

**ENGLISH POETRY IN THE NORTH-EAST:
An Analysis Of The Poetry From Shillong**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the Degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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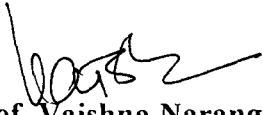
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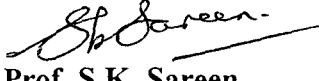
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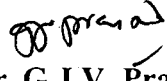
CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “English Poetry in the North-East: An Analysis of the Poetry From Shillong”, submitted by A Wanshai Shynret, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of this University, is to the best of my knowledge an original work and has not been submitted for any other degree of this University. or any other University.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiner for evaluation.


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This dissertation entitled “**English Poetry in the North-East: An Analysis of the Poetry From Shillong**”, submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any university.



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A Wanshai Shynret

"The Poetry Is In The Pity"

WILFRED OWEN

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The image of North-East India that other Indians have is of bandhs during Republic Days and Independence Days, slogans like “Khasi by blood and Indian by Accident”, insurgency, and ethnic strife. North-Easterners are subjected to racially abusive and aggressively alienating terms like “Chinky”. Hence it comes as no surprise and it is of no wonder that where the North-East of India is concerned, it is not art or literature but the decade long ethnic strife and militancy which registers more readily to the mind of a 'mainstream' Indian. The disturbing fact is that true to its nature, this strife and struggle does not seem to have any solutions in the immediate future. This is especially so in the present socio-political context where continued militant ‘struggles’ and government policies seem to be at loggerheads all the time. This is the case of the city of Shillong as it is of any other town or city in this region.

However, what immediately arises out of the situation is that many areas of vital importance and significance such as health, infrastructure, art and literature, are being left out of the ‘dominant’ discourse. Considering this and the continued ‘mainstream’ apathy, both political or otherwise, especially in the sphere of literature “it is surprising that no serious attempt has been made so far to understand this rare phenomenon of a single-town poetry scene, especially, in the context of Indian ethnicity and multiculturalism: this town’s population comprises almost all the ethnic groups of the North-East.”¹ Hence the literature that comes out from Shillong and more specifically English poetry, makes for a challenging, confusing and an immensely satisfying experience to look into. The general

¹ Sumanyu Satpathy, “*Weiking*” In *The Mists or the Literature of “Real Conflict”: English Poetry from the Khasi Hills* (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.13.

complaint is that, in spite of its variety and richness, the literature that comes out from this area both in oral as well as in written form has been caught in a web not spun by it and thus in turn becomes a silent sufferer of this unmitigated and unwarranted socio-political situation.

The whole of the North-East has a rich cultural heritage which holds it together, and this fact is particularly more evident in its strong and vast oral literature. But the onslaughts of modern day western lifestyles through cable networks, modern education have made people forget their rich cultural heritage. People are very fast at aping anything that is 'happening' in the west. The danger to this region is the liquidation of their native ethos and a surrender to western domination. To top it all, the neglect shown by the mainland people and successive central governments, have somehow taken these people further from their culture and even further from the larger Indian civil society. This segregation and apathy is sadly enough true even in the case of poetry in English, which has started blossoming in the past two decades or so. Along with the blossoming of Indian poetry in English in general, "North East India too witnessed the emergence of such a younger groups of poets in the 80's and early 90's whose poetry [was] written in feverish moments of societal crisis..."² It is however, extremely painful to see these talented poets and writers being left-out and cold-shouldered by the mainstream Indian intelligentsia. Apart from a few individuals and one or two cultural organizations, the rest have usually turned a blind eye to these developments which otherwise would have contributed and would have added more to the diversity of English poetry in India in general. This is especially regrettable in the case of poetry and the poetry scene in Shillong where the poets are of different ethnicities and backgrounds. But to those – critics and scholars - who have made an effort to go through their poetry, these poets

² Ananya Sankar Guha, *Poetry and the English Writing Scene*, (Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities in North East India (1947-97), New Delhi, Regency Publications, 1998), p. 117.

present a picture where “their poetry gave a continuity and compatibility to the Indian poetry scene though they spoke in a different voice from the poets of ‘mainstream’ India and expressed different points of view”.³

This work is an attempt to make a beginning in one of the most exciting and challenging fields of study in Indian English poetry today. It is an attempt to understand and analyse the different facets of English poetry from the North-East which presents itself in different themes, situations, etc. English poetry from the North-East should have been accessible to mainstream Indian intellectuals and should have been read, given the long history of state oppression, militant violence, exploitation and neglect in this far flung quarter of India. This proposal aims to look at the poetry scene in Shillong, which happens to be the hub of literary activity in the North-East and plays host to quite a few poets representing different ethnic tribes and communities, who albeit “coincidentally ... all live in Shillong...”⁴ The tribal population (as selected here) is represented by Desmond Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih (both belonging to the Khasi tribe), and Robin S Ngangom who is originally a Meitei from Manipur. Anjum Hasan, Ananya S. Guha, etc. represent the non-tribal population.

But at the outset, it should also be clarified as to what this work is ‘not’ about. The scope of the work will be limited only to the poetry written originally in English by the poets named above. It will not cover nor analyse the aspects of poems translated into English from North-Eastern languages. It will also look at only the poets who write from Shillong.

³ Ibid., p. 119.

⁴ Ananya Sankar Guha, *Poetry and the English Writing Scene*, (Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities in North East India (1947-97), New Delhi, Regency Publications, 1998), p. 118.

Any attempt at understanding the poetry from this region immediately raises a few vital and interlinked questions. What are the special characteristics of poetry from the North East? The general feeling is that the literature coming from these parts has many virtues, oral literature being the most exciting and stimulating, considering the fact that most of the languages of the region developed their written script barely a century ago. What is the relation to the rest of poetry written in India? Where do the poets derive their inspiration from? Does their poetry have any social, political, ethnic bearings and influences? Considering that this type of poetry belongs to the rare and yet unclassified genre of 'single town poetry', does each poet know about the other poets in terms of their tastes, styles, influences, inspirations, etc. Do they form a group if not a school? Another vital issue of concern that crops up and that needs to be looked at and analysed properly is whether these poets represent the community that they come from. Can they be in any way be called representatives or spokespersons of their communities? Or, are they writing in their own individual capacity, airing their own individual concerns vis-à-vis their community? Writing from a place widely known for its scenic beauty, how much of the natural environment is reflected in their poetry? "The poets from the North-East...sketch scenes from the life in the hills with some enchanting nature poetry (a rare genre) shot through with nostalgia for a 'lost world' of peace and beauty."⁵

As stated earlier, people in the North-East have been at the receiving end of state apathy and mindless insurgency-related violence. All these poets based in Shillong have in one way or the other experienced the intricacies of ethnic strife, governmental apathy and neglect. How much of this is reflected in their poetry? What has to be explored is how much of the poet's environment has affected his/her craft? "Poets from the North-East, in perhaps a cathartic bid to come to terms with their region's violent history, use

⁵ Nila Shah & Pramod Nayyar (ed.) *Introduction*, Modern Indian Poetry in English, Creative Books, New Delhi, 2000, p. 21.

violence as a unifying theme and motif⁶ in their poetry. Is the poetry written in Shillong a reflection of the upbringing in this situation of “real conflict”⁷ as Tariq Ali puts it? Or, is it that the lure and charm of the nature around them that acts as an alternative source of inspiration for these writers? In the backdrop of the neglect and the violence, can the vaguely defined and unclassified concept of ‘internal colonisation’ apply in the case of this poetry? Can it be used as a framework for analysing the literature that comes out of this region?

Nearly the whole of the North-East has been largely influenced by the missionaries from Britain as well as from Wales. The coming of the missionaries has been a blessing as well as a harbinger of many problems and many will willingly attest to that fact. If on the one hand the missionaries’ presence was a blessing in the form of education and health care, on the other hand it has also created a lot of social problems with the near decimation of indigenous tribal cultures being a major complaint and cause of concern. In light of the above developments, I also propose to look at this phenomenon of a single town poetry scene from the post-colonial and sub-altern perspectives, so as to get a much vivid picture of the subject. More importantly, can the parameters for judging the poetry from this region be equated with that of the rest of India? Or for that matter can it be compared with any other tradition say the English Romantic tradition or any tradition existing in English or the Post-colonial literature.

In the present context, before going into the intricate details of their poetry, which we will do in subsequent chapters, an introduction and a brief background to the poets becomes an absolute necessity. The first – in no particular order – is Desmond Kharmawphlang, a folklorist by nature. He collects Khasi folk stories and is a lecturer at

⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

⁷ Tariq Ali, *Literature and Market Realism*, (New Left review, no. 199, May-Jun 1993)

the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. "His researches into his land's chanted folk literature has taken him into deep jungles."⁸ He has to his credit four collections of poetry; one published bi-lingually called *Touchstone/Mawshamok* (1988) and *Here* (1992), *Home Coming*. He co-edits the cultural journal *Muses* and the poetry magazine *Lyric*. He is also the recipient of the Golden Poet Award, World of Poetry, Chicago.

Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih is a Khasi and Indian English Poet and critic. He has ten published works to his credit, including *Moment* and *The Sieve*. (both from Writers Workshop). He is at present a lecturer in English, Sankardev College, Shillong. He is also the editor of the English-Language daily *Apphira*. Apart from being a translator, critic and essayist in both Khasi and English, he is also an authority on Khasi religion, customs and folk tales. He has also been published widely in reputed magazines and journals in India such as *Femina*, *The Telegraph Magazine*, *The journal of the Poetry Society India*, *The Poetry Chain*, etc.

An Indian English Poet, belonging to the Meitei tribe of Manipur, Robin Ngangom has three collection of poems including *Words and Silence* (Writers Workshop, 1988) and *Time's Crossroads* (Orient Longman, 1994) to his credit and his poems appears in *An Anthology of New Indian English Poetry* (Rupa, New Delhi, 1993). A Recipient of the Udaya Bharati National Award for Poetry, 1994, he is at present a lecturer in the department of English, North Eastern Hills University, Shillong. "...He has lived in Shillong for many years, and is perhaps the first 'outsider' to use the 'matter of Khasia' in his poetry."⁹

⁸ Sumanu Satpathy, "Weiking" In *The Mists or the Literature of "Real Conflict": English Poetry from the Khasi Hills* (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.16.

⁹ Nigel Jenkins ed., "Introduction", *Khasia in Gwalia: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose from the Khasi Hills in North-East India*. Wales, Alun Books, 1995, p. 5.

Ananya Sankar Guha, a non-tribal, is an Indian English Poet. He has three collections of poetry to his credit including *What Else is Alive* and *Poems*. Recipient of the Michael Madhusudan Academy Award 1997, at present he is the Regional Director IGNOU, Shillong. He “is the least ethnic and therefore the most underrated of the three senior poets of Shillong.”¹⁰ He also co-edits the poetry magazine *Lyric* along with Desmond Kharmawphlang and Robin Ngangom.

Anjum Hasan presents herself as a researcher’s delight. Being a non-tribal Muslim woman poet, she becomes an instant challenge to any researcher. How she comes to terms with her different identities is really a very interesting part of this attempt. She is presently working as a Programme Executive, IFA, Bangalore.

Though there is no attempt at any formal classification as to which literary tradition or which school these poets belong to and represent, it would be however safe to club them together to “third generation of poets [who] began publishing around the late 1980’s and 1990’s. [Because] There is the self-conscious return to the Indian locales and contexts.”¹¹ The poets writing from Shillong do however also show strains of being highly influenced by the likes Pablo Neruda, Arghezi, Gullen, Pessoa, Seferis, Lorca, etc. Hence Nigels Jenkins remarks of the Khasi poets as a “talented younger generation”, but which is applicable to the other poets writing from Shillong as well, that they “cut their

¹⁰ Sumanyu Satpathy, “Weiking” In *The Mists or the Literature of “Real Conflict”*: English Poetry from the Khasi Hills (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.20.

¹¹ Nila Shah & Pramod Nayyar (ed.) *Introduction, Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Creative Books, New Delhi, 2000, p. 21.

teeth on Lorca, Seferis, Arghezi, Neruda and the hard-edged modernist of the third world...”¹²

Taking all the above-mentioned aspects into consideration, an exhaustive treatment of the subject matter will be the primary concern of this attempt. The poets selected as well as the framework of this work are in tune with the challenge that this attempt seeks to unravel, to understand and project the poetry that comes out from the beautiful hill station called Shillong. The fact that the researcher himself belongs to the place in question should be an added advantage. This should enable the work to be empirically grounded. However, utmost care will be taken not to let one’s subjectivity come into the analysis of the problem and subject matter under study.

¹² Nijel Jenkins, Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis, *The New Welsh Review*, No. 21, 1993, p.63.

CHAPTER II

THE POST-COLONIAL AND SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVES OF THE POETRY

In the last twenty years, historical studies have been widely stimulated by the globally renowned Subaltern Studies project. The debates surrounding it have interested scholars in disciplines ranging from history and politics to anthropology and literary criticism. The anthropologists, historians and others of the Subaltern School of thought are paying particular attention and concern now to the subject of historiography of the post-colonial period in India and to the period preceding that. In this new context, the nation is being re-configured, re-imagined, re-theorised. Subaltern Studies has become an original site for a new kind of history from below, a people's history free of national constraints, a post-nationalist re-imagining of the Indian nation on the underside, at the margins, outside nationalism. Subaltern India emerged in fragments during the eighties and nineties, and it changed form, but from the outset, it rejected official nationalism and developed transnationally, as did its readership and its critical appreciation. This has led to a wider debate and a better inquisitive perspective to the process of historiography of the Indian nation.

The process of historiography has however not been as smooth and flawless as it apparently has been presented. As Ranajit Guha rightly pointed out, in the process of the colonial historiography, two distinct bipolar groups of elites emerged who in spite of being diametrically opposed in ideology are ironically dependent on each other for their survival and history in the process became "a game for two to play as the alien colonialist

project of appropriation which was matched by an indigenous nationalist project of counter-appropriation.”¹³ In *Dominance Without Hegemony and its Historiography*, he notes that, “The paradox consists of the fact that the performance of the elite groups, whose careers have provided both these historiographies with their principal themes, was widely at variance with their historic incompetence. Thus, the metropolitan bourgeoisie who professed and practiced democracy at home were happy to conduct the government of their Indian empire as an autocracy...Their opposite number, the indigenous bourgeoisie, spawned and nurtured by colonialism itself, adopted a role that was distinguished by its failure to measure up to the heroism of the European bourgeoisie in its period of ascendancy”¹⁴. Thus, “On the contrary, all transactions between the two parties which made up the stuff of the elite politics followed from an understanding to abide by a common set of rules based on the British constitutionalist, parliamentary model.”¹⁵

Guha also opened Subaltern Studies by declaring in *Subaltern Studies I*, a clean break with most Indian historians, announcing the project’s ambition “to rectify the elitist bias”¹⁶ in a field dominated by elitism - colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. The situation with the literature emerging from the North-East is slightly different from that of the rest of India. Here, we have societies which are not anti-colonial because of reasons that we shall talk about. But the societies are also much against the existing bourgeois-nationalist elitist bias which exists at the moment. This can be seen from the neglect shown towards this area not only by the government but also by the larger Indian civil society too. This itself should lend credibility to the fact that the

¹³ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony and its historiography*, Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society, 1989, p. 212.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 213-214.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁶ Ranajit Guha, (ed.) *Introduction*, Subaltern Studies I.

historiography of the Indian nation has to be re-evaluated to arrive at other ends than those that the earlier historiographies served to meet. Officially or unofficially, blessed accounts of the nation's past have been challenged in many countries by the champions of minority histories. Post-modern critiques of "grand narratives" have been used as ammunition in the process to argue that the nation cannot have just one standardized narrative, that the nation is always a contingent result of many contesting and ever conflicting narratives. Minority histories one may say, in part, express the struggle for inclusion and representation that are characteristic of liberal and representative democracies.

But surprisingly even this 'new' perspective – the subaltern insistence on history 'from below' - does not seem to adequately counter such incomplete interpretations and representations to the fullest extent. The subaltern mode of representation is equally open to the charge of systematic bias, or rather, neglect, considering the fact that this new approach is itself elitist to certain degree. Thus, Kancha Illiah says that, "Mainstream historiography has done nothing to incorporate the Dalitbahujan perspective in the writing of Indian history: Subaltern Studies is no exception to this"¹⁷. He points to an alarming trend in recent Hindu politics and historiography to co-opt the Dalitbahujan into the fold (as "fallen" Hindus) and deny them a different and unique history. If one may add, this charge against the subalterns is also valid in the case of the North-east of India, which has been a victim of subjugation and systematic bias in different forms – economic, social, and political - since the days of the British Raj to this day. Thus Sumanu Satpathy says that there is a challenge lying ahead for theories and approaches like post-colonialism and others and this applies to the subalterns as well, to "come to terms with the complexities involved with the question of internal colonization as well as

¹⁷ Kancha Illiah, *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, OUP, New York.

nationality, multiculturalism, and ethnicity.”¹⁸ The neglect however, has also partly to do with the fact that subalternism as a model of approach or a school of thought is still evolving. But this should not divert the attention from the fact that what this approach has done, which is, to give an entirely new dimension and theoretical perspective to look at the left out histories and perspectives of the subaltern groups. We will come to the case of the neglect of the Khasi society a little later in this discussion.

The Language Effect:

Ranjit Guha in his essay *Dominance Without Hegemony and its Historiography* has given us a vivid detail of the structuring of the colonialist historiography as well as that of the elite Indian historiography. But what he has neither mentioned nor implied in the “fundamental agreement between the Indian bourgeoisie and the British”¹⁹ is the all-important role of language in the process of this historiography. The desire for power on the part of the Indian elite and their colonialist counterpart had a lot to do with the eagerness on their part to ‘know’ and learn the language of the other. To both the elites, language was a means of hanging on to the instruments of power. We are reminded of Foucault in *The Discourse on Language*: “In appearance, speech may well be of little account, but the prohibitions surrounding it soon reveal its desire, the desire for power.” He goes on to add that “...speech is not merely the medium which manifests – or dissembles – desire; it is also the object of desire.”²⁰ Thus the colonialist’s urge to learn

¹⁸ Sumanyu Satpathy, “Weiking” In *The Mists or the Literature of “Real Conflict”*: English Poetry from the Khasi Hills (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.16.

¹⁹ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony and its historiography*, Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society, OUP, New York, 1989, p. 212.

²⁰ M. Foucault, “The Discourse on Language”, *The Foucault Reader*, Ed. P Rainbow. Pantheon, New York, 1985.

the language of his colonized has much to do with his urge to maintain his status. To him the mastering of the language is equivalent to mastering the people who speak such a language. The Indian elites' fascination with the capabilities of their colonizers to somewhat speak their language and their own desire to counter what their colonizers had gained by learning the language of the colonizers is nothing but an indication of their 'desire' for that elusive power. What we now need to look at is how language was used as a tool for the expansion of the colonial set-up and its other machineries. Cultural imperialism is in a way the conquest of nationalism and socio-economic independence resulting in a alienation of a country or society from its own roots. Once this happens, life-styles change, resulting in the subjugation of traditions and cultures. There is always an attempt to establish a monoculture of the mind. To quote Ngugi, "The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth: what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed; to control in other words the entire realm of the language of real life...To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self definition in relationship to others."²¹ Thus, Desmond Kharmawphlang regrets and despairs at the fact that he has to express himself in an alien language.

My burdensome English learning
assails me, and the tomb
it has become, laughs and cackles
without end.

He finds himself reaching an understanding where the 'gift' of language by the colonial masters has to be seriously challenged.

Hiding under dark cloaks of

²¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'O, *Decolonising the Mind*, OUP, London, 1986, p. 16.

my alien patrons, I was
taught to be ashamed
of my own.

(From the City With Love)

The deep anguish and self-realisation of being enslaved in another language cannot be missed here. The immediate realisation here is of “The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environments, indeed in relation to the entire universe.”²²

Globalisation, Language, Religion:

The process of globalisation, which has its roots in the expansion of the British Empire, has become one of the major intellectual and practical concerns of our times. The reason behind this is that it reasserts, as K Satchidanandan says, “colonial imaginaries through discourses of domination. It ‘anthropologises’ culture while promoting cultural amnesia in its victims...it induces a forgetting about the rich pre-colonial past of countries like India. A country like India with its great tradition...suddenly begins to parrot the west without even caring to look at the indigenous traditions – by which I mean not only those of Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali and Persian but also of the various languages of India”²³ (Indian Literature, No. 190. p. 9). This however is not restricted to language alone. Subjugation of indigenous culture was also routed through the convenient and easy

²² Ngugi wa Thiong’O, *Decolonising the Mind*, OUP, London, 1986, p. 4.

²³ K Satchidanandan, *Introduction* (Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2, New Delhi, 1999), p.9.

route of religion whenever the opportunity presented itself before the colonial machinery. Speaking of Africa Ngugi says, "On the one hand is imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial phases continuously press-ganging the African hand to the plough to turn the soil over, and putting blinkers on him to make him view the path ahead only as determined for him by the master armed with the bible and the sword."²⁴ In the process, it is interesting to note that the erstwhile colonial masters do not leave out even the relatively unknown tribal societies of the North-East society from this process. Desmond Kharmawphlang bluntly reasserts this in the first poem of his first collection *Touchstone U Mawshamok*. The whole process of colonial expansion and the method it uses seems to puncture any existing tradition and culture. Thus he remarks of the process of how the Khasi culture got subjugated by some alien culture:

Long ago, the men went beyond the
Surma
to trade, to bring
home, women who will nurture
their seeds.

But this seemingly utopian and idyllic existence was not to remain for long with the Khasi culture and society because,

Later, the English came
with gifts of bullets, blood-money
and religion.
A steady conquest to the sound of
guns began.

(The Conquest)

²⁴ Opp Cit. p.4.

This is the whole process of which Ngugi talks about where the colonial machinery unleashed a “cultural bomb”²⁵ The intention and the “effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their language, in their environment...”²⁶

This process in case of the societies in the North-East has however started long ago. Sumanyu Satpathy sums this up beautifully. “The Khasis, of course, are grateful to the Welsh for their many acts of kindness, particularly to Thomas Jones (1810-49) for having handed down the Khasi alphabets to them and making them educationally advanced. But the Welsh benediction was not entirely an unmixed one. And the Khasis can neither Forget nor forgive their erstwhile mentors for the near-decimation of their indigenous culture.”²⁷ This holds true not only for the Khasi tribe, but all the indigenous tribes of the North-East wherever the colonial machinery – missionaries included – spread its tentacles. It may be recalled here that the North-Eastern societies and cultures had a rich and powerful folk tradition. But the coming of the colonisers destroyed much of this. The colonisers might have handed over a written script to them. But in the process, the colonisers seem to have given the written word with one hand and taken the spoken with the other. It became a two-edged sword or to use another metaphor, a bitter pill to swallow, a pill with debilitating side-effects at that.

This finds echo even in the words of the anthropologist, Nigel Jenkins. Himself coming from a post-colonial set-up though entirely different from the one in India, Nigel Jenkins admits that, “The Welsh, arriving in the Khasi Hills eight years after the end of the war, (The Anglo-Khasi War 1829-1833) were part of that classic imperialist

²⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁷ Sumanyu Satpathy, “Weiking” *In The Mists or the Literature of “Real Conflict”: English Poetry from the Khasi Hills* (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.16.

chronology succinctly defined by General Sir Charles Napier, the conqueror of Sindh: ‘a good thrashing first and great kindness afterwards’. In addition to converting thousands of Khasis and their compatriot Jaintias to Christianity, they opened the first schools, they founded the first dispensaries and hospitals, and ran medical care programmes; they recognized in the Khasis a small people with an ancient language who were confronted with powerful new forces that threatened to sweep their culture away. No one can deny as the Welsh, in their ‘kindness’, built they also destroyed. Even Christians, who constitute about half of the Khasi Jaintia population of one million, acknowledge the harm that was done to the Khasi way of life by boxing converts away in mission compounds and attacking every manifestation of tribal culture – from musical instruments and rice beer to traditional sports and personal names. What perhaps the Khasis do not realise is that the Welsh, in the name of Reformed Christianity, had recently subjected their own civilisation to almost identical prohibitions. In the ensuing upheavals, both societies re-made themselves. What survived the cultural attrition was, in both cases, the one tool that was vital to the negotiation of the future; the native language.”²⁸ But what Nigel Jenkins might have missed here is a very important point of deviation. The Khasi society in no way survived that cultural attrition, because subsequently the Khasi language – though the Khasis are thankful for the script – lost all the sheen and glory that it possessed.

As mentioned earlier, religion played a major role in this process of colonial expansion and cultural subjugation. The perfect dovetailing of religion with language brought about, what we can call, a situation of complete domination. The missionaries, though they have done a tremendous amount of work in setting up the basic facilities and infrastructure like schools and hospitals, cannot shirk from the responsibility that they too have been a vital part in the process of this subjugation. Thus the persuasive and

²⁸ Nigel Jenkins ed., “Introduction”, *Khasia in Gwalia: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose from the Khasi Hills in North-East India*. Wales, Alun Books, 1995, p. 11-12.

institutional powers of the colonial machinery proved to be a great success in the North-East. We have situation here like what Partha Chatterjee mentions in the illuminative and pivotal essay, *Caste and Subaltern Consciousness*. Quoting Gramsci from his *Prison Notebooks*, he says that man has two types of consciousness. One is the consciousness of his everyday practical activity and the other is the ‘theoretical consciousness’ of such a practical activity. But as Gramsci says, in his *Prison Notebooks* – the part entitled ‘The Philosophy of Praxis’, that for man, “his theoretical consciousness can be historically in opposition to his activity. One might also say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses...one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with his fellow workers... and one, superficially explicit and verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed.”²⁹ Thus what we have here is a group, which has its own understanding and view of the world, however limited or small that view may be. But in circumstances different from his practical consciousness, “...this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in ‘normal times’ that is when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate.”³⁰ This is what exactly happened with the societies who were part of the grand colonial expansion. Faced with a new culture and lifestyle that the colonial machinery brought along with it, they were completely swept and affected by it or rather by the positives that they saw in it and in the process neglecting their own culture and tradition.

The case of the North-Eastern societies is not different from this, which has thus changed the course of the historical process of relations between the dominant and the

²⁹ A Gramsci, “The Philosophy of Praxis”, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York, 1971, p. 325.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 327

subordinate group which is in this case the colonial machinery vis-à-vis the tribals. The emergence and rise of new concepts, philosophies and religions have a lot to do with the omnipresent struggle between the subordinate and the dominant group. Thus, as Partha Chatterjee says in *Caste and Subaltern Consciousness*, "...the emergence of new philosophies and religions which acquire a dominant position in society will have its impact through the borrowed element in the common sense."³¹ Any religion, which then succeeds in establishing itself, is viewed as a 'necessary justification for existing social divisions' by the dominant group and a sense of privilege 'to a more powerful cultural order' by the dominated or the subordinate group. This is exactly what happened to the societies in the North-East.

But this should not take away from our focus of the subject matter of a cultural subjugation that the Khasi society went through. This is true even of the Mizo community in Miroram, where language and religion went hand in hand in successfully creating a distinct two-class society. This is what in a sense Thomas Jones (1810-1849) attempted and succeeded in accomplishing to a large extent. In the process of the translation of the Bible, a more ingenious method was adopted whereby any indigenous language, which did not have a script prior to that, was created as a written language and given to the tribals. The script, which was given, was the Roman script (influenced by Welsh spelling) and the underlying tone of its relation with the translation of the Bible cannot be missed. "The success of the Welshman's [Thomas Jones] script led eventually to the adoption of the Roman rather than Bengali letters by the neighbouring Garo, Mizo, and Naga peoples"³² as well. But the motive becomes clear when J.S.M. Hooper in *Bible Translation in India, Pakistan and Ceylon* states categorically and unambiguously that,

³¹ Partha Chatterjee, *Caste and Subaltern Consciousness*, Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society, OUP, New York, 1989, p. 171.

³² Nijel Jenkins, Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis, *The New Welsh Review*, No. 21, 1993, p.60.

the Khasi written language –adopted from the Roman script - was adopted based on the dialect around Cherrapunjee, “...and since that time has had no rival”³³. This had a double benefit for the colonialists. One was the ease with which the Khasi language would mesh with this newly created script and secondly the ease with which the Bible could be accessed and thus preached. Nigel Jenkins adds, “Within a matter of months he [Thomas Jones] had sufficient command of the language to begin preaching.”³⁴

The fallout of this process can be seen in the near-total decimation of the rich Khasi tradition of oral folktales, legends and others. Trying to be as objective as possible, Nigel Jenkins remarks that, “The Khasis were weaving stories and minting songs long before the Bible-thumping, hymn-crazy arrived on the scene. The richness of their oral and folk traditions is perhaps still underestimated. It was, after all, a snatch of the native song to the accompaniment of the four-string *duitara*, that first excited my interest in the Khasi people. Yet the missionaries, with their Pantycelyn and tonic sol-fa, consistently denied that the Khasis had any musical tradition of their own.”³⁵ This is in contrast to what J.M.S. Hooper notes in the introduction to the *Bible Translation in India Pakistan and Ceylon*, which hides more than it reveals. Speaking of the tribal languages in India, he says, “In some areas, tribal disintegration has advanced to a stage when it seems unlikely that literature in the particular language will be of any further practical use.”³⁶ It is approaches like these, which have raised eyebrows to the genuine ‘humanitarian’ causes that missionaries came to serve. And hence the subaltern approach becomes a necessity where we have to question the authenticity and legitimacy of such a historiography. The situation is not only true of the Khasi society vis-à-vis Christianity, but also of other religions and other societies as well. A clear indication of this intention

³³ J. S. M. Hooper, *Bible Translation in India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, OUP, Bombay, 1963, p. 155.

³⁴ Nigel Jenkins, *Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis*, *The New Welsh Review*, No. 21, 1993, p.60.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 61.

³⁶ J. S. M. Hooper, *Bible Translation in India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, OUP, Bombay, 1963, p. 10-11..

of cultural subjugation by the erstwhile masters is in the way the way the Bible is interpreted in the North-Eastern Hills. In the process of their contestation with the native culture and religion, what has emerged, to cite one example, is a 'mis-presentation' of the Ten Commandments. Within the Khasi Christian community, for example, the cock, which acts as a symbol or conduit for the communion with God in the traditional Khasi religion is looked down upon. The reason lies in the justification, where by, the Bible forbids any idol worship. Contrast this with the rooster – and not the Cross – being kept atop the churches in European countries, and the 'mis-presentation' becomes obvious. Our erstwhile 'mentors' and 'alien patrons' thus saw the native practices and traditions as a threat to what they had inculcated. Colonialism here was thus more subtle and practically without any force. It is but a perfect case of colonising the mind. The subalterns have in a way totally neglected this perspective, which made its own contribution in the successful expansion of the colonial machinery.



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But coming back to the neglect that the subalterns have shown to this part of India such as the North-Eastern society, this can be explained by the fact that for the tribal societies here the subaltern framework is somewhat frail considering the fact that the subaltern project depended heavily on the notion that first and foremost, the new substance of subalternity emerged only on the underside of a rigid theoretical barrier between "elite" and "subaltern," which resembles a concrete slab separating upper and lower space in a two-storeyed building. This hard dichotomy alienated subalternity from social histories that hardly had such storeys or those, which include more than two storeys; and not only histories rendered through the lens of class analysis, because subaltern social mobility disappeared along with class differentiation. Secondly, because subaltern politics was confined theoretically to the lower storey, it could not threaten a political structure. In the case of the Khasi society, before the coming of the British and for many years after that, it never had any clear-cut, definable class structure. Though

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there were kings and chieftains, they acted mostly as heads of clans, who were considered an intricate part of the extended family. This coupled with the fact that pre-independent Khasi society was very democratic somehow did not give a suitable entry-point to the subaltern perspective.

But nonetheless, in view of the ever-changing goals, evolving definitions and methods of the subaltern perspective, a deeper look at this method of colonial expansion and subsequent subjugation of the colonised, can always be looked at from a broader national perspective. In the context of the coming of the missionaries to the North-East, with most of the missionaries coming from Wales, who were themselves in a way, colonised, the subject matter has to be viewed differently. The Khasi society and for that matter all the places where the Welsh set up their missions in India, seemed to have been through a process of “double-colonisation”. The subaltern perspective may thus be re-defined to look into these perspectives as well.

What we subsequently have is thus, an interesting case study of colonial expansion. If viewed properly, there is a thin line of difference in the process of colonialist expansion in the North-Eastern hills as compared with the colonial expansion elsewhere in India. There was a clear line dividing the ‘cultural order’ between what the Welsh brought and what the British brought. Hence some of the poetry that comes out from the region also tries to address this ambivalent attitude towards the colonial past. Thus one of the budding poets in Shillong, Almond D Syiem identifies this and observes:

A paleface, godsent young man
entered once our mistwoven hills,
brought us letters, literature and the Bible
he was a Welshman.

The Tommies, however, brought spite,
spattered the ferns with our fathers' blood
and spoke to us in gunfire tones.

Such reactions however has much to do with the good work the missionaries did in setting up basic health care facilities, schools, etc rather than anything else. "...the Khasis remember the Welsh – more with affection, I think, for the good the missionaries did them, than regret for any puritanical heavy-handedness..."³⁷ The subaltern perspective would do well if it could incorporate and differentiate the two cultural orders that the process of colonial expansion brought about.

³⁷ Nigel Jenkins ed., "Introduction", *Khasia in Gwalia: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose from the Khasi Hills in North-East India*. Wales, Alun Books, 1995, p. 9.

CHAPTER III

THE POETS AND THEIR SOCIETIES: ALIENATION, CONFLICT, AND APATHY

In the previous chapter the attempt was to set a basic framework to analyse the poetry that comes out from Shillong. The attempt is to basically formulate a theoretical perspective and read the poetry accordingly. This chapter will somewhat be an extension of it, the only difference being that it will try to define and formulate another angle through which the poetry from Shillong can be read. While the earlier perspective somehow limits itself mostly to the tribal writers, the attempt here would be to incorporate a perspective where the writings of the other writers who are non-tribals be taken care of as well.

The environment in which a writer lives and interacts with becomes a very important part of the writings or compositions that comes out. In the case of the writers from Shillong as well, this cannot be discounted. If in the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth professed that poetry should be in the language of the masses, the poets here go one step further by writing not only in the language of the masses but even writing on them and about them and reflecting the issues that affect the region as a whole. Their poetry has an “innate but untutored wisdom; and in William Wordsworth’s decree is ‘man speaking to man.’”³⁸ Being poets who are socially aware, they always make it a point to show their

³⁸ Ananya Sankar Guha, *Poetry and the English Writing Scene*, (Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities in North East India (1947-97), New Delhi, Regency Publications, 1998), p. 119.

deep concern in the form of anguish or jubilation for the society at large. The commitment of these poets towards the society in which they are living in, is never in doubt. Their wish and craving to be enjoined with the society to which they belong is amply reflected in most of their poetry. Hence Desmond wishes to be identified with

Sweet *Hynniew Trep*, beloved,
soiled by the people you love.....
touch me,
teach me to sing again;
give another birth
to those who are struck silent
in their valleys of lament.

(Of Stones – To Mimi)

Thus Guha says that “If we speak of a general ‘Indianness’ in poetry written in English in India, these poets nonchalantly subverted such a notion by writing poignantly and memorably of their hometown, a shared nostalgia for the past, and the prevalent social issues with their attendant pitfalls”³⁹

But as initiated in the introduction, the concept of conflict, strife, insurgency, inter-tribal clashes, etc. in the poetry from Shillong becomes a very important yardstick by which we can move ahead and pursue it. Thus, “Desmond Kharmawphlang’s...Robin Ngangom’s [poems] are culture specific and present individual conditions within a social context (war, separations, death, aliens and military presence in their lands.)”⁴⁰ Most of the poets would readily attest to the fact that the ongoing intractable conflicts, in which

³⁹ Ibid., p. 119.

⁴⁰ Nila Shah & Pramod Nayyar (ed.) *Introduction, Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Creative Books, New Delhi, 2000, p. 19.

whole cultures, religions and people are fighting each other mercilessly to the death as in Manipur or Nagaland or in Meghalaya and elsewhere in the North-East have to do with alienation, suppression and distortion of memories and the refusal to hear the pain of the other, while at the same time being obsessed with the sufferings of one's own clan or group. Conventional political leaders continue to posture and rattle their sabres, but seem incapable of really healing the situation. Traditional religious leaders or even heads of tribes and clans are also largely ineffectual to heal these divisions. Often, the bravest and the most concerned among them are assassinated or otherwise silenced and inter-tribal or interfaith peacemaking becomes reduced to little more than a bureaucratic machinery intent on issuing pious statements for the press, rather than actually doing anything to make a real difference in the way of mediation for example. There are many other reasons that can be traced historically. But one of the main reasons as Jayanta Mahapatra rightly pointed out is that after the emergency period, "terrorism and needless acts of violence became the order of the day in states like Punjab and Assam. Writers and poets had become one with the anguish they saw and felt"⁴¹

The poets writing from Shillong however also seem to realise that in order to be able to talk about violence and how to avoid it, we have to deal with conflicts. Their poetry can be looked at as attempts to understand this conflict and initiate peace through poetry and literature. The poetry of the North-East appears to point a way out of this impasse. Hence "whether they write of love, terror, exploitation or disillusionment, the forgotten dreams of the earth speaks through their rhythms with an urgency rarely matched anywhere else in Indian English poetry."⁴² Thus Desmond dedicates his first collection to his people with the catchword that "Believing that the people need poetry no

⁴¹ Jayanta Mahapatra, *Mystery as Mantra*, World Literature Today, Spring 1994, p. 286.

⁴² H.S. Shiva Prakash, *When you Do Not return*, (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 197, May-June 2000, Vol. XLIV No. 3), p.6.

less than bread, I dedicate this volume to them.”⁴³ “The poets from the North-East, ... sketch scenes from the life in the hills with some enchanting nature poetry (a rare genre) shot through with nostalgia for a ‘lost world’ of peace and beauty. A poetic rendering of the chaos (army presence, terrorism, separated loves, curfew) that reigns, the individual’s purely subjective reactions to the current sad situations, the weary resignation at the transformation of their towns, the romance and friendships that survive here, make this poetry both an important social document (though there are no polemics here) and some extraordinary intense human responses to the context. Unlike the citified, ‘White’ and initial poetry (except in the women poets) that constitutes the largest chunk of Indian poetry in English today, these poems spring from definite social sorrows – curfew, fear, threats, and love that survive these.”⁴⁴

Conflicts not only bring things into opposition, they open up possibilities. They can provide creativity with many alternatives by which to make poetry, literature and drama. Hence the concept of empathy becomes a recurring theme in their poetry. By applying empathy to the very meaning of conflict and peace we learn how to open it up to creative possibilities. This is a central theme to the study of all the poetry from Shillong. Somehow through their poetry one gets the impression that these poets do stand together and raise their combined voices in inspired warning and guidance, to give hope and vision and courage to all those working for peace and social and civil justice, for an end to the neglect, persecution, oppression, poverty and violence of every kind. Their immediate concern is to do away with the explosion of despair over centuries of repression; caste driven, racial, religious, feudal, colonial, economic. The statement of their objective cannot be more emphatic than in the editor’s note in the recently published

⁴³ Desmond Kharmawphlang, *Introductoin*, Touchstone U Mawshamok, Mrs J Kharmawphlang, Laitumkrah, Shillong, 1988.

⁴⁴ Nila Shah & Pramod Nayyar (ed.) *Introduction*, Modern Indian Poetry in English, Creative Books, New Delhi, 2000, p. 21.

Anthology of Contemporary Poetry in the Northeast, which says, “During these pessimistic times, the responsibility of the writer is much more modest than what well-meaning people would like him to shoulder”⁴⁵

However some of the poets also reacted differently to the chaos of the conflict. Surrounded by death, they turned to the topic of life. Their poems take the circumstance of war as a given, and examine human character within it. They reflect on the life they left behind, a life of substance, thus making death more tragic, verse, bittersweet. They do not celebrate the conflict, the strife, the killings, but neither do they surrender themselves to it. They view the whole situation as a process in which they find themselves, in with they preserve, and overcome.

In the North-East however, with its violence and injustice, its social breakdown, poverty, crime and disease everywhere, the whole problem of conflict, be it political or social, is also intricately linked to the concept of ‘Internal Colonisation’. We can pick up from the where we ended in the last chapter and try to analyse and see how the two concepts of internal colonisation and the situation of “Real conflict” is interlinked. As far as the term internal colonisation goes, it might not necessarily be applicable to all the writers from Shillong. The term is limited in scope as it is for lack of a proper theoretical guideline. But it can be somewhat taken as a position or a situation where the people who identify themselves as belonging to a different nationality find themselves being governed by others against their will though they are a part of that territory because of economic and geographical reasons. A majority of the people in the North-East view themselves as being ‘colonised’ by mainland India even in the present situation. If the

⁴⁵ Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih & Robin S Ngangom Ed., *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-East*, NEHU, Shillong, May, 2003.s

term internal colonisation is taken literally, then the situation in the North-East is a fitting example of 'internal colonisation'.

But the question that immediately arises is that, is the yardstick of internal colonisation applicable to all the writers writing from here? The poets here belong to different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Their opinion in such matters is bound to be different from each other. Hence it would not only be improper but also full of inherent faults and difficulties if any such attempt were made. It is difficult to conjure as to how the term internal colonisation will be applicable to all the writers who are based here. The main reason behind it, traces back to the time when nearly at the same time all the North-Eastern states acceded to the Indian Nation. Very much unlike Manipur and Nagaland, Meghalaya was very much a part of the Undivided Assam with Shillong as the Capital. The accession of Assam was far more smoother compared to the other North-Eastern states, like Nagaland which never had any view of being one with the Indian nation. To drive the point home, there has hardly been any demand for any separate 'state' or 'nation' from Meghalaya. Whatever demand is there, is but an echo or offshoots of what is happening in Nagaland or Manipur. Though there is a considerable hatred to 'any central government', – because of the obvious reason of neglect by successive central governments – it does not necessarily translate to any form of demand for a separate state (country). But irrespective of this all, being at the receiving end of state terrorism and insurgency, the poetry that comes out from this place thus fall under the purview of poetry being written in a situation of "Real conflict".

CHAPTER IV

THE POETS AND THEIR POETRY

Having attempted and cited at the critical framework under which the English poetry from Shillong can be read, I will now in this chapter take up the individual poets and try to analyse and relate their poetry to the broad theoretical perspectives mentioned in the previous chapters.

Desmond Kharmawphlang

Born to “a notably literary household”⁴⁶, Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang is the son of the respected and popular Khasi novelist, Mr. Leslie Harding Pde. His sister, Lauretta Kharmawphlang is widely published in Indian magazines where she writes on popular culture. His poems have appeared in popular magazines such as The Telegraph, Poetry Chronicle, Debonair, etc. He has to his credit a large number of critical essays on contemporary Khasi literature and society. To his credit his poetry has attracted attention of the noted novelist and columnist, Mr. Khushwant Singh who remarked in his column after going through Desmond’s first collection *Touchstone /U Mawshamok*, in the *Sunday Magazine* in August 1998 that “If Mr. Desmond Kharmawphlang could write as well in

⁴⁶ Nijel Jenkins, *Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis*, The New Welsh Review, No. 21, 1993, p.63.

English as he writes in Khasi then he needs to be encouraged, because he is a poet of international dimension”⁴⁷

A cursory glance into the published works of Desmond will reveal that he is visibly enchanted, inspired and deeply influenced by the rich oral tradition that the Khasi culture has imbedded. His fascination for Khasi folktales and legends can be immediately gauged by the titles that he ascribes to most of his poems – *My Name is U Lei Shillong* – referring to the legend of U Lei Shillong*; - *The Sun and the Moon* - referring to the popular Khasi folktale, etc. Thus Sumanyu Satpathy remarks, “Desmond L Kharmawphlang is a folklorist by profession and an incorrigible romantic by temperament. His researches into his land’s chanted folk literature has taken him into deep jungles.”⁴⁸ In his poetry we seem to encounter the notion that every human culture in the world create stories (narratives) as a way of making sense of the world. Some familiar features of the oral narratives, a common kind of story around the world, for example, can be discerned in the 'Tortoise and the Bird', an Igbo folktale recounted in chapter 11 of Chinua Achebe's much acclaimed novel, *Things Fall Apart*.

The story in itself is a primary form of the oral tradition, primary as a mode of conveying culture, experience, and values and as a means of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings, and attitudes in oral societies. This is what he exactly demonstrates in poems like *U Kyllang*. “U Kyllang is a giant Rock, the size of a small mountain. It is made up of a single mass of granite. Regarded as a marital God by the Khasis, it is also identified, with a murderous cyclone which hits the Khasi hills every year in April,

⁴⁷ Kushwant Singh, *With Malice Towards One and All*, The Sunday Magazine, 21-28 August 1988, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Sumanyu Satpathy, “Weiking” In *The Mists or the Literature of “Real Conflict”: English Poetry from the Khasi Hills* (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.16.

causing death and destruction”⁴⁹ He is amazed at the power that this Rock can generate. In spite of it being identified with being the reason for all the destruction, *U Kyllang* is still held in awe and reverence by the people.

Wrathful God, slayer of
brother you tower over
hills and hamlets, mocking
the world.

Sullen one, how you call
to battle the ancient warriors
you bring on the throb of
drums, the clash of swords.

Every time you bellow and move
southwards, trees supplicate,
and even warriors of a
hundred battles quake.

And only last April
you scattered houses
like dried leaves and
trampled lives under
your fearful feet.

⁴⁹ Desmond Kharmawphlang, *Here*, Writers Forum, Calcutta, 1992. p. 8.

He is trying to understand the behavior of this semi-divine being, who seem to revel at what he does best, that is to destroy. We are reminded immediately of Shelly's West Wind, with its power and majesty of being the destroyer, in full display. The poet persona seems to find the answer in the legend of the *Kyllang* itself, because folktales and stories are means of finding answers and knowledge, in societies with an oral tradition. He thus immediately states with the gusto of one who has stumbled upon a treasure of knowledge. He says

What manner of libation
do you ask?
People say that in your
haste to see your lover,
the Umngot river, you
kill and that you
are maddened by her
cries of pain.

Be at peace, raging one,
she still waits for you
in the languid plains
of the south and
there together having
traded blood for blood,
she will cool the
fires of your heart.

(U Kyllang)

But to understand how really the element of folktales works in his poetry, one also has to understand the structure behind the Khasi folktales. Khasi stories draw upon the collective wisdom of oral peoples, express their 'structures of meaning, feeling, thought and expression' and thus serve important social and ethical purposes. One cannot study Khasi literature without studying the particular culture and oratures for the themes, values, narrative structures, plots and rhythm are drawn from them. To find out what is the essence of an oral narrative and its relation to the Khasi culture. Prof. B L Swer in his book *Ka Mationg Ki Khasi* brings out three main divisions of the Khasi oral tradition. Under this acceptable classification, the equivalent of myths are the 'Khanatang', the legends are 'Khana-Pateng' and the folktales are the 'Khana-Parom' Under this classification, the story of 'U Kyllang' falls under the category of 'Khana-Pateng'. He also emphasises that the 'Khana-Pateng' and the 'Khana-Parom' always have a moral behind them. He also further emphasises that the two are not merely for the sake of entertainment, but, they also act as 'Khana-Pharsi', that is, stories with a lot of irony and satire involved. However one must not forget that the reason behind these folktales and oral narratives is also to try and explain most of the natural phenomenon that occur within the Khasi Land. This thus explains the attempt of the poet to understand the behaviour of the *Kyllang* within the specific terms and conditions of the Khasi culture.

This trend of using the folk material as a background to his poetry is also evident in other poems of his such as in the monologue of *U Lei Shyllong*. He tells us of the story of *U Lei Shyllong* who is regarded as the chief deity of the Khasis. According to Khasi legends, he is said to dwell atop the Shillong Peak and his daughter, *Ka Pah Syntiew* is said to be the mother of the Khasi Chiefs. In the monologue the deity cries,

My name is U Lei Shyllong
and I watch over

this land with the
fondness of a sentinel,
a God....

I gave man
my only daughter
whom witty mortals
call ka Pah Syntiew.
lured out of a cave
by flowers and wedded
to man she bred
generations of chiefs
in all corners of the land
wherever my name is feared,
wherever the winds
dance to the drums of
the Hynniew Trep.

The poet also however is disillusioned when he finds that this land of the Hynniew Trep does not get the due from its inhabitants. In a poem he makes a strong social statement by using this famous legend, whereby the *Hynniew Trep* (Name applied to the Khasi people, by the Khasis themselves) have forgotten their rich tradition and culture by showing scant respect to it. He indicts his fellow *Hynniew Treps*' for having forgotten their roots. In the Khasi tradition, the places or forests where the deities are supposed to reside are considered to be sacred. The forests are called *Law Kyntang* (Sacred forests) and none of the vegetation, there, including the trees are supposed to be

cut off or taken away. But things have changed. The poet laments at the disregard and disrespect shown to such traditional beliefs.

My name is U Lei Shyllong,
Lord protector of this land
time spun stories and flew
away with dreams, and
I, sentinel and God,
feel a huge betrayal,
nursing my grief on
this mountain top.

Men no longer call me
these days and without
shame or consideration,
strip me bare of my
green remnants...

I stand now a
forgotten testament
in a fleeting world,
were only the swirling
clouds and weeping
trees are real to me.

(My Name is U Lei Shyllong)

There is also an overwhelming tone of sentimentalism which is clearly evident in poems such as these in Kharmawphlang. But that sentimentalism stems from the fact that the poet is deeply anguished at the way the people have forgotten their own culture. Hence there is a queer but admirable “sentimental historicism ... [which] marks poets from the North-East such as Desmond Kharmawphlang, and Robin S Ngangom”⁵⁰ This sentimentalism comes from the urge to turn back the clock and get back to the glorious past.

Apart from the sentimentalism attached to it, one also has the feeling that Kharmawphlang’s penchant for folk material in his poetry is also his wish to recreate the past in all its glory and a nostalgic attempt to go back to the days of peace and prosperity, using nature and folk material as the backdrop. It is an attempt to project the history and culture of the Khasi society in its much truer form after it has been subjected to varying influences from outside since the coming of the missionaries to the present where the traditional culture has lost its appeal to western cultures and influences. It is also an attempt of the author to display the best that Khasi oral literature has to offer using the medium of poetry so that he can reach out to people far and wide. He would like his poetry to be the means through which others will know about the rich culture that the Khasi society possesses and more importantly, he would like his poetry to act as a catalyst in the resurgence and revival of the glorious Khasi culture among his people. Hence the urge to identify with his place, culture and its history. But alas, he also realizes that much has been lost in the process due to various reasons. He seems to have imbibed a fountain of knowledge in due course of this pursuit of his. Thus in *Of Stones* – which is aptly titled, because the Khasi word for remembrance is *kynnmau* and *Mau* also means stone - he remarks,

⁵⁰ Nila Shah & Pramod Nayyar (ed.) *Introduction, Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Creative Books, New Delhi, 2000, p. 13-14.

I speak
with a cold learning of cities.
My land (I tell everyone) wears
a great ochre stone in
her sweeping hair, spelling rain
in summer...

But this tranquil and heavenly existence was not to last forever. Things have changed and have been tainted. He yearns back for that lost time, and pleads to his motherland to give him the insight and act as a muse to enlighten and inspire him more.

I have grown accustomed
to this savage sadness I
nurture in my heart.
sweet Hynniew Trep, beloved
soiled by the people you love...

Touch me
teach me to sing again;
give another birth
to those who are struck silent
in their valleys of lament.

(Of Stones)

His persistent attempt to identify himself with his motherland, with its history, with its struggles, and to be part of it, is simply astonishing worthy of emulating. In one of the

poems, he narrates the story of betrayal of one of the greatest hero of the Khasi-Anglican war and the pains that the Khasi martyr had to go through while being imprisoned. But he simply cannot seem to come to terms with the fact that it was one of his own kinsmen who betrayed the great king.

Suddenly
who comes in the night
armed with papers, law
and religion to crown a
pale-face, king of this noble earth
these virgin waters?

This and such other poems are his attempts at recreating and trying to understand the history of his motherland. And he realizes, that these are scars that every self-conscious Khasi will have to bear. Our neglect for our own people, own culture, in fact started from those very days. Hence he cries

These my love, were the pains
of long ago; but they are a
part of me, as blood becomes
part of our soil.

(*Stories*)

The concept of the past becomes very important in his poetry. He is perfectly aware of the history of his land and his attempt is to find meaning and sustenance in it. A major part of his two collections *Touchstone U Mawshamok* and *Here* deals with the poet's

relationship with the past, the history of his motherland. That is why he goes back to the old tales and legends that act as a source of inspiration for him. It is also in a way a journey that he undertakes, a journey into his inner life.

He however considers himself too to be blamed for the neglect of his own culture. Much like his other colleagues, he despairs at the fact that he has to communicate and explain himself in a language that is not his own. He expresses his deep anguish that though he has returned to his “moorings” he also realizes that

My burdensome English learning
assails me and the tomb
it has become, laughs and cackles
without end
hiding under dark cloaks of
my alien patrons, I was
taught to be ashamed
of my own

This partly explains the fact that his first collection, *Touchstone U Mawshamok* is bilingual, the translation to Khasi being done by the reputed writer Bevan L Swer. Kharmawphlang apparently, is very conscious of the fact that in his attempt to reach out to a wider audience outside, he should also not lose his own audience and more importantly not to lose his own bearings. Hence he relishes the trauma and the ordeal he had to go through, because

...in that long silence
of thought and search

my heart hummed that tune
born among pines, by the
rivers, near our skies
and in the past.

(From the City With Love)

Kharmawphlang's weakness for the folk material in his poetry, coupled with his urge to make his poetry as rooted as possible makes any attempt to understand his poetry an immensely educative and enabling experience. He thus clarifies in the introduction to his first book of poems, *Touchstone U Mawshamok*, "This is my first book of poems, and an attempt to address myself to the people, not simply as an individual but as their voice."⁵¹ And that voice which is attempting to act, as mouthpiece is clearly evident in the first poem of the collection itself. He expresses his genuine concern of his land having been exploited by others for their own gains.

I am never tired of talking about my
hometown
in summer, the sky is pregnant,
swollen with unborn rain.

But this was not to last long. In a general tone to which most of the Khasis would attest to, he tries to recreate and reconstruct the history of exploitation which happened with the coming of the colonial machinery who came along with their "gifts of bullets, blood-

⁵¹ Desmond Kharmawphlang, *Introducton, Touchstone, U Mawshamok*, Mrs J Kharmawphlang, Shillong, 1987, p. 3.

money/and religion". It was not to end there; after the Colonizers have left, came those from the plains.

But in the wavering walk of time
came those from the sweltering
plains,
from everywhere

The anguish and the realization of his land being used and exploited for the benefit of others cannot be missed. In a very sarcastic way, he sums up the irony in the last stanza.

You stricken land, how they love
your teeming soil, your bruised children,
one of them told me "You know,
yours is truly a metropolitan city".

(The Conquest)

His 'concern' for his people and the region as a whole however does not stop here. The mindless violence going on in the North-East as well as in other parts of the world is one of the most important and recurring themes of his poetry. In this era of strife and conflicts, even personal relations suffer because of reasons totally unknown to the persons concerned. In a very heart rendering exposition, he finds that in midst of his wishing to meet his loved ones, he sees 'human' barricades everywhere.

Nothing much separates us – only

the old road with armed men
in its shadows – only they...

(Nothing Much – To Duh

Duh)

The spectre of violence seems to be looming large and making its presence felt everywhere. Peace seems to be a non-existent word in the whole exercise around the world. He sees the situation at home not different from anywhere in the world where murders, communal clash, killings, ethnic cleansing, etc have become the order of the day. Being at the receiving end of this whole problem he realizes that

From land to land, country
to country, people are committed
to a non-existent peace...

We say "Peace can sing no more; it has
grown a shadow and is driven
to a bitter exile".

In Lebanon and Ireland
hearts of poets have wept...
It is not so different in Africa...

Everywhere, men pay in bullets
men collect debts in of bullets.

(Peace)

The unfathomable and ruthless violence and the injustices pervading in contemporary society baffles and worries the poet to no end. He tries to catch the pity and the horror of events that seems to have shaken the society.

The streets,
dotted with men in green,
Policemen,
Arsonists and
miscreants,
growing like unwanted sores,
sigh under the burden
of violence

Just as in the poem *Peace*, he reiterates here:

Peace eludes all,
and voices are loudest
of those who speak
of stones, bullets, knives and fire.

A large number of poems also deal with social issues and issues concerning the everyday life of a common man. *The Prostitute's Prayer*, *The Beggar Woman and Her Child*, have somewhat similar theme; poverty and human desires. In the monologue of the prostitute's fervent prayer as she asks a question to the Lord whether she can feast with him at his table, because hunger

...dragged me down the streets
today like everyday, I
undressed with a nameless man
as if going through a ritual
of death...

Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

Born in the wettest spot on earth, Cherrapunjee, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih is one of the poets whom Nigel Jenkins describes as the “talented younger generation” of poets from Shillong. Though he did his Post-graduate studies in English, unlike most poets he had not had much exposure to the influencing trends in literary movements either abroad or at home. But as Satpathy points out, “He has Made amends for his early lack of exposure by reading up widely in Latin American and Central European Poetry; and in his more recent poems, which are yet to be collected, Nongkynrih has started showing signs of maturity”⁵² At present he is the Deputy Director in-charge of the Publication Cell, North-Eastern hill University, Shillong, and is also the editor of the English Language daily, *Apphira*. A translator, essayist and critic in both English and Khasi, he is an authority on Khasi religion, custom and folktales. He has to his credit, a large number of published works and his poetry which is widely published and anthologised, is collected in two volumes, *Moments* (1992) and *The Sieve* (1992), both from the Writers’ Workshop editions, Calcutta. He is currently working on his next collection, *The Fungus* to be published by Alun Books, Wales, shortly.

Being an authority on Khasi customs, traditions and folktales, *Moments*, bring out the best of what the Khasi literary tradition has to offer. Much like Kharmawphlang, Nongkynrih’s poetry is deeply rooted to his place of origin. This is a great achievement on their part, to look back at what their history and roots can provide them with. “The best of post-Independence Indian poetry in most of

⁵² Sumanyu Satpathy, “Weiking” In *The Mists or the Literature of “Real Conflict”*: English Poetry from the Khasi Hills (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.13.

out languages has addressed itself to the great dilemma – whether to turn back upon itself or to turn to the unprecedentedly elusive and shape-shifting world.”⁵³ These poets here never tried to hide or conceal their preference. But while Kharmawphlang’s rootedness is somewhat in a more general sense, referring to the whole of the land of the Khasis or Hynniewtrep, Nongkynrih’s is more specific, to his place of birth, Cherrapunjee. In search for a perennial source of inspiration for his poetry, in Cherrapunjee, he seems to have found a voice and a medium entirely by the force of a surging need within him to express and relate to his own inner self.

Poetry had first come to me in Cherra
so twice I went back
looking for it in the barren winter-world.

(The Poetry of Cherra)

Elsewhere he says,

Cherra! When I grow old,
I shall come back to stay.

(A Day in Cherrapunjee: V – Khoh Ramhah)

⁵³ H.S. Shiva Prakash, *When you Do Not return*, (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 197, May-June 2000, Vol. XLIV No. 3), p.6.

The poetry of Nongkynrih can characteristically be read in different ways. But he is best approached as a writer who is inherently Post-colonial. Like Kharmawphlang, the themes that he portrays, the preoccupation with the little known Khasi tradition of folktales and with the past, the attempts to represent religion, all point toward post-colonialism. *Moments* is an attempt to look at all the issues mentioned above. Knowing well enough that the Khasi literary tradition derives its strength from its oral narratives, he confides, "...we are fundamentally a story-telling people, not a poetry-writing people."⁵⁴ In *Moments* what he attempts is to weave the two strands together and in the process producing some of the most unforgettable poetry. The collection is filled with poems based on tales and legends emanating from his birthplace, Cherrapunjee. It also dwells in a sustained fashion, on the poet's relationship to his past and those from the past that live on in the lives of people around him.

In *A Day in Cherrapunjee: II (Dainthlen)*, he recounts the tale of the demon-snake or *U Thlen* as the locals call him who used to terrify the inhabitants of Cherrapunjee and the villages nearby. He became a living terror for the people who had to go out of their houses to go somewhere else. After invoking the Gods, the people got their blessings to proceed with the task of killing the demon. A man by the name of Suidnoh was entrusted with this huge task. After the initial hiccups, Suidnoh managed to kill the monster. The people were informed and it was decided that to make their triumph complete, all were asked to join a feast, and eat the body of the demon snake. But it so happened during the feast, that, a lady wanted to take a piece of meat for her son who was away. She kept the meat at home pending her son's arrival. But she always forgot about it. The demon-snake had the power of re-incarnation. So it happened one day that, the snake, very small in size pleaded to them that they do not kill him and in return promised to bestow upon them

⁵⁴ Nijel Jenkins, *Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis*, *The New Welsh Review*, No. 21, 1993, p.63.

with riches. But it so happened that when the demon-snake regained his full vitality, he started for human sacrifices and threatened to devour her and her family, if his demands were not met with. Eventually the demon-snake cast his spell on other families as well. But to satisfy him, human sacrifices have to be given in lieu of his bestowing upon them with wealth and good fortune. On visiting the place – one of the many tourists spots in Cherrapunjee - where the demon-snake was supposedly killed, the poet mentions with pride the history of his birthplace.

Cooler than the breath of autumn!
sweeter than a lover's acceptance!
purer than the thoughts of an angel!
Dainthlen,
what may one call your stream,
gathered like dewdrops
in glittering pools of crystal
that years of rain and water
had carved from solid rock,
scattered everywhere
like cells in a beehive?

...They have told me
how the evil Thlen was killed
in this very spot
by the wisdom of our forefathers
who poured red-hot iron bars
into his feasting belly.

The collection is literally filled up with facets that Cherrapunjee is famous for; the tales, the rain, the fog and its lovely forests and gorges that has turned it into a scenic beauty that it is now. He recalls his visit to his native place in *The Rain Waited With its Holy Waters*,

Going to Cherra for a union of pure hearts,
the wedding of childhood friends,
I found the rain waiting
to receive me with a passion.

Amazed at the reputation that this natural phenomenon has acquired for itself, he wishes that his poetry that stems from this place too be acknowledged likewise. He is understandably elated at this reunion, and yearns for its God-like abilities and craves to be identified with it. The rain becomes symbolic in the sense that it cleanses everything.

Dear rain that comes from the hills
like the Gods,
share with my song a little of your force
and let them be heard and be talked
as your thunderous storm.
Carry them into the four winds
and let them overflow the world
as your water in the plains –
for all I ask is a little of your fame.

The collection can also be looked at as an attempt to discover a sustaining connection with and meaning in the Khasi history. *Moments*, is an attempt to build meaningful bridges with the past. Most of the renowned places in Cherrapunjee, be it the caves or the waterfalls have a story behind it which has lasted for generations. He seems to regale in narrating us those stories.

Being an authority on Khasi tales and tradition, he realises that oral Khasi storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience, whereby the common mass participation even within the story is an essential ingredient much like the African oral tradition. Everyone in the society participate in formal and informal storytelling as interactive oral performances. Such participation is an essential part of traditional communal life and basic training in a particular culture's oral arts and skills is an essential part of children's traditional indigenous education on their way into initiation into full humanness.

If Nongkynrih's creative adaptations of the Khasi tales and legends and his conscious borrowings from them reveal his admiration for the traditional form of Khasi oral literature, at times there are also poems which articulate his annoyance, agony, anger at the ravishing of his land which has produced such enduring tales. He is amazed at the ravaging his land had to go through. In *Cherra*, he questions these

But what are these,
once rich with deep green camouflage
that gape like rat-bitten potatoes?
What are these,
consecrated once and dense with growth,
that shine like a high-shaven punky head,

bald and pallid?

(Cherra)

The bold and rather unconventional images linked to Cherrapunjee takes us by surprise. In his search for that “moment” of poetic inspiration, he turns to his birthplace. He wants to sing songs in her praise. He however hopes he is not too late in witnessing the nature’s grand symphony that Cherrapunjee promises to unveil. He laments,

Like little late Lalyngi who missed her dance,
I choose too late to sing.

He is aware of the history of his land, but he also knows that he has to find meaning in it. Hence it comes as no surprise that he turns towards these tales and legends looking for that elusive understanding in his personal life as well. He looks at the fragility of human relationships in the backdrop of these tales and legends. The poems thus become self-reflective; capturing the poet’s dilemma vis-à-vis his relationship with his loved ones and the society as a whole. In *A Day at Cherrapunjee: IV (Sngi Thiang)*, he recollects the famous tale of undying love of the maiden Sngi Thiang by whose name the famous Nohsngithiang falls is now known. He narrates

Sngi Thiang was a maiden...
she was a fairy,
and suitors, it was said,
flocked to her hut
like courtiers to a queen.

But the heart of Sngi Thiang was already given to someone else.

Only the betel nuts
were already exchanged
a long time ago,
when her heart was given
in the playgrounds and courtyards,
to a childhood sweetheart
who though an orphan,
rose like the moon
of fourteen nights...

But what do unfeeling parents,
who only thought of physical needs
and living well,
understand of the love
of true hearts?

He uses this story to reflect upon his own life and in relation to the lady that he loves, Ruby. Taking a dig at the system of arranged marriage prevalent in mainland India, and at the point of stating the obvious, he mentions,

Ruby, ours is a culture of love
and the free will,
we are not of the plains

who submit like an ass
and marry like a business deal.
But love,
let us defy in life,
nobody gains by death.

[*A Day at Cherrapunjee: IV (Sngi Thiang)*]

His love for his native place being well known, the best of Nongkynrih comes out in *Moments*. The poem seems to weave a language of its own. Here we find him sharing the anxieties of his life and remembers his moments and narrates this with a rhythm and urgency rarely matched. Here is an attempt to situate himself in a particular 'moment' in close proximity to people around him, to his society, the Other and history itself. A plethora of images is unleashed to vividly capture the moments of his life. The potential for individual destruction, the danger of everyday life in the streets, the human relationships and the accompanying pangs, these are all recorded in *Moments*. He recalls his life and how it is spent trying to come to terms with its complexities.

Life is spent fighting dirt
threatening to absorb my very moral breath
and it is not a vacant wish,
to imagine a man without his beast
as to imagine rain without mud.

He recalls his city life, life led indoors because of the unrest. The dynamics of the lived present and the moments of ethnic tensions and clashes seems to be intensely ingrained in his mind.

Squash covers the gardens
barricaded gardens of suspicious men,
with a green camouflage,
as the illusionary quiet
conceals a communal strife.

At such moments, he yearns for the quiet of his birthplace Cherrapunjee. The poem is a journey, where he is traveling *within* and discovers his primordial roots, which are strongly bounded to this native place. In this journey, his search for that moment is blissfully transformed when he realises that there is “peace in Cherra”. It is evident that the images move between the niggling and upsetting present and the deep urge to go back to the past. He knows that

There is peace in Cherra
where a man may walk
the time-honoured paths unperturbed
and breathe the invigorating air
without affliction to his nose.

For once he craves and desires to relive the moments spent at his birthplace, Cherrapunjee.

O, that I were in Cherra now
and lived it all once more.

(Moments)

Nongkynrih's other published collection, *The Sieve* is a collection of love poems. Strangely enough this collection does not follow any of the tradition of love poems that abound in India or otherwise. In the love poetry of Nongkynrih we encounter another medium of expression, which is bold, unconventional and extremely sharp-edged. We have in his poetry the desiring lover, the petulant lover, the persuasive lover, and to top it all his obsessive love for his native place, Cherrapunjee. In his love poems he talks of things that are so obvious that they are left unstated most of the times. The basic elements of naivety and the simplicity of human lust is penned by Nongkynrih without any hesitation. He captures ordinariness in human life yet recreating it in a novel and refreshing manner which makes the poem full of surprise and delectable humour. In *After the Passion, the Hangover is a Haunting Conscience*, he blurts out the truth:

When you sit with a woman,
it's like sitting in the sun.
First comes the warmth to the senses,
followed by the heat of desire.
and then, only the satisfaction matters.
But after the passion,
the hangover is a haunting conscience
and the unease for hours,
having said, "I love you,"
to a woman you can never love.

He writes about the innate human desire without any hesitation. The temptation for that momentary pleasure after being seduced by the flesh is very innate and basic in

humans. Talking about his libido in the poem of the same name, after seeing bits of “creamy thighs” or “ripening breasts”, he says,

At such times,
I have known
my mind to walk out on my books,
my fancy to turn its back on its own magic world
and even my love to forsake its fairy lover
for a cheap one with the real rolling hips.

However there is also a note of caution. While accepting the lure of the physical element, something else holds him during such times. The victory and triumph of reason over that “hour of joy” is made very clear. And he surprises the reader when he says,

It’s not the fear of the world,
but I thank god for it,
the fear of being caught
with the wrong woman for life,
that puts on the brake
and backtracks my mind
to the same lonely road,
where at the end,
my faithful books
once again wait
like a welcoming hut.

At times however love is also traditionally expressed in Nongkynrih. In *To the Quiet Inamorata Who Brought Love and Poetry Back to my Life*, written in a prose-like style, we find the quality of genuineness in the poet's experience. The naturalness in his manner of expression and the way he speaks about the fundamentals of human love and passion is very arresting. Taking a dig at his colleague giving him company at the examination hall, he tells us of how he fell in love, when his friend Prof. Joshi asked him to "stake out/the most beautiful girl in the room." But beauty and love are not equated here; they are not equal. Hence he chose the "most loving one", and that was how his love began, "with timid eyes reaching out/and smiling lips beaming a welcome." Love thus, does not curb his quest but instead gives an impetus to it. Hence

Even shame, that lover's plague,
ran a marathon,
as like, a sly impresario.

There is also the anguished lover having been betrayed by his beloved. The poem *You Are My Broken Heart*, might mislead the reader into taking the poet persona as someone desperate and frantic. But it is not so. The energy of the opening lines jolts the reader into taking notice. Buoyed by her innocence, he fell in love with her. But she is not the one who she pretends to be.

You are a whore and a killer.
how many abortions you have had?
You are a cheat and a maniac.
How many lovers have you led to bed?
You are a seducer, pretending innocence.

The poem acts as an insight in to the head-over-heels lover not heeding to the advice of family and friends. It is a pointer to the dangers and pitfalls of falling in love with the wrong one. Having known the truth, the poet persona adds as an after-thought,

But you are also my lover,
my fight with my family and friends,
till when you proved them right
and became my broken heart.

Though as a poet Nongkynrih sketches mostly the details of everyday life, looking forward to the future, he does not forget the past, as the past is a preserve and a treasure of haunting memories of the poetry of his love, his birthplace, Cherrapunjee. Time past is haunting because,

Poetry had first come to me in Cherra,
so twice I went back.

Detailed actions and happenings of the past are painted with vivid nostalgia.

But twice the wind whipped my face,
twice dust tried to get at my eyes
and twice the sun burnt my cheeks and nose
to a tormenting red.

There is a thin line dividing his love for his native place and that of his lover from where she hails. The poem does not re-enact the whole sequence or spectrum of actions. The only ones recounted are those charged with echoing significances.

And then the rain,
the first of the year,
arrived on that last February day
to usher in the poetry –
that came smiling with a country girl
from the shelter of a hut.

The poet in Nongkynrih is also deeply affected by the ongoing violence which seem to bring life to a standstill in this peaceful town and elsewhere in the region. He dreads at the spectre of violence that is looming large in the region. Speaking of the annual posture of the self-styled ‘liberators’ of clamping bandhs during Republic Days, he mutters in *Forebodings*:

Fear like a militant
had silenced every sound
and the timed afternoon
was slinking out like peace
from this town.

The endless killing spree has become like a poison in the region. All that a poet can do is tell the truth about it. And he does not hesitate in lamenting,

Each day, that is, was spent
filling in the pages with mundane things
recently with murders and shoot-outs
that have become mundane even here

this backwoods town of ours.

(Over my Heart the Seasons did Not Pass)

There is however one aspect of Nongkynrih's poetry that distinguishes him from all the other poets, be it those from the North-East or all over India, and that is humour. Tabish Khair while analyzing the element of humour in Indian English poets vis-à-vis the Indian English novelists notes that, "It is strange that Indian English poetry has been afflicted by this funny dearth [of humour] considering that Indian English literature is anything but dull and dour."⁵⁵ Khair includes a host of Indian English poets in this list including that of Robin S Ngangom. Trying to find a reason for this he goes on to add that, "Put in a situation of conflict by the mere selection of his language of expression, the writer tends to agonise over issues much more than if he had been speaking to the bar man. This tyranny of meanings is re-inforced by the post-colonial writer's struggle to give a name to an anonymous but familiar world."⁵⁶ Even Nil; a Shah and Pramod Nayar in their co-edited review of modern Indian English poetry remarks, "Indian Poetry in english, except for Daruwalla and Vikram Seth, is uniformly serious and gloomy!"⁵⁷ This allegation, though it might be true of most of the Indian English poets, is certainly not true of Nongkynrih. Humour, in his own imitable style though it might be satirical, sarcastic or otherwise, is one of his trademarks. Talking about a scholar who was pressing himself upon a maid "for easy prey" he remarks:

But thank God, I didn't hear

Him say, I Love You"

(But Thank God I Didn't hear Him Say)

⁵⁵ Tabish Khair, *A Funny Lack of Humour*, Times of India, New Delhi,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Nila Shah & Pramod Nayyar (ed.) *Introduction*, Modern Indian Poetry in English, Creative Books, New Delhi, 2000, p. 12.

In Delhi, to attend a national seminar on India's Renaissance attended by all those who mattered, he found that they talked "of many things in the seminar". But he remarks in a very sarcastic tone which is ultimately meant to convey a simple message as well.

Indeed my love,
We talked of so many things,
Of so many things,
That one hot-blooded Kashmiri
Stood up and asked the house,
What is the use of all this talking?

(In Delhi IV)

In an atmosphere where mostly serious poetry is written, "it is his wit which distinguishes him from the generally serious-minded Shillong poets."⁵⁸ On his visit to Delhi with a lecturer friend he remarks,

In the North-East Express
My lecturer friend had already found
A matric-passed Manipuri
With whom he discussed philosophy.
(Later, I heard them call each other fools.)

In his recent, but uncollected poems Nongkynrih has shown traits of a poet worth emulating. "He has made amends for his early lack of exposure by reading up widely in

⁵⁸ Sumanyu Satpathy, "Weiking" *In The Mists or the Literature of "Real Conflict": English Poetry from the Khasi Hills* (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.18:

Latin American and Central European poetry; and in his more recent poems,... Nongkynrih has started showing signs of maturity”⁵⁹ Nongkynrih has a felicity with words, be it his insistence on some terms from the Khasi language in his English poems which shows the poet’s belief that the ethos cannot be replicated or translated in any other language, or his concise, precise and sharp-edged choice of it in most of his poems. His next collection is thus eagerly awaited and it should show Nongkynrih at his best.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 18

Robin S Ngangom

Passing on from the two Khasi poets to another poet who is also a tribal but a Meiti from Manipur, one finds in Robin S Ngangom a notable change in his diction, and language, though the subject matter is nearly the same in most cases, speaking of the verdant hills and the depressing state of endless communal clashes. Writing both in Manipuri and English, he is widely published and his poems are also included in the *Anthology of New Indian English Poetry*, brought out by Rupa and edited by Makrand Paranjape in 1993. His first collection *Words and Silence* appeared from the Writer's Workshop, Calcutta in 1988. His second collection, *Times Crossroads*, in 1994, drew rave reviews and was published by Orient Longman, Hyderabad. Robin's poems and translations have also appeared in magazines and poetry journals such as *Lipi*, *The Poetry Chain*, *The Telegraph Colour Magazine*, *Chandrabhaga*, *Kavya Bharati*, *Indian literature* and others.

Like Kharmawphlang, Ngangom too believes – as he noted in the prefatory note in *Words and the Silence* – “in the poetry of feeling which can be shared, as opposed to mere cerebral poetry.”⁶⁰ Born in Imphal in 1959 before coming over to Shillong, his poetry echoes and reflects aspects of both the cultures and “therefore his understanding of the ‘trouble-torn city’ that Shillong is, comes from a broader perspective of the north-east.”⁶¹ One of his poems, *Native Land* deals with the impasse of having been brought up

⁶⁰ Robin S Ngangom, *Moments*, Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1988.

⁶¹ Sumanyu Satpathy, “Weiking” *In The Mists or the Literature of “Real Conflict”: English Poetry from the Khasi Hills* (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.19.

and living in the “miserics of contemporary dilemma”⁶². They are portrayals of society under the grip of senseless violence. He recounts,

First came the screams of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a newspaper: Six shot dead,
twenty-five houses razed,
sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church.

The strength of the lines come from his strong observatory powers and an eye for the minutest details. These startling facts have however made the poet lose his bearings and the events around him have made him lose his “tenuous humanity”. In a remarkably moving confession he says,

I ceased thinking,
of abandoned children inside blazing huts
still waiting for their parents.
If they remembered their grandmothers’ tales
of many winter hearths at the hour
of sleeping death, I didn’t want to know,
didn’t want to know if they ever learnt
the magic of letters.

⁶² Jayanta Mahapatra, Foreward to *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-East*, NEHU, Shillong, May, 2003.

There is a that realisation at his responsibility, but he bluntly and unequivocally admits his helplessness. He seems to have resigned to his fate. He regrets “his inability to be more than just a witness.”⁶³ Reminiscent of Wilfred Owen and his insistence on the ‘truth untold’, Ngangom acknowledges,

I burnt my truth with them,
and buried uneasy manhood with them.
I did mutter, on some far-off day:
“There are limits”, but when the days
absolved the butchers, I continued to live
as if nothing has happened.

He is also deeply conscious of the dubious case of the ‘freedom fighters’, more so he becomes very skeptical of the people who ‘profess’ about peace at every street-corner. Taking a dig at the so-called apostles of peace, who comes armed with unconvincing and uncertain rhetoric, he mentions mockingly,

There now arrive those who say they can fetch peace
wrapped in embraces and garlands and tongues,
they say they can soften the bludgeoning of ruthless hands.
They also extended soft palms which became mailed fists
that strangled justice.

The choice of the word ‘fetch’ is so apt considering that peace and security has become a commercial item in the present circumstances. When the biblical reference of the ‘mailed fist’ is added to it, the poet tries to poignantly remind the reader of the countless number

⁶³ Adil Jussawala, *A Range of Poems*, The Times of India, February 20, 1994.

of times the people have been duped and cheated with the promise of that elusive peace. He reminds us in *When You Do Not Return*, that even men “of God merely chants/the sanctimonious burlesque of prayers...” On a more philosophical note he adds with conviction,

It is not the hour to greet each other
with “Peace be unto you” if we do not know how
to comfort the bereaved...

(We Are Not Ready For the Hand of Peace)

He envisages a situation where is no peace and dreads at it because,

When you leave your native hills
winter is merely a reminder
of all past winters.

In one of his most memorable lines, he says,

The poet loses his metaphors
when you do not return, and he
merely repeats himself in the
dreadful arithmetic of the day.

(When You Do Not Return)

Ngangom, however, does not write only about the strife. He is also a poet of the misty climes and the verdant hills that would put the poetic imagination of any person in overdrive. Rooted as he is to the beauty and charm of the region he swears by his undying devotion and allegiance to it. He captures the essence the land of the Khasis, – or *Hynniew Trep* as the Khasis would like it to be called – its culture and its fascinating landscape and people in *Ode to Hynniew Trep*. The ravaging of the land in the hands of the outsiders and the general insensitivity shown by the native inhabitants is a matter of great concern for him. Hence the “Solitary light/on eastern hills” becomes a “sad widow”, a “forgotten rambling rose” abandoned by its won people and thus “poised/for the renegade’s hand.” But in spite of it, the place still entralls. He salutes the amazing hospitality of the people and its culture.

Hills with spires of churches,
hills with rice-fields for siblings,
hills with genial steps
where earth’s tribes
intercourse.

The land is identified with a

Woman with hair of pine,
girl with breasts of orchid,
woman with mouth of plum,
girl with feet of opaque stone

Tiny waist of hill resorts
with misty loin-cloth,

cool descending
stream of soil
to rainforests darker
than sky.

“Part of Ngangom’s charm is the fascination for distance. His hillsclapes seem to belong to a very quiet, very distant land. But there is also his special mix of Khasi and Meitei myths, Chinese poetics and plain adolescent lust”⁶⁴ these features are clearly evident in poems such as *Gangtok, February 1998*, *There is a Consummate Woman*. He also surprises us with his deep insights into the everyday life of a common man. He shows the humourous side of himself in poems such as *Weekend*, where he talks of a man “who comes home drunk on Saturday nights” only to beat up his wife and scare his children. “Inside the man picks up an argument with the woman.” But things take a drastic turn in the morning.

In the morning the man teases the woman in bed.
The woman, not angrily, but rather pleasantly says,
‘Please stop this, not in front of the children’...
...in the afternoon the man goes out,
the woman goes with him, their arms linked...

The weekend is spent.

⁶⁴ Adil Jussawala, *A Range of Poems*, The Times of India, February 20, 1994.

One of Ngangom's most memorable poems deals with the relationship with his mother. He laments the fact that he could not live up to her expectations. And yearns for forgiveness, for having ruined her dreams of him.

Forgive me, for all your dreams
of peace and rest during remnant days
I only turned out to be a small man,
With small dreams and leading a small life.

Anjum Hasan

The only woman poet among the five chosen, Anjum Hasan is a non-tribal Muslim poet. Though she has no published collection till date, her poems have however appeared in various reputed poetry journals and magazines such as *Lipi* edited by the reputed poet Jayanta Mahapatra, *Lyric*, the poetry magazine published bi-annually by the Shillong Poetry Society, *Kavya Bharati*, *Chandrabhaga*, *Indian Literature*, the *Journal of the North-East Writer's Forum*, etc. Being well read in "English and other literatures, and a student of philosophy, she has the right kind of 'long foreground' for a serious engagement with poetry."⁶⁵

What would however strike any reader encountering her for the first time is the prose-like style of her poetry. In her we can see and hear a new voice slowly making itself heard by carving out a new style, very individualistic in itself and trying to break away from styles and forms which are self-constricting. In most of the poems as we shall see, Anjum Hasan is rarely comfortable with poems written with regular metre and rhyme. Let us sample the poem *Time of My Childhood*. The poem as the title suggests recollects the time of her childhood, "secret as light/in the boughs of a bougainvillea at night when two or three / music-filled taxis go by laden with silhouettes and / dreams. She Has a clinical eye for detail which combined with a well chiseled syntax enables her to reproduce all the images of her childhood whose significance extend well beyond the mere description. The beauty of her poems lies in the imagery and in the poem *Time of my childhood*, the image of the ever-wondering child calls up in the reader's mind a response which includes, besides a sense of boredom and loneliness, a haunting

⁶⁵ Sumanyu Satpathy, "Weiking" *In The Mists or the Literature of "Real Conflict": English Poetry from the Khasi Hills* (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.21.

perception of a childhood spent not in the most memorable of ways. The dark, grim and barbed images in it suggest this.

/The time of my childhood was brittle
As glass ground into the string of a kite that the wind ate away,
The strange twilight o'clock time of tree spirits and other ghosts
Of the mind, that bleak urban time. My childhood time was
Time stoked by an old woman's breath in a dark kitchen at night,...

But she realizes that when she tries to go back to those times, it on hindsight is not as bad as it seemed to be. Immediately there is a visible change in her choice of her images. They become brighter and happier when she tries to nostalgically recollect the childhood days

...runs out of my hand to dance like light
On the snows and goes out when I try to go back to it.

(Time of My Childhood)

Anjum Hasan's poetry is extremely "evocative, emotive and built around memories of people, and places. And yet she seldom lapses into sentimental slop"⁶⁶ As we have seen in the previous poem, most of her poetry recalls her childhood poignantly and all the people and places are revisited once again. Some of her poems act as social commentaries. In *On My Street*, she recalls the invasion of satellite television in her neighbourhood,

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 22

Everyone on my street dreams of America:
... Grandfather is dead now
and the new double-storied, concrete house...
has a satellite dish into which the whole world fits.
And everyone dreams of America.

She is apparently worn-out and fed up of it. So she decides, "I'm going to the village."
But she adds in a very ironic vein, "I know the future:". While in the city everyone
dreams of America, here in the village

It'll be the preacher's daughter who'll teach us
How to lead our lives
And her cool American heels will resound in chilling clarity
Down my forsaken street.

Anjum Hasan also writes about anguish, suffering, the destitute, love. Most of the images in her poetry convey a sense of a wild shriek of despair that fills every nook and corner. Some of her poems seem to form a continuous tale of woe. But she does this with finesse avoiding the usual sentimental blabber. Hence some of her poetry can be viewed as a metaphoric journey into the heart of existence, into the roots of one's self or being which embodies the existential dimensions of life. Thus her poetry represents a reality in which all the dichotomies of life are included, in which contraries exist side by side and in which the encountering self seeks a resolution out of the tension that one encompasses in daily life. In her relentless search for her 'self' in a moving soliloquy she says,

I have forgotten all of myself

But my name.
Watching in a darkening room
The seas fight their old wars
Of water and colour on the steps
Of the old spinning earth,
Somebody began me and I walk continents
Searching for the meaning of my face.
From the blood on the mountains
And the glass on the street,
Is the blood of my fingers
And the glass of my fingers
And the glass of my eye,
And I am a part,
Yet I am apart
For this horizon of weakening light
That watches me.

The poem is an attempt to question her identity. And here she effectively uses the confessional and rhetorical modes – which she does quite often – to focus on the pertinent questions relating to a woman’s identity. Leading a life that has been ‘surrounded by windows’, she comes to a tearful conclusion when she realizes that the search for the woman in her is becoming fruitless because,

I neither body nor dream,
Only human as a wind
Trapped in the thin red rocks of history,
I fight the strata of dead men

Who have contributed their mortality to mine.

(Reading Paz)

There is a desire to be even with the world and grow up in her own terms and not confirm to family pressures by confirming to traditional family roles. Hence when she was growing up she walks in her “mother’s clothes on the street.” The objective and the intention is clear enough, to live life in her own terms.

...I cheat people:

Men, girls in high heels who pretend not to look
And fidget and sulk, girls lovely and empty with want
Who I destroy with my look of Elsewhere.
It’s so easy to break girls, spoil their carefully planned
Afternoons, their elaborate plans to sweeten the air,
Tantalise. Their eyes are bright with their love
For themselves, while I walk on the street
In my mother’s clothes, laughing inside relieved
Of the burden of being what one wears...

(In My Mother’s Clothes)

But the wearing of the mother’s clothes also symbolizes the inner urge to be a mother. But she vehemently questions the notion, “is it only one woman we all want to be?” she wants to be different. She stumbles upon the realization that this is actually a dream “of all the girls in high heels/on the street, who I scorn?”, and this is definitely not what she wants to be, because she herself dreams of “elusiveness”.

This spontaneity of the treatment of a girl's/woman's experience belongs to the recent times in which there has been a heightening of interest in the work and achievement of women and women writers in particular. The importance of the theme is the way in which a woman can re-define her existence and not to succumb to the traditional roles assigned to them. Much like Kamala Das's poetry, Anjum Hasan's poetry too is the celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman. In spite of all this, Anjum Hasan however seems to have a good deal of the conventional woman in her. This makes her able to speak of the common woman and her basic needs with knowledge of conviction.

Ananya Sankar Guha

Like Anjum Hasan, Guha too is a non-tribal, born and brought up in Shillong. "Ananya S. Guha is the least 'ethnic' and perhaps the most underrated of the three senior poets of Shillong."⁶⁷ He is the founder member of the Shillong Poetry Society and co-edits its poetry magazine *Lyric*. He was awarded the Michael Madhushudan Academy Award in 1997 for his first book of poems *What Else is Alive?* Which was brought out in 1988. Poetry apart, Guha has written a number of book reviews and literary articles for journals and magazines such as *Journal of Indian Writing in English* (Gulbarga), *Indian Review of Books* (Madras), *Indian Book Chronicle* (Jaipur), etc. he number of articles pertaining to the various aspects of Distance Education have also been published in newspapers, magazines and conference manuals. He has also written a series of textbooks for schoolchildren in Meghalaya, entitled *Creativity is Fun*. He has also been broadcasting news, plays, narrations in AIR Shillong and the Northeastern service of AIR. He is at present working as the Assistant Regional Director of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, Shillong.

A cursory glance at this poetry will reveal that it deals mostly with personal issues and hence his poetry is somewhat urbane, elitist, and aesthetic oriented. But if the other tribal poets deal with issues out of regional concern, Guha's poetry has a more nationalistic outlook. If there is a strong sense of belonging to a place in Guha, it is not only the region, but also the whole of India as such. There is a strong national appeal that cannot be denied. This however, in no way means that Guha's poetry is escapist, or

⁶⁷ Sumanyu Satpathy, "Weiking" *In The Mists or the Literature of "Real Conflict": English Poetry from the Khasi Hills* (New Delhi, Indian Literature, No. 190, Mar-Apr 1999, Vol. XLIII No. 2), p.20.

segregating the real issues affecting the region. Hence Chandra Chatterjee in his review of Guha's first collection of poems *What Else is Alive?* Writes, "Guha's flexibility in treating themes can be discerned by the way he widens his perspective in specific

situation poems"⁶⁸ Hence in *Song for India*, he writes,

Here beggars
crawl on all fours, like animals
or spoilt children

Dirty pavements, overbridges
and noisy sidewalks spawn them.

Seeing them I feel a heavy burden
on my frail shoulders
and those incessant hammerings within

India wounds me.

He however also shows his concern for the region as it left out of the national mainstream. He says,

We are the skeletal remains
of a decaying age

⁶⁸ Chandra Chaterjee, Review of Guha's *What Else is Alive?* in *Prativa India*, no. 2 vol. IX, Jan-March, 1990.

We look at a blood splattered Punjab
and write suave editorials on it

And for forget India bleeds in the hills.

(Prayer)

Unlike the other tribal poets in the northeast, Guha's poetry however gives the impression of a dual, if not multiple allegiance; allegiance to his place of birth, allegiance towards his ancestral place, Bengal and towards his country as a whole. This translates into his concern not being limited to only a specific region or place. Hence it is not strange to find Guha saying,

Writing away with my
sorrow with these lines...

While, of course,
India bleeds
in the sultry plains
of Punjab
or the hilly terrain of Nagaland
in a street in Calcutta
where every year the same
ancient man sits begging for alms and
sympathy.

If the other tribal poets give us a perspective of inter-tribal clashes and killings, Guha gives us the bloody details of the Hindu-Muslim communal strife which seems to be the bane of our nation. Talking of the birthplace of his mother, Mymensingh, which was a part of the undivided Bengal he realises that his roots are “dirty” and “straggling”, blotted by the communal killings of the partition. He cries,

My mother was born in Mymensingh
she speaks of it
with the desolateness of a pauper
sagacity of a saint

Primeval wisdom Mymensingh
festering pot of cultures Mymensingh
Hindus and Muslims Mymensingh
Hindus versus Muslims Mymensingh

Ugly, squalid Mymensingh
where on the eve of partition
terrified Hindus and Muslims gouged each other's eyes
spat at one another, astonished at this deceit
bloodlust,
mother we remain astonished till today.

And like all the poets from the region, this is a history which though it pricks him a lot, he would like to forget.

I'll never dig them out

But let them remain growing like cacti
In the opal shores of history.

(Mymensingh)

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The study of English poetry from Shillong has been a very enabling process. Though the lack of critical material has been a distinct disadvantage, what has made the exercise worthwhile is the fact that it has helped especially in the understanding of the culture from the North-East, more specifically from Shillong. The reason why only poets from Shillong have been chosen is that Shillong is the literary hub in the North-East and apart from the lack of poetry writers in English in other places, these poets here speak of the region as a whole, capturing and magnifying its rich cultural heritage, as well as its inherent problems of ethnic conflict, strife and living under the shadow of the gun. One can situate most of these poems anywhere in the North-East. In most of the poems there is a definite transformation of the poet as a personal voice to that of a social voice. What is most striking in the poetry that comes from this place is the collective voice that these poets stand for without any uncertainty or ambiguity. The poetry magazine *Lyric* from Shillong which is co-edited by Ngangom, Kharmawphlang and Guha or even the recently published *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* co-edited by Nongkynrih and Ngangom stands ample testimony to the fact that these poets know about each others poetry try to speak and project a collective voice. Hence the insistence in the editors' note on "*the* writer from the northeast [who is different] from his counterpart in the mainland"⁶⁹ [My italicisation]

It is interesting to see a distinct pattern in the poems which have been discussed in this study. With the exception of the two non-tribal poets, Guha and Anjum Hasan, there

⁶⁹ Kynpham S Nongkynrih, Robin S Ngangom. Editors' Note in *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, Shillong, NEHU Publications, 2003.

seems to be a dedicated effort to strive for harmony within the seemingly turbulent emotional themes of love, life and the endless strife and conflict. One can safely conclude that the poets here are trying to use the meaning of cultural ethnicity within a periphery of re-theorizing and re-asserting a new form of modern poetry. To them the role of folk culture and literature cannot simply be ignored. They sing of the voices in the streets and villages and *haats*. Their poems are rich with deep thought and emotions expressed in easy words used in daily life. Their poetry is somewhat similar to the *baul* songs or the *bhajans* in mainland India.

As discussed and mentioned in the text, the Northeastern tribal culture is deeply rooted in its ethnicity to which it owes its origin. The theme of the return to the past seems so dominant that often it does not differentiate patterns of modernisation from the age-old customs and traditional living. It would be probably a common scene to encounter the people from the hills to be attired in the trendiest apparels at the same time singing the folklores of yesteryears. It would be also be a regular feature to see the customs of the tribe followed so ardently by the people especially like the rites and rituals offered during funerals and childbirth as well and many others. At times there seems to be no conflict adjusting to the cyclic pattern of tradition versus modernity. What turns out so spectacular in these poems is the fact that the underlying aim of uniting the present with the past is so perfectly and painlessly attained.

The imagery used by the poets here is derived from the ancient folk tales and lores that might have been extinguished had it not been for the songs and oral tales, which kept them alive. The use of concrete natural items like the hills, streams, rain, clouds, trees etc added a new dimension to while keeping the significance of the content matter intact. The themes that our forefathers were most familiar with include these items and it is impressive to notice affinity in the poems today since there is a similar, if not the

same, flow of ideas which has remained unsullied. Reflections of the lifestyle then and now have been beautifully captured and arranged presenting a harmonious balance. The play of emotion and sentiment is as creative as it sounds to the ears which were once attuned only to the oral renderings of the folk tales. Now through the poems, one can still feel the potent charm of the mystical culture he/she belongs to.

Myths, legends, tales, which have been a part and parcel of each person who has invariably heard them from his elders at least once in his lifetime, have now been added a different dimension of time. The adaptation of these (myths and legends) into a revised version seems to be a virtue for these poets as we see here. It is this commendable work that makes one wonder how these “unheard voices” stayed mute once, and how can one still tie them down; because they are so powerful and so awesome in nature that they may just burst out on their own if left unattended to. The ‘return’ also helps in re-defining and re-writing the history of these people which has been mis-constructed and mis-construed for a long time. Hence the editors of the recently published *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* assert that a part of the reason why the anthology was brought out was because, “although a great cultural cauldron, the Northeast of India remains little-known and largely misunderstood”⁷⁰ Hence their poetry can be easily looked at as an attempt to re-write the history of the region and clear it of all its mis-conceptions. Most of these poets are young aspiring affluent men/ women of the society who have not left their traditions behind. In fact they have striven to build their stance upon this very aspect of following traditions.

All these poets have also strongly identified themselves with the common man and his problems. Then transcending to the incorporation of the present to past and vice-

⁷⁰ Kynpham S Nongkynrih & Robin S Ngangom Ed., *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, NEHU Publications, Shillong, 2003.

versa theme, they have transformed the image of the common man to a highly sensitive entity personifying mystic and magic. Whether it is their love poems, or poems dealing with everyday reality, they seem to capture the essence and the trials and tribulations of everyday life in their poetry. What strikes me also is that the poets' have been able to personify situations yet maintaining their own individuality. The core focus and the objective remain clear and precise to the reader within the background of events. The socio-economic significance of the prioritized endeavour seems to be the recognition of the common man and his muses. One may wonder invariably whether there is an aim here or just expressions of the moment, yet the objective of the poems reflects a silent protest to the common man's afflictions. The issues and the options they seek to find is in itself a solution to rectify these loopholes in the society.

The poetry of all the poets in general reflects the spark of the contemporary life and society. They are mostly short, compact and are concerned with the various common subjects of contemporary interests and knowledge of life and civilization of the modern society. If in Kharmawphlang, Nongkynrih and Ngangom it is the everyday life in midst of a major strife and conflict, it is about womanhood and its past in Anjum Hasan or mostly the search for the self in Guha. In other words, it is the length and breadth of human life in all its aspects and situations expressed in tender senses. Concern for the women folk also stands out as one of the major concerns in some of these poems, as the poets venture out to a domain where the ruthless and barbaric male-dominated world harass the weaker sex either by thought, word or deed. The cries of the children orphaned and handicapped to such an extent that the voices almost seem to be mute or even muted, also rises up somewhere in the vicinity of the theme. It is fascinating that the themes here present a total picture of the society by and large encompassing all the defines of "common man".

Though there is no explicitly stated problem with the choice of language as such, it seems that the prime concern of the poets is with the message that they have to convey. It seems to be an uneasy and an unstated understanding that if their portrayals have to be identified with, it has to be in English for the sake of a wider audience. The widespread popularity of English makes it possible that the major themes are communicated whether in lyrical form or otherwise. It eventually becomes a mode of expression best utilized in its form and functionality. In the everyday situation, particularly if we enact a scene from the life of a common man in Shillong where he uses English language as the main medium of conversation with peers and strangers alike, we can derive at this certainty that perhaps English stands out to be a dominant lingua franca where the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' be best developed. This aspect conceivably is one of the reason why the poets chose to write in English. Perhaps, by doing this, he has a sense of affinity with the person and the situation alike. English is the only language by which one can communicate within and without in the northeast, considering the large number of languages and dialects that is spoken there.

Scope for Further Research:

The trend of writing poetry is catching up very fast in the region, and all credit should go to the senior poets like Kharmawphlang, Nongkynrih, Ngangom and Guha for their endeavours, attempts and efforts at popularizing this art through whatever means is there at their disposal. It is extremely painful not to include so many other talented and promising poets in this small and modest attempt of mine. One of the main reasons is the difficulty with collecting the required manuscripts, since most of the young poets like Almond D Syiem, Frederick R Kharkongor, Gweneth A Mawlong, Iamon Syiem, Paul Lyngdoh and many others from the neighbouring states do not have a collection as yet. Most of their poems are published in magazines, journals, newspapers, etc. But there is no denying the fact that poetry in the northeast is on a firm ground providing endless scope for further analysis and more elaborate studies.

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