

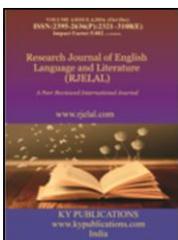


RE-DEFINING THE SELF: A PERSPECTIVE ON WRITINGS FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA

V.LALENGKIMI

Assistant Professor, Lawngtlai College, Mizoram

vengkimi5@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

The act of writing is a subversive act especially when one is writing from the margin. Writing from North-east India is writing from the periphery and it is a political act. It is not writing for the sake of writing, not just an art for art's sake but a commitment and a responsibility. This paper attempt to briefly discuss the role of the writer is such a marginalised society. The themes in the three selected poems analysed and studied in an attempt to understand and study how and why it is relevant to the people of the region. Attempt has been made to do justice to the diverse poetry comes from North-east India by selecting three different poets from three different state of the region. Mentioned may be made that one of the poem (A Day in Sohra) is a translated version of the original poem written in the Khasi Language, a tribe in Meghalaya.

Keywords: North-east India, Identity, marginalisation

©KY PUBLICATIONS

The act of writing or being able to tell one own story is very significant especially within mainstream Indian narratives where the voices from the peripheral North-east Indian states are seldom heard. When one talks of Indian Literature or for that matter Indian writing in English , voices from the North-east region are the "other" voices, hardly ever discussed and barely finds mention in predictably mainstream oriented studies of Indian Literature. The very term North-east is in a way a misnomer because the North-eastern region of India comprises of seven state characterised by linguistic, cultural, ethnic diversity. The negotiation with an alien culture form a major part of the literature from North-east India. "The Novelist in particular is regarded as a teacher whose primary task is to re-educate his society to an acceptance of itself . He could accomplish this by strongly affirming the value of African culture" writes Bernth Lindfors in talking about modern African writers. (25) This resonates

with most writers from North- east India. The encounter with so called culture at the 'centre' or in other words mainland India results in confusion and disorientation regarding one's place in the nation. It has deeply affected writers of these region. But writing can be liberating in negotiating these conflict as is aptly asserted by Temsula Ao, "Once articulated through the written text ,similarities of worldviews with other cultures have helped forge new affinities , and at the same time enabled them to accept the differences as only uniqueness of any given culture rather than a denominators of any deficiency or inferiority" (2007:109)

This paper takes the premise that a writer is not just an observer of the daily life of the society but she/he is has a commitment to be politically aware, to respond appropriately and not allow his/her writing to be dictated by outside forces. Three poems by three different poets from Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland respectively

have been selected for discussion. The poems selected for this paper offer a glimpse into the variety of modes and concerns to be found in writing in English from North-east India.

Writing is a powerful weapon of subversion questioning the idea of India and an indictment of the dismissive generalisation and stereotyping of people from North-east India. Poetry of North-east India is by and large entrenched in identity politics. On one hand identity politics, has led to the reformulation of identity and culture discourse from a non-dominant subject position. Cherrie L.Chhangte's "What does an Indian look like?" challenges the very notion of India and the celebration of its diversity. The "celebration" is restricted only to tourist brochures and draws a comparison with the "United Colors of Benneton" advertisement. Chhangte exposes the shallowness of the attempt to portray India, as a land where diversity is celebrated, by questioning, "Are we as proud of our unity/As we are of our diversity?". The poet went on to interrogate the very idea of India as the 'largest democracy in the world' by asserting the presence of a marginalised citizens whose very existence is often unacknowledged, undervalued and misunderstood. As somebody from the state of Mizoram the poet draws attention to her looks and her ethnicity, her physical features and language which is antithetical to the idea of who an "Indian" is or should look like. Chhangte voices the experience of many people from the North-east India who have ventured out of their home to the metropolitan cities of India who are often mocked and taunted for being different in terms of looks, language and culture. The poem is a scathing diatribe against the ruthless indifference and dismissal of the ethnicity and identity of people from North-east India.,

"You look at me, and you see

My eyes,my skin,my language, my faith
You dissect my past ,analyse my present
Predict my future and build my profile
I am a curiosity, an 'ethnic ' specimen
Politics, history, anthropology,your
impressive learning
All unable to answer the fundamental
question'(2011:76)

The poet however ended on an affirmative note, there is a clear assertion of the Indianness as the question – 'What does an Indian look like?' is answered- An Indian looks like me, an Indian is Me".

The North-east region of India is known for its rich biodiversity and beautiful topography. The unique ecology of the region with its mountains, valleys, rivers, form an important part of the narrative of the literature of this region. Poetry from North-east is often deeply rooted in the land, in the people's culture and in their past. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, "A Day in Sohra" is a celebration of the beauty of the place in which he grew up. Sohra, considered to be one of the wettest place on earth is rhapsodized in this poem. The poet gives a vivid description of a day in Sohra in the month of April, the absence of dust, the cool air and the howling wind.

Dressed for the warm April/the cool blasts
of Sohra

cut through my thin clothes.

But I could feel gentle autumn in the
sun/and there's no dust in the wind.

The wind rules the land/howling like a
maniac,/for where are the trees

To tempt its wild laughter/into romantic
wooing.(67)

Nongkynrih went on to describe the landscape of Sohra with a description of the rivers and water fall. Here the poet returns to the legend of the Noh-kalikai Falls in Sohra, named after a woman named Kalikai, whose second husband tricked her into eating the curried flesh of her only daughter. After realising her mistake, she flung herself into the falls where he died. The North-east has a rich tradition of folklore, legends and myths and poets often draw from this rich repertoire to add a distinctiveness to their poems.

The next part of the poem talks about the famed rain which makes "a fool of sorry umbrellas". Rain is an unforgettable presence in Sohra, and the poet in an interview with travelplus has been quoted as saying that, 'as the rain of Chile was to Neruda, the rain of Sohra is to me'. The poet uses varied imagery to describe the unpredictable rain-from 'fighter planes' to a dance form, 'waltzing', 'million whips' and finally a 'violent downpour'.

Satire is often a very suitable form for poets seeking to negotiate the plight of a common man caught between security forces and insurgents in the troubled regions of North-east India. Their irony is directed not only towards the outsiders but towards themselves and their self serving leaders. In strife-torn Nagaland the gun is a recurring trope in poetry. Monalisa Changkija's, "Shoot" talks about the conviction of the poet that Naga Unity can be attained in spite of threats from those who wield guns and exercise gun power. Those who "swear by Christ or Mahatma" are juxtaposed to expose that where violence is used, both parties lose. She challenges the instigator of violence and utters in disgust,

Go ahead, shoot and blast us to eternity
I give you my word, we will not move
Shoot, you, all of you who have us covered
from your sides
You have us now the way you want, so
shoot.
Shoot and claim victory, it's all yours
We will stand firm and not move
From our dreams of brotherhood.(90)

Cherrie L.Chhangte from Mizoram, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih from Meghalaya and Monalisa Changkija from Nagaland- the three poets discussed in this paper cannot represent the diverse poetry that has emerged from the Northeast India. But these poets, bound together by their love for their land chronicle relevant issues faced by the people of the Northeast. The strong turbulence of the region, the presence of myths and legends, evocative description of the land etc are the common elements that run through the poetry from the diverse North-east India.

Works cited

- Sen, Soumen and Desmond Kharmawphlang (eds) 2007. *Orality and Beyond*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi
- Mishra, Tilottama. 2011. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi: OUP
- "Interview'. *Meghalaya with Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih*, travelplus.intoday.in. Accessed on 19th February 2017

Lindfors, Bernth. "Politics, Culture and Literary Reforms in Black Africa". vol.15 : 4 dec Colby quarterly 1-12