

Henjunaha, masculinity redefined

By - Rubani Yumkhaibam

One of the memorable commercials from the very recent times is Gillette's campaign against toxic masculinity that oppressively propagates the thesis, 'men will be men'. In the new vision, men are encouraged to be "The Best a Man Can Be", which is to be interpreted as the need for a man to come to terms with his nurturing side. In the dominant practices of toxic masculinity, a few men are ridiculed and castigated for showing the emotional side; such men are encouraged to be men in a violent and exaggerated manner, such as the display of physical strength, dominance over women and denouncing of weak/sissy men for being vulnerable to feelings. Toxic masculinity is a culmination of hegemonic masculinity that encourages men to establish and legitimate male perspectives as the dominant structure, which leads to subordination of women and censoring of marginal masculinities (generally considered as "weaker" forms of manhood). How far a commercial that is destined for the market could help in changing the structured consciousness of our society is debatable. That advertising appropriates the marginal struggle for selling its products is not a new awareness. Artifacts proliferate, and so commercial houses are looking for new themes and ideas to script their products. Let us relax the critical cap for a while and appreciate Gillette for dealing with a very pertinent issue that has got a wider attention only in the recent times. Undoubtedly, women suffer from the endorsed culture of toxic

masculinity, but the toll on men to cultivate the aggression is, among other things, psychologically damaging. In one of the astringent assessments of the regime of masculinity, bell hooks wrote, "The first violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill of the emotional part of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem." It is also true that men who do not embody the scheme of dominant masculinity do exist; however, how does society assess such men? In other words, what is the fate of marginal masculinities? The story of Henjunaha, a popular folk narrative, opens up a perspective on redefining masculinity within a culture that celebrates the dominant understanding of being a man – men fight, men initiate, men are emotionally strong, men act, men are nonchalant, and so forth.

The erstwhile kingdom of Moirang, blessed and protected by the abundance of Lord Thangjing, is abound in numerous legends and romances; it is the abode of the splendid *Moirang Kangleirol* that has fascinated story tellers and story seekers all through the luxurious folk repository of Manipur. The legend of Henjunaha is one such narrative of romance, love and reincarnation, the mysterious play of the immortals, and above all a crucial glimpse into an alternate masculinity of a male who desires and loves. The

reading of Henjunaha in this article is based on four sources – Rhythms of Manipur's performance 'Henjunaha' (2017), Pupu's Folktales 'Henjunaha' (2019), James Oinam's rendering of K. B Sharma's 'Henjunaha' (2019 [2010]), and various oral versions of Henjunaha narrated by my older acquaintances.

Henjunaha is introduced to us as an orphaned boy. The circumstance under which his father dies leads his mother, Khoidom, to protect Henjunaha from all possible perils, which also implied a very sheltered life for Henjunaha. (Henjunaha's father died of Lord Thangjing's curse after the former inadvertently tried to cut down a tree that embodied the spirit of Thangjing.) Although poor, he is never let to struggle with deprivations. Khoidom performs all the tasks required for maintaining the household, such as collecting firewood from the forest, catching fish from the lakes, and such other things, while Henjunaha looks after the house in her mother's absence. It is a domesticated life for Henjunaha. He is constantly warned by Khoidom against venturing into the nearby forest. When Henjunaha grows up he wants to help his mother; however Khoidom is reluctant to let his son go out in the world and expose himself to the lurking danger. Henjunaha's fragile character does not allow him to outrightly contradict his mother. On the contrary, he expresses his wish that if his mother does not allow him to work, he will fast and inflict pain upon himself, which shows that he does not use force and rebellion to win over his mother. Rather, Henjunaha is willing to reprimand himself for not helping his mother.

Henjunaha's diffident character is revealed in his encounter with Lairoulembi, the romantic heroine of the story. Through this romantic plot we are led into Henjunaha's interior world of monologues, reveries, love of women – he is motherly love or the romantic love of a fellow woman. Henjunaha and Lairoulembi fall in love with one another at the first sight. Lairoulembi is smitten by the beautiful youth sailing on the waves of Laihali River, while Henjunaha falls for the goddess like beauty. The meeting is interesting for the implied romantic tension and the play of female desire and gaze on Henjunaha as an object of love. Lairoulembi's bold gaze encourages Henjunaha to concede the messages of love as much as the latter does. However, Henjunaha does not exercise the masculine drama of a dominant romantic hero. In the romantic tradition of love and courtship, the male romantic is the driving force of the proceedings of love; in this manner he initiates, he directs, and he propels the wheel of love in the romantic plot. However, this tenor of romantic hero is displaced in the Henjunaha/Lairoulembi encounter. Henjunaha is not forward with confessions of love even as he loves the woman. Henjunaha is rather a feminised hero who ruminates on the outcomes of a romantic confession; Henjunaha's greatest fear is that Lairoulembi might decline his love, and he is not afraid of voicing this anxiety. More importantly, Henjunaha is not impressed upon by the mediated belief that a woman must respond to a man's confessions of love under any circumstances.

Henjunaha's ability to reflect and think about Lairoulembi's position differentiates him from the army of romantic heroes who aggressively seek. It is remarkable that Henjunaha mulls over the possible rumour that could be created if he approached Lairoulembi on his own motif exclusively. His silence carves him into the realm of pathos that does not fare well with male aggression. His fragility and hesitation are indeed a counter to the action and assailing of toxic masculinity that lead to violent coercion on women.

The highest expression of a marred masculine pride is found in abduction of women, nupi faba, in the name of mad love. Love is no justification for abduction. The idealised concept of romantic love involving a highly sexualised male lover (who shows aggression when deprived) and a passive female beloved, is not free of sexual violence inflicted on women. Society considers such men as nupa thokpa, a nefarious construct that accelerates men into freely exercising sexism and misogyny as the marks of a brave man. Abduction of women in the name of love is an imposition of coercive masculine force at the cost of contravening the female agency. If one looks at it closely, there is nothing heroic or affectionate about this glorified abduction. It is rather a neurotic response of a man who has not been informed of the culture of consent. A feeling and a thinking hero like Henjunaha waits for the consent from the woman. In fact Henjunaha does not live in the concrete world of male physical valour and exploits, he is a man of feelings and subjectivities.

Moreover, Henjunaha's romantic plot does not incorporate the connotation of the male service to the female romantic. In the patriarchal paradigm, love both romantic and Platonic is a gendered construct. Love is an opportunity for a man to show his masculine power and privileges, which is painted as a civic virtue and a personal statement to which women are expected to genuflect. Physical strength, the well-formed muscles of a warrior like man in full display, sexual domination over the woman and good lineage are liked in the stereotype of a heroic romantic hero. Khamba's harnessing of a mad cow, an archetypal cultural imaginary of bravery, is linked to his romantic capability - the hero as physically brave, chivalrous man and hence a good mate. In this well-structured construct of what is romantic and who is romantic, the figure of the female beloved becomes an object of male heroism. Her presence and beauty are designed as a secondary plot to the teleology of the hero's journey towards masculinity. Let's take the example of the duels men fought in the romances of the Medieval French literature, or the emaciated, not emaculated, poets of the courtly love poems in Renaissance England, the poems are nevertheless filled with combative imageries and hidden sexual violation of the love-object, the woman, or take the example of non-romantic James Bond who plays with his own life for Her Majesty (although in absence of perfectly cut tuxedo suits, Rolex watches, outrageous gadgets and the bevy of beauties, Bond's career as a spy is adequately bleak. It is also perplexing that nobody can successfully ambush him). They all use the love of a woman as a driving force of their masculine valour, while in reality it is not love per se, it is the cultural justification for heroism, and such show of valour is also carried out in the public space. Many have used women as a tool of conquest and wars. Troy did not fall for Helen, it was Agamemnon's lust for power and wealth that made the Greeks waged a self-righteous war against Asia Minor. Masculinity is a public text and so it has to get its testimonial in the public space – war, marriage, parenthood, male guardianship, symbols that involve male fertility and female submission.

Henjunaha's romantic exploits are very private. He is not an embellished hero - Henjunaha does not have the heroic lineage of Khamba (who is the son of Purenba); he does not have wealth and titles, he belongs to the working class; and he is brought up and mentored by a woman single handedly. It follows that Henjunaha

defies the symbols that constitute a romantic male who is destined to be heroic. He is an everyday iconoclast. The private domain of his love for Lairoulembi is also synchronised in the way he dies an uneventful death, he dies at the door of his lover. One should also not miss the bold love and decisions of Lairoulembi who defies the paternal authority for the sake of love, an intimate private sphere of personal freedom and choice. Let it be noted that the material world of Henjunaha is populated with paternal/male figures – Lord Thangjing, Henjunaha's father, the king of Moirang, and Lairoulembi's father. While all might be fair in love and war, defiance is a political tool that survives one beyond death. Defiance is freedom, and freedom is inherent in the soul and the very constitution of being a human being. It is human nature to desire freedom, although we have been re-engineered to control it and tame it. Civilization is the truest discontent. Freedom cannot be fundamentally given as a right or law, it is embodied and exercised as human nature, and so brave humans have to wrench it from the authority. Lairoulembi's defiance is her triumph as a human being and more fundamentally as a woman of agency.

The romantic motif of the legend of Henjunaha is woven into the gore of Lamta Thangja, the night of Saroi Ngarois. The Sarois are the malignant spirits; their dreadful nature and killings are ingrained in the cultural dread of Lamta Thangja. Lamta Thangja stands in staggering contrast to Henjunaha's personality – a man of feelings and interiority. Sarois are a destructive force often visualised alongside the fear of the dark. The manner in which they overtake Henjunaha speaks of the world Henjunaha does not embrace. That Henjunaha cannot run fast enough to save his life is also a question on how far his alternate masculinity can survive in the world dominated by evil spirits and toxic manhood. The staff Henjunaha uses to protect himself from sarois is a symbol of male inheritance. It is a gift to his father from the king of Moirang. However, Henjunaha ultimately loses the staff, thereby completely severing himself from any association with the male nexus. And the moment he loses the staff, he is killed. The staff is an interesting symbol of competing male authorities in the story of Henjunaha. The disarming of Henjunaha is not just about the triumph of the Sarois, it is also a symbol of the father's transgression in trying to dedicate a tree to the king thereby provoking the divine ire. The miraculous staff is no use in the presence of fate and the voracious Sarois. The world is a reflection of the divine will and we humans do not have much to claim. Here we see competing worlds within which Henjunaha's subjective world and alternate masculinity are examined. The weaving of the romantic motif and the terror of Lamta Thangja is thus a narrative tour de force that both dramatises and symbolises Henjunaha's redefinition of masculinity.

What makes Henjunaha a hero of the passive world? Khoidom's upbringing of Henjunaha is responsible for the man he grows up to be. However, would Khoidom bring up Henjunaha differently in a different turn of events? The question reflects on how parents and social institutions encourage boys to be tough, manly and competitive alongside a full license to exploit every corner of the society. Such boys grow up sans the understanding of respect, consent, and human limitations. The family and society have bartered away justice and humility in exchange for toxic/hegemonic manhood, and one can say that it is the longest oppressive cultural

exchange in the history of the humans. Often marginal masculinity is not consciously taught, it comes across as a defect. And those embodying it are called 'weak' and 'effeminate'. It is in the way boys are brought up that creates violent masculinity – don't cry, don't fall, always fight back. This belligerent culture has forced men into suppressing the ability and desire to feel, to cry, to be vulnerable. This is a psychological war patriarchy wages against men in its anxiety to produce powerful nations, triumphant wars, domineering guardians, authoritative fathers and brothers, manly (read controlling) husbands. The damaging effects of such a cultural onslaught are often explored in the anti-war literature, those wars that instigate men to prove their manly prowess. We often come across the image of a young man lying in the trench, lying in ambush reflecting on the futility the twin horrors of war and masculinity create, and the crippling hopelessness they have to go through in the line of fire. The emptiness of war and the false promises of masculine redemption are acutely depicted by Status Quo in a very popular anti-war song, "In the Army Now" – "You'll be the hero of the neighbourhood/Nobody knows that you've left for good/Smiling faces as you wait to land/But once you get there no one gives a damn." The only certainty is death. War and masculinity are indifferent, cold, cynical and frustrating. Men have to rebel against the imposition of heroism that only serves to dehumanise them. Centuries of cultural learning have trained men to behave in a particular way; however, it should not be a matter of pride for men to justify their toxic actions in this manner, it is pseudo-science.

Henjunaha is not to be considered as a lesser hero, nor are we interested in claiming him as a 'strong male'. Men have to embrace weakness. Henjunaha is not unloved by Lord Thangjing in the end. Lord Thangjing and his consort bless Henjunaha/Lairoulembi to be reincarnated into another love or romance in the figure of Kadeng Thangja Hanba and Tonu Laajing Lembi, a classic tale of love and longing in the Manipuri literature. Henjunaha and Lairoulembi are the cycle of regeneration and rebirth. Henjunaha is a hero most men fear – his fragility, feelings and emotional dependence on Lairoulembi are a synchronised action of true courage. We can hope that there is a Henjunaha in every man, but one has to acknowledge it and act on it. While all other masculine men are hiding for the fear of sarois, Henjunaha overcomes the mortal fear. It is a personal journey of love and empathy, not a journey to prove dominance and false heroism. It is also crucial to resist the temptation to cast Henjunaha as a heterosexual hero exclusively. His masculinity is a paradigm for all the oppressed people under the male dominance. This includes freeing love and romance from the constraints of conventional gender and eroticism. Nonetheless, we have to ask why Henjunaha has to die and why the marginal masculinity mostly lives in the realm of legend. Are men of today willing to resist the breeding of toxic masculinity? Are they willing to venture into the political project of reclaiming marginal masculinities? Briefly, are men willing to resist the heinous crimes of patriarchy? The world will not necessarily change if you shove with Gillette razors, but your willingness for a revolution towards the best you can be, that is the ability to be humane and empathise with others, will be a vital step towards the change.

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When the man is silent

By- Dr Nunglekpam Premi Devi
Independent Scholar

When the man is silent; he wants something;
When the man is silent; he wants to say lots;
When the man is silent; he expects things;
When the man is silent; he expects more unnoticed;
When the man is silent; he's crazy hunting;
When the man is silent; he speaks within;
When the man is silent; he knows something odd;
When the man is silent; he's becoming wild within self;
When the man is silent; he's thousand heads;
When the man is silent; he's violent and damaging within;
When the man is silent; he tries focusing on ventures;
When the man is silent; he's in himself a lone Ranger;
When the man is silent; he prefers an individual mode travels;
When the man is silent; he's an individual warrior.

When the man is silent; he designed desires;
When the man is silent; he elaborates his feelings;
When the man is silent; he's bound to know about him back;
When the man is silent; he eagerly awaits answer;
When the man is silent; he conquers his woman;
When the man is silent; he cuts every single personal;
When the man is silent; he wants other to know him;
When the man is silent; he has too many queries;
When the man is silent; he tries manages worshipping 'mother';
When the man is silent; his eyes and ears all seeing active;
When the man is silent; he dangers every unfaithful souls;
When the man is silent; his passions so privately reserve;
When the man is silent; his privacy is golden.

When the man is silent; he hates being group;
When the man is silent; he truly pressure woman to be with;
When the man is silent; he is aggressively aggressive;
When the man is silent; he provokes her woman to understand;
When the man is silent; his love for 'her' woman's is cosmic nine;
When the man is silent; he gathers thousands strength;
When the man is silent; he orders an order a killing eye;
When the man is silent; he step million steps back forward;
When the man is silent; he tries building his empire;
When the man is silent; he doesn't even trust his own right;
When the man is silent; he heals his egos passionately.

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