

'What Good is Poetry in Desolate Times?'

¹

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The contemporary socio-political situation in Manipur has been studied in its breadth and depth by social scientists. As a social anthropologist examining the process of militarisation in sacred sites in my PhD thesis I have been facing difficulties in the representation of the field. In doing 'fieldwork under fire'², the factual contents of ethnography often have to be re-presented through fiction, especially when the lives of informants depend on what factual details are revealed. On the other hand as a poet I have relative ease in capturing the poignancy of violence, which I am unable to represent in my ethnographic research due to disciplinary constraints. It is this schizophrenic tension between the personal and professional, poetry and ethnography, fact and fiction that I wish to explore in this paper. I write thus as a subject struggling between non-hyphenated and yet a necessary marking of boundaries between a poet-anthropologist, an informant-anthropologist, insider-outsider and many such permeable identities.

So, what should we do in the absence of a corpse?
I heard he died in training
In Bangladesh or Burma
What day do we choose for the Shradh?
Is this better than the stench ridden corpse?
The son of the neighbour next door
Reclaimed three days late
Death degrading itself into stench

The mother says "He isn't dead
I haven't seen his ghost yet
You see, there are no walls, to contain the dead
They have to come back"

In the absence of the corpse
How do we convince her,
she isn't a half widow
but a full widow
And you thought half and full
is only the proverbial water in the glass tumbler

In the absence of the corpse
Can't we just get another?

Give it her name and set it ablaze
in her name

Many do come back after the cremation
Not as spectacular as second coming
But no less a miracle

They come back, sometimes to grief
sometimes to happiness
sometimes to indifference –which is worse than either

You see, sometimes in the absence of a corpse
We are given to too much hope

Field Notes, 1st April, 2011

The above verse forms a part of my field notes while working on my PhD thesis in Thanga, Moirang. In my thesis I looked at how the notion of the sacred gets challenged by the presence of ongoing military operations at a sacred site. The poems of course could not form a part of the disciplinary demands of a PhD thesis in Sociology. Yet, the writing of them, after writing out the field notes of the day, formed a part of my routine. This is also partly contributed by the fact that much of the information that respondents shared with me in the course of my field work could not be revealed for the safety of the respondents could get compromised. Many wished to remain anonymous. From such experiences stemmed the engagement with poetry as a way of stating the *unsayable/ unspeakable*.

Amitav Ghosh in an interview with Stankiewicz (2012) on 'Anthropology and Fiction' stated about his book, *Antique Land* that people regard it as fiction because of its form and not its content. I engage in anthropology of fiction, more precisely analysing poetry written in and about the violent times that characterises Manipur to look at the potential of poetry as it breaks free from the need to follow a linear and/or a chronological form. Indeed many had also critiqued Bruce Chatwin's travelogues as more of fiction than fact (which one assumes travelogues to be). Poetry has no such burden of either presenting itself as fact or fiction. I am however not using fiction as

an opposition to fact. Fiction does not mean falsification. Rather fiction in the genre of poetry (that I analyse here), I argue, would mean breaking away from the need to follow specific form or a genre. Thus this form has the ability (like fiction) to narrate much beyond what will be ethically possible within ethnography without jeopardising the respondents' lives and relationship with the community.

In this essay I analyse few poems of Modern Manipuri poets whose works get reflected in anthologies of poets from 'northeast India' or as in performances by artists. I am aware that the term *Manipuri* has since become a vexed category. Many ethnic groups do not identify with this term and more often than not this term has become synonymous with the majority *meitei* community. My paper therefore has this disadvantage of discussing selected works written in *meiteilon* or its translation in English. This is also partly because of the fact that most anthologies of poetry from the north east seems to offer works by writers of the majority community as standing-in and representing the fractured collective. Having stated so, I however do not condone myself of this peril of having reinforced the manner (through the selected of specific poets and poems) in which certain majority communities become representatives of the whole.

The poems I discuss here do not constitute a specific canon and exist in the niche space of works translated in English; they enjoy a small regional readership. To reiterate the layers of the challenging issue of representation as I stated in the above paragraph I add another layer to it which is that of certain works being relegated to the space of the *poetry from the northeast* which itself reveals a way of reading wherein it is an area studies or geographical criterion that distinguishes these poets and their works from those of mainland India. Before I begin to discuss the poems, some comments on certain genre of poetry would seem apt. Firstly, is the question of Aesthetics. The paper was presented in the International Seminar on "Poetry as Counter Culture: An Unbroken Indian Tradition", the specific panel was titled '**Poetry of Bad Times**'. When certain poetry become categorised as protest poetry or poetry of bad times certainly the concept of aesthetics become vexed. What is the conception of 'beautiful' here? Do we need to rethink the idea of aesthetics which is of paramount importance in literature? Do we need to rethink the aesthetics of poetry while dealing with certain genre of poetry? For instance, does the very notion of poetry as counter culture have a conception of aesthetics that is distinct and separate from the idea of aesthetics in celebrated works of poetry as culture? Thus, all these are questions related to the concept of aesthetics. What might distinguish the conception of aesthetics in the poetry of

bad times as opposed to the poetry of good times? Can both be analysed and held from a similar way of seeing?

Secondly, the question of text and context will be discussed along with the selected poems. However what is internal to the text and what is external to the text has been a point of contention in critiquing poetry. As suggested by John Hall (1979), the way out of this seems not be to posit one against the other. There is way out of the insistence of the Marxist approach 'that literature can only be understood in its social context, or that an **external** referent is necessary for the full comprehension of any text' (Hall, 1979: 2) as opposed to the view 'enshrined in the insistence of the American 'New Critics' that one commits an 'intentional fallacy' if (to use D.H. Lawrence's famous phrase) one trusts the teller rather than the tale (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946 in Hall, 1979: 2). The way to look at this is to hold the text and context in a tension, rather than argue for the foregrounding of either. Also the obsession with context rather than text adds another layer to the concept of aesthetics. A poem, after all, needs to be distinct from a pamphlet. But truly can one satisfactorily define the distinct contour of either especially in specific genre of poetry, for instance, protest poetry? If such a contouring is possible, the question of aesthetics needs to be addressed by that definition.

Certain poems like Thangjam Ibopishak's '*I want to be killed by an Indian Bullet*³' will be discussed in this paper. The particular poem reflects the anguished necessity of choosing a manner of dying (and not of living, for who here could have a say in that!). When Thangjam Ibopishak wrote 'I want to be killed by an Indian Bullet', it was censored out of an India International Centre publication. *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North East India* has three poems of Thangjam Ibopishak translated by the poet Robin S Ngangom. The above poem is one of them.

Similarly Irom Sharmila, in her poem titled '*Untitled*', writes 'For born with lips, for endowed with thoughts, how can I leave without protesting⁴?' The Introduction of Irom Sharmila's collection of twelve poems, *Fragrance of Peace*⁵ also refers to her as she who "speak out the unspeakable without losing the essence of humanity" (Roy, 2010: 12). I want to explore this fixity of identity as problematic. One of the consequences of that fixity could be seen in the cover of the book and the contents which refers to Irom **Sharmila** as Irom **Sarmila**. When I asked the publisher on the peculiar spelling I was told that the pronunciation of 'Sh' does not exist in Meiteilon. This was in spite of the poet herself signing her work as Irom Sharmila. The fixity of identity and the almost universal acceptance of her as Iche (Sister) has entailed that some of us have gone to the extent of censoring her given name to fit into the limited readings of her

politics. While my argument still remains speculative and a generous reading could be that this peculiar shift (Sharmila as Sarmila) had emerged due to the problem of translating of her work from the Bengali script to Meitei Mayek and to English; however it seems more likely that an urge to political correctness had obliterated the name that Sharmila uses in reference to herself. This also speaks of the way one think of cultures and practices including pronunciations as static. Extending the bizarre argument would be to say that the name Sharmila is itself not a Meitei name at all. What does this reading of name do? This collection does not even footnote this shift, this renaming of the poet because her given name's pronunciation does not exist talks about other anxieties – what do we reclaim from history and what do we deny? To extend my point of partial recuperation and denial I look at the concept of *dharma* in the introduction of the book. The introduction looks at the concept of *dharma* a theme that many of Sharmila's poems deal with. Dharma as Roy draws analogy with, in the introduction, 'bursting into song, the like of which was heard eons ago by the mythological *Pandava* warrior prince of the *Mahabharata* as the blue-god, *avatar* of *Mahavishnu* sang to him through the rising din of the weapons at the battlefield of *Kurushetra*' (2010:9)

While history is denied, mythology is embraced. I state that history is denied to look at this peculiar situation of revivalism that is seen in the renaming of the poet that also denies the non fixity of cultures, that denies the Hindu past however oppressive and yet an engagement with the mythology that this past brings. The latter cannot be denied as this thematic is a recurring feature in Irom Sharmila's poetry. The search for a singular originary moment that much of the revivalism discourse deals with is much fraught with the possibilities thrown up by the question of what do we sieve out of the historical processes as antithetical to our collective sensibilities. Collective sensibilities and cultural provincialism are marked by overarching ideologies. Ideologies lead to partial recuperation. This ambiguity of partial recuperation is what I want to read as a process of that history of violence, a denial of her 'self' wherein we present her as a sanitized 'sister/ iche' poet and activist and thereby deny the scope for her also as a sexual being.

The political and the sexual seem to be thought of as discrete and separate categories leading to the banning of the newspaper *The Telegraph* beginning from the 6th of September 2011 because of a reportage of her love-life. The contention seems to be that the journalists in the state get so little access to her and yet when *others* get access the question of politics is postponed and the journalist seems to ask 'non- political' question around her love

and love poems. That also seems to be the reason that her body of work which includes a majority of love poems is not picked up in her collection as well as anthologies. There is a placing of love and politics as separate impermeable categories. What is the contestation of meaning here? This contestation can be placed as existing within the triad of the poet, the poem and the reality/ location (derived from Stead's *The New Poetic*). 'A poem may be said to exist in a triangle, the points of which are, first the poet, second, his audience, and, third, that area of experience which we called variously "Reality", "Truth", or "Nature". Between these points run lines of tension...' (2005: 2) I complicate this notion by keeping the poet/ self at every point of the axis. One does not keep the poet apart from the poem and one reads the poet into the poem and vice versa, so much so that we deny parts of the poet's life which does not seem to 'fit in'. The Convener of the Sharmila Kanba Lup 'accused the national media house of the country of sidelining the cause and agitation of Sharmila by publishing *some personal matter instead of publishing the voice of the Gandhian* who adopted non-violence as a means of demanding constitutional rights of a citizen of the country' (*Hueiyen News Service*, September 06, 2011, emphasis mine). If parts of the poet-activist's life do not seem to fit in, what does not fit in should not emerge to embarrass and drive a 'wedge between the human rights crusader ... and her supporters who are extending unconditional support to her agitation' (ibid, emphasis mine). Thus the lines which connect and form this triangle need deeper analysis. I therefore speak of distorted triangles. This triangle has to incorporate both the poet and the poem; reality has to encapsulate the people as well as the state and their interaction –sometimes camouflaged, sometimes visceral such as in the act of fasting. What happens to this triangle when one point appropriates the other? Is it possible for us to begin to imagine poetry as distinct from the area studies trope of 'northeast poet' or 'Manipuri poet' that would make it impossible to read their works also as a comment on the universal human condition? It should be admitted that it is a difficult enough proposition and that there are gains to be got from the prefixing of identity and politics into the poets and their work. However it should also be acknowledged that such processes hampers the creative process of the poet and shrinks their repertoire. To reiterate, in this reworking of reality that fiction (of recuperating parts of the whole) enables and the alternative strategy of using fiction to state reality as it is, brings to fore the role constituted by the audience/ reader/ anthropologist. Poetry (and naming) is not a singular narrative but is deeply entrenched in a contestation of meanings. The Introduction of the book

is therefore illuminating in the way it tries to address all these.

The poet – Irom Sharmila (in spite of the book I will use Sharmila and not Sarmila) and her protest through fasting which is the lens through which her poems will be seen regardless of the fact that this collection contains poems written much earlier and yet it is difficult to imagine poems like 'That cane of the policeman!' written with anything else in mind but the repressive laws (AFSPA) and the seeping in of laws like these into the everyday. So much so, that the police, who does not function under the ambit of AFSPA still functions with impunity.

... on southern edge in the middle of this very bridge
was resting on his rickshaw like his aged colleagues
at that moment came a truckload of policemen from the east
when the vehicle slowed down its speed
one of the three constables sitting in front
that one on the left rose and stuck out a cane
and struck the rickshaw puller on his back...

(Sarmila: 2010:21)

Irom's collection of poems is also engrafted with a desire, the desire of letting the roots seek its home of soil, to foster and nurture not the idea of territorial belongingness but one that is rooted in the crises of the 'canes of policemen' and yet as a mother exhorting

What gain you by torching an effigy?
for a scrap of land you cannot take with you

(Sarmila: 2010:37)

This particular poem from which the above line is taken – *eemâdee khongdai setlaroi* ('mother will be ragged no more'), rags *khongdai* is a word difficult to translate, the Phanek, the lower garment for women tied around the waist is made of two rectangular strips of cloth which is stitched in the middle. With regular wear and tear the middle part of the Phanek gets worn out. The Phanek is then again cut horizontally in the middle and the upper half and the lower half is stitched so that the worn out portions are at the upper and lower edge of the Phanek. In this poem this rag – this Phanek *kongdai* is used to suggest the abjectness of the widowed mother who has brought up a son hoping he will be a wisdom keeper and is shattered by his growing up to be a brute. Whether or not a conscious thought, those who had put in the collection the poems, reflect a certain role – that of a mother or a sister. That the collection is a political act is beyond doubt. However, this begets the question: Is the gendering of women's writing inherently problematic? In the particular context of this collection is there an attempt to look at the poet, vis-à-vis her relation as a sister to a man / (or even in solidarity to the idea of sisterhood). Is there an attempt to embed in her the ideals of a universal

mother in the choice of poems? There is a gendering of her as a sister that also desexualises her and thereby the censure and banning of her 'love' as opposed to her politics. It is indeed difficult to begin analysing Sharmila's poems given the self imposed overarching political correctness of those who choose not only to read but also to select which works are to be published.

Let me stretch out my hands
Beloved friends
Welcome me in your midst
So unquenched that I am
Unable to voice in words
I desire to tear open my chest
and show the bland empty smile within
I desire a voice of that laughter
be struck by shrapnel of bombs
for the aftermath cheap tears
to reduce all filth to cinders
Let every face be radiant
with the hope of a new era!
This one weak step
Wants to leave a hundred footprints
And become chants of courage
Come, open your door
For born with lips
For endowed with thoughts
How can I leave
without protesting?

The Untitled Poem, (translated from Irom Sharmila's 'Maming Thondaba Seireng'). This poem was translated by me as a part of a performance by Rojio Usham on the occasion of the book release of Irom Sharmila's *Fragrance of Peace* in the year 2011. Following this the performance, has also travelled to various sites with the poem including the Zubaan's organised 'Festival of Peace'. How do we read the above poem? Certainly we read it with Irom's fast – 'So unquenched that I am'. One could think of this metaphorically as a thirst for normalcy. However, one could also see this as a visceral bodily need of hunger and thirst that she has denied herself until the time comes for such things to be quenched.

She seems to say –How can poetry be not anything but a tool of protest in my hand. Though her oeuvre is much more than protest poetry but this poem certainly foregrounds that role of poetry for her. This reading of poems that I engage with marks a shift from earlier works of literary criticism especially new criticism⁶ that considers works of literature as apart from the historical location of the work. Engaging with poems in the way I have done according to new criticism parameters will be seen as an 'extrinsic' approach. However new criticism has been decried as an orthodoxy. There is also a literary turn in anthropology as much as there is a cultural turn. Many ethnographers were trained in literature. Certainly

disciplines are also not confined and bounded by strict rules of what is their constituency. Thus I argue that Irom Sharmila is already seen as an activist poet by the publishers and political vanguards. Her works get chosen and interpreted in a manner that reinforces and fixes this identity. The political climate during which her work is produced and read is important. Her collection of poetry, as stated before, has poetry from her childhood as well. But the prevailing time is what triggered her work to be produced.

Similarly Thangjam Ibopishak's poem that I mentioned in the beginning of this article – 'I want to be Killed By an Indian Bullet' needs to be reproduced in full here.

I want to be Killed By an Indian Bullet

I heard the news long ago they were looking for me;
in the morning in the afternoon at night. my children
told me, my wife told me.

One morning they entered my drawing room, the five
of them. Fire water air earth sky –are the names of these
five. They can create men; also destroy men at whim.
They do whatever they fancy. The very avatar of might.

I ask them: 'When will you kill me?'

They leader replied: 'Now. We'll kill you right now.

Today is very auspicious. Say your prayers. Have you
bathed? Have you had your meal?'

'Why would you kill me? What is my crime? What evil
deed have I done?' I asked them again

'Are you a poet who pens gobbledygook and drivel?
Or do you consider yourself a seer with oracular powers?
Or do you a madman?' asked the leader.

'I know that I'm not one of the first two beings. I
cannot tell you about the last one. How can I myself tell
whether I'm deranged or not?'

The leader said: 'You can be whatever you would like
to be. We are not concerned about this or that. We will
kill you now. Our mission is to kill men.'

I ask: 'In what manner will you kill me? Will you cut
me with knife? Will you shoot me? Will you club me
to death?'

'We will shoot you'

'With which gun will you shoot me then? Made in
India, or made in another country?'

'Foreign made. All of them made in Germany, made
in Russia, or made in China. We don't use guns made in
India. Let alone good guns, India cannot even make
plastic flowers. When asked to make plastic flowers India
can only produce toothbrushes.'

I said: 'That's a good thing. Of what use are plastic
flowers without any fragrance?'

The leader said: 'No one keeps toothbrushes in vases
to do up a room. In life a little embellishment has its
part.'

'Whatever it may be, if you must shoot me please
shoot me with a gun made in India. I don't want to die

from a foreign bullet. You see, I love India very much.'

'That can never be. Your wish cannot be granted.
Don't ever mention Bharat to us.'

Saying this they left without killing me; as if they
didn't do anything at all. Being fastidious about death, I
escaped with my life.

(Thangjam Ibopishak in Ngangom and
Nongkynrih, 2009: 132-133)

There is no exteriority or interiority to this poem i.e. to
say that I cannot make a distinction between the above as
a 'pure' text detached from its context. The title 'I want
to be killed By an Indian Bullet' is certainly not interior
and separate from the Armed Forces Special Powers Act,
wherein under the law one can be shot by an Indian bullet
on charges of suspicion. The latter is not the exteriority.
The former and the latter have merged together to give
us a satire, a demand that then –this must be so. Kill me
as decreed and no other manner of death will suffice.
The exteriority of death which seeks out every person
on whatever pretext has come looking for this poet in
his poem. Here, the poet stands in for everyone and the
five elements are the banality of violent death. This poem
could be seen as the merging of the two, the blurring of
boundaries. There no longer is a boundary of what is
inside of the poem and what is outside. The boundary
that a movement of literary criticism has established
between the two has long been broken down but poem
like this particular one illustrates that the boundary was
always untenable.

What has the above work to do at all with either
ethnography or anthropology? Or does it have no bearing
at all to say, researchers wanting to work in the 'exterior',
the location of the poem?

Renato Rosaldo (2014) in his book *The Day of Shelley's
Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief* explains why he
chose to write about his wife's death in free verse rather
than choosing his medium, i.e. prose. He states 'It makes
a case for poetry that situates itself in a social and cultural
world; poetry that is centrally about the human condition'
(2014: 101). Could I argue that his poems act as a witness
to Shelley's death? Certainly the poems talk about 'not so
much the raw event as the traces it leaves' (ibid: 102). He
further writes 'The work of poetry, as I practice it in this
collection, is to bring its subject –whether pain, sorrow,
shock, or joy –home to its reader. It is not an ornament... I
strive for accuracy and engage in forms of inquiry where I
am surprised by the unexpected... If one knows precisely
where a poem is going before beginning to write there
is no point in going further. The same can be said of
thick description in ethnography where theory is to be
discovered in the details' (2014: 105-106). Rosaldo gives
the term *Antropoesia* 'for verse informed by ethnographic
sensitivity' (ibid: 105). One might say therefore that my

argument is tenable for certain types of poems. However, I argue that all poems are anchored to both the exterior and the interior. The manner of the exploration of this relationship will trace both the space and 'belonging' of the text which simultaneously produces the 'other' of the poem – who or what is it supposed to be read against.

Notes

1. I adapt the title with a quote from Heidegger's essay 'What are poets for'. Here he begins with a quote from Holderlin's elgy *Bread and Wine* '... and what are poets for in a destitute time?' (Heidegger, 1975, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Harper C& Row: USA)
2. The term is borrowed from the anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom and C. G. M Robben's book *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival* published in 1996.
3. Bhartiya, Tarun "Liberal Nightmares: A Manual of Northeastern Dreams" http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/06-turbulence/02_tarun_bhartiya.pdf (accessed on 15th January 2011)
4. Translated by me for a performance by Rojio Usham. This short performance has been a part of the book release of Irom Sharmila at the Zubaan book store at Shahpur Jat on 22nd of December 2010 as well as the Zubaan organised 'Festival of Peace' 28-29th of January 2011. This is now an annual event.
5. Sarmila, Irom (2010) *Fragrance of Peace*, Zubaan

6. New Criticism is an American movement of literary criticism that emerged during the 1930s. This literary criticism movement considers literary works to be 'self-sufficient objects' and therefore talk of the works as separate and distinct from the historical location or origins of the work.

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