

Short Story

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Chawngchilhi

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Abstract: Chawngchilhi is a Mizo folklore that has been translated by Dr Margaret L. Pachuau from Mizo to English. The story takes place in pre colonial and pre Christian era of the Mizos, who reside in Mizoram in North East India. It denotes the centrality of folk ethic and the communion between animals and men as well as the inherently primitive nature of the community within the oral tradition.

Keywords: Jhum, snake, maiden, dao, widow, gourd, em

A long time ago, there lived a man who had two daughters. The older girl was a comely young maiden named Chawngchilhi. The younger daughter however was a young girl who was only old enough to accompany her older sister to fetch firewood from the forest. One year, there were a lot of wild animals and birds that fed on their crop and so the jhum had to be guarded all year round. Chawngchilhi and her younger sister would go to the jhum everyday and because of this their father was well pleased and he would pack a mid day meal for them, consisting of rice and dried meat. However in the midst of all this, Chawngchilhi and the snake that lived near their jhum fell in love.

They would meet frequently and after the sisters cleared the jhum Chawngchilhi would send her younger sister to call the snake. Thus in this manner they would meet everyday and so the love between them thrived by the day. Her younger sister was often reluctant to call the snake but Chawngchilhi would threaten her by saying, "If you do not want to call him, I shall make this known to him." Thus, her younger sister would call the snake only because she was terrified. The snake would slither out as soon as Chawngchilhi's younger sister called out for him and he would crawl out of the snake pit. It would then wander towards the *jhum* hut and thus in this manner the snake would spend the entire day with Chawngchilhi. Her younger sister was very scared of the snake and so she was reluctant to even enter the *jhum* hut when the snake was inside. Thus she did not even eat her mid day meal very often. On the other hand, Chawngchilhi would be cavorting with the snake whom she had taken as her lover and they would also enjoy the mid day meal together. And as she never partook of the mid day meal and because her elder sister was in love with a snake the younger sister soon grew thin with worry. Chawngchilhi, on the other hand swore her sister to secrecy and would often threaten her to keep her alliance with the snake a secret from her father. She would threaten her by saying, "If you even tell my father about the snake, I shall order the snake to swallow you whole." Thus, her younger sister did not dare to tell their father anything. However because she was growing more and more emaciated, her father asked, "My dear, I feed you with rice and meat, why are you still so thin?". But no matter how hard he tried, he

could not get a response from his daughter. One day however when Chawngchilhi was away the father decided to ask his younger daughter yet again, and he asked her, "My dear, you are getting thinner by the day. Is it because you are pining away for a lover?"

At this she retorted, "Of course not. My sister is the one who has a lover." After deliberating at length, the younger sister told her father about Chawngchilhi and the snake. In the process she told him about how the snake and her sister would eat up the mid day meal. She also confessed that she was terrified about the snake. As soon as he heard all this, her father was enraged and he decided to kill the snake. He bided his time and finally one day he told Chawngchilhi, "You must stay home today. Your younger sister and I will go to the *jhum*."

He then sharpened his dao and when they reached the *jhum* he pretended that he was Chawngchilhi. He wore her clothes and made himself up like a woman and even placed an *em* (a traditional woven basket) on his back. He did this in case the snake spotted him from afar, in order that he would still mistake him for Chawngchilhi. When they reached the *jhum* hut he hid inside and he told his daughter, "My dear, call the snake to come to the *jhum*, and I shall lay in wait for him and when he comes inside I shall kill him."

The girl did as she was told and started to call for the snake. In a short while the snake came crawling out of his hole, and entered the *jhum* hut. Instantly Chawngchilhi's father hacked away at the snake with his sharpened dao and he cut the snake in three different pieces. After this the father and daughter headed for home as fast as they could. The father however, could no longer contain his anger, and as soon as they reached home, he called Chawngchilhi and when she appeared he began to hack away at her like one insane, with his dao and soon she too was dead. However, he did not know that she was pregnant with the snake's children, and when he cut away at her stomach, there were hundreds of little snakes that crawled out of her womb. This enraged him all the more and he began to kill them. He killed all but one snake who slithered away to the lower part of the house and hid in the mound of a dung beetle. Soon, the snake grew big and was both wild and ferocious. It was a greedy snake and at times it would steal chicken and eggs from the nearby houses. The people in the village then started to complain about the disappearance of the various edibles from their houses and it was a frequent occurrence. They remained mystified by the thefts and gradually there were reports of pigs and goats and even children disappearing. The villagers lived in extreme anxiety and children especially did not dare to wander out of their houses to play in the evenings. Soon the villagers grew worried and decided to find out why the thefts were taking place in so rapid a manner. An old widow in the village knew the reason behind the mystery all along and on being questioned she told the villagers, "I will reveal the secret only if you promise to give me the choicest portion of the meat of the snake when you hunt him down."

The villagers replied, "Kapi, We will surely give you whichever portion of the meat of the snake that you desire." The old woman then told them that the culprit who took the animals and the children was none other

than a huge snake. She also knew where the snake lived and she denoted the direction to them. The snake was very cunning and so the villagers could not catch it at once. Thus the villagers would bribe it with meat and other tasty portions of food so that it would not catch other children in the villages. As they were bent on killing the snake, they set a trap in its hole and in this manner after a long while they could finally catch hold of it. However the snake was big and huge and it was difficult for the villagers to pull the snake out of the hole. They struggled very hard and eventually they managed to get hold of it. The snake however, warned them and said, "Even if you pull me very hard you will not be able to get hold of my tail."

Finally the villagers cut the tail and they cooked the meat of the snake and they gave the old woman the head of the snake as her share. She cooked it for the entire night but she realized however that it could not cook well enough to be eaten. So she finally gave up and said, "Let me see if I can eat it now". The snake was yet alive and so he cautioned, "Watch out, you might pierce my eyes with your sharp tongs". Eventually the old woman got very annoyed and she threw the head of the snake along with the pot where it was cooking. The rest of the villagers feasted on the meat of the snake and that night the roosters in the village began to crow and as they did so, they all urged in unison, "Let all the guests leave the village."

Due to the advice of the roosters, all the villagers who had guests in their house were compelled to send them out of the village. The old woman too was compelled to send out the lone guest in her house. As soon as the guests had reached the outskirts of the village, the entire village shook and trembled and all the houses of the people who had consumed the meat of the snake fell down in the debris. As the old woman had not consumed the meat herself, her house alone did not fall down to the ground. The head of the snake that the old woman had thrown out turned into a big gourd and it grew big and strong. Often people would exclaim, "I have not seen a gourd like this ever in my life".

However, it had only one fruit and this astonished all the villagers. The lone fruit that it bore however grew big and healthy and people would marvel at it from far and wide. Often they would ask, "I wonder how many seeds it will bear?". As this question was being deliberated upon, Chhura the famed trickster, was passing by the village and it so happened that he had overheard the ogress chanting, "That huge gourd has only one seed". And so in response to the query of the villagers he replied, "It has only one seed". But none believed him and they said, "We do not believe you. A gourd as big as this one will surely produce more than one seed. Only Chhura could utter something so ridiculous." When they did cut open the gourd it turned out that it indeed had only one seed and so it came to pass, that Chhura the famed trickster was proved right.

Margaret L. Pachuau has several published works to her credit and these include works of Mizo fiction in translation in *The Heart of the Matter* (2004), *The Experience of Expatriation* (2006), *Construction of Good and Evil in Iris Murdoch's Discourse* (2007), *Handpicked Tales from Mizoram* (2008). She won the first prize for fiction in translation, in a competition organized by Muse India in 2008 for *Lamkhuang* (translated as *The Jackfruit Tree*) by a Mizo author named Vanneihtluanga.