



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 3 No.1, March, 2018

Editor : Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
St. Theresa International College, Thailand.



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.1, March, 2018

Voices Heard, Voices Unheard: Poems of Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

Prayash Gupta

Assistant Professor
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Sikkim Manipal University
&

Bhaskar Chettri

Research Scholar
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Institute of Technology Sikkim

Abstract: Robin. S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih are prominent Northeastern writers who present the clear insight of the ground reality of their native place. Robin's poems make us visualize the extreme conflict going on between different ethnic groups, the suffering of the common masses and the helplessness of the poet to stop the existing violence. Kynpham's poem shows the affair between lovers of two different ethnic groups even in the midst of the heightened ethnic conflicts. Their love acts as a symbol of humanity crossing the boundaries of their ethnicity or regionalism. The present paper attempts to study the select poems of Robin and kynpham and assess the ethnic conflict in the region, its relations with the mainstream, heightened tensions, suffering of the common masses and the idealistic portrayal of the prevalent situations.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, reconstruction, sublimity, custom, disorder.

Northeast India is often referred to as the chicken neck part of the country. The sensitiveness of the region is marked by the presence of the international boundaries covering China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The main matter of concern is the internal conflict between mainstream India and its periphery regions and the heightened tensions among the different ethnic groups within the region, which adversely affects the peace of the common citizen. Ethnic groups according to Max Weber are "groups of humans who have a subjective belief in shared origins, a belief which is founded on a similarity of habits, customs or both, or on collective memories of migrations or



colonization, and that such a belief is important for the creation of a community spirit, irrespective of whether blood ties exist” (Bolaffi et al. 94).

The entire scenario of the Northeast can be vividly portrayed in the Northeastern literature be it in the form of poetry, novel or drama. Mark Bender is of the opinion,

The poem here tends to converge on themes and imagery (of the region): origins, migration, material culture, rituals, and features of the natural and human- manipulated environment. Though the cultural and linguistic links between these poets may be ancient and modern division’s complex, many of their poems resonate in ways that seem to dissolve borders and create poetic homes for their respective voices within the terrain of this upland region. (Bender 107)

Robin. S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih are key writers who give us the clear insight of the ground reality of their native place. They say,

...the writer from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but perforce master the art of witness. (Nongkynrih and Ngangom ix)

The poems of Robin and Nongkynrih give us the glimpse of how India tried to control over its Northeastern states by two methods; the gun and the gold. In the gun method, the central government imposed the Armed Force Special Power Act (AFSPA), whereby they had complete control over the tension states by introducing strict laws and armed forces. In the gold process, the centre tried to overflow all the developmental schemes in order to ensure the development of the neglected regions.

However, the local or the state government wants more autonomy and power from the Central Government. As a result, there are frequent clashes between the central and the states. The worst sufferers are the common people, as they are arrested, tortured and some are even killed in the clash. For instance, Robin’s *Native land* gives us the picture of the extreme conflict going on between the different forces, its deadly consequence, the suffering of the common people and the helplessness of



the poet to change or put to halt the existing conflicts. The voice of the common people is lost in the labyrinth of the different external and internal conflicts.

Literature, however, not only portrays the realistic image of the society or place of a particular period but also gives the directions of sublimity or aesthetic representation that will act as a soothing effect to the prevailing realistic disorder or chaotic situation. Kynpham's poem *Sundori* for instance, shows the love affairs between couples of two different ethnic groups even in the midst of the heightened ethnic violence. Their love acts as a symbol of humanity crossing the boundaries of ethnicity or regionalism.

Robin S Ngangom is a bilingual poet and a translator, born in Imphal, Manipur. Before analyzing his poem, *Native land*, it is necessary for us to know about the conflict going on in the land of the poet. Modern Manipuri poetry, according to Ngangom, "was born amidst the ravages of the Second World War, of which Manipur remains a forgotten theatre" (Ngangom, 2007).

Brig Sushil Kumar Sharma in his book *Ethnic Conflict and Harmonization: A Study of Manipur*, (2016) gives us the details of the mutual harmony among the three major ethnic groups of Manipur. He writes they stayed together for centuries in unity but the 'divide and rule' policy of the colonial administration widened their cultural gao leading to tensions and conflicts. He further says that

after India's independence, these communities continued to coexist peacefully, however, owing to separate aspirations and perceived insecurity regarding overlapping claim over natural resources, gradually they moved apart. Certain post-independence developments deepened these prejudices leading to inter-community ethnic clashes. These clashes also hastened the formation of various armed groups affiliated to respective ethnic communities. The insurgent outfits, therefore, were not only waging struggle against the establishment but were now seen more as a necessity against the hegemony and violence perpetrated by rival communities. (Sharma 2016)



The above statement of Brig. Sharma enlightens us about the actual clash-taking place in Manipur. Through literature, Robin has beautifully portrayed the ongoing clashes between different ethnic group in his place, its consequences and suffering and helplessness of common people in his *Native Land*. He writes,

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
behind their backs inside a church ... (Native Land, 1-5)

The poems begins with a realistic nightmare along with a gradual transition from the subconscious to conscious state in which the poet visualizes the piercing cry of the person who is in the state of losing their mortal bodies indicated with a continuous tense. The reality is more horrifying, terrifying or brutalizing when he listens to the radio report and goes through the headlines of the newspaper, which perhaps gives the accurate figure of the victims held in the mishap. We come to know that six-person are killed on the spot, twenty- five houses are burned down to ashes and the remaining sixteen are brutally butchered inside the church. The irony of the situation is heightened with the use of the word 'Church', which in fact is the place where people go to pray and find peace, but has been turned down into a slaughter place. The image we get from the introductory lines is, in fact, disturbing but carries a strong realistic picture of the ongoing violence, tension and terror going on in the native land of the poet.

If we look at the realistic picture of Manipur, Shivananda H in *Ethnic conflict and Security Apprehension in Northeast India states*

The clashes between the Naga and Kuki tribes which erupted in 1992 in the Chandel district remain a major ethnic conflict in the state sparking a reign of terror in the hills of Manipur. It resulted to death of nearly a thousand people and an enormous loss of property. Over 2,000 houses were burnt and hundreds of villages were affected. It continued for about five



years and came to end in the early part of 1997 after the intervention of the Meities and other neutral tribes. Besides, the demand by an ethnic group has been a reason for conflict with the others. (Shivananda, 2011)

The undercurrent of tension and violence is further intensified in the following lines:

As the days crumbled, and the victors
and their victims grew in number,
I hardened inside my thickening hide,
until I lost my tenuous humanity. (Native Land, 6-9)

Along with the passage of time, the number of 'victors' and 'victims' increases which clearly indicates that the violence, the terror that has been burning in the land of the poet is not going to end but rather it is increasing at an alarming rate. The poet in spite of witnessing all the gruesome reality is rather helpless to put an end, the never-ending quarrel going on in his place; so he is trying himself to be strong in such a dilemmatic situations. The poet has become a mere spectator of the dualities and conflicts and he is feeling dehumanized losing his not so clear humanity inside his troubled soul.

I ceased thinking
of abandoned children inside blazing huts
still waiting for their parents.
If they remembered their grandmother's tales
of many winter hearths at the hour
of sleeping death, I didn't want to know,
if they ever learnt the magic of letters.(Native Land, 10-16)

The troubled soul of the poet is caught in the arena of his imagination, which in fact is juxtaposed by the word 'ceased thinking'. The heart touching imagery introduces us to the innocent deserted children, which in fact might have become the victims of the conflicts and violence. The naive children are looking for their parents without knowing the fact that they too are becoming the victims of the tensed situations. The poet is not sure whether the children can recollect the tales that



have been told by their grandmother about the winter fire place at the hour of their approaching death which is intensified by the phrase 'sleeping death'. The poet is, in fact, curious to know whether those abandoned children are gaining education or not although we can find the negative statement, "I didn't want to know if they ever learnt the magic of letters." (Native Land 16) but deep down he was keen to know whether they were gaining proper education or not.

In his another poem *My Invented land*, the poet speaks in the same tune where he witnesses his own people marring the education of the coming generations and disturbing the peace and beauty of the prevailing situations.

My people have disinterred their alphabet,
burnt down decrepit libraries
in a last puff of nationalism
even as a hairstyle of native women
have been allowed to become extinct.
And the women heavy with seed,
their soft bodies mown down
like grain stalk during their lyric harvests;
if they wore wildflowers in their hair
while they waited for their men,
I didn't care anymore. (My Invented Land, 12-22)

The image then shifts from the innocent children to that of women who in spite of all hardship and trouble struggles to find a peaceful life to live in. The poet describes women who are all preoccupied with the domestic affairs indicated in line, 'women heavy with seed'. Their hardships are highlighted when he compares their soft bodies with that of grain stalk. We can find out the grim romantic feeling when the poet paints out the picture of the women who after all the hardships of life waits for the men to come wearing the wildflower in their hair; But the undercurrent of tension lies in the fact



that whether their men will return back or not in such a conflicting situations. He once again says he does not care which, in fact, is his intense care for the abandoned women.

The above stanzas vividly show the impact of the conflict and violence on all human beings. Not only the men involved in the conflict are affected but the innocent women, children; in fact, all other innocent people becomes the victim of the frequent clash going on in the native place of the poet.

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. (Native Land, 23-28)

The concluding stanza, in fact, gives the realistic yet painful touch. Although the poet is well aware of the ongoing situations and has a deep care for the wounded humanity, he can't normalize the situation.

In his poem *Revolutionaries*, the poet describes how the revolutionaries affected all people of the region including the poets.

Before they used terror when things were beginning to go out of control and people showed aberrant behaviour, revolutionaries had asked poets in their lower ranks to compose patriotic songs for a country that cannot be found on a map....I know this for real; I grew up with revolutionaries. They had even asked me to translate a press release over the phone.
(Ngangom and Nongkyrih, 2009: 202)

Therefore, unwillingly, he says that he burns his truth and manhood along with day-to-day violence. He voices within himself that there should be some limits to this bloodshed and act of brutality and it even tries to come out as a matter of protest but when the violence and the conflict accelerate to its maxim the poet lives like a visible blind person ignoring what is going around in the poet's area.

Kynpham Sing Nongkyrih is also a bilingual poet writing chiefly in Khasi and English. The poetry of Nongkyrih shows the realistic picture of the tensions going on in Northeast: "terrorism,



insurgency, human rights abuses, environmental and ecological concerns, erosion of tribal values, and the corrupt politician-businessman-bureaucrat nexus” (Das 20).

His poem *Sundori* deals with inter-ethnic conflict in his native land and is addressed to a woman Sundori by a narrator, who aims for inter-ethnic peace and harmony in the region. While going through the poem, we come to know that both the narrator and his beloved belong to different ethnic groups.

Beloved Sundori,
Yesterday one of my people
Killed one of your people
And one of your people
Killed one of my people. (Sundori, 1-5)

In the above lines, the narrator is addressing his beloved named Sundori, a beautiful woman. He says to his love that their clansmen have fought and killed each other. However, the interesting thing to note here is that though there is violence, clashes, disturbances going on, yet the narrator and the lady are in love with each other.

Today they have both sworn
To kill on sight. (Sundori, 6-7)

Tension further accelerates when the narrator informs his love that the people involved in the violence have promised to kill the opponents if they ever meet each other. The conflict is at its zenith because the hatred is so much so that not only the people involved in the clash are in constant danger but all the innocent people including the narrator is in the risk of losing their life and are constantly living in tension and fear.



But this is neither you nor I,
Shall we meet by the Umkhrah River
And empty this madness
Into its angry summer floods? (Sundori, 8-11)

The above lines clearly indicate that not all individuals residing in the tension area are involved in the violence. The narrator says neither he nor his beloved is the part of the clash. Therefore, he requests the beloved to meet near Umkhrah River to put an end to all the madness, conflicts, disturbances, and not so comfortable situations of their clansmen. He really wants to empty the entire discontentment into the angry summer flood so that it can never come back again.

I send this message
Through a fearful night breeze,
Please leave your window open. (Sundori, 12-14)

The narrator wants transition from the tension situation to a peaceful one, but the circumstances are so fearful that he cannot meet his beloved in person and try to normalize the situations. If they dare to meet, the antagonistic forces might slaughter them. The imagery of fearful night breeze intensifies the horror and the not so comfortable situations prevailing out there. Finally, he requests his beloved to keep her window open so that his message can be reached through the fearful night breeze. Here, he takes the help of natural elements to reconcile the situations, as nature never distinguishes human beings based on any other identities that they acquire in life.

However, in reality, it appears that it is almost not possible for the narrator to meet his beloved yet their love stands as an epitome and perfect reconciliation to the different violence based on ethnicity, racism and insurgent disturbances. It tries to give the message to all the human beings that any problems and disturbances can be conquered by love. Thus, the deep insight into the poems of Robin and Nongkynrih gives us the vivid image of the prevalent tension between the different ethnic groups. It enlightens us about the realistic picture of their society, the heightened tension,



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.1, March, 2018

suffering of the common people, the helplessness of the poet and also the literary harmony and peace that the poet sees even in the undercurrent of tension and violence.

Works Cited

- Bender M. *Ethnographic poetry in North-East India and Southwest China*. 2012, pp.106-129.
- Bolaffi G, et al. *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003, pp. 94-102.
- Das P. "Anthology making, the nation and the Shillong poets", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 2008, 43(45), p. 19-21.
- Ngangom. R.S and Nongkyrih K.S. *Dancing Earth, An anthology of contemporary poetry from North East India*, 2009, India: Penguin Group, p.202.
- Ngongom, Robin. S. "Contemporary Manipuri Poetry: An overview", 2007, *Muse India* Issue 16: November- December.
- Nongkyrih, K.S. & Ngangom R.S. *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, 2003, Shillong: NEHU Publications.
- Sharma B.S.K. *Ethnic Conflict and Harmonization: A Study of Manipur*, 2016.
- Shivananda H. "Scholar's Voice: A New Way of Thinking", Vol. 2, No. 1, January-June 2011, pp.13-21.