

Robin S Ngangom's Poetry : A Critical Study

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Robin

S Ngangom — (Photo credit Kushal Dutta)

Robin Ngangom's poem "Last Word" from his anthology *The Desire of Roots* is important because it is a self-reflexive declaration of his poetic manifesto. As this poem was published in 2006, there is a possibility that Ngangom's philosophy of poetry may have changed from what he believed almost two decades back. The shift in worldview is evident in some of the "New Poems" from Ngangom's latest anthology *My Invented Land* (2023). The themes taken up in the new poems concern the fate of humanity and the ecosystem, rampant consumerisation, technological singularity, post-pandemic condition, sufferings of people including children (during the Arab Spring in Iraq and Syria), and so forth. These poems are rendered in broad, universal terms. However, the broader contextualisation and scale apparent in Ngangom's new poems are not seismic to warrant a revisionist manifesto of his poetical philosophy. Hence, it seems that Ngangom's *purpose* for writing poetry as reflected in his "Last Word" is still very relevant. The first line of "Last Word" is a question often asked by readers while attempting to understand Ngangom's poetry:

What kind of a poet is he? They ask.

The poem answers this question in this way:

I am a poet of earth and space,
possibly water, but not fire. I know
my limitations, and there are many things
between earth and sky I cannot name...
They whispered among themselves:

“How come his poetry is riddled with bullets then?”
So I said:
“I wanted my poems to exude a heady odour
but only the sweet taint of blood
or burning flesh emanates from my poem. (“Last Word”)

This poem offers a clear indication of Robin Ngangom’s concerns in his poetry. Pramod Nayar rightly observes that Ngangom uses two tropes in his poetry: first, “Aesthetic of Pleasure” derived from sensuous apprehension/perception of nature, and second”, “Aesthetic of Suffering” associated with the anarchy unfolding at home. The dimension of aesthetic of pleasure is evident in “Last Word” in which the poet notes that he loves simple everyday pleasures like—

sunlight on our shoulders,
or women with firm breasts
and hills quiet in the rain. (“Last Word”)

The reader realises that the sensuous, lyrical, and richly suggestive poems that are part of Ngangom’s “nature poems” have a specific spatial context, and that context is Shillong (home-away-from-home), not Aizawl (home). It is the home-away-from-home that gets embodied in all of his lyrical, nature poems. Ngangom has stated in an article titled “Poetry in the Time of Terror” published in *Indian Literature*:

It is natural for someone from the Northeast of India to exploit the folk traditions he grew up with, to write of the hills when he is living in the hills. It is Shillong, which has moved me into this kind of poetry, Shillong with its gentle hills, the Khasis with their rich oral literature. If I had not made use of this hill world, my poetry would have been false. You would notice this preponderance of images from the hills in many of my poems—the vast pines, the mountains with their great rains. (Ngangom, *Indian Literature*, May-June 2005, Vol. 49, No. 3 (227), pp. 168-174)

These poems gravitating towards the aesthetic of pleasure derived from sensuous apprehension of nature are hermetic and apolitical, eschewing the realistic mode of enunciation. Pramod Nayar, in his article “The Postcolonial Picturesque: The Poetry of Northeast India” (*Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 30:2, 2008) identifies two distinct strands in NE poetry. These two strands are what Ngangom had already indicated in his poem “Last Word”. Nayar said:

The picturesque in NE poetry is constituted by two strands. The first strand is what may be termed the “natural picturesque.” The second strand, which often cuts or merges messily into the first, is embodied in an aesthetic of suffering. This second strand, what [he terms] the “savage/d picturesque”, suggests a transformation of the beautiful land and constitutes the NE poetry’s politics.

Therefore, it can be argued that the natural and the savaged picturesque are what perhaps constitutes the dominant “Northeast paradigm”.

The “natural picturesque” is evident in several poems of Ngangom. To cite an instance, one can consider “Ode to Hynniew Trep” to be a part of this paradigm. The last stanza of the poem signifies this:

Shimmering cascade,
nude twilight
reposing on eyes,

living root bridge
of arterial rivers.
Crucible of hearts.
Deep-burning
ancient rice wine.

The “natural picturesque” is seen in this poem through the sensuous merging of diverse sights, sounds and texture. Such a “natural picturesque” is also evident in many other poems like “From the Land of the Seven Huts,” “Hynniew Trep”, “Fog”, “Hill”, “During Easter”, etc, where the poet’s sensuous, lyrical persona comes to the fore, through what Nayar termed “anthropo-morphing”, which implies “gendering/humanising nature”. Here, nature is intrinsically connected to the human – at times, even changing each other’s shape and form. In the poem “Hill”, this “anthropo-morphing” is evident in the lines,

Hill, the ancient ones speak of a time
When the gods, tired of heavens,
descended to earth, and with lustful fingers dipped in
primeval clay, moulded your torso and breasts.
They scooped the clouds and
Poured them over diaphanous cliffs
To fashion your silver hair.

Thus, the poems which are part of “natural picturesque” are steeped in the rich oral tradition of the indigenous Khasi community. Folklores of star-crossed lovers – the tragic fate of the orphan Manik Raitong and the legend of the bamboo flute taking root – are given an “anthropo-morphing” treatment in Ngangom’s two poems– “At the End of Autumn Sitting Near the Window” and in the “Spring at Ri Bhoi.” The sombre, ominous, yet lyrical note of these two nature poems eloquently testify to Robin Ngangom’s capacity to suggest a world of feelings in the barest, minimum words.

However, the “natural picturesque” or the “aesthetic of pleasure” that forms one definitive strand or corpus of Robin Ngangom’s poetry, is characterised by the poet himself as “mostly artless, inoffensive poetry.” Yet, it cannot be denied that part of Robin Ngangom’s claim to fame as one of the most influential poets of the Northeast rests on this corpus of nature poems that are seem to be part of the hermetic tradition, deploying figurative devices like synaesthesia, metonymy, symbol, imagery, all these bolstering their aesthetic value. A few lines from “At the End of Autumn Sitting Near the Window” can be quoted from this context:

It is the ninth moon and already
A shiver runs down the back of the hill.
In calm solitude I latch my door,
Wondering if I’ll ever see
Plum blossoms again.

Blinking among pines the autumn stars.
Silk-spun moonlight and
Silver streams breaking over stones.
Laden peasants from day’s end
Bringing winterwood to the Syiem’s mansion.

How sad is the lot of my friend Manik,

Spilling his heart
From the seven mouths of his flute,
Even though he has dared to wear
The flower of the Syiem.

Thus, from the dimension of the “aesthetic of pleasure” in Ngangom’s poetry, I will make my incursion into the arena of the “aesthetic of suffering”, the second strand in Robin Ngangom’s poetry.

I will begin with an analogy. In James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the notion of “self-imposed exile” is an important theme. In the novel, Stephen Daedalus’ leaving Ireland is determined by political and religious factors. We can understand Stephen’s predicament associated with living in a country that upholds conservative, reactionary ideals, providing little opportunity for liberal values to exist. Stephen decides to leave his land, and go on a self-imposed exile to a place that offers him autonomy and agency to express himself, he says—

“in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning.”

This tripartite interplay of “silence, exile, and cunning” becomes the site/stake from which enunciation becomes possible for Stephen, who for long have been considered the autobiographical characterisation of Joyce himself. Therefore, the “self-imposed exile” of Stephen (or Joyce for that matter), was a “tactical” necessary to undertake the responsibility of representing “the reality of experience” and forging “in the smithy of his soul” the “uncreated conscience of his race.” These are the immortal phrases that we come across towards the end of the novel.

It is possible that Robin Ngangom’s purpose in composing poetry is similar, starting with the overtly confessional element in his writing. Ngangom’s poetry read in their totality, begins to manifest certain patterns, which make readers assume that his poetry is significantly autobiographical. Even though we know that the speaker of a poem should not be identified or equated to the poet, the lines of distinction between the “poet” and the “speaker” gets so blurred in Ngangom’s poems that we are forced to conflate the speaker and the poet as one entity. Western aesthetic theories of impersonality, distance, tradition conceived in universalised terms, etc., are debunked in Ngangom’s poetry, to valorise the “expression of personality” and “a turning loose of emotions” – the affective element – that gets embodied through the conflation of the poet and the speaker. Ngangom has stated:

I don’t agree with the view that a writer requires a tradition to lean upon, to till the soil which others have made fertile, and harvest idea for himself. A writer can be influenced by anything, and he would be able to write in any country other than his own. But he has to reclaim his individual voice (My Invented Land 14)

Reading Ngangom’s poetry makes one believe that the “expression of personality” and “the turning loose of emotions” are actually what poetry should strive to embody in the contemporary world, and especially writers who have to perforce live in oppressive “states of exception”. The determining “purpose” of Ngangom’s poetry seems to be the depiction of the “reality of experience”, just like Joyce, using “silence, exile, and cunning”. The purpose of depicting reality

of experience is evident in poems like “Homeland I left”, “To a Valley Known as Imphal” (from the anthology *Word and the Silence* (1988)), “Imphal”, “Myanmar’s Story,” (from the anthology *Time’s Crossroads* (1994)), “Primary Schools”, “A Libran Horoscope.” “Revolutionaries,” “The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom,” “Poem for Joseph,” “The First Rain”, “Native Land,” “Middle-class Blues,” “Everywhere I Go”, “Last Word’ (from *The Desire of Roots* (2006)), “15 August 2008. Northeast India”, “Father on Earth”, “Marriages and Funerals”, “My Invented Land,”, and so forth.

In most of these poems, the confessional note is evident, with the poet attempting to understand the political imbroglio of his native land with its flagrant human rights violation, coming into being of a despicable culture of impunity, and the moral degradation that had seeped into the cultural fabric of the community. The poem “Imphal” can be read in this context as well. Despite critics implying that these poems are too realistic, visceral and not nuanced enough to be eligible for induction into academic canons, the truth is that these poems provide the most honest context for knowing and understanding the problems of Manipur, and in extension, the sufferings of the people of India’s Northeast (primarily due to the deeply flawed/skewed policies and politics of the mainland). Ngangom has stated in the “Introduction” of *My Invented Land* that he has opened his eyes “to insistent realities and have stepped out of the proverbial ivory tower” (15).

Therefore, he rejected the mainland tradition of composing poems exhibiting “verbal wizardry” and “woolly aesthetics” that skirted away from addressing germane political concerns. However, Writing from the Northeast could never shy away from political issues. It would necessitate the mastering of what he phrased “the art of witness” (15). This, he felt, was how a Northeast literary paradigm could be established and consolidated. It will be useful to read the poem, “Homeland I Left” to understand what Ngangom meant by the expression “mastering of the art of witness”:

I hear a wicked war is now waged on our soil, and
 Bloody bodies dragged unceremoniously
 Through our rice fields, that they have dropped
 The word ‘shame’ from everyday parlance, and
 The newly-rich are ruling our homes.

I hear that freedom comes there only
 When escorted by armed men.

The above are stark, visceral lines, bereft of poetic, figurative devices. But it is by dint of such a pared-down, prosaic expression that Ngangom has succeeded in foregrounding the political issues confronting Manipur. I as a Northeasterner can connect deeply on the personal level with Ngangom’s politically-charged realist poetry as we also have been mute witness to similar situations in our state. What Ngangom writes a s “growing ethnic aggressiveness, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious bigotry, the marginalisation of minorities and the poor, profit and power struggles in government and as a natural aftermath to these, the banality of corruption and the banality of terror” (15) in presenting the dystopian state of affairs in Manipur is what can be said verbatim in the context of most states of Northeast India. Reading his poetry does make one ponder about the dystopic condition that have paralysed these states. His poems also make one realise that being in a condition of “self-imposed exile” can be enabling as it sets one free from different kinds of bindings. The “flight” from a “carceral space” (home, Imphal) to a

“liberal/liberatory space” (Shillong) can provide agency to articulate the “aesthetic of suffering”. Robin Ngangom does it with conviction in his poetry.

Some scholars have examined Ngangom’s poetry through diasporic lens, through tropes like “home”, “dislocation”, “memory”, “nostalgia”, “belongingness” and so forth. I think such diasporic appropriations are only useful to a small extent. It is evident from Ngangom’s poetry that in remembering “home” (Manipur), there is no indication of experiencing the “unhomely” in the place of migration (Shillong). The “Insider/Outsider” dichotomy that is apparent in the works of many writers from the Northeast who challenge the culture of homogenisation, is conspicuous by its absence in Ngangom’s poetry. On the contrary, the present place of “mooring” offers the speaker in Ngangom’s poetry a safe place, an anchorage, from the vantage grounds from which he can introspect on roiling issues besetting his “home”— issues like indigenous uprising, home as a militarized zone, rampant corruption, friends turned into insurgents, violence against women, drugs, AIDS, and so forth in Ngangom’s poetry, there is little romanticisation of “home” or experiences of “dislocation” as an outsider in the “home-away-from-home”, which debunks some of the foundational diasporic premises.

On the other hand, Ngangom’s poetry adopts a “savaged picturesque” while remembering “home”, but a diametrically obverse attitude and affect while delineating the “natural picturesque” of the place of exile. Ngangom remembering “home” (Imphal/Manipur) through the “aesthetic of suffering” is fundamentally different from the speaker waxing eloquent about the change of seasons, gushing over pine trees, the picturesque hills and canyons situated in and around the home-away-from-home (Meghalaya). This is in the sense that the home-away-from-home (Meghalaya) is a welcoming space.

Ngangom’s elaboration of the “aesthetic of suffering” runs through a gamut of affective states, for instance, fear, guilt, helplessness, feeling of emasculation, and resignation. For instance, these figure prominently in Ngangom’s “Native Land”. Some lines from the poem will be useful in highlighting the various states of sentiment present in it:

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.
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.
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.

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.

The poem presents the tortured feelings of a person who is aware of the violence being perpetrated upon innocent civilians, with the awareness of his own complicity due to inaction, passivity, and feeling of emasculation.

Ngangom's poems depicting the "savaged picturesque" through the "aesthetic of suffering" is what makes him part of the "strategic formation" and the "strategic location" – the constitution and consolidation of the Northeast "paradigm" through "writing back" – a paradigm that can be understood only by those inhabiting the "troubled periphery" confronted with the baffling, inscrutable "durable disorders." Ngangom's poetry on "home" stands as horrifying testimonies to the collective "trauma of witness". Therefore, despite many readers/critics attempting to circumvent the discussion of Ngangom's poetry towards the "natural picturesque", or frank depiction of sexuality or "libidinal economy" evident in many of his poems, I think Ngangom's legacy will continue on being a brave voice of the Northeast, attempting to speak truth to power through his sparse, penetrating, powerful verse, and in that way becoming one of the representative poets speaking on behalf of the entire Northeast region.

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