

The Translingual Poetics of Robin S. Ngangom: Exploring Cultural Translation and Identity in His Poetry

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Abstract

Robin S. Ngangom, a bilingual poet from Manipur, India, navigates the complexities of cultural translation and identity through his poetry in English and Manipuri (Meiteilon). His work, deeply rooted in the socio-political and cultural landscape of Northeast India, engages with themes of displacement, memory, and resistance. This research paper examines Ngangom's translingual poetics, focusing on how his dual linguistic practice facilitates a dialogue between personal and collective identities, mediated by cultural translation. By analyzing key poems from his collections—*Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994), *The Desire of Roots* (2006), and *My Invented Land* (2023)—this study explores how Ngangom negotiates the tensions between regional specificity and universal resonance, employing translation as both a linguistic and cultural act. Drawing on postcolonial and translation theories, the paper argues that Ngangom's poetry redefines identity through a translingual framework, resisting homogenization and asserting the plurality of Northeast Indian experiences.

Introduction

Robin S. Ngangom, born in Imphal, Manipur, in 1959, is a significant voice in Indian poetry, known for his bilingual oeuvre in English and Manipuri. His poetry emerges from the marginalized Northeast region of India, a space marked by ethnic diversity, political unrest, and cultural heterogeneity. Ngangom's work is profoundly autobiographical, intertwining personal experiences with the collective trauma of his homeland. As a poet-translator, he engages in what Walter Benjamin describes as the "task of the translator," where translation becomes a creative act of carrying a culture across borders (Benjamin, 1969). Ngangom's translingual poetics—his ability to write and translate between English and Manipuri—serves as a site for exploring cultural translation and identity formation.

This paper investigates how Ngangom's poetry employs translingualism to negotiate cultural and personal identities within the context of Manipur's socio-political realities. It addresses three key questions: How does Ngangom's bilingual practice shape his poetic voice? In what ways does cultural translation manifest in his representation of Manipuri identity? How does his poetry resist hegemonic narratives of Indian identity? By analyzing poems such as "A Poem for Mother," "The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom," "Singjamei," and selections from *My Invented Land*, this study employs postcolonial theory, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, and translation studies to unpack Ngangom's poetics. The paper is structured into five sections: Ngangom's translingual context, cultural translation in his poetry, identity and memory, resistance to homogenization, and a conclusion synthesizing the findings.

Ngangom's Translingual Context

Ngangom's bilingualism is central to his poetic practice. As a poet who writes in English and Manipuri, he operates within a translingual framework, where language choice is both a personal and political act. Manipuri, or Meiteilon, is the official language of Manipur, spoken by the Meitei community to which Ngangom belongs. English, as a colonial legacy and a global lingua franca, provides access to a broader audience but carries the burden of cultural alienation. Ngangom's decision to write in both languages reflects what Steven G. Kellman terms "translingualism," the phenomenon of authors writing in multiple languages to express their multifaceted identities (Kellman, 2000).

In an interview, Ngangom describes his poetry as "mostly autobiographical, written with the hope of enthusing readers with my communal or carnal life" (Subramaniam, n.d.). This autobiographical impulse is evident in his oscillation between English and Manipuri, where he translates not only words but also cultural contexts. For instance, many of his poems originate in Manipuri and are later translated into English, or vice versa, creating a dynamic interplay between the two languages. This process aligns with Susan Bassnett's view of translation as a "cultural transfer" rather than a mere linguistic exercise (Bassnett, 2014). Ngangom's translingualism allows him to bridge the local and the global, embedding Manipuri cultural markers—such as references to Meitei festivals, flora, and myths—within the universal medium of English.

The socio-political context of Manipur further complicates Ngangom's linguistic choices. The region has faced decades of insurgency, state violence, and ethnic tensions, often marginalized within India's national narrative. Ngangom's poetry responds to these challenges, as noted by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, who describes Northeast Indian poets as chroniclers of "insurgency, state-sponsored terrorism, and ethnic cleansing" (Nongkynrih, n.d.). By writing in English, Ngangom resists the homogenizing tendencies of mainland India, while his Manipuri poems preserve the linguistic and cultural heritage of his community. This dual practice positions him as a mediator, translating the Lived experiences of Manipur for diverse audiences.

Cultural Translation in Ngangom's Poetry

Cultural translation, as defined by Bhabha (1994), involves the negotiation of cultural differences in a "third space" of hybridity, where new meanings emerge from the interaction of disparate cultural systems. Ngangom's poetry exemplifies this process, as he translates Manipuri cultural elements into English while retaining their regional specificity. His poems are replete with images of Manipur's landscape, rituals, and social realities, which serve as anchors for his cultural identity.

In "Singjamei," from *Words and the Silence* (1988), Ngangom evokes the vibrant market of his childhood, a microcosm of Meitei culture:

Now nocturnal hours fall/returning us to childhood/and roams your milling bazar;/the stalls of seasoned smoked fish/rotting betelnut, bunches of magnolia/and herbs, handpicked for maidens and/moonlit nights (Ngangom, 1988, p. 15).

The sensory details—smoked fish, betelnut, magnolia—ground the poem in Manipuri quotidian life, while the English medium makes these elements accessible to a wider readership. However, the poem shifts to a darker tone, reflecting the present-day Singjamei scarred by violence: "a land scarred with the images of child prostitutes" (Ngangom, 1988, p. 15). This juxtaposition translates the cultural memory of a pristine Manipur into the contemporary reality of conflict, creating a hybrid narrative that is both nostalgic and critical.

Similarly, in “A Poem for Mother,” Ngangom translates the universal theme of filial love through the lens of Meitei cultural practices. The poem, dedicated to his mother, Palem Apokpi, celebrates her selfless toil: You laboured silently for the family,/always mindful of their well-being,/and I, your naughty son,/could not inherit your virtues (Ngangom, 1988, p. 23).

The reference to the mother’s labor reflects the matriarchal aspects of Meitei society, where women play central roles in household and economic activities. By rendering this in English, Ngangom translates a culturally specific image of motherhood into a universal expression of gratitude and regret. The poem’s free verse and conversational tone further facilitate this translation, making the personal resonate with the collective.

Ngangom’s role as a translator extends to his professional work, having received the Katha Award for Translation in 1999 (PoemHunter, n.d.). His translations of Manipuri literature into English and vice versa demonstrate a commitment to preserving cultural heritage while fostering cross-cultural dialogue. In poems like “Home” from *My Invented Land* (2023), he translates the concept of belonging into a universal lament:

Here, I am both native and illegal migrant./My homeland has no boundaries (Ngangom, 2023, p. 47).

The paradox of being “native and illegal migrant” captures the alienation experienced by Northeast Indians within their own country, a theme Ngangom translates through vivid imagery and lyrical intensity. This act of cultural translation not only preserves Manipuri identity but also challenges the reader to reconsider notions of belonging in a postcolonial context.

Identity and Memory in Ngangom’s Poetics

Identity in Ngangom’s poetry is a fluid construct, shaped by memory, place, and language. As a poet from a region often misrepresented as a homogenous “Northeast,” Ngangom asserts the specificity of Meitei identity while engaging with broader Indian and global discourses. His translanguaging practice allows him to navigate multiple identities—regional, national, and cosmopolitan—without privileging one over the other.

In “The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom,” the poet uses his own name to collectivize the experiences of Manipur’s people:

I stand for the collective voices of the people of Manipur/who are suppressed, oppressed, and suffering because of political conflict (Ngang Patron, 1994, p50. 32).

The poem critiques the distortion of patriotism and the devastation wrought by insurgency and state violence:

Patriotism is playing the chattering of guns/to the child who is sleeping in the womb (Ngangom, 1994, p. 33).

By writing in English, Ngangom translates the regional crisis into a universal critique of nationalism, while the Manipuri version retains the emotional immediacy of local suffering. This dual articulation underscores the interplay between personal and collective identities, mediated by memory. Memory plays a crucial role in Ngangom’s construction of identity, as explored by Singha (2017). In “My Invented Land,” Ngangom reflects on the mythologized homeland of his childhood:

My homeland has no boundaries./It is a land of cherry trees and women’s riverine hair (Ngangom, 2023, p. 12).

The imagery of cherry trees and riverine hair evokes a prelapsarian Manipur, contrasted with the present-day reality of “rivers choke on garbage” (Ngangom, 2023, p. 13). This mnemonic reconstruction aligns

with Pierre Nora's concept of "lieux de mémoire," sites of memory that preserve cultural identity in the face of erasure (Nora, 1989). Ngangom's translingual poetics transforms these memories into literary artifacts, ensuring their survival across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The poem "A Poem for Mother" further illustrates the role of memory in identity formation. The speaker's regret for failing to inherit his mother's virtues is a personal confession that resonates with the collective guilt of a generation displaced by conflict:

I've become a small man,/with small dreams (Ngangom, 1988, p. 24).

The mother figure becomes a symbol of cultural continuity, her sacrifices anchoring the poet's identity despite his physical and emotional distance from home. By translating this intimate memory into English, Ngangom universalizes the Meitei experience, inviting readers to empathize with the poet's sense of loss and longing.

Resistance to Homogenization

Ngangom's poetry is a form of resistance against the homogenization of Northeast India within the Indian national imaginary. The region is often stereotyped as a "hilly" or "exotic" periphery, ignoring its cultural and ethnic diversity (Singha, 2017). Ngangom counters this narrative by foregrounding Manipuri specificity and critiquing state violence and neglect.

In "The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom," he indicts the Indian armed forces for transforming Manipur into "a hell and graves of youths" (Ngangom, 1994, p. 33). The poem's ironic tone and vivid imagery—soldiers as "mime artists who killed people instantly without speaking a single word" (Ngangom, 1994, p. 32)—translate the lived reality of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) into a scathing critique. By publishing in English, Ngangom ensures that this resistance reaches a national and international audience, challenging the mainland's indifference.

Ngangom's translingualism itself is an act of resistance. As Anjali Nerlekar notes, bilingual poets often use their linguistic duality to subvert dominant cultural narratives (Nerlekar, 2016). By writing in Manipuri, Ngangom preserves a language threatened by globalization and internal migration, while his English poems assert the legitimacy of Northeast voices in Indian literature. In "Bad Places," from *My Invented Land* (2023), he critiques the stigmatization of Manipuri neighborhoods:

Sometimes, through no fault of its own,/a neighbourhood picks up a bad reputation (Ngangom, 2023, p. 55).

The poem translates the social prejudice faced by Northeast Indians into a universal commentary on scapegoating, resisting the reduction of Manipur to a "disturbed area" (Singha, 2017).

Ngangom's resistance is also aesthetic, as he rejects "silken rhetoric or spice adjectives" in favor of a lyrical simplicity (Subramaniam, n.d.). His poetry's Zen-like minimalism, as noted by critics, reflects a refusal to conform to the ornate style of mainstream Indian English poetry (Roy, 2024). In "My Invented Land," he writes:

I'm a brown dervish leaf on a forgotten web./All voyages will be inward from now (Ngangom, 2023, p. 14).

This inward turn is both a personal and political stance, asserting the validity of regional poetics against the pressures of assimilation.

Conclusion

Robin S. Ngangom's translingual poetics represents a profound engagement with cultural translation and

identity, offering a nuanced perspective on the socio-political and cultural realities of Manipur. His bilingual practice in English and Manipuri (Meiteilon) serves as a dynamic mechanism for bridging the local and the global, translating the specificities of Meitei culture—its landscapes, rituals, and collective traumas—into universal themes of displacement, memory, and resistance. Through poems such as “A Poem for Mother,” “Singjamei,” “The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom,” and selections from *My Invented Land*, Ngangom navigates the complexities of personal and collective identities, employing translingualism as both a linguistic and cultural act. This dual practice enables him to preserve the linguistic heritage of Manipur while asserting the legitimacy of Northeast Indian voices within broader Indian and global literary discourses.

Ngangom’s poetry challenges the homogenizing tendencies of India’s national narrative, which often marginalizes the Northeast as a peripheral or “exotic” region. By foregrounding Manipuri cultural markers and critiquing state violence, as seen in his condemnation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in “The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom,” he resists the erasure of regional identities. His translingualism itself is an act of defiance, subverting dominant cultural narratives through the strategic use of Manipuri to safeguard linguistic diversity and English to reach a wider audience. Furthermore, Ngangom’s aesthetic choices—marked by lyrical simplicity and a rejection of ornate rhetoric—reflect a deliberate resistance to mainstream Indian English poetry’s conventions, affirming the validity of regional poetics. His Zen-like minimalism, as critics have noted, underscores an inward turn that is both personal and political, prioritizing authenticity over assimilation.

This study underscores the significance of translingualism in postcolonial literature, illustrating how marginalized voices can reclaim agency through the act of translation. Ngangom’s work exemplifies Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, creating a “third space” where new meanings emerge from the interplay of cultural and linguistic systems. His poetry not only preserves the memory of a conflict-ridden Manipur but also redefines Indian identity as plural and inclusive, challenging readers to confront the nation’s internal diversity. By translating the lived experiences of Northeast India, Ngangom invites empathy and understanding, transforming the “nook of a third world country” into a site of universal human experience. The implications of Ngangom’s translingual poetics extend beyond literary studies, offering valuable insights for postcolonial and translation theories. His work highlights the potential of bilingualism to foster cross-cultural dialogue while resisting cultural hegemony. Future research could build on this analysis by examining Ngangom’s translations of other Manipuri poets, such as his contributions to anthologies of Northeast Indian literature, to further explore his role as a cultural mediator. Comparative studies with other translingual poets from South Asia, such as Arun Kolatkar or A.K. Ramanujan, could also illuminate shared strategies for negotiating linguistic and cultural identities. Additionally, an investigation into the reception of Ngangom’s poetry among Manipuri and non-Manipuri readers could reveal the efficacy of his translingual approach in bridging diverse audiences.

Ultimately, Robin S. Ngangom’s poetry stands as a testament to the resilience of regional identities in the face of marginalization. His translingual practice not only enriches Indian literature but also contributes to global conversations about identity, memory, and resistance. By weaving together the personal and the political, the local and the universal, Ngangom’s work reaffirms the transformative power of poetry to translate cultures, preserve memories, and assert the plurality of human experience. His voice, rooted in the turbulent yet vibrant landscape of Manipur, continues to resonate as a call for recognition, empathy, and justice in an increasingly interconnected world.

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