

A CONCERN OF CULTURE, TRADITION AND ECOLOGY IN KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH'S *THE YEARNING OF SEEDS.*

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ABSTRACT :

Literature from Northeast comes with variety of hues in terms of their culture, ethnicity, traditions and religious practices. The clash between the outside/foreign culture and inside/indigenous culture can be seen in almost all the writers from Northeast India. Modern tradition and urbanization brought about erosion of indigenous tradition thereby shattering the ancient beliefs and practices. The natural landscapes with its rich tapestry of flora and fauna is very much connected to the language and culture of the people. But due to the intrusion of foreign or outside culture, life in North-east is passing through a drastic change which makes the conscious natives to look back in anger and sadness of losing the indigenous traditions. The paper is an attempt to analyze Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's collection of poems, "The Season Of The Wind" from the poetry volume titled "The Yearning Of Seeds" where the author voices his deep concern of losing his indigenous culture and tradition and the fear of ecological imbalance by the ravage of modernization and urbanization. It highlights the importance of maintaining the age old traditional values for its own survival and for survival of indigenous identities.

'Northeast' is a term used to club together eight disparate states that happen to extend to the extreme northeast periphery of the Indian union. It is a region created only after the partition of the Indian subcontinent. No such term exists in ancient or medieval Indian discourse until the advent of the British. Towards the end of the 19th century the British conquered Assam and the other tribal and princely kingdoms located between Bengal and Burma. Because of this, for the first time, the concept of a 'North-Eastern Frontier' evolved for their Indian colonies.

India's Northeast is one of the most conflict-ridden regions of India and South Asia. This is the easternmost region of India comprising of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. This region is distinctively different from the other parts of India in terms of its ethnicity, language (Tibeto-Burman), culture, history and geography. India's Northeast is home to many ethnic groups, who are devoted to self-preservation and movements for autonomy in various ways. Sometimes, these struggles have turned violent, leading to frequent insurrection and proliferation of armed insurgent groups, like the ULFA, NLFT, NDFB, NSCN(IM), NSCN(K) and many such offshoots.

Literature from Northeast India refers to the body of work by English-Language writers and indigenous-language writers from this region. The disturbed political scenario, the picturesque landscape and the conflux of various ethnic groups perhaps have given rise to a body of literature that is drastically different from Indian English Literature. Due to the diversity of this region, there is no single definition of the phrase Literature from Northeast India.

Since 2008, both national and international magazines and journals have taken unprecedented amount of interest in the literatures of this region. Several channels have featured special issues on Northeast writers. In 1980 there was the emergence of young group of poets whose writing reflected the conflicting issues of the time when there was constant strikes and crisis in the conflicting political scenario. These energetic poets in their poems tried to capture the experience of the time brought about probing changes in the literary field with their new ideas and the way they tried to analyse life. Coincidentally these poets all live in Shillong and it was the renown Indo English poet Jayanta Mahapatra who edited the poetry page of the Telegraph Colour Magazine gave them the prerogative to be published and that was a breakthrough for them in the Indo-English poetry scene. The North East Forum for English Studies was established in Guwahati in late 1990s, and North East Writers Forum was formed mainly by some College teachers consisting of creative writers from this country who committed much of their time and energy in invigorating the art of poetry in English in the region. Among these many poets, Temsula Ao from Nagaland, whose ethnographic laden work, based in folklore studies, includes many poems invoking Naga traditional myths. She has published five volume of poetry- *Songs that Tell*, 1998; *Songs that Try to Say*, 1992; *Songs of Many Moods*, 1995; *Songs from Here and There*, 2005; *Songs From The Other Life*, 2007. Easterine Kire Iralu, another poet from Nagaland also writes on issues relating to her homeland. Works of a similar vein have been produced by Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, a Khasi poet and folklorist from Meghalaya whose works include *Touchstone*(1987), *Here*(1992) and *Home Coming*(1996).

Esther Syiem, another established poet from the same place is also a folklorist whose poems depict myths and legends. Another influential poet is Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. His poetry volume includes *Moments*(1992), *The Sieve*(1992) and *The Yearning of Seeds*(2011). Robin S.

Ngangom, a Manipuri poet and editor from Imphal, Manipur but a Shillong based has published three poetry volume so far- *Words and Silence, 1988; Time's Crossroads, 1994; The Desire of Roots, 2006*. Anjum Hasan who is now in Bangalore is also a Shillong based poetess. She has published only one volume of poetry, *Street on the Hill, 2006*. Ananya S. Guha, born and raised in Shillong is a widely published prolific poet. His poetic works include *In this My Land, 1986; What Else is Alive, 1988; Poems, 1997*. Paul Lyngdoh, another bilingual (English-Khasi) poet from the same place has published a collection of poetry, *Flood-Gate/Ka Khyrdop*. Almond D. Syiem is also a Shillong poet whose poetry provides a bird's eye view of magical ecology of the hills and valleys of Northeast. Indari Syiem Warji(1967-) also from Shillong explores the nostalgic royal traditions and cultures of Meghalaya in her poems. Mamang Dai is an Adi novelist and poet from Arunachal Pradesh whose poetry draws on imagery of the environment and folk tradition. She is quite known for her *River Poems, 2004*. Yumlam Tana, also from Arunachal Pradesh, is a teacher and of the Nyishi ethnic community. H. Ramdinthari (1976-) and Mona Zote (1972-), are Mizo poets from Aizawl in Mizoram. Writings of Mizo poets reflect the nostalgic themes/elements of the pristine beauty of Mizoram's landscape. *Dazzling Dewdrops*, edited by literary scholar Chungkham Sheelaramani, is a collection of poems by women poets writing in English, or translated from Manipuri language. Irom Sharmila also known as the "*Iron Lady of Manipur*" is a civil rights activist, political activist, and poet from the Indian state of Manipur. She has a poetry collection called *Fragrance of Peace, (2010)*. To name a few from Assam, we have Amaresh Datta who has two volumes of poetry- *Captive Moments, (1971) Time's Harvest, (1996)*, Lakshahira Das' (*Between Births*),(1990), Dayananda Pathak's *Coral Island, (1998)* Bhupati Das' *May I, (1998) Life and Beyond life, (2004)* the finest among the poets of Assam writing in English, Rupanjali Baruah's *All things Passing and other poems, (2005)*. Among the Sikkimese poets Rajendra Bhandhari is the famous poet. He has three volumes of poetry- *In the veils of cold wintry nights, (1979) These Words: These Lines, (1986) Perishable/Imperishable, (1998)*.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is a resident of Shillong in the Northeast Indian state of Meghalaya. He belongs to the Khasi tribe and writes poems and short fiction in both Khasi and English. Nongkynrih's poetry has been published in three volumes- *Moments, (1992) The Sieve, (1992), The Yearning of Seeds, 2011* in English and three in Khasi- *The season of the Wind, (2002) The Ancient Rocks of Cherra, (2002) Remembrances, (2002)*. He works as a Deputy Director of Publications, at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in Shillong.

He edits the University newsletter, NEHU News, the University's official journal, The NEHU Journal, *Rilum*, the first poetry journal in Khasi. The Government of India has awarded him a 'Fellowship for Outstanding Artists 2000', as well as three bursaries for Khasi texts by the Government of Meghalaya. He is the first recipient of North-East Poetry Award in 2004 from the North-East India Poetry Council, Tripura. Some of Nongkynrih's poems have been translated

into Welsh, Swedish and several Indian languages while others are included for the MA programme in English in the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, and the Nagaland University, Kohima. He has read his poetry in several cities in India, Bangladesh and in the United Kingdom, where he was invited to participate in 'The UK Year of Literature and Writing, 1995'.

The present paper endeavors to make a critical gaze on the first section of the "*The Yearning Of Seeds*", a collection of poems by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. The volume reveals the poet's genuine love for his culture, tradition and ecological concerns with the grave realities of his daily experiences. The "*The Yearning Of Seeds*" contains three sections- *The Season of the Wind, The Fungus and The Sweetness of Plums: Haiku and Senryu*. Nongkynrih's major themes in the poems centre around uniqueness of Indigenous culture and traditions and existence of these traditions rooted in the unwavering connection to the world of Mother Nature. As one travels through the hills and plains of his poems, the reader is made to realize the deteriorating conditions of his society through the years because of the intrusion of other culture in his homeland and gradually being displaced by strange and foreign culture.

Culture is the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. It is a way of life of a group of people- the behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. A tradition is a belief or behaviour passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. An inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behaviour as a religious practice or a social custom, especially by oral communication. Culture and tradition of a particular group of people or society or nation go hand in hand and both are inseparable in the context of one's own society, nation and people. At the same time, these two factors are highly influenced by how they live in a particular environment. Therefore, it's very relevant to bring here the concept of ecology which we human-beings in particular and other living organisms in general have relationships and interactions with their environment.

Kynpham, through his poems, expresses his seriousness on how the roots, culture/tradition of his own people are replaced by a gradual yet promising advances of immigrants and other foreign forces. He depicts this aspect in the poem, "*Only Strange Flowers Have Come To Bloom*" as he registers his sadness over erosion of culture by outside elements. Infiltration of other culture is compared to the blooming of strange and unknown flowers in the hilly regions...

"Like them we shed our old ways/and having shed them we find/no spring to bring the flowers back.../like flowers, only strangers/and strange ways have come/to bloom in this land."

The poet shows his angst at his own people who at the sight of an Englishman can bring about displacement of culture.

In the poem, *"Influx"*, the poet gives us vivid and geographical imageries of raindrops where infiltration is metamorphosed as expressed in the following lines...

"And so they come/these desperate men/from mountains and plains/like little drops of rain.../lose to their earth-consuming craze".

Loss of tradition and ethnic identity is a central concern in his poetry. He further eulogizes on his subject on the loss of tradition where he brings about the spellbound and magnificent beauty of the mountains in his visit to Sikkim. The grandeur of Khangchen-Dzonga with its magical display of the golden rays of the sun in the morning and in the evening which he tries to capture disappears before he could capture in his camera as revealed in the lines from the poem, *Khangchen-Dzonga...*

"The streets of Gangtok./Is it Nepal?/Is it Tibet?...Converse'99./Abuzz with poets,/abuzz with poems./abuzz with people./No Lepchas.../The same terrace at dawn./Khangchen-Dzonga!/I dashed for the camera./I rushed back./It was gone."

Ripples of anguish of something lost forever and emotions of longings surge through most of his poems. In poems like *Hiraeth*, *Winter Song* and *Lawsotun*, he presents himself as witness to these changes which occur in his own native place. The concept of 'outside culture' is brought about with the imagery of unknown seed being planted and it gets rooted as it grows to branch out and hold its ground and thus displacing the space of the rest. It is shown in the poem, *Lawsotun...*

"At night the moon rises to show me your mermaid/...Often i just mount the terrace to watch/gunmen blasting the night like Diwali crackers."

In *"Rain Song"* (2000), the poet laments at what have become of his own land. Christianity has uprooted the sacred religion of his people. Many are converted into Christians and Seng Khasi (Organization considered as custodian of the Khasi heritage and indigenous faith. The rooster is its revered symbol) is defiled by its advent...

"But religious men were convinced /...and cocksure Seng khasi should not/have ascended our holy mountain, Sohpet Bneng."

We come to realize the futility of the various attempts to keep alive and vibrant our own culture and values. The hybridization resulted from the shifting of cultures and brought about the death of the poet's old customs, traditions and beliefs and it is expressed in the poem, *Play of the Absurd...*

"Somewhere in a forgotten little corner of the world/...Their motto:/To dream the impossible dream,/...to run where the brave dare not go..."

The same idea can be found in the poem, *The Lament of Riti...*

"Leave this low-down mountebank, they said. Stop/...that he was of your people and believed in God?"

Riti is a common Khasi name given to women, meaning established customs or the custodian of customs.

The poet, in the same vein, satirizes over his people; their insensitiveness who have consciously blinded themselves from the truth that unravels before their very eyes the threat of gradual conglomeration of immigrants as depicted in the lines from the poem, *Agartala Nights...*

"Supplant their customs, reduce their palaces/...herd them to the mainstream, drown them there."

Kynpham reiterates his own identity, his Khasiness and his love to remain a Khasi; his adherence to his social moorings and his primitive laws. He shows his pride in his ancestral practices, values, beliefs and customs. Through the lines from the poem, *Identification Marks*, he sends an earnest appeal to his native people not to give up their indigenous culture to carry down such practices from generation to next generation...

"A Khasi is a man, who once a year,/...to know Maternal-Paternal Relations,/to Earn Righteousness' is our faith./But this, only once a year".

A beautiful comparison is brought about with the help of folk story. A strange and ill-matched love story where the indigenous tradition and culture lose its native appeal adulterated by adaptation of artificial foreign culture. The poet expresses his determination to his own people, his customs and traditions from being destroyed and polluted. His clarion call to his people is expressed through this verse from the poem, *Lowsuhtun...*

"Maybe, after all, someone has to save your/...wind, there are times when I feel determined/to liberate your hills."

Concerns of the environment, the inter-relationships of organisms and their environment, the totality or pattern of relations and interactions between human-being and its environment and

surroundings areas also occupies a major space in his poem. Urbanization is not merely a modern phenomenon but a rapid and historic transformation of human social roots on a global scale, whereby predominantly indigenous culture is being rapidly replaced by predominantly urban/modern culture. The phenomenon of urbanization has become a growing concern as it can lead to homogenization. Incidence of such phenomenon as well as concern about it has increased over the years. Kynpham, repeatedly reiterates this rapid changes through his poems, pours out his concerns on such phenomena and changes on environment which ultimately result to ecological imbalance.

In the poem, *"The Parking Lot(1)"*, the poet emphasizes on global warming, depletion of ozone layer, pollution and deforestation due to urbanization and its impacts on environment leading to the above unwanted results...

"In Rio/the world talked/of global warming/the ozone layer/pollution/and eroding rain forests/...humbled down/hundreds of our proudest/pines."

"An Evening by the Source of the Umkhrach River" is a nature poem in the sense that here the poet describes the beautiful kaleidoscopic picturesque, Umkhrach River and its surroundings. Yet, its serenity and dazzling effects are lost and fall prey into man's filthy hands. Nobody pays attention on the destruction of nature and the imbalances as most of the projects are done in the name of collective common good which are part of the hidden agendas in the name of modernization and development which echoes in the following lines-

"Nobody cares that this limpid water,/...where life itself wallows in the filth."

The poet brings about an intricate nexus between the loss of his own culture and tradition and urbanization. Developmental programmes in rural areas of the poet come with strings attached packages where the common people have to give up their age-old practices to give room for the new projects. Deforestation, charcoal burning, jhum cultivation, digging of coal mines which are signs of urbanization lead to global warming, ozone layer depletion, and ecological imbalance. Again such urbanization/development changes the already existed beliefs, values and behaviours of indigenous groups or society. The people start to throw away their old cultures and embrace modern values in the name of urbanization. Such changes can be found in the poem, *Rain Song 2000*...

"Global warming,/charcoal burning/...West Khasi uranium and on and on"

There is urgency in the voice of the poet for his own folks, the Khasi people, his environment and woods where they used to live, the fast changing milieu, the lost topographical features its trepidation, the harmony and balance in the ecosystem which also is part of the human species.

His voice of intervention and appeal for preservation of the ecosystem vibrates through the following lines of the poem, *Kynshi...*

"This western land which breeds/the truest Khasi braves.

ploughing clumsily through a foreign tongue."

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's writings are heavily laden with the voice of a patriot for his motherland, his indigenous culture, tradition and environment of the people of his community. It is voice of a poet who through his lyrical lines tries to bring about redemption of his people by seeking to save it from deteriorating elements that have infiltrated into the very political and public spaces of his native land. Being a Khasi tribe, he has painted a distinct and unique characteristic of his own tribe and has presented his thoughts and validity in such a way that the readers are made to transcend their own world and are transported to his world of strange and obscure milieu. What is most striking in his poetry is the way he projects his argument with detailed explanations that comes with an inclusive conclusions of a thought provoking central idea at the last stanza of every poem. Indeed, seeds of his yearnings and longings are found scattered in his poetry lines and it is evident when he quoted in the prologue the famous lines from one of the best read poets, *Pablo Neruda...*

"I have gone into practically every corner of Chile,

Scattering my poetry like seed among the people..."

-Pablo Neruda

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