

Verse Affairs: Between Terror and Beauty

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Culture

Robin S. Ngangom's new collection of poems, 'My Invented Land', brings together old and new poetry, engaging with the violent politics of the Northeast and demands of prosody.

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In an essay published in *Indian Literature*, the literary journal of Sahitya Akademi, in 2005, poet Robin S. Ngangom writes that his earliest poems, written in childhood, were inspired by the *One Thousand and One Nights* and "Casabianca". These early poems were, in his own estimation, aimed at engaging the attention "of kindred hearts through friendly and soft-hearted verse".



But immediately after this recollection, Ngangom writes: “That well-meaning world is no longer recognizable now; the sacred landmarks have disappeared long since.” His native Manipur is roiled — in 2005 and now — by violence, poverty, corruption, drugs, and AIDS. “(M)y poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land,” he writes.

A revised version of this essay, originally titled ‘Poetry in the Time of Terror’, serves as the introduction to Ngangom’s collection of poems, *My Invented Land* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger). This collection brings together poems from his previous books — *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time’s Crossroads* (1994), and *The Desire of Roots* (2006) — as well as 32 new poems. It provides a cross-section of his three-and-a-half decade-long literary career.

Born in 1959 in Imphal, Ngangom studied English literature and currently teaches at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong. He is also the co-editor of two collections of poetry from the Northeast. Embedded as he is in his native land, Ngangom’s poetry reflects the region’s troubled history.

For instance, in his poem “The Dead Shall Mourn the Living” from *Words and the Silence*, Ngangom writes:

*How many times have we seen
fire wilting in crystal brown eyes and
a slow cataract of hate forming?*

*Look, childhood has died for that urchin.
He now lights his bidi in the dark noon and
bears a filial cross on his hunched back.*

The “lost innocence” trope that Ngangom uses here would be familiar to readers of English poetry — it has a direct lineage in Wordsworth and Blake. But perhaps what might not be immediately evident to readers is its relation to George Orwell’s influential essay, ‘Why I Write’.

In the essay, first published in 1946, Orwell claims that he would have written long, sentimental novels “full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their sound” if he lived in more peaceful times. But he lived in a “tumultuous, revolutionary age”, the decades of the rise of Fascism and Nazism, the Spanish Civil War, and the Second World War, compelling him to choose more political subjects.

Ngangom, too, finds himself and his contemporaries, both in English and other languages of Manipur, engaging with such subjects. “In contemporary Manipuri poetry,” he writes, “there is a predominance of images of bullets, blood, mother, the colour red and, paradoxically, flowers too.”

A poet in Imphal tells him that they have been writing the “poetry of survival” — “with guns pressed to both temples: the guns of the revolution and the guns of the state”. If on one, Manipuri poetry is “hemmed in” by hyper-reality, on the other hand, poets like Y.

Ibomcha and Thangjam Ibopishak react to all-pervasive violence and death with absurdity; bullets turn into fruits in their poems.

Yet, Ngangom knows, poetry cannot only be about the word outside — it operates with its own prosodic and aesthetic logic. A poet “must be true only to his own world and to himself,” writes Ngangom in his 2005 essay — an emotion that is echoed in his new poem, ‘Poet’:

*Why do trees weep leaves without warning?
Why do the old choose to die in their mountain hamlets?
Why did his people turn to terror?
Why does love tie him down?
How is he a poet if he doesn't know how to ask for answers?*

The perpetual conflict in his poetry, throughout his career, is between the political and the aesthetic. In the introduction to *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009), Ngangom and his co-editor Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih are at pains to explain that the Northeast cannot be considered a homogenous region, as residents of the Indian mainland often do, because of the wide variety of communities, cultures, religions, and languages in the eight states.

Yet, they try to find some similarities between the experiences and output of these poets. “The writer from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way ...living with the menace of guns he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness.”

But would Ngangom agree with this self and other formulation between the mainland and the Northeast anymore? In the titular poem of the book, ‘My Invented Land’, Ngangom writes:

*My home is a gun
pressed against both temples
a knock on a night that has not ended
a torch lit long after the theft
a sonnet about body counts
undoubtedly raped
definitely abandoned
in a tryst with destiny.*

Political scientist Benedict Anderson had defined nations as “imagined communities” in his eponymous and landmark 1983 book, claiming that no nation has existed as a whole throughout human history nor do all citizens have anything in common beyond their imagined identity.

Ngangom poetry dramatises the conflict between different imaginations of nations — a phenomenon that might have been common in the Northeast for the seven-and-a-half decades since Indian independence in 1947 but has now spread beyond its borders to

consume the rest of the subcontinent. This augments the appeal of Ngangom's poems.

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