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# Towards a Poetics of Reconstruction: Reading and Enacting Identity in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's Poetry

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## Abstract

Literature from the Northeast is usually rendered with a homogeneous proliferation of signifiers that dissolve its native capacities. The Northeast Literature is structured as a possible stance against majoritarian discourses. However, most commentators who view this particular regional literature in terms of an assortment for access often fail to locate the displaced qualifiers which are integrated into such socio-literary practices. While a segment of the literary output from the region is decidedly an attempt towards integration or absorption into “central” discourses, there also exists a substantial voicing of the resistance which is offered by means of extending the regional identity. The question of this micro-politic endorsement is arguably best rendered in the poetry of the Shillong-based poet, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. Nongkynrih assumes the role of a revisionist who recapitulates the identity-experience of the Northeast in the form of a politico-poetics that distinguishes him from the mainstream Indian English poets or even from the largesse of the Northeastern poets. An essential denominator for Nongkynrih is his sublative poetic existence which owes much to the historical, contemporary and lived-experiences which illuminates the ethos of a Khasi identity. The following paper would attempt to evaluate Nongkynrih's poetry in light of the political, socio-cultural and literary scenario of the Northeast, and the imbroglio which is encouraged further by his poetic engagement.

[**Keywords:** Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, poetry, indigenous, Northeast, culture]

Apart from the geographical disadvantages of the region, India's Northeast's condition of exclusion has been exacerbated by a step-motherly behaviour of the country's mainstream politics. “Although the Northeast historically has served as the eastern gateway for the passage of people, commodities, and ideas between India and its neighbours,” cites Das, “the Northeast's emergence as a separate region bounded nearly on all sides by other territorially defined nation-states brought such continuities and interrelations...to an abrupt end” (Das, 2008, p. 5-6). Surrounded by international boundaries, Northeast's only route of communication with the mainland India is the narrow Siliguri Corridor. Such poor communication system, to a certain extent, hinders Northeast's social, economic and cultural transactions with the mainland. As an obvious

result of negligence of the Central Government and poor communication system the region is underdeveloped and underprivileged which result in poverty, dissatisfaction among people, and insurgent activities. Since the post-Independence era the intra-India hegemony, of which Northeast becomes a victim, renders the regional subject one step further down the hierarchy to the limit of an almost unspeakability. The Northeastern subject's condition is aggravated by issues of underdevelopment, regional turmoil and fast disappearing ethnic heritage. In analogy to Spivak's choicest "subaltern," immolated Hindu widow or "sati," who is a victim of two-fold oppression of colonialism and patriarchy (Lomba, 2005, p. 192-203), the Northeastern subject turns out to be a victim of a coercive Central apparatus and conflicts within the State which have a kind of complicity for mutual interest (Barua, 2008, p. 19- 24). What again deteriorates the condition of the Northeastern subject is identity crisis resulting from "the large-scale migration of population from outside the region during the past one hundred years" (Singh, 1987, p. 162). The clash between the myriad ethnic groups, some of which call themselves 'native' and label others as 'immigrant', mounts up to the palimpsest of multi-layered conflict. The rivalry between different ethnic groups each of which makes their own claim of negligence and oppression prolong the disorder. However, the cultural heritage of the Northeast is not completely lost as different ethnic groups of the region have begun to discover their cultural roots although much of their purity has been obliterated.

Usually considered backward and ineligible for 'central' contestations, the region has suddenly become the centre of social, political and literary activities, and the three elements often construct a combined survey of the 'condition of Northeast' question. The literary output of the region has been decidedly incisive in presenting the identity politics and other pressing concerns for the Northeast. This is particularly exhibited in the reconstructive poetics of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, one of the Shillong Poets, who has broken away from "the mainstream tradition of city based cultures and urbanized images which marked poets from Mumbai, or Calcutta" (Guha, 2013). The poetic and politic significance of these poets, emerging from a neglected region, is immense, as Mark Bender illustrates:

The poems here tend to converge on themes and imagery (of the region): origins, migration, material culture, rituals, and features of the natural and human-manipulated environment. Though the cultural and linguistic links between these poets may be ancient and modern divisions complex, many of their poems resonate in ways that seem to dissolve borders and create poetic homes for their respective voices within the terrain of this upland region. (Bender, 2012, p. 107)

Nongkynrih is aware of Northeast's various conflicts, both intra-regional, national and international, which provide him with fertile themes for his poetic projects. But the poet maintains an aesthetic distance from the chaotic ambience of the region, never producing an opprobrium against any agency or over-glorifying a scenario. In "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" Nongkynrih returns to an ancient legend according to which

the primeval gorges are “caused by the death throes of the Thlen<sup>1</sup>, a gigantic man-eating serpent that once supposedly stalked its wilderness” (Nongkynrih, 2006d). But he is not to find smug solace in the mythic story to forget the tragic reality of his beloved Meghalaya. The region seems prehistoric in its barren wilderness. The only means of cultivation in some of the green Northeastern hills is *jhum* (slash-and-burn cultivation) which is practiced on the slopes of hills, but its productivity is very low. As a result, poverty reigns supreme over the hilly region:

This land is old, too old  
and withered for life to be easy.

Poverty eats into the hills and squeezes  
a living from stones and caterpillars  
gathered for out-of-town drunks  
each market day. (Nongkynrih, 2006d)

The veracious fact of underdevelopment of the region screening nothing other than “this incredible barrenness” (ibid) renders Nongkynrih's heart grief-stricken but his forbearance restrains him from indulging in radical commentary. The grey rocks appear to him sages, the epitome of tolerance, which renders the unruly landscape bearable to him. It is also his profound love for his native land, bearing in its bosom the scars of insurgencies, that infuses tolerance within him, as he encapsulates in the poem “Kynshi,”

I love them still  
in the dark room of my heart,  
and loving them, I become soft  
and poetic with this land and Kynshi. (Nongkynrih, 1999)

Nongkynrih mourns over the loss of greenery in the western hills of Meghalaya which is complemented by rising upheaval of insurgent activities in hatching the conspiracy of robbing the valley of its virgin beauty. One of the occupations of the Meghalayans is cane craft for which the Khasi people are much dependent on the woods on the Khasi and Jayantia hills. The reign of terror in those hills obviously affect the common people's lives and activities. But the valley of Kynshi and its rural people still continue to retain their innate simplicity and loveliness unaffected by the sociopolitical turmoil of the land. Kynshi, like the heartbeat of rustic people, goes on flowing through the hilly chasm “however changed the land/however fickle the people” (ibid). The benevolence of Nature as opposed to the cruelty of a sect of people is what Nongkynrih highlights in this poem.

Nongkynrih's poetry or poetic credo could best be defined through instances of exposition and expression contained in his poems. He is keenly aware of the victimhood

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<sup>1</sup> Nongkynrih (2005) has adapted and translated the story of “U Thlen” in *India International Centre Quarterly*, 32(2/3), p. 33-38: “The legend of U Thlen, or Thlen, is a living one and to this day people talk about this man-eating serpent as they would talk about the plague, cancer, tuberculosis and any other killer disease. That is what this monster represents now: the cause of a kind of deadly illness . . .”

of his land—“deaths, injuries, and humiliations resulting from ‘insurgencies’ and ‘counter-insurgency operations,’ as well as the hidden hurt that citizens quietly endure” (Barua, 2008, p. 3), and the unrest and turmoil spring from the foul-play of both exterior and interior politics of the land. While the maintenance of counter-insurgency operations essentially materialises and perpetuates “the institutionalization of authoritarian practices” (ibid) with the Central Government dominating the power-play there are hostilities among the ethnic militia groups too. Right from the redrawing of political map in the 1960s the Northeast came to be identified as marginalized, estranged from the mainland India. While Nongkynrih scorns the Central politics of negligence he does not see in blood-thirsty revolution any hope for a better day either. The region has been a witness to enough of insurgent activities, as Barua (2008) mentions the plethora of militia groups that have existed and still exist in the Northeast: “Manipur tops the list of militias with 35, Assam is second with 34 and Tripura has 30, Nagaland has four and Meghalaya checks in with three militias” (p. 4). Some of the insurgent groups call themselves ‘ethnic militias’ fighting for the preservation of their socio-ethnic cultures while some have agendas of liberating territories from the immigrant, but their activities have only deteriorated the situation to the advantage of no native individual. In the poem “Play of the Absurd” Nongkynrih draws the reference of Camus’s Sisyphus who is believed to be happy “for the attempt alone had satisfied him” only to ridicule the rebellious spirit of the militias—specifically mentioning the Khasi rebels—which he sees as sheer wastage of energy:

Somewhere in a forgotten little corner of the world  
 a hill tribe of one million, fearful of its extinction,  
 waged an arms insurrection against a nation  
 of one billion. Their motto:  
 “To dream the impossible dream,  
 to fight the unbeatable foe...” (Nongkynrih, 2006c)

Such guerrilla warfare does not seem to Nongkynrih an effective means of achieving all they are deprived from. Instead, the insurgent activities emanating out of thoughtless passion cause impairment to daily life of common people and diminish the march of progress with destruction of property and slaughter of innocent beings:

When for the fourth time  
 the region's liberators  
 clamped a bandh on Republic Day  
 there was nothing else to do  
 but watch the grey winter sky  
 breeding ill will. (Nongkynrih, 2000b)

Nongkynrih’s poetry is marked with a difference, characterized by regional ethos and tribal heritage, which essentially deters critics from situating him in the similar bandwagon as the charismatic mainland Indian-English poets. His poetic oeuvre is fuelled with native tradition making a plea for ethnic identity. Ethnicity, in the present context, is not simply a category of genetic kinship. Ethnic groups, in Max Weber’s view, as

summarized in the *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture*, are “but groups of humans who have a subjective belief in shared origins, a belief which is founded on a similarity of habits, customs or both, or on collective memories of migrations or colonization,” and that “such a belief is important for the creation of a community spirit, irrespective of whether blood ties exist” (“Ethnicity”, 2003, p. 94). The undercurrent of communal ethos and a sense of fast disappearing tribal heritage is one of the conspicuous elements in Nongkynrih's poetry. Much of the ethnic typicality is lost in negligence in addition to the process of “standardization” (Barua, 2008, p. 7) which can be seen as an extension of the legacy of cultural hegemony. The poet envisages the necessities for a democratisation of the Northeast that has been marred by politically motivated propaganda, for he realizes that “Along with the issues of identity and security, underdevelopment is the third factor which has given rise to agitation and insurgency” (Madhab, 1999, p. 321), but instead of any real progress what is observed is counter-insurgency operations to pin down insurgencies, in the words of the poet, “only strangers/and strange ways have come/to bloom in this land” (Nongkynrih, 1998).

Nongkynrih's poetry engenders, in an oblique fashion, the contemporary socio-political unrest in the Northeast—“terrorism, insurgency, human rights abuses, environmental and ecological concerns, erosion of tribal values, and the corrupt politician-businessman-bureaucrat nexus” (Das, 2008, p. 20). his “insurgent poetics”<sup>2</sup>, familiarised in the works of the Shillong poets, marks a distinct identity for the poetry of Nongkynrih, and makes his poetry counter-discursive, and therefore liable for exclusion from the canon of mainstream Indo-Anglian poetry. His derision at the mainstream literature has been protested against by several critics such as Ngangom, Prasanta Das and Guha, but in his authentic mode of dissent, Nongkynrih has remained remarkably distant from such appendages, constantly shirking the imagined or enforced ideological responsibilities of an Indian poet writing in English. Instead, he imbibes a fervour of poetic ontology into everything that he surmises, interrogating authority and identity, as he does in one of his early poems, “Writer, Peddler, Lover, Dog”:

A writer lives like a peddler,  
always at strange doors  
baiting clever inmates  
with his goods.  
Or like a lover,  
growing small as he sighs  
for acceptance.  
And most of all,  
like a dog, sidling back

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<sup>2</sup> “In contemporary Manipuri poetry, there is a predominance of images of 'bullets', 'blood', 'mother', 'the colour red' and, paradoxically, 'flowers' too. A friend told me of how they've been honing 'the poetry of survival' with guns pressed at both your temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state. Hardly anyone writes romantic verse or talks about disturbing sexuality because they are absorbed in writing the poetry of survival” (Ngangom, 2005, p. 172). Ngangom's comment on Manipuri poetry, taking on a rather militant stance, is almost true of poetry of the Northeast in general.

after the initial kicks -  
 its happiness  
 being locked  
 in others' hearts. (Nongkynrih, 1993, p. 12)

Nongkynrih's poetic distinction is individual and irrespective of popular substantiatives. For Nongkynrih, poetry is a flow, a response that perhaps resonates the linguistic apprehensions that the marginalised contexts possess with regard to the Central discourse<sup>3</sup>. It is of importance, therefore, that Nongkynrih opts for Khasi as the primary language of his poetry, ensuring a continued privileging of the indigenous concerns.

Nongkynrih's "writing back" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989) to the Central discourse is for the most part embedded in linguistic codes that is reserved for erudite readership to discover and dissipate, but his irony often verges on sarcasm in the controversial poem, "When the Prime Minister Visits Shillong, the Bamboos Watch in Silence," written at the aftermath of I. K. Gujral's visit to the capital of Meghalaya. The much coveted visit of the then Prime Minister with its promise for an almost overnight change of situations in the land failed most pathetically because of the absence of hearty resolution to solve the Northeast problem. Gujral's visit, clamorous with "strident sounds of sirens" unnerved the common men with their memory of "warnings in war-time bombings" (Nongkynrih, 2006g). But neither anything remarkable happened nor was a good sign of change perceived as a consequence of his visit; Gujral's pompous, superfluous visit only left people agonizingly deluded, unlike the bamboos which seem more shrewd than men:

He came like a threat  
 and scam-stained ministers  
 were in a cold sweat.  
 But he left like a diffused bomb.

They wandered  
 what he could have seen  
 of the land  
 what of the people  
 he could have learnt  
 when he came  
 like snapping of fingers.

They wondered  
 and sought answers  
 like little children.  
 Only the bamboos watched in silence

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<sup>3</sup> "We can also speak of poetry written in (indigenous languages) as negotiating space for itself while accommodating to the dominance of English by obliging or inducing English to give recognition to its 'minor' role through translation." (Patke, 2006, p. 22).

too used to the antics of men. (Nongkynrih, 2006g)

However, Nongkynrih's poetry cannot be situated within a specific poetic sub-genre especially due to its often ambiguous and non-didactic formations, as well as the deliberate disconnect which a reader often finds between the location of the poet and poetic authority in the poems. However, the only insistence which Nongkynrih illustrates in his poetry is the political motivation which constitutes an essential element in debates involving the Northeast. Nongkynrih's poetics characterize what is describe as "minor literature" by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: "if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer . . . to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1989, p. 17) in which "language seems foreign, open to mutation, and the vehicle for the creation of identity rather than the expression of identity" (Colebrook, 2002a, p. 104). Nongkynrih's poems are usually devoid of the "major" intellectual discourses that poets from centralised regions in India infuse as a necessary amendment to their marginalized poetic excursions, as Nongkynrih and Ngangom argue:

The writer from the North-east differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but perforce master the art of witness. (Nongkynrih & Ngangom, 2003, p. ix)

By addressing the minor literary politics of the Northeast Nongkynrih "creates" an ethnically distinct standard of poetry<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, by reproducing an overview of the politics of the Northeast, at times quite latently, Nongkynrih approaches a state of "minor literature" even further as an identifying "characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.16). The politicization of poetry allows for a linguistic turn towards innovative expression where familiar poetic manoeuvres are presented in a more minoritarian-accommodating form.<sup>5</sup>

It is evident that Nongkynrih, along with the other Shillong poets, has been consistent in removing the traces of isolationism, exclusion and neglect that poetry, or any literary genre of the Northeast has been subject to, in a like manner as the political neglect of the same region, for "[the] commonplace distinction between ethnic groups and communities on one hand and civil society on the other gets complicated" (Das, 2007, p. 44), nullifying divisible representation of the adjunct crises. The discontent with omissions, especially in the instances of anthologies edited by Ranjit Hoskote (*Reasons for Belonging*, 2002) and Jeet Thayil (*60 Indian Poets*, 2007) has been addressed especially with the increasing de-marginalisation of the established and emerging poets from the

<sup>4</sup> "A minor literature . . . does not appeal to a standard but creates and transforms any notion of the standard" (Colebrook, 2002b, p. xxv).

<sup>5</sup> "In the concept of minor literature Deleuze and Guattari connect the political struggles of minorities to the formal experimentations typical of the modernist avant-garde. What makes possible this rapprochement of politics and formal innovation is Deleuze and Guattari's view of language as a mode of action in continuous variation" (Bogue, 2010, p. 170).

region. The political ethos has been emancipated poetically, particularly identified when we quantify the mainstream adoption of literature from the Northeast as a factor in the assessment, even if it reflects mere populist measures. And this voicing of the Northeast would not be complete without the nomination of Nongkynrih's re-presentation of the Khasi narratives, embodied in his poems, stories, and translations from Soso Tham, the chief bard of the Khasis. In the poem "Ren," Nongkynrih charts the life of a Nongjri fisherman, "the beloved of a river nymph," who left his family "to live in magic depths" (Nongkynrih, 2003, p. 158-159). Ren's union with the roaring river provides Nongkynrih its apt metaphor for a wistful return to his own atavistic self throbbing with the rhythms of nature. He mourns over the loss of good old days since the catastrophic time have blurred the memory of a once-affluent tribal culture:

Still it was too faraway  
 from the year dot  
 what he had said—  
     times have changed  
     few care to listen  
     many only wish to be left  
     to their separate dreams.  
 And mine always end  
 with lurking policemen  
 their eyes longing  
 to eat us up. (Nongkynrih, 2003, p. 158-159)

A similar unease with the present, worked out in terms of auditory sensation, is illustrated in the poem "Hiraeth"<sup>6</sup> which revolves round the surrealistic maze of time present and time past. The morning sounds of time past generates nostalgia in him which illuminates the dark corner of memory just after which the poet recoils from time present clamoured with giddy noises but hardly finds any way out. In his brief sojourn to reminiscence he gazes pensively at the golden past:

Out of that restlessness the past rises from dimly  
 remembered songs and I watch my ghostly ancestors  
 hasten from their dark pallets at the rooster's  
 first reveille; warming up for their fields,  
 boiling rice, packing their midday meal in leaves.  
 I saw them arm themselves with hook-like whetted  
 knives at the second. And slinging bamboo cones  
 on bamboo straps, I watch them emerge from their huts  
 at the third; bamboo torches twinkling in their hands,  
 ancient songs and playful limericks flowing  
 from their lips. (Nongkynrih, 2006a)

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<sup>6</sup> "Hiraeth" is a Welsh word which means "longing".

This poem illustrates Nongkynrih's profound concern for the fast-decaying tribal culture. The Khasis possess a rich indigenous culture. They still celebrate with much enthusiasm such festivals as Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem, Ka Pom-Blang Nongkrem, Ka Bam Khana Shnong, Umsan Nongkharai at different seasons of the year ("Festivals of Meghalaya," n.d.). Music is an indispensable part of Khasi life, and "whatever it lacks in formal sophistication of established schools and forms of music, it makes up in purity, beauty and a certain complexity in skilful rendering. . . One can hear natural sounds enmeshed in the songs—the hum of bees, bird calls, the call of a wild animal, the gurgling of a stream" (ibid). But the Khasi musical tradition is losing its native flavour which Nongkynrih mourns over. The continuum of ethnic heritage is despoiled in the name of standardization and modernization which are invariably another facade of intra-India cultural colonization, if not globalization. As the noisy din of city disturbs the poet's psychic composure he feels "Like the rooster, I too, seem/to have become obsolete" (Nongkynrih, 2006a).

But Nongkynrih is not decidedly "obsolete" in his poetic manoeuvre. He cherishes some progressive views as is the requirement of evolving time. In "Lines Written to Mothers Who Disagree with Their Sons' Choices of Women" the poet advocates on behalf of the sons who defy their mothers' choices of women for them and select their brides themselves as a radical revision of entrenched and accepted conventions. The Khasi community is traditionally matrilineal in which "descent is traced through the mother...the woman looks after home and hearth, the man finds the means to support the family, and the maternal uncle settles all social and religious matters" ("Culture", n.d.). Obviously, the defiant sons would incite their mothers' anger—"a garland of threats"—but the poet pledges: "Leave cherries to winter, mother,/love to seasoned lovers" (Nongkynrih, 2006b). In another poem, Nongkynrih (2005) draws a "blasphemous" portrait of her "cantankerous" mother who was separated from her husband and used to exercise her command over the poet as a dictator. She used to abuse him in coarse slangs without any proper reason. The poet was often given to wash the menstrual-blood stained clothes of his mother because she had no daughter. Then, the mother used to excrete on trash can and gave it to her son to "ferry the cargo/to a sacred grove" and in both the instances "Refusal was out/of the question" (Nongkynrih, 2005). But the poet is not completely devoid of respect for his mother, as the lady did not marry a second time after losing her husband and, as a true Khasi woman, took the entire responsibility of the family on her shoulder:

There's only one  
thing commendable I will admit about her:  
if she had married again and not been  
the cantankerous woman that she is,  
I probably would not be standing  
here reading this poem today. (Nongkynrih, 2005)

The oscillation between contexts of gender, politics, ecology, myth and history in Nongkynrih's poetry is represented through this singular estimation of the mother—the

Northeast, with its imposed limitations may restrict the poet, but also nurtures a specific poetic sensibility that increases the range of considerations.

Nongkynrih's poetic cry obfuscates the boundaries of negligence emanating from inferiority extrapolation alleged of narrow regional ethos and propagates a corresponding "other" poetics which ensnares identity-issue with the cadence of the distant land. His poetry is an attempt to establish both the poetics and politics of involvement, and to ensure the stabilisation of a general poetic identity which "[draws] on traditional referential knowledge of language, myth and legends, material culture, values, spirituality, life-cycle rituals, and the environment which form the traditional 'ethnic life-worlds' of the various regional cultures, [allowing for] more meaningful, culture-based interpretations of the 'ethnographic' poetry being written by passionate poets in the border areas that, in their variegated ways, these poets call home" (Biswas & Suklabaidya, 2006, p. 18-20).

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