

# SOCIAL VALUES AND IDEAL WOMANHOOD IN THOIBI DEVI'S RADHA (1965)

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The emergence of modern education in Manipur during the 20th century marked a decisive turning point in the intellectual and cultural life of Manipuri society. This period marks the beginning of modern Manipuri literature, and Thoibi Devi emerged as a pioneer writer. She, along with Khaidem Pramodini and M.K. Binodini, was often regarded as one of the three legs of an iron tripod (yotsabi) and they were recognized as part of the first generation of Manipuri women writers. In fact, Thoibi Devi was considered the first woman novelist in Manipuri literature. She was also active politically and ideologically. She was a writer in several aspects of literature, such as novels, poetry, drama, translations, short stories, and songs.

This paper explores *Radha* (1965), a landmark text by Thoibi Devi that stands as the first novel authored by a woman in Manipuri literature. She was, in fact, among the first female authors to utilize the novel as a serious literary medium. The time following Indian independence and World War II marked a significant turning point for the Manipur society. Educational facilities with modern methods were made available and the people were stepping forward; however, the relations between the sexes did not improve at the same rate. People, influenced by the new social order, were increasingly concerned with their social ranks and public opinion. Social respectability, family honor, and outward morality were often more esteemed than individual feelings, personal freedom, and inner truth. Consequently, women, in particular, were required to hold back their emotions and needs in order to be perceived as "the ideal ones". In a lot of ways, since the monarchical era of the kings, men were the ones controlling women's lives more than ever, especially in family and social settings. Women were expected to follow traditional roles of obedience, sacrifice, and silence, even as society claimed to be modern and progressive.

It was in this post-independence and post-war context that Thoibi Devi wrote her novel *Radha*. She employed innovative literary styles to uncover the socio-cultural truth of the female part of the population in a society dominated by men. She was modern education's finest pupil and expressed her thoughts with clarity, realism, and social consciousness. Through her writings, she mainly pointed out and felt the pain of women and their problems in Manipur's conservative and patriarchal society. Right from the start, she was socially aware with her novel *Radha*; she wanted to reveal the practices that ruled the Manipuri community and show, through gentle sensitivity, the hardships of the women in that society. The author does not choose open rebellion or a dramatic clash but rather a mild and truthful selection of story that mirrors the women's real experiences of that time. By this narrative technique, she brings forth the social rules and enables the audience to see how profoundly these standards influence the community, particularly women's lives, options, and feelings.

The novel starts by introducing two close friends Nandababu and Bishwanath. These friends agreed to a future marriage pact for their kids. Bishwanath is a wealthy traditional man while Nandababu is an educated middle-class man committed to social services. The novel's internal conflict begins by contrasting two friendly families with differing views on gender and education. Krishnachandra's parents Nandababu and Yasumati valued education embodying a progressive perspective even when formal education was not common. Their support enabled Krishnachandra's academic success and subsequent medical pursuits in Kolkata. He even aced his medical examination in Kolkata. His success represents the freedom and opportunity given to men inside a social system that marginalizes women. Education becomes a marker of social privilege accessible to men but systematically denied to women.

In contrast, Radha, the only daughter of Bishwanath and Bhanumati, grows up under strict patriarchal control. Bishwanath, a traditional man, refuses to send his daughter to school. He believes education is unnecessary or even wrong for women. Instead, Radha receives only limited literacy from a private tutor at home. This restricted form of education shows society's fear of women's independence and intellectual growth. Knowledge is allowed only as long as it does not challenge existing gender roles.

Radha's upbringing is similar to that of a bird in a cage. She is both trapped and protected. Her education is centered on household chores. She gains knowledge of weaving, cooking, and managing the home. Cultural norms view these abilities as indicators of the "ideal woman." Her world is thus confined to the interior of her house. Serving her family

and adhering to rigid customs are the foundation of her identity. Far from celebrating this domestic mastery, the novelist uses it to offer a subtle critique, exposing a social order where a woman's value is calculated entirely by her utility within the home.

Radha and Krishnachandra meet for the first time in their teenage years when Radha's parents invite Krishnachandra's family for dinner. It is a grand dinner to celebrate the success of Krishnachandra passing his matriculation examination. The two teens fall in love at first sight, but they suppress their feelings for each other and dare not confess, fearing communal judgement. Thus, their lives begin to part ways when Krishnachandra leaves his home to pursue his medical dreams. As soon as Radha turns sixteen, the culturally prescribed age for marriage during that period, many wealthy families come to Bishwanath's home to ask for Radha's hand in marriage for their sons. The conflict of the novel begins here when Bishwanath asks Nandababu about their promise to marry their children to each other. Nandababu replies that Krishnachandra is only eighteen, still a youth who needs to explore the outside world and fulfill his professional goals instead of marrying young. Nandababu believes a man's responsibility extends beyond personal and familial obligations; he seeks to contribute to the overall betterment of society rather than marry off his son at a young age which he considers a limitation to personal growth and social progress. Nandababu bucks early marriage norms; he's aiming for societal impact, prioritizing social reform and individual growth over starting a family young. Therefore, the promise comes to an end, as Nandababu and Bishwanath have different views of life, thus compromising that Nandababu's son Krishnachandra will continue his further studies while Bishwanath's daughter will be married off at the right time set by society. The contrast between Krishnachandra's freedom and Radha's restrictions exposes the gendered moral code of the society. Krishnachandra is encouraged to dream, to leave Manipur, and to pursue professional success, even if it means leaving behind his beloved Radha. His ambition is celebrated and supported. Radha, however, is expected to wait, endure, and ultimately submit to decisions made by others. Society validates male ambition while demanding female sacrifice.

Krishnachandra thus grew up with his father's progressive vision, obtained higher education and became a doctor devoted to the welfare of the society. His occupation was not simply an avenue of personal triumph, but a means of social support and public health. Nonetheless, when Radha's parents decide to marry her to Anand, an unknown lawyer, she does not resist. Her agreement is not shown as a weakness but rather as the unavoidable result of a lifelong social training. Marriage is seen as a social obligation, not as an individual preference, particularly in the case of women. Radha's compliance reinforces society's perception of the perfect woman as one who is subservient and self-effacement. Her emotional conflict remains hidden inside her, not recognized by the social system that values stability over the happiness of individuals. Radha's married life mirrors the very expectations that were thrust upon women. As a dutiful wife and a mother of three, her performance is flawless morally. Society recognizes her success not in terms of personal satisfaction but in her ability to create and maintain co-existence, decency, and family honor. Fate intervenes years later when she encounters Krishnachandra during the birth of her third child. But social values demand restraint so the two neither declare nor even hint at their past love, so that Radha's marriage will not be overshadowed by the consequence of an affair or the resulting social scrutiny. Thus, silence once again prevails over truth. This instance is very significant when it comes to comprehending Radha's idealism. Her unwillingness to admit or get in touch again is not only a personal matter but is also deeply social. She prioritizes community moral standards over emotional sincerity reinforcing values instilled in her upbringing. Thoibi Devi shares this dilemma with very deep empathy enabling the reader to sense the heaviness of Radha's sacrifice without blaming her act. The story points to the society's definition of the perfect lady as one that usually requires the emotionless and the dullest of virtues as the highest one. The main character's life, Radha, serves as a critique of a social system that celebrates the suffering of women while at the same time taking away their rights and freedoms. Although Radha suffers, her suffering is silent, and dignified hence it is accepted, and even praised, by the society that she lives in. Yet, the admiration for Radha concealed a deeper injustice. Thoibi Devi confronts the issue that society sees women as moral symbols, hence turning them into burdens as far as the duties are concerned but keeping them out of control and choice. However, Thoibi Devi is showing Radha's hardships not as a weakness but rather as a form of spiritual strength. Her crying is turned into a mark of endurance and a sign of quiet strength. Thoibi Devi does not limit Radha to be just a woman's tale of heart in society but also as a poetic expression of life's sweetness and bitterness. Therefore, in this paper, Thoibi Devi, through her novel *Radha*, cleverly defines the social values by placing women in the very center of moral and cultural responsibility. She presents women's idealism as a result of social influence, where the qualities of being patient, giving up, controlling oneself, and enduring sufferings are recognized as virtues. The novelist through Radha's experiences reveals how society holds an ideal image of womanhood and at the same time subjects women to emotional suffering and social restrictions. Radha's life symbolizes the plight of numerous women who are more of what the society expects than what they want to be. By depicting these scenarios, Thoibi Devi not only mirrors the prevailing patriarchal norms of her time but also uncovers the quiet injustices that are part and parcel of them. Thus, Radha serves both as a social document and a literary critique, urging readers to reconsider the meaning of ideal womanhood and the true cost of maintaining social values.

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