

Documenting Life in Contemporary Manipur:

Robin S. Ngangom, the Witness Poet

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ABSTRACT

The poetry of Robin S Ngangom has been widely appreciated for its lyrical quality and poignant themes. His poems invite readers into the poet's intimate world of nostalgia, reflections on his society, and protestations against injustices. Often described as 'poetry of feeling', Ngangom's poetry is inspired by the emotional turmoil brought by both personal and public incidents pertaining to Manipur. Much of his poetry, written in the event of social disharmony or political unrest has efficaciously captured the collective experience and sentiments. This paper aims to explore the depiction of contemporary life in Manipur as seen in Ngangom's works. It looks at the intersection of the personal and political, the self and society, and the individual and collective in his poetry. From social issues such as drug abuse, economic failure, disillusioned youths, moral decay to political challenges such as militarization, insurgency and human rights abuse, Ngangom has borne witness and chronicled these developments through his poetry. Thus, Ngangom's poetry transcends from being an autobiographical record to documenting the life of the ordinary man living in contemporary Manipur.

Keywords: Robin S. Ngangom, Manipur,
Documenting, Poetry, Witness.

INTRODUCTION

Robin S. Ngangom is a contemporary Manipuri poet who primarily writes in English and has several volumes of poetry collections to his credit. His poetry collections published till date are: *Words and the Silence*

(1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994), *The Desire of Roots* (2006) and *My Invented Land* (2023). Other anthologies in which his poems have featured include *Khasia in Gwalia* (1995), *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* (2009), and *Lyric*, a journal brought out with the collaboration of the Khasi Poet Desmond Kharmawphlang and Ananya S. Guha during the 1990s. Ngangom's oeuvre shows an exploration of the personal, social and political events of his times. In Ngangom's case, the act of writing poetry is concomitant with the act of witnessing of the changing socio-political climate wherein he is located. From childhood memories in Imphal to his adult life in Shillong, Ngangom has documented his life and times through poetry. His poetic awakening took place in childhood, when he found solace and joy in his imaginary world, full of adventures and dreams. Later this personal passion became tied with a sense of public responsibility, which led him to articulate the harsh realities around him.

Ngangom has reiterated the urgency of prioritizing writing poetry that perforce masters "the art of witness" instead of aesthetically pleasing and intellectually challenging poems (Ngangom, 2005, p. 171). Poetry borne out of the aftermath of world wars, genocides, conflicts or great shift in political, geographical organisations such as the Partition of India, namely, 'poetry of witness', no longer fit the mould of traditional poetry. Carolyn Forche has argued that political and personal realms in poetry no longer remain mutually exclusive:

We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between "personal" and "political" poems – the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary. The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough. If we give up the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality. (Forche, 1993, p. 31)

Poetry of witness therefore speaks of personal, subjective experiences in an atmosphere created by the political. The poets become witnesses, one who bear testimony to events of historical importance or extremities.

With Ngangom, the witnessing begin not with the act of writing poetry per se, but much earlier in his childhood, where the everyday reality of the beautiful and scenic hill ranges of Manipur became peppered with ‘banal’ violence and a military culture. In writing about his self’s journey, Ngangom places the ‘I’ in the state’s history and presents the socio-political reality of Manipur through his subjective experiences. As Kynpham Sing Nongkinryh, fellow poet from Shillong, observes about contemporary poets from North East India, “(they) chronicle subjective realities and the particular predicament of their people...the poet invariably becomes a non-objective and involved chronicler” (Nongkinryh, 2006, n.page). Thus, in Ngangom, documenting contemporary times in Manipur is not through a detached, objective poet’s persona. Rather, a subjective engagement with society is quite pronounced, which after all, explains his idea of “poetry of feeling” (Ngangom, 2025).

Nongkinryh’s view is uncannily echoed by Ngangom in his essay, “Poetry in a Time of Terror” (2005), which reflects on the aesthetics and politics of poets like himself:

“Manipur, my native place in Northeast India, is in a state of anarchy, and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land... While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics... Living in society, he will talk about his milieu, the people with whom he is in touch with daily.” (Ngangom, 2005)

In his poetry, the self articulates the injustices, pain and angst of the society he has long left behind but is still organically rooted in his self-definition. Only when peace and liberty is ensured can the poet pursue the finer side of “beautiful words, /skies, dances, images, discourse, /trees, nudes, illumination,” (“Writer”, *The Desire of Roots*, p. 17). Undeniably, his widely appreciated poems happen to be those concerning Manipur, such as “Imphal”, “A Poem for Mother”, “The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom”, “A Libran Horoscope”, “Native Land”, etc. However, to limit Ngangom’s craft to just being a ‘sensitive’ reaction towards his society would be erroneous. Many of his poems have featured as varied a theme as the bountiful natural and scenic beauty of Northeast India, and the unrequited desire for the woman he loved. Agha Shahid Ali, a poet from the troubled region of Kashmir once said: “If you are from a difficult place

and that's all you have to write about then you should stop writing. You have to respect your art, your form." (cited in Ghosh, 2002, p. 13). For Ngangom, the common pain and suffering, collective misfortunes weigh heavy on his conscience as both individual and poet. But he strikes the delicate balance of the self or personal and the multitude of objects, places, and people that constitute his poetic influence.

DOCUMENTING IMPHAL: PAST AND PRESENT

Imphal, the capital of Manipur, has real and imagined connotations in Ngangom's works. There exists two 'Imphals', one is a safe place full of fun and adventure while the other resembles a dystopia. The first is derived from recollections and memories blurred by time but fondly cherished. The Imphal of his childhood and adolescent years, glorified and almost magical, bear no trace of what it was to become. The past was defined by childhood games, festivals, plucking exotic flowers, rearing chickens and riding bicycles on the streets. This Imphal is depicted as a place where fairies and mythical weretigers once existed.

Childhood took place
among moonflowers and sunstones,
in nakedness with the wind as your wet nurse.
Childhood took place
among fairies and weretigers
when hills were yours to tumble ("A Libran Horoscope", *The Desire of Roots*, p. 45)

Perhaps this picture is clouded by childhood innocence. Being born in the year 1959, Ngangom could not have missed the chaos that engulfed Manipur from 1960s onwards. The perfect imagery of an idealistic Imphal in "A Libran Horoscope" is contrasted with the nightmarish image of the present Imphal, which is joltingly expressed in the very next few lines. The same *hill* of his childhood metamorphoses into a camping ground for soldiers where the guilty as well as innocent are tortured—

before they became soldiers' barracks
and dreaded chamber of torture.
Childhood took place
...until your friend adored a gun
to become a widowmaker. (ibid, p. 46)

The present Imphal that Ngangom returns to annually is inhabited by superficial people immersed in growing materialism and a culture of corruption. In “Imphal” (*My Invented Land*, 2023), Ngangom observes the decadence: rich men lord over women in the markets earning meagre incomes, young men boast of their fathers’ cars and young women are displayed as beauty queens. With limited opportunities and delayed economic developments in the state, many youths, purposeless and dreamless, become disillusioned with life. The most unfortunate of them fall victim to drug abuse destroying society and families. These youths “with bodies alive and/ eyes dead” (p. 60) struggle to escape the clutch of drug addiction. Even when Manipur boasts of rich talents in art, music, dance and sports, development and prosperity seem a distant reality. Fear and uncertainty prevail over dreams and aspirations.

There is something sadly inevitable
about this land, something inescapable,
like a beast which stalks its own death. (*ibid*, p. 61)

Fear exists in the hearts of men who are trapped in a cycle of hatred and pitiful dreams of revenge, especially among conflicting communities. Seeing the predicaments besetting Imphal, Ngangom develops a mixed feeling towards his birthplace. Nostalgia becomes intertwined with remorse. He starts reproaching his people and himself for allowing the corruption, decadence, violence and bloodshed to continue:

I should have been there
in a deserted hamlet in Ukhru
when every able-bodied male
fled to the nearest jungle and
only naked children
were left playing
with stolid old women. (“Imphal”, p. 62)

The ‘home’ that Ngangom wishes to return to seems to exist no more. His home remains in his imagination and desire, an unreachable place that he remembers but cannot find.

DOCUMENTING MANIPUR AND ‘MOTHER’

The history, politics and tradition of this ‘home’ Manipur has closely been tied with its women. From the two Nupi Lans (women’s war) of 1904

and 1939, to the disrobing of twelve mothers in front of Kangla in 2004 in retaliation to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), Manipuri women have created history for their resilience and courage to fight against injustice. In “A Poem for Mother” (*Words and the Silence*, 1988) Ngangom brings together the tribute to his biological mother or Ima (*Palem apokpi*) with the idea of the ‘Ima Leibak’ or motherland. Besides these two aspects of the mother, the poem also seems to endorse the idea of the mythic mother, ‘Ima’ being a powerful cultural symbol in Manipur.

The poem is autobiographical and nostalgic in tone, which poignantly captures the transformation of “dreamy-eyed” boyhood into a practical preparation for life (p. 24). Much like the poet himself who went to Shillong to pursue his education, many youths are sent by their families to other states for better prospects, away from the ‘unrest’ of Manipur. In the process of estrangement that ensues, the son moves on to chase his dreams while the aging parents, especially the mother (nurturer and provider), continue to be pinned to their traditional roles. The portrait of the poet’s own mother’s monotonous, physically demanding domestic chores mirrors that of most women in Manipur.

Today, as on every day you must have risen with temple bells before cockcrow, swept the floors and after the sacred bath cooked for the remainder of us. I can see you returning every dusk from the bazaar, your head laden with baskets. Must you end toiling forever? ("A P

The women's unending toil from dawn till late into the night goes unnoticed (p. 24). Lamentably, neither the son nor the "liberated daughters-in-law" are capable or deserving of inheriting the mother's "gentle ways or culinary skills" (*ibid*, p. 25).

The nostalgic and apologetic tribute to his mother is, allegorically, a tribute to his homeland. With every visit home, the poet is confronted with the ageing mother steadily losing her young years, signs of vitality and hope, just as his home state is getting depleted of its natural riches while simultaneously being robbed of “peace” and “rest” due to the protracted conflicts and unrest in the state (p. 25). Moreover, the mythification of mothers dates back to the Nupi Lans, and is carried forth in popular images

of the Imas, the Meira Paibis (torch bearers), Ima Keithel (Mothers'/ Women's Market), etc. These images contribute to the trope of the mythic mother, which is valorised as a collective power, and yet also symbolizes the “essentialist” and “sacrificing” mother (Soibam, 2018, p. 221).

Ngangom's poem hails the sacrificing, selfless and uncomplaining mother, but at the same time presents the nondescript ordinariness of women in Manipur who not only participate in 'larger' movements concerning the state or homeland, but are fighting smaller, individual battles at home. Often, the mythic mothers of Manipur often prove incongruous with the biological mothers who carry not just the local economy but the responsibility of satiating hungry bellies at home.

DOCUMENTING POLITICAL UNREST

Two decades after Manipur was merged with the Indian union in 1949, a new era of Manipur began with the attainment of statehood in 1972. These decades were chequered to say the least, with the state going through myriad political changes and unrest due to the standoff between the revolutionary groups and security forces. The tipping point came in 1980 with the implementation of the AFSPA after the declaration of Manipur a 'disturbed area'. The period of uncertainty for the common man under such circumstances has been extensively recorded in Ngangom's poetry. In the autobiographical poem "The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom," (*The Desire of Roots*, 2006) the description of Ngangom's childhood suddenly shifts to a story of Manipur, thereby signifying the inseparability of Ngangom's fate from the state. The history of the land of his birth is showed through the prism of his subjective experiences.

The self-irony of the title soon gives way to scenes of violence and violations in his homeland, which in turn merge with his self-narration and personal growth:

"This is the story of my people
We sowed suspicion in the fields
Hatred sprang and razed the crops. (ibid, p. 68)

The poem depicts a generation of people that grew up with fear and suspicion as dominant feelings. The suspicion "sowed...in the fields" (p. 68) but resisted in writing history stubbornly finds its way into the youths of the hills, exhuming centuries old ethnic feuds or igniting new ones. The

lack of love and unity among the people empowers the agents that want to control and exploit them. Contemporary Manipur resembles a lawless dystopia, and newspapers every day are filled with:

the same bland items:
rape, extortion, ambushes, confessions,
embezzlement, vendetta, sales, disappearances,
marriages, obituaries, the usual. (ibid, p. 70)

The state's landscapes are plundered. The hills are covered by shrouds and the roads plied by "trucks carrying / the appliances of death and devastation" (p. 69), and the city is invaded by capitalists and materialists. The above lines reiterate the banality of unwanted elements or incidents that pervade the morning newspapers. The hope is that just as the poet is a witness, the hills and landscapes too will "speak" (p. 71).

Life seems stuck on the same record that plays a woeful song. With no strict law and order, people seeking justice have no one to help them. The situation is deplorable as people are silenced by fear of losing their lives:

Everyone has correctly identified
the enemy of the people.
He wears a new face each morning,
and freedom is asking yourself
if you are free, day after sullen day. (ibid, p. 70)

Manipur's state of affairs has forced the general public to be caught between the power tussle of state and non-state agencies. Freedom of expression and thought are censored from both ends. Ngangom exposes the hypocrisy of such instruments and indicts the misplaced sense of justice and morality in a loveless state where the spectre of death looms large:

Uprightness is not caressing anything publicly
Integrity is not drinking
Worthiness is contributing generously to a new faith
to buy guns for unleashing ideological horror.' (ibid, p. 70)

People are considered good citizens only if they silently follow the rules imposed upon them, thereby leading defeated lives in a restrictive environment. Even patriotism is defined by hypocrisy that serves only selfish goals. Ngangom further critiques the failing economic condition of Manipur, as the state heavily relies on imported goods to sustain daily life.

With frequent blockages of roads, strikes, mass boycott, protest and heavy tax on highways, availability of commodities are never guaranteed:

Nothing is certain:
Oil
lentils
potatoes
food for babies
transport
the outside world.
Even
fire water and air
are bought and sold. (ibid, p. 71)

As the relative innocence of the poet's childhood adolescence wears off due to the hardened experience of being exposed to the brutal condition of the state, the poet's voice becomes more cynical, ironical, satirical and pessimistic, evident in these oft-cited lines:

patriotism is admiring
the youth who fondles grenade,
patriotism is proclaiming all men are brother
and secretly depriving my brother,
patriotism is playing the music of guns
to the child in the womb. (ibid, p. 71)

The poem ultimately closes with the poet resigning to being tethered to the harsh and painful reality of his beloved "homeland", the "pursuing prison(s)" (p. 73) still close on his heels.

In any conflict, children and the old are the most affected sections of society. When killing, destruction of properties and outright abuse of basic human rights become daily experiences, the people become numb to the pain. In "Native Land" (*My Invented Land*, 2023), Ngangom questions his 'manhood' on failing to protect the women and children as traditionally a man is beholden to be the protector.

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”, p. 125)

The knowledge that lives are brutally played with by inhumane hands can only be met by helplessness on the poet’s part. Ultimately, he is left to resign to himself and ruminate alone on the powerlessness or otherwise of his poetry.

CONCLUSION

Ngangom’s poetry exposes the realities of contemporary Manipur from a personal viewpoint. Besides being intertwined with the social and political landscape of his home state, this personal narrativizing through poetry adds a touch of authenticity and immediacy. Despite its form, Ngangom has used the verse form to effectively relay his personal experiences and the history and story of Manipur. Flitting between Imphal and Shillong, both of which define his idea of the home and self, he has invariably witnessed and portrayed the changing social and political climate in the region in his works. Although Ngangom envisions love, peace and harmony for the people of Manipur, he is confronted with the reality of contemporary Manipur—one that is full of challenges and misfortunes. His poetry demonstrates that the only duty that a poet can unflinchingly fulfil is to speak the truth and not remain a silent observer. His work further underlines the fact that although poetry can bring little change in times of crises, it can mirror and voice the anomalies and injustices in society with conviction, angst and sometimes hope.

The witnessing, although not always necessarily by choice, is tied with the act of documenting and chronicling when the social reality around him becomes translated into words and poetry. Poetic documenting is, thus, to narrativize through poetry the self’s story, which is inextricably linked with the history of the society he belongs to. Ultimately the poetic endeavour that Ngangom has adopted is one that many great poets of the past have fulfilled, i.e., to speak of the truth that one knows. Even when poetry remains incapable of bringing solutions, Ngangom believes poetry can and should comfort the heart of man, inspiring hope and healing.

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