

“So I return to where I began”: Reflections on Three Poems of Nini Lungalang

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Nini Lungalang

Poetry is not easy to read in this day and age. In the context of a 24/7 breaking news cycle, celebrity authorship, and stoical opinion pieces that privilege data and facts, the metaphoric entanglement that poetry represents as well as its impoverished status in relation to prose in the current moment, the engagement with poetry requires an epiphanic rebirth. Reading Nini Lungalang approximates this experience of poetry. On a personal note, growing up on nursery rhymes, the zealous performance of praise hymns in front of Sunday congregations in a fairly well-known church in Dimapur, culminated in the annual event of reading Biblical chapters diligently memorized from the New King James version; poetry was not yet found but thereabouts. The language of the Proverbs and the Psalms, even in translation, contained an element of the poetical that a John Donne or a Milton would readily recompose. Christmas Day occasioned an event for children of the churchgoers called “mlo pite phi” in the Sumi language, one of the many in Nagaland, which translates to “recite from memory” or “memory recitation.” We were instructed to precisely recall the intonation of the divine passages, the lilt of each sentence, and the emotive nuance of every telling was essential to a successful recitation. During this time, English recitations were seen to be a measure of the calibre as well aspiration of a community still coming to terms with violent reprisals from both without and within and the tilt toward a political and social reality enmeshed in Indian nationhood. At that time, many churches were uncertain about the divine capacity of the mother tongue but have now turned to their respective iterations of the *mlo pite*, evincing a revival of indigenous languages. However, English remains an anchor language as much as Nagamese and it is not surprising that the former serves as a mezzanine language to the plethora of tongues that insists also on narrow politics. It is an attestation of such experiences with storytelling and recitation that poetry continues to hold relevance in an age that insists on objectivity. Poetry continues to reveal the innermost sentiments of

complex minds, the histories of people, personal agonies, and sufferings, even as it remained confined to Sunday sermons, classroom lectures, and the rare oral retellings shared by a generation that is now consigned to memory. Poetical narratives locate landscapes through an exuberant arrangement of words, sounds, and syntax that reveal more than what is spoken. Poetry is meaningful to its reader because of its insistence on being concise and on its emphasis on being listened to while it is being read. In many respects, this is how one would engage with Nini Lungalang's poems, each line of which reminds of what literary absences abound in the state of Nagaland.

Nini Vinguriau Lungalang was born in 1948, during the height of the Naga national struggle. She attended Loreto Convent in Shillong, St. Edmund's College, and Delhi University. She has a daughter from her marriage to Jacob Poovanthikal. She taught literature and classical music at Baptist College in Kohima during its early years and later served as Vice-Principal at Northfield School in Kohima till her death in October 2019. I read her poetry with intent only after her passing in 2019. One may find several of her poems not just in Nagaland school board textbooks, but also in Nagaland University's undergraduate curriculum; however, the famed *Writing in English from Nagaland* course, unfortunately, has been cancelled in the current CBCS syllabus. In 2020, her complete collection of poetry was published posthumously in a reprinted edition of *The Morning Years* by PenThrill, a local publisher based in Kohima. *The Morning Years* was initially published in 1994 by a small publishing enterprise (Write-On Publications) at a period of "raging peace between Indian independence and Naga nationalist movement" (Tellis). The poems in this collection have a profound melancholic quality but also an unmistakable reverential voice. The poems capture Nini's whole being, animating her personal life through her words; this is precisely who Nini was as a poet, a musician, and a teacher, but also as someone who treasured the personal so much that she chose to deliberately remain untouched by the contemporary insistence on the authorial presence and the pronunciation of mastery in one's field. She opted to remain obscure, disenchanted with the possibility of being recognized because that would cramp her sense of writerly freedom, and she noted nonchalantly, "I am a very private person and these are very intimate thoughts... and therefore, I feel a sense of discomfort. I don't like being encroached upon. It's not embarrassment or shyness, once it's out in print, it's not really yours anymore" (Tellis). Nini Lungalang, as a self-described literary recluse, is a poetess of numerous moods and of different intensities. Her poetry is essentially unbound by structure, and she defends this free verse style, saying, "I don't use rhymes, I feel it makes ideas stilted... I feel every thought has its own rhythm and you have to catch it, that takes real work" (Tellis). Her poems frequently deal with absence, estrangement, and death, but are also drawn to commonplace and unnoticed items or individuals, such as a 'Street Sweeper', who is "a beautiful, filthy child/ (She doesn't know she is beautiful, thank God)" (lines 15-16). Her experiences are recounted in 'On Puliebadze,' 'Kohima: Spring '85,' 'Impressions: Winter – Kohima,' and 'Going Home' laying emphasis on locations that expand upon the geographical and geopolitical complexity that is the state of Nagaland. These linkages provide coherence to a wide body of work and connect different subject matter. Her poetry unfolds in cadences or impressions, and her perceptions of life and death are inextricably related to the specificities of her lifeworlds, namely, the hills of Kohima, which are captured in the poems shared below.

Kohima becomes a disambiguated landscape in her poetry. The sparse yet discerning poems such as 'Kohima: Spring '85' and 'Impressions: Winter – Kohima' reflect the windy springs and chilly winters of Kohima, but noticeably, as a uniquely subjective spatial experience that does not insist on the politics of cartography or the theorization of space. Notably, the bounds of these poems – the frigid hills and fierce rainswept winds of Kohima – function as fluid referential between both poet-

narrator and subject matter, juxtaposing both as intimately bound. The poems' vocabulary, rhythm, and linguistic environment seem to encapsulate the escape from the ontology of being and place as distinct and separate. As also, 'Impressions: Winter – Kohima', collapses the physical and the metaphysical taking on an almost mythic quality when Nini lyrically expresses, "The black hills of gold dissolve" (*Winter*, line 31). Location, geographical space, and the physical bounds of the world are internalized, interiorized, and recast as part of the poet's landscape of memory, experience, and contemplation. This write-up is reproducing here three poems in full, so as to reveal the full extent of the aesthetic, syntactic, and metaphoric capacities that Nini Lungalang embodied, that is as yet not fully acknowledged, either in popular culture or in academic discourse.

Impressions: Winter – Kohima

Lying abed, fidgeting,
I try to fret a cocoon of warmth under blankets,
My mind rummages for sleep..
Tiny mouse, scampering, scuttling,
I do not grudge your meager gleanings tonight.

II

Electric, fire, gas flame;
Hard, harsh, ungenerous heat
Gleaming steel, glinting knives,
Cold, brisk, efficient,
Hateful things!
This grey hour, almost tearfully,
I remember the kind smells,
The dim, untidy, friendly warmth
Of my grandmother's kitchen.

III

Even the cars have abandoned our street
And have hurried home
Huddled against the fog.
Then the children swarm out.
Creating each its small capsule of warmth,
Playing, shouting, fighting, laughing..
I warm my hands at their vitality.

IV

Mean little winter raindrops
Reluctantly falling
In parsimonious scatters,
You'll freeze tonight!
I haven't money either:
My assets, for what they are worth
Are frozen too!

V

Morning comes thumping on jogging feet.

I stand and watch with bated breath
The black hills of gold dissolve.
Hope rises with the light.
Lord, pardon my shortcomings
Accept my thanks -
Accept my offering of this day. Amen.
Accept my offering of this day. Amen.

To begin, here is a poem that resonates with my personal memories of the winter chill, the raucous neighbourhood youngsters, and the aureate dusk in the hills of Nagaland. There is a clarity in the use of words and imagery that captures the more nuanced experiences associated with home. The impression is of two contending worlds, one, the comforting memory of an “untidy” but familiar past, and frustratingly, the confusion of “hateful” glinting tools that carry none of the warmth of her “grandmother’s kitchen” (line 14). The strong discord and dissimilarity between memory and experience re-enact the musical dissonance of *pianissimo* and *mezzo forte*. Nini connects incongruous things not as a conceit but as a matter-of-fact—the use of odd imagery in lines such as “cocoon of warmth under blankets,” (line 2) her “mind rummag[ing] for sleep,” (line 3), and “money” and “assets... Are frozen too” (lines 26-28) provide the undercurrent to contemporary concerns that are not only symbolic but pragmatic. This laborious joining of ideas where existence and place are intimately linked is also the framework to understand Nini’s poetic process. She said,

I prune mercilessly. To get to the core of an idea you have to keep stripping off what’s not necessary. All my ideas are not equal and are all not worth poetry. For ordinary people, like me, you have to plot. Being self-critical is important (Tellis).

Naga writing in English has often been reduced to a pendulous refrain between extremism and exoticism. Identity politics has generally assumed narrow, parochial, and xenophobic dispositions. However, Nini confronts the hypocritical and superficial constructs entrenched in the Naga mindset. And for this poet, this is not a dilemma but a confrontation not reckoned with. Nini notes defiantly, “I do not write on my ‘Naganess’, it is a social characteristic and as such are, in a way, universal. I refuse to mythologize my ‘Naganess’” (Tellis). In this sense, Nini explores her personal relationship to the community, critiquing the status of home and the conflict between the obligation to a place and the yearning for independence, free of historical and social ties which is finely reflected in ‘**Going Home**’:

I’ve left the city, though you are there -
I am going back to my mountains.
Though you are there, I cannot return
To the terrifying city that thunders at night
When all should be lulled and still.

There the toil and pain and rage of life
Is paid for one’s very breath,
For there, the stature of a man
Is a terse equation of his bank books.
A man is a stranger among his own,

And his home, a space between walls;
For a small measure of peace, he must
Reach for his wallet, and buy it.
The price depending on what he thinks.
At that moment, your company's worth.

So I'm going back home, I'm terrified here,
I'm going to the sanctuary of my mountains -
High they are, remote and harsh,
Grim they are, but real and holy, unchanging;
Forever clad in the dignity of silence
(Forever is a long, long time ...)
They are a law unto themselves,
And for them, time has no meaning at all.

So I return to where I began,
I go, because I must:
I return to the dust of which I was formed
And the air that breathes life in me -
And yet - through the misty heights I see,
Your face strange now, shattered, refracted
In the prisms of my tears.

This love poem begins by claiming a relationship between leaving a place and returning home, a declaration of emotional commitment exacted in the need to belong. The heart's unwillingness to disconnect with her present is then compared to the call of the "mountains", in which she locates the notion of home, "Grim... but real and holy, unchanging" (line 19). Instead of acquiescing to her passions, she resigns her love and her fate to the mountains, "remote and harsh" (line 18). This idea of home flies against the conventional sense of belonging as coterminous with comfort, and familiarity. In contrast, it is the very remoteness and harshness of home that presupposes her sense of belonging, signaling an unlikely way in which to think about the notion of home. The poem takes on an almost mythical and spiritual quality by concluding that the poet-narrator must "return to the dust" (line 26), the contradiction of existence itself. That mighty ranges and harsh mountains can be so reduced stand testimony to the power of poetry to juxtapose these incongruous elements in a tense but plausible imaginary. Such is the verbosity and literary nous that Nini has managed to capture. The phrase highlighted in the pithy ending "in the prism of my tears" (line 30) also implicates the reader in the quest for this imagined homeland only to be walled off by the "the misty heights" (line 28).

Kohima: Spring '85

A child would not know
That flowers do not hold
On such a windy day
Little girl,
The scattered drifts
Of your peach petals
Led me up the hill.

II

Listen, the wind!
Hissing in the branches
Spanking the sky
Tossing torn blossoms
In handfuls of wild confetti,
Clouds chasing their shadows...
What will people say?
If I run out in the sun
To chase that kite
On its broken string?

III

Ah the winter chill
Still curls my toes
My fingers cringe
At the touch of water.
I feel naked and abandoned
As that old tree...
But how the wind rushes!
And in its voice, I hear
The rustles
Of a thousand leaves
Of summer.

I will conclude by exploring Nini's auditory world as a crucial aspect of her poetic imagery. Nini's insistence on an underlying thread between disparate elements is manifest on many levels. Hence, as seen before, home can be both harsh and remote, the wind can hiss menacingly, and the pursuit of a kite or the petals of a flower shorn by a child's hands would spur a morbid fascination to test the limits of societal acceptance. These are the multifarious undertones that may be read in her poetry. 'Kohima: Spring '85', for instance, amplifies both the visual and sonic worlds that the English language can construct. The "spanking" (line 10) of the sky aurally depicts the coalescing of sounds with sights. Rustles and curls and cringe and still are syllabic emphases in an incongruous landscape. "The emotional character," writes Nini, "the suggestiveness of a word, as well as its sonic significance are very important" (Tellis). This poem captures the flux and velocity of the Spring wind, resonating with environmental motifs which are deeply personal but simultaneously familiar to anyone who has lived in or visited Kohima. However, language and its play in poetry also reflect political and social concerns. The poet's anxiety at not being able to replicate the freedom of petals in the wind, of kites in the sky, of the elemental simplicity of nature, is conveyed in the line, "What will people say?" (line 14). This, in turn, generates a significant question that the poet draws attention to in a subtle but significant way wherein language both unveils as well as obfuscates the desire between the imaginary and the real. Reading Nini's poems reveals a philosophy that deromanticizes the idea of writing poetry and its importance as a fount of meaning. She succinctly states, "...poetry is not disorganized...it is not the same as a kitchen conversation, it is an intellectual activity" (Tellis). This brevity of thought, which traverses the spectrum between the particulars of the world and the universal attributes that may be traced in them, underscores Nini's exuberant poetry which jostles with her reticence, creating a contradiction that would sooner be resolved by reducing her poetry and intellectual capacity to a sanitized and composite segment of Naga women's writing in English in order to make sense of such incongruity. This point may be

well-revisited in her insistence that “to get to the core of an idea, you have to keep stripping off what’s not necessary” (Tellis). Until I discovered Nini’s poetry, and read each line in awesome reverence of a persona not unlike any other Naga woman writer, I held an innate aversion to anything that was remotely associated with Kohima, not least because of its unsteady landscapes, its bureaucratic citadels and its bourgeois conformity, firm grounds for prejudice that needed to be excised. I see now, that taken together, Nini’s poems visualise a home that does not decry its incompleteness or its cruelty, rather it embraces these very facets that would expunge from the notion of home its very homeliness. She accomplishes this by reimagining her surroundings and spatiality in all their rawness, resulting in a landscape that preserves ambiguity, ambivalence, and spiritual meaning that is truly central to her poetry. She simply states, “So I return to where I began” (*Going Home*, line 24) acceding that home and belonging are not mutually bound in notions of comfort, or of agency. For Nini, Kohima is “the toil and pain and rage of life” (line 6)...but such is her “sanctuary” (line 17).

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