

*Female as a Monstrous Figure:
A Study of Mizo Mythical
Character Phungpuinu through
the Feminist Disability Lens*

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Abstract

Nestled in the north-eastern corner of India, Mizoram is isolated from the mainland in geography as well as in culture. Its habitants are collectively called the Mizos. As a tribal society, its history is rooted in the oral narratives, embedded with clusters of myths, legends and folktales. The folktales have become the autobiographical ethnography and are the evidence of continuities and consistencies through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief, and feeling (Khangte 2018, 12). While the Mizo literary archive is devoid of disability representation, the large reservoir of folk literature serves as the earliest narrative to inform us of the cultural and societal perception of disability. Disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body. The female body is inherently disabled and victimized as she is considered a “mutilated” man (Horowitz 1976, 189). The paper will investigate the intersection of folklore and disability within the Mizo context through the feminist disability lens, focusing on the folk mythical character Phungpuinu, who is commonly described as a horrendous female humanoid creature. She is a common villain character in Mizo folktales who is twice deformed in her un-femaleness and its un-humanness. The historical figure of the monster invokes disability. Although the term has expanded to encompass all forms of social and corporeal aberration, monster originally described people with congenital impairments. ‘Women monsterization’ (Patterson 2017, 3) is a common trope in literature, from Medusa, the snake-haired woman to ‘the mad woman in the attic’. The Mizo cultural discourse and literature is blotched with ableist agenda which often comes into contact with the sexist narrative. Navigating this intersection would instigate a new critical inquiry into the neglected field of feminist disability studies.

Keywords:

Disability, Feminist theory, Mizo folktales, Monstrousness, Phungpuinu

The term 'disability' hints at something missing either fiscally, physically, mentally or legally, and to be disabled evokes a marginalized place in society, culture, economics and politics (Goodley 2010, 1). The female body is inherently disabled and victimized as she is considered a "mutilated" man (Horowitz 1976, 189). Twice marginalized from the normal society, the disabled female body has been the victim of subjugation and discrimination. The double infliction of the 'male gaze' and the 'ableist gaze' has marginalized a disabled woman's existence to the painful strait of humiliation and sufferings. Disability literature is laden with stereotypes and negative assumptions that confine disability representation within a claustrophobic attic. From the "world's hall of mirror that is mythology" to the folklores and the contemporary archives, disability is navigated more as an accusation than as an assessment. History carries the indentation of this stigma through the distorted image of unconventional women engendering the common trope of 'Women monsterization' in literature, from Medusa, the snake-haired woman to 'the mad woman in the attic' of Thornfield hall. Drawing from this cultural discourse, the paper investigates the intersection of folklore and disability within the Mizo context through the feminist disability lens, focusing on the folk mythical character *Phungpuinu*, commonly described as a horrendous female humanoid creature. Garland-Thompson's introduction of the feminist disability theory probes into the cultural meanings attributed to bodies that societies deem disabled and defines disability as a vector of socially constructed identity and a form of embodiment that interacts with both the material and the social environments (2005, 1559). The uncontested image of *Phungpuinu* as an evil entity has permeated the cultural discourse. This paper navigates the cultural situations in which the figure appeared. A critical dissection of the character through the feminist disability lens will address the intricate social process of the disablement of *Phungpuinu*.

Feminist disability studies is one of the critical discourses within feminism that arises from conflicts between overarching feminist assumptions and the experience or perspectives of women, who, in addition to being female, are members of other underrepresented or stigmatized groups. The points of view underpinning these critical subgenres contest not only the homogenous category of woman but insist as well on articulating just how multiple identities intersect

(Garland-Thompson 1995, par. 1). Garland Thompson's description of the motif and fundamental axiom of the conflation of feminism and disability provides a critical backdrop of this study, she states in "Feminist Disability Studies";

Feminism challenges the belief that femaleness is the natural form of physical and mental deficiency or constitutional unruliness. Feminist disability studies similarly question our assumptions that disability is a flaw, lack or excess. To do so, it describes disability broadly from a social rather than medical perspective. Disability, it argues, is a cultural interpretation of human variation, rather than an inferiority, a pathology to cure, or undesirable trait to eliminate. (1557)

The discursive link between physical difference and disability offers a tangent towards the discernment, characterization and representation of *Phungpuinu*. Jeffrey R. Wilson enunciated how "difference is exaggerated to make what is difficult to interpret into something radically strange, even unnatural and inhuman" (R. Wilson 2018, 147). This claim explicates the deliberation of disability as the assignment of aberrance to physical difference, and instigates a narrative informing the cause and effect of the process of exaggeration, or process of de-familiarizing or othering, which culminates into the obscure concept of monsterization. In relation to the association of disability and corporeality, Garland Thompson has also explained that disability and femaleness have been primarily navigated as a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune. Price Herndl's discourse on the link between disability and illness also explained invalidism, her term for disability, as the collection of formal corporeal differences, usually pathologized as physical "defects," "abnormalities," or--more alarmingly--"monstrosities," that comprise much of what the nondisabled world visually registers as disabilities (Garland-Thompson 1994, par.14).

Phungpuinu: The Uncanny in Mizo Folktales

A panoramic view of the history of literature would show that at the opposite end of the "Angel of the house" and "Damsel in distress" ideals in femininity, is the monster or creature of the wild, which is embodied in the Mizo folk character Phungpuinu. Her character has been described variedly by different folklorists in

translation; she-ghost, mother-ghost (Thanga 1978, 50-52), ogress (*Pachua* 2013, 43), a spirit, ghost, bogey, spool, ogress, goblin, hobgoblin (generally regarded as female) (Poonte), hobgoblin (Khangte 85), an evil witch (Chhangte 2023, 60). She is a common villain in the tales of *Chhurbura*, *Raldawna* and *Tumchhingi*, *Lengkawia* etc. Her physical features as described by different scholars, authors and bloggers as follows;

Phungpuinu or the 'ogress' has been portrayed as very ugly to look at, silly by nature covetous and seem to possess some kind of magical powers (Ramdinsangi 2014, 45).

A Phungpuinu is an extremely ugly sort of goblin. They are always female and usually not very nice (Chhangte 2023, 2).

Para-human entity (whose) name raises children's hairs without ever knowing what they are like, what their powers be. No brave heart has ever challenged them... (R. Thangvunga 21)

Demons rather than as benevolent beings. Their attributes are limited to appear in frightful and horrifying forms. They occupy inferior status to humans and are therefore jealous of humans, especially women, for their beauty and love and often resort to tricks and cannibalism (Gospel 50).

The same trope of evil women with some form of physical deformity appeared commonly in other Mizo folktales. In *The Story of Nuchhimi*, the villain is *Hmuichukchuriduninu*, an 'evil old woman who lived in the woods. She had a very long neck, and instead of a nose and mouth, she had a hard protruding beak, like a bird's (Chhangte 2023, 25). In *The Story of Vanchung Nula*, the antagonist to the *Vanchung nula*, the Sky Maiden, an epitome of female beauty and grace, is *Taunu*. A *Taunu* is a nasty female evil spirit that lives in dark forests and looks and acts very much like a *Phungpuinu* (107). This paper aims to enquire into the intersection of disability, folklore and feminism on the cultural paradigm through a study of the character *Phungpuinu*, the embodiment of what is grotesque and uncanny in the tales that have been passed down for over a century. As in every other culture, disability is the hidden 'other'. Douglas C. Baynton has rightly

observed, "Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write". Through this study, the Mizo literary archive is explored, narrowing it down to the oldest record, folklore in order to explicate the inconspicuous existence of disability in the narrative, that had been shrouded by the normative cultural discourse into obscurity. Disability does not find direct or appropriate representation, however characters like Phungpuinu is the implication of the ambiguous cultural perception of what is deviant and thus offers a site for enquiry into how the society today and the culture interacts with disability down the history.

In *The Story of Tumchhingi and Raldawna*, the female protagonist is compared to a bright red berry because of her beauty. She and Raldawna, a handsome young man, married. On their way home to her husband's village, she encountered Phungpuinu while Raldawna was away. Phungpuinu saw Tumchhingi's shadow on the ground and mistook it for hers, singing happily to herself as she admired the shadow. When Tumchhingi finally interrupted her, she climbed the tree and suggested they look for each other's lice. The ogre's wild hair was full of lice while Tumchhingi's scalp was clean and white. Then she became hungry and in a series of events swallowed Tumchhingi. When Raldawna returned he suspiciously commented at Phungpuinu who had put on Tumchhingi's clothes, "Why is it that your eyes look so stretched?...Why is it that your fingers are so long and pointy, like talons?" She falsely lived as Raldawna's wife for a while. In the end, she and Tumchhingi competed by sword fighting and her body was butchered in half and thrown out.

Central to this folktale is the Puritanical accusations against unconventional women of maleficarum, or the power "to cause harm to others by supernatural means" (Patterson 2017, 1). The cultural abomination of the deviant woman is coarsely reflected in the portrayal of Phungpuinu, the ugly and physically deformed figure who is jealous of the beautiful bride, Tumchhingi. Her deviancy is externalized in her disfigurement and evinced through the vulgarity of her nature and the inhumane cannibalistic act of devouring Tumchhingi. The violent ending of Phungpuinu in the story echoes the ableist society's desire for 'the retention of normal physical features' (Sati et. al. 2022, 127) and elimination of undesirable traits (explicitly embodied in Phungpuinu). This connotes the safeguarding of a

'normal' society that strictly rejects the 'abnormal' as the female counterpart of Raldawna.

In *The Story of Lengkawia*, *Lengkawia* built a trap. Phungpuinu came and asked what it was, when she came to know it was a trap she got curious and wanted to trap herself. Foolishly, she trapped herself and she was hanging upside down and seemingly enjoyed it until *Lengkawia* beat to death despite her begging. Later he was washing Phungpuinu's intestine in the river when a group of Phungpui came and ate the intestines. When *Lengkawia* told them it was their friend's intestine, they were furious and resolved to take revenge. However *Lengkawia* managed to usurp them and violently fought them off through a series of clever tricks. This folktale insinuates that the ghastly image of violence against Phungpuinu is well within the cultural comfort zone. Her anomalous, unfeminine body and para-human derogated status render her disposable in the eyes of society. No such violence against a 'normal' woman, of ripping out a person's intestine or being fed a friend's intestine would fuse into a narrative without raising a brow from the listeners.

In *Chhura and The Horn of Plenty*, Chhura and his brother Nahaia exchanged their jhum. In Chhura's new jhum, there lived a Phungpuinu and her children inside the hollow of a tree. Chhura, in a series of events killed all the children and then he planned to capture the mother-ghost also. He set up a swing to lure her out, then caught her while she was swinging. The she-ghost offered to bail herself out in exchange for *The Horn of Plenty or a Magic Horn*. In this story, *Phungpuinu's* motherhood is mentioned alongside her loss of all her children in the cruel hands of Chhura. The story of *Chhura* and the *Story of Lengkawia* are testament to the cultural toleration of the victimization of *Phungpuinu*, the undesirable woman whose mere existence is a convenience to the patriarchal ableist society. Violence towards her character is even considered a comedic relief. The interactions between the 'normal' society and *Phungpuinu*, as seen in the mentioned folktales, all have a common ending- the obliteration of her character. These stories are a resonance of Prof. Sati's statement that for the "the 'normal' world...there is...nothing else to do but admonish the woman who has strayed, even if it means resorting to violence" (127).

History of Monstrosity and Disability: An Intersection

Monsters are never just monsters. Since antiquity, monsters have been used as propaganda to define marginalized groups as subhuman. Monstrous bodies, which defy categorization through liminality and hybridity, are often used to signify a dangerous Other (Steiner 2021, 11). The historical figure of the monster has always invoked disability. Although the term has expanded to encompass all forms of social and corporeal aberration, monster originally described people with congenital impairments (Lawrence 2016, 9). Dana Oswald, the author of *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, posited that the clearest definition of monstrosity is based on the physical difference. A monstrous body is visibly so and is constituted through lack, excess or hybridity (4). A critical view of the conception and historical contextualisation of monstrosity alongside disability would reveal there is an easily bridgeable gap between how scholars and researchers have defined them and how the general mass perceived them. In the medieval period, a literal definition of the monstrous referred to any deviation from the norm. They are the expression of a cultural discomfort. The etymology of monstrosity suggests the complex roles that monsters play within society. According to the anonymous author of the medieval text, *Mulierium De Secretis*; “Monsters or errors of nature are those individuals of a certain species which in a certain part of their body are outside the bounds of the common course of the nature of the species”. Sir John Mandeville from *Mandeville’s Travels*, written between 1353–71, describes monster as “anything deformed, of both man or beast or of anything else”. The main contention here is that monstrosity is a physical aberration, and “in order to be monstrous, one must manifest a clear and usually visible sign of physical difference from that which is “normal” (Oswald 2010, 9). An etymological history of the term essentially validates this claim, as ‘Monster’ is derived from the Latin, *monstrare*, meaning ‘to demonstrate’, and *monere* ‘to warn’. Monsters, in essence, are demonstrative. They reveal, portend, show and make evident, often uncomfortably so.

Disability, according to Georges Canguilhem, could be observed as a body that is not how it ought to be, and a characteristic that does not meet the expected norm, or trait of minority, alien to most people as it is not commonly observed (69). A person with a disability is predisposed as a “defective human being” or “less

than a whole person" (Vehmas 2004, 209). These two socio-historical concepts, Disability and Monstrosity violently intersects with femaleness, expediting the cultural narrative that conjoins women as 'deformed, monstrous, magical, and connected to the Devil' (Steiner 2021, 11). The character of Phungpuinu stands at this critical juncture as a figure of ambiguity, 'a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel...that lives on what Mary Elizabeth Coleridge called "the crystal surface"' (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 812).

Marie-Helene Huet, the author of *Monstrous Imagination* (1993), enquires into interface of monstrous genesis and disability. Her historical account of the discursive place occupied by monsters documents an important shift in the cultural interpretation of congenital disability that came with modern Western thought. Prior to the Age of Enlightenment and the epoch of rationalism and scientific praxis, 'living monsters - people born with visible disabilities' were seen less as medical abnormalities than as signs, as embodiments of some inexplicable, often religious, meaning. Their corporeal otherness certainly cast them outside of ordinary humanity as it does today, but it also invested them with a kind of prestigious awe which accompanies ineffable mystery. As revealed by the etymological link between "monster" and "demonstrate," their bodies were marvellous messages to be read, not abnormalities to be institutionalized or dismissed as inferior. Huet made another significant enquiry into the Romantic ideology and its relation to the gendered imagination that presents the aberrant body's capacity to disrupt the patriarchal order of things as well as to destabilize patrimony's line of inheritance based on resemblances between progeny and their putatively primary progenitor, the father (Garland-Thompson 1994, 18-22). Huet's contention is a resonance of Aristotle's claim that "anyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type. The first beginning of this deviation is when a female is formed instead of a male...". Through this explication, a decisive association has been made between the monstrous and the feminine as two departures from the norm (Huet 1994, 718). Phungpuinu is both the female and the monstrous, the unsophisticated Other who is "denied the intellectual development".

The Japanese proverb – “the nail that sticks out gets hammered out” in reference to the cultural assertion of the undesirability of corporeal deviance echoed the voice of every culture and its desire to create a society free of deviance, anomalies, aberration or disability. Innate to a man’s social psyche is the desire for uniform group and bodies that will conform. Disability is the unsophisticated other who made uniformity impossible, the non-conforming body – the nail that sticks out. Mitchell and Snyder, in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000) describes how this non-conforming body becomes ‘a crutch upon which literary narrative leans on for representational power, disruptive potentiality and analytical insight’ (224). Thus the disabled body becomes a metaphorical device and the anomalous character often finds visibility in literary representations only as a symbol of fear, villainy or danger. Banik Somdev has stated in his work *Representation of Disabled Characters in Literature* (2016), “Physical beauty is equated to goodness of the soul, while disability to evil. The conflict between normality and deformity is presented as the archetypical conflict between good and evil, where the evil crippled characters are hell bent on destroying the good ones, and eventually getting eliminated themselves. Such disabled and deformed stereotypes abound in literature” (Graceline Sorna 2019, 2). The ‘mad woman in the attic’ of Thornfield Hall, the controversial character in Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, Rochester’s first wife, West-Indian born, the hidden mistress, brought home from the Caribbean and tamed like a wild beast, isolated from the eyes of society, considered the dark double of Jane Eyre, Bertha Mason is another victim of women. The dehumanising code of Jane’s description of Bertha on their first encounter that uses a neutral pronoun ‘it’ incites a persuasive account of Bertha’s monstrosity; What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell; it groveled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face (1980, 295).

A critical point to note is that, even before Bertha’s corporeality grew ‘monstrous’, she was already othered by her mental disability. The grotesque figure of the woman with a ‘hysterical’ and ‘demonic’ laughter, standing on all-fours and lunging at her husband expedites a total collapse of humanity and femininity in Bertha. This deranged and bestial image of the madwoman is not a far cry from the description of Phungpuinu in Mizo folktales.

Phungpuinu: The Monstrous Female

Jess Zimmerman, in her book *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology* (2021) reexamines the monsters of antiquity through a feminist lens. Folklore, as a historical archive has shaped our dominant culture injected with malicious female creatures. In our language, in our stories, we underline the idea that women who step out of bounds—who are angry or greedy or ambitious, who are overtly sexual or not sexy enough – are not just out of the norm. They are unnatural. Monstrous. Female monsters have implicitly represented “the bedtime stories patriarchy tells itself,” reinforcing expectations about women’s bodies and behaviour. Zimmerman investigates the monsters of antiquity through a feminist lens. “Women have been monsters, and monsters have been women, in centuries’ worth of stories,” she notes in the book, “because stories are a way to encode these expectations and pass them on” (Mcgreevy 2021)

Garland-Thomson explains disability as ‘a culturally fabricated narrative of the body. Wendell has also explained the feminist concept of othering as a process that entails seeing disabled people as symbols of something we fear. The two theorists have discussed how disability and illness are gendered feminine (Ahlvik-Harju 2016, 227). Likewise, Price Herndl enunciated that illness remains a feminine experience. Otherness is continually maintained by culture and concepts like women monsterization is one paradigm on which this is procured. Humans are both fascinated and repelled by monstrous forms. They want to witness strange bodies, but they also wish to control, to circumscribe these bodies. The aberrant body of the ogress who fights the beautiful damsel out of jealousy and tries to kill the men to usurp them, is painted with the strong scent of malevolence, disgust and fear. As folklore is the earliest narrative that informs us the cultural discourse, it inevitably guides our perception and reception of the deviant character. In the contemporary social context, women who are fat or broad and has wild volumous hair may jokingly be referred to as *Phung*. Phungpuinu’s physical aberration is implicated through the absence of femininity in terms of her appearance- wild hair, dark skin, broad and thick body and saggy breasts.

Susan Bordo's feminist idea of "too-muchness" of women can be integrated into a disability narrative that perceives subjugated deviant bodies as 'ungovernable,

intemperate, or threatening' (Garland-Thomson 2005, 8). The character of Phungpuinu has been passed down through folklore and pervaded the cultural and social discourse as the peculiar embodiment of what a female should not be. Female monsters have been known to engage in transgressive gender roles, by their temper and strength. They hunt, take revenge or simply kill men. She is "dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" because she challenges cultural "normality" and rewrite cultural understanding. Debbie Felton wrote that the female villains' myths "all spoke to men's fear of women's destructive potential. The myths then, to a certain extent, fulfil a male fantasy of conquering and controlling the female." True to this postulation, the Mizo folktales is imbued with the defeat, subjugation and degradation of Phungpuinu. Moreover, Phungpuinu is the monstrous-double of the ideal Mizo woman, she enacts the "fantasies of aggression, domination and inversion".

Debbie Felton has explicitly claimed, "That women could also sometimes produce children with physical abnormalities only added to the perception of women as potentially terrifying and destructive" (McGreevy 2016). Here lies one of the peculiarities of Phungpuinu despite her lack of feminine and maternal bearing connotating the impracticality of a male counterpart, she is known to have offsprings. A body that is capable of reproducing itself is considerably more dangerous than a body that simply attacks but can be killed off (Oswald 2005, 15). Phungpuinu subverts the biological and social order, and thus steps out of the familiar plane and into the realm of the uncanny, where her ability (to reproduce) becomes a disability, and her naturalness becomes monstrosity. However, Marie-Helen Huet offers a perspective contradictory to this negative implication. According to her, the belief that monstrous births resulted from the mother's wishes, desires, or impressions at the moment of conception or during pregnancy was not an accusation against the mother but, rather, was a narrative attributing both potency and autonomy to the female imagination. The character Phungpuinu who is a monstrous character, a mother without male counterpart thus stands as a symbol of female autonomy. Although acknowledging, on the one hand, the classical interpretation Aristotle inaugurates of the female as a deformed male, Huet asserts, on the other hand: "The monster [produced by the inherently deviant mother] thus erased paternity and proclaimed the dangerous

power of the female imagination". The monster, Huet points out, was the maternal signature, a "neologism, an object of exclusion," a product of female "writing in which the signifier, like the monster, would prevail over the signified (that is the father, the origin, the root of words) or, worse yet, would be capable of doing without it entirely" (Garland-Thompson 1994, par. 19-23). Such reduction reveals why Phungpuinu has become a symbol of the outsider, chaos, and evil, utilized to warn against subverting the social order, where man is superior to monsters, and man is superior to women.

Conclusion

The Mizo society, which constitutes five major tribes (Mizo is a generic term for all the tribes residing in Mizoram. It is not used in reference to a particular tribe.) is a traditional one and is culturally rooted in patriarchy. There has always been a cultural anxiety about women who do not conform to the norm just as well as a body that does not fit into the standard. While deviant bodies are spared from direct social scrutiny, deviant women are the first target of social discussion and contempt. Women monsterization is a continually evolving concept that is inbuilt into the social structure. Phungpuinu thus, become a crucial figure. She can be seen as an extreme example of how a woman's image is distorted and disfigured by the patriarchal and ableist society if she steps out of the conventional realm. The female body or the disabled body, or the disabled female body are neither new or unknown, but due to the social inhibitions around them, they remain absent from the main cultural literary and social discourse. They are visible only if they serve a purpose of inducing fear, as a message against the danger of deviating from the norm and conventions set by the normal society. The disablement of Phungpuinu character by her corporeal aberration reflects the cultural and social perception of women who exhibits anomalous behaviour that transgresses the traditional expectations. While the discrimination of women with unconventional behaviour or deviant character may go against societal ethics, the marginalisation of women with abnormal appearance is historically tolerated, trivialized and even deemed necessary. This nuanced junction is where the ancient folk character Phungpuinu was born and lived.

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