

ISSN 0976-8165

# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

August 2015 Vol. 6, Issue-4



6th Year of Open Access

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Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## “A Heap of Darkness”: Dystopian Vision in Thangjam Ibopishak’s Poetry

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### **Abstract:**

This paper is premised on the concept that Ibopishak’s poetry works within a dystopian poetic vision which mirrors contemporary Manipuri society. Dystopia is an important notion to examine contemporary society with all its insecurities and phobias. His images are sharp, satirical and anti-romantic. He uses ordinary language and open lyrical form which suit the tempo and terrain of a society descending towards a dystopia, that’s, ‘bad place’. He names Manipur ‘a heap of darkness’ and ‘a land of half-human’. It is inhabited by ‘a newly arrived creature’, materialistic and amoral dangerous than both human and animal. By highlighting the seamy side of Manipur, he gives a critical commentary of its social and political condition.

**Keywords:** *Dystopia, human condition, inhumanity.*

### **Introduction**

Thangjam Ibopishak, a SahityaAkademi winner (1997), is a well-known modern Manipuri poet. His poetry breaks sharply off his predecessors in theme and style. Manipuri poets before him were self-absorbed with what is beautiful, natural, fantastic and ornamental language. He is occupied with the ugly, the real and the ordinary language. His realistic poetry is satirical, anti-romantic and anti-ideal. He uses free open lyrical form and surrealistic images to show anxieties and discontent of existence, society and its materialistic obsession minus human values. He never allows himself the luxury of believing in a beautiful past or a better future. He dumps on the reader one horrible image after another to show that the world we are living is bleak without any promise of redemption. He barely lets himself waver from the pestering wound of the present. He lives with and talks about it without any desire to escape from it. His poetry covers over four decades and his poems articulate different moments and concerns of the turbulent times which Manipur has been going through since independence. A pattern of dystopian sensibility runs through all his poetry collections. As they talk about the troubled world he is located in, his poetic articulation features as a social criticism also.

### **Dystopia: A Poet’s Vision**

The concept of dystopia is a key concept for understanding contemporary Manipuri spirit. Dystopia is the antithesis of utopia. “Utopia’ is derived from the Greek word *eu* “good”, *ou* “not” and *topos* (place). (*Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*). The term ‘dystopia’ or ‘bad place’ is applied to works of art (fiction, film, poetry) which represents a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination (Abrams, 337). In today’s popular literature, dystopian genre takes an important position. A dystopia is a community or society that is in some important way undesirable or frightening. Such societies appear in many fictions set in a future as in *WE*, *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Blade Runner*, *The Hunger Games*,

*Logan's Run, The Maze Runner, Divergent*, etc. Features of dystopias are dehumanization, totalitarian governments, environmental disaster, or other characteristics associated with a cataclysmic decline in society. Fictional dystopian societies often expose present real-world issues regarding society, environment, politics, economics, religion, psychology, ethics, science and technology, which, if not taken care of now, could lead to such a dystopia-like condition.

M. Booker states that “dystopian literature is specifically that literature which situates itself indirect opposition to utopian thought”. (*Dystopian Literature*, 1994, p3) If utopia is the ideal, dystopia is the nightmare. Thangjam Ibopishak’s poetic vision has nothing to do with an imaginary future ravaged by war, death, despair, oppression and environmental, or a utopian past turning upside down in the present. His poetry shows that the present Manipuri society itself is nothing sort of a dystopia. The poet’s world is basically ‘a bad place’ as he imagines a gloomy human condition. Several of poems captures images and motifs which tells us about ‘bad place’ materialized in the forms of dehumanized state, sociopolitical dysfunction, alienation, violence, hopeless bewilderment, immorality, absence of security, constant presence of terror, isolation, poverty, oppression, etc. Maybe behind this picture is a concealed desire for a ‘good place’ life. But idea of ‘good place’ is absent in his poetry. For him, dream only turns into nightmare, and nightmare seems to be the only reality.

One does not have to look far to know why he keeps using dystopian images. Whenever one discusses Manipuri society in the media and books, words that often appeared are: killing field, fractured society, conflict zone, disturbed area, ‘bleeding Manipur’, ‘wounded land’, ‘troubled periphery’, etc. The poet belongs to such a disturbed society. Living in such a world puts one’s life at risk every moment and this danger seems to haunt the poet constantly. A poet is a product of a particular historical and material context. His poetry is filled not only with the imaginings of the society but also the fear and insecurity in the mind of common Manipuri folk. His poetry reflects and critiques the socio-politics of that particular historical moment.

His poetry does not directly show us the complete idea of a dystopia as in a dystopian fiction. But the disturbing images of his poetry certainly points towards a dystopian human condition. They tell us of a bad place where the past gives no solution or shelter, the future promises nothing and the present is totally uncertain and hopeless. The poet lives in the real world and imageries of his poetry comes from the surrounding world. Images are the outward signs of the poet’s inward state, and his inward state means his feeling and thought or blending of the two. Behind the manifest images are the unconscious motives and needs of the poet as well as the political realities of a historical era, that’s, the Manipuri reality of insurgency, ethnic clashes, state callousness, etc. His poems are both reflection of and comment on contemporary Manipuri psyche and its anxieties.

### **‘Newly Arrived Creature’ in post-independent Manipur**

Ibopishak’s poetry is vocal about the human condition of Manipur post World War II. Second World War shook up Manipur from its conservative-cultural setup and pushed it towards democratic politics. People equipped with modern education turned away from the Monarchy-centric discourse and began to see themselves in the eye of individual self-determination. People become self-critical and question the old world and find that it has yet to reach a proper welfare state. In 1960s, the poet’s mind was occupied with stirrings of a

new world. But this post-World War-II world, this beginning of a new era of democracy, does not seem to hold any hope or promise.

In 'Fallen Statue' (*Wandering Spirit*, 1969), he talks about the destruction of the last remains of monarchy and the end of its influence. He heard the sound of a loud fall the night before and it turns out to be the loud noise of the fall of Bhagyachandra's old statue. Its fall created earthquake. 'Raj-Rishi's neck was broken/And the crowned head/Lay on the ground'. The lines indicate that the time of King is over. Not a single soul is interested in it. Nobody misses it. Broken old Kangla and the ruined palace in Kanchipur symbolizes the end of another age. The time of king was not a golden age but the present time (post World-War II, the beginning of a new era of democracy) is not a satisfying place either. Groups and groups of agitated people in tatters were waiting outside a ration shop. Manipuri people is a proud people. But poverty and hunger make them forget their pride. It probably refers to the time of before Hunger Marchers' Day, the artificial scarcity of rice in Manipur created by a section of powerful businessmen hand in glove with the then government in 1965. Now they think only for themselves and their survival, and cry 'mine first, mine first'. Individual survival has become more important than the survival of the community as a whole.

In "Story of a 'Dustbin' ", the speaker says: 'Born in the life of a half tar-drum,/I/Am a "dustbin". The purpose of his life is to fill itself with the garbage of people. Tar-drum is in fact a symbol of development. The tar is used to pave roads. After it is used, its drum is cut into half to be used as a dustbin. Life of a dustbin is a socially useful one, though, not a respectable one. Such is the life of the speaker. Even in the garbage inside it, sapling of a white *Kaboklei* flower grows. It seems to make its life happy and meaningful for a moment. But before it grows up, it is axed and uprooted and thrown on the hot asphalt to die. Images of dirt and hopelessness are simple and clear. 'Then, the black fat servant /Laughs sharply'. 'The black fat servant' suggests death.

The picture of dehumanizing poverty in 'NgariPhumai' (the cheapest *ngari*, fermented fish), is sharp. Mani's mother, the widow, lives by pounding rice in the neighbourhood. She gives her son ten paise, which is what has been left of her day's earning for the day, and tells her son to get *ngari-phumai*. *Ngari* is an indispensable part of Meetei dish. *Ngari-phumai* is the least tasty part of *ngari* and the cheapest one, eaten only by the poor. She cooks Borban rice, again the cheapest rice in the market, and waits for her son. On the way back home, he falls down and his *ngari* falls on the dust. He tells his mother and his mother goes to the extent of saying 'Why didn't you pick it up, stupid!/ It can be washed and eaten'. But it is that kind of stuff which even a fish-loving cat refuses to eat. Ram Babu's cat only sniffs at this 'dust-covered *ngari-phumai*' and walks away.

In 'The Tale of an Ape', he thinks that the so-called 'modern man' may be dressed up properly but he is only a clever ape living in "stone-made cave", wearing "tie and specs". The ape appears "beautiful and looks like a real human". He uses his sharp fangs and teeth to destroy all the small animals. When it is punished by his master for his excess, for taking the role of "the master", it cries and "his cry sounds like an ape". Man has not yet fulfilled the promise of being "a human" yet. He is intelligent and dressed well but he is still struggling between the baser instincts of an ape and the ideal of humanity. The message is that of a warning to the man who has become too smart for his own good. In the similar strain, 'My Diary' shows that the true nature of man behind his external self is ugly. Dairy is something which one records one's personal story, something where one can be honest with oneself. The struggle between man and animality in man, morality and instinctual behaviour, is there. In

the public, one claims that “one should give up life for truth” and that “man is different from animal/Because of its good behaviour and compassion”, but in reality, he is like “a lustful dog” that “dies trying to appease its lust”. The failure to reach a resolution with man’s animality is shown clearly.

This degrading social environment produces a new type of creature who is neither human nor animal. In ‘Newly Arrived Creature’ he is vocal about the pointlessness of gathering knowledge of the new world. Man piles up knowledge and proclaims himself the king, the centre of universe. Despite all his knowledge he kills himself. ‘What happens now that you put rope round your neck and died’. Beautiful things have gone blind and see nothing. Love for truth is burnt down. Nothing has been left in the battle of drugs. Their stomachs are all hollow and rotten. Despite the clever tricks of man’s knowledge, man has degraded. A different kind of man, a different creature, has appeared in the midst of this decay. This creature is more frightening than anything because it is without any soul of humanity.

Humankind- the name has disappeared from this world  
Their souls have perished.  
Then who’s that you’re witnessing,  
A creature more dangerous than animal,  
Arrived only recently.  
It hasn’t been named yet.

That it ‘hasn’t been named yet’ makes it all more frightening. We can cope with things which has a name. But it is something new, dangerous and incomprehensible and the new creature is going to dominate the new Manipur.

### **Manipur : A Heap of Darkness**

The idea of Manipur, the place of his birth, often figures as a ‘bad place’ in Ibopishak’s poetry. His picture and tone are not always optimistic. Manipur is depicted as a dark and violent land which reminds one of a dystopian society. Miserable present. In ‘A Heap of Darkness’, (From *Hell, Underground, Earth*, 1985) the speaker says:

When I got married to this country  
Morning sunlight wasn’t gifted to me’.

Darkness is a recurrent symbol in his poetry. Darkness is a traditional symbol of fear, evil, insecurity; in short, negative aspects of things. Marriage is a moment of celebration, hope and continuity of life. But the narrator says that ‘morning sunlight’, that’s hope, was not a part of it. It suggests that it was not a marriage of consent and happiness. It indicates the poet’s troubled relationship with the country of his birth. He has become so used to its darkness that he says ‘light, don’t come; light, don’t come.’ Light obviously shows positive, optimistic side of life. The country he finds himself in is so hopeless that he has no faith left in humanity and what it can do. Discontent people come out on the road at midnight in a protest rally. Then, the narrator talks about his birth. He was not happy to be born in his land. For him, his own gestation period in his mother’s womb was like “a prison, dark as a cave”. He hoped for light.

But when he came out of that dark cave, he only found himself in another small dark room. In the morning, the cock crows as usual, but there is no dawn in this place. For years, thousands of people come out on the street for one protest rally after another. The narrator says:

Now today doesn't recognize yesterday  
Tomorrow won't recognize today also.

Past is disconnected from the present, and the present from the future. Once in the past, as a kid, he saw 'the face of dream's country/With heaps of endless wonder'. Now he thinks 'nothing is realizable./Now there is no hope.' There is no specific idol which they can worship. The uncertainty is shown by the lines:

They live between past and present,  
They built one lord  
    With the ancient Lord as the model:  
    Then it is broken again  
    Then it is erected again.

They live in darkness. There is no hope of light. With sad satire, they cry 'Light, don't come. Light, don't come'.

In 'Telephone', sound of a telephone keeps ringing in a room, but there is no human to pick it up. The empty room is the symbol of an earth without human beings. Once humans lived there working interdependently for survival and were afraid to go to sleep. Then sleep visited them and they could not stop it. Sleep is a powerful drug. Many years later, they all fell asleep and never got up. Their shadows stay on in the room. The phone keeps on ringing, but there is nobody to pick it up. The poet seems to believe human values are gone and he is lamenting its loss. Telephone is a means of communication. It helps to connect people. But here, its purpose is totally lost. Connection among human beings is rendered impossible.

In 'Hell, Underground, Earth', he continues with the impossibility of salvation of any kind for man in three worlds: Hell, Underground, Earth. Water symbolizes purity, healing and cleansing. Man lives so close to it yet he cannot enjoy.

In the country of Hell, famished people  
Carry heavy earthen pot of water on their head painfully,  
Yet, they can't drink a drop of water;  
No, no. Not in the country of Hell,  
But in the country of Underground, hungry-thirsty people  
Carry earthen pot of water painfully,  
Yet, they can't even have a drop of water;  
No, no. Not in the country of Underground  
But in the country of Heaven;  
In the country of Heaven people with parched throats  
Can't even get a drop of water  
As wage for their labour.

The people of these three worlds are humble people. They have not committed any sin or crime. They have not done any stealing or lying. Yet they have been punished for something

not done by them. Hard-working, innocent people suffer without any hope of happiness, without any known reason.

In 'Turning My Back Now', the speaker says he has been sick for a long time, "sick from a disease of non-thinking". Common folk hardly thinks about anything. He ironically says that non-thinking gives him great pleasure. There is nothing good about thinking. To think about human is not painful as well as stupid. The reasons for it are:

What does life mean?  
A man enjoying another man's sorrow.  
What does the world mean?  
A man feeling satisfied with another man's mistake.  
What does human mean?  
A man crushing another man by finding his mistake.

So the speaker decides that to live in this age, one must learn to be indifferent. He should let himself become dull and unconscious gradually. He wants this 'disease of indifference' as it is 'a pleasant sort of game' and 'God's wisdom' in this time of history. In this age, only the rich, the powerful and the violent are doing great. To the common folk who do live a non-thinking life, he says with anger and hopelessness:

Die, you humble man who has no friends;  
Die, you truthful man who is innocent;  
Die, you weak poor man;  
Die totally, you good man who cares for others;  
Strange earth's useless dream,  
Repulsive earth's dangerous joke,  
Let it end like this gradually,  
Let it be finished like this gradually.

At the end he says that he has become clever. All this time, he has been very stupid caring for the weak, the humble, the good and the truthful. In this time of history, one should turn one's back to them all. If one becomes sensitive about the good, truthful things of life, one cannot survive. So he hardens himself and satirically claims that 'the disease of non-thinking' is 'a pleasant sort of game.' Non-thinking is his defense against the onslaught of lawless, non-ethical, violent world surrounding him. Yet it is only a game. When the game is over, he will find himself in the very world he is shouting against.

'Poetry' is about the life of a poet and the purpose of his art in a callous world that does not care either for the poet or his craft. In a light-hearted satirical tone, the speaker says that for a poet, not to have the freedom to say what is troubling his heart or the problems of the world around him, is nothing less than death. Yet he has to go on with his life thinking of his family and career.

Now in this land  
You can't speak loudly,  
You can't think openly,  
That's why I play  
With poetry like flower.

Repressive forces surrounding him do not allow him to speak loudly and openly only. He can do so only at the cost of his life. All kind of 'strange, fearful, terrible' incidents keep happening in front of him. While sleeping he had nightmares. During daytime, he saw nightmares with open eyes. Enough is enough. He wants to close his eyes, shut his ears and let 'my (his) heart turn into a god made of earth'.

Now in this land  
One has to think of flower,  
One has to dream of flower,  
Because I have to think of my little child and my wife,  
I have to think of my career  
And protect myself.

Here, flower becomes a symbol of a beautiful thing without much substance. He plays with it and he is not much happy with this play. Maybe he wants to write about thorns of truth, about the people who cover up the truth and feed lies to the world. Flower also becomes a symbol of untruth, which he has to think and dream. So writing poetry has become an unwilling escape from reality. If he writes about the reality, he has to sacrifice his child and wife, his career and himself. Circumstances of this land is such that he has to choose self-preservation over exposing the reality. Poet is also a man with the liability of having a family and career. Finally, the man in the poet takes over the poet in the man. The need and vulnerability of the man defeats the vision of the poet.

The poet comes up with another imagery of a room without light in 'It was a Blackout'. 'They' switch off the light and the whole world becomes dark. The poet does not explain who 'they' mean. In this dark room, which is indicative of his age, man turns away from history and cuts off his hands himself and put 'ten-ten fingers' inside 'their dried up mouths'. Inside the womb of a woman, a nine-months old baby is wailing nonstop:

Now I don't want to be born as human on this earth,  
Don't want to be born as human on this earth.

His motif of feeling sorry for being born or his unwilling to be born in this place appears again. He despises being born as a human. The idea of living a happy life does not even arise in his mind. He seems to think that nothing good can happen to this place. As he cannot change anything, he has to accept it, sit in a corner and live a life of isolation. This self-isolation is not life at all, but death-in-life.

The fetus inside the womb does not want to come out because the world waiting for it outside is not a good place. He does not suggest killing the child in the womb itself. So it is the will of nature for the child inside the womb to come out willingly or unwillingly. In 'Small Child', a child is born to the speaker and this is what he feels:

My lovely child  
The moment you laugh fitfully  
I forget world's misery;  
The moment you cry fitfully  
I remember world's pain.



He is full of guilt and sorrow to bring the ‘totally ignorant, totally blameless’ child to ‘the terrible, cruel trap of this world’. He rationalizes that ‘this unbearable wreckage of life’s burden’ was handed down to his father by his father, to him by his father, and now, he is handing down the same life’s burden to his child. Self-preservation, selfishness or just plain ignorance, the speaker does not fully know why he is doing it. But the fact is that, for the speaker, life has no other purposes than shouldering this burden, which he has to carry on unwillingly as there is no escape from it.

His dissatisfaction with the affairs of the land is evident again in ‘Manipur, I don’t care for you’. The speaker says that like others, he also calls Manipur as ‘Mother’, but he says he will not die for her. In the eye of God, everyone is the same, yet, the poor suffers and the rich grows richer. There is no point blaming God for it. The situation has turned so bad that one is ready ‘to live by cutting off each other’s intestines’. In a tongue-in-cheek way, he remarks:

If one has to die for you,  
Then, let those who suck from you die.  
Let those who cheat, steal, extort  
And hoard wealth enough for seven generations  
Of their children  
Die for you.  
Why should I die for you?

In prose-poem like ‘The Land of the Half-human’, his satire comes out sharp. The picture of society he shows is very bleak. He suggests that Manipur is a sort of ‘the Land of the Half-human’ populated by people who are ‘just head without body for six months, just body without head for another six months’. There is no connection between the two halves of the body. The head keeps on talking, eating and drinking, while the body keeps on working, laboring and shitting. It has a democratic form of government and election is held every five years. ‘But for the people in this land, there are no names. So for the nameless citizens, the nameless representative govern the land of the half-humans.’ So, democracy exists as name only. Because of this absurd human condition, it has become a big problem whether to give ‘human names to the head or to the body’. The point is that the people of this land looks like human but they have not become human yet. Half-human means half-animal and the sad thing is that he does not suggest the possibility of human transformation, of half-human becoming whole.

In ‘New Year Thought’ (from *Illusionary Country*, 1999), the speaker conveys that the time of new year is a good time. He tries to look at this land with good thought, but absence of electricity prevents him from doing so. He says he was born and grew up in this land, he should be ready to think good of it, care and suffer for it a little, but there is no tap water. He barely gets the basic needs of water and electricity. Then, he does not get his salary, indicating Manipur’s economic stasis. So he ironically says ‘let’s sleep/by eating or catching air/till our stomach is full;/let’s fart again then,/afterward let’s sleep/snoring/like a pig’. The speaker is prepared to accept the privations of electricity, tap-water, salary and food, but he is afraid of sleep.

I don’t want to sleep;  
If asleep there will nightmare,  
Nightmare can kill me;  
And who wants to die.

In this situation, there are only three ways in front of him: sleep, death and escape. He can't choose any of them because he is a timid writer trapped without choosing any of the choices.

I'm timid who doesn't like death,  
I'm afraid of sleeping as dream will come, then nightmare.  
Escaping will shame me in front of others,  
In front of others' wives.

He chooses to live in this bad place, with the fear of death, open eyed as he is afraid of sleep and avoiding flight, because it will mean losing his dignity. Such existence cannot be called life or death, but something more dangerous than both.

## Conclusion

His poetic personas are either totally isolated or are in helpless rage, pain and self-repulsion. They suggest they come a society, if not exactly a dystopia, but surely moving towards one. They are trapped in an oppressive environment with no salvation in sight, yet they are unable to reject the very society which causes these terrible feelings and life-denying attitudes. Over the years, the political situation of Manipur seems to move from bad to worse. In a region plagued with problems of poverty, violence, insurgency, political intolerance and poor ethics, his poetry documents how they undermine people's well-being, from low life satisfaction to happiness, to depression and anxiety, to personality disorders, gross egotism and antisocial behaviours. In the eye of the poet, the new Manipur is simply a portrait full of despair, impoverishment and inhumanity.

What is it to be 'a human'? He often points towards man's failure to be a human. Solution lies in being human. How do one resolve the conflict between animal and human to become a whole man, a happy man at peace with himself and his surroundings. The poet never attempts to answer it. He only shows a dehumanized environment without any God. The question of spiritual well-being, or spirituality of life never find in his words. So spiritual awakening is out of question. There is no divine plan, only human wills. There is man's lust, man's fight for power and wealth. There is also no words about the redeeming quality of love. Man is isolated, alone and helpless against an indifferent, corrupt, immoral society. One has lost faith in oneself, so no faith in the collective is possible. Human misery only increases with time and man can live in a corner, in pain, silence and isolation without dignity.

Life which is like a dustbin, the cry of a child inside the womb, about not finding a drop of water anywhere to quench one's thirst, to be shut up without the freedom to speak one's heart, to be permanently in a dark-room, not going to sleep out of fear of nightmare, etc; these disturbing poetic images belong to the underbelly of dreams and nightmares, which are a part of the poet's psychological reality. They are chunks of images floating in the subconsciousness of a degraded human condition, things which our social consciousness rejects or represses out of anxiety, fear and decency. They are also those inhibited things which once taken out of the mind, can free oneself from the nightmares troubling the soul. His poetry examines the ugly picture of contemporary society and emerges as an important voice among contemporary Manipuri poets. The only hope the reader can dig out of his ugly worldview is that he is doing it deliberately to show the great need for the truth, the good and the beautiful.

(Poems cited here are originally written in Manipuri and are unpublished translation of his poems. This paper is a part of MRP sponsored by NERO, UGC).

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