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Poets Writing the New History of Manipur

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of poetry as an alternative historiography in the context of political violence and marginalization in Manipur, Northeast India, with a focus on the works of poet Robin S. Ngangom. It argues that in a region often excluded from dominant national narratives, poetry becomes a form of counter-memory that resists state-sanctioned histories and hegemonic structures of knowledge. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concepts of subjugated knowledge and counter-memory, the paper examines how Ngangom's poetry functions as a political and historical archive — not through grand narratives or official documentation, but through deeply personal and affective responses to conflict, grief, and loss. The paper thus situates Ngangom as a poet-historian whose work transcends literary aesthetics and participates in the urgent political task of remembering. In doing so, it posits that poetry in conflict zones like Manipur is not only a cultural expression but a form of resistance, remembrance, and radical truth-telling.

Robin S. Ngangom, a poet from Imphal, Manipur. Since the release of his debut poetry collection in 1988, he has remained a significant and consistent literary voice from Northeast India. Over the years, his body of work has evolved, becoming richer in emotional depth and political resonance. Ngangom pursued literature at St. Edmund's College and North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, where he now teaches. He describes his poetry as "mostly autobiographical"—a term he embraces sincerely, underscoring the way his personal experiences are deeply entwined with political realities. His work reflects the identity of someone shaped by marginalisation, describing himself as "a politically-discriminated-against, historically-overlooked individual from the nook of a third world country."

Despite this personal lens, Ngangom's poetry is far from narrow or introspective. His poems often begin with intimate reflections—on love, longing, or memory—and gradually unfold into broader commentaries on communal suffering, political unrest, and the lived experiences of a region long ignored by the mainstream. He does not treat insurgency, government brutality, systemic corruption, or ethnic tensions as distant or theoretical issues. These are immediate, personal, and pressing realities that demand attention. With clarity and moral intensity, Ngangom meets these subjects head-on, refusing to be silenced by fear or indifference.

His major poetry collections include *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994), and *The Desire of Roots* (2006), each contributing to the growing voice of resistance and reflection from the region. Beyond his poetic contributions, Ngangom has written powerfully about the role of the poet amid political conflict. His essay, *Poetry in a Time of Terror*, appeared in *The Other Side of Terror: An Anthology of Writings on Terrorism in South Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2009), a collection that examines the multiple dimensions of violence in the subcontinent. In 1999, he received the Katha Award for Translation, further highlighting his role in amplifying the literary voices of the Northeast.

He has a number of works to his credit which mostly represents the affairs and events of his time. He writes poetry hoping for a change, for peace and for a better time tomorrow. Manipur, a multi ethnic state

where different ethnic groups lived harmoniously in the yesteryears is not the same anymore. They have their own respective demands and are at loggerheads among themselves which becomes violent at a time. Manipur became a part of the Indian union on 21 January 1972. Their demand for autonomy from India still ensues which has led to formations of several rebel groups and insurgents. Due to several issues such as Armed Force Special Power Act, insurgency, ethnic tension, Manipur has seen various forms of conflicts in the recent years. The last few decades have seen thousands of people being killed and displaced in various ethnic conflicts. Thus the poets emerging from the region write about their individual experiences. In the editors' note to the *Dancing Earth: Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih have argued that:

The Writer from the Northeast differs from his counterparts in the mainland in a significant way … living with the menace of a gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardly and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness.

History is often understood as a structured narrative of events, chronicled through official records, government documents, and academic discourse. However, history is not merely a collection of dates and facts—it is a lived experience, shaped by emotions, suffering, and individual perspectives that rarely find space in formal historical accounts. In this context, poetry emerges as an alternate form of historiography, one that captures the essence of an era through the personal lens of its creator. Poets, in their deep engagement with socio-political realities, function as historians, recording the experiences and emotions of their time in ways that traditional historians often overlook. Robin shares his experiences and the events that he has personally witnessed. Portraying the scenario of the place he shares how protests have marred the region's peace.

The critical situation of 1960s and 1970s when separatist movement and discontent against Indian rule affected the north eastern region and sort of changed the style of literature in Manipur. Secret killings and atrocities became common norms there and the entire land was permeated with political violence and social degradation. Then Manipur was a crumbling state, subsuming images of violence, bitterness and suffering of the people. The 1970s was a period of insurgency and it impinged upon the poet's memory. The writers saw Manipuri youths being fired by the Indian Armed forces under the AFSPA Act.

Manipur became a part of the Indian union on 15 October 1949. However, many insurgent organisations were born after this time pursuing independent states. The secessionist activities began just after Indian Independence when Hyam Irabot, a noted Maoist communist desired to 'liberate Manipur from feudalism and semi-colonialism of Manipur kings and Indian State' (50, Chandra Jyoti Sonowal). In later periods, the Maoist movement gave birth to other secessionist groups like People's Liberation Army (PLA), the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), and the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP). These groups played their roles in factionalism in Manipur and brought insecurity and violence in the land.The land was underdeveloped and the role of the Central government was one of apathy and neglect. So different insurgent movements burst out in protest of the antipathy of Government which tried to curb them with stringent measures and oppressive laws like the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act, 1958 (TADA), National Security Act, 1980 (NSA), Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967 (UAP) etc. All these created a disorderly situation, bloodshed and terror spilled over everyday life. At this background and time period, Poets from Manipur wrote down their best poetry which was often known as poetry in a time of terror. So when poets write about their land and terrible loss, images of guns and bullets emerge naturally. Manipur was turned into a state of anarchy and different horrifying incidents captured the areas.

And perhaps the most disturbing reality is the deafening silence that surrounds it all. The official history taught across India scarcely acknowledges the trauma, the insurgency, and the generations raised in fear in the Northeast. School textbooks speak of the Seven Sisters and a brother in terms of geographical beauty, cultural diversity, and tourism potential — but they do not speak of the lives that have been lost in the pursuit of autonomy, justice, and identity. The dominant national narrative romanticizes the region's landscapes while erasing its blood-stained history.

This selective remembering, or rather calculated forgetting, marginalizes the entire population. The rest of the country often remains unaware that a war-like situation has persisted in parts of the Northeast for decades — a war not always visible, but deeply embedded in everyday life through militarization, surveillance, and conflict. The story of Manipur, and the larger Northeast, is not one of mere rebellion or regional unrest. It is a story of systemic neglect, silenced resistance, and historical invisibility.

This erasure is not accidental; it is what Michel Foucault would call a product of "power/knowledge" — where what is known, taught, and remembered is controlled by those in power (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*). History, when institutionalized, becomes an instrument of power, and those who do not control the narrative are excluded from it. In this case, Northeast India becomes a peripheral subject, rarely allowed to speak for itself within the mainstream. The silence, then, is not just ignorance — it is structural, it is political, and it is violent.

What makes Robin S. Ngangom's poetry so necessary is precisely this: it resists erasure. His verses speak the unspeakable and remember what the official records omit. They refuse to allow suffering to be buried under the weight of bureaucratic language or patriotic myth. His poetry becomes the archive that the state refuses to maintain — a record not of dates and treaties, but of blood, silence, and broken homes.

In his literary essay *'Poetry in the Time of Terror'*, Ngangom writes 'Manipur, my native place in Northeast India, is in a state of anarchy, and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land.' (Ngangom 167) He has given vent to his pent-up feelings and desires where the idea of freedom appears to be elusive as the poet says freedom in his region can be felt only when guarded by security forces:

I hear a wicked war is now waged
on our soil, and gory bodies dragged
unceremoniously through our rice-fields.
That they have dropped the word "shame" from the vocabulary,
and the newly-rich are ruling our homes.
I hear that freedom comes there,
only if escorted by armed men.
("Homeland I left" 27-36)

This vision of freedom escorted by violence is not the kind of freedom that history books proudly document. It is a lived contradiction, one that makes its way not into school curricula, but into the trembling stanzas of a poet bearing witness. The poet, here, is not simply reacting to events — he is shaping an alternative discourse. Ngangom's *The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom* exemplifies this role of the poet as witness and historian. It is not merely a personal lament, but a vital historical document that chronicles insurgency, military oppression, ethnic conflict, and the psychological burden of growing up amid war and silence.

Where official historical narratives reduce the region to dates, treaties, and statistics, poetry resists that erasure. It refuses to flatten pain into chronology. Instead, it humanises what history tends to abstract. Poetry captures the way a mother trembles when a knock comes at midnight. It preserves the sharp smell

of gunpowder in schoolyards, the uneasy stillness of a street under curfew, the silent grief of communities split by suspicion. It reclaims memory not as fact but as *feeling*. This is where poetry, as Foucault might argue, becomes a form of counter-memory — resisting dominant historical discourses and offering "a different way of remembering the past, one that challenges the official narratives and reclaims the voices of the marginalized" (Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 1977).

Thus, Ngangom does not simply write about Manipur — he writes *from* Manipur, from its soil soaked in blood and longing. His poems are not decorative expressions but deeply political acts — attempts to preserve truths that the state prefers to forget. In doing so, he exemplifies Foucault's idea that knowledge and power are always entwined — that controlling the narrative of history is a form of power, and resisting it through poetry is a form of dissidence. Through his poetic testimony, Ngangom chronicles the insurgency, military oppression, ethnic conflict, and the psychological burden of living in a war-torn land, offering an account that is as historically significant as any official record.

At the heart of the poem is the poet's struggle with identity in the face of historical forces beyond his control. The opening lines—*"Not once can I say / I am the captain / behind this wheel of fire."*—immediately establish a sense of powerlessness. The phrase "wheel of fire" suggests an endless cycle of destruction, a fate imposed upon the poet rather than one he can shape. This helplessness is not just personal; it reflects the experience of the people of Manipur caught between state repression and militant insurgency. By embodying the collective despair of his community, Ngangom provides a historical record of what it feels like to live in a politically unstable region. While official histories might speak of conflicts in terms of government actions and rebel movements, Ngangom captures the internal trauma of an individual forced to navigate these realities.

The poem also serves as a record of how violence and betrayal have shaped Manipur's socio-political landscape. The lines—*"We sowed suspicion in the fields. / Hatred sprang and razed the crops."*—present history as an agricultural metaphor, where communal tensions, much like poisoned seeds, grow into destruction. This recalls the real-world ethnic conflicts in Manipur, where communities such as the Meiteis, Nagas, and Kukis have been embroiled in violent clashes over land, political representation, and autonomy. The poet does not simply describe these conflicts in statistical terms, as a historian might; instead, he renders them through imagery that captures the emotional weight of betrayal and violence. His poetic method is akin to that of a historian recording oral narratives—an effort to preserve the human cost of political strife.

While official records of the region may describe insurgency in terms of "law and order" or "national security," Ngangom's poetic voice documents the lived realities of military violence, cultural erasure, and emotional trauma.The imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the region, which grants the military sweeping powers to arrest, detain, and even kill civilians with impunity, has led to gross human rights violations. Ngangom does not refer to AFSPA by name, but his imagery speaks to its consequences: *"Soldiers with black scarves / like mime artists / turn them in seconds into shrouds."* which function as a poetic archive (EFL,27) one that preserves the memory of oppression often erased from official texts. The transformation of scarves into shrouds suggests how quickly life is extinguished under military rule. The comparison to mime artists implies a certain eerie performance, as though the violence is a scripted act, repeated so often that it has become mechanized. This is a poetic way of recording the loss of countless lives—casualties of the conflict between insurgents and the Indian military—without reducing them to mere numbers. It is history, not as dry documentation, but as Foucault puts it a subjugated

knowledges— the suppressed and marginalized experiences of individuals — reclaimed through alternate forms of expression.

Ngangom also critiques the way patriotism is weaponized in politically unstable regions. The lines—*"Patriotism is preaching secession / and mourning our merger with a nation, / patriotism is honouring martyrs / who died in confusion."*—expose the contradictions within nationalist discourse. In Manipur, patriotism is not a stable concept; it is fractured between those who seek independence and those who uphold the Indian state. The poet points out that many who died for political causes did so in confusion, manipulated by leaders who used nationalist rhetoric for their own ends. This critique of patriotism is not unique to Manipur—it resonates across histories of colonial and postcolonial struggles, where common people are often sacrificed in ideological battles they barely understand. By embedding this theme in his poetry, Ngangom documents how patriotism functions as a tool of political control, a phenomenon that official histories often sanitize or ignore.

Perhaps the most powerful historical insight in the poem comes from its depiction of inherited trauma. The poet declares—*"Patriotism is playing the music of guns / to the child in the womb."*—a chilling image of how violence is passed down from generation to generation. In the Northeast, children grow up amid conflict, absorbing the rhetoric of resistance or state oppression even before they can understand it. Ngangom's poetic articulation of this phenomenon is as valuable as any sociological study; it captures the emotional and psychological effects of political instability on a people. Where historians may quantify the number of deaths in a conflict, poets like Ngangom show how that conflict alters the very fabric of life, shaping even unborn generations.

Ngangom reflects on the burden of his homeland. The lines—*"But where can one run from the homeland, / where can I flee from your love?"*—capture the inescapable pull of history. The poet acknowledges the pain of his land but also his inability to separate himself from it. This duality—the simultaneous suffering and attachment to one's homeland—is a key aspect of postcolonial history, where writers and intellectuals struggle with their roles as both critics and inheritors of their nation's fate. Ngangom, like many other poets before him, serves as both a witness and a chronicler, recording history not through detached analysis but through deeply personal reflection.

The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom affirms that poets are indeed historians, albeit of a different kind. Traditional historians deal in documents, treaties, and official accounts, but poets record history through lived experience, emotional truths, and metaphorical insight. Ngangom's poem does not merely describe the history of Manipur's conflicts—it embodies them, making them accessible in a way that no government report or news article can.

Through this poem, Ngangom proves that history is not just something that happens—it is something that is felt, something that poetry, more than any other form, is uniquely equipped to capture. As he defines the role of poetry in "Poetry in the terror of time", "Poetry cannot help anyone to get on in life, or make a successful human being out of anyone. But poetry should move us; it should change us in such a manner that we remain no longer the same after we've read a meaningful poem. For all these reasons, a poet can never be a conformist. He may not be an anarchist, a nihilist, or an inquisitor, but by the token of his verse he is a natural dissident. Poetry is always an act of subversion. And paradoxically, the poet perhaps is the most ironic realist. Each word must be fashioned from a private hurt, and writing poetry is like trying to keep a deadline with death. That is why I've always felt that poetry should comfort us, and not merely amuse us, or make us think. Poetry must heal the heart of man". (Ngangom 174)

Ngangom's poetry resists the disciplinary mechanisms of history-making by focusing not on events alone but on the experience of those events, turning personal memory into a political act. In Foucault's terms, Ngangom is not merely a poet but a *genealogist of power* (Foucault) — someone who traces the emergence of violence, alienation, and resistance in the micro-histories of everyday life. His work does not seek to replace one "truth" with another but instead reveals how "truth" itself is a product of discourse — shifting, unstable, and deeply political.

By turning to poetry as a mode of historiography, Ngangom undermines the authority of dominant historical narratives, opening up a space where history is not written by victors but felt by survivors. This act of poetic testimony not only gives voice to the voiceless but also disrupts the legitimacy of the historical discourse that has excluded them. As Foucault might argue, Ngangom's verses are not just about insurgency — they are insurgent in themselves, defying the disciplinary order of knowledge production.

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