

'A Poem for Mother'



Discipline Courses-I

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Paper: Indian Writing in English

Lesson: 'A Poem for Mother'

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The North-Eastern scene and the poems of Robin S. Ngangom



Robin S. Ngangom was born in 1959 in Singjamei district, Imphal, Manipur. He was a student of literature at St. Edmund's College and later at the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong. He has also been serving as a lecturer in the Department of English at NEHU. His books include three collections of poems, *Words and Silence* (1988), published by Writer's Workshop, *Time's Crossroads* (1994), and *The Desire of Roots* (2006) and an essay, *Poetry in A Time of Terror*, which appeared in *The Other Side of Terror: An Anthology of Writings on Terrorism in South Asia*, (Oxford University Press, 2009). This bi-lingual lyric poet and translator, writing in English and Manipuri, has received many honours like the Katha Award for Translation in 1999 and Udaya Bharti National Award for Poetry in 1994. He was also invited to U.K for the U.K Year of Literature and Writing, 1995.

Did you know:

Katha Books, also known as 'Katha Vilasam', is a publishing house that was founded by Geeta Dharamarajan in the year 1988. It has done some pioneering works in translating Indian Literature into English and Hindi from more than twenty regional languages.

Katha Awards were introduced in 1990 for Creative Writing, Translation and Editing, which promotes wide readership for best works from regional literature.

Katha Chudamani Award, on the other hand, recognizes lifetime literary achievements of writers of exceptional merit.

North-East

The eight states comprising the North-East region of India, namely Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura and Sikkim are geographically situated between the mainland India and South-East Asia. The blanket term 'North East', however, elides over the distinct cultural, regional, linguistic, and ritual-religious practices that each of these states observe and uphold. These eight states are not just different from the mainland India, but are also disparate from each other, and marked by existence of differences within the difference. For instance, there are complex divisions within Meghalaya, breaking up into sub-tribes and clans, and each speaking their own language and dialect, as well as practicing their own distinct rituals. This is also true for all the other states that comprise the North-East.

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Yet, all these states are joined by one common link, of being largely ignored and misunderstood, by the mainland India or anybody who stands outside this mistakenly assumed homogeneous domain. This lack of knowledge and sensitivity in comprehending the North-East as an assortment of people of different ethnic origins gave rise to discontentment among the North-east people leading to political unrest, especially during the 1950s. In the 1950s, when the statehood was granted to these princely kingdoms, after their integration with the newly independent state of India on 15th October 1949, the processes delineating the state boundaries overlooked their ethnic and cultural specificities. The uniform policies that were formulated and implemented by the Parliament of India, similarly, met with aversion from the North-East. The clashes between the local inhabitants and the government, ever since, are the order of the day in the North-East.

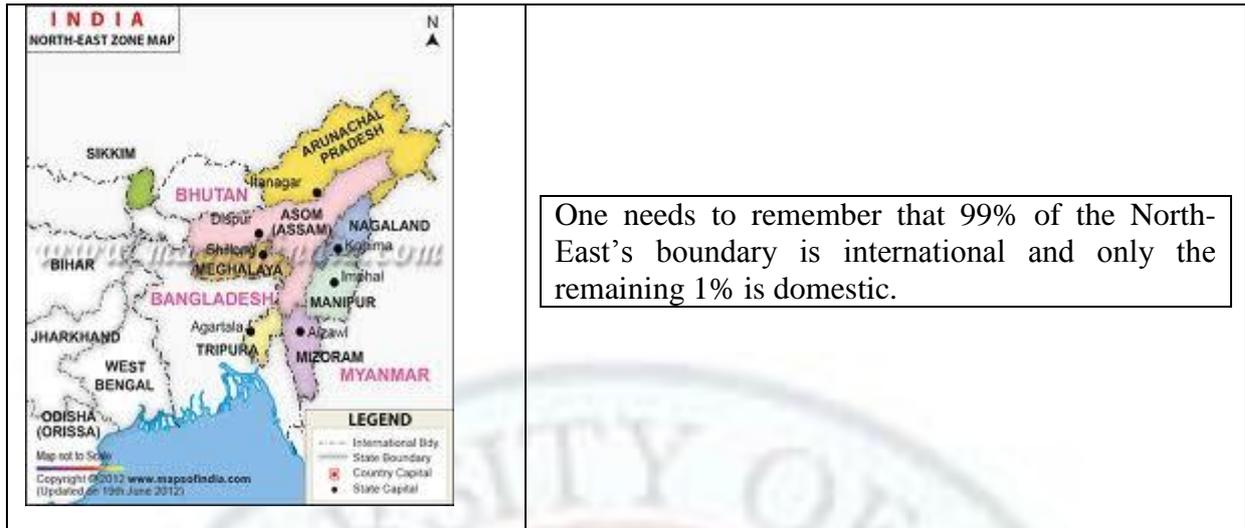
Thingam Kishan Singh, in his essay, "Encounters and Literary Engagements: A Critique of History and Literature in Manipur" discusses the three major cultural encounters that the Meetei has had experienced. The first has been with the Meetei culture coming in contact with Hinduism during the reign of King Charairongba in the seventeenth century. This encounter led to a major socio-cultural religious displacement during the reign of King Pamheiba (rechristened himself as Maharaja Garibniwaz, after the death of his father) in 1709. This alien Hindu faith was almost militantly imposed. Any opposition or resistance to the practice of the new Hindu religion, as dictated by King Pamheiba, met with dire consequences. In 1737, Pamheiba himself converted to the Ramanandi sect of Vaisnavism under the guidance of Shantidas Goswami, a preacher from the Sylhet regions. This clash between the indigenous Meetei faith and the alien Hindu faith is viewed by many as Manipur's first encounter with the 'modern'. Thingam Singh, however, identifies this cultural interaction as an encounter between two traditional or two pre-modern cultures.

Meidingu Pamheiba was the son of Meidingu Charairongba and Sapam Chanu Ningthilchaibi. During his 39 years of reign (1708-1747), he was intensely involved in the project of expanding the territory of his kingdom through warfare. Under the influence of the Hindu culture, which had reached Manipur around 15th -16th century, he publicly burnt the holy books related to Sanna-Mahi religion, on the full moon day of Mera (October) in 1732. This day is known as Puya-Meithaba among the Meeteis. He also expelled some of the prominent Meetei scholars like Louremba Khongnang Thaba, Langol Lukhoi, Konok Thengra, Wangoo Bajee and others for they opposed his idea of replacing indigeneous religions with a new faith.

The British conquest of Manipur in 1891, according to Thingam, is not just the second cultural encounter that Manipur experienced, but also their first exposure to a modern cultural system. With the new enlightenment ideas such as liberty, equality, justice; and with the Second World War the Meetei culture was in flux of change. It also experienced a wave of decolonizing processes that swept Asia, Africa and Latin America, especially after Manipur was freed from British control in 1947 and remained a sovereign state for a couple of years.

Manipur's integration with India on 15th October 1949 marked the third phase or the third cultural encounter of Meetei people with a different cultural system. Large parts of the North-East had never experienced the principle of a central administration before. Their allegiance to the newly formed Indian state was also not a simple process as it met with a natural feeling of mistrust and suspicion. This was further accentuated by the creation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) which meant the loss of a major chunk physically connecting the mainland India and the North East India.

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The crisis of identity that marks the existence in the North-East is brought around by a constant re-drawing of boundaries as well as because of the resentment at the sovereign states being turned into virtual or internal colonies of the mainland India. The disillusionment with the new political arrangement leaves these states in a conflict situation ever since.

Two political maneuvers implemented/imposed by the Indian government have had a serious impact on the North-East, the Sixth Schedule Autonomous Council (1952) and the Armed Forces Special Power Act (1958). Articles 244(2) and 275(1) make special and arbitrary provisions for the administration of the Tribal areas of the North East with an aim of generating democratizing and autonomous processes. Towards that end, for instance, according to the point 3 of the article, the Governor through public notification may create a new district, increase or diminish the area under any district, rename any district, and so on. This, however, led to creation of multiple centers of power and rather than achieving the democratic end, for which it was formulated, ended up enabling the vote bank politics of many astute leaders.

To manage the ever-increasing political turmoil and turbulences in these states, the Indian Army, for the first time since independence, was deployed on 18th August 1958, to manage internal conflict. The Armed Forces Special Power Act (1958) is exemplar in highlighting the government's laxity in devising appropriate political strategies to resolve the conflict in the North-East. The Indian government by transferring its political responsibility to AFSPA, undermined and sub-humanized both the agency as well as the existence of its North-Eastern subjects. AFSPA is invested with seamless power and has the authority even to shoot at a mere suspicion. The denial of trial of the 'suspect', however, obliterates the 'suspect' not just as a political but even as a human entity. According to an August 2008 Human Rights Watch Report, "The Act violates provisions of international human rights law, including the right to life, the right to be protected from arbitrary arrest and detention, and the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. It also denies the victims of the abuses the right to a remedy." This clearly establishes AFSPA as a symbol of oppression and its rule as a powerful statute of despotism.

The Armed Forces Special Power act (Assam and Manipur, 1958) was promulgated by the then President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, on 22nd May 1958.

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Ironically, the Act was fashioned on similar lines which were enforced by the British Government on 15th August 1942 to suppress the Quit India Movement. The Parliament of India on 11th September 1958 made use of the same nomenclature that was deployed by the British to describe the areas in which granting special powers to Armed Forces had become necessary, “the disturbed areas”.

Sharmila Devi



Irom Sharmila Chanu, popularly known as the ‘Iron Lady of Manipur’, has been on a hunger strike since 2nd November 2000, demanding the Indian Government to annul the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA), which according to her is the prime cause of violence in Manipur and other parts of north east India. This hunger strike was in response to the ‘Malom Massacre, an incident that involved Indian Parliamentary Forces shooting and thereby killing ten civilians who were waiting at a bus stop in Malom, a town in Manipur.

Along with Irom Sharmila, the literature, poetry as well as fiction, produced in the North-East holds up a mirror to the North-East society, and also highlight the general neglect and disregard they face from the Indian government.

Thingam Kishan Singh, in his essay, draws parallels between the three historio-cultural encounters of Manipur and the kind of literature they gave rise to. The first cultural encounter between Manipur and the Vaishnavite Hinduism led to a ban on the use of indigenous script, under the autocratic rule of the King Pamheiba. The Bengali script and Shantidas Goswami’s chronicle, *Vijay Panchali* replaced the indigenous manuscripts and texts. Alien art forms like Natya Sankirtan, corruption in language, adoption of Indo-Aryan languages like Sanskrit, were systematic attempts at destroying the history and culture of the local people. The literature of this period was shrouded by deliberate anonymity.

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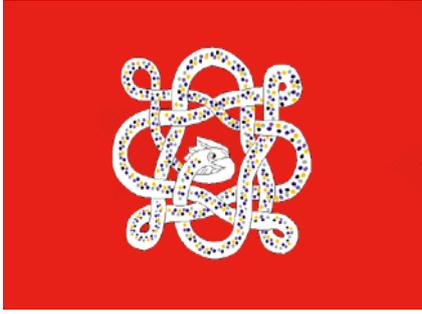
Texts commissioned by King Pamheiba	Texts produced by anonymous writers
<p>1. Garibniwaz patronized one Kshema Singh Moiramba to compose <i>the Ramayana</i> in Manipuri.</p> <p>2. <i>Parikshit</i>, a part of the <i>Mahabharata</i> was translated by Gopaldas, king's Vaishnavite teacher.</p> <p>3. The <i>Bhagwad Gita</i> and various other parts of the <i>Mahabharata</i> were translated.</p>	<p>1. <i>Sanamahi Laikan</i></p> <p>2. <i>Khagemba Langjei</i></p> <p>3. <i>Chingoiron</i></p>
<p>Aim: To wipe out the socio-cultural and literary history of Manipur.</p>	<p>Aim: To preserve and nurture the indigeneous faith, religion and culture along with the pre-hindu literary culture.</p>

The Anglo-Manipuri war, conflict with Burma, fratricidal scuffles for the throne along with the technological changes introduced by the British rule and the proselytizing project of the Christian missionaries led to rapid changes in the socio-politico-cultural landscape of Manipur. The point of British intrusion is hardly realized in the literature of the period, but the thrust of modernity and the new perceptions of reality were immediately addressed by the writers with a call for invoking their rich cultural heritage. Khwairakpam Chaoba, Lamabam Kamal and Hijam Angahal are the names associated with this literary phase, writers who were constantly interrogating the assumed notions of received ideas and practices by the Manipuri people. All these writers were trying their hands at varied genres like poetry, drama, novel, short story, essay, epic, and so on. At the same time, they were also coming in contact with Western Romanticism and writing high romantic poetry, invoked the natural and rural landscape in their works. They are, however, considered to be the founding fathers of Manipuri literature.

Haodijamba Chaitanya, is considered to be an important literary intellect, writing in the transition period, as the pre-modern Manipur was making way for the new modern influence. The four significant works published by him were *Khamba Thoibi Warini* (1899), *Khagi Ngamba* (1900), *Takhel Ngamba* (1902) and *Chingthangkomba* (1902). Hijam Irabot is understood to be the first truly modern poet. Though many of his works were published posthumously and some continue to remain unpublished till date, he is considered to be a pioneer in many spheres. *Metei Chanu*, the first literary journal in Manipuri, is credited to his name; as well as *Mandalay Khongchat*, the first proper travelogue in Manipuri.

The British withdrawal from Manipur, and Indian subcontinent at large in 1947, granting a free and independent status to Manipuri state was short-lived, for it was merged with the mainland India in 1949.

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The 'Pakhangba Flag' was adopted as the state flag in the short period of Independence (1947-49). It is also known as the snake flag and is considered by 'the Independents' to be the national flag of Manipur till date.

Did you know: Indian states officially do not have flags, except for Jammu and Kashmir?

The political measures adopted by the newly independent state of India, glossing over social, political, cultural, regional, religious, linguistic and economic specificities that marked the existence of the states in the North-east as well as the differences that operated within a state, was met with resistance at the political level. The literature produced in this phase, especially poetry, offered itself as counter discourse to this homogenizing mechanism espoused by the Indian government. The Manipuri poetry, therefore, ever since is steeped deep into the political strife, conflict and unrest. The impact this experience has had, in shaping the individual conscience in Manipur, informs the central discussion in the poems composed by Manipuri poets. Contemporary Manipuri poetry is, therefore, reflective of the contemporary Manipuri society and of the bitter experiences of the poets, forced to live in a world turned upside down. A departure away from the high romantic poetry was already marked by poets like Hijam Irabat, who unlike Chaoba and Kamal, wrote in a highly revolutionary language. But, by the early seventies, there emerged a group of poets, who chose to call themselves 'angry young poets'. This title was appropriated Ranjit W., Thangjam Ibopishak and Y. Ibomcha in an anthology titled *Challenge*, published in 1974. Robin S. Ngangom in his essay, *Contemporary Manipuri Poetry: An Overview*, describes how these poets were inately critiqued by quoting a leading critic of this anthology:

"Their poems are like sudden bellows by vulgar young men in the dead of night. If you believe that whatever you say should be uttered without inhibitions and regurgitated like vomit, it stinks. That cannot be new art..." (Ngangom, 298).

The poets of the next generation, especially the ones writing after the mid eighties, even when they avoided the excesses of the angry young poet, they were preoccupied with unrelenting representation of their immediate reality, which was shrouded with violence, corruption, terrorism, abuse of women, drug addiction, and so on. The poetry composed by these poets, such as Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang and Kynphum Sing Nongkynrih, at once took the shape of narratives of pain and suffering, as well narratives offering resistance. Their poetry, according to Ngangom constitutes 'the poetry of witness', illustrating the predicament of their people. Ngangom, in the 'Introduction' to his joint anthology with Kynphum S. Nongkynrih defends the North-Eastern poets from the prevailing criticism by establishing the poets and their poetries coming from the North east and mainland India as different:

"The writer from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way...living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in a verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness." (Ngangom and Nongkynrih, xii).

Ngangom clearly establishes contemporary Manipuri poetry as poetry hemmed in by "extreme realism", which explains why the predominant images employed in their poetry are

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to deal with the machinery of death: guns, bullets, blood, the color red, and so on. At the same time, his poetry also foregrounds images of the mother, nature, hills, lands, flowers, and so on. Through references to the scenic beauty and the natural landscape of Manipur, Ngangom both invokes the glorified past of Manipur, as well as describes his painful experience of having abandonedⁱ his homeland, and left behind his mother, family and friends. Ngangom attempts to comprehend these contrary circumstances, the conflict between the past and the present, that define the predicament of an individual oscillating between these two realities by looking at Camus:

“For the first time I have begun to understand Camus’s words: ‘whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression’.”ⁱⁱ

Nature, in any case, is not viewed as an aesthetic object. Nature, on the contrary, becomes a site on which socio-political histories are wielding their power; it becomes that mnemonic device that acts as a register to the unhappy memories of the present, even when it continues to be a beautiful canvas painted with a mythic past. Ngangom’s poems mark that interface between the personal and the political, private and public, past and present, sentimental and reactionary, which highlights the existence of people living in Manipur.

An analysis of *A Poem for Mother* and *The strange Affairs of Robin S. Ngangom*.

A poem for mother seems to be a fairly personal poem about Ngangom’s own life experiences. Travelling through the autobiographical details, capturing the specificities of time, “ten years ago”, the poem appears to be a tribute to his own mother, individualized through naming, “Palem Apokpi”. The poem, however, rapidly moves on to invoke the ‘mythic woman’ in her traditional roles as a housekeeper, homemaker, and especially “toil(ing) as all mothers do”. Similarly, the poem from supplying personal details about Ngangom’s childhood, growing up and then finally abandoning his homeland and migrating to Shillong moves on to invoking migration as a general universal phenomenon in Manipur, motivated by political chaos and unrest that informs the public space.

Even when this poem is not one of the political poems of Ngangom, the poem traces the advancement of a society in transition by looking at its three main character portraits: the mother, the son and the daughter-in-law. The mother symbolizes the traditional and ancestral values of the land. She is a mute and silent spectator who continues to unquestioningly witness the changes both within the family as well as the changes that inform her land. Even when the times are changing and the sons are leaving their homeland, the figure of the mother continues to surface as a powerful rock, who manages to withstand public, political and private upheavals. The sons and the daughter-in-law, on the other hand, could be associated with the emerging modern values. Manipur is primarily a matrilineal culture. Thus, the invoking of a female figure that is ‘strong’, ‘toiling’ and self-sufficient is not a peculiar feature. Yet, the use of the word “liberated” indicates the influence of the Western ideas of liberty and equality; and an awareness of the Suffragette movement of Women on the indigenous Manipuri society. The figure of the son, abandoning the homeland, becomes an emblem of a dilapidating social environment. Prompted by economic and political crisis, he seeks his fortune outside Manipur. The last stanza of the poem, however, underlines the horror of the “young boy” turned “man” who discovers that even after leaving home, he could not improve his fortune. The compromise he is forced to make in an alien land underscores the tremendous urge of the young boy, who left home “to be a man”. It also

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points out that migration within the geographical scene of Northeast could not bring about any major change. At the same time, despite the “smallness” of his pursuits outside Manipur, the alien land is more covetable. This could be understood in the light of post-integration history of Manipur. The corruption and misuse of funds by the government leaving a dearth of economic opportunities; and the state history of Manipur that continues to be conflicted still with Nagaland threatening its claim over the Naga areas in Manipur leading to terror campaigns. The lines, therefore, are not just autobiographical in nature, for Ngangom has been living in Shillong, Meghalaya for over thirty years and is recognized among the group of ‘Shillong Poets’, but it also highlights the pathos of a young man who is alarmed by his existence amidst political strife and violence. In his poem titled, *Childhood*, he presents a shocking picture of the ‘childhood’ of all the children growing up in the face of political strife and conflict:

“Childhood took place/ free from manly fears,
When I had only my mother’s love/ to protect me from knives,
from fire, and death by water

...

Childhood took place/ before your friend worshipped a gun
To become a widowmaker.”

The self-deprecatory tone of the speaker, the note of apology that the son offers to his mother and the repetition of the word ‘small’ belittle the existence of the son outside the ‘motherland’:

“I’m sorry Palem...

I only turned out to be a small man,
With small dreams and living a small life.”

The mother-motherland equation and the motherland-mother earth parallel is drawn, which is also one of the peculiar features of the Manipuri poets. The regret for not having done anything worthwhile for his mother and motherland could be traced through the tone of lamentation:

“Only I deserted much and left
so little of myself for others
to remember me at home.”

At the same time, one can also infer a parallel between the mother, motherland and nature, but with a difference:

“...your lips couldn’t blossom into a smile,
Lines have furrowed your dear face and
The first signs of snow are on your hair.”

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The poetic expression, to describe signs of ageing upon his mother, draws the imagery from the storehouse of nature, and thereby summons nature in its cyclical pattern. While one season of nature is replaced or followed by another, 'fall' being followed by 'spring', and 'snow' followed by springing of new leaves; any such natural scope of regeneration and rejuvenation is refused to the mother. On the other hand, the motherland, with all its scenic beauties, hills, plains, rivers, flora and fauna, could have been synonymous with nature, the political turmoil and the rule of gun, similarly denies that regeneration and rejuvenation to the motherland. Sumanyu Satpathy in his essay, *Locating Cultures A semi-academic Essay on the English Poetry of the North East*, discusses that issues of ethnic strife are what a poet from the north east immediately thinks of, even before thinking about the medium of expression, poetry itself. The writer history of oppression and violence in Manipur, and north east at large, naturalizes this inversion in the poetic process.

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". The "narratives of pain and suffering", according to Sisir Kumar Das are always a collective narration of a community's suffering. The speaker also attempts to resolve his uncertain or constantly oscillating identity, "I can say I am this or that" along with the twofold discourse that his community's history offers. By attempting to erase the difference between the "make believe" and the 'actual' histories, he seeks to locate in the past answers for the present crisis situation.

The poetic agenda is fairly ambitious as it gradually traces the entire bloody history of Manipur; step by step looking at all those reprobate factors that have reduced his folks to the present state of degeneration, "something has changed me"- the shell shocked, fragmented psyche:

"...we sowed suspicion in the fields
Hatred sprang and razed the crops."

The traditional agricultural economy, as if is replaced by a city that manufactures death at a large scale:

"For the trucks/ carrying the appliances of death and devastation,
...the graves of youth who died in turmoil/ are the only milestones to the city."

With caustic satire, Ngangom foregrounds Manipur at an interface between state sponsored terrorism and internal conflict. The internal colonization of Manipur by India and the subjugation and exploitation at the hands of much more powerful states of India; and the internal strife between the three main tribal communities of Manipur: the Kukis, the Nagas and the Manipuris, alike contributes to Manipur's status as the city of "death".

The invocation of Mammon, is not just an ironic subversion of invoking gods and muses at the beginning of the poem in order to seek inspiration, but it also shows a glimpse of the a ruined world with capitalism, and commercialization. Commercialization not only led to deforestation, reducing to rubble the scenic beauty of Manipur. It is also a comment on the growing degrees of corruption at misusing power and money at the local, administrative and political level.

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The political crisis does not allow the domestic, private sphere to remain unaffected. Breakdown in essential relationships and conventional expectations from familiar landscapes mirrors the breakdown of order and control in the society. Something as simple as a love relationship could also not be realized. There's an overlapping between love and guilt:

“Hands filled with love,/ I touched your healing breasts...

Like the beaten-up past/ Scars appeared on your body.

I ask, who branded the moonskin of my love?...

And my hands came back to me/ stigmatized with guilt.”

The moment the lover wishes to rekindle his love relationship and revive those earlier feelings of love, he experiences a rude shock. His beloved, just like his motherland, has already been ravished. The pristine ideas of chastity and virginity could not be safeguarded by his beloved. The abuse of women has become a normative aspect of this society; their existence is shrouded under the threat of rape, assault, molestation and so on. It is interesting to note, that the lover hasn't managed to protect his pristine innocence either. He is also a part of a similar crowd, a crowd marked out by degenerating and fast decaying moral values.

This individual and personal crisis is a result of the world turned upside down:

“Love is also a forgotten word.

The ability to suffer, and the ability

To inflict the utmost hurt on the person you love most,

This is how I have known it.”

The personal crisis is further accentuated by a breakdown of language or the insufficiency of language as an expressive mode in articulating their experiences:

“...patriotism is honouring martyrs

Who died in confusion...

Patriotism is playing the music of the guns

To the child in the wombs.”

“Talibanization of Manipur” under the disguise of political and administrative policies has led to confused worldview. The AFSPA was enforced to check the growing unrest in the socio-political space. It, on the contrary, aggravated the entire problem to an extent that the Manipuri subject fails to claim national identity as its legitimate identity. The separatist politics of Manipuris, on one hand, and the insensitivity of the Indian government on the other, has led to mere anarchy. Jayant Mahapatra, in his essay, *Mystery as mantra*, *World Literature Today*, notes in the context of north east: “Terrorism and needless acts of violence became the order of the day....writers and poets had become one with anguish they saw and felt.” Ngangom's reaction to the bludgeoning violence of his times makes his poetry, to use Tabir Ali's words, “the poetry of conflict.”

Various titles that define Ngangom's poetry as “poetry of resistance”, “poetry of survival”, “poetry of witness”, and so on, however, also attempt to bring his poetry under the same scale

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which is used to judge disparate works. These terms or titles are not appropriated by Ngangom himself, but his works have been designated with such titles by the mainstream writer, reader and critic who find his works thematically and aesthetically different and refuses to contextualize that difference. For instance, Jeet Thayil in his 2005 publication, *Give the Sea Change and It Shall Change: An Anthology of English Poetry in English (1951-2005)* included fifty six poets from across the globe, united by their 'Indianness'. In this all-inclusive anthology, three main voices from the north east, Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang and Kynphum Sing Nongkynrih were denied representation. Their claim to the *Anthology* fell short of a homogeneously assumed national/Indian imaginary. Poetry from the north east, therefore, not just challenges the readers and critics to step out of their comfort zone but is also an attempt at redefining the contours of Indianness in Indian Poetry and Indian Poetry written in English.



ⁱ For more than three decades, Ngangom is living in Shillong.

ⁱⁱ *Poetry in a Time of Terror*.