

## **Weaving History by Witnessing: Some Reflections on the Poetry from Northeast India**

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### **Abstract**

Since the inception of literary writings, writers began to project their perception about their time period in their works. Many earlier writers used poetry as their medium for recording the history, day to day events, religious hymns, folklores, beliefs, cultures and traditions of the early society. Poets continued to reflect the scenarios of their respective time during different eras but a major breakthrough in poetry writing came during and after the First World War. Soldier poets who had enlisted in the war witnessed the event and wrote poems based on what they witnessed. First World War transformed the way poems were written before and aftermath of war. The term “Poetry of Witness” was introduced in the later years referring to the works of many poets from various parts of the world who had witnessed the atrocities and brutalities of wars. This paper is an attempt to explore how the act of witnessing an event of the time by the poet becomes the history. The paper focuses on some of the poets and their poems from the Northeast India and sees how they have mastered the art of witnessing the ongoing issues of their respective place.

**Keywords:** Witness, history, First World War, Northeast Poetry.

The history of English poetry gives an idea about how the earlier poets felt as their duty to record the day to day events, the culture and tradition, folklores and myths, religious hymns and all that was significant of the earlier times. Poetry was the most important medium of recording events of the time. Through poetry many details surrounding the lives of the people of the given period could be known. As the years rolled by, poets continued to represent various

issues of their time in their poetry. However, substantial development came in the form of First World War and the poems written during this period and aftermath of it. The poets who participated in the war wrote their poems witnessing it; in this process they recorded the genuine details of the war. Some poets wrote while in the trenches, some wrote while convalescing, some wrote after the war yet they collectively addressed the brutalities of the war. The terror of the war changed the way poetry was ever written before and after as poets began to respond to the situation in a different way. Earlier war was celebrated and associated with glory, power and might and same was represented in the earlier poetry. But the soldier poets who participated in the war went through extreme sufferings and depicted the horror, suffering, casualties and brutalities of the war. “Many poets did not survive, but their works remain with us as poetic witness to the dark times in which they lived.”(Forché 29) Poets like Wilfred Owen and many other soldier poets were killed during the war at their early age. They felt it as their moral duty to bear witness in their poetry to events such as war, tyranny and other forms of injustice. This kind of war and various other atrocities in the history of mankind gave birth to the term “Poetry of witness”:

The term “Poetry of Witness” is coined by Carolyn Forché, referring to the poetry written by the poets, who lived in war zones or conflict areas. It is the expression of trauma and suffering. It is an ‘alternative history’ recounted by the poets as the victims of cruelty, or at least the witness of it; a manifestation of the suffering of the people, subjected to very ‘serious situations’ in periods of war or conflict by the state agencies. (Ashraf 221)

“Poetry of Witness is a type of poetry that attempts to reveal human pain through the art of words.”<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Forché’s *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (1993), and *Poetry of Witness : The Tradition in English, 1500-2001* (2014) co-edited by Duncan Wu and Carolyn Forché are the two books which have brought awareness about Poetry of Witness to the wider audience. In his book, *The Witness of Poetry* Czeslaw Milosz defined poetry as the “passionate pursuit of the real.” (25)<sup>2</sup>

According to Carolyn Forché, their poetry is “an attempt to speak for more than one and to engage all others” (34). The war poets wrote in order to bring general awakening about the

brutalities of the war, to preserve their memories and events of an era that otherwise might get lost and to give voice to their experiences. Their records are the testimony of what has once occurred. These poems were written while the poets were enduring afflictions of worst sort and present the historical records of the time. In Forché's word, "Poem as trace, poem as evidence" (31). It awakens the reader and makes them ponder upon the situation as represented in the poem. It invites for re-thinking, preventing war and atrocities that have already caused greatest casualties in human history. In her essay, "Poetry of Witness" (2011), Forché wrote:

The poem makes present to us the experience of the other, the poem is the experience, rather than a symbolic representation...we are marked by it and become ourselves witnesses to what it has made present before us". Hence, "Witness" occurs not in the poet, but in the reader, meaning that the craft emphasized transitive energy rather than mimetic narrative.<sup>3</sup>

The witness poetry makes the reader feel the experience of the poet; it makes the reader visualize the scene that is represented in the poem. The motive of this kind of poetry is not to frighten the readers but to make them aware of what war is like and what can be done in order to prevent this kind of brutalities in future. Witness poetry has influenced the literary world today like never before. Poets are awakened to the atrocities around and have begun portraying it as it is. The poets from the Northeast India are also witnessed to the issues surrounding their respective regions. Poets like Temsula Ao, Robin Ngangom , Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and many others are popular for representing the situations as they occur. Poets from the regions are highly conscious about the ongoing circumstances and shoulder the onus to depict it in their poems in the hope of bringing change and awareness among the people. Temusla Ao, a poet from Nagaland is concerned about her communities vanishing culture in the present day due to modernization, urbanization, globalization and several other factors. She is conscious about the present day cultural loss and believes that the solution for many present day issues lies in reviving the traditional past. She has witnessed the degeneration of cultures in the region and wishes to do her part in order to bring awareness about the lost heritage among her people. In

one of her poems “The Old Story-Teller” she narrates the importance of her story telling heritage:

Grandfather constantly warned  
That forgetting the stories  
Would be catastrophic:  
We would lose our history,  
Territory, and most certainly  
Our intrinsic identity. (27-32 )

She says she remembers the time when her grandfather once spoke highly about oral stories and warned that forgetting the stories which enshrines the tales, traditions and cultures and secrets of their origin would mean losing their identity. Thus, recognizing the loss and shouldering responsibility to perpetuate this tradition she says:

So I told stories  
As my racial responsibility  
To instill in the young  
The art of perpetuating  
Existential history and essential tradition  
To be passed on to the next generation. (33-38)

The poet in order to highlight the importance of storytelling tradition amongst the present day younger generations decides to write about it and also to preserve its importance for the upcoming generations. At present she is dismayed to see that the younger generations disregard their own tradition under the influence of so many modern changes and developments:

But now a new era has dawned.  
Insidiously displacing the old.  
My own grandsons dismiss  
Our stories as ancient gibberish  
From the dark ages, outmoded  
In the present times and ask

Who needs rambling stories

When books will do just fine? (39-46)

The present generation seems not curious enough about the stories of their tradition; often they reject it giving no importance that it deserves. Thus, the poet chooses to warn them because she believes that nothing really can replace the old precious tradition. In this way she points out the issues of cultural degradation in the region. She decides to portray in order to make people realise what it means to be without an identity of one's own and what can be done to amend it.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, a poet from Shillong writes about the issues of growing population, infiltration of migrants, haphazard building construction in the region and many other relevant issues of his time. His motivation behind writing his poems are bringing change in the attitudes of mankind as well as change in their behavior. In the editorial theme titled “ The Writer and the community: A case for Literary Ambidexterity” he writes:

I too wish to address my people directly, I would like to tell them of the colossal threat to our land posed by the careless flood of humanity and the growing aggressiveness of migrants. I would like to speak to them of the perils of terrorism and the greater peril of human turning terrorists. I would like to tell them of the absurdity of trying to deny their own roots and the anarchy that follows in forgetting their own identity. I would like to talk of our great festivals, of Weiking, and the vitality of their part in our social life.  
 (Nehu Journal)

The Northeast regions as a whole is generally known for its breathtaking beauty, greenery and plenty of forests but the following lines reveal the situation as otherwise. The poet observing the damaged done to once pristine environment reflects:

Inevitably, however, here too,  
 time has left its ugly wounds.  
 Pines like filth are lifted  
 from woodlands in truckloads.  
 Hills lose their summer green,  
 blasted into rocks,

into pebble and sand  
and the sand is not spared.  
This is the sadness with us all  
who cannot think beyond possessions  
and live but for a single season. (“Kynshi” 38-46)

The poet vividly presents man’s actions and his excessive greed. Man’s acquisitive nature has led to the decay of natural world around. He has plundered nature and its resources to the edge, sparing nothing. The poet disapproves the rapacity of mankind and their wanton destruction of nature. The mindless acts of man, his thoughtlessness are the plight of the present day.

Similarly, Robin Ngangom, a poet from Manipur reflects upon the conflicts in Manipur in his poetry. His poetry becomes a medium for reflecting on the day to day realities of the region and serves as a testimony to the time of the event and place. In his essay, “Contemporary Manipuri Poetry: An Overview”, Robin writes that, “poets also have to write about here and now. And writing about it lends a sense of immediacy and vividness to their poetry. This is perhaps what constitutes ‘the poetry of witness’”. (300). He believes in representing the issues and incident as it is, he further says, “for the first time I have begun to understand Camus’s words: “whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression.”(299)

Robin by comparing the pleasant past to the corrupted present shows the difference in order to make people realize their roots as well as revive the past. In his poem “I am Sorry to see Poetry in Chains” he observes:

Once prime land, beneficent and fabled  
and now playground of black-marketers,  
haven for fortune hunters where  
none misses a heartbeat  
as you feed money, sell honour, peddle justice. (36-40)

Unlike the beneficent past, the present time in his place appears to be degenerated due to the action of corrupts few. The well being of the past can hardly be seen. The poet does not hesitate to speak about the truth he knows. The very fact these poets are writing about the truth of their respective regions reveals their intense love and concern for their place and people. Their poetry is the result of their personal experiences and is the evidence of the issues that have occurred in the region. According to Forché, “beyond being a medium for reflecting on historical realities, poetry could also serve a testimonial or evidentiary purpose.”<sup>4</sup> During the troubled time, the responsibility of the poet is to mirror the issues of the time. In Forché’s words, “what I found was human soul endures in the poetry, poetry is the natural prayer of the human soul and a depository for all that occurred.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, these three poets found poetry as their medium to depict several issues of their time. It is not that these three poets represent only the single issue as presented in this paper; in fact, they are standing against different kinds of problems in the region. The major contemporary issues they have addressed in their poetry are universal in nature as it not limited to their region alone, same kinds of issue are prevalent worldwide. Their poetry makes the reader feel and experience what the poet has undergone. In other words, the reader becomes the witness of the events being represented in the poem. By depicting the events as it is they are also recording the history of the region. It thus gives reader a space for deep reflection and further necessary action.

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