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English Poetry from the Northeast and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

Dr. Jayanta Pathok¹, Ankur Goswami²

^{1,2}Assistant Professor, Department of Assamese, N.E.F. College, Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract: *Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is one of the outstanding poets from the Northeastern region of India, writing in English. He is a poet rooted to Khasi tribes of the state of Meghalaya in India. As a poet, Nongkynrih is noted as a multi-ethnic poet as he dwells on ethnicity in Meghalaya. He is preoccupied with a spirit of belongingness to a social group with a common cultural tradition. There is an astounding diversity among the tribes of the Northeast. The English poems of Nongkynrih explore Khasi myths, legends and folklore inherent in his native heritage. Further, ecology is a significant facet in his poetry. Ecology works as a binding factor in the poet's exploration of identity within traditional values. Poetry from the Northeast is often branded as poetry of brutality and terrorism. If we analyze this traumatic condition we agree with Margaret Zama, who sums up the factors as historical and political trauma of untold suffering and marginalization. Nongkynrih's poetry sincerely gives voice to the political negligence and the economic deprivation in the region.*

Keywords: *Northeast, ethnicity, marginalization, alienation, ecology, conflict, identity*

I. INTRODUCTION

The diversity of the tribal groups of Northeast India is truly astounding. The states of the region are distinct, in their languages and the tradition of cultural practices, from the other states of India. It is believed and often projected that the greater culture of the Northeast of India is a harmonious mix of the tribal and non-tribal cultures. In reality, the perceived harmony and integration is upset by a crisis of identity and a sense of alienation felt by various ethnic groups, understood to be the indigenous people of the land. The most accessible modes of information about the Northeast region, whether it is Ministry sources or media propaganda, fail to delve into this ethnic alienation. 'Alienation', which means estrangement, is born out of a basic form of rootlessness. Chandra and Das allude to a "socio-cultural alienation" marked in the region. The tribes feel they have been deprived of the exclusive historical and cultural identities they desire and deserve. Rather, they are pushed to the margin, away from the Center. This generates the awareness of alienation. The forced homogenization does not help at all. This condition has given rise to many issues ruining the region, including matters of "racial autonomy, conflicts of the identity-question, and insurgency/militancy" (Preface V). Literature in the wider sense, and poetry and fiction in particular, written by writers ingrained to the soil, provide us with factual and emotional perspectives and reactions to the signified conditions.

II. DISCUSSION

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is a member of a Khasi tribe and would invariably feature in the list of outstanding and rooted Shillong poets. Nongkynrih was born at Sohra, in Cherrapunjee, in the state of Meghalaya in the Northeast of India, and is known for his Khasi poems and volumes of English verse: *Moments and The Sieve*, both published in 1992, and *The Yearning of Seeds* (2011). He is prominently known as a bilingual poet -- though, he has also written short fiction in both the languages. As stated, the diversity in the Northeast is quite perplexing. There are seventeen notified scheduled tribes in Meghalaya alone, "with all of them breaking up into a complex network of sub-tribes and clans, speaking their own languages and dialects" (*Dancing Earth* Introduction X). Recognizing this complex web, the historical identity of the tribal clans acutely clings itself to their traditional customs and beliefs. It is formed of an identification and acknowledgement of their folklore, myths, and ethos of ethnicity. As a poet, Nongkynrih is outstanding while dwelling on ethnicity in Meghalaya, preoccupied as he is by the spirit of belongingness to a social group with a common cultural tradition. In this exercise he is similar to some other prominent poets from Meghalaya including Desmond Lee Kharmawphlang, Ananya S. Guha, Esther Syiem, Anjum Hasan and Paul Lyngdoh. Along with D. L. Kharmawphlang, Nongkynrih has contributed to English poetry for two decades. The poets have been branded as ethnic poets or even as "multi-ethnic poets" (Chandra, Das 1). The English poems of Nongkynrih explore Khasi myths, legends and folklore inherent in his native heritage. An instance is the reference to the myth of Nohkalikai. This myth "pervades the bi-lingual poetry of the poets in Shillong". (Guha)

Another remarkable feature of his poetry is the comprehension and perception of the ecology of his place. 'Ecology' is used here in the sense of one's relationship with the physical environment. The natural picture seen in all the states of the Northeast is quite similar – all of them have a similar ecosystem comprising hills, forests, rivers and varied flora and fauna. The discovered environment in Nongkynrih's poetry, pervaded by hills, forests and streams is often mysterious in its presence and is imbued with the sacred human-nature, nature-culture interrelationship. Ecology works as a binding factor in the poet's exploration of identity within traditional values. Images of natural environment are sometimes imaginative, and at times romantic; but are also symbolic in their representation of the poet's emotional outburst. He expresses a concern for the wearing down of tribal values due to the intrusion of a foreign culture in "Only Strange Flowers Have Come To Bloom". Here he uses strange wild flowers in the hills to signify foreign powers that break into native cultures:

Like them we shed our old ways and having shed them we find no spring to bring the flowers back (qtd in Bhattacharjee, Guha 87)
Writing on Shillong poets, Satpathy identifies a contemporary resistance to non-native, alien cultures apart from "the dialectic between the beauty of the land and the inhumanity and horror of violence, between the private world of love and the public world of hatred" that have contributed to the richness of their poetry. (Satpathy 15) Akin to the above poem, the writing of the Indian English poets of the Northeast is "strongly political" (Das 1), speaking of the "desperate need to be understood, and to be accepted" (Ngangom 2). Nongkynrih laments this degeneration of traditional values of his ancient land and hints of political injustice are understood at several places : This land is old, too old and withered for life to be easy. ("The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" 1-2) There are allusions suggesting sadness, gloom and pain in various poems: There are many things to be sad about in this life many things that become a misfortune many things I would like to thresh like a washerman with the aroma of sweet soaps on the smooth washing stones. ("Pain" 8-14)

Commenting on 'Shillong Poets', Das has made a significant discovery: "The poets they feel close to are the political ones like Pablo Neruda, Czeslaw Milosz, Mahmoud Darwish, and Yehuda Amichai who by choice or circumstance (or both) voice the anguish and aspirations of their land and its people." (Das, 2). Though hard to pinpoint, Neruda, the Spanish poet, is inflamed with political fury; in Polish poetry Milosz speaks of death, loss and suffering; Palestinian poet Darwish concerns with Palestine's tension with the neighbouring Israel; and in Hebrew Amichai gives voice to the alienation and loneliness in the aftermath of war. Thus, the point of inspiration for the Shillong poets is clear when they portray their anguish and aspirations and address the readers directly. Poets from the Northeast responsibly bring in critical issues afflicting the region and these include "terrorism, insurgency, human rights abuses, environmental and ecological concerns, erosion of tribal values..." (Das 2) In the speaker's report to an unidentified beloved 'Sundori', there is a stark reference by Nongkynrih to group-conflicts and killings:

Yesterday one of my people Killed one of your people And one of your people Killed one of my people. Today they have both sworn To kill on sight. ("Sundori" 2-7) The poet, in an essay, describes this condition as "the menace of the gun and terrorism that came with ethnic cleansing and the growth of militant nationalism whose demands vary from greater autonomy to outright sovereignty" (Poet as Chronicler) Thus, Poetry of the Northeast may be defined, in one way, as the poetry of "psychological and social perplexities" (Dancing Earth xii) that take account of ethnic clashes and insurgency. However, that 'killing' or terrorism is a political response of the tribes and not rooted in the Khasi traditional belief-system and practice, is strongly clarified in his poetry:

Gestating, she warned me not to kill anything. That was what her ancestors, the old Khasis, had taught her. ("Killer Instincts" 1-4)
The title of the above poem is, however, aptly justified when it comes round to assert the internal rage in today's generation: it was maddening not to be a killer. ("Killer Instincts" 12-13)

If we analyze this traumatic condition we agree with Margaret Zama, who sums up the factors as historical and political trauma of untold suffering and marginalization (Zama xi). Within the concept of marginality, 'identity' and 'difference' are the principal elements; and the poets of the Northeast attempt at a renewal of their cultural and ethnic identity with a discernment of both. Politically, there remains a much grave recognition of how power brokers and politicians, bureaucrats and the national security lobby have made an "unmitigated mess of conditions" and impoverished the area (Hazarika, Introduction). Lines in Nongkynrih's poetry give voice to the political negligence and the economic deprivation as in Poverty eats into the hills and squeeze living from stones and caterpillars ("The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" 3-4)

Subramaniam emphasizes Nongkynrih's belief that poetry must respond to the exigencies of his time and place (Subramaniam). The modes and concerns within the poet's preoccupations, therefore, amount to an exceptional poetic sensibility when perceived as responses intrinsic to a poet of the Northeast.

III. CONCLUSION

For Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih the dominant commitment is identity-formation; and his restructuring of identity with “intricacies of feeling” (Satpathy 18) is through recollections from memory. Poetry serves for him as a platform as in mnemonic, whence images from memory participate in the formation of the identity-experience. To conclude, some movingly impressive lines are quoted from his poem “Hiraeth” which speaks of a ‘longing’ (English for the Welsh word “hiraeth”) for a rich cultural heritage that has now fallen to the path of acute degeneration:

Out of that restlessness the past rises from dimly remembered songs and I watch my ghostly ancestors hasten from their dark pallets at the rooster’s first reveille; warming up for their fields, boiling rice, packing their midday meal in leaves.

I saw them arm themselves with hook-like whetted knives at the second. And slinging bamboo cones on bamboo straps, I watch them emerge from their huts at the third; bamboo torches twinkling in their hands, ancient songs and playful limericks flowing from their lips. (12-22)

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