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DYSTOPIAN SATIRE AS PROTEST IN THANGJAM IBOPISHAK'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the proposition that Thanjam Ibopishak's poetry uses dystopian satire to offer a critique of the contemporary Manipuri society. The concept of dystopia is a crucial term for understanding contemporary spirit. Theoretically, it uses ZoltCziganyik's discussion on the connection between 'satire and dystopia'. Ibopishak's bleak satiric images are reflective of a 'bad place'. His poetic outburst is one way of responding to the immediate dehumanizing influence of a society full of injustice, corruption and oppression. The poet is a witness to and his poetry evidence of different kinds of protest seen on the streets of Manipur for reasons both natural as well as man-made. Though dystopia offers no escape from its debasing influence, his social criticism reveals a cry for justice. His poetry directly defies and stares at the ugly reality of Manipuri society. His poetry is never about expressing the sublime moment of life or the beauty of emotion. It is about making us aware of the 'bad place', the worsened, corrupted, unwanted world of the present time. For this reason, his dystopian satire surfaces as a protest, a poetic effort to jolt one out of dull complacency.

Key words: *Dystopia, protest, satire, inhumanity*

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INTRODUCTION

Thanjam Ibopishak's poetry offers a critique of the political corruption, social unrest and economic uncertainty of contemporary Manipur. Post-independent Manipur is hardly a 'good place' for the commoners. The idea of democracy was a new concept to the general people who was just breaking off from decades of British-backed monarchy. Old world was breaking up and a new world was yet to be shaped. A newly educated class of people was just beginning to open to the idea of Western enlightenment. A moneyed class emerged and 'the quality of life too underwent a palpable change'. 'The war had left many metaled roads' and 'the people were accessible now to a variety of consumer goods' (Manihar, 242). They were moving from self-blindness to self-awareness. With this new knowledge, what they saw around them was an ugly spectacle. Underdeveloped infrastructure, insurgency woes, poverty, moral excess, materialistic values, militarization and a failed political environment are the new realities. This new consciousness is full of discontent, anxiety, violence and hopelessness. They could not go back to their conservative past for comfort. They could not look towards the uncertain future with hope. Poetry of this Sahitya Academe winner(1997) emerges out of this

unwelcome milieu and reveals the anxieties of his time. He satires present Manipuri society as a social hell, a sort of dystopia, and provides a social criticism which can be read as a cry of protest.

Dystopian Satire

Ibopishak's poetic oeuvre presents the world of his poetic personas as a kind of dystopia. For Northrop Fry, dystopia comes under the mythos of winter: irony and satire, in the second phase of satire, when "the other world" appears in satire (...) as an ironic counterpart to our own, a reversal of accepted social standards." The tone of satire becomes darker and demonic and we longer want (or can) laugh at the tragic hero or situation. Dystopias present 'human life in terms of largely unrelieved bondage. (...) In our day the chief form of this phase is the nightmare of social tyranny'. (Fry, 238). Zsolt Cziganyik stated that dystopia is "a special kind of satire". He cited "the feeling of *inevitability*" as a characteristic of dystopia, 'the belief that the present world is going in a direction, whose future consequence are shown in dystopias, and we cannot alter these consequences,... the catastrophe is unavoidable.' (Cziganyik, 306)

In the preface to *Hell, Underground, Earth* (1985) Ibopishak states that 'the social reality surrounding me and the things like frustration, restlessness and anxiety that stemmed from my involvement with social reality; if poems shaped out of angry discontent moods protest against the present system, they can be an instrument of challenge.' (*my translation*). Then again, in the preface to *Ghost and Mask* (1994), he says that his poetry develops out of 'the reactions from the relationship between man and society; condition of modern man troubling my heart; self-observation and search for life's purpose; God and destiny; disbelief in the result of Karma; life's painful suffering and inability not to think about death; thought and feelings resulted from the encounters between my changing views, the world and natural things.' (*my translation*) These remarks show how interwoven the poet is with politico-social reality of Manipur.

In Ibopishak's poetry, one does not find the optimism of a better future world. The catastrophe is not in the distant future, it is our very present and there is no escape from it. Dystopia is an extreme form of satire and his satire of Manipuri society often goes to extreme point. He sometimes calls it "a heap of darkness," sometimes "a land of half-human", sometimes "illusionary land". He is attacking a whole society directly as an insider poet who lives with its wounds on daily basis. In his "Turing My Back Now" (from *Hell, Underground, Earth*, 1985) the speaker declares that the injustice of his world has become too much for him to tolerate. He wants the same "disease of indifference" which has infected everyone. From this indifferent stand, he cries out:

Let the earth rot and degrade,
 Let the man rot and degrade,
 Useless dream of today's world,
 Repulsive strange world,
 Let it play its dangerous comic play,
 Let the rich man live,
 Let the violent clever man live,
 Let the business politician live,
 Let the fake secretive politics live,
 Friend, don't think difficult thoughts of this age.
 Let them build their golden fantasy
 On the odorous heap of their excreta!

His anger is palpable. Even though he desires to be infected with the "disease of indifference, his tone indicates that he cannot remain unconcerned himself.

His 'My Frequently Married Wife' (from *Ghost and Mask*, 1994) makes Khwairambund Bazaar, the busiest commercial centre of Manipur, its subject. The speaker calls it 'my frequently married wife'. He looks at it as a wife, someone intimate yet a figure beyond his control and comprehension. It also becomes the metaphor of moral depravity and gross materialism. He addresses it as 'bazaar of darkness' and 'idols of darkness'. The bazaar squalor is described thus:

Filth within darkness,
 Darkness within filth,
 Within smelly dirty drains,
 Slimy liquid of rotten things.
 Broken alcohol bottles,
 Empty cigarette packets,
 Pieces of cinema tickets,
 Torn pieces of newspapers
 Torn pieces of playing cards,
 Butts of *churup* and *bidi*,
 Used old condoms
 Alcohol vomit and feathers of bird-animals,
 Loosened fleshed rotten rats.

Behind this squalor is another secret which is darker and dirtier than meet the eyes. By calling it 'my wife' he shows his intimacy with bazaar life, yet it is something that unsettles his soul. disturbs in a way he cannot understand. He no longer loves her yet he cannot hate her. She no longer inspires any good in him. She also brings out only his ugly side. Yet he cannot leave her. He only witnesses with a helpless stare. It is a complicated relationship. How can one call someone 'wife' when she marries frequently. That's why, he also calls it 'Kwairambund, you frequently married whore' and 'And life/ An outward facial show/ A game of cheat'.

In the past when he was a young boy, he thought the bazaar 'was a pure unmarried girl/ Untouched by any human hand'. When he reached 29 years of age, he became aware of her reality. But then it was too late to go back. She is in fact only a sensually attractive woman who fulfills man's desire at a cost. He was tempted by its physical beauty and his lust: 'In the temple of two white thighs/Is the idol of the Goddess of Fish'. And he walked inside the door of this temple eagerly. Fish is a symbol of sensual pleasure. There are many fish mongers in the bazaar. 'Our idol is that of two-fold position' and it has become a laughable triviality. Copulation stops being a spiritual union of two bodies. Business of sex and money takes place everywhere:

Give and take within the alley,
 Give and take within the hotel,
 Give and take at the door entrance,
 Give and take outside the door,
 Give and take inside the room,
 Give and take on the bed,
 On the bedstead, table and chair,
 Give and take,
 Give and take...

He becomes one with it and 'my (his) shadow runs away from me (him) '. His innocent self runs away from him. He becomes one with the reality of 'give and take'. She is owned or purchased for a while by many customers: 'I in you/ He in you/They in you'. That's how, Khwairambund expands gradually and he becomes smaller gradually till his identity vanishes. The temptation of the market becomes too big for him. He cannot fight against it. He is carried by it. There is no anger in him. There is dejection and along with that an acceptance, not resistance, of the bazaar mentality. The last image of an old woman returning back home at night after throwing away all the sick fish in a corner of the fish-market tells a different kind of acceptance. The old woman 'calmly and coolly' goes along with her work. She is not worried about the sick fish or the loss. Her fatalistic gesture is similar to the lack of will or moral strength in the speaker. It seems to say that individual is too weak and morality too purposeless in the powerful materialistic schemes of bazaar.

In 'This Protest isn't against the Ruling Government', (from *Hell, Underground, Earth*, 1985) the speaker says thinking of the people of this land only gives him suffering because they live a life where only 'a thread/divides between life and death' and man does not have that 'small share' where he can live a simple

life. Here nothing is sure whether you will be rewarded if you follow truth, or you will be punished if you do something wrong. His satire is pointed in this lines:

My protest isn't
Against the ruling government
Or the man-made laws.
Man-made laws
Are totally true with no errors.
Spreading everywhere
Self-sufficient government ruler
Can even judge god.

.....

My protest is only against
The small weak god
Who likes to differentiate
Between light and darkness,
Between right and wrong,
Who builds the path of virtue and sin.

Man-made laws, their maker and ruler have become more powerful than God himself. Lives of a loving friend whom one has met a moment's ago, mother and child, wife and husband, can be shot at, killed and separated at any unexpected moment without any chance of getting any fair justice or compensation. The speaker says that he is living in a bad time where 'words can't be spoken loudly', and 'man's truthful pure thought/has to be hidden'. They hint at the repressive forces, state as well as non-state actors, which do not allow free expression of thought and feeling, where the chance of a victim getting fair justice is very low. Out of fear of death, one has to bottle up his real thoughts. Faced with the impossibility of challenging or living with it, man is pushed into a corner of isolation. He can only 'crouch silently/and like in a corner/by closing one's eyes and blocking one's ears'. He retreats and seeks a dissatisfactory consolation in *the Bhagawat Gita's* indestructibility of soul and illusionary character of life itself. Finally, it is about the loss of individual will accompanied with that "feeling of *inevitability*" and surrender to the catastrophe of dehumanized condition.

'Don't Kill me, I Was Born in This Land' (from *Illusionary Country*, 1999) refers to the different kinds of ethnic killing taking place in the 90s. Violence has become the only form of human expression. Anger takes over patience. Everyone seems to think only violence can solve everything. In the power struggle of the leaders and ethnic politics, only the common people suffer or become victims. The poet takes the persona of an ordinary man. The ordinary citizen celebrates the peaceful beauty of hills and valley and its birds. Its distant bird calls in fact symbolize the desire for peace in the heart of the man himself. We all share the same birthplace, yet we kill each other in the name of territory and ethnic origin:

Don't kill me,
I'm an ordinary man,
I'm not an enemy of man,
I don't think evil of man,
I'm not a bad man.
He was also born in this land,
I was also born in this land,
You and I are one;
Don't get me wrong.

It brings up the ethnic killing taking place in the hill and the valley in Manipur in 1990s. In the struggle for power, territory and identity, only common man who is 'voiceless', 'dumb like mud' and 'tiny like grass/with no identity of his own' ends up as casualty. He demands to know the benefit of destroying 'mud' and 'grass'. It ends with a plea, 'I'm just a human./Don't kill me/Let me live'.

In 'Supposing Poetry to be Flower', the poet tells about the position of a poet in such a world. The poet has only words. He is as trapped as other. He can be a victim and is as insecured as others. Poet has no special role to play. But the poet is not the defeated one. There is a difference between the poet in the man and the man himself. The man may be defeated, but not the poet. The poet is ready to face the world as it is. The man thinks that a poet can face the deplorable situation of life better than the man himself. The man may run away, but not the poet:

I am someone
Oppressed by the evil and powerful;
Weak, timid and voiceless,
Defeated, stepping back and running away from life,
I am someone disowned by myself.
Poet, write poems
With blood running down from my body,
Write poems of blood.

By inciting the poet to write 'poems of blood', not of flowers, he eyeballs the hostile reality, and remains a witness to the violent history of the present.

In 'Dream Trader and the Poet', there is a long conversation between the dream trader and the poet. The poet goes to the trader to buy a dream. The trader says there is 'no dream left/ no hope left;/ all are sold out'. He gives a list of people who have bought dreams starting from impoverished people to educated but corrupt class; Dreams have been purchased 'by those politicians,/by those social workers,/by those N.G.O workers,/by those student leaders,/by those who set up new colleges,/by those certificate traders,/by those traders of fake appointment letters,/by those who deal with Ganja,/by those who deal with No.4'.

The poet says that he is not a poet of imagination and nature. He does not move away from what is real. The Dream-trader is in a difficult situation himself. At the end, the trader negotiates with the poet. For he says:

People say I'm the owner of dream and hope;
But I'm also someone weary of this life.

Then, he asks the poet to give him the poet's final poem, then he will give the poet dream and hope. In short, the dream trader needs the poet more than the poet needs him. The poet cannot write his final poem and he is not going to get any dream from the dream-trader. The poet writes without dream. Is his writing futile because of that? Writing without any expectation is his defense against the onslaught of despair. On the contrary, the dream-trader puts his hope on the poet. The end is open-ended with no reconciliation.

Satire as Protest

For Ibopishak, his bleak satire may be one way of responding to the immediate dehumanizing influence of a society full of injustice, corruption and oppression. In the balance between art as an aesthetic contemplation and art as a propaganda, his art mostly tilts towards the later. That may be one reason, why he turns more to prose poem and conversational mode of writing in his later poems. His dystopic tropes bring out his "oppositional and critical energy or spirit". "Oppositional and critical energy or spirit," according to M. Booker, reveals dystopian impulse. (*Dystopian Literature*, 3) While discussing dystopian fiction, Erika Gottfried says that it 'describes a society characterized by not only occasional errors in the execution of justice but by a machinery for the deliberate miscarriage of justice'.(30) And 'dystopian satire has a primarily social message, a didactic intent to address the Ideal Reader's moral sense and reason as it applies to our place in society.' (*Dystopian Fiction*, 32) She also views 'dystopia as organized injustice'. In poetry too, Ibopishak's dystopian satire criticizes existing social conditions and political systems, in so doing, raising the question of justice.

In Ibopishak's later poems, the extremity of his satire and hardness of his image tone down. The poet is a witness to and his poetry evidence of different kinds of protest seen on the streets for reasons, natural as well as man-made. The age of unrest is here and mass fury is in the corner. For a variety of reasons, Manipuri people have become angry, violent and unstable. The emerging educated and motivated middle class want security for their families as well as opportunities for themselves but corruption and decay are everywhere.

Barely a few days go by without another protest over social grievances, suggesting that the discontent could worsen and pose increasing complications. The widening gap between quickly rising expectations and a substandard reality is threatening state's stability.

In "Gandhi", (from *Ghost and Mask*) the speaker shows how dissatisfied the people have become and they have come out on the street for all sort of protests and pasted their posters and banners on the statue of Gandhi in Gandhi Avenue:

This land has seen flood and drought.
 People suffer.
 They protest about rice and goods scarcity,
 They strike against unemployment and job removal,
 About bribery and refusing repayment.
 They come in line:
 Farmers, employees, women, students;
 About not giving loans, about not paying workers,
 About not getting salary.
 Women from bazaar and woman-torchbearers come protesting
 About killing women and exploiting woman's honour.
 New posters are pasted
 Over old posters.

This has been going on for years. One late night, some unknown old men come with hammer and chisel. They tear off the posters, remove the statue, put it on a bullock cart and take it away to a secret place. The statue of Gandhi is a symbol of non-violent protest and someone who brings India's independence. Frequent protests take away that the very meaning of protest itself. Peace marches and protest demonstrations have often been part of the Manipuri social and political landscape. The removal of the statue in the middle of the avenue, perhaps, suggests that non-violent protest is not working. Should one turn to violent ones?

His poems on 'Illusionary Country' (from *Illusionary Country*, 1999) are all satire on political leaders who pay only lip-service, who do not think of or act for the people.

Your Majesty, your throne doesn't eat fodder.
 It eats money, it eats gold. ('Illusionary Country I')

.....
 Don't know; but rice and sugar certainly turn sand;
 That's why, king doesn't eat anything,
 But citizens eat sand. ('Illusionary Country II')

.....
 In every country,
 Victory to the country of falsehood. ('Illusionary Country III')

.....
 Want to sell a mouth,
 Want to sell a mouth,
 ...the mouth of a minister. ('Illusionary IV')

In a similar tone, Ibopishak mocks at politicians holding all kinds of portfolio in a government in 'Mantri Pukhri' (from *Human Smell*, 2003). Mantri Pukhri is the name of a place which literally means 'Pond of Minister'. He implies that Manipur is "a land ruled by a blind king". Obviously, it alludes to the kingdom ruled by a blind king in *the Mahabharata* where the unjust and immoral acts go on unseen. Ministers are doing excellent for themselves. Finance minister makes money, eats money and gold and excretes silver. That's why, when he goes out for toilet, citizens follow him with potty. Power of money is everywhere: 'Money buys men,/buys votes,/buys women.

Another minister lives in multi-storey house with all his relatives and servants while 'citizens have no house,/no place to sleep and eat'. Another minister 'owns new property/and buys new dukan plot' in his

children's names, wife's name and mother's name. Another minister has his heart 'absorbed in Dharma,/reads the Gita', and he 'has seven wives,/ all kept in his house,/he treats them equally'. In another case, the political power is carried on like family business, compelling one question the idea of democracy:

His father is also a minister,
His uncle is also a minister,
His brother is also a minister,
His son is also a minister.

Ultimately, these ministers are like dogs. Dogs even when given respect and position jump down from their palanquin when they see excreta. They cannot forget their love for the smelly substance.

Game of Death

Death occurs frequently in Ibopishak's later poems. Death threat is also a common thing to the poet who cannot keep his mouth shut. Written in prose poem, 'Die by India-made Bullet' is about an armed group who come looking for the poet to give him capital punishment for writing all kinds of non-sense. The names of the five people who visit the poet are known as Fire, Water, Air, Earth and Sky. 'They can create and destroy man at their whims. They can do whatever they like! Models of power!', and 'killing people is our (their) only job'. They are a part of non-state actors who oppose and hate Indian government in Manipur. They have all kinds of guns 'German-made, Russian-made, Chinese-made', and 'they don't use India-made guns'. Then, the poet tells them that he loves India and wants to be killed by an India-made gun. As they do not use India-made gun, they go away without killing the poet. Thanks to the poet's fastidiousness about the manner of his death, he stays alive. The thing is that to stay alive in this land, a poet or a writer, cannot speak out his ideas honestly and freely. He has to play with words and twist their meanings to keep himself alive.

Death has become very cheap, without any of its shocking tragic value. In 'Coffin Market' (from *Illusionary Country*), the speaker says that in this land there is no difference between the rich and the poor because it has become 'necessary for every man/to arrange a coffin of his own/so that he doesn't have to borrow from others/when it's required urgently'. The demand for coffin is making its dealer very profitable. In localities and villages, big store-rooms for dead bodies have become a matter of pride. Dogs, jackals and rats are so fed up of eating human flesh that 'its smell makes them vomit'. Like this is not gloomy enough, the speaker says:

Young small children
Make many holes in their chests
And let the blood flow
As a kind of new game;
So that the bullets
Flying suddenly from nowhere,...
Can enter...
They live bullets very much.
Seeing that
Makes their mothers smile

That the poet is trying to make light of the horrific atmosphere makes it all the more horrible, thereby making its satire cuttingly dystopic.

How can a mother be happy to see her children waiting to be shot at? Only an extraordinarily bad situation can make her feel like that. A similar image is there in another poem, 'Human Smell' (from *Human Smell*, 2003):

Unfolding the jute bag in front of her,
One woman sells bodies of small children
Shot dead by bullets,
Like fish.
She sprinkles and smooth them with water.
She said laughing happily:

'Nobody's,
They are nobody's children;
They are my own children.

Death has become meaningless. Nightmare is total and this is the very face of dystopia. No satire can be gloomier than this. Suffering when taken beyond a limit stops being ironical or tragic, it becomes absurd.

Bullets kill many people and they do ask whether one is rich and poor, innocent or guilty. But there are also those who take their own lives. In 'Suicide Note', the speaker plays with the idea of killing himself. Death has so obsessed him that when he receives a New Year card from a friend, he mistakes it for 'an unexpected card of his (friend's) death ceremony'. He says that he suffers from 'a fatal disease of/having nightmare without sleeping'. Last section of the poem is straight out of his nightmare. The speaker is a boatman rowing a boat in a lean river. A man from the bank says he wants to be in the boat and asks him where it was heading. The boatman replies:

No room here,
Dead bodies have filled it;
I'm heading for the graveyard.
The man asks again:
'From where you get so many dead bodies?'
I answer:
'They're all those who killed themselves.'

So many people have lost their desire to live. Human suffering is taken to the level of absurdity. Life has lost its value. People seek escape in suicide. Yet suicide does not change anything. Instead of ending suffering, it simply passes the suffering to those still alive.

CONCLUSION

The laughter of a mother selling her dead children is a satire which pushes itself to the limit because it cannot be humorous. It takes away the very purpose of satire whose function is to expose & discourage vice, abuses and folly. James Sutherland puts that 'the satirist is destructive; he destroys what is already there (...) and he does not necessarily fill the vacuum that he has created. (*English Satire*, 1) Connecting dystopia and satire, Cziganyik argues that like the satire, "a dystopia usually offers no alternative to the horror depicted".(309) The poet may feel that the world his personas are located is certainly wrong, but he refuses to offer innocent solution.

His poems magnify a certain problem and force one to see and think what one often avoid out of fear. His poetry does not offer consolation or provide solution to 'the flawed world of the present'. The place of hope in his world is minimal. He only makes one confront with the hopelessness. He does not talk about justice, but the absence of justice. Speakers of his poems seem to be condemned without any faith of emancipation. Thus, his poetry directly defies and stares at the ugly reality of Manipuri society, its cruelty, exploitation and injustice. His poetry is never about expressing the sublime moment of life or the beauty of emotion. It is about making us aware of the 'bad place', the worsened, corrupted, unwanted world of the present time. For this reason, his dystopian satire surfaces as a social criticism, a protest, a poetic effort to jolt one out of dull complacency. It is an affirmation of life in a negative way. Otherwise, it will be a defeat of life and the win of inhumanity itself.

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

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