



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2. Issue 3., 2015 (July-Sept.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

INTERPRETING THE IMAGES OF DECAY AND UNREST IN ROBIN NGANGOM'S POETRY

SARAT KUMAR DOLEY

Assistant Professor

Department of English, North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous)



SARAT KUMAR DOLEY

ABSTRACT

All is not well in the north east of India. The conflict outside has taken a more frightening appearance in the form of the conflicts inside. These inner conflicts are not about the opposite pulls of honest and sincere duty, the pangs of sacrifice and the glory of martyrdom. The conflicts within have degenerated into bestiality and humanity, material exhibition and moral austerity, corruption and honesty. In the majority of the cases the dark forces are eroding the foundation of humanity. In Robin Ngangom's poetry, this pain of loss of the greatness of life in the hands of the circle of vice flows like a silent stream in the hills of Manipur. The author attempts at an interpretation of the expression of the inner decay in Robin Ngangom's "When You Do Not Return."

©KY PUBLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Born in Singjamei, Imphal, Manipur in 1959, Robin S. Ngangom is one of the most significant poets writing in English from the North East of India. He has published several collections of poetry so far and he received the Udaya Bharati National Award for Poetry in 1994, and the Katha Translation Prize in 1999. His poetry ranges from the personal to the political in content but the personal details are used as points of entry to the turbulent political present of his native hills. In that sense, most of his poems veer around the immediate past of the nation usually referred to as the poetry of witness.

Robin Ngangom's "When You Do Not Return" belongs to the poetry of witness. It takes up the themes of moral degradation and socio-political turmoil in his native land. The poet creates an imaginary situation in which a speaker addresses an absent persona whose non-existence in the land has resulted in the moral degradation and socio-political turmoil. Without giving any direct reference the poet recounts the troubled periods in the history of contemporary Manipur which has been described as the "sick man of the North east" in Indian political discourse. But the indirect references provided in the poem as it hints at "native hills", regrets the "sunless kingdom", grieves the situation in which "...gunfire reverberates/ in the hills, and bullets sprout from/ windows instead of geraniums." These indirect but meaningful references in the poem testify to the fact that it is an appraisal of the moral and socio-political situation in the contemporary times in Manipur.

Moral and Spiritual Decay:

The land of the poet has suffered moral and spiritual degradation in the absence of the imagined persona. The poet has lost interest in the cycles of season. The present is no different from the past in terms of variation and colour for the poet. The present is insipid and uninspiring, monotonous and repetitive as the present winter is "...merely a reminder/ of all past winters..." in which the poet used to revel. This monotony is infectious as it has turned people into walking statues without the capacity for fellow feeling and affection. The weak and the old are left alone to suffer alone. Civic and family values had died and as a result the sick, the weak, and the old have turned into burdens. Doors are closed upon them. Even those houses once established for the service of them have been closed down.

Because of this incapacity for fellow feeling, the change of the seasons and the variation in the landscape that comes along this change has not reached the heart of the people. They are unable to feel the beauty of nature as their hearts are moribund and the souls are dead. They have lost humanity. No plants of humanity can grow in those hearts at the moment as they have turned infertile. As the rain helps regain the earth its fertility after the dry weather of the winter, only a shower that washes the hardness from the hearts of the people will be able to re-ignite the people's sense of the changing seasons as- "...the heart lies fallow/ expecting winter rain."

Lost Creativity:

Creativity has deserted the native land of the poet. As woman reaches menopause, she loses her fertility. She turns into an infertile being that ceases to be the woman that was the symbol of creation and glory. In other terms, the land is cursed as nobody dares to dream since it never comes true. Nobody treads beyond the drudgery of harsh reality and consequently, the creative faculty of the people is dead. Since the land in which the poet lives does not allow plurality of dreams and represses oppositional voices, people are afraid of advocating freedom. Lack of freedom and repression of the dreaming self have broken the backbone of creativity. So, in the land of the poet- "...dreams/ turn to rust, the flame and the dew/ cannot create art."

Discourse of Material Pleasure

Moral degradation has dipped so low in the absence of the imagined persona in the native land of the poet that people in his land do not talk about love and affection. The discourse of material pleasure and carnal desire has replaced them. In the land of the poet, "...Only lust breaks/ on the branches of night..." Since the discourse of carnal desire has repressed the wish for spiritual connectivity between individuals in the land of the poet, disbelief and faithlessness have prevailed in the land. Nobody is trustworthy there as people "wear hideous masks." In this situation of faithlessness and distrust, authenticity and true quality lost their place to the exhibition of decorations. Everlasting human values have given way to artificial rituals. Ceremonies have replaced the glories of devotion. The poet deeply regrets the fact that "...the fragrance/ of the wild rose is lost, and only/ the flowers of the market are on sale." The culture of showmanship and marketeering has outgrown the worship of values and pursuit of excellence in the native hills of the poet.

Because of this moral and spiritual degradation, the fellow poets in the land of the poet have lost their creativity. The poetry they write do not inspire anybody. Their art does not transport anybody anywhere. The capacity for grandeur and sublime has deserted the creed of the poets in the land of the poet. Neither the subject matter nor the poetic ways in which they convey their message reach the heart and the mind of the readers. The banality of daily life has taken a toll on the poets as they are unable to see anything beyond that. They have lost their creative power- "...in the/ dreadful arithmetic of the day." This infertility and lack of inspiration perceptible in their poetic creations is only a mere reflection of the moral and spiritual decay conspicuous upon the native hills of the poet. Poets have failed to inspire since they have no spiritually universal truth to convey to the public.

Lost Humanity:

People have lost the capacity for empathy for fellow human beings. A self-centred, narrow, and a bestial nature has engulfed humanity in the native hills of the poet. The moral degradation is so severe that friends turn up only in the times of prosperity. Come the sorrows of adversity, friends turn into indifferent strangers. In the times of personal glory, people come from all directions offering fellow feeling and healing

affectionate hands. In the times of grief, they abandon the poet. Personally the poet was happy when the imaginary persona was present in his native hills and people were sympathetic and friendly to the poet then. But things have changed after the departure of the imagined persona as the same people "...now ignores my grief because/ you left."

This cruelty and lack of empathy for fellow human beings in the native hills of the poet have turned the people emotionally blind. They are unable to feel the beauty and peace created in abundance by nature around them. The river flows along the native hills of the poet the same way creating the music of peace and love, but the people in his land have turned deaf. They are unable to hear the sweet melody of the river as they are emotionally handicapped. The light of sympathy and fellow feeling has faded away in the land of the poet. In this "sunless kingdom" they are incapable of hearing the music of "The murmuring river". So, the people inhabiting this land are emotionally both deaf and blind and as a consequence they have metamorphosed into men without the glories of mankind.

Socio-Political Turmoil:

Another important theme of the poem is the socio-political turmoil in the native land of the poet since the absence of the imagined persona. As a poem written in the mode of the "poetry of witness", Robin S. Ngangom captures the violent socio-political situation in Manipur with the help of the temporal and topical allusions in the poem. Manipur has been the breeding ground of insurgency in the north east for many years. The socio-political discontents of the people inhabiting that piece of beautiful land in the easternmost part of India often took the shape of violent protests. These protests gave rise to not less than 17 insurgent groups in Manipur. The poet laments the fact that the revolutionary ideals of the youth in the past has deadened into unprincipled terror-mongering. Both the youths in the insurgent groups and the common youths in the streets of his native land have been led astray. The "messianic young men betray principles/ and there's no fire in their eyes." The main cause of the revolution is forgotten, and only they know the truth of their continuous fight. The youths in the streets are left with no ideals to follow and they have degenerated into a sloganeering crowd. They follow a self-proclaiming, self-righteous, and arrogant demagogue of a leader who may use them as he pleases. For easy material gains, the youths in the land of the poet have surrendered to sycophancy as "In the streets students shout themselves/ hoarse for newly-arrived patriots."

Shallow Ideological Jingles:

Honest and sincere ideological perspectives and distinctions have lost their respectability in the land of the poet. All parties and all followers of those parties, no matter what the party line is on paper, are hand in glove. They only show their differences in the public in name, but in reality, their practice is unitary. There is no difference in their action as "...The/ right and the left have become synonymous..." All parties are corrupt, all leaders are corrupt and the people in the land of the poet must choose from them. Since they act as the decider and arbitrator of the fate of the people, the people in the land of the poet are left with no other option but to "garland only the thieves." The thieves advertize their pet political ideology and people must worship these advertisers.

The ecclesiastics have become assistants of this corrupt political class. The sacred is subservient to the selfish in the absence of the imagined persona. The sacred is degraded to become parasites living on the sacrilege of the corrupt. The promise of the holy and the everlasting bliss that the prayers used to allude to in the past has turned to a travesty of the holy service. They are mere noise without the essence, mere practices without the principles. It has come down to such shallowness because of the worldliness and the materialism that the priests of the poet's native land secretly hold in their hearts. The pursuit of the divine has given way to the collection of wealth. Spiritually blinded by the material desires in their hearts, the ecclesiastics have forsaken their mission of shepherding the people to the Promised Land. Therefore, "while the poor remain cold and naked/ the preacher is warm and fed." The poor and the weak are reeling in pain and sorrow, while the rich priests are basking in the temporal glory of luxury and worldly comfort.

Uninspiring Ideals:

The native land of the poet has been bleeding in violence and hatred since the departure of the imagined persona. All hell has broken loose as "...dead waters breed/ reptiles in our minds..." Hatred has

prevailed over harmony and peace and hence there is violence everywhere. Innocent people are killed and revolution has taken the form of terrorism. Ideals are uninspiring since they are artificial. Enemies are the innocent people and they are the target of attack. The peaceful hills of the past have turned to a battleground. Chaos and anarchy are let loose and they run amuck in the native hills of the poet after the departure of the imagined persona. No house in the hills is trusted as bullets may be shot from any window. Nobody is welcome in the hills since vengeance and bloodthirsty ambush are awaiting people at every doorstep.

Since violence and bloodshed have become a routine in the poet's native hills, "...The barbwire/ of the day encloses us as we enter the era/ of the assassin." The world has entered the era of the killers and everybody is counting his days. The inevitable is knocking at the doors of the people as if the Judgment day has arrived. In this age of the killers, only those who kill will survive.

So, the poet regrets the fact that only the stories of sorrow and violence, decay and bloodshed could be sent to the imagined persona as an appraisal of the lives of the people inhabiting the hills. The poet wishes that these stories of pain might change the mind of the imagined persona and he might think about returning to his native hills. Only his return may potentially bring back peace that has left the poet's country.

REFERENCES

- Hazarika, Sanjoy. 'Kallika: The Unveiling of Literature from India's North East', *The Book Review*, Volume xxi, Number 4, April 1997, pp. 23-24
- Ngangom, Robin S. "Sundori." Ngangom, Robin S and Kynpham S Nongkynrih. *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009. 198.
-