

**Unmasking Terror and Politics in Manipur:  
A Study of Robin S Ngangom's *Words and the Silence***

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**Abstract**

Manipuri literature has overwhelming role in self-discovery of a much-neglected land. It depicts the turbulent time and political and social life of an erstwhile feudal state. Writers portray disturbing situation of a neo-colonial regime. They become inward-looking and adopt ironic and alienated stances to fashion out dark, sombre situation of this land. In Robin S. Ngangom's poetry nostalgic tone and tenor revealing the pathetic situation of a land is very much prominent. He is concerned with the loss of cultural values and the killing of the youths in his land. His poetry is infused with memory of violence and his individual voice paves way to collective tone.

**Keywords:** Robin S Ngangom, *Words and the Silence*, Manipur, Northeast India, insurgency, conflict, nostalgia,

**Northeast Writing**

The term 'North East' has special connotation which binds together eight disparate, underdeveloped states with regard to geographical, linguistic and ethnic ideas. These areas are ill-famed for their insecurity, violence, poverty, unemployment etc. Thus, literature of this region is entwined with all these issues. A completely new generation has emerged from North-East. Preeti Gills thinks, 'Having grown up in the shadow of the gun, their desire to analyse the common people's reaction to insurgency is as strong as ever' (Wikipedia, *Literature from North East India*). Poetry is a particular genre to uphold terror, violence, extortion etc. Northeast poetry developed as an opposition to Indian English poetry and it carries on this tradition because the national media have not upheld them. Poetry depicts the saga of the people of the region. This poetry is concerned with the psychological and social difficulties of the common people living in this region. This poetry raises a great deal of issues like identity crisis, looking after roots, ecological problems, socio political and cultural atmosphere. Eulogising the efforts of the poets of the region, Jayanta Mahapatra highlights: '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 North-east'(xi-xii). This poetry is also besotted with the subject matter of large scale migration, a sense of alienation, ethnic violence, insurgency and counter insurgency etc. North East Indian poetry did not come to the limelight like other regional English poetry. This poetry was marked by the portrait of violence, fear, tension and searching for peace. This poetry is notable for remarkable expression of mythology, folktale. The North Eastern Indian English poets have depicted robust militarism, ethnicity and politics and love for nature.

**Socio-Political background in Manipur:**

New literature in Manipur springs out from the critical situation of 1960s and 1970s when separatist movement and discontent against Indian rule affected the north eastern region. Secret killing and atrocity

became common norms there and entire land was permeated with political violence and social degradation. Then Manipur was a crumbling state, subsuming images of violence, bitterness and suffering of the people. The 1970s was a period of insurgency and it impinged upon the poet's memory. Actually the writers saw Manipuri youths being fired by the Indian Armed forces under the AFSPA Act. The youths tried to snatch the power and carry out self-determination programme and the confrontation occurred thus. So, they saw homeland under the stark image. Manipur became the part of the Indian union on 15 October 1949. However, many insurgent organisations were born after this time and those organisations pursued for independent states. The secessionist activities began just after Indian Independence when Hyam Irabot, a noted Maoist communist desired to 'liberate Manipur from feudalism and semi-colonialism of Manipur kings and Indian State' (50, Chandra Jyoti Sonowal). In later period Maoist movement gave birth to other secessionist groups like People's Liberation Army (PLA), the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP). These groups played their roles in factionalism in Manipur and brought insecurity and violence in the land. Actually, this land was underdeveloped and the role of the Central government was one of apathy and neglect. So different insurgent movements burst out in protest of the antipathy of Government which tried to curb them with stringent measures and oppressive laws like the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act, 1958 (TADA), National Security Act, 1980 (NSA), Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967 (UAP) etc. All these created disorderly situation and bloodshed, terror spilled over the everyday life. At this background and time period Manipuri poets wrote down their best poetry which was often known as poetry in a time of terror. So when poets write about their land and terrible loss, images of gun and bullets emerge naturally. Manipur was turned into a state of anarchy and different horrifying incidents captured the areas.

### **Poets in Manipur**

Among the poets in Manipur Nilmoni Phukan, Harekrishna Deka, Nilim Kumar, Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Robin S Ngangom are famous for their unique tone. Their works are highly inspired by political themes and developed by intense subjective experience and these sometimes wax emotional and lyrical. That poetry contains multi-faceted voices. They are full of natural scenery, scent and sound, myth, legend, tradition and culture. Manipuri poets collect materials from their surrounding atmosphere and the modern Manipuri literature draw the poetic sustenance from the ravages of Great War. It is not infused with visions of grandeur but expression of new poetic mode. It represents economic and political power, rootlessness, depression, fragmentation of home and family, urbanisation etc. The writers are the visionary artists witnessing fractured stature of Manipur and shifting realities of Manipur. Manipuri poetry is now obsessed with representation of ethnic violence, corruption, terrorism, oppression etc. Therefore, moral degradation and socio-economic turbulence are common theme.

### **Robin S. Ngangom Focuses on Conflict**

In north east India, the conflict is a recurrent matter. It has taken frightening appearance and shows the degeneration of soul into bestial form. It exhibits the dark forces that brood over the basic foundations of humanity and exposes the corruption and moral laxity. Robin S. Ngangom witnesses the pathetic incidents, socio-political disturbances and paints the image with his power of imagination. He has tried to sum up the gory picture of Manipur in his poems. These poems are charged with emotional feeling of homeland, but they cannot fail to bring out protestation, resentment of the terrible time and the protection of homeland against all odds.

### **Sentimental Poetry**

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Raju Ta, Ph.D. Research Scholar

203

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Ngangom has explored the outside world by his sentimental poetry. He wrote in his literary essay 'Poetry in the Time of Terror'- 'Manipur, my native place in Northeast India, is in a state of anarchy, and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land.' He has given vent to his pent-up feelings and desires. However, he cuts off the Meitei culture that shaped the childhood period, yet the folk tradition, the geographical location always haunts him.

His poetry gives vent to troubled periods in the history of Manipur. Manipur has long been captured by insurgency and the beautiful land often is caught by violent protest. However, poet laments that this protest is not issued from one of revolutionary ideals but it is marked by lack of principality and terrorism. Hatred has taken the place of beauty and peace and violence overflows the pristine land. Again B.B. Kumar writes, 'Although a great cultural cauldron, the Northeast of India remains little known and largely misunderstood. The uneasy existence of paradoxical worlds such as the folk and the westernized virgin forest and car-choked streets, ethnic cleansers and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant corruption, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider's predicament, make this picturesque region especially vulnerable' (ix).

### **Witness to Political Violence**

Ngangom who writes in English and Meitei thinks that some poets have moved beyond recording the events of insurgency. However, he thinks that poets in Manipur tend to take the risk of writing as a witness to political violence. The theme of north eastern poetry originates from the contemporary events. Poetry may not be insurgent art, but insurgency has led to the birth of high quality poetry.

The ethnic clash between Kukis and the Nagas which was known as 'Joupi Massacre' has been represented in his poem 'Native Land':

First came the scream of the dying  
In a bad dream, then the radio report  
And a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five  
Houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied.

Ngangom presents culture, custom, tradition and historical background of Manipur. This area is gradually turning into battleground-the battle being fought between armed forces and the terrorist groups.

Ngangom has to undergo crucial period in his youth as everything is uncertain. He thinks about the coming years which may prove grave for any person's existence. He is now tired and looking for some rest. Thus, he is asking this apprehensive question:

Who would have thought behind  
my twenty-six year old face  
lurks the fear of oncoming years?  
(Tired As I Am)

Actually, Ngangom has observed many tragic incidents and casualties and his face is marked by the impending fear.

### ***Homeland I Left***

‘Homeland I left’ is a bitter recollection of his early childhood. Poet left home in his early age and often falters to remember the names related with his early childhood, but he tries to remember the formative years which sooth him. The country has attained freedom, but war has not stopped. The common people fall victims to successive wars that rage throughout the frontier part. Thus, he remembers:

I hear a wicked war is now waged  
on our soil, and gory bodies  
dragged unceremoniously  
through our rice-fields.

(Homeland I Left)

At this time ‘newly rich’ was ruling the region and the entire land was filled with armed persons. Freedom is unheard thing in his native land.

Manipur has felt deep wound as it has witnessed the fight with the arms. The voice has been suppressed:

O who will create guns which can throttle  
the ugly fates of our homes before they come to light!

.....  
.....

even you couldn’t know  
what could happen to your homeland.

(To Those Who Went Away Leaving Us: A Tale of Manipur)

Thus, it is very pathetic to think of the homes that he has already left behind but could not left the memory associated with the home.

### **Childhood Reminiscences**

Ngangom’s poems reach supreme when they are cast in childhood reminiscences. He laments the conditions of Manipuri people who are ‘the remnants of a dying people’. Here the old family order of honour is gradually breaking down. This breakdown of values coupled with recurrent fusillade is the recurrent feature of Manipur. Its natural scenery is fine, but this scenery become faded as the natural landscape is turning worse because ‘guns which can throttle the ugly fates of our homes before they come to light!’ This is no heroic deed with guns. Instead, this history is marked by destruction and here none laughs but cries in anxiety.

So, Manipur has its own saga which has not found its expression so far. The north eastern poetry tries to raise the much unheard topic.

### **Degeneration**

Ngangom has pointed to another issue, the issue of degeneration in next generation. People have mastered the way of the colonial master, but they have lost innocence and abandoned roots. But the innocence and traditional roots are the eternal features of Manipuri tribal people. They have come away from it yet they struggle to keep them. They have taken shelter in cities

### Curfew and Fake Encounters

Robin S. Ngangom does not write the effervescent piece of poetry celebrating the charming landscape and beautiful image of Manipur because he thinks that justice would not be done on his part if he remains obsessed with positive aspects only. He is not demonstrative of the physical beauty; rather, he depicts the brutality of mental ruggedness through nostalgia and memory. He depicts the image of fake encounter that killed hundreds of youths rampantly in Manipur. The common people have to bear the brunt of this terrible violence. Thus, he brings out the predicament of his place in the poem, 'Curfew':

The once groaning streets are muted  
no motor sounds can break this spell  
of motionless quiet  
that has descended like fate.  
A fallen leaf from the day's tree  
settling from the town on woods.  
.....  
people were killed in a lawless firing  
and the streets today observe  
hour long silence for the departed. (66)

### Poetry in Chains

Ngangom stays away from home but cannot deny the turbulent political situation that has crept into the fine fabric of life. He depicts this state in metaphoric garb and strongly opposes the violence that kills hundreds of people in a 'lawless firing'. Consequently, people observe curfew that is imposed hours after hours. So, he participates with the victims mentally though he has to remain detached physically. In this situation he cannot live in dreamy-magical world and comes down with miraculous power of poetry. However, his physical distance from his native land compels him stand with utter hopelessness and wretched situation. He dives deeper into pessimism, watching the brutalisation of human lives. He is worried about the lurking corruption in his land and the harsh realities that people's conscience is pricked no more. He reiterates his own stance in the poem, 'I Am Sorry to See Poetry in Chains':

Once prime land, beneficent and fabled  
and now playground of black-marketeers,  
haven for future hunters where  
none misses a heartbeat  
as you feed money, sell honour, peddle justice.  
My love, night upsets us however,  
heightening the day's fears. (69-70)

Ngangom feels distracted by the fact that his poetry would not be able to curb the hellish situation and liberate his state out of it. So, he expresses his tragic undertone without any ambiguity.

### Political Corruption

Ngangom also protests against lack of development and Central government's attitude to this region. Consequently, rampant corruption spreads throughout this region and people become victims

to this wretched condition and only people with wealth and money can draw respect from others. This is the bleak portrait of a damaged society which is torn by fears, sufferings, miseries and insecurities. It becomes quite unpalatable to bear:

here everything is bought and sold  
to the highest bidder.  
the gunpoint, the hypodermic needle, and currency  
notes: these are the only languages we know.  
Brothers buy brothers and fathers sell sons as a way of life.  
(20, Racial Progression)

The poet shatters down the pathetic picture of his native place. It shows how inhumanity grasps the land and people lose their identity to live with honour. People act in utter callousness and do not care human value and entire land is in topsy-turvy condition. This system has been going on for several centuries and people are only 'remnants of a dying people'. Poet's lamentation knows no bounds in that case. He finds no hope for his countrymen as this land is nurturing the culture of inhumanity. So, he criticises this land thus:

Capital of thieves, pimps, cutthroats,  
malignant peasants and stray dogs!  
Come for a contest of riches  
at the town's premises.

All seems like a bad dream today. (To My People)

Here the poet ironically points to the growing materialism. Money seems to rule the land now and people are not concerned about any roguish activity. This image evokes threatening moral and social dangers and reveals the reality of life of this region. It is both a wake-up call and an indictment against the society that tolerates the corruption.

### Nostalgic Cry

The total picture that the poet reveals is marked by sensitivity. As a poet he cannot remain mute to the tragic happenings around and thus he highlights lurking dangers that are imminent to every Manipuri people. He mourns the past glory that crumbles with the passage of time due to utter carelessness of the people and tear down the harsh realities that are killing people's conscience. Though he stays away from his home, his nostalgia and love is very much prominent. He has expressed his idea through subtle imagery and appropriate symbols with a serious intent. In this way, he has probed into the social condition and the fractured psyche of modern Manipur.

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207

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208

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