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Manipur's Sociopolitical Unrest in the 1970s and a Mother's Shattered Dream: A Study of Robin S Ngangom's 'A Poem for Mother'

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Abstract:

Officially becoming the 19th state of the Indian Federation in 1972, Manipur faced socio-political unrest since its merger in 1949, influencing literature including of Robin S Ngangom, a Northeastern bilingual poet. The sociopolitical unrest in Manipur during the 1970s witnessed ethnic secessionist movements and demands for independence, fuelling conflicts over identity and governance. The enforcement of the 'Armed Forces Special Powers Act' intensified marginalisation, prompting autonomy movements. Under the backdrop of such unrest migration from Manipur for better opportunities led to Shillong attracting students, highlighting the impact of unrest on career choices. Ngangom's own journey, influenced by conflict, saw him leaving Manipur for education in Shillong, evoking estrangement from his community. Ngangom delves into personal, cultural, and socio-political dynamics in his work. This paper attempts to explore how Ngangom's poem 'A Poem for Mother', which is steeped in personal struggles, maternal sacrifice, and poignant familial remorse, has aestheticised a mother's dream shattered by contemporary unrest.

Keywords: Manipur, Sociopolitical Unrest, Robin S Ngangom's Poetry, Migration, Nostalgia, Remorse, Mother's Dream.

Introduction:

Although Manipur officially became the 19th state of the Indian Federation in 1972, it was incorporated with the Union of India on 15th October in 1949, becoming a princely state with a history of about two thousand years (Mangoljao Maibam - et al.). Since its merger it has been rattled by long standing socio-political unrest. That unrest had an impact on general life and livelihood playing a role in literature as well. Robin S Ngangom is a contemporary Northeastern Indian bilingual poet and translator from Manipur whose writings hinge on the local, cultural, sociopolitical, and personal dynamics. His 'A Poem for Mother' (from 'Words and Silence') published in 1988, chronicles with an autobiographical touch along with others issues, a mother's dream surrounding her son and the crushing of that dream largely due to the dislocation of the poet from his motherland owing to some extent to the contemporary socio-political unrest of land.

Methodology:

The methodology used in this paper to address the issue in question is a historical study of the sociopolitical unrest in Manipur along with an autobiographical approach to the poem under purview. The study of unrest in Manipur was primarily conducted during and around the 1970s. Previous research in the area has been explored. An in-depth textual analysis of the poem vis-à-vis the poet's personal life is undertaken here to address the research topic.

The Historical Context of the Sociopolitical Unrest in Manipur:

The socio-political unrest in Manipur during the 1970s and beyond has been propelled by complex ethnic and political dynamics. Since the 1960s, the region of Manipur has been afflicted by movements advocating for Meitei secession, which seek to achieve autonomy from the Indian state.(K, Singha et al) Throughout the 1970s, the conception of land was separated from political ideology and took form as 'leikai' (residential address), indicating a transformation in the view of land as a representation of particular identities and ethnic territories(L. Haokip et al.). This resulted in the demands for territorial autonomy by ethnic groups who perceived themselves as distinct nations, leading to conflicts over identity and governance in a culturally diverse society(Meetei).

On the other hand, the enforcement of the stringent 'The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958)' (AFSPA) has had a significantly detrimental impact on the populace of Manipur, which has been subjected to socioeconomic and political marginalization since attaining independence. The persistent marginalization of Manipur by an indifferent and negligent 'mainland' India acts as a catalyst for anti-state groups advocating for enhanced autonomy(Gaikwad).

Therefore, it is well discernible that the rise of ethnicity-based autonomy movements, the impact of 'The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)', and the assertion of ethnic identities have all contributed to a protracted and multifaceted conflict. The state's interventions have often failed to address the root causes of the unrest, leading to ongoing demands for autonomy and recognition (Shimray).

Such continuous sociopolitical conflicts and the state's failure to effectively manage these issues have led to a destabilised environment. The grouping and regrouping of tribal communities, influenced by political and economic interests, further compounded the situation, making the local

environment less conducive for stable career development. This turmoil influenced various aspects of life, including the migration patterns of individuals seeking better career opportunities outside the state, prompting individuals to leave Manipur in search of better career opportunities (Shimray). Regarding their destination for building a career, Shillong, the capital city of the Indian state of Meghalaya, has become a preferred space. A study on migrating college students in certain North East Indian states shows that Shillong attracts college students mostly from Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram due to better infrastructure, proximity, and affordability, with fifty-seven percent planning to move for higher studies out of Shillong to other Indian cities like Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Pune, etc. (IOSR). The survey on the Manipuri students showcased that the largest percentage of Manipuri students who came to Shillong pointed to the rise of insurgency and social unrest as the reasons behind their migration ((IOSR).

Robin S Ngangom's Journey to "Become a Man":

Born in 1959 in Imphal, Manipur, Robin S. Ngangom, acknowledged as a distinguished Indian poet and translator for his dual-language literary contributions in English and Meiteilon, came to Shillong in the late 1970s to study English Literature at St. Edmund's College. After that he studied M.A. in English at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Eventually, Ngangom settled there and began teaching English Literature at his alma mater. The formative years of Ngangom's life were significantly influenced by the Indo-China conflict, widespread famines, and epidemics that profoundly affected north-eastern India, in addition to the divisive strategies employed by the national government and the exploitation and neglect of the populace in the hill states of the north-east. Ngangom underwent an early dislocation from his community because he was sent away to attain education which ultimately led to his evolution as a student and educator of English literature, as well as a bilingual poet. Nonetheless, this educational experience also fostered a

continual and painful sense of estrangement from his own community, land, and cultural heritage, coupled with the awareness of leading an apparently futile life as a mediator between clashing cultural paradigms. These themes are prominent in his poetry, which, besides portraying the lamentable decline of the hills, encapsulates the enduring decades of terrorist insurgency that have transformed life in the hills into a surreal nightmare.

The Artistic Journey of Ngangom:

Ngangom's first published volume, titled 'Words and Silence,' was made public in 1988. This milestone marked the initiation of his formal involvement with poetry, notwithstanding the lack of definitive documentation specifying the exact moment he started his writing activities within the available literature. His work has experienced considerable transformation, reflecting both his individual experiences and the socio-political context of northeastern India. He has consistently continued to publish poetry collections over the subsequent decades. His other notable volumes of poetry are – 'Time's Crossroads' (1994) 'The Desire of Roots' (2006), 'My Invented Land : New and Selected Poems'(2023) etc.

A Poem for Mother: An ode to the Mother's Dream:

Robin S. Ngangom's poem 'A Poem for Mother' featured in his volume entitled 'Words and Silence'(1988) is a poignant poem that serves as an earnest homage to his mother, Palem Apokpi, while exploring themes of maternal sacrifice, remorse, and the intricacies of familial affection. This poem delineates the emotional odyssey of a son who has departed from his domicile and contends with sentiments of nostalgia and inadequacy. It is a kind of an ode to his mother (Chauhan).

An Apology for a Mother's Dream:

His 'A Poem for Mother' can be called an apology for a mother's broken dreams like of many other Manipuri mothers of the time in question. If we study the poem with an analytic bent of mind, we shall not miss the manifestation of a mother's dream articulated throughout the piece. In the last stanza, the poet's prayer for forgiveness to his mother hinted at existence of the dream in her mother's heart :-

“Forgive me, for all your dreams
of peace during your remnant days” (Ngangom, lines 39-40)

Indeed, like every mother of the world Palem also, dreamt of bringing her son up and getting posted on bright career positions so that she would enjoy “peace” of mind and complete rest in her “remnant days”. She must have cherished the wishes of staying together with her son as a family in her old days. There is nothing abnormal in those wishes.

To make her dream come true she devoted her life for her children and family. The poem reveals to us her multifaceted efforts to realize her dreams. The poet states that apart from giving birth to her son, Palem had to bear difficulties in educating and managing the adolescent days of his son. Robin reminisces-

“But I’m still your painfully shy son
with a ravenous appetite,
the boy who lost many teeth
after emptying your larder.
And I am also your dreamy-eyed lad
who gave you difficult times during his schooldays,

romancing every girl he wanted,
even when he still wore half-pants”(Ngangom, lines 5-10)

Not only that, the mother who represents the tradition and age old culture of the Northeastern India, took care to inculcate positive values in her child’s personality, especially the value of hard work, proper use of “time and money” in life -

“You told your children that
money and time do not grow on trees,”(Ngangom, lines 14-15)

In order to make her children self-made on any matter of life she tried her best to teach them even the “stable ways” and “culinary skills”.

Driven by her dream the mother toiled from dawn until dusk -

“Today, as on every day you must have risen
with temple bells before cockcrow, swept
the floors and after the sacred bath
cooked for the remainder of us. I can see you
returning every dusk from the bazaar,
your head laden with baskets.”(Ngangom, lines 29-34)

The excerpt above highlights her hard labour and family’s pecuniary difficulties. Her days start before the “cockcrows” and end with a “head laden with baskets” from “bazaar”. In between she spends doing all kinds of domestic chores. Such toiling might have been inspired by the dream she had visualized around her son. The Image of the mother that we get from these lines is that of a traditional Indian mother having a “sacred bath” after sweeping the floor and before cooking, embodying cultures and rituals.

The continuous rigorous hard work day after day made her weary and weak, but she neither showed her emotions for the sake of her family nor was she able to fully hide the effects in a world wrought by time -

“I know how you work your fingers to the bone
as all mothers do, for unmarried sons,
age-ing husband and liberated daughters-in-law.
Worried about us, for a long time
your lips couldn't burgeon in a smile,
lines have furrowed your face and
first signs of snow are on your hair.”(Ngangom, lines 22-28)

It is clear that Palem Apokpi made every possible effort to build up her dream and was surely waiting for the realisation of it. In the process of dreaming, she has grown old with “first signs of snow” on her “hair”.

The Shattered Dream and the Remorse of the Poet:

Now the question is whether her dream could be realised? How and why did her dreams get crushed? The poet seeks an apology from her in the opening lines of the concluding stanza of the poem.-

“I'm sorry Palem.
.....
Forgive me, for all your dreams
of peace during your remnant days
I turned out to be a small man
with small dreams, living a small life.” (Ngangom, lines 36, 38-42)

A sheer sense of remorse and repentance is clearly visible here for he has become instrumental in crushing his mother's dream. The repetitive use of the word "small" in the concluding two lines reaffirms the poet's poignant remorse. Her dream was crushed, and it is evident when the poet utters the above lines and when he confesses his inability to inherit his mother's personality legacy

-

"I've inherited nothing
of your stable ways or culinary skills."(Ngangom, lines 37-38)

The undercurrent is also evident in the line when he admits that although his mother told the children that -

"...money and time do not grow on trees, and
I could never learn to keep up with them."(Ngangom, lines 15-16)

The responsibility for failure does not apply to the mother but to the son himself. He categorically takes responsibility for the failure. -

"It isn't that I've forgotten
what you've come to mean to me
though I abandoned much and left
so little of myself for others
to remember me." (Ngangom, lines 17-21)

Needless to say, a sense of remorse for being unable to uphold his mother's dream runs throughout the poet's soul and is showcased in his recurrent apology and prayers for forgiveness to her mother. A feeling of detachment and unhappiness loomed over him. That made him more nostalgic for his past. The opening stanza captures that nostalgia beautifully-

"to be a man how I hated leaving home

ten years ago.

Now these hills have grown on me.”(Ngangom, lines 1-3)

Conclusion:

In a broadcast discussion with DD Meghalaya, Robin Singh Ngangom said, “What distinguishes the poetry of the Northeast, even for people who write in English, is that there is a lot of heart in their art.” (Garcha). Indeed, his poem ‘A Poem for Mother’ carries a lot of his “heart” along with his “art”. The poem is indeed a poignant tribute to his mother, and it aestheticises his mother’s dream as well as the shattering of the dream due to the unwilling exodus of the poet from his native land for a better future in the interest of the poet himself but at the cost of his mother’s dream. That does not mean that she could not bear the estrangement. She might have tolerated things like every mother does for the better future of her sons or daughters. This is a universal sacrifice made by every mother. Here, it can be noted that Palem Apokpi transcends the personal to the stature of a universal mother. But it is the poet who is anguished with a prick of conscience for not able to discharge the duty of a responsible son to his mother. Much of this drama of life involving the poet and his mother is enacted against the backdrop of the socio-political unrest of the 1970s demanding for political acknowledgement, the unification of ethnic groups, the burden of historical grievances, the yearning for self-determination exacerbated by the complex interplay of intersecting ethnic identities and the enduring influence of colonial demarcations, ultimately resulting in armed insurgencies.

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