

## **POETIC VOICES FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA: A STUDY ON ROBIN S. NGANGOM'S AND DESMOND L. KHARMAWPHLANG'S POETRY**

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**Abstract-** *Northeast India is an under- represented region in many ways. The troubled climate, the unfamiliar landscape and the confluence of various ethnic groups and communities of people have given rise to a body of writing that is completely different from Indian English Literature. North-East, unlike the other regional territories of the country, nurtures an inbuilt multiplicity. It has diverse and different voices. Modernity has made its penetration with all its mendacities yet, the vigour and verve of the oral preeminently persist, the folk and the modern too exist uniformly in the narrative of the region. It is an extraordinarily rich and diverse region, in natural resources and beauty, in its peoples and their rich social and cultural inheritance, in the resonance of its complex politics and post-border ethnicities. But the place is also extraordinarily tragic in the range of the violence it has suffered and the blood that has been shed in the name of preserving national unity and upholding India's security. This paper is an attempt to show how writers from north-east expresses their innermost feelings related to their land- culture, nostalgia, the landscape, folklore, etc. and how their writings deals with the issues related to it.*

**Key words:** North-East, Ethnicity, Culture, Folklore, Diversity, Land, Memory

### **I. Introduction**

Northeast India comprises the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. It is a study in diversity. You will all agree that the image that the word Northeast conjures up for most Indians is of an entity distinct from the mainland and populated by people equally dissimilar – geographically, historically, racially and linguistically.

One of the reasons for this perception is its geographical position, which makes the region almost detached from the mainland: “India’s Northeast is a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometers wide at its slimmest which is referred to as the Chicken’s Neck”

The Northeast had always been placed mostly outside the purview of studies in Indian culture and history, and till very recently, serious attempts to study this region in conjunction with the larger narratives of the nation have been few and far between. The fact that a considerable majority of the population is tribal was one of the causes for the interest of colonial ethnographers and anthropologists in this region. They recorded the customs, manners, languages and everyday life of the people. The incursion of Christian missionaries began around the same time. Except for Assam, Tripura and Manipur, which had linkages with the Indic culture of South Asia, the rest of the Northeast had affiliations with Mongoloid South East Asia. However, as the British ensconced themselves in India, colonial political expediency led to the entire region being yoked together with India. The region was evidently a colonial construction as was the demarcation of borders, which were also imposed. This historical legacy was handed down to independent India as well, and the interests of the Indian nation state have been at odds with the reality and the aspirations of the people of this region. There is a history of resistance to both British as well as Indian attempts to administer the area, most of the issues being linked to cultural conflicts which translate into identity-based political agitations. However, the renewed political and academic interest in the region at the turn of the century holds promise for the generation of a proper perspective to understand the region and its variegated reality.

Historical exclusion is just one part of a larger picture, where, apart from freedom fighters, creative writers, thinkers, academics, artists and many others find no mention beyond the borders of the region in nationalist discourse. Writings from and about the Northeast tend to focus on these unresolved issues. Most of the literature from this region reflects the experience of change and the response to it. Identity, ethnicity, violence, marginalization and life lived amidst this volatility are, understandably, the content of creative and critical writings from this region. Since, they write about terrorism, insurgency, human rights abuses, environmental and ecological concerns, loss of ethnic values and customs, and the corrupt political – bureaucrat nexus their work has a distinct identity within Indian English poetry.

## **II. Objectives**

The objectives of this paper –

- To study the unique position of the Northeast with respect to the rest of India;
- to find out how the topographical, cultural and political distinctiveness generate a very unique kind of literature from this region;
- to be able to understand and analyse the specificities of Manipur and locate Robin Gngangom as a writer from Manipur and from the North East;
- To study Desmond Kharmawphlang's underlying issues in poetry

## **III. Methodology**

This paper would examine how north-east poetry depicts the voices of the writers protest, resistance, memory and violence. It will also make an attempt to show 'why' and 'how' the writer from Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. The poems selected were examined critically and closely in detail and those finally chosen for discussion are generally placed in the context of each poet's work.

The primary sources here are the poems of the individual poets and along with that various secondary sources like pdf, online journals books etc have been considered for the research.

## **IV. Discussion**

Northeast is not a geographical, political unit, but a place of many languages and cultures. An intense awareness of cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with 'other' cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of seven north eastern states. Each small community or linguistic group has responded through its oral or written communication to the encounters with the major cultures from mainland India in its own distinctive manner. The main waves of cultural invasion that have brought significant changes in the literature world of the region originated in the Bhakti Movement followed by the various reformist dispensations of the nineteenth century, colonialism and the Christian missionaries activities that accompanied it, and the new culture of development that has become a part of global culture. Each of these encounters resulted in different forms of resistance as well as appropriations. The clash of cultures has often led to the loss of traditional forms and the adoption of new cultural icons that threatened the existing ones. In Assam,

Manipur and Tripura, the process of cultural intermixing began long before the advent of Colonialism. Shaiva , Shakta, Vaishnava and different forms of Hinduism together with Buddhism and Islam spread their distinctive influences in the region, while the Tai Ahoms who entered Assam from the east and ruled the country made immense contribution towards the creation of a syncretic culture in the region. It is significant that the literature of the pre-colonial period in all these three kingdoms was deeply rooted in the wonderfully mixed cultural life of these societies.

A Manipuri by descent, Robin feels that contemporary Manipuri poetry has a preponderance of bullets. “The young poets talk of blood, bullets and flowers all in the same breath,” he explains. With violence an all-pervasive influence in their lives, red remains a favourite colour with the new generation of writers. When life for the Manipuri poet gets too oppressive, he takes refuge in self-directed irony, satire and parody. What emerges is a brand of black humour to portray, what Robin calls, “an absurd picture”. But it is not as if all poets talk of violence. Some of them tend to explore myths and their own mindscapes.

Robin’s recent forays into poetry have all the ingredients of a strife-torn world. He talks about “...the trucks carrying the appliances of death and devastation, ...the graves of youth who died in confusion...” in *The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom*. Readers have lapped up such works since they reflect the terror of the times.

In many instances, poetry fraught with tensions and conflicts have a cathartic value. While militancy has thrown up a rich harvest of creativity, some amount of artistic freedom is a necessary precondition for its evolution and flowering. Many poets may not join demonstrations and marches but they often write the poetry of subversion. “A writer cannot be a conformist but a natural dissident. And even as poetry cannot bring about a moral revolution, it has the power to heal in stressful eras,” says Robin.

Desmond L Kharmawphlang looks at the past in an ambivalent manner writing of it at times, with a kind of ferocity. The past is permeating, yet the past and the present interface with a sense of longing: the emotional pause created between the past and the present leads to sadness layered with irony; notwithstanding a touch of sarcasm.

"I never get tired of talking about my hometown,  
In summer the sky is pregnant,  
Swollen with unborn rain  
Winter arrives, with a tepid sun  
Touching the frozen hills, the... boats on lakes.  
Long ago, the men went beyond the Surma  
To trade, to bring some women...  
Later came the British with gifts of bullets,  
Blood-money and religion.  
A steady conquest to the sound of guns began."

( "The Conquest")

Kharmawphlang gives voice to the anger felt by the Khasis at the impact of Colonialism on their life and land. His poem expresses resentment and frustration with a different kind of "conquest":

Quite suddenly, the British left.  
There was peace, the sweet  
smell of wet leaves again.  
But in the wavering walk of time  
There came those from the sweltering plains,  
from everywhere.

You stricken land, how they love  
Your teeming soil, your bruised children.  
One of them told me, "you know,  
Yours is a truly metropolitan city".

In his poem "Letter from Pahambir", Desmond Kharmawphlang undergoes a journey to the remote village of Pahambir in search of his cultural roots in the midst of his hybrid generation. Thus, we see how the poet links the past with the present.

' We come', I plead, to learn, not to reach  
We come with longing, we are the

Forgetful generation, our hearts tapping  
A rhythm spawned in shame, a shame  
That splits our present from our past.  
We have suckled for so long  
On a wisdom of falsehood- we ourselves  
Our own worst enemies.'

(“Letter from Pahambir”)

Kharmawphlang describes himself in “Letter to a Dear Friend” as “a recorder of bitter things”. In the poem, he speaks of the corruption of the politicians and the impact of development on the environment of his home state Meghalaya:

They are a peculiar breed, the leaders-  
they have an eel for a tongue,  
a mint for a brain.

When you write next,  
I may have some interesting things to  
Report- may be about the advent  
Of acid rain or even the disappearance of  
Some villages for the mining of  
a rare mineral.

In his "The September Song" and in Robin S. Ngangom's "The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom" there are vibrant portrayals of the current society and of social trends experiencing painful, horrific processes of change and transition. The poets here voice anguish yet there is objective distancing from the subjective reality when the poet finds solace in the self.

"...My love, how can I explain  
that I abominate laws  
which punish a man for his past,  
Only the night seems to understand

that we must bear it again

When I am gone

I would leave you these:

a life without mirrors,

The blue ode between pines

and the winter sky, the

secret understanding of

roots and the earth,

But where can one run from the homeland,

where can I flee from your love?

They have become pursuing prisons

which hold the man

with criminal worlds".

(“ The Strange Affair of Robin Ngangom”)

The Strange Affairs of Robin S. Ngangom is Ngangom’s most ambitious and political poem. In this poem, Ngangom attempts to sketch the narrative of an individual desiring freedom. The multiple voices that the poetic voice adopts resonates the individual’s desire for freedom from multiples levels of oppression, domination, subjugation and tyrannies. The individual “I”, however, paves way for a collective and communitarian “we”. As the poem progresses, it talks about the decay of morality, culture, and humanity as well as the destruction of personal relationships for material gains and the overall tragic lives of the people of Manipur. By using his own name in the title of the poem Ngangom drives home the point of his unique affiliation with his homeland. The circumstances being talked about are not the fragments of the imagination. The poet has lived through and faced these circumstances.

Another poem "Native Land" is a testimony to the hard times endured by the native Manipuri crowd. It is a tribute to the men and women for the survival instincts, appreciating their unwavering endurance in the face of ethnic or political conflict. Nobody apart from the native poet acknowledges the mental and physical dispossession and displacement faced by the crowd.

The poem is a pensive recollection of the kind of scenarios that poet's native land has faced and the way it has affected his psyche.

I burnt my truth with them,  
And buried uneasy manhood with them.  
I did mutter, on some far-off day:  
"There are limits", but when the days Absolved the butchers,  
I continue to live As if nothing happened. (23-28)

These lines emphasize that either the experiences of these people are so disturbing that they are trying hard to repress the memories or that the authorities have turned a blind eye to these circumstances and refuse to acknowledge their wrong doings.

Similarly, in another text "My Invented Land" he describes the gory picture of bloodshed and violence prevalent in Manipur. He describes how it has become a common aspect of their lives. The main theme of this poem seems to be that loss of their cultural identity. The poem is believed to be inspired by Nehru's speech "Tryst with Destiny"

My home is a gun  
Pressed against both temples  
A knock on a night 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)

The poet elaborates by saying that even though people are trying to serve justice now, the damage has been done. The memories of this torture and conflict will always remain with them and haunt the future generations. The threat and fear of cross-border enmity is also hinted at in the poem. In the following lines, the poet registers his protest and makes clear his resentment against the onslaught of the so-called "outside forces" (the Indian forces, who are attempting to uproot their indigenous culture and identity. It seems that the poet's homeland resists the politics of assimilation adopted by the mainland.



Ngangom describes his poetry as mostly 'autobiographical'. Tribal folklores have been explored through his poetry for asserting an identity that can be claimed as his own. He is also concerned of the problem of insurgency in the north-east in general, which, to a large extent, is responsible for the erosion of human values as well as degradation of the environment.

## V. Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that the verses of these poets display a kind of maturity and vigour of expression that come from a sensitive tapping of the rich resources of the vernacular languages. The dexterous intermingling of social, political, historical, satirical and personal themes makes these poets a class apart by themselves. These are the canons of poetry by which we are to study them critically. Both these poets have written on love and human relationships. Gngangom and Karmawphlang along with the other poets from northeast feel that they have an obligation to write about the crucial contemporary problems of their region.

Modern Manipuri poetry, according to Gngangom, was born amidst the ravages of the Second World War, of which Manipur remains a forgotten land. The political event that followed soon after the war were all reflected in the literature of the post war period- the departure of the British, the disillusionment with the new political scenario, the subsequent militant resistance movement, etc. Likewise, we get a deeper probe into the social reality and the journey inwards into the tortured soul of these poets.

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