

Satire as Cultural Critique: Negotiating Mizo Identity in Zephyr Drama

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of satire in reflecting and shaping cultural identity within the context of Zephyr Drama, a prominent theatrical production rooted in Mizo society. Satire, as a literary and performative tool, is examined not merely as a form of entertainment but as a cultural critique that exposes contradictions within societal values, political structures, and personal morality. The study contextualises satire historically, referencing canonical works, which serve as comparative models for analysing the Mizo adaptation of satire in Zephyr Drama.

By focusing on two dramas—*Tu Rawng Nge I Bawl Dawn?* and *Sum of Money*—the paper identifies how satire in these performances interrogates and mocks the contradictions within Mizo cultural identity. Characters such as Pu Tenga, who misuses his church title and status for personal gain, Johnny, who abandons his native language and roots after a brief time outside the state, and Pu Thanglianhrimhrima, a corrupt officer who misuses his power, exemplify the tension between traditional values and modern aspirations.

The paper argues that Zephyr Drama acts as a mirror to Mizo society, highlighting how cultural identity is continually negotiated and reshaped under the pressure of hypocrisy, globalisation, and materialism. The satire embedded in the dialogues and scenarios reflects the inner conflicts of a society caught between the ethical demands of Christianity, the influence of modernity, and the desire for social status.

Keywords: identity, culture, satire, cultural identity, Mizo, ethics, identity negotiation

1. Introduction

Satire is a literary tool or a means to mock the shallowness, stupidity, follies, and superficiality in a humorous and absurd manner. But the main objective behind it is to dislodge the shortcomings and put forward an appropriate vision and perception of life in a constructive way. According to Abrams & Harpham (2015), satire is a “literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation (p.352). It is a genre of literature that uses wit for the purpose of social criticism. It ridicules problems in society, governance, business, and individuals in order to bring action to certain follies and vices in order to bring about change and improvement.

Irony and sarcasm are important aspects of satire. Irony is used when the actual intent is expressed in words which carry the opposite meaning, while sarcasm is a sharply mocking or contentious remark. According to LeBoeuf (2007), satire has three characteristics: firstly a *critique* of human behaviour, vice, or folly, with the intention of persuading the audience to look at it disdainfully, which will encourage a

degree of social change. Secondly, *irony*, which is mostly used in a humorous way, to point out the problems with the behaviour being critiqued. Lastly, *implicitness* as “satire is not an overt statement, and it does not come to an explicit verdict, but rather the critiqued behaviour deconstructs itself within the satirical work by being obviously absurd, most often because it is exaggerated or taken out of its normal context (p.3). Murasing (2025) have stated seven purposes of satire as criticism of society and institutions, encouraging reflection and change, entertainment and humour, exposing hypocrisy and corruption, highlighting absurdity, breaking taboos, and revealing hidden truths. There are three forms of satire, namely, Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean satire (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). Horatian satire ridicules of universal human folly. Its purpose is to entertain and gently correct. Juvenalian satire is contentious and abrasive and uses attitudes of irony and sarcasm. Its purpose is to expose and condemn wrongdoing or immorality and provoke change. Menippean satire criticises mental attitudes rather than societal norms of specific individuals and exposes absurdity and challenges ideas.

Satire used in a humorous form is given the name ‘Satirical Comedy’. It is usually dramatic. An example of Satire in modern pop culture is the TV series ‘South Park’ that uses Satire as its primary medium for drawing attention to the flaws in society, especially American society at present. The script and writing for the show are an excellent example of satire in written form. Though a comedic and humorous tone is used in satire, “its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit as a weapon and as a tool to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society” (Singh, 2012, p.68).

Satire has been used for social criticism for a very long time since it has a unique ability to confront to public discourse and ridicule leaders into changing their policies. Some consider satire to be the best way to understand culture, as it provides insights into the collective psyche of a people and show who had power.

The paper aims to study satire as cultural critique in Zephyr drama. Zephyr Drama club is an art production famous in Mizoram, the north-eastern part of India, where actors perform and display theatrical activity in the form of play or show often performed on stage with live audiences which is later recorded and redisplayed in the form of television show entertainment. It can be said that they are the most popular and only well functioned stage play artists in Mizoram. The theme of the drama is regional in nature and characters are mostly based upon Mizo society. Mr. H. Rotluanga (Mapuia) is the producer, proprietor and director of the Zephyr drama club. These dramas are used by the producer to address social, political and economical issues and challenges that affects Mizo society.

2. History of Satire in English Literature

The history of satire begins with the early Greek poets. From the 1st Century A.D until near the end of 12th Century there appears to be a little satire of any note in European literature, though one can detect satirical elements and tones here and there in the occasional work.

From late in the 16th century and in the early 17th century, we find an increasing propensity towards satirical modes and means. Thomas Lodge’s ‘A Fig for Momus’ (1595) is one example among the English literature, which is a collection of satire in Horatian manner.

From round about the middle of the 17th Century, one can see the increase in the list of satirists' figures like Sir John Denham, Edmund Waller, John Dryden and Alexander Pope. The major English satirist of the second half of the 17th century was John Dryden whose most notable satires were ‘Absalom and Achitophel’, ‘The Medal’ to which Dryden wrote an important preface called ‘Discourse concerning the original and progress of satire’. John Oldham, a younger contemporary of Dryden, wrote some satire, and

so did Rochester later. The finest satire of the period in verse was written by Nicolas Boileau from 1660 onwards; he published a large number of satires. One of his main works was 'Le Lutrin'.

In European literature, the last part of the 17th century and much of the 18th is generally regarded as the golden age of satire. The various reasons adduced for this are that it was a period of fairly highly developed civilisation and culture which bred the satirist whose need and purpose was to protect the culture from abuse, aberration and corruption. The satirist's aim was to keep it intact by ridiculing and bringing scorn upon those who threatened to impair it. Thus, we find Pope satirising materialism while Swift ferociously attacked hypocrisy, pride, cruelty and political expedience. With their moral weight and unblinking scrutiny of the truth, such men sought to be cleansers and guardians of civilisation. It can be said that one of the major preferred modes of expression in prose and verse was satire.

In the first half of the 18th century, there flourished the two greatest satirists in the history of literature, namely Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope. In France, the greatest prose satirist of the period was unquestionably Voltaire. Minor verse satirists of the late 18th century were John Walcott, Christopher Ansley, Alan Ramsey and Robert Burns.

Many 19th-century poets wrote satire on occasion, notably Praed, Bulwer-Lytton, Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Coventry Patmore, and Alfred Austin. For the most part, during the 19th century, prose was the chosen medium of satire. During the 20th century, satire was rare. Two of the main reasons for this lack are that it has been a period of much instability and violent change, and the humour industry has grown to such an extent that the satirist can hardly make his work felt except in caricature and the cartoon. The rich literary value and sources that has been hidden in Zephyr drama and its impactful contribution in shaping the culture and society are an under-researched area that will greatly contribute in the literature of satire in the modern world. Therefore, it has been chosen for this study.

3. Literature review:

Two notable satirical works have been considered for the literature review of this paper. First is Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift (1726) and the other is Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain (1884). The following sections present a review of these two works.

a) Gulliver's Travels (Jonathan Swift, 1726):

Jonathan Swift, one of the leading satirists of his day, wrote Gulliver's Travels as a satire of human nature. Lemuel Gulliver travels several different lands, like Lilliput, where he finds himself a giant among six-inch-tall beings. The next journey brings him to Brobdingnag, where his situation is reversed: now he is the midget in the land of giants. His third journey is to Laputa and then his fourth to Houyhnhnm. With this story, Swift satirises the conditions of Europe. The peculiar customs of the nations of Lilliput are one of Swift's satire in this story. One example may be seen in the methods of selecting people for public office in Lilliput, which are very different from those of any other nation. In order to be chosen, a man must "rope dance" to the best of his abilities; the best rope dancer receives the higher office. While no nation of Europe in Swift's time followed such an absurd practise. They did not choose public officers on skill, but rather on how well the candidate could line the right pockets with money and how well they pleased the concerned authority, thereby winning their favour. In Lilliput, Gulliver had been treated with respect, largely due to his size. In this land of giants, while in Brobdingnag, he is treated as a curiosity, forced to perform shows for public amusement. It shows that giants are not all perfect. Some are greedy as well. Swift concentrates on the superiority of the giants and the insignificance of Gulliver. His third voyage at Laputa is a satire on all science and philosophy. The pride that the contemporary thinkers

associated with rational and scientific achievement leading to the perfection of man is exposed in the fourth voyage to the country of Houyhnhnms. The aim of Swift is to demolish the pride of the Yahoos, who cannot rise without the grace of God. The Yahoos were the inhabitants of Houyhnhnms and represent the image of a fallen man who has lost the capacity to lead a decent life of reason; rather, their life was written with stupidity and silly frivolity. In this story, Gulliver, as well as the reader, is plainly aware of Swift's understanding of human nature and his negative view of it.

b) Huckleberry Finn (Mark Twain, 1884).

The satire in Huckleberry Finn usually focused on religion. He used the characters of Jim and Miss Watson, Jim's owner, to highlight the hypocrisy of slavery. Miss Watson is revered as a good Christian woman who has strong values, but she is a slave owner in the story. She owns a slave called Jim, who runs away upon hearing that Miss Watson might sell him to New Orleans. Twain uses satire to show how hypocritical a "good Christian woman" can be when it comes to owning slaves as property. Miss Watson is called a "Good Christian Woman" so that readers may realize that what she purports to stand for is in direct opposition to her actions. Silas is a farmer and a preacher that people of the town claim to be a great preacher because he preaches for free and his preaching is very much worth listening to.

In the novel, Twain writes that he also owns slaves in his plantation. So he is a slave owning preacher whom Twain satirises much like Miss Watson, because she is also a strong Christian and owns a slave. This places Silas, the priest, in a weird predicament, where he disobeys the instruction for Christians as given in the Bible by owning a slave of his own to work for him. This clearly shows the contradiction in designation and character which is an irony in itself.

In addition to these two notable works, let us look at a comparison of two ancient and modern satirical works. LaBeaouf (2007) has made a comparison of ancient and modern satire comparing two great satirical works one from both ancient and modern times. The ancient satire analysed is *The Acharnians* by Aristophanes, which was first performed in 425 B.C.E.. It is a comedic play that pointed anti-war satire set during the Peloponnesian War. It used side-by-side scenes to highlight the benefits of peace like prosperity and abundance, contrasting with the hardships of war like scarcity and injury. The target of the satire is to show how politicians exploit war for personal gain and is limited to live viewers in Athens only. The modern satire analysed is *The Colbert Report*: "The Word" Segment ("Silence"). It is a satirical news segment where Stephen Colbert, in a mock-conservative persona, comments on current events. It highlights hypocrisy by spreading "democracy" abroad while stifling it at home and uses irony, visual gags, and exaggerated logic to reveal political dishonesty. It has a global audience via TV and the internet. Zephyr drama, in a way, has carried both the features of ancient and modern satire. As the dramas are showcased both in front of live audiences and are later broadcast through television and YouTube, it has both ancient and modern features. However, the humour techniques are modern as it uses sarcasm, irony, exaggerated logic, and political mockery which can also be seen in *The Colbert Report*.

4. Methods:

The paper has three objectives listed as follows:

- a. explore, evaluate and analyse the use of satire in Zephyr drama.
- b. identify the form of satire used in Zephyr drama and its mode of use
- c. Analyse how Zephyr drama acts as a tool for cultural critique and negotiating identity

To meet these objectives, a literary review of available texts on the history of Satire in English Literature is conducted, followed by the qualitative analysis of characters and themes in Zephyr drama. Two of the

most popular Zephyr dramas that will be considered in this study are:

- a) Tu rawng nge I bawl dawn? (Whom are you going to serve?)
- b) Sum of money.

The video record of these two Zephyr dramas has been carefully and critically analysed to pick out the satirical attributes and their role as a mirror in reflecting and shaping society. One limitation to be noted is the inadequate or non-existent written literature of Zephyr drama, and the non-availability of scripts and outlines of the acts played or performed in Zephyr drama. The qualitative evaluation of the two plays, exploring and analysing the use of satire in Zephyr drama, identifying the form of satire used in Zephyr drama and the different modes of use and the analysis of how Zephyr drama acts as a tool for cultural critique and negotiating identity are presented in the following sections.

5. Satire in Zephyr Drama

Satire has now become an important tool for those who, in any way or by any means, want to expunge or at least address their concern in regard to the moral degradation of either an individual or society. Likewise, it is an important tool for the Zephyr Drama Club to reflect the conditions of our society in a humorous way. So, the form of humour used or presented in Zephyr Drama is that of a satirical comedy and satire is mostly seen in their dialogue.

5.1. Analysis of the first play Tu rawng nge I bawl dawn? (Whom are you going to serve?)

The first play, “Tu Rawng Nge I Bawl Dawn” (Whom are you going to serve?), can be summed up as: one cannot serve two masters (Choice in Question). The main character, Mr. Tenga, gives us a satirical reflection of today’s Mizo officers who are corrupt but use the church and Christianity as a cover. Like Miss Watson and Silas in Twain’s “Huckleberry Finn” the lead character, Mr Tenga is used as a medium of satire and as a contradiction-in-self, where the character’s actions contradict the character’s title or position in the church as a good Christian church elder. Here, irony is used for satire and can also be Juvenalian satire. Mr Tenga supposedly enjoyed talking a lot about himself and would blow his own horn in adequacy, which of course is not what is expected of someone who claims to be a man of God and fights to be a church elder. A man of God is supposed to be humble, wise and reasonable while at the same time, being sensitive to the emotions of the members of the church where he is an elder. The dialogue of the lead character mirrors the vanity and recklessness of those similar individuals in the church who are actually seen living a lie in our present church. The character is presented as a good preacher in the church and a well-known government officer who is proud and well aware of his power because of the confidence that his money and status have given him. He loves to brag about how well he speaks in church and would sometimes even force people to say their testimony in the church to draw the attention of the people in the church to command his influence and authority in the church.

Another humorous satire shown in this drama is how Mr Tenga fights for himself so that he would be elected as a church elder. He said that he campaigned for it and gave lots of offerings to the church. He bravely satirises our present churches, the means of electing our church elders and the criteria for judging who fits the bill. The prayer word of Pu. Tenga “*Lalpa ka pawisa lak luhna ah hi chuan rawn inrawlh lo la, mahse ka rawngbawlina hi chu chhawm nung zel ang che*”, which in translation, means that he asked God not to interfere in his method of earning money; however asked God to bless his ministry. Human nature is such that, given the opportunity, like Mr Tenga, we are easily driven by our selfish nature to achieve what we desire, even to the extent of adopting any form of unfair means to fulfil those desires. This role not only satirises the corruption present in our church system but also within the self.

Another satire shown in this drama is a satire of how the Mizos treat our comedian. The satire shown here takes the form of folly or foolishness, silliness and stupidity of humans, which is depicted in the action of Mr Tenga towards his visitor, who is a famous comedian of Mizoram. Mr Tenga tries to laugh at everything his guest, Laltharlian said and they cannot have a serious talk. He acted the opposite of what they want us to learn. The satire employed here is implemented through the character's mental attitude and the dialogue, which clearly portray the negative means and ways of considering who should be considered a leader and an authoritative figure in the society and the church. At the same time, portrays the hypocrisy and selfish nature in human. Like Swift (1726) uses the relation of Gulliver with liliput and Brobdingnag, Zephyr drama also utilise the relationship between Mr. Tenga and the Mizo society's attitude to bring out the shallowness of the ways of treating people just because of their size, appearance and societal preconceived notion of what has been rather than what can be or what may be. So, here, zephyr drama uses Menippean form of satire to address and highlight the mental attitude of the Mizo people in general and the way they react and approach individuals. The stupidity of the officer and his folly is satire of Horatian type of everyday human follies.

5.2. Analysis of the second play "Sum of Money"

Now we will look at their other play, "Sum of Money" which shows us certain political and social satire that mainly focus on corruption which also includes moral corruption. In the first scene we get to see a satire in a humorous form, people who were studying at places outside Mizoram for a short time and forgetting the culture and language of Mizoram as they come back home. Johnny, a character who stayed out of Mizoram for only two months at Bangalore, returned home to Mizoram, forgetting most of his mother tongue. He could not express himself properly in Mizo and speaks meaningless words. Every word that he utters is to mock those Mizo people who pretend not to be able to speak their mother tongue fluently after spending a few academic years outside Northeast India.

In the second scene of the drama we see Mr. Khiangawia having a conversation with his wife talking about their wealth and richness and on their side stands Mrs. Thani, watching them admiringly saying "*In van hausa em em!*" at the end of their speech which translates to "Wow! You are so rich". This scene is a satire to show how the rich people are admired in our society just because of their richness alone. In these two scene, we see satire in the form of Horatian that reflects human folly through the character Johnny who forgot his root as a Mizo after staying out of the state for just a short time and Menippean satire by reflecting the mentality of people through the mentality of Pi Thani, who over admired their neighbour's wealth.

There is a scene where Isaac or Tutua and his friend Felfela were caught by the Village Defense Party (VDP) Duty for consuming alcohol under age and in the restricted area inside town. One of the duty man goes beyond boundary and punished Felfela by beating him severely with a stick for silly reasons. The words of Felfela, "*Khawtlang leh Ram duh loh zawng ti theuh theuh te chu in vaw lo ila. Nangni in zu changkang in rui a keini in a man tlawm kan rui ani mai a*" which means "Both of us have gone against the norms of our society, so let us not punish each other. You got drunk on expensive alcohol and I on cheap alcohol". This statement is a satirical, scornful word for the unqualified men in positions of our society, and to let them know that they were in the same position as the people whom they hunt for (social policing).

Mr Thanglianhrimhrima, as a rich, corrupt officer, has the power to give a job to anyone he likes. He gives a job to a woman/lady not because she is qualified for the job but just because he is attracted to her physical beauty. This is a satire to show how some officers and government officials were not fair enough and misused their power. At the end of the drama, Mr. Thanglianhrimhrima's corruption was noticed by the

government. He was told that he was going to be investigated. As he heard this news, he said to his wife, “*Ka hrisel loh viau a ngai ang*,” which means “I really need to be unhealthy”. This word is said in a satirical tone to attack the coward officers and politicians who try to escape their punishment or at least reduce or lessen the term of punishment by pretending to be ill and acquiring fake medical certificate from doctors; as “*Ka hrisel loh viau a ngai ang*” begs the constitutional law of India where any accused may make an appeal to the law making their illness a means to achieve lesser degree of punishment. In these last two scenes, satire is seen in the form of Juvenalian satire, mocking the higher classes of society.

We see some similarities in the satire used in the satire used in Zephyr Drama and the references used for the literary review. In the drama ‘*Tu rawng nge I bawl dawn ale le le*’, Pu. Tenga is a church preacher who indulges in corruption, and in Huckleberry Finn, Silas is a good Christian preacher who has a slave. Both writers use irony as a tool to satirise the inherent hypocrisy and vanity in human nature. In the drama ‘*Sum of Money*,’ we can identify satire in the form of criticism and ridicule in how we admire and respect people just because of their wealth alone, like Gulliver was respected because of his size in the story of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. In this same drama of Zephyr, we see the measures and means used by our officers for giving a job in their office. Swift also satirises the peculiar custom of the nation of Lilliput in their method of selecting people for public office

6. Satire as a Mirror to Cultural Contradictions in Zephyr drama

In a society like Mizoram, where Christianity and traditional values are tightly interwoven with public and private life, satire becomes a powerful cultural mirror. It reflects internal tensions and contradictions, such as Religious hypocrisy (as seen in Pu Tenga’s character), class inequality and admiration of wealth over morality (Pi Thani’s admiration) and corruption disguised under religious or moral authority. It helps negotiate modern Mizo identity by redefining what it means to be Mizo and Christian in a changing world. Zephyr Drama, through their plays, satirises these contradictions not to mock the faith or culture, but to expose inconsistencies between professed values and practised behaviour. This is a cultural critique from within, not from outside.

Satire through Zephyr drama can also help preserve Mizo cultural and moral identity by holding up standards that society claims to uphold, like truthfulness, humility and service. It exposes the erosion of communal ethics through modern forces like materialism, individualism, and power abuse. This is especially true in Menippean satire, which targets mental attitudes rather than individuals. When Zephyr dramatises the pride of Mizo returnees from Bangalore or the superficial respect for the wealthy, they are defending a core cultural value, which is collective humility and authenticity.

Satire can also act as a form of resistance and identity negotiation. Mizoram has always been subjected to pressures from both Indian mainstream society and globalisation. Zephyr drama can be a resistance to the homogenization of culture. It permits internal critique without disintegrating communal solidarity. It assists in negotiating new Mizo identity by reconceptualising being Mizo and Christian in the evolving world. Zephyr Drama balances on a razor's edge by maintaining the integrity of Mizo religion and culture while subverting its distortions. This is how satire helps negotiate identity, not in rejecting identity, but in reconsidering and cleansing it.

The satirical play of Zephyr drama utilises humour as a safe space for cultural self-critique. Direct criticism is possible in an area where Christianity runs so deep and an atmosphere of unity as in Mizoram, but it would be perceived as offensive or divisive. But satire, particularly Horatian and Menippean, provides for a safe venting of discontent, a means of laughing at oneself, minimising defensiveness and a mass self-

scrutiny in a communal, even purging, environment. This is especially vital in an intimately organised society where shame culture can keep open debate smothered.

7. Conclusion

For a satirist, satire does not intend to cause harm or damage by ridiculing. The main objective of satire is to create awareness and recognition of vices which is rampant in society. At the same time, it may be noted that not all satire is meant to be corrective in nature because satirists occasionally attack foibles or failings basic to man's nature, which cannot be changed, or for which change is unlikely. But it can be argued here that such satire of inextinguishable vices is still corrective, for it seeks to establish proper moral attitudes towards those vices. For example, if it is impossible to rid men of jealousy or egotism, the satirist can or may or will at least try to make men despise those feelings, resist them whenever they can or may be able to, thereby ceasing to encourage them.

The way satire is used in Zephyr drama somewhat suggests *philanthropism*, where satire is used as a tool to address the relationship that an individual has with society and how the preconceived notion of societal norms and outlook affects the individual in it and vice versa. The satire in Zephyr is thoroughly concerned with justice, morality and virtue in the Mizo society and is mostly in relation to the basic ethical viewpoint of Christianity. Both Satire and Christianity strongly believe in the fallen nature of man and that right conduct is not possible without a guide or at least without a hint or a nudge. Zephyr drama at its best has proved to deliver what it sought to do so in criticism through its satires; however, one may not be wrong in saying that uncertainty cannot be ruled out in meeting the purpose of the drama.

The play of Zephyr drama, really satisfies various definitions of satire and its purposes as they dislodge the shortcomings and put forward an appropriate vision and perception of life in a constructive way. Their plays are a clear mirror to today's social and political conditions of our society that act as a mirror of critique to the culture and helps in rebuilding its identity. Zephyr Drama uses satire as a cultural mirror to navigate Mizo identity by confronting the contradictions between Christian values and lived behavior, exposing flaws in religious authority, social status, and cultural pride, while reaffirming core values like humility, justice, and moral integrity in a changing society. However, Satire has a limitation in itself as it really does not give the solution for curbing the aforementioned social, political or personal issues. Rather it ridicules and criticises.

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