



Recollecting the Past: Reading Select Poems by Mamang Dai, Kynpham Singh Nongkyrih and Temsola Ao

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ABSTRACT

With a unique cultural heritage of their own, the seven states from the easternmost part of India, collectively known as the North-east, is a region of undulating hills and plains. Rich in its flora and fauna, the region is also known for its linguistic and ethnic diversity. However, since the past few decades, the region has been suffering from numerous ethnic as well as political conflicts owing to various factors. The separatist movements that have aroused in various parts of the region have miserably failed in their pursuits thereby transforming the region into a seat of violence and war against the nation state. This has also led to violent conflicts among the people within the region. The interminable violence has overshadowed the rich tradition and culture of the region thereby leading the natives to suffer from a sense of loss and identity crisis. The crisis for identity and the longings of the people for their rich cultural past are being reflected in the literary works of many writers from the North east. The paper thus aims to analyse some of the poems written by three prominent writers of North-east India.

Keywords: North-East India, Culture, Violence, Insurgency, Literature, Poetry.

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INTRODUCTION

The English writings from the North-eastern region of India have emerged during the late 20th century. The North-east India often considered being a stereotyped entity is known for two main reasons: the rich ecology and the terrorism which are common issues reflected in literary works. Since the region accounts for an extraordinary multiplicity of race, ethnic groups, religions, languages and dialects, a diversity rarely seen anywhere in India, the literary writings of the region seem to primarily focus on ethnic and linguistic issues. Nearly each writer through his or her poetry and prose tries to give the world a true picture of their land thereby evoking a sense of loss and separation along with a message of harmony. Apart from highlighting the troubled picture of their region, the writers also thrive to show the possibility of a peaceful environment amidst diversity. However, owing to the violent uprisings since in the region since late 1960s, it has been considered as the most troubled one among all the states of India. Subir Bhaumik in the preface to his book *Troubled Periphery : Crisis of India's North East* writes, "The North East has been seen as the problem child since the very inception of the Indian Republic. It has also been South Asia's most enduring theatre of separatist guerrilla war, a region where armed action has usually been the first, rather than the last, option of political protest" (Bhaumik, xiv). The numerous mass movements, however, have changed the entire scenario of the India's North East thereby leading to endless sufferings of its people. The endurance of the people has also been reflected in the literature of the region. Thus, apart from the subject of ethnicity as the chief concern of the writers, violence and insurgency are also some of the dominant and recurring themes in their works. Their writings are often fused with an unheard euphony of the common man's struggle for peace as well as and ethnic identity.



Often underrepresented in comparison with the mainstream literary works of the nation and abroad, this newly emerged body of literary works has been able to create a space of its own in recent times. However, it is very unfortunate that such a rich body of works has not been brought to the forefront of the mainstream India. There are books written by some well-known writers on the history of Indian English literature but there is no mention of the vast bulk of writings produced by the writers of Northeast. M.K Naik's *A History of Indian English Literature* also, does not have any mention of the works of the writers from this region. The North-east has always been considered as a region full of violence and terrorism. The fact that it has a rich cultural heritage and traditional values remains unknown to the mainstream India and often misunderstood. Therefore, it is important to bring the rich treasures of the land to the forefront and let the world know about the little known place and its assets.

Put together as a stereotyped entity, this region shares international boundary with Bhutan, Myanmar, China, Nepal and Bangladesh. The diversity that the region possesses is rarely seen in any other states in India. While this diversity along with its scenic beauty gives the region a unique identity, it is often considered as a land of violence, terrorism and insurgency. Despite many differences, all the states share common social, political and economic problems like insurgency, separatist movements and terrorist attacks.

BACKGROUND

Writing in English from the North East is relatively a new phenomenon which started with the sole objective of self-expression and consciousness. Articulating the senses and sentiments of its people, the literature of North East India has been successful in highlighting the true picture of the region. Poets like Mamang Dai, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih and Temsula Ao, mostly try to negotiate with the challenge to represent



the peaceful past in the inexorable present. Concerned with land, sacred places, education, legends, the poems of these writers present a nostalgic longing for the past which is lost in the midst of modernity and violence. The present research project attempts to study the common man's crisis of identity and longings for the past with reference to the writings of these three renowned writers.

It cannot be denied the fact that attempts have been made to study the works written in this part of the country. Robin S. Ngangom, an eminent figure, writer and critic, has written a lot about the literary world of North-east. He often talks about the violence inflicted upon the innocents and the aftermath of the same. In *An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from North-east*, Ngongam along with his fellow writer, Kynpham Singh Nongkyrih, writes about the position of North-east in the world literary scenario. Violence has changed everything, making the land a misunderstood place where peace and art are far cries. Poets like Temsula Ao, writes in her poems and short stories, about her native place, Nagaland, which once had a rich cultural and traditional treasure but owing to insurgency and violence, everything seems to be lost at present. She often brings in the myths and mythological beliefs of her land as well as the folk culture of Nagaland. And by doing so, she attempts to revive her cultural past. Lokendra Shyam in his book, *Who is a Terrorist*, writes about the condition of Manipur, a beautiful land, acutely disturbed by terrorism. Violence and insurgency have shattered the land to its core with a gradual degeneration of cultural values. Thus, the research paper attempts to bring out some interesting observations about the region through the poetic renderings of three prominent poets from three different states of the region.

**PARAPHRASING – AUTHOR'S VIEWPOINT**

Born and brought up in hills of Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai had witnessed numerous changes in her land owing to terrorism and modernity. In her poem "Remembrance", she expresses her nostalgic longing for her land when it was devoid of violence and the days passed by in accordance with the natural phenomena. But in the present time, it is full of violence with the serenity of the place been broken by terror and violence. She writes,

" Why did we think survival was simple,
That river and field would stand forever
Invulnerable, even to the dreams of strangers"

For the people living in harmony amidst the quietness of nature, it seems difficult for them to cope up with the new chaotic environment that has stirred the tranquillity of their abode. Survival for them was simple in an "invulnerable" place which however has been totally disturbed by the emergence of violence in recent times. Mamang Dai thus realize that survival is no more "simple" in her place. She writes,

"In the hidden exchange of news we hear
that weapons are multiplying in the forest."

The phrase 'weapons are multiplying in the forest' gives us the hint of terrorist activities undertaken in the dense forests of Arunachal Pradesh. She further writes,

"The jungle is a big eater hiding terror in
carnivorous green."

The jungles of Arunachal Pradesh were the sole givers of livelihood for its people. But now, this natural resource as well as the means of survival of the people has been transformed into a haven for terrorism. The poem thus is a remembrance of the past,



beautiful and safe, which the poet desperately desire to relive in her present, filled with violence and chaos.

In her poem "An Obscure Place", Mamang Dai presents her homeland as a place of stories in the past which has been invaded by violence and terror. Men have turned to "stones". She writes,

"If there is no death the news is silent.

If there is only silence, we should be disturbed.

Listen, the tone of a prayer is hushed."

Violence had gripped the once peaceful land and now the only things that remain death and silence. The phrase "the tone of prayer is hushed" can be suggestive of the acts of violence that have brought a fearful silence. She again writes,

" A smoke cloud chases the ants,

See! They have slain the wild cat

And buried the hornbill in her maternal sleep"

The atrocities have been not only inflicted upon the lives of human beings but also upon animals. These lines are indicative of the dangers that the animals face due to human wars. The phrase "buried the hornbill in her maternal sleep" symbolizes the harm that the animals suffer from. Hornbill which is the state bird of Arunachal Pradesh, are being killed by human beings. It can also be suggestive of the degradation of the beauty of the land by the frequent acts of violence.

As pointed out by Satya Sudha, "Describing the beauty of the Dawn-lit mountains, valleys and rivers, she blends the sorrow of the communities who are victims to the uprising as well as to the vagaries of nature. The horrors of insurgency, neglect and exploitation, mass killings and migration have brought misery to the land which is



known for its rich biodiversity and beauty of nature" (Sudha, 2019).

A poet, writer, and translator, Kynpham Singh Nongkyrih is another important figure in the literature of the North-east India. Born in Sohra, Megalaya, Nongkyrih writes his poems and short stories both in Khasi and English languages thereby drawing a wide range of issues and references. Written during the troubled period of 1990s, in his famous poem, "Sundori", Kynpham Singh Nongkyrih describes the violent incidents that have gripped the land. He writes,

"Yesterday one of my people
Killed one of your people
And one of your people killed
Killed my people"

Violence in this region of India has aroused out of various factor. In some places it is because of ethnic conflict, in other, it is because of militancy seeking independent status of the state. Even in the midst of violence and terror, there is the presence of love which knows no boundary as shown in Kynpham. S. Nongkyrih "Sundori". He writes,

"Beloved Sundori,
Yesterday one of my people
Killed one of your people...
Through a fearful breeze
Please let your window open..."

Thus, amidst the brutality, love seems to be a source of survival for the speaker. His poems are often concerned with deaths, injuries and humiliations resulting from terrorism and insurgencies. He also satirically describes the role of administrations in



restoring peace in the state of Meghalaya during the troubled period in his poem "When the Prime Minister visits Shillong, the Bamboos Watched in Silence" written at the aftermath of I.K Gujral's visit to the capital. He writes'

"They wandered
What he could have seen
Of the land
What of the people
He could have learnt
When he come
Like snapping of fingers"
"... only the bamboos watched in silence"

In "Kynshi", Nongkyhrih laments for the lost world owing to violence and insurgency. The valley has been robbed of its beauty and what left is a barren and devastated land. He writes,

" I love them still
In the dark room of my heart,
And loving them, I become soft
And poetic with this land and kynshi"

In "Hiraeth", the poet recalls the past in a disturbed present. The nostalgic longing of the peaceful past is being reflected in this poem. He writes,

" Out of that restlessness the past rises from dimly
Remembered songs and I watch my ghostly ancestors
Hasten from their dark pallets at the roosters..."
" ...warming up for their fields,
Boiling rice, packing their midday meals in leaves"



Nongkynrih portrays the simple lifestyle of the people of Meghalaya is depicted in the above lines. The decaying of the tribal culture in the face of modern chaos is a matter of great concern for the poet who recollects the memories of those days left as “dimly remembered songs”. In “Forebodings”, the poet talks about the environment of his state during national festivals. The militants were rebelling for autonomy of their state and therefore restrict everyone to celebrate the same. He writes’

When for the fourth time
the region’s liberators
clamped a bandh on Republic Day
there was nothing else to do
but watch the grey winter sky
breeding ill will”.

The phrase ‘grey winter sky’ can be suggestive of gloom and despondency in the region. While the nation celebrates liberty and freedom, this part of the nation, almost devastated by violence and terrorism, celebrates ‘bandh’ and refrains itself from being a part of the country. Yet, there is a nostalgic longing for the past which was beautiful.

An accomplished poet and ethnographer, Temsola Ao was born in Nagaland and further worked as an English professor in the North Eastern Hills University, Meghalaya. Hailed as one of the major literary figures of the North-east, Ao has contributed immensely in reviving the lost culture and tradition of her tribe. As an ethnographer, she tried to explore the oral and folk culture of her community which seemed to be suppressed under the threat of violence, modernity and commercialization. Her poems on the other hand also served as a medium to bring back the glorious history to the forefront and make her people aware of such a splendid past of their native land. In the



poem 'Heritage', she writes,

They languish, these uprooted
Treasures of my heritage
Caged within imposing structures
In designated spaces

The poem describes Temsola Ao's experience of witnessing the tribal artefacts of her own land in a European museum. It expresses her despair at watching those artefacts already 'uprooted' in her land being displayed in a foreign land as exotics.

She writes,

" But artefacts wrenched from their origin
Must, by reason
Remain mute"

The exoticization of the cultural artefacts of her place seems to be painful on her part as these objects that used to hold some cultural values are 'wrenched from their origin'. The once cultural treasures have been reduced to mere caged objects by the 'imposing' foreign structure which again is suggestive of the threat and effect of globalisation. The poem articulates Ao's helplessness in protecting and preserving her traditional values as well as her identity.

The poem "History" from her collection *Songs of Other Life*, also indicates her effort for the revival of the cultural and traditional past of her land. She tries to reconstruct the traditional past of her native land that has been destroyed by the ethnic and political conflicts in the region. She thus writes,

" They now resonate
In words of new



Discernment

To augment the lore of our essential core"

Temsola Ao is regarded as the prominent writer from Nagaland for her constant efforts in reviving and restoring the culture of her land through writing. Her writings are always ingrained mythical references of the Naga culture along with a sense of nostalgic longing.

CONCLUSION

The North-east of India has been suffering from multiple conflicts since decades. The conflicts leading to violence have disturbed the land as well as its people which are reflected in the literary works of the region with a sense of nostalgia. The writers of North-east India, writing in English as well as their respective mother tongues often bring in the sense of despair and identity crisis in the face of so much violence and chaos. The poems by the writers discussed above have truly portrayed the socio-political environment in the contemporary period and the prevailing tensions. There is always an effort on their part to revive and relive the lost past through poems and these three writers namely, Kynphang Sing Nongkyrih, Mamang Dai and Temsola Ao have been successful in rendering the inner sense of sorrow and nostalgia.

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