The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-V, October 2026
www.the-criterion.com

Women's Performativity and Empowerment in Cherrie L. Chhangte's "A Morning Diversion"

Dr. L. K. Gracy
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
North-Eastern Hill University, Tura,
Meghalaya, India.
lkgracy@gmail.com
https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n5.1

Abstract:

The experiences of women in Northeast India provide an important context for examining gender performativity and women's empowerment. The region is characterized by cultural diversity and a rich tapestry of ethnic identities, alongside persistent conflict and armed resistance. Their lived experiences illustrate how gender norms are continuously reproduced, challenged and transformed. Cherrie L. Chhangte's short story "A Morning Diversion" (2025) delves into the life of the protagonist, Rothangi, as she steps into the social and economic spaces which have been historically excluded from women. She takes up photography to earn a living and achieve economic empowerment. Some pertinent observations arise as one reads the story, particularly, on gender performativity and women's empowerment. The paper is qualitative in nature and will be exploring these strands drawing on the ideas of Judith Butler, Rachel Vogelstein and others.
Keywords: gender, empowerment, fluidity, photography.

Article History: Submitted-05/08/2026, Revised-04/10/2026, Accepted-11/10/2026, Published-31/10/2026.
Copyright vests with the author. Licensing: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

A strong patriarchal system has always shaped a woman's life in societies around the world. Before education was introduced for women, they had little or no voice and were considered a liability. They were also unable to contribute to the economy of the family because they were confined to household chores. Access to education and economic empowerment enables women to break the cycle of dependence and significantly improves their position in society.

Women in Northeast of India enjoy a relatively more favourable position than their counterparts in mainstream India. The women of the region cannot be clubbed as a monolithic entity; they come from diverse cultures, share an array of ethnicities, and at times face challenges and constant clashes, yet they emerge to be front runners when it comes to keeping the community at peace. Evident among them are the famous *Meira Phaibis* and *Nisha Bandh*, the torchbearers against alcoholism, state atrocities and human rights violations in Manipur; the strong voice of the Nagaland Mothers' Union against ethnic conflict and substance abuse; and various other organisations from different states of the Northeast strongly highlight this fact. Women have performed exceptionally well in both the organized and unorganized sectors. Due credit should be given to the early missionaries who promoted widespread access to education for all, including women, at a time, when education in the rest of India was largely dominated by men. Literacy enhanced women's status and contributed to their emancipation by enabling them to work outside their domestic spheres and earn an income to supplement their family's income. Lonkham Boruah, in his article "Changing Status of Women in the Society: Patterns in Literacy and Workforce Participation in Assam", states that,

> The social status of women in North-east is quite better in comparison to her counterparts in other parts of India. The notion of women as an economic resource of the household elevates women's status in the society. She is an important contributor

to the household income and activities hence a valuable member to both household and community. (71)

Traditionally, the Mizo society has been patriarchal, but now it is often regarded as one of India's more socially progressive states with high literacy rates, comparatively favourable health indicators, and active participation of women in almost all the sectors. Although women continue to face structural barriers to political representation, decision-making and property ownership, these constraints are slowly easing, allowing them greater freedom and mobility.

Writers from the Northeast of India, particularly women writers, have often explored woman's positions within socio-cultural and political contexts. They also examine the complexities women face while negotiating the tensions between modernity and tradition, particularly, in relation to gender roles. The paper attempts to examine the evolving nature of gender performance in the life of a young tribal woman, drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as its critical framework. It will also explore how women's agency and empowerment contribute to their sense of fulfilment and well-being. An eminent writer from Mizoram, Cherrie L. Chhangte, delves into the life of a young wife and mother, Rothangi, in her short story "A Morning Diversion" (2025). The story opens with a scene commonly associated with the life of a woman living in the mountains, nestled in Mizoram, a state in the Northeast of India. It portrays a woman who rises at the crack of dawn and rushes through her chores. The short story can be situated in the late 1970s or early 1980s, as suggested by the objects mentioned in the narrative, such as the Yashica camera, Clix III camera and Beatle boots, which were popular during that period. Even for taking a photograph, a black cloth was used to cover the camera, which was mounted on a "makeshift wooded tripod" (Chhangte 121). Apart from this, the clerical position held by Zomuana, the husband of Rothangi, has been referred to as *ardali* in the story, is now considered archaic. The office where he worked is referred to as the District Collector's office, at present, the office is known as the Deputy

Commissioner's office. His salary was only sixty rupees a month, an amount that may seem modest by today's standards but would have provided a reasonably decent living at the time.

As any other woman across the globe, the protagonist Rothangi had to juggle between household chores and looking after the children; this can be seen in the following lines: "The rice had to be boiled, water fetched from the spring, and the vegetables had to be cut and prepared for the morning meal. By this time the youngest child was already up and crying for attention" (Chhangte 113). Her life revolved around these chores. Throughout the story, we do not find Rothangi complaining about her plight; instead, she accepts her position as dictated by societal conditioning. The husband's work seemed to be of more importance because he was providing them with his earnings. This ritualised reputation of constantly immersing oneself in domestic chores makes her daily chores feel legitimate. The time, energy and effort Rothangi devotes to her household chores seem to go unnoticed by others. She, too, appears unconcerned about her own exhaustion and is more pre-occupied with her husband's well-being, as reflected in the line "Poor man, she thought, he must be exhausted" (Chhangte 113). Although feminism originated in the Western world, it is important to question whether its theoretical framework adequately accommodates the diverse experiences of women in Northeast India, who belong to distinct cultural contexts. In the strictest sense, Rothangi is performing gender and living up to the cultural expectations of her tribe. As per Judith Butler, gender is created entirely through performance,

> …gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (519)

Traditional feminist theory often conceptualise women as a unified category. However, this notion has been challenged by scholars who argue that women's identities are diverse, fluid and contested. Moreover, since gender is performed rather than naturally given, as stated by feminists, it can be challenged and transformed. In the story, Rothangi sought comfort rather than confining herself to the shoes a woman is expected to wear. What was normally worn by men in those days, the Beatle boots made of leather, was coveted by Rothangi. It was not to feel like a man but she preferred it because of its sturdiness, much to the chagrin of her cousin Ruata, because a woman is not expected to wear such a style of boots as is evident in the expression of her cousin, "Ruata looked at her as if she had gone mad. Women did not wear Beatle boots. It was unseemly. It was wrong. It was ridiculous. It was embarrassing. He swore he would deny all knowledge of her if she wore shoes such as these" (Chhangte 114). This did not deter Rothangi from wearing them though they made a loud clacking sound whenever she walked in them, all that it mattered was that she was able to "trek all across the surrounding villages in relative comfort" (Chhangte 114). The durable footwear made her perform her task more efficiently. It also symbolizes freedom of movement, independence and accessibility to spaces traditionally considered to be dominated by men.

Rothangi is a woman who refuses to adhere to the traditional role of a woman. She has dreams of her own and wants to pursue her interests. Apart from the boots which brought her comfort, the camera snugged in a leather case brought in much joy, it was a prized possession and a blessing. Those were the times when photography was largely analogue. The process of taking and developing photos was fundamentally manual and chemical, requiring skill with focus and exposure. Rothangi had to struggle and even "waste entire rolls of precious film because the images would come out blurry" (Chhangte 115). Yet she was undaunted, and continued with her passion. She eventually honed her photography skill. Like many professions outside the domestic sphere, photography was dominated by a man in Rothangi's village. There

were no women photographers, and the field was monopolised by "...Pu Sapa, who had been taught the art of taking pictures by some of the missionaries who had in a sense, adopted him." (Chhangte 115). With age, Pu Sapa was finding it difficult to traverse the hills taking portraits of people; this allowed Rothangi an opportunity to explore her passion, as well as bringing in some extra dough to substantiate the requirements of her family,

> The money she brought home helped with the family finances, and her husband was becoming more and more appreciative of her contribution. Why, last month, they were even able to save twenty rupees after all the necessities had been bought! She was also secretly hoping to be able to buy a Click III camera soon. (Chhangte 115)

This act of Rothangi taking over the profession of a photographer, which was regarded a male preserve in her village, just shows how gender is fluid, learned and performative. By entering this male-dominated sphere, she destabilizes the cultural codes that restrict a woman's identity to domesticity and challenges fixed gender roles. Any deviation from these roles often incur disapproval and is challenging to both man and woman. Nasrulah Mambrol in the introduction to her article "Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity" states, "Refusing fixities, Butler sees gender as provisional, shifting, contingent and performed. This view also rejects essentialisms and stable identities and meanings, while also eschewing notions of authenticity, authority, universality and objectivity."

Rothangi moves beyond her prescribed social role and, fortunately, faces no significant obstacles in pursuing her passion. Family support is crucial in enabling women to pursue their dreams and thrive in life. In Rothangi's case, her mother-in-law proves to be her greatest source of support, taking on the responsibility of caring for her grandchildren in Rothangi's absence. This is reiterated in the lines, "Her husband and his family indulged her, even encouraged her, because of her money she was bringing home. And she was glad that she could help out"

(Chhangte 115). The hard-earned money that she brought home for expenses is much appreciated and precious. This narrative illustrates how gender shapes identity and power while challenging traditional binaries and promoting a more inclusive understanding of gender roles. Rothangi's actions not only enhance her financial autonomy and contribute to the household's socio-economic well-being but also gradually strengthen her decision-making power within the family.

The Yashica camera gifted to Rothangi by her brother marks the beginning of her journey towards empowerment and self-discovery. By entering a field traditionally dominated by men, she transforms not only her own life but also the socio-economic circumstances of her family. Like many women who must balance their personal aspirations with domestic responsibilities, Rothangi has to steal "moments" (Chhangte 116) to learn and practise photography. As her skills and confidence grow, she becomes increasingly sought after, attracting clients not only from her village but also from neighbouring areas.

Lemmon and Vogelstein in their article "The Case for Women's Economic Inclusion" states that "Empirical evidence indicates that enabling women to contribute can boost economies in four ways: higher macroeconomic growth, more favorable development outcomes, greater economic diversification, and lower levels of income inequality." (3) They further state that this sustainable development not only reduces poverty across generations but also child and maternal mortality, thereby making families stronger and more resilient. Through her new venture, Rothangi felt independent, empowered and enriched.

The short story not only highlights the resilience of Rothangi, a young woman who takes on the challenging task of pursuing a profession traditionally dominated by men but also offers a glimpse into the renowned hospitality of the Mizo people, and the quiet yet meaningful support she receives from her community as she travels across the hills. Their encouragement

reflects the collective spirit of the community and its role in supporting her aspirations. This nature of the tribe convinced Rohtangi that she never had to go hungry though she may be away from her family and village: "But Mizos were hospitable, and she knew she would be offered, at the very least, a cup of tea by her clients, so she was not unduly worried" (Chhangte 117). This brings us to the culture of the tribes inhabiting the Northeast of India. The various theoretical frameworks of feminism may not categorically fit in to find a pattern in the lives of the women here in the Northeast of India because nowhere does Rothangi complain about her plight as a woman expected first to perform her duties as a homemaker. In a society, women are usually expected to be emotional, passive and dependent whereas men are expected to be rational, assertive and make decisions for the family. Nonconformity to these roles can be challenging for both, especially for the women, and often incurs disapproval from society. However, in the case of Rothangi, when she starts pursuing her passion, she is encouraged not only by her husband but also by her mother-in-law, who steps in to look after what is considered to be one of the most important tasks of being a mother, that is, the well-being of the children in Rothangi's absence. Apart from them, it is her older brother, who seeing her fixation in the art of photography lends her the precious camera, "Her older brother, fed up with her relentless begging, finally relented and handed it over to her" (Chhangte 116). He does not dissuade her but allows her the opportunity to explore the world of photography. When she goes out to take photographs, it is the community on whom she banks, in case she is hungry and needs to take some rest before proceeding on her journey. In fact, the community stands by her, ensuring safety, security, and most of all encouraging her. As per Rachel Vogelstein, Jamille Bigio, Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, Meighan Stone, Alexandra Bro, Becky Allen and Jody Heymann in the article published in 2018, "Let Women Work: The Economic Case for Feminism," not all the women in different countries have the benefit of such a support system,

> …women face gender-based job restrictions in 155 countries, including limitations on property ownership, spousal consent requirements for employment, and laws that prevent them from signing contracts or accessing credit. In many nations, women are still barred from traditionally male jobs or face limits on the number of hours they can work. (8)

Rothangi is fortunate enough to have a family and a society that play a crucial role in shaping her to achieve her aspirations. They help her in overcoming social barriers, and realise her full potential at a time when women hardly ventured out.

What is noteworthy is that with a shift in her role, Rothangi's attire also changes, making her stand out from the rest of her contemporaries, so much so that children would follow her out of curiosity,

> She cut a noticeable figure in her attire, not least because she was taller than the average Mizo woman but also because she had a Stetson hat on and the traditional Mizo *puan* wrapped around her waist and secured with a 007 belt…With the Beatle boots and, of course, the camera slung across her body and bobbing along with every purposeful step, she really cut a peculiar figure. (Chhangte 117)

Once she gets hold of the camera, Rothangi creates magic with her photography skills, from something as mundane as her husband chopping firewood and resting to taking the family portrait of one of the most well-known and accomplished families in the community; she captured a moment, an emotion, and a story in every face, thereby turning that particular moment into something timeless. Her reputation as an expert in photography earned her much respect, and she became sought after by affluent families. This transformation in Rothangi reflects fluidity and resistance to binaries. It was heartening to see her striding off confidently to one of the oldest and most respected families in the town of Serkawn. The patriarch of the

family, Pu Ngura, was educated by the missionaries and considered to be cultured. True to her profession, as an artist, she ensured that not only the angle but the lighting and location was perfect to get the momentous shot, a milestone in the lives of her art. The family of Pu Ngura "…froze for the camera" (Chhangte 121), just as the moment captured will remain frozen in time. Once her task was accomplished, she felt oddly satisfied, that it could be one of the best portraits ever taken by her.

The story not only highlights women's empowerment but also reflects the struggles of women who are left to manage their lives and responsibilities, on their own, in the absence of a male family member. In her writing, Cherrie L Chhangte conveys that not all women in this society are as fortunate as Rothangi, as seen in the case of her aunt, Aunt Ziki. The prolonged absence of her husband, Pu Kuala, and the desirable location of her house provoke the wrath of the village chief who orders "his men to demolish the little house on the hillock where the 'widow' lived" (Chhangte 119). She is under surveillance by the patriarchal society and made to tackle this unwanted trouble on her own. Fortunately, in a tribal society, a chief is expected to listen to his advisors, and Ziki is spared of the agony of losing her home. Patriarchal authority and dominance is blatantly mentioned here. The absence of a male head leads to the vulnerability of the woman, she is constantly devalued and controlled by this structure.

Despite the apparent success in Rothangi's venture, the conditioning that is embedded in her has not forsaken her, because the first thing that crosses her mind on accomplishing the task of taking the family portrait of Pu Ngura is to help her husband "get ready for work…and to finish the three bucketfuls of laundry she had kept to be taken to the well for washing" (Chhangte 122). Without any remorse, she looks forward to the day, as is evident from her gait, "She picked up her pace. Her rumbling stomach caused her to grin, and she happily thought of the delicious pumpkin leaf *bai* or stew she had made this morning, fresh from her garden, and her mouth watered at the thought" (Chhangte 122).

The morning diversion taken by Rothangi is not only a detour from the humdrum life of being confined to the usual chores expected of a homemaker; it is an exciting path which few women would dare to tread but once she ventures, it changes the course of her life by strengthening her social position, empowering her financially and making her independent. Although she juggles multiple responsibilities, the active support of her family and community strengthens her ability to make independent decisions, thereby enabling her to pursue her interests and capabilities. This empowerment is essential when it comes to creating a fair, progressive society, and contributes significantly to the development of families and communities. The importance of women's empowerment extends beyond improving economic growth to promoting gender equality and reducing discrimination. It further strengthens society by promoting diverse leadership in decision-making process. Triantafyllia Kadoglou and Katrina Sarri, in their article "Women, Motherhood and Work," mention the European Commission's stance on this matter,

> "The successful combination of work and private life helps reduce the gender gap and improve the quality of the working environment, while facilitating methods to address the challenge of demographic change." Research conducted in Europe, Scandinavia, and the United States has demonstrated that the opportunity to work outside the home has enhanced women's sense of independence and achievement. (38)

Chhangte's Rohtangi stands out as a torch bearer of women's empowerment, inspiring Mizo women to pursue their aspirations. A society becomes vibrant, equitable, progressive, and inclusive when women are given equal opportunities to participate fully in all aspects of life. Today, women in Mizoram are increasingly asserting their agency, challenging traditional gender norms, and contributing to the state's socio-economic and cultural development, making Mizoram an important case study in discussions of gender and empowerment in Northeast of India.

Works Cited:

Boruah, Lonkham. "Changing Status of Women in the Society: Patterns in Literacy and Workforce Participation in Assam." *Women of North East India*. Edited by Brahma, Bhanuprabha, Tejaswita Duarah, EBH Publishers (India), 2024, pp. 67-83

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–31. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893. Accessed 3 July 2026.

Chhangte, Cherrie. "A Morning Diversion." *Lapbah*. edited by Nongkynrih, Kynpham Sing, Rimi Nath, 1st ed., Penguin Books, 2025, pp. 113-122.

Kadoglou, Triantafyllia, and Katerina Sarri. "Women, Motherhood and Work." *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 29, 2013, pp. 33–45. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/45170687. Accessed 13 July 2026.

Lemmon, Gayle Tzemach, and Rachel Vogelstein. "The Case for Women's Economic Inclusion." *Building Inclusive Economies: How Women's Economic Advancement Promotes Sustainable Growth*, Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, pp. 3–10. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29884.5. Accessed 14 July 2026.

Mambrol, Nasrullah. "Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity." *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 10 Oct. 2016, https://literariness.org/2016/10/10/judith-butlers-concept-of-performativity/. Accessed 12 July 2026

Vogelstein, Rachel, et al. "Let Women Work: The Economic Case for Feminism." *Women and the Law: Levelling the Global Economic Playing Field*, Council on Foreign Relations, 2018, pp. 7–12. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29886.4. Accessed 14 July 2026.