



**MODERN MANIPURI POETRY: A JUXTAPOSITION OF  
REFLECTIONS OF ONE'S SELF AND THE SOCIETY; REAL AND  
SURREAL**

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**Abstract:**

From monarchy to colonial rule and then democracy, Manipur has been through hard times. The literature of a time period cannot be isolated from the social reality of that time. Literature, in fact, reflects a society with clarity and this is true more with regards to poetry. Social instability, continuous turmoil and the constant war between tradition and modernity kept Manipur in an unstable state. Modern Manipuri poetry took the form of "poetry of survival" in which the society was represented in its raw and naked state. This paper intends to study the Manipur society through modern Manipuri poetry. And Manipuri Poetry, here in this paper, is not merely poetry written in Manipuri language but in English as well and the word Manipuri here is used to connote the writer's identity as a Manipuri rather than the language, incidentally in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution.

*Key Words: Manipur, poetry, tradition, rootlessness, dispossession, identity, modernity.*

**5.1: INTRODUCTION:**

“There is in the North East an ‘uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds such as the folk and the westernised, virgin forests and car-choked streets, ethnic cleansers and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant corruption, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider’s predicament...” (Nongkynrih & Ngangom, 2009).

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The North-East is an umbrella term used by the rest of the world to describe the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Though these states have different cultural heritages and are not similar to each other, except of course for the fact that they lie in the same geographical location, they are always referred to as one. There are a few common issues that link the poetry of these states, but that cannot be a basis to bring them under the same category. They follow their own unique traditions and have their own different ways of life.

Manipur is one of the North-Eastern states, and she has had her own history of struggle, violence, and encounter with the modern world and so on. From monarchy to a colony and then a part of the Indian “State”, she has a lot of stories to tell.

“In Manipur, when the reality becomes oppressive, these poets frequently seek refuge in absurdist irony often directed towards oneself, in parody, and in satire. It is a rejection by these poets of the extreme realism I’ve mentioned; they in turn, also reveal an inclination towards the surreal.” (Misra, 2007:297)

## 5.2 MANIPUR THROUGH THE PRISM OF HISTORY:

Manipur was a flourishing princely kingdom during the pre-colonization period. After the British colonized India, it automatically fell under the British regime. The shift from monarchy to a colony initiated the degeneration of cultural values. Christianity rushed into the society like a flood washing away many existing tribal cultures and ways of religion. And along with colonization came modernism, which contributed to the loss of traditional ways of life. It made man around the world more materialistic and machine-oriented. And after 1947, when India had won her independence, one sudden day, Manipur found herself as a part of the Indian Union. *“A one-time princely kingdom with visions of grandeur, which fell into the clutches of British colonial regime and ultimately freed, only to become a part of the Indian Union under dubious circumstances, Manipur became just another corrupt and disillusioned state under the new dispensation.”* (Robin: 2007)

Manipur was integrated as a part of the Indian nation in the year 1949. The post-Independence period saw a lot of political upheaval in Manipur. The people divided into fragments based on their demands. There were demands for merger with the Indian Union, independent Manipur, and merger to Assam and so on. There are even reports that a fragment



of people wished to be a part of Burma, than India. They feared the loss of cultural identity if the vast Indian State engulfed them into her territory. In the first elections held, no single party attained majority due to these differences. And the Government of India was in a hurry to bring all princely states and districts under their vast democracy. As the Communist Party was gaining popularity in Manipur and the demand for it to remain an Independent state increased, the Indian government felt threatened and annexed Manipur to the Indian state on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1949. *“It was the period when Nehruvian optimism, induced by a promised ‘tryst with destiny’, was giving way to a darker, more sombre, and questioning mood that gradually turned into deep disillusionment with the values on which a modern state had been founded.”* (Robin: 2007)

Another important event that altered and affected the history of Manipur is the World War II. Subhas Chandra Bose’s INA had a tie-up with Japan. And hence, during the World War II, Japan set one of their bases in Manipur. The war left the state devastated and lamenting for years together. There was a shift from romantic poetry to revolutionary poetry post the World War II. By now, the society had faced many losses and undergone many changes and this reflected in their poetry.

*“After the trauma of World War II, there were distinct transformations in the political and social life of this erstwhile feudal state. Shared areas of experience for many would include **loss of traditional values in human affairs, they tyranny of those who wield economic and political power, rootlessness, dispossession, fragmentation of home and family, urbanization, and, interestingly, the disturbing consequence of struggles of those who cherish freedom in a perceived neo-colonial regime, and the misgivings of those who felt that they were losing their identity and culture.**”* (Misra, 2007:298)

### 5.3 REFLECTION ON SOCIETY IN MANIPURI POETRY:

Manipuri poetry became more inward-looking and it began to adopt the world to their culture. They aimed at self-discovery through irony, satire, detachment and confrontation in poetry which led to ‘deep disillusionment’. And by the end of 1970s, the ‘post-angry young poets’, deepened their vision and broadened their perspectives. And this is reflected in modern Manipuri poetry. There is a constant complex conflict between the poets and the milieu. Their poetry was termed as *“the poetry of survival”* and the poet undertook *“the art*



*of witness*". This paper would now attempt to refer to Manipuri poems in English and in translation in order to relate it with the themes and motifs of Manipuri poems discussed above.

As discussed above, the World War II had a lot of impact on the Manipuri society. There was destruction everywhere and a constant fear seeped into the hearts of the people. The very language and content of poetry changed during the Post-War period. "...and the seeds of modern Manipuri poetry were perhaps sown amidst the ravages of the Great War. Hijam Irabat, the socialist poet, is considered a trailblazer because of his revolutionary language and subject matter ('Vulture aeroplanes are on the wing/Wolf siren is hooting/It's quite a scene') which constituted a break with the high romantic poetry written by Chaoba and Kamal." (Robin: 2007)

We can also see such references to the War in many other poems. The direct references to the War can be seen in the poetry of **Laishram Samarendra**. In Laishram's poem *From Thoughts about Africa*, the speaker talks about how his soul, which was once killed, is carried away across the globe to fight someone's battle. The speaker experiences the War and tastes its bitterness. He seems to be sharing his pain and sorrow with other sufferers around the world. He is now waiting for humanity to be reborn again. ("I, quashed by Hitler's boots/Run over by tanks, tractors of the Nazis/Tortured at concentration camps/My bones broken, annihilated! /But I stood up again/Supported only by mankind's compassion.").

The War also caused a loss of faith and cultural values in the society. These implications are reflected in many poems. In **Robin S. Ngangom's** *When You Do Not Return*, the speaker is calling back his brothers and sisters who have left their motherland and travelled to faraway lands in search of peaceful and better lives. For the speaker believes that, it is those who have left the land, can return and bring back the lost prosperity of his motherland. In *During Easter*, the speaker in the poem is lamenting the loss of faith in people. The people have become more materialistic and fail to recognise God in their lives now. This poem is in a way an appeal to the people to look back at their roots and if not return there, at least not to forget their way to get there. The poet mocks at the man who cleans the feet of his automobile instead of the feet of a poor man on Maundy Thursday. **Yumlembam Ibomchain** his poem *Battleground of the Victorious*, also laments at the way his society has 'developed'.



The old woman in the poem is looking for the lost culture, feels disgusted at this new Manipuri society and stands alone to resist these changes.

Another element that constantly prevails in modern Manipuri poetry is revolution and unrest in the society and hearts of the people. Because of the constant war between the State and the revolutionaries, the life of the common man is very much affected, and this is reflected in the poetry. *“A poet from Imphal told me of how they’ve been honing ‘the poetry of survival’ with guns pressed to both temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state.”* (Robin: 2007)

Such feelings of unrest, lies as the undertone in most modern Manipuri poems.

In **R. K. Bhubonsana’s** *Jatinga*, the poet makes a reference to the State’s using of power in order to put down various revolutions. Revolution is simply gunned down by the state. (*“Men wearing masks of different birds/Lay dead on newspaper pages/Some are strangers/Some of a rare kind/Their wings are all unhinged.”*)

**Naorem Bidyasagar** in *Blood-smearred Dawn* writes on the fate of the common-man, (*“Spending nights in this land of hills/Each of us ordinary citizens/Is a target today/Of blind bullets/Bursting like flames from two directions/In this darkness.”*) In this crossfire between the state and the insurgents, it is the common-man who is affected most.

**Saratchand Thiyam** also writes extensively about the unrest in his society. In his poem *Sister*, the ongoing violence in the society is compared to the rain that is only increasing with time and the speaker takes the role of a protective brother; he doesn’t allow his sister to leave home for the streets are very dangerous. (*“Sister, I won’t allow you to go/Every road is reverberating/With the deafening utterance of boots/Hide inside the house, sister/Don’t you go at all.”*) Saratchand also continues this style of writing in his poems like *Gun Muzzle* and *Clouds of Olive*.

**Liashram Samarendra’s** *There’s No Time* is a very powerful poem that portrays the human mind that is in constant unrest and fear of being killed. One can notice that many of these poems have a slight undertone of an anti-state sentiment. The atrocities of the Indian government in Manipur and the silencing of many revolutions has created such a sentiment in the hearts of the people, and hence in the soul of poetry. Robin in his short essay titled *Revolutionaries* writes on how the Indian government has used both ISAs (Ideological State



Apparatuses) and RSA (Repressive State Apparatus) like the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) in order to curtail revolution and that revolution has itself taken another course in Manipur today, with which the poet is not very content. His poem *Monody* is a love poem, written for his love for revolution.

**Thangjam Ibopishak** in her poem *Volcano, You Cannot Erupt*, writes about how the Indian government suppresses all kinds of outbursts in Manipur. (“*Pour in filth, pour in faeces/By heaps, the unholy misdeed to fill up/The clear depths of the earth to the brim/For future generations too, for the years and the centuries/Create an unregenerate, rotten society/Then say, Volcano, you cannot erupt/Lava, you cannot open your eyes.*”)

Manipuri poets also use satire to criticise and question the sacrosanct and the very Centre. In **Raghu Leishangthem’s** *Politician and White Dove*, he writes: “*A politician and a white dove/Mad with each other, quarrel often/The dove says it wants to fly freely in the sky/The politician replies/‘To allow you to fly or not fly/Is my politics.’*” And when the dove insists on flying, the politician points a gun at it, hence, bounding it to his pockets.

**Thangjam Ibopishak**, in his poems *Gandhi and Robot* and *I Want to be Killed By an Indian Bullet* mocks at the Indian government. One can also see the introduction of surreal elements in his poetry. Ibopishak juxtaposes real with the surreal, creating a magic-realism effect. Another poet who uses satire as a tool is **Rajkumar Bhubonsana** poems. In his poem *Should Light be Put Out or Mind Kept in Dark*, the poet talks about the conditioning of the Manipuri society by the Indian government over years using various tools. For generations they have been controlled and the Indian state had established itself as an anarchist power over Manipur. Such social conditioning is responsible for this kind of poetry that comes as an outburst of years of suppression. The Indian government, according to the poem, gives the choice to the people of Manipur to decide between a dark society or dark minds. This is the conditioning the Indian state has imposed upon Manipur. (“*Over and above these/Education causes mind to develop/If mind is developed, one becomes aware of the wrongs/If one is aware of the wrongs, an urge to divulge them is felt/If the wrongs are made public, in our place/One gets bashed up, hip broken/So it’s better to keep mind in dark.*”)



#### 5.4: CONCLUSION:

Manipur has witnessed a lot of violence and turmoil. It still continues to go through such conditions. The Indian state is in constant war with the revolutionary groups within Manipur. Hence, the poetry produced under such circumstances carries in it these disturbances and feeling of unrest. And amidst all these, life must go on and it does.

*“Whether winter or summer  
Whether bombs burst or don’t burst  
Beautiful women walk gracefully  
Faces eyes lips shaded with colours  
Walk the women.  
Whether crossfire or no crossfire, whether deaths or no deaths  
Men look at beautiful women  
Handsome men look at beautiful women, ugly men also look.”  
(Worshipping Imoinu by Yumlembam Ibomcha)*

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