

# Thematic Concept in Select Poems of Robin Singh Ngangom

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**Abstract** - Poet Robin Singh Ngangom, hailing from Manipur in India, initially based his poetry on a sacred or romantic world. His poetry is characterized by mythological allusions akin to other poets of the Northeastern region of India. His themes have later undergone a change to address the social and psychological perplexity in the Manipur of the twentieth century and later. Poetry of the Northeast is defined, in one way, as the poetry of ethnic clashes and insurgency. Somewhere within this definition, many of Ngangom's mature poems mirror an atmosphere of unrest and brutality in his homeland. Rootlessness and search for identity constitute his major thematic concerns while he expresses indignation or indifference in the face of the violence and fear. The paper tries to analyze his poetic attempt, which is to delve to the core of the issues, and move beyond his earlier dreamy adolescent subjects and a mere recording of events to an internalization of the complex conflict in the region. In his poetic response the poet resorts to realism, satire and parody.

**Key Words:** Northeast, Manipur, thematic concept, political violence, conflict

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Robin Singh Ngangom, a poet and translator of significant repute, has managed to push himself gradually but assuredly into the domain of Indian poetry in English. This bilingual poet has his roots in Manipur – born in Singjamei at Imphal in Manipur -- though he has been residing in Meghalaya for the past few decades. Much of Ngangom's poetry is in English in its inception and later reformed in Manipuri. Ngangom's mark as a poet is ascertained by the sincere quality of his poetic output when he thematically offers emotion, politics or violence with equal passion and excitement. The poet's dominant approach is a genuine and earnest representation of social and political truth even when it is at times unsettling for the ignorant or complacent reader. He attempts to capture the diction from within the allied spirit of the natives of a region. In his poems of finest caliber, there is a recurrence of metaphors and allusions that denote a complex condition marked by insecurities, traumatic memories, deprivation and callous cruelty. The select poems picked in this paper may easily be posited within the body of poems by writers from Northeast India or from Manipur in particular.

### 1.1 Aim and Objective

This paper will attempt to examine select poems of Robin Ngangom which are either anthologized or often quoted and adopted for review. The poems analyzed in detail

do not belong to his adolescent poetry, where, the poet tells us, he showed tendencies to lose himself in dream worlds of romance and adventure. That group is small and mostly forgotten. The chosen poems are from a later period, perceptibly coming from a mature writer. The aim is to discern in them certain key matters constituting the common subjects of concern for the poet.

### 1.2 Methodology

The methodology followed for study in this paper is the analytical one. The poems are located against the social and political backdrop of the time and corresponding patterns are observed. In view of the dearth of critical material on Ngangom and his poems, the findings are mostly supplemented by scholarly expositions by him and other poets in articles and interviews. The poems are carefully interpreted to arrive at the thematic concepts in them. For, in poetry, comprehension seems inseparable from interpretation (Sollors 61). Recurring metaphors and the writer's stated views in the texts are primarily considered for interpretation.

## 2. Discussion

The term *theme* has its origin in the Greek *thēma*, which is understood as the subject of a discourse, meditation or a composition. By 'theme' in literature we will mean the central subject chosen by the writer, literally "something set down" for treatment within a literary text. 'Thematic concept' is the reader's perception of the core topic of a text. In Ngangom's poetry we accost *human* themes; as Henry James expressed: "No themes are so human as those that reflect for us, out of the confusion of life, the close connection of bliss and bale, of the things that help with the things that hurt..." (qtd. in Sollors 9). Having said that, appreciation of all facets of a poem's theme remains a humble attempt; as, Ngangom's poems incorporate dimensions as the psychological, the sociological and the historical, all ingrained into a single poem.

That Ngangom hails from the Northeastern region of India is a noteworthy factor dictating the thematic concept in his poems, any reading of which is incomplete and unjustified without considering and inspecting this face. 'Northeast' is an inclusive label designating a shared territory for poetic concerns of the writers from this region. However, it is a fairly imposed term in the postcolonial era entirely absent in ancient and medieval documents. The homogeneity promulgated in the unified perception and representation of the eight Northeastern states, is far from

real. This umbrella name tagged to the entire region is hardly able to do justice to the rich historical, cultural and ethnic heritage that each state individually possesses. These states are: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The term 'Northeast' will still be used in this paper or referred to as the 'region' for a comprehensive and cohesive reference to the contextual environment in Ngangom's poetry as there might not be an improved nomenclature to replace the same.

Poetry from the Northeast is rooted firmly in a familiar milieu, and compares in culture and sentiment; and this exercise is a unifying factor binding the themes adopted by the poets of the region. Ananya S. Guha, a distinguished poet and writer from the region, discerns that the kind of poetry the Northeast generates "has a remarkable whole" (Guha). Jayanta Mahapatra states in the Foreword to *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*: "Undoubtedly it is poetry that unites us. It is the poets who will not keep us away from one another, who will not separate us. This is the strongest feeling one gets when one reads these poems from the very different regions of the Northeast." (qtd. in Nongkynrih, Poet as Chronicler). It is appropriate to recognize that Ngangom consciously steers readers into accepting that the socio-political sketches in his poetry are, as one would expect, situated in his homeland Manipur and, in the larger context, in the Northeast of India.

Like the poetry of several other contemporary poets from the region, Ngangom's is noted for a wistful search for identity. The poets of the Northeast passionately grapple some of the "psychological and social perplexities" of the present (Dancing Earth xii). Similarly, Margaret Zama identifies that 'emerging' literatures from the region have been through "historical and political trauma of untold suffering and marginalization" (Zama xi). As writers labour to represent the communities from the region, that seems a bid to project a worldview in their process of preserving the cultural and ethnic identities, voices must be recognized that are "caught in the cross current of their political and historical inheritances, personal tragedies and cultural ambivalence" (xii). The root for this literary consciousness lies in the duality or plurality of identities of the Northeastern states and the resultant political development of crisis. There remains a much serious discernment "of how power brokers and politicians, bureaucrats and the national security lobby have made an unmitigated mess of conditions" and impoverished the area. (Hazarika, Introduction) Ngangom isn't different in exhibiting this thematic tendency in the crudest form. This is when his poetry paints terror, in an attempt to capture the violent retort of his people to the 'mess'. The persona in Ngangom's mature poetry grapples with the suddenly altered views and feelings about one's identity and roots mainly in the second half of the twentieth century and afterward:

They whispered among themselves:

"How come his poetry is riddled with bullets then?"

So I said:

"I wanted my poems to exude a heady odour but only the sweet taint of blood or burning flesh emanates from my poem." (Ngangom, "Last Word" 12-17)

An atmosphere of unrest now pervades most of Ngangom's poetry. Guha recognizes a universal poetic tension in the Northeast poetry, in which he finds "violence, of torpidity and fear" as thematic concepts on one hand and a 'search' on the other – the "soul searching for peace" (Guha). Most states of the Northeast have witnessed some form of discord and conflict and there remains a perpetual quest for the ever-eluding peace. "We have witnessed growing ethnic aggressiveness, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious bigotry, marginalization of minorities and the poor, profit and power struggles in Government..." (Ngangom, Poetry in the Time 171). It is disquieting for Ngangom's persona to deal with the changing social reality rife with conflicts and killings. Heart-rending cases relating to absence of peace and an outburst of a long pent-up distress voice out from the poems.

Ngangom once said on the stance of the poets in Manipur, who "often have to take the risk of writing as a witness to the political violence in the region". The problem with the region is in the "tenuous historical and geographical link to the rest of India" for which it has still remained "little known and perhaps largely misunderstood" (Ngangom NE Poets Misunderstood). In areas of political and administrative concerns also, deliberations on the Northeast very soon give way to reflections on conflict and terrorism. Contentious politics is a factor to be considered. In an essay<sup>2</sup> Sanjib Baruah refers to Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly on their views that contentious politics emanates from the sustained contact between authority groups and people who conduct collective activity in the name of "a populace whose interlocutors declare it to be unjustly suffering harm or threatened with such harm". When armed rebels acquire prominence out of a society which feels unrepresented, they might seek representation or identity through a social movement or even by means of insurgency.

In the life portrayed by poets from the region, violence does not feature to sensationalize or to add thrill. The Manipur that the mature Ngangom goes back to 'ritually' is "not the sacred world" of his childhood. He has come a long way from his erstwhile "well-meaning" world of romance, spirituality and adventure. In his critical article "Poetry in the Time of Terror" the writer accentuates: "Manipur, my native place in Northeast India, is in a state of anarchy and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of the land" (Ngangom Poetry in the Time 168). Further, the "dreamy-eyed adolescent stuff" (168) that was his staple poetry at one point, no longer can gratify his creative impulse and obligations as a conscientious poet aware of the 'cruel contradictions' of his land. The writer's 'springing' response to the chaos and disorder is perhaps more than

coming to terms with it in writing. It is more an opening of a true face to the world as a writer, unable to be oblivious to the reality, however 'ugly' it may be:

But that wouldn't sound aesthetic even though it's the truth.

He hates himself for having to utter the ugly things and even his bold words would seem prudish in free worlds. (Ngangom, "Writer" 20-25)

Yet, it would be erroneous to classify poets like him simply as a terror-poet since Ngangom himself warns us against doing so: "To be a very tenacious witness to the agonising and recurrent political violence without sensationalising it, is also a risk the poets have to often take. It will be a mistake to typecast them on the basis of these themes alone". (Ngangom, NE poets Misunderstood). The question is: Is it a comfortable attempt to ignore the recurring motifs and the frequent allusions to brutality and suffering in estimating the thematic preoccupations in Ngangom's verse? It is best to acknowledge that poets are not chroniclers or mere 'recorders' of events. Rather, they go beyond, towards an unconscious assimilation of the intricate conflict: "...few fine poets have moved beyond merely recording events and have internalised the complex conflict between themselves and the social environment" (Ngangom). For illustration we may evaluate his oft quoted poem "My Invented Land":

My home is a gun pressed against both temples a knock on aht that has not ended a torch lit long after the theft a sonnet about body counts undoubtedly raped definitely abandoned in a tryst with destiny. (25-32)

This is Ngangom's unhesitant mirroring of his native place Manipur and the dreadful fragments are what he can recount from memory. The title of the poem itself is ironic as it conveys a pain of devastated dreams. The land he mirrors is what he would wish it was not – definitely not the one he would have conceived in his imagination. The men responsible for the turbulence and the atrocities are not the only ones to suffer; ignorant women and children become victims of the destructive agencies and operations. The illustrations are factually and poetically true – making his trouble-torn land an 'invention', deliberately constructed through violence, epitomized in the image of the home as a 'gun'. The poem exudes inhumanity and rage, and utters a deep-seated cry. The poet finds no resolution other than in self-directed satire and parody. The natives have lost faith in the spirit that seeks to bind the entire nation through common aspirations. A section of the poet's own people has to unearth their ancient literary identity for a more reasoned perspective of their history and culture, in a bid to keep patriotism alive:

My people have disinterred their alphabet, burnt down decrepit libraries in a last puff of nationalism (11-13)

In the rapidly changing times, his land is still an unknown and unexplored, isolated and neglected segment of the nation. This is one real aspect of political negligence and the other is the economic deprivation:

My homeland, a travelogue without end, a plate that will always be greedy (but got rice mixed with stones) (17-19)

There is a serious lack of someone righteous and bold to emancipate the race and lead the state in the path to prosperity, cultural security and peace: because its leaders aren't competent and ideal but those who "have disappeared / into their caricatures." (23-24)

In another poem "Native Land" Ngangom brings to mind the "Joupi Massacre": an ethnic fight involving the Kuki community of Manipur and the militants of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland — Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM). Kuki International Forum reports that "more than 575 innocent Kuki civilians were shot or hacked to death by Naga militants in Manipur alone..." In this abominable hostile clash, people were confined to a church with their hands tied and brutally massacred. In a Huffington Post blog article<sup>3</sup> Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen provided vital historical facts in this connection: "The intention to drive out Kukis from the four hill districts led to "ethnic cleansing" by the NSCN-IM". Ethnic cleansing is defined as a forceful removal of minority ethnic groups from a region. The report continues, "Though the initial violence was triggered by militant outfits in Chandel district, it spread over to other parts of the state, and to Nagaland state and Myanmar as well". The following is Ngangom's poetic account: 'First came the scream of the dying' as if in a nightmare and then arrived the newspaper and radio report of '...six shot dead, twenty-five houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied behind their backs inside a church ...' (3-5)

As the days 'crumble', the volume of 'victors and their victims' keeps increasing (6-7). Keeping with the poet's unspecified solemn intent, the speaker 'hardens' within his 'thickening hide' and purges off his shaky and fragile humanitarian feelings to move beyond his weak, thin-skinned self (8-9), which he calls his 'uneasy manhood' (24). There is no better way of attaining this than by arresting soul-stirring thoughts – blocking reflections about 'abandoned children inside blazing huts/ still waiting for their parents' (11-12) and of women in their late pregnancy 'mown down' like 'grain stalk' (18-19). One is left with questions: if those children could reminisce when dying, the pleasure of having listened to their 'grandmother's tales' (13); or, if those would-be mothers had been waiting for their men with 'wildflowers in their hair' (20). These are unanswered. The poet doesn't break down with them but he burns the 'truth with them' (23) and moves on in life.

Ngangom is witness to a turbulent history. Yet, the gruesome perception the poet expresses is not his alone; as the images of gun, scary knocks on endless nights, screams,

bloodshed and rape are a part of the brutality and horror that must be a component of the subconscious of all those who witnessed, experienced or suffered them. In "Poem for Joseph" we get a victim of 'ethnic cleansing' who is forcibly extradited from his roots, isolated from his objects of desire.

...it's true that in my native land, children have crawled out of burrows they had gouged under hard beds, long after the grownups had fled and roofs came apart like charred heads. (8-14)

The poet names this representative sufferer after the Biblical character Joseph, who moved away from home. The condition of imposed exile is painful in his desperate bid to return to the lost homeland: this character frantically seeks 'a homeland' where he could 'recognize' himself 'even when 'there is nothing to return for' (7). In the 'dog-eat-dog' (24) Imphal extremists redraw maps, redefine territories and assert their identity through violence.

Ethnic clashes and insurgency have indeed had a remarkable impact in the region and have served to condition the minds. Ngangom seems to pick images from the greater subconscious of the natives and to render them in verse. Critics tend to see violence in art and in poetry as serving to communicate and arriving at a higher plane of appreciating beauty and the sublime. According to Ngangom poetry has remained "an underground exercise" with him. He believes in "the poetry of 'feeling which can be shared'". (Ngangom, Poetry in the Time 169).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

There are enough reasons why Ngangom's "Native Land" is put in an anthology by Oxford which thematically assembles poems on terrorism in South Asia. The threat to a culture or the ethnicity of a race concerns the poet as much as the violent retort of his people to the perturbing political attitudes to their concerns and needs. An individual in his poems may remain a traumatized spectator hapless in an atmosphere of conflict or may be a victim of the trouble and the resultant rootlessness. The writer's common responses include disapproval, bitterness, indignation and apathy. Poet and author Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih guides us to examine the exposition of conflict and fear in the poetry from the Northeast, flowering in the breed of the 'poetry of terror', emerging in the 'troubled zone' of India. In an interview published in Poetry International Web, Nongkynrih reiterates the recurring but startling definition of the poetry from the Northeast as literature of terror and adds that there may not be a "need to sensationalise the subject" (Nongkynrih, The Poet as Chronicler). Following the seasoned writers like Ngangom, emerging young poets are also increasingly speaking of bullets and blood.

### Endnotes

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