

Poetry in a Time of Terror

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There is no such thing as an innocent bystander. If you are a bystander, you are not innocent.

¡ Czeslaw Milosz

I wrote my first faltering line in the relative innocence of childhood. I was about eleven or twelve years old then, and caught as I was in the flush of youth, I wanted to explore the world by writing ornate and sentimental poetry. Since life was ignoring me, I thought I could engage the attention of kindred hearts through friendly and softhearted verse. Naturally, my poems were mostly inspired by romances and adventure stories, especially *The Thousand and One Nights*, but it was essentially dreamy-eyed adolescent stuff. I still haven't grown out of it.

One favourite poem of mine began with these lines: The boy stood on the burning deck^af That well-meaning world is no longer recognisable now; the sacred landmarks have disappeared long since. Only dim memories of hoisting the country's flag on a holiday, or leading a blind man by the hand, or praying in temples on a feast day, remain as mute reminders of that sacred past. Manipur, my native place in Northeast India, is in a state of anarchy, and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land. Manipur boasts of its talents in theatre, cinema, dance and sports. But how could you trust your own people, when they entrust corruption, AIDS, terrorism and drugs to their children?

Naturally, the Manipur that I ritually go back to from the laid-back hill town of Shillong every year is not the sacred world of my childhood, because

*Childhood took place
free from manly fears
when I had only my mother's love
to protect me from knives,
from fire, and death by water.
I wore it like an amulet.*

*Childhood took place
among fairies and weretigers
when hills were yours to tumble
before they became soldiers' barracks
and dreaded chambers of torture.*

*Childhood took place
before your friend worshipped a gun
to become a widowmaker.¹*

Having acknowledged this growing restlessness within myself, poetry became an outlet for pent-up feelings and desires, where I can bare myself without actually being demonstrative. 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 poetry which is inaccessible, and which leaves the reader outside the poet's insulated world. I suppose I've always tried in a naïve way to invite the reader into my small world. Perhaps I've written poems because I've felt this desperate need to be understood, and to be accepted:

*I want to describe myself again and again
to people who do not know me.
That is why I always look for paper and ink,
even in the midst of a terrible loss,
or, a dangerous illness.
Because someone said
the spoken word flies
but the written word stays.²*

In many ways, my own Meitei culture, which is part of my childhood, has shaped my thinking. Perhaps we all mourn the fate of our homeland, as the Sicilian poet Quasimodo has said. And though I've never remotely imagined myself as any conscience-keeper, I've often tried to speak of my people, and of the terrible things happening in Manipur:

*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
behind their backs inside a church^a
As the days crumbled, and the victors
and their victims grew in number,
I hardened inside my thickening hide,
until I lost my tenuous humanity.*

*I ceased thinking
of abandoned children inside blazing huts
still waiting for their parents.
If they remembered their grandmothers' tales
of many winter hearths at the hour
of sleeping death, I didn't want to know,
if they ever learnt the magic of letters.
And the women heavy with seed,
their soft bodies mown down
like grain stalk during their lyric harvests;
if they wore wildflowers in their hair
while they waited for their men,
I didn't care anymore.*

*I burnt my truth with them,
And buried uneasy manhood with them.
I did mutter, on some far-off day:
There are limits, but when the day
absolved the butchers, I continued to live
as if nothing happened.³*

But it may be mistaken to see only geographical, or cultural, or linguistic differences. I don't agree with the view that a writer requires a tradition to lean upon, to till the soil which others have made fertile, and harvest ideas for himself. A writer can be influenced by anything, and he would be able to write in any country other than his own. But he has to reclaim his individual voice. It is natural for someone from the Northeast of India to exploit the folk traditions he grew up with, to write of the hills when he is living in the hills. It is Shillong that has moved me into this kind of poetry, Shillong with its gentle hills, the Khasis with their rich oral literature:

*I told you the stories of old
on soft Sundays, of Manik Raitong
and Ka Likai. Only the stones of unknown gorges
weep for them, I said.*

*We awakened sleeping melodies
and talked of native lands,
and my foolish youth.
Where the pines
read the lips of the wind
and silent rain drums the hills,
the cottages dry their eyes
and open them in the dusk.
The land of the seven huts,
they've named these hills.
You would belong here
if you would listen to your heart.⁴*

If I had not made use of this hillworld, my poetry would have been false. You would notice this preponderance of images from the hills in many of my poems; the vast pines, the mountains with their great rains. But this, I've realised, is mostly artless, inoffensive poetry.

For someone who has suffered from a fundamental poverty of experience, I've been naturally inclined towards the personal lyric. I don't have faith in inspiration, but since poetry cannot originate in a vacuum, I've also left my influences open, and have allowed myself to be ambushed; by political events, books, biased memory, a dogged sexuality, womankind, films, streets even. But my poetry seems to be drifting towards something more. It is no longer a mere diary of private incidents, or a confessional. I've been trying to come to terms with this change of heart, which is even more distressing than the shattered love of a woman. And I've perhaps opened my eyes to insistent realities and have stepped out of the proverbial ivory tower. If anyone should ask now why my poems do not speak of my land's breathtaking landscapes, its sinuous dances, its dark-maned women, I can only offer Neruda's answer: Come and see the blood in the streets!⁵

The writer from Northeast India, consequently, 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 does not permit him to indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetics, but is a constant reminder that he must perforce master the art of witness⁶. Forces working under slogans that have been twisted, slogans such as self-determination, rive my society. We have witnessed growing ethnic aggressiveness, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious bigotry, the marginalisation of minorities and the poor, profit and power struggles in government, and as a natural aftermath to these, the banality of corruption and the banality of terror. Further, the 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 materialism, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider's predicament, make the picturesque Northeast especially vulnerable to tragedy.

And what can a poet-aspirant do in such contrary circumstances, when he can no longer nurse a magical vision of the world? For the first time, I've begun to understand Camus's words: Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression⁷. Today, when cruel suppositions are made about the conceit of the artist, innuendoes that the poet has become a world unto himself and should be brought to his knees; when there is a sharp divide between modish criticism and literature, when literary schools are merely reactionary and seem to be turning their eyes from what is known as the human condition, I would again like to reaffirm my indebtedness to my fellow men. Today, when heartrending events are happening all around a poet, when all he hears are chilling accounts of what man has done to man, how can he close his eyes to the brutalisation of life and remain solipsistic? Anyone with even an iota of conviction is in immediate danger if he speaks up; a gun points at you if you don't observe a prescribed code of behaviour; how then can I claim that I am living in a free society?

In contemporary Manipuri poetry, there is a predominance of images of bullets, blood, mother, the colour red and, paradoxically, flowers too. 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. Hardly anyone writes romantic verse or talks about disturbing aspects of sexuality because they are absorbed in writing the poetry of survival. This has resulted in criticism that contemporary Manipuri poetry is hemmed in by extreme realism. There is, of course, a danger of the images listed above becoming hackneyed. And maybe poets should try to strike that fine balance between realism and reflection, as Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai skilfully does in *The Diameter of the Bomb*. The opening lines of this poem read like statistics and a news report that we often ignore as we go on with our daily lives: The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimetres/ and the diameter of its effective/ range; about seven metres/ And in it four dead and eleven wounded. But the lines that follow make us reflect on lives obliterated by violence; they reveal how violence transforms men and women, regardless of nationalities; and also how such mindless acts make one reflect on the indifference of a god who, if he exists at all, should never have allowed his creation to be erased or reduced to an absurd drama.

But poets also have to write about the here and now. And writing about it lends a sense of immediacy and vividness to their poetry. I call this the poetry of witness. Reviewing the Chinese émigré writer and 2000 Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian's work, translator and critic Mabel Lee comments: Alternatively, the nonconformist could remain in conventional society and survive by feigning madness or could achieve freedom, transcendence and self-realisation in literary and artistic creation⁸. In Manipur, when the reality becomes oppressive, a few 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. In Manipuri poet Y. Ibomcha's *Story of a Dream*, murderous bullets turn into luscious fruits, and in Thangjam Ibopishak's *I Want to be killed by an Indian Bullet*, terrorists appear in the guise of the five elements. This kind of verse is a reaction to the absurdity of violence and death, when the Manipuri poet's existence is reduced to negotiating the subject matter of guiltless addicts, child soldiers, and young mothers with AIDS.

Literature that is not the breath of contemporary society, that dares not transmit the pains and fears of that society, that does not warn in time against threatening moral and social dangers; such literature does not deserve the name of literature; it is only a façade, claims Alexander Solzhenitsyn. But here lies a paradox, because the writer is not beholden to anyone, let alone to society. He must be true only to his own world and to himself. A writer is not a self-assigned conscience-keeper. Living in society, he will talk about his milieu, the people with whom he is in touch with daily. But you cannot expect a writer to consciously promote, say, ethnic harmony, as a part of his writing programme. You cannot expect a writer to be a public relations official on behalf of any organisation, or a propagandist for any cause. On the other hand, there is often a defiant and self-damaging streak in him that sometimes incites him to confront authority. When in 1964 Joseph Brodsky was asked by Soviet authorities what he did for a living, he replied that he wrote poetry; he was immediately arrested on the charge of social parasitism. Is the writer a social parasite or a conscience-keeper for his society? One thing is certain; he values his freedom above everything else, and will protect it fiercely.

I think the task that literature of the Northeast must address is what Albert Camus called the double challenge of truth and liberty. Truth, because what can the writer hope to accomplish now except to tell the truth? When the unspeakable is out there, being enacted and quickly consigned to oblivion, when cruel things are done but never undone, and when media machines are busy feeding the world one-sided lies, the writer can only tell the truth about what he knows. Literature cannot bring harmony or a moral revolution by telling us what we must do. And forces are always at work to rob the writer of his freedom. Liberty, therefore, is a necessary precondition, which the writer must fight for in order to tell the truth he knows; freedom is the lifeblood of his art.

During these pessimistic times, the responsibility of the writer is much more modest than what well-meaning people would like him to shoulder, that is, to change the world into a better place through his efforts. But at most, poetry of the Northeast can only mirror the body and the mind of the times, as in Thangjam Ibopishak's *Poem*:

*Now, in this country
One cannot speak aloud,
One cannot think in the open.
Hence poem,
Like a flower I sport with you.
Before my eyes, incident upon incident,*

*Awesome, heaving events,
Walking, yet sleeping,
Eyes open, but dreaming,
Standing, yet having nightmares;
In dreams, and in reality
Only fearsome, shivery instances.
So around me, closing eyes,
Palms on ears,
Moulding the heart to a mere clay object,
I write poems about flowers.*

*Now, in this land
One should only think of flowers,
Dream about flowers,
For my little baby, my wife,
For my job,
To protect myself from harm.*

Surrounded as we are by playthings we don't need, when a man's worth is determined by what he can buy, we are continuously taught to be grateful to the capitalist god. What we have inherited then are the tyrannical fetishes of market capitalism, murderous technologies, and grisly ideologies that would leave a cursed earth for our children. How can poetry sing the praises of this age, or compose hymns to Mammon? For me, poetry can never be an ally of this numbing materialism or a party to mindless violence. Materialism, wherever it abounds, begets a particular kind of terrifying alienation, for the simple reason that we forfeit our ability to love when we place commodities above our fellow men. And someone who cannot love is always alone.

These hostile forces have often compelled poetry to burrow deeper into itself; it has retreated into its shell of obscurity and isolation. In such precarious times, writing poetry is always a defiant gesture that poets make against power and money, insensitivity and terror. Poetry cannot help anyone to get on in life, or make a successful human being out of anyone. But poetry should move us; it should change us in such a manner that we remain no longer the same after we've read a meaningful poem. For all these reasons, a poet can never be a conformist. He may not be an anarchist, a nihilist, or an inquisitor, but by the token of his verse, he is a natural dissident. Czeslaw Milosz questions the efficacy of poetry in his *Dedication*^f: *What is poetry which does not save/ Nations or people?/ A connivance with official lies/ A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment*^{af} But he will also not espouse his native language or champion his people's cause unquestioningly. As he says in *My Faithful Mother Tongue*^f:

*Now, I confess my doubt.
 There are moments when it seems to me I have squandered my life.
 For you are a tongue of the debased,
 Of the unreasonable, hating themselves
 Even more than they hate other nations,
 A tongue of informers,
 A tongue of the confused,
 Ill with their own innocence.*

Poetry is always an act of subversion. And paradoxically, the poet is perhaps the most ironic realist. No more for him the security of an ivory tower or the temptations of Utopia. In *Who Is a Poet?*, the Polish writer and poet Tadeusz Różewicz offers with certitude an ambivalent definition:

*a poet is one who writes verses
 and one who does not write verses*

*a poet is one who throws off fetters
 and one who puts fetters on himself*

*a poet is one who believes
 and one who cannot bring himself to believe*

*a poet is one who has told lies
 and one who has been told lies*

*one who has been inclined to fall
 and one who raises himself*

*a poet is one who tries to leave
 and one who cannot leave*

Each word must be fashioned from a private hurt, and writing poetry is like trying to keep a deadline with death. Perhaps I am always dying/ Yet I listen willingly to the words of life/ that I have never understood^a wrote Quasimodo. That is why I've always felt that poetry should not merely amuse us or make us think: it should comfort us, and it must heal the heart of man.

NOTES

1. Robin S. Ngangom. *A Libran Horoscope* *f*. Unpublished poem, 2000.
2. . I Want to Describe Myself *f*. Unpublished poem, 1995.
3. . Native Land *f*. In *New Statesman & Society*, London, 14 July 1995, p. 41.
4. . I Told You the Stories *f*. Unpublished poem, 1992.
5. Pablo Neruda. I m explaining a Few Things *f*. In *Selected Poems* (Penguin Books, 1985, Harmondsworth).
6. Michael Ignatieff. The Art of Witness *f*. In *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XLII, No. 5 (23 March 1995).
7. Albert Camus, Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 1957.
8. Gao Xingjian. *Soul Mountain* (Introduction), transl. Mabel Lee (Perennial/Harper Collins, 2001).

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