Sexual Metaphor in the Poetry of Robin S. Ngangom: Interpretation through the Triangulation of Discontent, Regret and Discovery

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Abstract

Robin Ngangom's poetry abounds with sexual metaphor which bears a profound significance on the oeuvre of the poet. The paper seeks to establish the closely interlocked relation that Ngangom's poetry has with the representation of sex as the poet's masterful attempt at finding answers to questions on both ontological and political levels. I will try to establish, through the paper, the intersections between discontent, regret and discovery as the triumvirate that Ngangom, as a poet carefully employs through sexual encounter. These encounters, far from being merely casual, provide deep interconnectedness with the poet, the politics of his state and the discovery of the self.

Keywords: Sexual Metaphor, Discontent, Regret, Discovery, Politics, Indigenous.

Introduction

To say that Robin Ngangom is a poet from Manipur would be both provincial and cosmopolitan in the same breath. While foregrounding the writer within his 'region' enables a certain contextualization of place/space/politics/; the opposite is also true, when Ngangom becomes 'exoticized'/'hinterlized'/'meuseumized' because he belongs to Manipur. And like Wouters and Tanka Subba say that the people who live here are depicted as the 'exotic' and the 'erotic'; as the "Orientals of the Orientals," TemsulaAo, celebrated Naga writer also rued this experience. When on a visit to a museum and seeing a Naga artifact, Ao was struck to see a placard which said, "Do not Touch" (6). What is essentially 'yours' becoming the naturalized other. Robin Ngangom, a well-known poet who teaches English at North Eastern Hill University in Shillong, writes in an autobiographical style which is deeply rooted in the ontology of tribal/political/private. The role of place and people (external), and the quest for identity (internal) constitute one of the many frameworks within which the writer operates; and Manipur becomes the poet-cartographer's essential tool; even though, unlike the imagination of the traveler-cartographer, Manipur is far from being a site of idyll visions and homely

succor. Soibam Haripriya says that even the term Manipuri has become a "vexed category" as many ethnic groups in the state do not identify with this term owing to its assuming hegemonic currency as the majoritarian Meitei community (Summerhill IIAS Review 68). And so, when the premises themselves are so problematically poised on tottering ground, it is expected that the answers will be illusive. And like Tarun Bhartiya says, the brave struggles for autonomy have reminded Indians and the world of the "provisional status of all atlases" (413). Ngangom says in *Poetry in the Time of Terror*, that Manipur which is his native place is "in a state of anarchy, and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions from that land" (168). And like Ngangom and Nongkynrih say in their introduction to *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* (2009), whenever reality in Manipur becomes oppressive, "poets frequently seek refuge in absurdist irony often directed towards oneself " (xiii). So, while Manipur and its concomitant associations are inseparable muses, the deeply personal, autobiographical and confessional embed themselves to produce the palimpsest of the poet's creative expression. The creative canvas of the poet's imagination is naturally stimulated within all these intersections through both subtle semiotics and bold linguistic turn.

The canvas of the poet pans out to the reader through several devices and one of these, sexual metaphor, is frequently employed. These metaphors and even the literal descriptions of lovemaking that the poet uses in his compositions are interred within a larger framework of the political and the personal, and become means of discontent, regret or discovery. In fact, Ngangom's book *The Desire of Roots* has a whole first section of 25 poems organized under the category of "The Book of Lusts." This section examines different facets of sex and sexuality with keenly incisive observations. Society views sex as a matter that occupies the intimate and the private; a matter that has to kept under wraps and not be made a matter of public conversation. "But this action merges with cultural norms. Sex is personal, but also political" (Romine). One cannot help thinking about sex divested from social/political influences. But far from any romantic escapades around undulating hill and meandering brook, the sexual experiences enumerated by Ngangom only induce languor, sorrow and the occasional epiphany. Why do sex and sensuality take these unprecedented turns with discovery appearing rarely, albeit powerfully? The paper aims to examine this deep interconnectedness between sex, the politics of Ngangom's state and the discovery of the self. For the paper, I have taken up the following poems of Ngangom for the analysis: "Last Word," "From the Book of Childhood," "She,"

"Spring's Torment," "Native Land," "Funerals and Marriages," "The Ignominy of Geometry" and "The Gazelle in Winter."

Objectives and Key Questions

Through the course of the study the paper would aim to achieve certain objectives. It will attempt to use triangulation as an effective tool to interpret sexual metaphor. Through the employment of triangulation, the aim would be to establish a close relationship between sexual metaphor and the triumvirate of discontent, regret and discovery. While doing so the objective would also be to locate the political in the sexual and thus unravel the poet's inclination to find answers to complex ontological questions. These objectives would hopefully lead to a fruitful conclusion. While closely examining the selected poems of Ngangom and his oeuvre, there are certain key questions that the paper would seek to address. How does sexual metaphor become the ubiquitous vehicle of Robin Ngangom's canvas and why do sexual metaphors/encounters transform into experiences of discontent, regret and occasional discovery? And most importantly, why does the political occupy such an important place in the discourse?

The Functions of Sex in Literature and the Use of Sexual Metaphor in Ngangom's Poetry

Sex as an act has been ascribed with multiple functions and procreation and physical wellbeing are often projected as the most important. Beyond the biological function of sex, several other purposes are also attributed to it which includes fostering feelings of love, togetherness, relieving of stress and even the discovery of innate powers and esoteric secrets through sexual union. What role does sex play in literature? Is there an easily discernible pattern; does it visibly point to an allegorical/ironical compass; or to even a more subterranean messaging? "Sex is a function of culture; in literature today, it plays only a small though aggressively righteous part" (Gliskberg 3). Yet this function in literature has been stridently apparent in various literary movements, as Gliskberg observes, from the Lost Generation to the Beat Writers. These aggressive movements aimed at the "glorification of instinct" and later, the "apotheosis of the orgasm" (4). Such movements allowed for much exploration and experimentation which found their vociferous way into literary syntax and idiom. Hence on the literary plane, sex and sexuality, sexual metaphors, sexual guilt, sexual violations and more have been portrayed in literature as central themes, to bring to the fore the power of this important motivator of human behaviour and action.

The employment of sexual metaphor in poetry is not new, permeating and puncturing narrative with sensual and erotic overtones; sexual metaphors have found a prominent place in the repertoire of several poets. While Donne was almost overzealous with the use of sexual metaphor, Whitman explored these symbols with an almost reverent fervour "Sex will not be put aside; it is a great ordination of the universe" (James 35) and while Byron employed such metaphors as a mirror of his emotional and erotic life, Kamala Das, on the other hand, used the body as the driving force to investigate the potential of sexual encounters as her confessional writings "often concretized her biding love for the human body, and its intimate details and processes" (Sunny 68). The candour with which the confessional poets addressed sexual questions almost became the hallmark of their oeuvre.

Robin Ngangom too, expatiates upon the sexual experience with as much candour, if not more. Ngangom has developed a syntax of his own, and while he acknowledges the influence of Jayanta Mahapatra on his themes and techniques, in recent years, he "increasingly seems to become his own legitimate voice" (Nigamananda 5). Ngangom describes his poetry as "mostly autobiographical, written with the hope of enthusing readers with my communal or carnal life-the life of a politically-discriminated-against-historically-overlooked individual from the nook of a third world country" (Subramaniam 13). This encapsulation of the writer's oeuvre, in his own words, brings two facets of Ngangom's writing to the fore: the communal and the carnal. The carnal is evident as a trope which leads to a number of revelations and the communal rests in the political/social/cultural/historical legacy of his people. The paper will closely examine the carnal in terms of sexual metaphors through the triangulation of discontent, regret and discovery.

Triangulation

Cohen and Manion (1986) define triangulation "as an attempt to map out or explain more fully the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint" (Turner and Turner 229). Triangulation has been used particularly in Sociology and in other social sciences as well to bring out multiple perspectives of social phenomena and social behaviour. I am employing the term in the context of the present study `to use three standpoints of discontent, regret and discovery as three postulates to study the overarching theme of sexual metaphor in the works of Robin Ngangom. All three postulates offer varied interpretations of the sexual metaphors and hence the one reinforces

the other. I do not use triangulation in a strictly research methodological manner, but rather borrow the terminology owing to its usefulness in trying to understand complex phenomena; sexual metaphor and its concomitant underpinnings offer fertile ground to delineate the many complexities that maybe encountered in their comprehension. The three postulates represent varying aspects of the sexual metaphor and yet they collate to bring home the understanding of this complex triumvirate in the selected poems of Robin Ngangom.

Triangulation of Discontent, Regret and Discovery

Discontent, in the works of Ngangom is deeply embedded within the tedium of the political and the personal and sexual metaphors offer the airing of this discontent. Like many writers who have often found the canvas of the world as inadequate expressions of their creative thirst, discontent only becomes the natural child of a poet's longing. In his paper, "Interpreting the Images of Decay and Unrest in Robin Ngangom's Poetry," SaratDoley enumerates characteristics of this decay as moral, spiritual, creative, material and ideological, among several others (528-29). All these and other 'forms of decay' often show the poet "etherized on the table" of fate and circumstance, caught between the personal and the political. Though Ngangom frequently uses the romantic lyric, he prefers "to ground it in politics" (Das Prasanta 5). Emerging from the onerous play of these two uncomfortable bedfellows, this seething discontent makes its appearance in several of the poet's compositions. Examine what Ngangom says in the poem "Last Word" which is a mix of desire and bloodshed. "This is why I love simple things/ such as sunlight on our shoulders/or women with firm breasts/ and hills quiet in the rain" (Ngangom 101). This seemingly innocent sexual desire and even the aspiration for "sunlight on our shoulders" is almost immediately punctured by a subsequent question: "How come his poetry is riddled with bullets then" and a few lines later he asks, "I'm sorry I always break my words on hostile surfaces" (Ngangom 101).

This apparently naïve love of commonplace pleasures inevitably gets tangled in violence and the resultant discontent becomes natural consequence. The reference to the bullets becomes natural in Ngangom's poetry. Like fellow poet and author from Meghalaya, KynphamSing Nongkynrih says, "living with the menace of the guns, the Northeast poet cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness" (Bhattacharya 12). The convoluted questions of overlapping ethnicities among the states and the reluctance of belonging to the "Indian nation" have cast long shadows ever

since Indian independence. And like Vandenhelsken and Karlsson say, such resistance makes people of the region "reluctant Indians" (331). Ngangom is often compared with Pablo Neruda and his lines "You will ask why doesn't his poetry/speak to us of dreams, of leaves/ Of the great volcanoes of his native land/Come and see the blood in the streets…" are very similar to Ngangom's "Last Word," which read as, "They whispered among themselves/How come his poetry is riddled with bullets then/So I said:/I wanted my poem to exude a heady odor/But only the sweet taint of blood/Or burning flesh emanates from my poem" (Haripriya 18).

The discontent which emanates from political instability, violence and blood on the streets engenders deep-seated discontent, translated into the seething pain of not achieving, not belonging and of continuously staying stuck in a warp, and remaining continuously fatigued. This is reflected in the last lines of the poem "A Poem for Mother," "Forgive me, for all your dreams/of peace and rest during your remnant days/I only turned out to be a small man/with small dreams and leading a small life" (Ngangom, Poetry at Sangam). In the poem "Native Land," he employs the sexual metaphor to express an abject sense of desperation and discontent. Ngangom writes poetry of witness when he testifies to shootings, mayhem and death and amidst all the turmoil comes the sexual reference, "I burnt my truth with them/and buried uneasy manhood with them/" (Ngangom, Poemhunter 15). The sexual act characterized by words such as "burn" and "bury" only portray the act as one that drives out the life force instead of instating/reinstating it. Some lines later, he says, "But when the days/ absolved the butchers, I continue to live/as if nothing happened" (Ngangom, Poemhunter15). The killings, the loss and mourning cannot be repaired through either sloppy or delicate lovemaking.

Regret

Sexual metaphor also becomes emblematic of loss and regret in Robin Ngangom's poetry. The sexual act or even sensual references, while they act as lilting tunes on the bodies of those that make love; such acts also reflect a deep sense of mourning that rues the loss of sanity, peace and love. The poem "From the Book of Childhood" captures the story of a boy's life from being his grandmother's darling, to becoming a young man, and experiencing the end of the drama of life through thoughtless killings and endless disappearances of young boys. Examine the sexual metaphors even while grandmother, the initial protagonist has turned mad and is "tied with a rope to her bedpost" and her grandson has abandoned

her. "Every girl was a fairy or a goddess/Smelling of lotuses and dreams/" (Ngangom 3). And some lines later, "It could be his blooming heart/Or his wet dreams, he mustered up courage to ask a girl out…" (3). And then there is also the wait in vain for the old life, the life of tradition and festivity; a mournful wait for the village music and festivals of the state but "they've disappeared in the folds of his reveries/Like the fairies and the goddesses" who all return in his middle years in an orgy of death on the streets (3). This yearning and regret are interred in sexual metaphor.

The poem "She" creates an embodiment of an imaginary woman, who, although, occupies only realms of fancy yet tethers the poet to desire and longing. Ngangom delicately conjures the idea of this woman as ethereal and physical at the same time. The sensual descriptions create a heightened image of woman and sensual associations with her, "I founded pain from her; /From her irresistible eyes, her unbound hair, /Her bright body" (4). Some lines later, the sexual reference is seen in, "The unexpected embrace of/Her inflamed stigma" and again, "She again reminded me/Of my birth's astounding passage. /And one day I entrusted the key/Of my life's lonely tenement to her/" (4). He regrets that he "put shape and form in place, but/couldn't make her stir/" (5). The narrator is able to create a 'perfect' image of his woman but it ends up being a mirage; a mystery "that I do not know of her" (5). The lingering sense of regret emerges from the sexual and sensual metaphors of the poem.

One of the most stirring poems of Ngangom is "Funerals and Marriages." The poet says that he has stopped going to funerals and marriages as "demonstration of grief or joy unnerves me" (Ngangom, Poemhunter 7). He, in almost blasphemous fashion, says that the only funeral he'd like to go to was the one he'd seen in a film where Bombay slum-dwellers drank themselves drunk after "tears and the burning" (Ngangom, Poemhunter 8). Early in the poem, the poet invokes the sexual which is embodied in the unsettled naiveté of boyhood. It is impossible for the narrator to imagine how to comfort someone during a funeral as, "I cannot be comforted, except by the woman I love illicitly" (7). And some lines later, the sexual overtones, both sensual and mellifluous in the form of sexual acts between cousins, "…my other lovely cousin, in whose body I first sang a liquid tune," and "I used to dip my hands into her blooming breasts, a pair of frightened pigeons" (7). Notice how Ngangom describes the trepidation of the girl cousin and the fearlessness of the man. This sexual manoeuvre is immediately followed by a haunting image of the dead cousin appearing in his dreams to "play and protect" him, but he took a long time to go away. There is

a lingering feeling of fear and an ache of guilt and regret; so, the ghost has to be dispelled by spitting three times, much like the Greeks did through "ritual spitting" as a good omen to ward off evil from infants and newlyweds (Jain). But this, this is no good omen! The juxtaposition of sexual metaphor and haunting of the dead is an uncomfortable framework, but goes to suggest, perhaps, that the sexual escapades also stopped after the ghost began to haunt. Is the ghost warning the boy to leave his sister alone?

The poem "Ignominy of Geometry" employs geometry as a framework which foregrounds our understanding of men and matters; a boring man becomes a square and that dark excitement we all secretly envy becomes an "eternal triangle" (*The Desire of Roots* 31). Ngangom cleverly teases the reader through several elusive flourishes but the poem ends suddenly, it appears, with loss, through a sexual metaphor, "Even my love was flesh and blood/because I had put my mouth on her lips/but good fortune abandoned us/and we became two points of light/on that white emptiness/drawing unhappy parallel lines" (32). The poet has felt the tangibility of the lover through lips and a kiss, but that was not enough to keep them together and now they are just two points of light who are together yet apart, reminding one of the early lessons in Geometry which taught the characteristics of parallel lines. The dictates of Geometry, Ngangom shows, are thus more than mere lines and points and angles; they in a way, can also dictate lives, plotting points, but not necessarily joining them. The sense of loss and regret is palpable.

Discovery

Sexual metaphor and sexual encounters in several of Ngangom's poems bring about a reflective unearthing, wherein the sensual complexion of the narrative is suddenly punctured and almost simultaneously ejected into the path of revelation. Several of these sexual metaphors are related to 'boys' and their discoveries of girls and in turn, discovery of themselves. In the poem "Primary Schools," the missionary school, so closed and stifling becomes an apt metaphor for the bursting out of sexual energy. The poem examines sexual exploration by the "naïve boy" who couldn't "read the dirty word…In the calligraphy of randy boyhood" ultimately "explored his girl cousins fervently" because he was "obsessed with that moist idea" (15). The boy's sexual foray accompanied by its attendant feelings of exploration and freedom are squarely cast against the backdrop of a highly regimented life in school "where only nuns seemed to believe in the power of the written word and punishment" (14). These forays are followed by

an unusual calm of "convalescent afternoons" where the boy lives at a slow pace "when life burnt slowly like calories even when he was sleeping/without the solemnity of anyone's life/coming to an end" (15). The sexual encounter, along with the distance from the "books from Glasgow" teaches the boy a lesson of pace and sloth, in one stroke, almost.

"Spring's Torment" personifies nature as a woman and the poet's constant efforts to be one with the universe, with sensual descriptions like, "I should have sucked you in me,/I am lost without your fingers,/Your healing oils/" (Ngangom 6). Personification becomes an important device and it works as an "effective strategy of making stories and ideas colourful, intimate, familiar to tribal anthropomorphism" (Chandra and Nigamananda 6). The sexual metaphors cannot be missed, more so, because they are not addressed to a woman, like several other poems of Ngangom but to the ecosystem itself. "Something under the cover of hill's night/Goes to your street in quest of lips./I should have sucked you in me/" (Ngangom 6). Notice how the sensual descriptions of nature take an almost eco-sexual turn. Eco-sexuality is a contemporary environmentalist movement started by Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens inviting people to treat the earth "as a lover." Eco-sexuals stand against exploitation of the earth and aim to "save the mountains, waters, and skies by any means necessary, especially through love, joy and our powers of seduction." (Turer 2). Ngangom has not made explicit his eco-sexual claims, but the descriptions appear to border around this environmental movement. "When I put my mouth on yours/I turn blind and deaf, earth must wait./Even as we speak, we become wet/With dew." And some lines earlier, "I recover from your lips what I knew to be/Constant as midnight water/In the thirsty glass" (Ngangom 6).

This veneration of nature is also a corollary of the "historical continuity" (Drissi) that indigenous tribes have traditionally had for nature which is apparent in the poem. Nelson is of the view that this eco-erotic impulse is deeply human and part of "a coevolutionary adaptation not only for survival but also for regeneration" (232). The engagements with nature bring about a deep understanding of how it can permeate the spirit and become an out-of-the-body experience while in the same instance, the accompanying feeling of regret is also discernible, making the poem a mix of discovery and regret, synergy and dissonance, all rolled into one. The poem ends thus, "And the day's torrent takes you away/In a submerged bus with broken windows/Running carefully with my memories/" (Ngangom 7). There is the constant reassertion of the nature/nurture dynamic and deep-seated revelations are made but the loss is

also undeniable. The poem "The Gazelle in Winter" is a picture of the discovery of womanhood, not so much on the part of the woman, rather, on the part of the imagination of the poet. The sensuous description of beauty and "womanhood, hidden," and imaginary lovemaking bring sexual metaphors to central focus. "She must be a virgin/for virgins find it difficult to understand poetry," along with the concluding lines of the poem which indicate:

> She is frightfully young and untutored,
> The poet would like to teach her
> With fire-things, bittersweet verse
> Of his own days, and
> Startle her with womanhood. (*The Desire of Roots* 27)

Ngangom, by imagining the poet unravelling himself to the woman would surprise her both by discovering and penetrating through the veils of her womanhood. The naïve gazelle would no longer prance on the streets, perhaps, but would revel/rebel in her new-found womanhood. The discovery by both the woman and the poet would be nothing short of "warm instinct" (26).

Conclusion

Robin Ngangom thus employs sexual metaphors in the selected poems with the result that there is a heightened comprehension of the ontological self, the political creature and the aspirations of the poet through these inflections. The triumvirate of discontent, regret and discovery become visible tropes around which the sexual metaphors hover. Sexual metaphor never assumes the glory of Romantic Escapism and neither does it allow any gossamer daydreaming; it tells hard truths: biting bullets, exposing the nakedness of shame and realizing the smallness of the poet's aspirations; terrifying discoveries, at most times. Ngangom, in almost confessional style gives the reader the taste of the bitter detritus of his mouth when he kisses a woman or melts his manhood into her, only to remember the sound of the gun or the smell of loneliness, with tiny apertures of revelations here and there. The triangulation of discontent, regret and discovery allow an adequate unpacking of the motivations of the poet and enable both a semiotic as well as a literal/literary understanding of the sexual and the sensual. All these emotions engender a comprehension of sexual metaphor which is a leitmotif in several of the poems of Robin Ngangom. And to repeat what the poet has confessed about his poetry: he says his work is "mostly autobiographical, written

with the hope of enthusing readers with my communal or carnal life…" (Subramaniam 15).

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