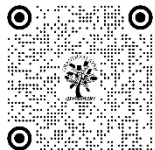# BEYOND DOMESTICITY AND WOMEN'S AGENCY IN MANIPURI CINEMA: AN ANALYSIS OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN ARIBAM SYAM'S FILM

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ABSTRACT

The representation of women in cinema has been a longstanding concern in the field of cinema studies. Historically, female characters have often been relegated to submissive and domestic roles on screen. However, recent years have witnessed a significant shift in the portrayal of women in cinema, with an increasing number of films depicting female characters in active, occupational, and self-determining roles. This article delves into this transformative narrative trend by focusing on two Manipuri films, *Imagi Ningthem* (1981) and *Ishanou* (1990), directed by Aribam Syam Sharma. These films feature resilient female protagonists who challenge and defy the traditional domestic roles assigned to women in cinematic narratives. Using textual analysis, this article explores the nuanced portrayal of these female characters and the agency they exhibit in shaping their destinies. Drawing from the framework of feminist film theory, this study critically examines how these characters navigate societal expectations and patriarchal norms within the context of their narratives. The films serve as compelling narratives that shed light on the evolving representation of female agency in cinema where women character challenges conventional gender roles and offer a fresh perspective on women's identity within the cinematic realm. By interrogating the textual and societal dimensions of these films, this study gives a broader discourse on gender representation in cinema and highlights the importance of female agency in shaping contemporary narratives.

Keywords: Manipuri Film, Agency, Women, Representation, Domesticity

1. INTRODUCTION

In feminist discourse, the historiography of gender suggests that the concept of domesticity is a reflection of deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and societal expectations. Domesticity is the conventional role assigned to women within the home, where they are expected to bear the responsibilities of caregiving, homemaking, and childrearing. These roles and the hegemonic gender expectations of women in patriarchal societies are socially constructed and manifested within the values of social relations Giles (1993). Historically, such domestic roles have denied women opportunities and relegated them to passive and subordinate positions

within the patriarchal structure of society. The traditional gender role of women as the primary homemaker, responsible for taking care of everyone in the family and confined to the home, is also legitimized by the "new cultural logic," in which the ideals of the "good housewife" and the "ideal mother" are the normative values Banerjee (2010), p.462. It was only with the advent of modernity in the early 1900s that the term "housewife" began to emerge, creating a collective identity for a homogenous group of women who could be collectively addressed as having common interests. These common interests primarily revolved around the role of being the principal caretaker of the family, often necessitating the abandonment of personal aspirations for the greater good of the family. This historical development marked a significant shift in societal expectations and gender roles, as women were increasingly defined by their domestic duties and their roles as primary caregivers within the family structure. The emergence of this "housewife" identity not only shaped the lived experiences of women but also had far-reaching implications for their agency and opportunities in the context of evolving modern societies.

Around the same time when the terminology of 'housewife' becomes more recognized, there is a burgeoning proliferation of mass media that is getting permeated with cultural signification. One of the mass media that has a major influence in creating the signification of cultural codes is cinema, where the images of women are ubiquitously seen in the role of housewives. In cinema, most women are relegated to domestic roles and are assigned archetypal motherly characters Datta (2000). These characters are often portrayed as selfless, nurturing, and sacrificing their own needs for the sake of their families, especially the male members, be it the husband or the son. Thus, limiting the identity of a woman to a one-dimensional image. Such pervasive representation of women positions them in a male-centric paradigm where patriarchal values manifest in various forms, such as women being confined to the domestic space and relegated to subordinate roles Chakrapani & Kumar (1994). The ascription of positions on women, where everyone is expected to conform to this value system, is derivative of the "traditional societal roles and power inequalities between men and women" Prentice & Carranza (2002), p. 1. As such, the representation of women in cinema has been a contentious issue for feminist scholars who argue that such stereotyping of female characters in cultural products, such as cinema, reduces women to mere objects without any subjectivities.

According to feminist scholars, women are annihilated from the image of media, especially in cinema, from actively participating in social or political discourse. Their image has been reduced to passive and docile characters not capable of any professional roles but only capable of domestic activities. They are usually framed as negatively feminine, where such stereotypical attributes have anchored them with no ability to take up active and leadership roles Carlin & Winfrey (2009). However, over the period, there has been a positive change in the portrayal of women in cinema where the depiction has broken stereotypes by assigning women to more active roles in which their characters play a significant part in the plot of the narratives. In this context, this paper aims for a nuanced exploration of the representation of Manipuri women within the select cinematic oeuvre of Aribam Syam Sharma. Manipuri women, renowned for their active engagement in both civil and political life, emerge as a striking paradox to these established stereotypes.

2. WOMEN AGENCY IN FILM

The emergence of the second wave of feminism during the 1960s and 1970s initiated a significant discourse concerning the representation of women in the

realm of cinema. This period saw a critical engagement with the problematic portrayal of women in film, where they were often confined to one-dimensional roles that reinforced conventional gender norms deeply rooted in patriarchal values. Feminist film theorists took centre stage in questioning and deconstructing these established paradigms. The prevailing practice of pigeonholing women into passive and domestic characters came under fundamental scrutiny with the rise of feminism. Scholars like Laura Mulvey articulated the notion that cinema, as a medium, had been traditionally oriented toward the visual pleasure of a male audience, reducing women to objects of desire within the framework of patriarchal values. Mulvey's ground-breaking concept of the "male gaze" sheds light on the inherently patriarchal nature of image-making in cinema Mulvey (1975). This gaze, she argued, had a profound influence on how women were both portrayed and perceived on screen. Concurrently, other feminist scholars and activists called for increased female participation in the creation of cinematic images. They highlighted the need for greater representation of women both in front of and behind the camera. New meanings from women's cinema can challenge the male-dominated film industry which manufactures stereotyped images of women Johnston (2014).

However, the cinematic landscape has witnessed a noticeable shift in the representation of women. More female characters are now portrayed as active participants in the narratives, showcasing a growing sense of agency among women in cinema. Women's agency is the capacity to challenge conventional traditional roles ascribed to them by the patriarchal values by which women claim their voice and choice independently Broude & Garrard (2005). Such transformation in female characters has gradually challenged the dominant cinematic narrative by depicting women as independent, empowered individuals capable of making their own choices and shaping their destinies. This represents a significant departure from the traditional, docile roles assigned to women in film. Thus, contributing to a more inclusive, diverse, and nuanced portrayal of women's experiences and subjectivities on screen. In recent years, there has been a notable shift in the portrayal of gender within cinematic narratives, challenging established norms and disrupting conventional patriarchal perspectives of female characters Petrescu (2020). This transformation has given rise to a new archetype of women, characterized by their confidence and self-empowerment, as they assert their agency in various ways.

One prominent facet of this shift is the subversion of traditional gender stereotypes, particularly in the realm of interpersonal relationships depicted on screen. Historically, female characters were often confined to roles centred around family and romance. However, contemporary cinema has introduced nuanced changes in the portrayal of these relationships. Friendship, for instance, has taken precedence over familial and romantic ties in emerging films. Even when family and romance remain central themes, the representation of female characters no longer implies that these are their sole purposes within the narrative Mastrocola (2020). Beyond the evolution of interpersonal relationships, there is a discernible trend in cinema towards depicting women as a vital workforce contributing actively to the economies of society. This departure from the traditional roles of wives and mothers, confined to domesticity, is evident in the emerging portrayal of women as dynamic, autonomous contributors to the workforce. These women are depicted as model workers, enjoying a sense of autonomy and self-determination in their professional lives Williams (2015). These changes in the portrayal of women as self-determined individuals are reflected in multifaceted ways in recent films. They represent a concerted effort to challenge culturally entrenched notions of women's roles being confined to the domestic sphere. In contemporary society, the conception of women is evolving as they assert their agency within cinematic

narratives. They are actively challenging and negotiating traditional family values, particularly the mother-child dynamic, in the domestic space. This shift reflects a broader societal transformation in which women are increasingly pursuing lives outside the confines of traditional marriage values and norms Makoveeva (2017).

Women who are portrayed as "strong characters" in the film are usually considered to be an individual who has agency. These characters are defined by their capabilities to assert themselves in the narrative rather than being a passive plot device in the film. However, such "strong female characters" are also perceived to be those characters that exhibit the usual trope of "traditional masculinity" along with being feminine at the same time Westeren (2020), p.5. Besides being represented as a strong character and contesting the patriarchal paradigm, women's agency in film is also exhibited by the relationship between the character and the dominant culture. In some films, women's pursuit of their freedom and choice is defined by the social conditions in which they live and when women reject such structured social structures and environments, their agency is reclaimed Peshkopia et al. (2012). These social structures could be economic structures such as class disparity or colonialism. This means when women's "self-identity and identity are imposed by others", the awareness of their political environment itself has an agency in their lived experience Mdege (2017). Thus, the female agency in the film is seen when a woman challenges social structures through their emerging sense of individuality.

The concept of women's agency in film is frequently associated with notions of self-hood, autonomy, and individuality, aligning closely with Western interpretations of agency. However, this perspective often overlooks the intricate interplay of cultural contexts that shape the agency of women within the narratives of the film. While the Western notion of agency emphasizes aspects like freedom, motivation, and individual initiatives, it is essential to recognize that there exist alternative representations of agency that extend beyond the confines of this Western definition of female agency. In cinematic narratives, female characters may not always be depicted as actively shaping or transforming their conditions in the manner typically associated with agency. Instead, their actions may be driven by a fundamental need to exist and survive within a patriarchal paradigm. In this context, their everyday lived experiences, situated within the specific cultural contexts they inhabit, become a testament to the presence of women's agency Walker (2018). This alternative perspective on agency acknowledges that women's actions within the constraints of their cultural milieu are not solely driven by a Westernized concept of agency focused on individual empowerment. Rather, they highlight the agency that emerges from navigating and negotiating complex cultural environments, where survival and existence themselves become acts of agency. This nuanced understanding expands the discourse surrounding women's agency in cinema, recognizing its diverse manifestations and contextual variations that transcend Western frameworks.

Within the Indian context, a discernible shift in the portrayal of women in cinema has been observed, with female characters in Indian films increasingly defying traditional stereotypes. This transformation reflects a notable emergence of women depicted with agency and a more active presence within the narrative structure of films. Recent Indian films have been at the forefront of this change, consistently portraying women in roles that emphasize autonomy, activity, and career-oriented pursuits, as opposed to the traditional domestic roles of mothers and wives Agarwal (2014). This change is not limited to a mere transformation in the depiction of women; rather, it extends to a significant shift in the prominence and centrality of women within Indian cinema narratives. Women are now taking

on lead roles in Indian films more frequently, signifying a profound departure from conventional patriarchal representations. This shift is exemplified by the increasing production of women-centric films in recent times, wherein the narratives revolve around and are anchored by strong female characters who challenge and subvert established gender norms and expectations. This transformative portrayal of women in Indian cinema marks a critical departure from earlier cinematic conventions and it reflects a growing recognition of women's agency.

From being portrayed as an ideal wife and mother, Indian cinema is representing women in much stronger roles where they are the protagonists who make independent choices which are not anchored around men Manzar & Aravind (2019). There is a change in narrative structure where women's portrayal in Indian cinema where the portrayal of women is shifting away from the traditional archetype of docile and passive characters. Instead, contemporary Indian cinema is increasingly depicting women in more career-oriented roles, transcending the confines of domesticity. This shift in representation challenges the entrenched "myth" of women in Indian cinema, where their identity has long been constructed through images and performances that cast them as chaste, passive, and docile figures. The manifestation of the 'ideal woman' in Indian cinema has perpetuated a particular image, one that is rooted in traditional gender norms and patriarchal control. These films subvert the idea of 'ideal women' where their identity is largely shaped by the dominant domestic relationship controlled by men Rasgotra & Vats (2017). However, this shift of traditional narrative is with the emergence of women-based films in Indian cinema. These films digress from the idea of the traditional notion of 'ideal woman,' presenting a narrative where women's identities are no longer solely shaped by their roles within male-dominated domestic relationships. Instead, they highlight the agency and autonomy of female characters who make choices and assert their individuality beyond the confines of traditional gender roles.

The shift in the representation of women within Indian cinema, with female characters increasingly exhibiting agency, is notably more pronounced in regional cinemas compared to mainstream cinema. The emerging prominence of women as self-reliant and motivated figures in recent films can be viewed as an extension of their regional and cultural identities, offering a glimpse into the pluralistic nature of India's social fabric. Regional films, in particular, serve as a powerful vehicle for depicting a more "pluralistic society and tells the stories of ordinary women negotiating their lives through extraordinary choices" where the female characters "embrace agency" within and outside the domesticity space Roy & Sengupta (2014) p. 69. Within these narratives, female characters boldly embrace agency, transcending the boundaries of domesticity and asserting their independence However, it is essential to acknowledge that the cinematic landscape still grapples with deeply ingrained patriarchal values, resulting in the continued portrayal of women in stereotyped roles as submissive and passive individuals. Amidst this backdrop, there are emerging film narratives that represent a departure from the conventional dominant paradigm, where women are increasingly depicted with self-motivated and active agency.

3. MANIPURI CINEMA AND ARIBAM SYAM'S FILM

The medium of projected images was introduced in the state of Manipur as early as 1890 by the colonial British when they exhibited a magic lantern performance in front of the Prince of Manipur. In the following decades, the general Manipuri audience witnessed the medium of moving images through touring tent

cinemas in the 1920s and consequently basic, makeshift cinema houses were set up for regular exhibitions of cinema Kongbam (2021a). Even though cinema was introduced early in the state, Manipur did not produce a film of its own until the 1970s. The place was not seen as a viable market to produce film as the economy was poor and a small population led to a limited audience. Besides the challenges, the release of the first Manipuri feature film, *Matamgi Manipur* in 1972 marked the birth of Manipuri cinema ushering in a pivotal moment in the cultural landscape of the region. While earlier attempts in producing feature films, such as *Mainu Pemcha* in 1948, had been made, it wasn't until 1972 that Manipur saw the fruition of a full-length feature film.

During the early stages when Manipuri film was in its nascent stage, Aribam Syam entered the cinematic realm and left an enduring mark. He remains one of the most influential filmmakers of the north-eastern region and the development of Manipuri cinema is largely shaped by his film Modak (2023). Right from the first feature film of Manipur where he acted as one of the male protagonists and also directed the music, he has been a significant figure of Manipuri cinema. Two years after his involvement in the first film, Aribam Syam transitioned to the direction and made a commercially successful film, *Lamja Parshuram* (1974). This is followed by another milestone film, *Olangthage Wangmadasoo* (1979) which ran for 32 weeks and remains the longest-running film in Manipuri cinema Kongbam (2021b).

Beyond the commercial realm, Aribam Syam Sharma's artistic prowess shone brightly on the global stage with *Imagi Ningthem* (1981), a film that secured the prestigious Best Film award at the festival des 3 Continents in Nantes. Furthermore, it clinched two national awards, a testament to its narrative depth and cinematic brilliance. His next film came a decade later, *Ishanou* (1990) earned the distinct honour of being officially selected for the Un Certain Regard category at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1991. His film narratives are mostly located within the cultural and societal realities in which his narrative techniques are shaped by the cultural aspects of Manipur Joseph (2023). Noteworthy within Aribam Syam Sharma's oeuvre are films that prominently feature strong female lead characters. *Imagi Ningthem* and *Ishanou* form a thematic phenomenon, revolving around the strong central figure of Meitei women in Meitei society RK (2017). These two films delve deep into narratives that not only elucidate the multifaceted identities of Meitei women but also scrutinize their intricate social relationships within the broader societal framework.

Aribam Syam's cinema, characterized by its profound engagement with gender dynamics, emerges as a testament to his commitment to making his film derive from the cultural realities of Manipur. Manipuri women traditionally have more access to freedom as compared to other Indian women as historical Manipuri women have been involved actively in political movements and economic activities Gurumayum (2021). It is within this context that this article aims for an exploration of Aribam Syam's cinematic works within the context of Manipuri society, focusing on the compelling representation of women who have active agency, challenging and redefining established societal norms and roles.

4. DEFIANCE IN MY SON, MY PRECIOUS

The English title of the film, *Imagi Ningthem* is *My Son, My Precious*. This title inherently suggests that the film centres around the dynamics of a mother-son relationship, placing it firmly within the domestic sphere. Unlike the usual trope of family domestic drama where the film narratives are anchored around male characters, either the husband or the son, this film challenges the conventional motif

of family domestic dramas as the narrative distinctively focuses on three female characters who consistently challenge and reject male-defined patriarchal norms and values. The film's storyline revolves around a pivotal female character, Ekashini, who makes a startling discovery about her husband's illegitimate child living in a remote village. Her revelation occurs through her cousin, Dhani, who works as a primary school teacher in the same village and becomes aware of the boy's true parentage, linking him to Ekashini's husband. Emphasising the female characters in the film, the first act of the narrative revolves around Dhani discovering the boy. The introduction of Dhani at the beginning of the film where she is heading towards the village from the city to work as a teacher breaks the conventional stereotype of women's representation. Most of the women in conventional film narratives are relegated to the role of submissive characters confined in domestic space but in this film, at the outset itself, her character is given a professional role and is situated outside the space of domesticity, travelling alone to work.

Not only does she have the agency to decide to work in a remote village but the film also gives an exposition to the background of her getting the job. In an introspective voiceover, she speaks about how she did not accept to bribe officials to get the job posting in a convenient place like Imphal City. As an act of protest, she chose to come to the remote village alone knowing that village space would have a more diminished life. To her, the pursuit of a career in teaching is more important than anything else. This character arc is a testament to Dhani's agency, defiance, and capacity to shape her destiny, even in the face of uncertainty by relocating to a different place. Her steadfast resolve and decision-making not only gave insight into societal norms but also highlighted her liberation from male-dominated decision-making paradigms. Her decision to reside alone in the village highlights her independence and resilience, positioning her as a significant figure within the community. As she takes on the responsibility of educating the village's children, she emerges as a vital presence, actively contributing to the well-being and development of the community's younger generation.

It is through her compassionate interactions with the children in the village that Dhani encounters Thoithoi, and she finds out Ekashini's husband has fathered an illegitimate boy.

Figure 1

Figure 1 A Still from the Film, Imagi Ningthem

While Dhani's character breaks away from conventional archetypal portrayals of women in cinema, she displays a positive feminine characteristic with her care for children. Her maternal care for Thoithoi, who resides solely with his frail

grandfather, exemplifies this aspect of her character. Dhani perceives a maternal void in the boy's life and her genuine concern for his well-being prompts her to pursue the story behind the boy's parents. This initiative underscores her agency and her capacity to make a positive impact on the lives of the boy and his grandfather. Dhani's actions reflect her determination to understand the realities of their living situation. The film strategically employs this narrative development to introduce another female character, Memtombi, who is the boy's biological mother. Memtombi's storyline reveals a distressing tale of deceit, as she was deceived by Ekashini's husband and abandoned in the village while pregnant, while he returned to his wife in the city. After some months, he sends a man to marry Memtombi to make up for his mistake to which she replies with a resounding "No, it cannot be!" Her refusal of this proposal highlights her understanding of justice and this ridiculous proposal cannot be accepted by her showing her agency to deny decisions made by men.

Her resistance to the preordained marriage arranged by Dinachandra reflects her defiance against societal expectations, challenging the trope of submissive compliance. Her refusal resonates with an empowering rejection of patriarchal imposition. Her un-accepting qualities of the male-defined justice and her decision to continue to give birth to the child indicate her agency in her existence and living through the realities as an act of protest. However, she dies while giving birth to the boy leaving him with her father. This narrative thread highlights the agency of female characters in the film, highlighting their resilience and ability to cope with difficult circumstances imposed by patriarchal norms. As soon as Ekashini knows about the injustice done to the boy and her mother, she does not hesitate to immediately go to the city and tell the story to Ekashini that her husband has wronged a woman. Ekashini is a homemaker but she is not confined within the domestic walls as she goes with other women to sing Jalakeli, an exclusive choir for women that sings the hymn praising the love of Lady Radha and Lord Krishna. This shows that without having an occupation, a woman character need not confine herself to domesticity and a life beyond the family also exists in women's life.

In a significant departure from the stereotypical representation of stepmothers as mean-spirited, jealous figures who mistreat their stepchildren, Ekashini's character in the film takes a radically different approach. In the narrative, the boy mistook her as her real mother and he thinks that her mother is long lost. Ekashini instinctively decides to bring the boy into her home. This decision stands as a testament to her independent agency, as she fully embraces the boy as her own, even going as far as adopting him without seeking her husband's permission. Ekashini's husband, who has been away for work, returns to discover that she has adopted the boy. Despite his inquiries into the reasons behind her decision, Ekashini remains resolute and dismissive of his attempts to understand. Ultimately, when the boy's grandfather and Ekashini's husband decide that returning the boy to the village is the best course of action, Ekashini intervenes. She firmly asserts that they have no authority to make decisions on her behalf, exemplifying her agency and her willingness to resist male-dominated decision-making processes. All three women character challenges the traditional narrative of women's dependence on men and highlights the theme of female agency in the film.

5. BREAKING STRUCTURES IN THE CHOSEN ONE

Aribam Syam's attempt to locate his film language in Manipur's culture, society and history took shape when he made *Ishanou*, whose English title is *The Chosen One*. In this film, the 'the chosen one,' is Tampha, a young housewife who dares to

defy the proscribed gender roles, challenging the expectations of being a conventional wife and an ideal mother. Initially, her life revolves around the mundane routines of domesticity, where she lives a simple and quiet life with her husband, a young daughter, and her mother. Throughout the first act of the film, Tampha's character resonates with the conventional portrayal of a housewife, fulfilling her duties as a caregiver for her husband, child, and family. However, a pivotal moment occurs during a walk with her husband when she suddenly breaks away from him, walking alone while singing a folk song. It is at this juncture that she becomes possessed by a female deity's spirit. In Manipuri indigenous culture and religion, the phenomenon of women being possessed by the spirit of female gods, and transforming into Maibis, who are the primary religious functionaries of the religion, is well-documented Parratt & Parratt (2017a). In the indigenous religious context of Manipur, women hold significant roles in religious practices, unlike in other mainstream Indian religions Rajkumar (2023). From this transformative moment onward, Tampha's life takes a distinct trajectory as she consistently strives to break free from the confines of domesticity, marking a profound departure from her earlier submissive portrayal in the film.

As Tampha becomes possessed by the spirit, there is a pivotal scene where she declares herself to be Panthoibi, a female deity. This revelation underscores the fact that she is now under the influence of a female god. In the subsequent phases of possession, Tampha exhibits various symptoms of hysteria and experiences seizures. During these intense episodes, she vehemently attempts to flee from her home, repeatedly proclaiming, "Let me go." This expression of her desire to break free from the constraints of conventional domestic life is evident. However, her family members respond to her distressing condition by restraining her, symbolically illustrating the structural constraints that confine women within the domestic sphere. Despite their best efforts, including consulting medical doctors and indigenous male healers, Tampha's condition does not improve. Consequently, she decides to escape from her home and seeks refuge in a place inhabited by *Maibis*, the female religious functionaries. This place is known as a *Maibi Sanglen*, an exclusive space reserved for women where they engage in religious training and ultimately receive ordination Nongthombam (2020). Besides women playing a primary role in public religious ceremonies, the transformative behaviour of Tampha where she unconsciously tries to break herself free from the confines of her monotonous domestic life suggests that through this means of spirit possession, one can break the societal structures.

Figure 2

Figure 2 A Still from the Film, Ishanou

In the *Maibi Sanglen*, Tampha undergoes a profound transformation, discarding her previous identity as a mother and a housewife to embrace a new role as a *Maibi*. This radical shift in her identity underscores the complexity of a woman's sense of self, emphasizing that it extends beyond a one-dimensional characterisation. Instead, it reveals the existence of multiple subjectivities within the same individual. These subjectivities encompass the conscious aspects represented by her domestic life and the more elusive and unruly unconscious forces that operate beneath her conscious awareness. These unconscious elements continuously strive to challenge the patriarchal structures imposed upon her. In the context of the film, the cultural belief in spirit possession serves as a powerful narrative device. It is employed to unveil the female character's agency, allowing her to assert herself and ultimately liberate herself from the traditional gender expectations that cast women primarily as caregivers within the familial relationship. This representation of Tampha's agency within the film serves as a compelling exploration of the multifaceted nature of a woman's identity and her capacity to challenge and transcend societal norms and constraints.

Following her religious initiation and the radical transformation of her identity, Tampha's actions transcend the conventional expectations of domesticity that patriarchal paradigms impose upon women. Before she realises the 'new self', Tampha's character is predominantly situated within the confines of the home, whether in the presence of her husband or daughter. This exemplifies the traditional gender role that dictates women must serve as the primary caregivers within the family structure. However, upon liberating herself and assuming the role of a *Maibi*, Tampha undergoes a significant transformation. As a religious functionary, she actively participates in public ceremonies, engaging in ritual performances that take place in communal spaces. These ritual performances hold great symbolic significance, reflecting the indigenous religious worldview of Manipur, where the *Maibi's* performance serves as the embodiment of their cultural genesis, with women's bodies functioning as the sacred text Parratt & Parratt (2017b). Thus, the agency that Tampha develops through spirit possession in the film signifies her transformation from a stereotypical housewife to an important member of her society. She assumes a prominent role in representing her community's history and civilization. Within the community, senior *Maibis* are addressed with respect as Ima, meaning mother. Over time, as Tampha attains this senior status, she encounters her husband and daughter during a ritual performance. Although her daughter has grown and does not recognize her mother, upon encountering Tampha, she addresses her as Ima, the *Maibi*. This poignant moment in the film symbolizes Tampha's transition from the conventional 'ideal mother' confined to domestic life to a different form of motherhood, one characterized by agency, the ability to transcend the confines of domesticity, and a challenge to conventional male-defined structures.

6. CONCLUSION

In both the works of Aribam Syam, the women characters resoundingly challenge and defy the entrenched gender stereotypes and confront the patriarchal narrative of film, offering nuanced portrayals of female characters that accentuate their autonomy, agency, and resilience. In *My Son, My Precious*, the character of Dhani embodies a departure from traditional cinematic depictions of women as she pursues a professional aspiration in an unfamiliar environment in a remote village as a schoolteacher. Her unyielding stance against bribery to secure a preferred posting in the city exemplifies her moral agency. She emerges as a powerful

assertion of female agency to self-determine her choice, challenging the normative narrative that often disempowers women by relegating them to passive roles. Ekashini, on the other hand, plays a transformative role in the film where her decision to adopt her husband's illegitimate child, disrupts the societal norms that stigmatize 'illegitimacy'. Her unflinching love for the child and her assertion of her right to make such a decision subvert traditional narratives of cruel stepmothers. She defies the conventional narrative that women are often depicted as passive recipients of male decisions by adopting the child against her husband's decision. In *The Chosen One*, the female character breaking free from domestic constraints symbolises women's resistance against societal norms that seek to confine them and assert their right to define their destinies. Her active participation in the religious ceremonies as a central figure challenge established religious hierarchies as she gains access to and actively participates in male-dominated religious spaces. Thus, the portrayals of women in both films accentuate women's capacity to make independent choices, resist oppressive structures, and redefine societal norms. In a cinematic landscape often characterized by the subordination of women, these films represent female agency and resilience, offering a compelling cinematic exploration of women's roles and possibilities in defiance of patriarchy.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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