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Home: Illusion and Disillusion in Robin S Ngangom's *Words and the Silence*

Yumnam Nirmala Devi

Ph.D Research Scholar
Pondicherry University

The paper deals with the concept of home in one Manipuri poet, Robin S Ngangom. It expresses what home really is and what it is like being away from home. The poet's firm rootedness to his place is very much confirmed when he narrates in every poem about his place, people, land and the contemporary issues. Indeed, he loves narrating about his native place. Yet, this fondness for home is disillusioned. It goes on discussing and exposing the harsh realities of the place. It is like two facets of a coin. The concept of home lies in this mixed feeling and it's ambiguous. At some point of time, the poet is like an iconoclast. The paper critically analyses how, through the poems, the poet's concept of home is discussed as a kind of illusion and is juxtaposed in another way as shattered and it's disillusionment is made known at last.

Post-colonial literature deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies through literature. This term has been started using after the Second world War in terms such as the post-colonial state and has carried a chronological meaning, designating the post-independence period. However, from the late 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization. It was Gayatri Spivak who first used the term Post-colonial in the collection of interviews and recollections published in 1990 called *The Post-Colonial Critic*. This was part of an attempt to politicize and focus the concerns of fields such as Commonwealth literature and the study of the so-called New Literatures in English which had been initiated in the late 1960s. The term has subsequently been widely used to signify the political, linguistic and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies.

Indian Literature (either originally written in English or translated from the indigenous language or existed in its native/regional language) is a part and parcel of Post-colonial literature. Many writers in their writings try to show and analyse critically the kind of relation between the colonisers and the colonised that were before as well as the impact of that relationship on the colonised minds so many years after Independence. They reiterate their themes on the political, linguistic and cultural experiences of the colonised people. In India too, many regions which were not then part of Indian subcontinent were former European colonies especially the British. However, after the British left, these regions came directly under the supervision of Indian Government. Some of these regions were independent princely kingdoms ruled by Kings and Queens. Paradoxically, they were colonised twice in their early dawn both by the British and the Indian subcontinent. These regions lie on the extreme north eastern periphery of the Indian mainland and now they are known to the mainlanders as the North-East. "North-East is, of course, a blanket term that has been used to imply a homogeneous province, a single political domain, inhabited by kindred peoples with a common history". It consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Because of its tenuous historical and geographical association with the rest of India, this region is often excluded from many important political discussions thereby it remains unknown to many and largely misunderstood as the hotbed for insurgents. In the words of Sanjoy Hazarika, "India's Northeast is a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor

just twenty kilometres wide at its slimmest which is referred to as the Chicken's Neck". Due to these inherent natural factors and the deliberate discard of the ethos and sensitivity of the people by the mainstream political centres, this region has established a flimsy affinity with the rest of the country that has played a major role in the origin of the conflicts and unrest insurgencies that have troubled the region for a long time. These have rekindled the Mizo, Meitei, Naga, Tripuri and Assamese assertion of separateness and autonomous states from the non-Mongolian communities that powerfully dominate the Indian subcontinent.

Given this historical and political background, it is from this conflicting situation that a body of a work of literature called the North-East Literature has arisen. North-East Literature is a kind of literature produced from this region in both English, translation as well as in indigenous languages. This literature is a part of Indian literature which is included under Post-colonial literature or New Literature. Apart from the Assamese, Manipuris and Tripuris who have their own distinct scripts and whose literature can be traced back to the fifteenth century or earlier, the literature of most of the other communities is new. As folklore is very rich in this region, many are under the assumption that this region produces only folklore narrative. And this is not at all the true picture of the region's literary tradition. Some writers use the technique of folklore in their writings to still keep alive the old tradition of their past which had been uprooted by the colonisers, while some others do deliberately deal with the psychological and social perplexities of the present. And to relate with the latter's tradition, Modern poetry from this region plays a significant role. These writers with their extensive reading of modern world literature from English translations, they find a common ground in expressing their subjective realities and the predicament of their people. North-East poetry is a result of the contemporary issues especially violence. In one way we can put in one sentence of the North-East poet as "Living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness". It is in this aspect, the North-East writers differ from the mainland writers. One very conspicuous feature commonly seen in these writers is their strong rootedness. The root of the past, the root of the land, the root of the people, the root of the time. This rootedness can be seen in their writings in one way or the other as the writers are the chroniclers of the contemporary realities.

The paper will deal with the concept of home in one Manipuri poet Robin S Ngangom, a Meitei by birth from a place called Singjamei in Imphal. He made significant contributions to Indian Writing in English by publishing three volumes of poetry: *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). Robin is one of the most representative contemporary Indian English poets from North-East India. He has been publishing his poems profusely in the leading journals of India and abroad. He had been away from his hometown since his early days. Though he belongs to the Meitei community from Manipur, he left behind his community long ago for Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya. It is because of this untimely separateness from his own society, he often feels a kind of alienation lingering in his life. Sometimes this feeling shatters him from within and always plays tricky roles of illusion and disillusion, hence, breaking the concept of home. This subtle play of concept through the play of words and expressions can be abundantly seen throughout his writings. Poetry becomes an underground exercise for him for expressing pent-up feelings and desires without actually being demonstrative as to put in the poet's words. This paper will discuss analytically his rootedness to his hometown through his poetry volume *Words and the Silence* published by *Writers Workshop*.

Home is supposed to be a refuge, the place where it has to take you in, as Frost once said. But it is also a place of conflict and death as much as comfort and birth in the case of Ngangom.

Home is a place of personal remembrance where we do not fight the battles for subjective gains, for political purpose. Home should be a well meaning world where freedom of choice, freedom of thinking, freedom of speech, freedom of living freely as a human being, freedom of everything should be found. Unfortunately, home becomes a ground of contestation for the survivors. Manipur, the native place of the poet, “is in a state of anarchy” and his “poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land”. Ngangom in his essay, *Poetry in a Time of Terror*, says that “Manipur boasts of its talents in theatre, cinema, dance and sports. But how could you trust your own people, when they entrust corruption, AIDS, terrorism and drugs to their children?”. This is the true picture of Manipur. The poet is very much aware of the lurking danger in his land. In the poem “Homeland I Left”, the poet expresses his happy childhood experiences with his beloved friends:

How we loved the colourful festivals,
and catching fish from stagnant pools.
You were rough in your streetfights,
we were young, we were curious of women.
But how we flew kites, planted flowers,
and tended chicken!
How we hunted small-game in the rice-fields
and covered every lane of Imphal on bicycles,
making passes at almost every girl! (10)

Yet this dream-like small world of the child is shattered. The illusion is unveiled and the poet mourns the fate of his motherland like the Sicilian poet Quasimodo:

I hear a wicked war is now waged
on our soil, and gory bodies
dragged unceremoniously
through our rice-fields. That they have
dropped the word “shame”
from the vocabulary,
and the newly-rich are ruling our homes.
I hear that freedom comes there, only
if escorted by armed men. (10-11)

In another poem, “To A Valley Known As Imphal”, the poet recalls of the past history of the Second World War where his own people took active part. However, those freedom fighters are forgotten and their story remains only in lips. He remembers how his departed grandmother narrated stories about the allied forces and how the people of the valley ran

helter-skelter because of the unmindful bombing. He also learns that the war fought was not the war of his people. He cannot forget his roots, his people's past history. The British left only to make his land a colony to India again. This unlawful and controversial Merger Agreement of September 21st, 1949 between the Governor General of India and his Highness, the Maharajah of Manipur leaves a scar on the collective psyche of the poet's people. According to which, in the best interests of the State of Manipur as well as of the Dominion of India, it is desirable to provide for the administration of the said State by or under the authority of the Dominion Government. Therefore, the poet laments:

at cockcrow one morning we found
ourselves belonging to a nation.
what happens when our bodies leave us behind
and even our songs must lie
damp in a corner? (12-13)

Ngangom is always haunted by his past life. He cannot totally forget his root to his native place. He is made to reminisce of his early days with pleasure and smile. Simultaneously, in the next moment, he cannot stop his stream of thoughts and ponderings on the predicament of his own people. He is deeply in love with his native land and people. Every hour he is reminded of them in a juxtaposed situation. In the poem, "Singjamei", the poet remembers how he spent his life there in this small hillock and is very much nostalgic of particular things and events:

Now nocturnal hours fall,
returning us to childhood,
and roams your milling bazaar;
the stalls of seasoned smoked fish,
rotting betelnut, bunches of magnolia
and herbs, handpicked for maidens and
moonlit nights: O how they all return!
To foreboding rhythms
of wood pigeons in shy groves.
Carefree on young streets
we are juvenile wooden wheels
of chariot festivals, munching
water chestnuts and pineapple rings. (15)

But in the next moment the image of a happy home is broken. The next stream of consciousness breaks this image making the poet realise the realities of his native place:

And the long and winding road
to a homecoming only greets
the beckoning smile of a child prostitute,
or chattering dead young mothers
black-marketing to keep
body and soul together, or
bathetic “flower children”
preaching dead after their affluent west.
And I deserted you once more. (15-16)

This disillusion is very much flagrant in many ways as the poet expresses through his verse. The illusion of what home really is devastated where the poet finds children and young women prostitutes in his native place. This is shocking to him. He often wonders how such evil things can happen in his native place. He keeps on recalling of the bygone glorious days where everyone exults in telling the stories. Every household feels elated in one's past glory and myths. Thus, in the poem, “The Quest As Beginning”, the poet writes:

In Kangleipak once upon a time
the royal beast of Kangla bit his tail
and the land lay snug within his coils,
and there was no dearth of mundane things
fish was as cheap and in the fields
ears of rice danced to the rhythm of the soil.
From the minstrel's song at the dead of night,
we heard winter yarns of warrior-Kings,
men who assured the land and the women no fear,
of men with untiring sword-arms.
We were sung of extra-terrestrial maidens
descended to earth and lost: Ingallei and Kombirei
elusive wildflowers, falling before anyone
could wear them, telling all in destroying love
we destroy ourselves.
We heard whatever is not lost.

We speak of a mythic time. (22)

But such memorable myths of the past are no more. His idea of home is lost in translation. Disillusion shrouds the poet's conflicting mind. Therefore, he negates his previous thought and starts brooding over the fate of his home land:

Instead of pages of heroic deeds or undying love,
we read parchments written in blood, our history
stained by illicit love and betrayal;

We found our alphabet buried with the shrunken heads
of enemies, ghosts who died long ago laughing
at the attempts at civilization.

Just outside the ramparts of the city of arts,
we found seething forces of destruction;
not dances, music or literature

but generations of groaning men and slaves. (23)

In the poem, "To My People", the poet describes his native place as "capital of thieves, pimps, cutthroats / malignant peasants and stray dogs / Come for a contest of riches / at the town's premises" (42). This is a reality happening everyday in his place and is spreading like epidemics. A culture of inhumanity, shamelessness and earning blood money blinds the souls of his people. While still nostalgic about his place and near and dear ones, he laments of what had become of his native land. He, in the poem, "Now Words Should Catch Fire", expresses:

While our boys and girls
take to the hills,
eat birds' eggs and roots,
fugitives in malarial jungles!

While at home our emaciated flower-children,
wear the essence of poppies in their hands,
seven times purified
the eaters of fresh lives infest,
thrive and are legion.

Now words should strike flint

Winds of iron go crying over the land. (58)

Though Ngangom expresses his being nostalgic and love for his home and people, despite of the fact that he stays away from his home, he does not limit his involvement to a distant-

bystander only. He believes that if “you are a bystander, you are not innocent”. Once we become bystander then we should participate not necessarily physically but mentally without being demonstrative. He, in spite of his deep rootedness to his hometown, does not write about the rich folklores and the beautiful breathtaking landscapes. He thinks that justice is not done on his part if he goes on writing only the positive and beautiful aspects of his place. It is compulsory for him to express through his verse that some things are to be made known and discussed openly. He wants to offer an answer to his denial of writing the “verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetics” from Neruda’s words: Come and see the blood in the streets. In fact, to relate this, the poet expresses vividly the predicament of his place in the poem, “Curfew”:

The once groaning streets are muted
 No motor sounds can break this spell
 of motionless quiet
 that has descended like fate.
 A fallen leaf from the day’s tree
 settling from the town on woods.

 People were killed in a lawless firing
 and the streets today observe
 hour long silence for the departed. (66)

What can a poet do in such conflicting circumstances? He can no longer live his life in a dreamy-magical world. His home is like a mirage in a desert. Illusion becomes disillusion. In this condition, the poet is put under strain as to remember the words of Albert Camus: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression. This is in fact the truth about the poet. He cannot lie of the fact and realities what he sees and knows of his place. At the same time he cannot resist the oppression and wrought brought upon to his place by his own people. He reiterates his own stance in the poem, “I Am Sorry To See Poetry In Chains”:

How can we sing of moonlight on hills,
 of lotuses in the lakes, of the misty rain,
 of legendary lovers and bardic rivers,
 or of endless rice-fields?
 The heart is a toy
 broken a long time ago.
 In Kangleipak we do not think
 of the past or a future.
 We only make sure our thinking

has some semblance of sanity,
 we only ensure that our limbs are intact.
 In this small patch of land,
 forgotten by history, isolated by nine ranges,
 in ignorant bliss Kangleipak lives.
 Once prime land, beneficent and fabled
 and now playground of black-marketeers,
 haven for future hunters where
 none misses a heartbeat
 as you feed money, sell honour, peddle justice.
 My love, night upsets us however,
 heightening the day's fears. (69-70)

The illusion for home and the disillusion for the hostile realities make Ngangom's poems to burrow deeper into pessimism. He cannot remain mute to the happenings and to be solipsistic. He cannot remain by feigning madness about the brutalisation of human lives. Yet there is a tinge of hope in his writing and is not altogether pessimistic. Though there is disillusion in every twist and turn, he believes that "Poetry cannot help anyone to get on in life, or make a successful human being out of anyone. But poetry should move us; it should change us in such a manner that we remain no longer the same after we've read a meaningful poem". Throughout his poems, he tries to highlight the benign, simple and beautiful aspects of his place and people. He is worried of the lurking fears in the face of every youth. He mourns of the past glory, his rich cultural heritage, and his good behaved people. Yet in the next moment, he is reminded of the harsh realities that are killing his people's conscience. Ngangom subtly juxtaposes his concept of home- an image both as illusion and disillusion and vice-versa. Therefore, he always felt that "Poetry should not merely amuse us or make us think: it should comfort us, and it must heal the heart of man".

Footnotes:

1. Kangleipak is the historical name of Manipur.
2. Kangla is the ancient seat of Manipuri royalty.
3. Ingallei and Kombirei are names of flowers.

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