



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



*Jaydeep Sarangi interviewing Malsawmi Jacob on the banks of river Krishna*

In Conversation with  
Malsawmi Jacob

Jaydeep Sarangi

*Malsawmi Jacob is an independent writer now living in Bangalore, India. Her first novel and seventh book, Zorami: A redemption song was published in 2015. Her other published books are a collection of poems in Mizo (a language spoken by an ethnic group native to north-eastern India) and English, a collection of short stories, two books of children's stories and two narrative non-fiction. She has worked in different cities of India: taught English to undergraduates at St. Claret College, Bangalore, and Aizawl College, Aizawl; was senior co-ordinator at SPARROW, Mumbai; and freelanced as a journalist for about two years while living in Guwahati. She has also contributed poems, stories and articles on different subjects to a few anthologies and journals.*

JS: When did you start writing? What was the motivation?

MJ: As a child of nine or ten, I remember trying to write a poem. It didn't work. I started writing poems and prose in high school, when I was around 14. Some of these were published in the school's annual magazine, including one simple poem in Hindi, about wishing to have wings and fly up to the sky. That's the only Hindi writing I ever did; my knowledge of the language is minimal, it must have been just the foolish boldness of the young that made me dare compose that piece! During my university days I wrote a number of poems, some in Mizo language, some in English.

Stories came later. Though I did attempt a kind of novella, a teenage romance, at the age of about 15, it remained only as a hand-written private copy. Years later, when my son was about three, he couldn't get enough of stories. My husband and I had read to him all the children's books we had, and narrated all the stories we knew. So I started inventing tales about birds and animals, like 'baby donkey' and 'baby lion' going to school. Out of these sessions, I created stories around a Magic Mirror who always popped up to help when birds, plants, animals and human beings got into troubles they couldn't manage. Again when my son was about seven, I wrote *Amazing Adventures* where people in a future world travelled to the present world and the past through 'science'. Then I started working on short stories for adults. When they came out, one

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commentator remarked that these stories were ‘psychologically acute.’ Then I concentrated on poems again. I seem to work in phases, alternating the emphasis on different forms of writing – poems, stories, articles, at different times.

What first motivated me to write? I think it was love – love for words, verses and stories. Nursery rhymes, fairy tales, I loved them all.

JS: Would you please tell us about your childhood days?

MJ: I’m the eldest of four siblings, three girls and one boy. All through our childhood, we were always moving from one place to another. My father was in the Army and they shifted every two years or so. At times he couldn’t take us along, then we were left behind until we could join him again.

My earliest memories are about the village in Mizoram where we stayed for a few years without my dad. My mum used to read to us or tell us stories at bedtime. Some of the folktales she told us are retold in *Zorami*. I started my schooling in Mizo medium there, and I’m thankful for the grounding I received in my mother tongue through that. Then we left Mizoram for Dharmsala in Himachal Pradesh, where my dad was posted. We learned a bit of Hindi in the Army camp school. From there we moved to Shillong and we started studying in Auxilium Convent, an English-medium school.

From Shillong we moved to Imphal, Manipur. My siblings and I joined Little Flower, another convent school. But after a year my parents found it difficult to pay the fees, which were rather high for my father’s small salary. So my sister, the second eldest among the siblings, and I were admitted in a government school called ‘Adimjati.’ The state of discipline there was shocking, and the teaching wasn’t great. But they had a very good library. That was where I got to read a good number of the classics. The teacher in charge of the library was very happy that a student was borrowing books – hardly any of the students wanted to read – and I thoroughly enjoyed the feast of wonderful books! But soon, my father put a stop to it. He got worried that I was reading too much and declared a blanket ban on reading any book outside the school syllabus. Too bad I was too obedient!

Those days there was no TV or the entertainments that children have now. My family didn’t even have a radio. We children had to find our own entertainment. Well into teenage, I was enchanted with fairy tales and dressed-up animal pictures. We had a pair of ducks. One holiday, I made a small necktie from a piece of cloth and with the help of my siblings, made the male duck wear it. We thought he looked handsome, and planned to make a dress for his wife too. We got a good scolding for our folly.

From Imphal we returned to Shillong and I went back to the same school I attended before. Shortly before my high school leaving board exams, my father contracted TB and was hospitalised. My mother too fell ill and had to be hospitalised also. I scraped through the exam, passing in third division. At around age 16, I started working as a Nursery class teacher in a private school and studied in the evening section of Shillong College. With my parents’ encouragement, I took up English Honours in the Degree course. My dad was thrilled when I passed BA with honours.

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Despite financial struggles, I did MA in English in the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), in the same town.

I sometimes feel that my education is rather half-baked due to much moving about and being a part time student through college. I went back to Mizoram only after Masters Degree, to teach in a college in Aizawl.

JS: Who were the authors you read during your childhood?

MJ: A lot of comics, to begin with. Fairy tales, Schoolgirl, Western and others. Then R.L. Stevenson, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, in the abridged versions. I remember being so totally immersed in *Ivanhoe* and *The Black Arrow*, that the real world seemed unreal. I read Thomas Hardy's works too in high school, starting with *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Most of my English language learning was through reading.

JS: Why did you decide to write a novel with the insurgency as a backdrop?

MJ: The insurgency affected every Mizo, whether in or out of Mizoram. We call it '*ram buai*,' which means 'disturbance of the land.' Our family was in Imphal when the news reached us. My dad was terribly upset. And soon after that, we kept hearing about the goings on, about the Army operations and the horrendous happenings. All this left a strong impression on me.

Many years later, when we were in Guwahati, around 2002-2003, newspapers often referred to Mizoram as 'an island of peace' among the Northeast states. The Indian Government and the MNF (Mizo National Front) leaders had signed the 'peace accord' in 1986, so Mizoram was generally peaceful while militancy had started and multiplied in some states. The description 'island of peace' sparked off a question in my mind: The people suffered so much during the insurgency. How do they feel now that political peace has returned? How are they coping emotionally with all the trauma they went through?

It was this very question that got me thinking of writing a novel. In other words, I didn't first think of writing a novel and what to write about, but thought of writing a novel only because the theme suggested itself. And the novel gives the necessary large canvas for the rather complicated theme.

JS: *Zorami* is set in the peak of the Mizo National Front (MNF) movement that began in the mid 60s and ended in mid 80s. How do you view this Movement?

MJ: I'd admit we had real grievances. Towards the end of the 1950s and the early part of the 1960s, Mizoram suffered famine caused by 'mautam' or the dying of bamboos. This phenomenon takes place every 50 years. The bamboos flower, produce fruit and then dry up. Rats feed on the fruits and multiply greatly, eating up crops in the fields. So when this famine took place in the early 60s, the Indian government did nothing much to help. The people were hurt by the neglect. Under the leadership of Pu Laldenga, an organisation called Mizo National Famine Front was set up. This was later renamed Mizo National Front (MNF), the group that fought for independence

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from India. Besides the famine, Mizoram had not been developed after the Independence. There were no proper roads, and the healthcare and education we had was negligible. There was not much improvement in any of these since the British left. These problems needed to be addressed. But taking up arms was a huge blunder. It only brought terrible sufferings for the whole community.

In all violent movements we observe, the participants may start with good intentions and high ideals. But as the fight goes on, they tend to descend into inhuman behaviour. I am against all violent movements and all atrocities.

JS: Do you consider *Zorami* as historical novel?

MJ: It may be too recent to call a historical novel in the strict sense of the term, as it portrays events in the author's own lifetime. But since it deals with historical events, and many of the characters in the novel are based on real people, some consider it appropriate to call it that. I personally like the term 'literary novel.' Maybe I have to leave it to the academicians to decide.

JS: Who did you talk to during your research for the novel?

MJ: A number of people I met at different settings, like at some get-togethers. Let me describe this one. When someone dies, it's our custom to keep visiting the family for many weeks after the funeral, to keep them company so they won't feel too lonely. When I went to Aizawl in May 2004, I visited a friend whose husband had died some time before. There were several other visitors. As we sat chatting, I brought up the subject of the '*ram buai*' period and asked what they remembered about it. Most of them spoke up. They narrated their experiences, some horrifying, some funny. I repeated the same method in Lunglei. I found that people were quite willing to come out with their own stories and the stories of others. I also interviewed at length some key persons by appointment, including former MNF leaders and a pastor who started the peace process.

JS: There is a hint of spiritual epiphany in the novel. Is it deliberate?

MJ: Spiritual epiphany is the key factor in my protagonist's inner healing. I honestly could not find any other way to mend her shattered psyche. And for a people still hurting from the atrocities they suffered, a genuine spiritual experience is the need. Spiritual, not merely religious.

JS: Do you think that some sort of spiritual bliss is needed for 'the time of singing has come' at the end of the novel?

MJ: The verse is actually taken from the Bible. I just applied it to Zorami's mental and emotional condition when her problems are solved. Yes, she certainly is in a state of spiritual bliss when her heart 'sings' these lines. It also points at the possibility of such healing for the land itself.

JS: Why did you make the story interspersed with songs and poems?

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MJ: This way of story-telling is borrowed from the Mizo tradition. Most of our folktales have lines meant for singing or chanting. Those may be parts of conversations, or parts that are important in the story. Using verses in my novel came quite naturally. But the way I have used them is different from that of the folktales. They are mostly quotes from real songs, which I translated into English. The lyrics in Chapter 40 are my own composition, since I couldn't find a suitable ready-made one for the occasion. I wrote it in Mizo language and translated it to English, to make it sound authentic.

JS: Will you enlighten us on the Mizoram Presbyterian Synod and its role these days?

MJ: Since the church plays a vital role in the Mizo society, The Mizoram Presbyterian Synod has been a powerful tool of social reforms. They get involved in all aspects of the society, including politics, like giving ethical guidelines before elections. They do not advocate voting for any Party, but would request the people to elect candidates with good character, and so on. But their influence seems to be weakening. They have not been able to check corruption, one of the biggest enemies of the society, for instance. And the recent lift on the liquor ban, which they fought against, shows that their political clout is on a downward slide.

JS: What was in your mind when you gave names of chapters/sections of your novel?

MJ: My editor 'commanded' me to give a title for each chapter after the last draft of the manuscript was completed. So I gave names that I felt were suitable to the content of each chapter. He changed some of them.

JS: *Zorami* capitalizes on Mizo folklore. Could you please cite a few examples from this novel for the vast reading world?

MJ: The traditional wisdom of a people is often expressed through folktales. Some Mizo tales that are relevant to the story line are narrated in *Zorami*.

In *Chemtatrakta's* story, we see how one person's aggressive action leads to a chain of anger and suffering. While the man Chemtatrakta was honing his machete at a stream, a prawn bit him. In his pain, he cut down a tree which supported a gourd vine. The gourd fell and hit the back of a jungle fowl. The fowl destroyed an ants' nest in anger. The furious ants bit a boar on the balls. The irritated boar pushed down a banana tree. A bat lodging in the banana tree, made homeless, entered an elephant's trunk. The elephant went wild and trampled down an old widow's hut. The incensed old woman dirtied the village's water source. Executing justice became very difficult with each culprit blaming another for their misdeed.

*Chunglengleh Hnuaileng Indo* tells the story of how a little tortoise's irresponsibility led to a war between birds and animals. Big Snake had given Teltea, a tortoise, charge of her eggs. A deer showed up and challenged Teltea to have a competition at jumping over the eggs. The deer neatly jumped over them, but the tortoise could not, flopped on the eggs and broke them. Then he ran away in fear, begging different animals to protect him. None dared, until Eagle, king of the birds,

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hid him under his wings. This led to a quarrel between Big Snake and Eagle, resulting in a great war, causing much trouble and loss of life.

JS: Do you consider your narration as 'linear'?

MJ: No. The narration is non-linear, weaving back and forth, in keeping with the portrayal of a people whose lives were disrupted and had fallen into chaos.

JS: Why is it 'a redemption song'?

MJ: This subtitle is taken from Bob Marley's popular song which calls for freedom. It was chosen by my editor. The lyric in a sense describes what the people of Mizoram went through. It also suits Zorami's spiritual and emotional experience towards the end. I think it's an apt subtitle for the novel.

JS: Is *Zorami* a trauma novel? Do you suggest any healing support for the trauma victims?

MJ: I should think so. The protagonist's personality undergoes a drastic change after her traumatic experience, and she is coping with the effects of that all through the novel. Her marred self-perception negatively affects her relationships, particularly with her husband, until her crisis experience towards the end. The same is true about the people of whom she is a kind of prototype.

Trauma victims need every possible support that can be given by the society. I have no particular suggestion on how to do it, except that it should come out of genuine care.

JS: Do you read Bangla novels? Are you familiar with *Prothom Alo* (First Light) by Sunil Gangopadhyay? I find a lot of similarities....

MJ: Unfortunately, no. I must make a point to do it.

JS: Postcolonial authors take the language of their coloniser (English or French, for example) and turn it on its head. – Do you follow the same trend?

MJ: I have used the English language to tell a Mizo story, and hope I have succeeded in bringing out the native flavour through it. For example, in the conversations, I 'listened' to my characters speaking in the Mizo language, and translated their words into English. In the descriptions, too, my aim was to make it all as 'Mizo' as possible. Some parts may read a bit bumpy because of this approach, though I've also tried to not hamper its readability – sort of striking a balance.

JS: You empower and give voice to the native population in their subordination. How old is this empowering process there?

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MJ: Mizo people came under the British rule and then became part of India. They mostly lived their own lives under both without too much of undesirable interference in general. As told in the novel, the British invaded Mizoram when some men killed an English tea garden manager and kidnapped his little daughter. The British government forced them to give up some of their old lifestyles, like inter-village raids and killings. Later, Christian missionaries arrived and brought in education and healthcare, thus beginning the process of empowerment. This was towards the end of nineteenth Century.

The way I see it, the real subordination of the Mizo people was what the Indian Army did to them in the aftermath of the uprising. The deprivation of power and voice was also most acute then. The air raids and Army atrocities were hushed up. The people of Mizoram became voiceless victims. Yes, *Zorami* has spoken out for the people whose voice was stifled.

JS: What are your other works?

MJ: This novel *Zorami* is my seventh book, published by Morph, a new imprint of Primalogue, Bangalore, in 2015. The new imprint was inaugurated with this book. My earlier books are: 1. *dTinkim Dawn*, a collection of poems in Mizo and English (2003, self-published with partial financing by Mizoram Publication Board); 2. *Fresh Lease*, a collection of short stories (2005, published by GLS, Mumbai); 3. *Amazing Adventures*, children's story (2006, GLS); 4. *A Pushkar Pandit's Tryst with God*, narrative non-fiction (2009, GLS); 5. *Magic Mirror Stories*, children's story (2010, GLS) and *The Messiah*, narrative non-fiction (2012, GLS). I've also contributed a number of poems, stories and articles to various publications.

JS: Over these years many awards and recognitions have come your way. Which are the ones dearest to you?

MJ: Sorry, not a single award! Awards and I don't seem to inhabit the same planet! However, warm appreciation of my works expressed by readers and critics are extremely precious to me.

JS: Are you planning for an anthology of poems?

MJ: Yes, the plan is there. I'm working on a set of poems divided into sections. About a month back, I thought they were almost ready. But I now find them not yet satisfactory and can't seem to get done with editing and rewriting them.

JS: I'm told ... *Zorami* is the first English novel by a Mizo writer. Is it so?

MJ: It's the first full-fledged novel. There were two Young Adult Fictions written by two young women that came out a couple of years before *Zorami*. One is *Facebook Phantom* by Suzanne Sangi, published by Duckbill Books in 2013. The other is *Jo's Journal* by Sarah Aineh (Notion Press, 2014). It seems both were just 17 when they brought out the books. Actually, we came to know about these two only after my novel came out.

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JS: Thank you, Malsawmi!

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*Jaydeep Sarangi is a bilingual writer, editor, reviewer, translator and author of a number of publications on postcolonial issues, Indian writing in English, Australian Literature, marginal literatures and creative writing in reputed journals and magazines. He is an Associate Professor, English Department, Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri College(CU), Kolkata. Sarangi is in the editorial board of several refereed journals in different continents. Widely anthologised and reviewed as a poet and a critic on postcolonial writings, he has authored five poetry collections in English and one in Bengali. With Rob Harle, he has authored five anthologies of poems from India and Australia. Another pioneering anthology (with Usha Kishore), Home Thoughts: Poems of the British Indian Diaspora, has just come out. He may be reached at: jaydeepsarangi@gmail.com*

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