Locating Trauma in Saratchand Thiyam’s *Sister and other poems*

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Abstract

The paper will provide a brief introduction to the historical background of North-East India and North-East Literature. The more predominant themes used by North-East poets are also discussed. Some of the major themes these poets deal with are the sense of rootedness to their own culture, the lamentation of losing their past roots and self-identity, political issues, violence, insurgency problems, death, trauma, power politics, etc. The paper will introduce one renowned Manipuri poet and travel-writer Saratchand Thiyam and his poetry volume, *Sister and other poems* which is translated into English because of its literary merit to Indian Literature by too renowned Manipuri poets from Manipur. The paper goes on discussing critically many aspects with special reference to violence and trauma. In Thiyam’s poems, trauma is seen throughout and the poet is often traumatised by the effects of violence and terror perpetrated in his native place as well as around the whole world.

**Key Words:** Trauma, Violence, Gun, AFSPA, Mangarakkanbi.
North-East India is the easternmost region of India comprises of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Sanjoy Hazarika in his book *Strangers of the Mist* describes India’s North-East as “a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometres wide at its slimmest which is referred to as the Chicken’s Neck”. This region distinctively differs from other parts of India in terms of their history, culture, language (Tibeto-Burman) and geography. Because of this tenuous link to the rest of the country as pointed out by Hazarika, this region is little known to the mainlanders and is often portrayed as “India’s insurgent heartland”.

Literature from North-East India is a part of Indian Literature and is considered as one of the newest bodies of works among New Literature. It can be either written originally in English or translated from the indigenous language or completely written in native language. It can also be called “emerging literature” if we use the term of Margaret Ch. Zama and has gained due recognition for their vibrant and new themes. The disturbed political state of affairs, the conflux of various ethnic groups, perhaps has produced a new body of literature from this region. There are so many writers dealing with different genres. But in around 1980s, there emerged a young group of poets whose writing reflected the image of the contemporary issues of the time. These energetic poets tried to capture the picture of the time through their deep experience and observation and often analyse in their writings with new ideas. Most of these poets speak about violence, terror and the troubled situations because they “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 of these, the banality of corruption and the banality of terror”. North-East poets cannot indulge in sentimental writings. Someone may wonder why these poets cannot write about the region’s breathtaking landscape, mesmerising contours and exotic culture and history. To this, Robin S Ngangom in his essay, “Poetry in a Time of Terror” gives Neruda’s answer: “Come and see the blood in the streets”. Indeed, this is the only answer one can reply at this juncture. People are so much affected by the daily gory happenings that such things already occupied a firm place in their minds and have become part and parcel of their daily life. Such acts bar their vision and leave a permanent scar on the collective psyche of the people. Therefore, in every
poet’s writing, there is always a streak of apprehension and trauma which has created enough anguish to torment and keep haunting them throughout the writings.

The paper will deal with a well known Manipuri poet and travel-writer, Saratchand Thiyam who was born in 1961 in Imphal, Manipur. He writes in Manipuri language. However, due to his literary merit found in many of his writings, it becomes compulsion on the part of some poets to translate his works into English. His dedication to the literary world can be seen since his childhood days. Therefore, at the age of nineteen, he had already published an anthology of poems, TengaliKarabaPodon (Smoked tapered-lamp). He has published eight books in Manipuri. He has participated in many literary events in various cities of India, and in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He was also part of the Indian delegation at the World Peace Council in 2000. Saratchand Thiyam bagged the Jamini Sunder Guha Gold Medal from the Manipuri SahityaParishad in 2002, and the SahityaAkademi Award in 2008. His poems have been translated into many Indian, English and foreign languages. The present paper is on his poetry volume, Sister and other poems translated into English by Robin S Ngangom and Bijoykumar Tayenjam who are also renowned Manipuri writers in Indian Writing in English.

“The word trauma is used to describe experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelms people’s ability to cope, leaving them powerless”. Trauma can happen to anyone when one witness intentional violence, sustained chaotic conditions and anarchy in one’s life. Judith Herman in her book, Trauma and Recovery says that “traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death”. This is very true in the context of Saratchand Thiyam’s poems. He, after witnessing so many ailing things in life, finds trouble to cope and poetry becomes avent to release the untold and myriad stories. His place becomes a small world of mystification and chaos where anarchy is loosed upon and he frequently reiterates the imagery of anarchy. He is like William Butler Yeats in his description of the prevailing situation. Like Yeats in his The Second Coming, we can describe Thiyam’s writing as “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world/ The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / The best lack all conviction while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity.” Because of such condition, one can locate trauma in everywhere of Thiyam’s writings. In his native place as well as the world taken as an entity, he witnesses violence, discrimination, chaos and anarchy. This has affected him to the most. He laments over the fate of his people, his land and of the
world. Poverty, death, confusions, conflict, uncertainties, dilemma, disease- all are discussed in his writing. In the poem, “Shillong”, the poet says that he can hear the hills crying, the people run helter-skelter and blood runs instead of tears:

Lifting latches of beauty
one after another
as I neared you
you were weeping

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darning needles
stab your twin eyes,
blood runs instead of tears;

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But your wailing voice
run over by time’s wheel
has become hoarse. (11-12)

The image of guns, bullets, deaths can be seen in the poem, “Gun”. The poet after witnessing all these harsh and brutal incidents, he cannot restrain his feelings. Therefore, he laments:

Till today one doesn’t hear any hypnotic voice rising
when a gun is thrummed calmly and gently by index fingers.

Like one demented, smitten by a melody,
no one has ever been transfixed
except lifeless bodies lying around unconcerned.

The tens of thousands of bullets appearing
The gun culture has become a kind of fashion in the world. One cannot raise voice against this culture. Freedom of expression is lost. Everyone shivers in front of gun muzzle. The poet mourns the fate of lifeless bodies. He sees dead bodies heaps by heap and this is very much painful and tormenting. The poet is in constant traumatic fits. He sees death everywhere. His lamentation becomes more and more vocal when he talks about the disaster that took place in three places. He compares the once beauty of these three places with the disaster which had been befallen to them now. So in the poem, “PokhranKargilGaisal”, he says:

The bullet holes perched on icy slopes
are carefully guarded by globs of blood night and day.

Empty land
completely barren, uninhabited, absolutely quiet
dawn about to break
death wiping softly, lovingly
sweat on the forehead
torn bodies
amid morning’s beaming rays,
among stinking organs
crisp fresh dolls are bathing. (17-18)

Besides witnessing the violence and terror in his native place only, his traumatic vision becomes more and more clear about other places also. He says that the world has become a battlefield and is full of blood and deceased bodies. This is because men are fearless in producing inestimable deadly weapons. This is like war fought between men and weapons. Men are in a dilemma. Their survival is at stake. It is contradictory that human beings only
make such deadly weapons and they are running for their lives too. The poet is satirical about this. Therefore, in the poem, “Human Bomb”, he says:

The living human bomb

and the lifeless nuclear bomb

how will they do battle indeed

on this earth becoming a battleground

where is journey’s end

in the midst of these wars between men

in the midst of these bombs made of humans

now

a question appears

on the face of earth. (20)

Thiyam sometimes can be compared with one Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, who also satirises the futility of deadly weapons that men are so much indulged with. Amichai calculatingly renders his verse in one poem, “The Diameter of the Bomb” on the anatomical structure of a bomb so vividly that the poem seems to be a kind of mathematical proposition:

The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimetres/ and the diameter of its effective/ range about seven meters/ And in it four dead and eleven wounded.

The lines reflect the poets’ obliterated lives by violence and terror that rip up the peaceful lives of their people. One can accept the conviction of the poets’ traumatic minds when one dips burrow into the lines. In fact, this is always true in Thiyam’s case. When certain situations become oppressive, the poet often takes refuge to mockery and irony which are directed towards himself by raising so many questions. Indeed, such paradoxical disposition often showed by the poet conveys that his mind is always in contradictory with the real world and is much anxious and distressed. One can locate trauma at this very moment itself.
“Sister” is the most justifiable poem in the whole volume. Here, the poet lucidly expresses the contemporary and true pictures of what is occurring in his native place. In Robin S Ngangom’s essay, “Poetry in a Time of Terror”, he quotes Czeslaw Milosz’s line: “There is no such thing as an innocent bystander. If you are a bystander, you are not innocent”. To relate with this quote, Thiyam in the poem conspicuously shows to the readers that something terrible is happening in his place through the voice of a speaker. The speaker becomes the mouthpiece of the poet and warns a girl whom he calls sister. Thiyam believes that after witnessing much, he cannot remain neutral and is not innocent at all if he is a bystander. Therefore, he feels the urgency of narrating a story of terror. It is in his psyche tormenting him throughout his life. It is this trauma the poet can never get rid of:

Haven’t you heard this sound
The commotion in every home
Of the still incoherent babies.
Don’t you go sister
This rain is only becoming harder
Don’t you go sister
Don’t you go.
Look sister, every courtyard
Has become
Mangarakkanbi
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. (23-24)
Simple yet the lines carry much more latent and metaphorical meaning. There is lurking fear and danger in the poet’s people. Every house is mourning. The place is under anarchy. The armies and the militants rule the place. Everywhere the deafening sounds of the boots fill the place. And this is sad. Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958 is implementing freely in this place. It is a law with just six sections granting special powers to the Indian Armies in what the act terms as "disturbed areas". “The Act has received criticism from several sections for alleged concerns about human rights violations in the regions of its enforcement, where arbitrary killings, torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and enforced disappearances have alleged to have happened”. It is not the Indian Armies only who are torturing the common people on the ground of just suspicion, militants and insurgents are also perpetrating the same treatment. Such unmindful acts by the both parties sadden the poet extensively. He is very much worried that his place becomes MangarakKanbi. “MangarakKanbi is the name of a gorge in Manipur. Early Meiteis, the majority ethnic group of Manipur inhabiting the valley region, used to throw the bodies of people who died of unnatural causes in MangarakKanbi”. The poet goes on lamenting and warns the people to be mindful.

In another poem, “Kolkata My Kolkata”, the poet talks about Kolkata. Kolkata is a metropolitan city where both good and bad things happen. It can be inferred that the poet visited Kolkata at some point of time. Now he recollects his experience and this direct encounter with the city left behind a sordid picture in his psyche. This thing comes to his mind intermittently and he captures this moment to express his traumatic mind:

Toddlers who can hardly walk
Are taught how to dance
To feign tenderness softness weakness
In hovels near the platform
By their mothers.

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From those aborted foetuses
The ones who survive stare

At the countries of the world

From windows of an orphanage. (26-27)


Also, the poet discusses the effects of urbanisation, infiltration and fear of losing identity. Urbanization is wrought upon on these hilly areas. In the blink of an eye, urbanization in the name of developing programs takes away the serene and calm world. The so-called old one becomes merged with the new one and a completely different face results. Such acts traumatised the poet’s anxious mind. He then starts lamenting over the sudden and drastic changes and the fear of losing the old values and customs. Reluctantly, in the poem, “Itanagar”, the poet in the last stanza talks about the ravage of urbanisation in village and hill areas:

The sleeping dust particles

Will start waking up, one after another

When the ones coming across the hill ranges,

The bulldozers, start running over them.

At that moment, what will you be?

With rows and rows of your bricks,

Keeping them encircled

Can you still save-

The fragrant flowers? (53-54)
The poet is very much concerned of his own society which used to live happily. Now a sudden change can be seen by the poet and he wonders what will happen to his society after such defilement of the pure one. He questions to himself and to his people. Indeed, he is made worried by this developmental construction. He also laments over the loss of village life which was once pure and unaffected by impure things. In the same vein, the poet talks about the effects of urbanisation in another poem, “Communication”. The scenic beauty of the hill is lost. Woods are cut down in lieu of concrete buildings. The rivers, lakes are drawn out for construction. Now the nature’s manifestation is lost and the poet’s zeal is shattered. Because the green and fresh images disappear. The poet is now distressed and it is here the poet is traumatized. The trauma lingers in his conscious mind:

The hill, once very high, has become shorter.

The green hill has become barren.

The stream, flowing down, has turned muddy.

The images before me have become duller. (56)

One of the predominant themes in North-East poetry is the fear of losing identity because of illegal infiltration of outsiders. Recently, an unprecedented amount of illegal migration took place. As a result, frequent insurrections upsurge. This is a big concern for everyone. It becomes a major issue in connection with identity issues. Due to the outnumbering of outsiders from the native people, the people who have been in this region since time immemorial stoop down to the level of minorities. This ultimately results to the slow yet promising loss of their self-identity. Many learned people start discussing this issue. If such illegal migration is not checked in time, native people’s identity is at stake, will obviously reduce to minority and one day the value and ethnicity for an ethnic group or community will surely be lost forever. Therefore, many poets start lamenting and it becomes a predominant theme in their writings. Thiyam being traumatised by the very fact of losing identity recollects in his poem, “Home for the Vagabonds”:

How shall we sing

the sweet patriotic song of our Motherland
No doubt, a variety of themes Saratchand Thiyam has discussed in his poetry. We can conclude that Thiyam is a versatile and prolific poet who can express his thoughts in a very expressive and lucid manner. He, having experienced and encountered so many things in life, can vividly recollect his thoughts and put down into words. His expressions are his only unexpressed feelings. And this is true of every writer. In certain point of time, the poet is very much disturbed by whatever he had encountered in his life. This commotion shapes into a mixture of ideas and is embedded deep into the psyche of the poet. Whenever, he recalls of certain incidents or experience, immediately his mind gets incited and that call itself is enough to create trauma in the poet’s consciousness and he is often traumatised by that very call. Such epiphany or moment is distressing. The poet cannot do anything at this moment except to find a way to release his traumatic feelings and thoughts. This is how the poet is able to express the disturbed and the conflicting incidents, events or experiences in a very lucid and vivid manner no matter how much he is conflicting. This is true of Sharatchand Thiyam. Everywhere he expresses, one can locate trauma. This is because the poet is too much exposed to the world where unwanted things are wrapping the world up day by day incessantly. Poetry is like in chains for him. Poetry used to be a piece of work where one can find river, mountain, lily, and so many good things. But poetry now becomes a place where hardly one finds nice and alluring things. It is like reporting and narrating of a traumatic and disturbed mind.
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