

Fragmented Realities and Symbolic Resistance: A Critical Study of Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Robin S. Ngangom, And Thingnam Anjulika Samom

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Abstract

This paper investigates the poetic articulations of socio-political unrest and cultural dissonance in the works of three distinguished Manipuri poets: Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Robin S. Ngangom, and Thingnam Anjulika Samom. Situated within the conflict-ridden landscape of Manipur- a state long burdened by militarization, ethnic tensions, and historical marginalization- these poets engage with fragmented identities and contested narratives through literary symbolism, irony, and resistance. The study employs a postcolonial and subaltern framework to examine how their poetry reflects the fractured realities of lived experience while simultaneously resisting dominant discourses that seek to silence or assimilate peripheral voices. Ibopishak's satirical tone and absurdist imagery expose the alienation and bureaucratic violence that plague the Manipuri consciousness. Ngangom's melancholic and lyrical poetics uncover the pain of memory and trauma, while Samom's feminist sensibility provides a gendered critique of socio-cultural oppression, blending personal and political struggles. Together, these poets construct a counter-discursive space that questions the legitimacy of state power, national identity, and cultural homogeneity.

The paper argues that through the fragmentation of form, multilingual registers, and symbolic layering, their poetry not only documents socio-political crises but also enacts resistance by reclaiming agency, memory, and identity. Ultimately, this research underscores the need to read Northeast Indian literature as a vital site of aesthetic and political negotiation in contemporary Indian literary discourse.

Keywords: Northeast Indian poetry, symbolic resistance, identity politics, gendered expression, postcolonial critique

Introduction

The literature of conflict zones often bears the dual burden of resistance and representation. In the Indian subcontinent, much of this literature has emerged from regions on the periphery of dominant narratives- regions like Manipur in the Northeast, where decades of insurgency, militarisation, and cultural marginalisation have left deep scars on individual and collective consciousness. The poetry emerging from this region is not merely an aesthetic expression but a charged political act, embodying the voices of those frequently silenced or misrepresented in mainstream discourses. Poets such as Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Robin S. Ngangom, and Thingnam Anjulika Samom have risen to the forefront of this literary resistance, creating works that oscillate between the surreal and the brutally real, the intimate and the political, the fragmented and the symbolic.

Manipur's history is one of persistent socio-political upheaval. Once a sovereign kingdom, its controversial merger with the Indian Union in 1949 has led to decades of unrest.

The imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) in the 1950s marked a turning point, plunging the region into decades of state violence, human rights abuses, enforced disappearances, and mass psychological trauma. For many Manipuris, poetry became a way to articulate these ruptures- a counter-history told through metaphors, silence, irony, and pain.

Significance of the Study

In Indian English literary criticism, Northeast poetry has historically occupied a marginal position, often overlooked in favor of voices from metropolitan centers. However, with increasing academic attention toward subaltern voices, postcolonial trauma, and regional identity, these poets have gained prominence. Studying their works offers crucial insight into how art functions under duress- how the poetic form mutates to reflect conflict, displacement, and resistance. Furthermore, this study is significant in the present climate of heightened nationalism, where regional identity is constantly at odds with centralising narratives. These poets not only voice political dissent but also reflect deep cultural and emotional ruptures, providing scholars and students of literature with a rich field of inquiry.

Background of the Poets

Thangjam Ibopishak Singh is known for his postmodern, ironic, and often absurdist poetry, which critiques the absurdities of militarisation and cultural alienation. His work, such as “I Want to be Killed by an Indian Bullet”, uses dark humor to depict the surreal nature of violence and identity in Manipur.

Robin S. Ngangom, a bilingual poet, has described himself as a poet "writing from a burning house." His work combines emotional lyricism with sharp political awareness, often portraying the pain of displacement, memory, and love for a lost homeland.

Thingnam Anjulika Samom, a newer but powerful voice, brings in a gendered perspective to the conflict. Her poems focus on the urban chaos, violence, and cultural loss experienced by women and the younger generation in Manipur.

Together, these poets form a triangulated lens through which one can read the intersections of identity, violence, and resistance in Northeast Indian poetry.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to:

- Critically examine the representation of socio-political fragmentation in the selected poems of the three poets.
- Explore how literary techniques such as irony, surrealism, and metaphor are employed to resist dominant narratives.
- Investigate the emotional and cultural responses to state violence, militarisation, and loss of identity.
- Situate the selected poets within the larger framework of postcolonial and subaltern literature in India.
- Demonstrate the significance of Manipuri poetry in reshaping the Indian literary canon and reclaiming marginalised histories.

Literature Review

The poetry of the Northeast region of India, particularly that of Manipur, has gradually entered the radar of Indian English literary scholarship, especially since the early 2000s. However, despite its rich socio-political depth and literary ingenuity, much of it remains under-represented in mainstream academic discourse. The few scholarly engagements that do exist tend to either romanticize the region's exoticism or reduce its literature to victim narratives. This literature review attempts to position the works of Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Robin S. Ngangom, and Thingnam Anjulika Samom within existing scholarship and theoretical frameworks of postcolonialism, subaltern studies, and resistance literature.

In *Between Ethnicity and Nationhood: Poetic Imaginations from Northeast India*, Sanjib Baruah argues that the poetry of the region oscillates between asserting cultural identity and challenging the state-imposed structures of nationhood (Baruah 112). Baruah highlights the role of poets as cultural mediators- negotiating personal trauma and collective history. This idea resonates with Ngangom's own claim that "a poet from the Northeast does not have the luxury of being apolitical" (Ngangom, "Poetry in a Time of Terror").

Thangjam Ibopishak Singh's poetry has attracted critical attention for its absurdist and surrealist quality. His poem "I Want to be Killed by an Indian Bullet" is frequently cited in discussions on nationalism and violence. Scholars like Dolly Kikon have interpreted the poem as a metaphor for the crisis of identity and belonging experienced by citizens in the periphery (Kikon 78). The poem's sarcastic tone and fragmented imagery highlight the absurdity of the militarised existence in Manipur.

Robin S. Ngangom, writing in both English and Meiteilon, bridges the literary traditions of the Northeast and the wider Indian poetic landscape. His collection *The Desire of Roots* (2006) has been critically acclaimed for articulating memory, nostalgia, and political despair. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih notes that Ngangom's poetry represents the interior landscape of conflict, mapping how violence seeps into familial and emotional lives (Nongkynrih 134). His lyrical, often elegiac voice contrasts sharply with Ibopishak's ironic distance, yet both poets document the ruptures inflicted by insurgency and counter-insurgency.

Thingnam Anjulika Samom represents a newer, younger generation of poets whose work has begun appearing in anthologies like *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from Northeast India* (2014). Her poems reflect urban anxieties, feminist perspectives, and a sharp awareness of gendered violence and cultural decay. Scholars like Uddipana Goswami have acknowledged the significance of such female voices in the male-dominated literary landscape of the Northeast (Goswami 158). Anjulika's work is particularly important in revealing the intersectionality of gender, space, and politics.

Beyond regional studies, the theoretical framework of subaltern studies is relevant here. As Gayatri Spivak argued in her landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", marginalised voices often lack direct access to representation within hegemonic discourse (Spivak 271). The poets discussed in this study, though writing in English or translated into it, symbolically reclaim that representational space. Their poetry challenges the epistemic violence of both the Indian nation-state and global literary markets.

Also pertinent is Edward Said's concept of "contrapuntal reading", which suggests reading texts from the margins in tandem with the dominant discourses they resist (Said 66). Through this lens, the poetry of Manipur becomes a text of opposition, speaking not just to the

immediate realities of Northeast India, but to the broader crises of identity, citizenship, and human rights in the postcolonial world.

In sum, while scholarship on these poets is still emerging, their works have started to receive deserved critical attention. However, there remains a significant gap in comparative analyses of these voices and their shared but stylistically diverse responses to socio-political crises a gap that this study aims to fill.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis methodology to critically examine the selected poems of Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Robin S. Ngangom, and Thingnam Anjulika Samom. The focus is on how these poets employ literary techniques, symbolic imagery, and narrative voice to articulate the fragmented socio-political realities of Manipur and offer a symbolic mode of resistance against systemic oppression.

The poems selected for analysis are:

- Thangjam Ibopishak Singh's "I Want to be Killed by an Indian Bullet" and "Dali, Hussain, or Odour of Dreams, Colour of Wind";
- Robin S. Ngangom's "A Poem for Mother" and "Native Land";
- Thingnam Anjulika Samom's "My Fearless Words" and selected poems from anthologies such as *Dancing Earth*.

These poems have been chosen for their thematic depth, socio-political engagement, and literary diversity. They collectively represent different facets of life in Manipur ranging from militarisation, personal trauma, gender-based violence, and cultural displacement to the ironies of nationalism and modernity.

Analytical Framework

The study uses the following analytical lenses:

Postcolonial Theory: Drawing from scholars like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, the poems are read as texts of resistance that challenge the hegemonic discourses of Indian nationalism and mainstream literary canons.

Subaltern Studies: Particularly useful for understanding how marginalised voices from the Northeast engage with power structures. Spivak's theory on the subaltern's agency is crucial to interpreting the poetic voice as a medium of dissent.

Feminist Literary Criticism: Applied especially to Anjulika Samom's work, feminist theory helps in exploring how the female body and voice become sites of both violence and resistance.

Formalist and Symbolic Analysis: Literary devices - such as irony, surrealism, juxtaposition, metaphor, fragmentation, and allusion - are closely examined to interpret how these poets symbolically represent the fractured realities of their homeland.

Results And Discussion

The selected poems of Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Robin S. Ngangom, and Thingnam Anjulika Samom reveal deeply fractured socio-political conditions in Manipur and demonstrate

the poetic imagination as a site of resistance. Through literary innovation, ironic detachment, emotive recollection, and symbolic embodiment, these poets critique the oppressive mechanisms of the state, repressive cultural norms, and the erosion of individual and collective identity. The discussion is structured poet-wise to maintain clarity while drawing comparative insights.

Thangjam Ibopishak Singh: Satirical Subversion and Surreal Absurdity

In “I Want to be Killed by an Indian Bullet,” Ibopishak employs biting satire and surrealism to foreground the alienation of the Manipuri subject from the Indian nation-state. The narrator’s ironic desire to be killed “by an Indian bullet” is a radical symbolic act of reclaiming national identity, twisted by decades of militarisation, racial profiling, and marginalisation. The bullet becomes a metaphor not only for violence but also for the state’s failed promises of inclusion.

The persona’s voice oscillates between the absurd and the tragic, mirroring the lived disorientation in a militarised zone. The juxtaposition of the personal (“my body”) with the political (“an Indian bullet”) blurs the boundaries between the self and the state. As Kikon notes, “Ibopishak’s poem deconstructs the national narrative through sarcasm” (Kikon 81). This is a protest not through romantic nationalism but through sardonic alienation a postmodern unraveling of state narratives.

His other poem, “Dali, Hussain, or Odour of Dreams, Colour of Wind,” elevates this stylistic experimentation by integrating references to European and Indian avant-garde artists. Dali and Hussain symbolize different modernist art traditions one surreal, one political. The poem becomes a meditation on creativity in a violent world, where the “odour of dreams” and “colour of wind” are ephemeral, elusive, and yet persistently sought after. Here, art becomes resistance: not through slogans but through metaphysical rebellion.

The poem’s abstract diction challenges conventional reading and disorients the reader mirroring the fractured realities of the poet’s homeland. The invocation of artists across cultures signifies a transcultural rebellion, where Manipur’s suffering connects to broader human experiences of oppression and creative defiance.

Robin S. Ngangom: Memory, Grief, and National Belonging

In contrast, Robin S. Ngangom engages with the political through lyrical remembrance and emotional vulnerability. His “A Poem for Mother” mourns not only maternal loss but also the disintegration of the nurturing homeland. The mother is both literal and symbolic representing the land, culture, and a way of life now engulfed by militarisation and displacement. The emotional intensity of the poem is not diluted by overt political commentary, yet the backdrop of violence is omnipresent.

Ngangom’s “Native Land” further explores this theme. The poet writes, “I have no use for poems / that don’t bleed.” This declaration aligns with Ngangom’s well-known assertion that “a poet in the Northeast cannot afford to be apolitical.” The “bleeding poem” becomes a metaphor for poetry as ethical testimony, where the poet’s body and the land are both wounded archives of memory.

The lyricism and elegiac tone mark Ngangom’s divergence from Ibopishak’s sardonic voice. Yet, both critique the internal colonisation of the Northeast. Ngangom’s poetic strategies

- soft-spoken but piercing - reveal the emotional consequences of structural violence, where trauma manifests not only in public protests but also in private sorrow.

Thingnam Anjulika Samom: Gendered Spaces and Intersectional Resistance

Thingnam Anjulika Samom brings a feminist consciousness into the poetic discourse of Manipur. In “My Fearless Words,” she writes:

“I wear my bruises like earrings / my stories like weapons.”

This poetic assertion turns the female body into a site of resistance. While Ibopishak and Ngangom speak largely from male perspectives, Anjulika’s poetry foregrounds gendered violence, revealing how the socio-political breakdown affects women in unique, often invisible ways. Her words “bruise” and “weapon” embody intersectional resistance where gender, ethnicity, and politics intersect.

Her poems also critique patriarchal traditions within Manipuri society, revealing a dual oppression from the state and from internal cultural hierarchies. The symbolic use of domestic imagery jewelry, kitchen utensils, lullabies transforms into instruments of rebellion. As Goswami notes, “Anjulika disrupts the normative feminine by politicizing the intimate” (Goswami 163).

Her presence in anthologies like *Dancing Earth* signifies the emergence of female poetic voices from the Northeast, challenging both national stereotypes and local silences. Her poetry complements Ibopishak’s abstraction and Ngangom’s lyricism by offering a gendered interiority to the discourse on conflict.

Comparative Reflections: Converging Voices of Resistance

A close analytical reading of the selected poems by Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Robin S. Ngangom, and Thingnam Anjulika Samom reveals the shared but stylistically distinct modes of poetic resistance that emerge from the fractured socio-political context of Manipur. Despite their individual poetic identities, a few recurring motifs and strategies underscore their collective challenge to systemic oppression.

Firstly, each poet grapples with fragmentation - be it the fragmentation of identity, memory, or nationhood. In Ibopishak’s work, fragmentation takes the form of surrealism and ironic dislocation. The absurdist tone in “I Want to Be Killed by an Indian Bullet” is not merely aesthetic experimentation but a literary strategy that mirrors the disjointed experience of Manipuri life under constant militarised scrutiny. His surreal imagery in “Dali, Hussain...” furthers this sense of psychological and cultural rupture. The breakdown of logical structure in his verse evokes a reality where reason has little bearing amidst political chaos.

Robin S. Ngangom’s poetry, by contrast, uses lyrical introspection as a means to interrogate the same fragmentation. The poet speaks from the fault lines of memory and mourning, crafting a personal yet political lament. His assertion, “I have no use for poems that don’t bleed” is a powerful ethical stance, suggesting that poetry must be embedded in lived history and collective trauma. The emotional register in his work becomes a counter-hegemonic force: it resists the amnesia of mainstream narratives by restoring affect to political discourse.

Thingnam Anjulika Samom’s poetry introduces a crucial intersectional critique by mapping the female experience within the broader landscape of violence. Her verses

reconstruct domestic, often feminised, spaces into terrains of resistance. The poetic lines “I wear my bruises like earrings” articulate a profound symbolic inversion - where signs of vulnerability are transformed into assertions of agency. Her poetic resistance is layered; it targets not only the state’s militarism but also the cultural misogyny embedded within Manipuri society. Her inclusion thus challenges the male-dominated poetic discourse and expands the terrain of political resistance to include gendered subjectivities.

Symbolism acts as a unifying aesthetic across the poets, though deployed differently. Ibopishak’s metaphor of the “Indian bullet” functions as a politically charged emblem, exposing the contradiction of national identity and internal colonisation. Ngangom’s “bleeding poem” becomes a synecdoche for Northeast pain, while Anjulika’s “weapons” of language and body imagery signify the embodied resistance of the marginalised. Each symbol contributes to a poetic cartography of Manipur that is not merely geographical but deeply psychological, cultural, and affective.

From a critical-theoretical perspective, one might align Ibopishak’s strategy with postmodern irony and defamiliarisation, Ngangom’s with subaltern lyricism, and Anjulika’s with feminist poetics of resistance. Their varied poetic idioms point to the fact that resistance is not monolithic; rather, it is multivalent and context-sensitive, shaped by identity, aesthetics, and the mode of engagement with trauma.

The convergence of these three voices demonstrates that the poetics of Manipur is neither silent nor singular. It is a tapestry woven from satire, grief, and embodiment, resonating with both regional specificity and universal concerns. Their work collectively illustrates that the poetic form, far from being escapist or apolitical, serves as a vital tool for articulating fractured realities and mounting symbolic resistance in a region historically silenced by the national mainstream.

Conclusion

The poetic landscape of Manipur, as represented through the selected works of Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Robin S. Ngangom, and Thingnam Anjulika Samom, reflects a profound engagement with themes of fragmentation, identity, trauma, and resistance. These poets, through their distinctive voices and literary strategies, have not only chronicled the socio-political turbulence of their homeland but have also transformed poetry into an act of symbolic defiance.

Thangjam Ibopishak’s deployment of surrealism and irony in poems like “I Want to Be Killed by an Indian Bullet” and “Dali, Hussain, or Odour of Dreams, Colour of Wind” offers a radical deconstruction of imposed national identities and the absurdity of life under military occupation. His poetic voice destabilizes dominant discourses by refusing to conform to expected narratives of nationalism and cultural assimilation.

Robin S. Ngangom’s poetry complements this resistance by anchoring pain and memory within lyrical introspection. His voice, marked by sorrow and moral clarity, reveals the internal wounds inflicted by external political forces. Ngangom’s emotive imagery and ethical commitment offer a counter-memory to the sanitized versions of history often propagated by state mechanisms.

Thingnam Anjulika Samom, as one of the prominent female voices from Manipur, introduces a much-needed gendered dimension to this poetic resistance. Her exploration of the female body, trauma, and language as a site of power provides a compelling intersectional critique of both militarism and patriarchy. Her work affirms that resistance is not only about speaking against the state but also about reclaiming agency in domestic, cultural, and poetic spaces.

Through close textual analysis, this paper has demonstrated that these poets do not merely reflect reality but actively reshape it. The use of irony, metaphor, fragmentation, and symbolism across their works serves as a counter-hegemonic discourse - a poetics of protest against marginalisation, violence, and erasure. Their voices rise from the edges of India's geographical and political consciousness, demanding recognition, justice, and dignity.

In conclusion, the poetry of Manipur - far from being peripheral - is central to understanding the complexities of identity, resistance, and literary activism in contemporary Indian literature. These poets illuminate how literature, particularly poetry, can serve not only as a mirror of suffering but also as a weapon of hope, critique, and transformation.

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