

## Mapping the Thematic Landscapes of Modern Northeast Indian Poetry in English: A Study of Robin S. Ngangom's Poetry Collections

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### Abstract

Robin S. Ngangom also known as Dr. Ngangom Rabindra Singh from Manipur is one of the most representative poets of Northeast India who writes in both English and his mother tongue *Meiteilon*. Themes of day-to-day life and the contemporary socio-political situation in Manipur are present in his collections of poems, namely, *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994), *The Desire of Roots* (2006), and *My Invented Land* (2023). Ngangom's poetry is also filled with beautiful landscapes, natural embellishments of Northeast India, love and romance, patriotism, corruption, resistance, insurgency, conflict, human relationships, and socio-political issues of the land. The paper discusses selected poems from the four poetry collections and critically studied through close reading of the texts by incorporating the postcolonial and ecocritical theoretical perspectives. The paper is an attempt to study the themes present in the selected poetry of Robin S. Ngangom and also how reading of Ngangom's poetry will leave a lasting effect on the readers' minds to its truest sense.

**Keywords:** love, Manipur, nature, Northeast India, marginalized voices

### Introduction:

Literature has been an educator for human beings from ages. As it mirrors life, one gets to know the existing issues and conflicts and enables one to seek the solution. Poetry is another form of literature that has been teaching our society in manifold aspects. It effectively leaves the readers' minds in awe just as a novel does. One cannot but appreciate the beauty of poem as it succeeds in touching both the heart and mind of the readers. With these concepts of literature, poetry and life, an earnest attempt is made to study the poems of Robin S. Ngangom and offer a perspective that has been less touched upon. The article is about studying the select poetry of Robin S. Ngangom though a detailed critical analysis and study the themes present in his poetry and find the relevance in today's life especially in the lives of Northeast Indians.

Robin S. Ngangom stands as a prominent literary figure from Manipur and Northeast India, celebrated for his poetic versatility and widespread recognition. Deeply rooted in the cultural and emotional landscape of his homeland, Ngangom's work reflects a profound love for his state, its people, and its rich traditions. Engaging with his poetry evokes a sense of admiration, as he authentically and passionately narrates the experiences and histories of his land and community. Born in Imphal in 1959, he completed his studies at St. Edmund's College and North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, where he served as a Professor

in the English Department. Ngangom's poetry is deeply rooted in the cultural and political landscape of Northeast India, often exploring complex themes such as conflict, identity, historical memory, and displacement. His acclaimed collections—*Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994), and *The Desire of Roots* (2006) and *My Invented Land* (2023)—demonstrate his enduring commitment to voicing the struggles and aspirations of his community. Beyond poetry, his critical writings, including the influential essay "Poetry in a Time of Terror," highlight his engagement as a thinker and advocate for greater recognition of the Northeast's literary and political narratives.

### **Methodology:**

Poems from the four collections of Robin S. Ngangom's poems namely *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994), and *The Desire of Roots* (2006), and *My Invented Land* (2023), are critically studied and analysed by using the theoretical perspectives of postcolonial and ecocritical studies.

### **Analysis:**

The Northeast region of India comprises eight beautiful states, and Manipur is one of them. The region is connected with mainland India by the Siliguri Corridor in West Bengal. Though Northeast India is handicapped in terms of many of the advantages and development which mainland India enjoys, it has not failed to attract a huge attention towards sports, theatre, dance, the multi-ethnic cultures and traditions, tourist spots, fashion, handicrafts, as well as the emerging literary output of both national and international importance and fame. The literary output has enormously contributed to Indian literature in the form of novels, drama, short stories, as well as poetry in both regional and English languages. It can be said that poetry written in English is one of the emerging literary genres in the Northeast region of India. Some of the finest contemporary contributors of this form of literature include Mrs. Lakshahira Das, Dayananda Pathak, Late Umakanta Sarma, Bhupati Das (from Assam), Anjum Hasan, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, Ananya S. Guha (from Meghalaya), Temsula Ao, Nini Vingurian Lungalang, Monalisa Changkija and Easterine Iralu (from Nagaland), Mamang Dai, Yumlam Tana (from Arunachal Pradesh), Robin S. Ngangom, R.K. Madhubir (from Manipur), H. Ramdinthari, Mona Zote (from Mizoram), Rajendra Bhandari (from Sikkim) and Bhaskar Roy Barman (from Tripura) (Jamil 18). One of the best contemporary poets who write of realistic situations of contemporary societies, of love and romance and of ecological concerns is Robin S. Ngangom from Manipur.

Ngangom's poems are published and widely known in India and abroad. Ngangom is a lover of the hills and valleys of his native land Manipur as well as of Meghalaya. Ngangom's poetry largely expresses the love of natural surroundings of both the lands and their rich cultures and traditions. He reflects the disturbed condition of his homeland caused by insurgency and corruption with vivid images in his poetry. Ngangom is a poet who takes the road less visited by. He draws the scenic beauty of places such as Manipur, Meghalaya and the North-East India which are less painted in the Indian poetry. And so, Ngangom's poetry are filled with beautiful lands and natural embellishments of the Northeast India, love and romance, patriotism, corruption, terrorism, human relationship, socio-political issues of the world. The purpose of poetry, according to Ngangom, should not only amuse or make us think but also it should comfort us, and must heal the heart of man (Ngangom "Poetry in a Time" 429).

**Theme of Love:**

Robin S. Ngangom's poetry springs from his own experiences of life both good and bad. His early poems reflect his childhood memories and past when he enjoyed summer with his friends in a local pond and riding bicycles. His poetry shows maturity and records life experiences ranging from childhood to manhood with a patriotic awakening. Ngangom succeeds in bringing out his inner feelings through poetry. His poetry talks of love and romance in such a way that the expression of his words touches the hearts of every reader. He strikes a balance between elegance and eroticism in his poetry. He skilfully fuses words and expressions that succeed in giving a vivid imagery. In his poem "Weekend", Ngangom speaks of love between a husband and wife during the weekends. He shows how a typical husband with masculine attitude comes home drinking late at night and quarrels with his wife and ironically, the same husband starts showing his love for his wife the next morning. Ngangom writes:

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."  
 They share a smoke. After a while the woman  
 gets up. She goes to the kitchen and sings  
 a popular film song. (Ngangom "Words" 34)

In another poem "There is a Consummate Woman", Ngangom vividly describes the beauty of a woman for whom the poet addresses his love. The poem is about a woman whom the poet admired and has never met for twenty years. The expression of the beauty of the woman is minutely described as "her steps are light", "body of snow", "a tint of sunset on her hair" and calls her a "consummate woman". His poetry sings of love and romance with joy:

Her laughter possesses my soul.  
 Defies all logic. Reveals to me  
 There will not be another  
 Quite like her.  
 Years breach us and I love her. (Ngangom "Words" 54)

The poet is even ready to search for her and wait for her even after twenty long years because he feels the search for the woman whom he loved is worth:

She is the kind of being  
 I will search through myths of despair.  
 For even though she treads on my poetry  
 Twenty best years I will wait  
 For her to walk all over my life. (Ngangom "Words" 54)

In the poem "Poem for R.S.", Ngangom talks about the temptation in love. He recalls his past memories with a "woman with forlorn eyes". He warns the woman to stay away from the "temptation garden" who could betray her heart. The rendezvous between the two lovers is expressed in a highly romantic way:

When we held hands  
 in cafes with rain-lashed windows,  
 conversed in the dialect of kisses  
 we felt youthful summers  
 lurking in the daylight beyond.

And while drinking white rum  
 In December's bleak room  
 One cheek touching another. (Ngangom "Time's" 11)

**Theme of Terror, Socio-Political Issue of the Time and Marginalization:**

As his native land Manipur is often frequented by bandhs, economic blockades and general strikes, poems based on Manipur's disturbed situation comes naturally from him. In the poem called "Curfew" he talks of how curfew is enjoyed in his land despite of the loss caused by it:

The impish trader waits  
 like a plump rodent  
 for the farmer's potato crop,  
 and the schoolboy enjoys  
 his providential holiday. (Ngangom "Time's" 17-18)

Ngangom is deeply saddened by his state's law and order situation, the corruption, the insurgency unrest, extortion and the killings of the innocents. The disturbed condition of Manipur is mourned in his poem "Homeland I left":

I heard a wicked war is now waged  
 On our soil, and gory bodies  
 Dragged unceremoniously  
 Through our rice-fields. (Ngangom "Time's" 10-11)

Ngangom also writes about the fear and destruction caused by Japanese bombing and war of the past during the World War II in Manipur. He captures the scene in panic and pain:

When the bombs fell  
 My people ran in panic  
 Across hill slopes and rice-fields.  
 Many perished. (Ngangom "Time's" 12)

Ngangom's poetry presents the terror faced by people in Manipur quite strongly by using simple yet powerful words. He gives a vivid image of the terror that occurs in his native land. The headlines in newspapers and radio of dying people appear almost every day. Even in dreams the people of his land is haunted by the images of death and dying people as well as the mass execution of people by the armed forces. The mayhem of the state is presented by Ngangom in short and direct words:

First came the scream 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. ((Ngangom "The Desire" 81)

The poem presents a wretched image of the native land Manipur where the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been condemned for its power of killing of the innocent people on the pretext of maintaining the public order in the "disturbed areas". The terror and fear in the state is further deepened by the raping and killing of women too. The protest of the twelve unrobed mothers of Manipur in front of the Kangla Fort Imphal in July 2004 against the act and the Indian Army is well put up in his poem "Everywhere I go...". Ngangom writes:

And I want to tell my poet-friends

of the twelve mothers who stripped themselves and asked soldiers to rape them. (Ngangom “The Desires” 93)

Ngangom takes the role of a social reformer giving message to the world to stop violence and terror for a better tomorrow through his poetry. On the other hand, he becomes a mere observer of the pain and sufferings of his people as he is helpless at the hands of law and politics. Ngangom says that his poetry springs from the “cruel contradiction” of Manipur. And poetry has served as a medium or outlet for his pent-up feelings and desires. This is what Ngangom has to say about his poetry:

Poetry, therefore, has remained an underground exercise with me. It perhaps began as a dialogue with the self, and has become an illegitimate affair of the heart, because I believe in the poetry of feeling, which can be shared “not cerebral, intellectual property which is inaccessible, and which leaves the reader outside the poet’s insulated world. (Ngangom “Poetry in a Time” 423)

Ngangom is deeply hurt and disturbed by the “predominance of images of bullets, blood, mother, the colour red and paradoxically flowers too” (Ngangom “Poetry in a Time” 426). He calls such poetry as the poetry of survival and according to him, nowadays nobody writes of romantic verse as there is so much of life threatening moments. The question in such a place where there is no security of life is to survive a day and pray for the moment. In such circumstances, talking about love or sexuality is a waste of time according to the poet.

In his latest collection of poems, *My Invented Land* (2023), he has compiled his old poems and added some more new poems. The very poem with the title of his collection “My Invented Land” is a significant one. It stands as one of the most searing indictments of postcolonial betrayal in contemporary Indian poetry. Writing from Manipur, a state perpetually labelled “disturbed” by the Indian nation-state, Ngangom transforms personal grief into a powerful critique of both British colonial cartography and India’s continuing internal colonialism in the Northeast. The poem reads:

My homeland has no boundaries.  
At cockcrow one day it found itself  
inside a country to its west (Ngangom “My Invented” 144)

The lines capture the violent absurdity of decolonization. Manipur, historically oriented toward Southeast Asia, was arbitrarily enclosed within India through British treaties and the controversial 1949 merger agreement. This forced incorporation echoes Frantz Fanon’s warning that the postcolonial nation often inherits and intensifies the colonizer’s structures of domination (Fanon 35–36). For Ngangom, independence merely replaced one master with another: the new nation-state treats the Northeast as a strategic frontier rather than an integral homeland.

Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” illuminates the poem’s central tension of hybrid, unsettled identity crystallizing the Northeast subject’s liminal status within the national imagination. Mainstream India routinely racializes and exoticizes its northeastern citizens, subjecting them to suspicion and violence in metropolitan centres—an internal Orientalism that Edward Said’s framework helps expose (Said 54). Ngangom refuses this binary by insisting on a homeland that dreams “looking East” on rainy days (Ngangom “My Invented” 144), forever resisting assimilation into the nation’s homogenized geography.

Further, violence saturates the poem's landscape:

My home is a gun  
 pressed against both temples  
 a knock on a night that has not ended  
 a torch lit long after the theft  
 a sonnet about body counts  
 undoubtedly raped  
 definitely abandoned  
 in a tryst with destiny. (Ngangom "My Invented" 145)

This violence is not merely insurgent but state-sponsored, enabled by the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act that grants the military impunity. Fanon's insight that decolonization is inherently violent finds tragic fulfilment here: liberation has calcified into chronic counter-insurgency, turning citizens into suspects in their own homes.

Cultural erasure compounds physical violence. Ngangom mourns traditions allowed to "become extinct"—native hairstyles, scripts, and myths—while "rivers choke on garbage" and youth chase oblivion in "white substance" (Ngangom "My Invented" 144). Yet memory becomes resistance. The grandmother's cooking fire sending "tiny sparks / which have lost their way into the universe" (Ngangom "My Invented" 144) preserves pre-colonial domesticity against ecological and social devastation. Writing in English, the colonizer's tongue, Ngangom performs what Bill Ashcroft et al. term "abrogation and appropriation" (37): he seizes the master's tool to dismantle the master's narrative and smuggle Manipuri grief into global consciousness.

In its refusal of consolation, the poem "My Invented Land" rejects both nostalgic nativism and patriotic integration. Instead, it demands continual re-invention of homeland through hybrid speech and unflinching witness. In doing so, Ngangom answers Gayatri Spivak's question: yes, the subaltern can speak—devastatingly—when granted neither silence nor safety. Ngangom poetry exhibits a sense of resistance against the postcolonial world and authority where man rules to oppress fellow people and the society.

#### **Theme of love for Nature:**

In today's world, nature is one of the most talked about issues in literature. Many writers have expressed their concern about the degrading nature: the cutting down of trees, the pollution and the desire to save it for the future generation. Nature has been the leitmotif in all forms of literature wherein the gifts of nature have been glorified in its most natural and breath-taking form. This is particularly true of the North-East Indian poetry. Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Robin Ngangom Bhupati Das, Dayanand Pathak and R.K. Madhubir are some of the poets from the North-East India whose poetry show ecological concerns. Such type of nature writing is studied under the genre "ecocriticism". The term "ecocriticism" may have been first used by William Rueckert (Barry 240). According to Cheryll Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). In Ngangom's poetry, the theme of nature is a recurring motif. T. R. Joy calls him "a poet of the soil" (Joy 287). The bountiful trees, calm rivers, freshwater lake, refreshed hills, the bird songs and rainfalls of Manipur and Meghalaya are well captured in Ngangom's poetry. Chandra and Das speak about the theme of nature and ecological glory of the North-East region of India:

Indian English Poetry from North-Eastern part of India is rich in enshrining various aspects of the ecology of the region. It has been a fashion with the

poets of the region to celebrate the ecological glory of the region and their ecological awareness. The ruthless act of deforestation and oppression upon the Mother Nature in various ways by destroying the serenity of the nature, obliterating the natural environment, killing rare birds and animals and distorting the landscape and biodiversity, have been sharply reacted upon by these poets. (Chandra 35)

In his poem “From the Land of the Seven Huts”, Ngangom shows his deep concern about the ongoing deforestation in his native land. The act of cutting down of trees is described by him as “killing”. He writes:

Although we kill more than a hundred trees every month  
in our region of hills outstretched  
as our guileless hands once,  
still the rainsong like our disturbed dreams  
of the past echoing pride muffled with shame and  
remote into our solitary slopes will not leave us ( . . . ) (Ngangom “Words” 19)

Ngangom draws a similarity between the hill and himself how they have been shaped by time. He paints the wealth of the natural surroundings with vivid images and describes about how God has outlined every contour of the hill. He immortalizes the hills of both Manipur and Meghalaya in the following lines:

You have been carved by time as I am.  
From your forests grow flutes  
oracular drums and nymphs.  
The ancient ones still a peak of the time  
when the gods, tired of the heavens  
descended to earth, and with sensual fingers  
and primeval clay, moulded your torso and breasts. (Ngangom “Time’s” 39)

Ngangom is indebted to the hill for saving his soul from dying. He certainly feels at home to see the hills just as the clouds find home approaching the hill. In one of his poems “When You Do Not Return”, Ngangom talks about the love of the hills and his desire to get back to them. He feels the season of winter becomes a reminder of how much love he has lost. The tone of the poem becomes sad and regretful one here:

When you leave your native hills  
winter is merely a reminder  
of all past winters, of all  
the loves we lost, and there's none  
to care for the old and infirm. All  
the hospices have closed their doors. (Ngangom “The Desire” 59)

The last stanza of the poem brings home the poet’s undying love of the native hills. The hills have given immense happiness to the poet. The stanza shows his lament of leaving the native hills. He doesn’t want the people of his land to lose the happiness given by the hills. He also warns to the general people of the consequences of leaving one’s native land where the nature’s blessing is found in abundance. He gives the message to those who have left the hills through his poem to realise the lost and return to the hills:

When you leave your native hills

I can only speak of lost times,  
and of sorrow and blood. And I write  
these letters of winter, asking you  
to return again to the hills, on  
grey pages I send you happiness  
because it has left my home. . (Ngangom “The Desire” 60)

### **Conclusion:**

The poetry of Robin S. Ngangom presents a variety of themes. Ngangom remains true to his poetic calling of writing about the present situation of his native land, socio-political issues, and degradation of the nature, love and romance in human relationship. Ngangom’s poetry etches him as a poet of the soil who pictures the society with the starker truth and shows his sincere sense of belongingness with the nature. The purpose of poetry, according to Ngangom, should not only amuse or make us think, but also it should comfort us, and must heal the heart of man. The expression in his poetry is direct and striking one giving instant effects of both beauty and surprise on the minds of the readers. His poems are exemplary of finding a balance between love and sensuality. He just marvels at such love poems. He truly exemplifies the saying that Northeast Indian poetry is “an art from the heart” and also the Northeast poet often writes “between hills and barbed wires” (Ngangom, “Robin S. Ngangom: Interview”). One can also witness the social unrest due to insurgency and the fear caused by the armed forces in the state through his poems. Coming to the ecocritical aspect of his poetry, Ngangom highlights the importance of nature in human life and the need to restore of what has been lost. Just like the Romantic poets, Ngangom also tries to escape from the ongoing unrest and violence by seeking solace in the world of nature. It can be concluded on this stance that Robin S. Ngangom’s poetry truly reflects on the theme of love, fear, terror, social political issues of the land and love for nature. By appropriating English to voice subaltern grief, Ngangom demands ongoing reinvention of homeland and affirms that the silenced Northeast can indeed speak—devastatingly. Thus, his contributions as a poet towards the Northeast Indian poetry in English stand true and bold.

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