha Ibemmma's creative abilities is

evident in her memories of her early years, when her mother actively encouraged her to take part in palace performances. To allow her daughter to partake in these, the story says, “Her mother sponsored many *Rasas* and *Gour Lilas*⁹ at her house” (106). Tampha Ibemma’s identity as a female artist is shaped by this shared recollection of family encouragement and the acceptance of her skills by society.

The narrative does, however, also emphasise how Tampha Ibemma’s recollections are tainted by the limitations and expectations placed on her because of her gender. As can be seen from the story’s portrayal of Tampha Ibemma’s household duties and the contemptuous behaviour of her relatives, especially her daughter-in-law, Nupimacha mutters sorrowfully, “I cannot request her now not to go...Let father tell her” (111), grandchildren: “Tell grandma not to go...Dear me! Our grandma has already changed to a girl of fifteen with shampoo and cleansing dirts. If told now not to go she would certainly faint” (111), and even her elder son, Madhumangol: “Mother, my presence cannot be helped...today remain at home as a kind of rest” (111). Thus, the gendered constraints she has encountered in preserving her creative identity are reflected in her approach to her artistic endeavours. Tampha Ibemma’s contacts with her daughter-in-law, Nupimacha, who actively encourages her artistic endeavours but also observes her grandchildren’s lack of interest in her musical legacy, serve as an example of the text’s gendered limits. The manners in which Tampha Ibemma constructs and negotiates her artistic identity further demonstrate the interaction between individual and collective memory. The protagonist’s “sense of living connection” is significantly influenced by the “trauma, memory, and intergenerational acts of transfer” of her family and community, as suggested by Marianne Hirsch’s idea of postmemory (2008: 104). These elements are then internalised and become a part of her own lived reality. The story’s description of Tampha Ibemma’s illness as a kid serves as an example of this, as her instant reaction to the sound of music captures the enduring bond between her individual experiences and the shared recollection of her family’s support of her creative abilities:

The nurse carrying Tampha Ibemma on her back listened to the music standing on the corridor. As soon as the music started Tampha Ibemma became quite lively, made the nurse go to the place of the performance nudging every time and did not allow to return back till the end. After this her illness came round very quickly. (106)

Binodini Devi’s story demonstrates the subtle manners in which memory functions as a gendered construct by fusing Tampha Ibemma’s personal memories with the general public’s impressions of her as a female artist. Memory can both empower and confine people, especially women, in their pursuit of creative expression, as seen by the protagonist’s battle to maintain her artistic identity in the face of parental duties and the shifting cultural landscape. Nonetheless, the study of memory in *Tune* as a gendered construct provides a sophisticated understanding of the socio-cultural factors that have influenced Tampha Ibemma’s life and the ways in which her artistic identity is inseparable from the wants and needs and collective memories of her community and family. The protagonist, Tampha Ibemma, uses art, music, and memory to engage in feminist resistance in Binodini’s short story, *Tune* which provides a subtle critique of the patriarchal restriction of women’s creativity within Manipuri society. Tampha Ibemma’s relentless dedication to her musical endeavours, which are continuously mediated by the expectations of her familial obligations and the contemptuous attitudes of her younger family members, is the main source of conflict in the story. Tampha Ibemma’s household responsibilities frequently eclipse her artistic goals, highlighting the gendered limitations that women artists face in this cultural setting. Feminist resistance may be seen in the story’s portrayal of Tampha Ibemma’s battle to preserve her artistic identity in the face of these patriarchal forces.

Through performing and preserving her musical heritage, Tampha Ibemma fights against the patriarchal repression of her creativity. Tampha Ibemma was once a well-known singer whose voice could

enthral listeners, as the story tells. Even though her family doesn’t seem interested in her, she still performs in musicals at the age of “about seventy-five.” Tampha Ibemma’s resolute loyalty to her art, even in the face of societal indifference, represents a powerful act of resistance against the forces that seek to erase the contributions of women artists: “Tampha Ibemma was around fifty, *jhulon*¹⁰ will start from the next day. Tampha Ibemma took part as a *duhar*¹¹ in the music group of princesses. The music will continue for five days.” (108)

The story’s exploration of memory further underscores Tampha Ibemma’s feminist resistance. As Marianne Hirsch’s concept of Postmemory suggests, Tampha Ibemma’s sense of “the sweetness of her voice...a cradle” (105-106) is profoundly shaped by the collective memory of her family and community, which in turn informs her own artistic identity. The narrative’s frequent references to Tampha Ibemma’s past triumphs and the fading recognition of her musical legacy can be interpreted as a form of “inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience,” wherein the protagonist reclaims and preserves the stories of women artists that have been marginalized or forgotten (Hirsch, 2008: 104-106). Furthermore, it is possible to interpret Tampha Ibemma’s relationships with her daughter-in-law, Nupimacha, who actively encourages and supports her mother-in-law’s artistic endeavours, as an instance of feminist resistance and solidarity in the home:

Nupimacha coming in front of her mother-in-law’s bed addressed, “Abok Ibemma”...since I have already engaged the jeep of Ibochouba, would you also be pleased to go for the rehearsal for a few moments. I shall take care of the house...” “Well, do what you think best, I don’t dispute your decision.” (112-113)

As Judith Butler’s gender theory suggests, the performance of gender can be a site of subversion—which means “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (1990: 174) if so, Nupimacha’s actions can be interpreted as a subversive performance that challenges the patriarchal norms that aim to restrict Tampha Ibemma’s creative freedom.

M.K. Binodini’s short story, *Tune* presents a poignant exploration of the challenges faced by the female artist, Tampha Ibemma, in her struggle for creative agency within the male dominated society of Manipur. The narrative’s deft interweaving of memory further illuminates how the protagonist’s lived experiences are both shaped by and resist the oppressive forces that seek to constrain her artistic aspirations.

Tampha Ibemma’s unflinching commitment to her work, which is frequently undercut by the gendered demands put on her as a woman, is at the centre of the narrative. Tampha Ibemma’s musical abilities were fostered from an early age, as the story demonstrates, as her mother supported “many *Rasas* and *Gour Lilas* at her house to enable her daughter to participate in them” (106). However, as the text remarks: “Surprisingly, she paid regular attention to household chores, the duties to her husband, and when she was free from all these, music was her pastime,” Tampha Ibemma’s artistic endeavours were continuously mediated by her familial responsibilities, even as her fame as a singer grew (107).

The narrative’s exploration of memory further elucidates the ways in which Tampha Ibemma’s identity as a woman artist is shaped by both individual and collective recollections. The use of memory in the story allows for a deeper understanding of the intersections of gender, class, and cultural capital that have influenced Tampha Ibemma’s artistic trajectory. The protagonist’s vivid recollections of her childhood, such as the incident where her “illness came round very quickly” (106) after she was exposed to music, underscore how memory serves as a site of both “traumatic knowledge and

experience" (Hirsch, 2008:106) for the female artist. In fact, the wider social erasure of women's contributions to Manipuri culture is reflected in Tampha Ibemba's battle to maintain her creative legacy in the face of her uninterested grandchildren's rejection of "uncivilised" activities. "Her greatest worry is the three daughters-in-law" and the "eleven" grandchildren, "none of whom has the slightest predilection for music," the text eloquently illustrates. "None of them even hums" a song in the lavatory, to put it mildly. (107). Tampha Ibemba's tenacity and resolve to uphold her artistic identity are evident despite the limitations placed on her by her social and familial duties. The story's depiction of Tampha Ibemba's daughter-in-law, Nupimacha, who actively encourages and supports her musical endeavours, emphasises even more how the protagonist's agency is negotiated and regained in the home.

CONCLUSION

The short tale, *Tune* by M.K. Binodini Devi provides a deep and comprehensive assessment of the ways in which memory, gender, and feminist struggle intersect in the Manipuri socio-cultural setting. The story connects these thematic threads by depicting the protagonist, Tampha Ibemba, and her battles to preserve her artistic identity in the face of patriarchal limitations. This helps readers better comprehend the challenges faced by female artists in postcolonial and indigenous contexts. A key component of the story's narrative structure and thematic significance is its interaction with memory theory, as conceived by Marianne Hirsch's concept of Postmemory. This theory holds that the use of memory in the story enables a more thorough comprehension of the ways in which Tampha Ibemba's artistic trajectory has been impacted by the intersections of gender, class, and cultural hegemony. "She is Chongtham Ningol Tampha Ibemba, once famous throughout Manipur, throbbing each heart with the sweetness of her voice. People say that her song had the warmth of pleasure of a cradle"(105-106)—the narrative's frequent references to Tampha Ibemba's past victories and the diminishing recognition of her musical legacy highlight the ways in which individual and collective memory interact to construct her identity as a woman artist. Her music is said to have had the comforting joy of "a cradle".

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performatives, by analysing the story through gender and the performance of gendered identity sheds more light on Tampha Ibemba's defiance of social norms and her actions. Furthermore, her steadfast dedication to her musical endeavours in spite of the responsibilities of her family roles is an example of feminist resistance that opposes the patriarchal systems that aim to restrict her artistic liberty. The manner that Tampha Ibemba's relationships with her daughter-in-law, Nupimacha, are shown encouraging and understanding in the story emphasises how gender norms and expectations are negotiated and rejected in the home: "Well, do what you think best, I don't dispute your decision." (113) The narrative structure of *Tune* emphasises even more how memory, gender, and feminist resistance are interwoven. A layered, non-linear temporality that illustrates the fragmented nature of memory and the ways in which the past continues to influence the present is produced via the use of flashbacks and the juxtaposition of Tampha Ibemba's former victories with her current troubles. Furthermore, the emphasis of the story on the conflicts that arise between Tampha Ibemba and her uninterested grandchildren across generations, "none of whom has the slightest predilection for music," is a statement on the wider cultural values that are changing in society and the erasing of women's artistic gifts and "treasures":

As much as Tampha Ibemba was beautiful, people liked her voice and her beauty was greatly admired. Talent and affection are the chief treasures of an artist....But her greatest worry is the three daughters-in-law and the grandsons and the granddaughters numbering eleven, none of whom has the slightest predilection for music. To say the least, none of them even hums a tune in the bathroom. Without confiding in anybody else, she kept concealed the agonies of her mind with in herself. (106-107)

The representation of women's experiences in Manipuri writing and the feminist discourse have benefited greatly from Binodini's works, especially *Tune*. As we discover, the story's depiction of Tampha Ibemba's struggles reflects the ongoing exclusion and lack of acknowledgement that women artists in Manipuri society have experienced throughout history and continue to do so today. Binodini Devi's stories have been helpful in elevating the voices of individuals who have been historically under-represented and marginalised by shedding light on the gendered limitations and the tenacity of female artists:

People say that her song had the warmth of pleasure of a cradle, sometimes producing excitement. It is also said that in the early hours of morning when the moon hides herself behind clusters of bamboo if she happened to hum a tune in her verandah, it appears as if the wind even stops to listen her. (105-106)

As demonstrated by the short story, *Tune*, there is a great deal of room and promise for more study on women's artistic challenges in postcolonial and indigenous contexts. By investigating how these themes are handled and portrayed in the literary and cultural output of other marginalised communities, scholars can go further into the intersections of gender, memory, and artistic expression. Furthermore, contrasting Binodini Devi's work with the accounts of female artists from other postcolonial and indigenous contexts may provide important new perspectives on the communities and resistance tactics of these artistic voices. M.K. Binodini Devi's short story, *Tune* intricately weaves themes of memory, gender, and feminist resistance into a narrative that challenges societal norms and highlights the power of personal and collective recollection. Set against the backdrop of Manipuri society, Devi's tale delves into the ways in which memory serves as a tool for resisting patriarchal constraints and asserting female agency. In *Tune*, memory is portrayed as a dynamic force that enables women to reclaim their identities and histories. Devi uses her protagonist to illustrate how individual and collective memories can subvert the dominant narratives imposed by a patriarchal society. The protagonist's recollections of past experiences and ancestral tales become a source of strength and inspiration, guiding her journey towards self-empowerment. This narrative strategy underscores the feminist notion that memory is not merely a passive repository of the past but an active agent in shaping the present and future.

Gender plays a central role in *Tune*, serving as both a site of oppression and a catalyst for resistance. Binodini's portrayal of her female characters reflects a nuanced understanding of the ways in which societal gender norms can confine and define women's lives. However, the story also emphasizes the potential for subversion and transformation. Through acts of remembrance and storytelling, the female characters—Tampha Ibemba and her daughter-in-law, Nupimacha—in *Tune* resist the limitations imposed upon them and carve out spaces for autonomy and expression. This aligns with feminist ideals that advocate for the dismantling of oppressive structures and the reclamation of voice and agency. Feminist resistance in *Tune* is intricately linked to the act of remembering and narrating. Binodini employs a narrative style that foregrounds the power of storytelling as a means of challenging patriarchal authority. By centering women's experiences and voices, the story becomes an act of defiance against a culture that often marginalizes and silences them. The protagonist's (Tampha Ibemba) journey is emblematic of a broader feminist struggle, where personal memories become a collective force for social change.

M.K. Binodini Devi's *Tune* stands as a powerful testament to the ways in which memory, gender, and feminist resistance can be woven together to elucidate the complex lived experiences of women artists in postcolonial and indigenous contexts. Through its nuanced portrayal of Tampha Ibemba's struggles and resilience, the story adds to the larger feminist discourse and the continuous attempts to recover the stories of those who have been historically marginalised and silenced. In other words, it is a profound exploration of how memory, gender, and feminist resistance intersect to challenge and

transform societal structures. Through her narrative, she illustrates the potential of memory as a tool for empowerment and the importance of reclaiming one's story in the face of oppression. This short story not only reflects the struggles of women in Manipuri society but also resonates with broader feminist discourses on the significance of memory and resistance to fight for gender equality.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Roy, L. Somi. *Makers of Indian Literature: M.K. Binodini Devi*. Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2022.
2. *Know Manipur Volume-I, The Director, State Council of Educational Research and Training Government of Manipur*, Imphal, 2025, pp. 28-40.
3. Binodini. *The Princess and the Political Agent*. (Trans. L. Somi Roy) Penguin, 2020
4. Abok Ibemba (Tampah Ibemba)—this is how a high caste mother-in-law of the royal lineage is addressed by her daughters-in-law, grandchildren and other people
5. Sutmdhari—a woman who sings the lead songs in a religious performance
6. Rasas—a dance depicting the dance of Radha and Lord Krishna
7. Jalakeli—a musical performance in summer days where Lord Krishna's antics in water are described
8. Music—a religious song with musical performance of Rasa, Jalakeli, Jayadev, nama pala, Gour Lilas, Basaka, Jhulon
9. Gour Lilas—a musical opera based on the life of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu
10. Jhulon—a musical and religious performance, describing Lord Krishna and Radha.
11. Duhar—the second most important singer in a religious performance

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