

IDENTITY, SOCIETY, AND MODERNITY IN HIJAM GUNO'S VIR TIKENDRAJIT ROAD (1983)

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Hijam Guno (1926–2010)'s *Vir Tikendrajit Road* (1983) stands as a major milestone in the development of the Manipuri novel, introducing modern narrative strategies and psychological complexity. Hijam Guno has been one of the leading authors in Manipuri literature and is known as one of its pioneering writers. He began his career as a novelist in 1958 when he published *Laman*, a book that marked his entrance as an author of serious literature. He has written and contributed to many other literary genres besides novels; he has also been actively involved in developing poetry, plays, and short fiction and through these works, Hijam Guno shows the breadth of his creative imagination and commitment to writing about the social and psychological realities. During his time as an author, he has written eight novels: *Laman* (1958), *Khudol* (1964), *Aroiba Paodam* (1965), *Eikhoi Tada* (1966), *Vir Tikendrajit Road* (1983), *Epam Meihoure* (1992), *Eidi Chingda Satpini* (2013), and *Poktabi Leima* (2014). Through these works, Hijam Guno has greatly influenced how Manipuri novels are written and how modern authors use themes and techniques that are contemporary to their time.

Vir Tikendrajit Road is widely seen as Hijam Guno's best literary work. It marks a new chapter in the development of the Manipuri novel. The novel won Guno the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985 and is viewed as one of the most important pieces in Manipuri literature. Hijam Guno's bold writing style in *Vir Tikendrajit Road* included abandoning the use of conventional narrative methods and employing new styles of writing, contemporary concepts, and modern topics; therefore, as he closely examined the evolving social problems of society and the impact on life in urban centres, Guno was able to advance the world of the Manipuri novel by assisting it in modernising itself.

The style used to create *Vir Tikendrajit Road* is psychological in nature, and is told with a **stream of consciousness** narrative approach that captures a character's cognitive processes, emotional responses, and subjective perceptions. This narrative form was one of the earliest in Manipuri literature, represented a significant movement away from the customary linear method of storytelling, and is viewed as an innovative addition to Manipuri literature.

William James, the **American psychologist** who wrote the now-standard textbook *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), coined the term "**stream of consciousness**". As a means of allowing a writer to show the ongoing cycles and flows of human mental activity and consciousness, literary critics and scholars began to use the term as a term for an authorial device used by a number of writers of the modern era. **Stream of consciousness** is a narrative method in literature intended to portray the unbroken flow of a character's inner thoughts, emotions, remembrances, and observations as they naturally flow in the human mind. Other than conceptualizing ideas into logical or orderly progression, it replicates the spontaneous, fragmented, and often non-linear movements of consciousness. It gives readers direct access to a character's inner life, showing psychological depth and emotional complexity because of its close imitation of the operations of mental processes. Through its experimental format, this book provides great insight into how an individual behaves/acts within and interacts with his environment; at the same time, the novel reflects upon the complicated nature of contemporary Manipur society and provides support for the growth & development of modern-day Manipur novel.

The term itself mirrors that the novel models a stream of consciousness, using a continuous, free-flowing, unstructured narrative mode. The work is not focused on any single hero or heroine; neither does the structure follow a regular, straight line of action from beginning to end. Readers encounter a series of episodes which at first sight seem to constitute a compilation of different stories. Yet, the work is not merely a collection of short stories. A hidden, significant connection ties these otherwise isolated narratives, hence creating a unified whole. More importantly, these episodes are framed by keen observations of human life and society, through which the novel gains thematic coherence and artistic depth. In the lines that follow, one is reminded of the words of Virginia Woolf:

“Examine for a moment an ordinary mind or an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of numerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn in the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (M. John: 1959:393)

Virginia Woolf defines that life cannot be understood as a neat, orderly sequence of clear events (“gig-lamps symmetrically arranged”). Instead, she suggests that life is a “luminous halo”, a continuous, fluid experience made up of thoughts, feelings, memories, and perceptions. It is semi-transparent because human consciousness is complex and constantly shifting, not fully clear or rigid. Human existence blossoms from the time we begin to have awareness until to the final stage of our completed awareness. Instead of life flowing away from us through a linear path forward, these types of experiences occur either within us or at some point between us.

The title *Vir Tikendrajit Road* refers to an arterial road in the heart of Imphal, the state capital of Manipur. The road runs right through the crowded atmosphere of the urban sprawl - it is the major artery of the city. Throughout the day, cars, buses & motorcycles are constantly entering & leaving the road. Vehicular movement consisting of cars, buses, and motorcycles, is going on heavily throughout the day. Air quality is getting worse due to the release of pollutants from petrol and diesel, which makes the inhalation of fumes unavoidable. Added to the congestion of traffic flow is the steady aural perturbation of vehicle horns, enhancing the overall atmosphere of noise and disorder and thus creating a frenetic and dynamic atmosphere that typifies this central district. Vir Tikendrajit Road is close to the Manipur Legislative Assembly and plays a significant part in the social and political life of Imphal. Historically, it has been a major site for public processions, protests, and demonstrations. The park flanking the road has become a site for those engaged in fasts or fast unto death for various causes, thus filling the area with incidents linked to political expression and social resistance. The playground nearby operates like a public forum where people gather to hold discussions on anything from India’s foreign policy to the personal life of pop female singers.

In addition to being the centre for commercial activity for the state, the bazaar is the main means of commerce in the state. People of all backgrounds come to buy products at the bazaar. Interactions between customers and vendors happen daily at the bazaar; this allows each character and their style of dress to be expressed through the manner in which they communicate with each other. Through prolonged observation, the author has developed a comprehensive understanding of human culture and society and has therefore become an informal historian, documenting human history and culture through the experience of individuals encountered at the bazaar. Stories derived from these observations provide insight, support and a rationale for the title of this book.

The author has woven together a wide-ranging tapestry of human experiences by amalgamating intimate biographical accounts with landmark historical and social events. The novel chronicles communal unrest in Punjab associated with Partition, highlighting violence, displacement, and emotional trauma as hallmark features of that period. It also chronicles the mass movement of refugees from Burma during World War II, thus placing individual suffering in a larger historical context. In addition, the author describes the businesses established by film moguls in Calcutta contrasted with the ascetic yet laborious lives of Manipur's fish vendors in the main market.

The novel goes on from there to describe other private and personal aspects of life - the internal life of a monk, the life experience of a particular widow, and the internal conflicts and adjustments of a young wife living with a traditional joint-family structure. Through this mix of experiences, the author seeks to provide a complete view of human life across different regions, classes, and cultures while simultaneously highlighting the focus of the book on human relationships and the impact these relationships have on society as a whole.

To observe and connect these varied social realities, the author introduces a central character, Accountant Babu who is a salesman employed at a shop on Vir Tikendrajit Road. He functions as a keen observer of the people and events unfolding around him. The novel starts with the introduction of Accountant Babu’s morning routine.

One morning, on his way to work, Accountant Babu stopped at a roadside tea stall on Vir Tikendrajit Road. There, he found a group of friends seriously discussing electoral politics and said, with an air of nonchalance, that “all is fair in love and war,” a comment carrying implications of the cynicism so often assumed to characterize political life. Nearby, he saw a number of young players playing games at the playground, these being the representatives of a group whose main interest was sports and exercise. As he continued travelling down the street, the Accountant Babu spotted a sign

on the gate of The Vir Tikendrajit Park, where protesters had posted a sign which read, “Hunger Strike until death,” to bring awareness to their cause. Shortly thereafter, he heard the sound of monks chanting “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Ram, Hare Ram, Ram Ram, Hare Hare,” and this religious chant reminded him of his old friend Babaji Krishnadas, who had left his life of worldly affairs at an early age to become a monk. Thus, through these various day-to-day interactions, the Accountant Babu is perceived as a silent observer who unites a variety of social, political, and spiritual dimensions which exist together along the length of the Vir Tikendrajit Road.

On one occasion during a curfew in the main city, the Accountant Babu could not find any Way to Return Home. Therefore, he had to stay at his friend Shukumar's House for the Night. On his way, he encountered a woman named Leiyon and another woman from Meitram who earned their living by selling fish. Since neither of them could return home because of the curfew, the Accountant Babu helped them and brought them to Shukumar's house for shelter for the night. During the course of that night, the Accountant Babu came to know about the personal life of Leiyon through his friend Shukumar. She was earlier married to a wealthy businessman from Meitram named Madhu, who frequently remained away from home due to his business engagements. Left alone for long periods, the young wife found herself emotionally and physically neglected. Unable to control her desires, she entered into a relationship with another man. When the matter came to light, her mother-in-law and sister-in-law placed the entire blame upon Leiyon, while Madhu, who had abandoned his newly married wife for business pursuits, was not held accountable. Later, society too condemned Leiyon for her moral transgression, while her husband Madhu continued to be respected and was even praised when he married another woman, as though he were a figure of moral purity.

Through this episode, the novel exposes the deep-rooted gender bias of society, where women are harshly judged for personal failings, while men are easily excused and socially honoured for similar or even greater moral lapses.

The Accountant Babu recalls his earlier days when he worked in a large textile shop jointly owned by two Punjabi brothers, Jasbir and Jagjit. After the death of Jagjit's wife, his younger brother Jasbir persuaded him to remarry and arranged a match with a young woman named Pritam. Pritam came from a poor background and was unable to find a suitable groom of her own age. Aware of this situation, Jagjit replaced his older brother at the time of marriage, believing that the young girl would not agree to marry an older man like Jasbir.

Upon getting to her in-law's house, Pritam learnt that she is married to Jasbir and not Jagjit. Jagjit, who already had a wife, children, and a threat to Pritam later forced her to keep a secret relationship with him. Pritam became pregnant with Jagjit's child amid these events that further cripples her. Under the control of the tricks by the two brothers, Pritam was playing into their hands like a pawn. Ultimately, she had longed to free herself from their clutches and live with dignity and freedom.

Determined to free herself from exploitation and to protect her unborn child, Pritam began to look for a way out of her painful circumstances. Her search for support led her to Khan Sahib, a young man working in their textile shop, who showed her understanding and compassion. Mr. Khan's identity is originally a Bangladeshi or a Pakistani but not an Indian. Trusting him, Pritam pleaded for help, and one night they eloped in order to escape the oppressive control of the two brothers. In time, they were married, and Pritam assumed a new identity as Miss Fatima. Together, they built a hotel named *Hotel Honey Dew*, which eventually became a prosperous establishment. This transformation marks a crucial moment in the novel, as Pritam's change of identity signifies not moral failure but personal liberation. From an exploited woman to an independent businesswoman, the journey of Pritam demonstrates the hypocrisy of a society that condemns women yet excuses men for their actions. Pritam's life as Miss Fatima illustrates the fundamental theme of this novel: what constitutes a "true identity" is formed through experience and the ability to act with moral courage, as opposed to a "label" or "appearance" as determined by society.

After Pritam fled the household, conflicts emerged between the two brothers, eventually leading to the division of the store. A second element of the novel involves the revealing of an additional secret: Jagjit is not the brother of Jasbir but rather his cousin (of German ancestry), supporting the idea of hidden identities and deceptive appearances as presented throughout the novel.

In addition to those experiences mentioned above, Accountant Babu has also had additional experiences in his encounters with other characters from the novel. When the conflict between the two brothers intensified, Jasbir sent Babu to consult an attorney. It was during this visit to the lawyer's office that Babu witnessed a woman seeking legal advice on filing a lawsuit against her husband for bigamy, since he had married a second woman while serving a prominent post in the government. Another episode involved the experience of a man seeking justice for his wife who died while under the care of a medical institution due to the negligence of medical staff members. The message conveyed by these two incidents is that the novel strongly supports the cause of social injustices, gender inequality and underprivileged members of society who suffer at the hands of the most powerful entity on earth - the government.

On another occasion, the Accountant Babu encounters the doctor he had been searching for at a gambling house, where he also meets his old friend Krishnadas Babaji in disguise. Formerly known as Giridhari, Krishnadas had become a monk at a young age. During his stay in Vrindavan, he had formed a secret relationship with a young widow, Chaobi, who had come there to pray for her deceased husband. They became so close that they went for a movie date at night, Babaji also came to her house donning a different dress. Despite their closeness, social norms ultimately forced Chaobi to marry another man, separating them and once again revealing the gap between religious appearance and human reality.

The Accountant Babu also encounters the hidden private life of J. M. Chatterjee, a man of social prominence whose actions reveal deep moral corruption. Chatterjee exploits a young tribal woman named Lucy by entering into a physical relationship with her, only to discard her cruelly when she seeks marriage and social security. He drives her away as though she were worthless. At the same time, he maintains another woman, Rojami, by his side, further exposing his hypocrisy. The episode ultimately reveals that J. M. Chatterjee's respected public identity is false, for he is in reality Mr. Das from Calcutta. Through this encounter, the novel sharply criticizes the double standards and moral pretensions of modern society.

An additional significant encounter unfurls in the novel, which occurs against the backdrop of World War II - an era in which there was turmoil among the different religious groups. During that time, a Muslim girl was abandoned by her parents while they were fleeing from their countries to avoid being killed. While they were fleeing their homeland, Amutombi, a Hindu woman employed in the area where the child was abandoned, took her in as a daughter. She grew up in this Hindu household, eventually becoming an accomplished physician known as Dr. Mema. Despite her acceptability as a doctor in society, many people questioned her identity due to her physical features: she is fair-skinned with a pointed nose and was always taller than the average Meitei woman. This episode illustrates how society determines one's identity based solely upon the external characteristics of a person and provides insight into the social constructs that influence people's perceptions of identity.

The novel then unravels as a wide, inclusive tapestry tracing out a broad spectrum of social and historical experience. The novel veers between public and private spaces as it scrutinizes human life with all its subtlety. This brings us to the commonly sighted theme-that which is light in modern society turns out to be very different from what lies deep within. Social identities do mask truths that constantly clash with public perception. What is commonly accepted as real is frequently far removed from actual lived reality, and true identity is seldom apparent on the surface. This idea is reinforced through a series of striking revelations in the novel. The respected J. M. Chatterjee, popularly known as Chatterjee Sahib, is in fact Mr. Das from Calcutta. Dr. Mema, widely regarded as a devout Hindu, is actually a Muslim woman raised as a Hindu girl. Krishnadas Babaji, a Vaishnava monk, secretly enjoys gambling and attends late-night movie shows in disguise donning a different dress. Miss Fatima turns out to be the same woman as Pritam, who was earlier married to Jasbir. Khan Sahib, a successful hotel owner in Imphal, is revealed to be a Bangladeshi or Pakistani national. Above all, Jagjit, believed to be Jasbir's brother, is actually his cousin of German descent.

Through his use of irony and reverse psychology, Hijam Guno has revealed the complexity of our social world and the contradictions, illusions, and hypocrisy created by the systems of belief that we adhere to in today's society. The author demonstrates that there is much more to a person's identity than the labels applied by society based on their religion, caste or nationality, and that human beings possess a complexity beyond any other living creature. In doing so, *Vir Tikendrajit Road* serves as both a social commentary on modern life and as an examination of the truths versus illusions of existence.

In summary, *Vir Tikendrajit Road* represents a strong example of social realism in Manipuri literature. Set against the backdrop of a recognizable urban space, the pulse of modern life gets captured in the novel. From its wide social canvas to its sharp insight into human behavior, it embodies meaningful studies of society, identity, and reality. Hijam Guno's work reminds readers that beneath the surface of everyday life lie hidden truths challenging conventional understanding and demanding deeper reflection.

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