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## The Poetics of “Homeland”: A Study of Robin S. Ngangom’s Select Poems

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### Abstract:

Robin S. Ngangom (b.1959-), eminent Manipuri poet and translator based in Shilong takes us into the tragic corridors of contemporary Manipuri society with his poetic engagement on the construction and de-construction of nation and homeland. His poetry juxtaposes identity politics and ethnicity politics, addressing more urgently of the violence that has erupted in the name of identity and ethnicity. This paper is an attempt at reading some select poems of R. S. Ngangom which intentionally or unintentionally have indeed become “the affair of the people”.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, homeland, identity, manipur, poetry of witness, nationalism.

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.

(R. S. Ngangom, “My Invented Land”)

These few lines from the poem, “My Invented Land” sums up the gory picture of Manipur. Manipuri poets have articulated the changing concepts, moods and emotions of “homeland” since the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. The moods are more of nostalgia, protestation, resentment and protection of “homeland” intertwined heavily with the rise of India as a nation. The poets felt the threatening onslaught of the outside (read Indian) forces attempting to uproot indigenous culture and identity. Amidst dramatic political upheavals, the poets have reflected different moods and changes in diction concerning “homeland” and “homelessness”. The construction and de-construction of “homeland” has spawned various ethnic clashes / conflicts in the past six or so decades since Independence. The “cry for homeland” is also one of the various reasons for the spurt in the number of different insurgencies operating in the country – especially in the northeast. The map of India figures as an almost negligible dot in the northeastern part of its geographical location called Manipur. The location itself suggests a relative isolation geographically, ethnically, linguistically, economically and politically from the rest of India except the other states of northeast India.

The coming of the new modern Manipuri poets after Independence kept alive the image of “homeland” within the discourse of the outside world as well as within the collective psyche of the people. In the poem titled “Manipur”, E. Nilakanta (1927-2000) arguably, the first modern poet of Manipur sadly visualizes “Mother Manipur” as a crumbling state having lost its freedom and now subsumed under the hegemony of a larger, overarching “Indian culture”. Thereafter, we find poets concerned more with the themes of “homeland”; defending homeland, redefining homeland and articulating images of violence, bitterness and suffering of the people. They wrote on the themes of ethnic cleansing and militant nationalism and critiqued them as disappointing movements in the name of homeland and identity.

These poets are also romanticists who love to write about the intrinsic beauties of their land, their hills and valley. They too are nostalgic about their presumed happy “pasts”. In the poem, “Homeland I left”, Robin S. Ngangom loves to remember “the colourful festivals / and catching fish from stagnant pools... / how he flew kites, planted flowers and tended chicken” (Ngangom, 1988:10). But these memories are obstructed by the dark violent images of present Manipur. The next moment, he realizes his native place, “Manipur”, is “in a state of anarchy” and he quickly moves to the wicked war which is waged “on our soil, and gory bodies / dragged unceremoniously / through our rice fields” (*Ibid*). The people’s past history and the forged “Indian identity” (since 1949, when Manipur was allegedly merged forcefully with the Indian Union) still haunts many poets and their works, though most writers have accepted the dominant Indian identity.

This identity crisis when “at cockcrow one morning we found / ourselves belonging to a nation” (Ngangom, 2012: n.p. www.poemhunter.com) is also highlighted by the renowned poet, Y. Ibomcha (b.1949-), when he commented that nationality for him is uncertain because he was born as a Manipuri and remained so for fifty-six days after which he became an Indian when Manipur joined India in 1949. As an Indian writing in Manipuri, the dual identity of being a Manipuri and an Indian has always occupied Y. Ibomcha like many other writers from this state. The dilemma over the dual identity of the Manipuri people is confirmed by Robin S. Ngangom when he stated that the people of the region have to prove on many occasions to the rest of the country that they are Indians too. At the peak of the insurgency movements in the 1970s, with a “cry for homeland” demanding complete secession from the Indian Union, the poet wrote about Manipur giving “testimonies” of a troubled period articulating the anxieties of a large, dispossessed population.

The nationalist and socialist movements in Manipur became militant in the 1970s and 1980s demanding complete secession from the Indian Union. The Indian state on the principle of “rule of law” asserted its right on the people of Manipur. In order to make the Indian national possible and to protect the democratic values of the constitution, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was imposed in Manipur in the 1980s. (The act allows an officer of the armed forces to fire upon or use any force even if it causes death of any person on mere ground of suspicion). This right is challenged by all the people of the state, including the militants. This struggle for power has compelled Robin S. Ngangom to define his “home” as “My home is a gun / pressed against both temples / a knock on a night that has not ended... / a sonnet about body counts / undoubtedly raped / definitely abandoned / in a tryst with destiny”. (Ngangom, 2012: n.p. www.poemhunter.com).

In the post-colonial era, the idea of a nation is more politically motivated although territory and demographic definitions still largely hold sway. Within its territory, Manipur manifests diverse communities and cultures, each asserting its ethnic identity. Manipur is home to three major groups – Kuki, Naga and Meiteis (including Muslims, often described as Meitei-pangals). The unclear territorial boundaries have resulted in a general feeling of lack of security and the last few decades have seen thousands of people being killed and displaced in various ethnic conflicts. Inter-ethnic conflicts are often backed by the respective insurgency groups. Manipur has been witness to continuous struggle by organizations claiming their right to self-determination; armed insurgent groups fighting for an independent homeland, or an ethnic group fighting for more autonomy or power. The fight no longer draws on romanticism and idealism. The fighters have turned on each other and on the people. In fact, it has been rightly commented that war between states seems to be on the decline whereas ethnic conflict within states is on the rise. In his poem “Poem for Joseph”, Robin S. Ngangom examines this assertion of identity based on ethnicity and delves into issues of exclusivity, governance and territory that have resulted in deadly violence.

It is never too late to come home.  
 But I need a homeland  
 where I can recognize myself,  
 just a map or even a tree or a stone,  
 to mark a spot, I could return to  
 like a pissing animal  
 even when there's nothing to return for.  
 Although it's true  
 that in my native land,  
 children have crawled out of burrows  
 they had gouged under hard beds,  
 long after the grownups had fled and  
 roofs came apart  
 like charred heads.  
 You said, you didn't regret  
 how ethnic cleansers had palmed  
 your newly-built home off on a people  
 well on their trail back to pure blood,  
 you didn't mind leaving behind  
 objects of desire  
 you had collected over twenty-five years,  
 or, how you came to live in a rented room  
 with your wife and your children  
 in dog-eat-dog Imphal,  
 among the callous tribe  
 I call my own....

(in Ngangom and Nongkynrih, 2003: 152)

Ethnic violence from 1992-1997 between the Nagas and the Kukis has resulted in many deaths, destruction of homes and displacement of thousands of people.

While British colonial policies of governance in northeast India and the rise of ethnic nationalism among Kukis and Nagas in the post-Independence period have been identified as major root causes of the Kuki-Naga conflict; competing claims and perceived threats regarding land and territory appear to be the major cause of the continuing tensions. The violence and destruction have left nothing for the survivors; “there’s nothing to return for” as Ngangom writes in “Poem for Joseph”, quoted above. Children who have been bundled underneath into “burrows” for safety roam in emptiness, homeless and orphaned. Those who “had fled” their abode “leaving behind objects of desire / collected over twenty-five years” at the mercy of those “ethnic cleansers” have now squeezed themselves into “rented rooms” among “callous tribes” in “Imphal”, the capital of Manipur. In yet another poem, “Flight”, Ngangom examines a range of emotions/events from terror to indifference which has become a way of life bogged down by an unrelenting series of violence and ethnic strife. Some lines in the poem present a picture of mass exodus – “and when they left... / they left chickens running in the yard”. Images of people running away from their violence-struck homes are quite common. Many a times they have to move in a flash with no destination and in such circumstances “only once did they wish for wings”. Many in India may not be aware of the ongoing conflict in this part of India and the Indian press hardly covers news and developments from here unless and until there are large scale and devastating natural disasters or particularly heavy violence. These poems are a testimony to the events of our hard times. It tells of ordinary men and women and their endurance for mere survival. The complexities of the contemporary situation in Manipur where we find deep divisions along tribal and ethnic lines often resulting in mindless killings is further delved into by Robin S. Ngangom 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  
 behind their backs inside a church...  
 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.  
 I ceased thinking  
 of abandoned children inside blazing huts  
 still waiting for their parents...

(in Ngangom and Nongkynrih, 2003: 154)

The inhabitants of Manipur with conflicting identities are insecure about their land, culture, language and people. In Manipur, often ethnic differences are used to identify one opposing group from another. These groups then become powerful mobilizing weapons often engaged in ethnic conflicts. There is a clash of interests over rights to land, political representation and preservation of ethnic identity which slowly takes the form of militant nationalism.

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