

**Interrogating the Silence: The Portrayal of the other Indians in Sudhiranjan's Short Stories**

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**Abstract**

*Understanding a literary work from the Northeast region requires an engagement with the social life of the people out of which such works are produced. The political practices being carried out in the region are institutionalized during the pre-independence period and extended till today based on the community interests of those in power. Setting a clear-cut problematic to embark upon a literary text produced under these determinate societal structure inevitably calls for another effort to uncover the pasts associated with the smaller ethnic communities of the Northeast. In corollary terms, our literary engagement requires a clear epistemological questioning of their pasts.*

*The paper "Interrogating the Silence: The Portrayal of the other Indians in Sudhiranjan's Short Stories" studies two Manipuri short stories-- "Nungshiraba Marupki Mapao"(News of the Beloved Friend) and "Khongul"(Footprint)--written by Sudhiranjan Moirangthem to hint at how certain social changes in postcolonial Northeast confront a group of people rendering themselves incapable of adapting to the new social structure. Further the paper seeks to prepare a literary alternative to the various ways of explaining the political violence in the region and Indian state's efforts to mainstream them in the larger 'national' interest.*

**Key Words:** power, ethnic communities, postcolonial, political violence etc.

## **Introduction**

Northeast India is frequently seen as a bundle of crucial crises deeply rooted in its own pasts and postcolonial India's economic and military intervention in the region has been characterized by widespread corruption and human rights violation. Heavily moved by the ethnic interests and facilitated by the administrative weakness, the region has been rendered into a fertile place of insurgency immediately after India's independence. Thus violence as a means of political protest has been the characterizing feature of life in the region today. A further interrogation of this region discloses that the political practices being carried out in the region are still part of a long colonial legacy institutionalized during the pre-independence period. For example economic entitlement on ethnic lines has been in practice for the last sixty years causing backwardness of certain ethnic communities and political dominance of a community over other. However the predicament of the people of this region has not got much space in the literatures produced by major Indian writers. This paper studies such issues textualized in two Manipuri short stories -- "Nungshiraba Marupki Mapao" (News of the Beloved Friend) and "Khongul" (Footprint), both written by Moirangthem Sudhiranjan.

Writing or interpreting a literary text against the backdrop of the complex socio-political landscape inevitably calls for our political prudence and a careful handling of the issues raised in the texts because 'dealing in these issues closely or analyzing them or perhaps writing a story on them renders one complicit with the phenomenon, or at least makes one liable for abetting or aiding the activity [of insurgents]' (Kalita 110). Authors, as a social being, prepare their materials for their work from their social and intellectual engagement in a 'real' world. This real world is the source of his ideas and values he puts in his literary works. This is to say that the stories under scrutiny are shaped by the nature of life in Manipur the author sees. Both the stories tell a tale of innocent people who are silenced by the violent activities of the state and its non-state counterparts.

## **Of Friends, Friendship and Death**

The story of "Nungshiraba Marupki Mapao" (News of the Beloved Friend) centers around the various news of deaths and arrests of his close friends brought to the protagonist. He was also arrested by the security forces without citing any reason. Later he came to know that he was arrested because his name was mentioned by one of his friends who were arrested by the same security forces.

The protagonist's friend just mentioned his name as one of his friends and that was enough for them to make his arrest. Similarly the security personnel asked him to tell the names of his friends and that was another reason for their arrests and so on. This chain reaction of various arrests and custodial deaths frequently haunts the protagonist every night and day.

The author's portrayal of the innocent lives lost unsung raises various socio-political questions on the nature of governance and power configuration in the largest democracy of the world where violence has been institutionalized as an important state apparatus. This political practice is, in the Marxian sense, the base upon which literary productions like the short story under my scrutiny is produced forming part of the superstructure. The characters, therefore, manifest the characteristic features of the ideology working behind the acts of violence. There is a character called Jiten who earns his living by buying groceries from the canteen of an army camp and selling it again. The small business has made him first earn his living and later a case to finish his life on the suspicion of aiding the army by providing secret informations. This 'Jiten' is among those whose names were mentioned by the protagonist at the time of his arrest. The protagonist knows he can meet the same fate any time for any reason. His harrowing psychological pang is thus narrated:

As the dogs bark repeatedly, he becomes restless. He will wake up from his slumber, startled. Rising up, he will listen- where are these dogs barking? Is this piercing barking of dogs becoming nearer? Has any vehicle stopped before a while? (Sudhiranjan 89)

This is the experience of the protagonist every night which carries the inevitable question: 'When is the night getting over?' The barking of the dog, the darkness of the night and the uneasy silence of the night altogether find a parallel meaning in the ravaged lives of the characters in the story that represent postcolonial India's Northeast. When the physical aspect of the violence is reported here and there in the print and electronic media, Sudhiranjan's short stories disclose the changing dynamics of human relationship at a time when 'friendship' can cost a life. He has just mentioned the names of his friends and it can cost their lives. Interestingly, the fear of friendship as the cause death at the time of insurgency, hints at India's postcolonial political practice as the determinant of human relationship.

There has been a long practice of militarization in the name of countering ‘terrorist’ activities in the region. The region is therefore rendered into a contested space in which violence is the most prominent characterizing feature as what Oinam says:

...Northeast India has become the object of the country’s militarist agenda. It operates through what I call ‘declarative discourse’. As far as the Indian state is concerned, dissenting groups and communities are viewed with suspicion, largely because of anxieties about national security and a ‘foreign hand’ conspiring to destabilize the nation, and those that grow out of a centre relating to ‘racial’ difference on a ‘frontier’. (Oinam 183)

Seen in the light of the above remark the case of Jiten, Manisana, Tombi, etc. portrayed by the writer is an attempt to stage not only a human relationship crisis but also a representation of an unseen stream of life largely covered by postcolonial India’s politics of representation.

The insistent repetition of the pronoun ‘he’ at the beginning of many paragraphs and sentences demonstrates the estrangement of the protagonist within a ‘democratic’ independent state. Such estranged lives, when encountered by the state sponsored assertive nationalist narratives, transform themselves into a collective margin called Northeast and strengthen the memories of their historical pasts. These memories of their pasts, set against the ‘militarist agenda’ as Oinam said, hardly find its space inside postcolonial India’s grand nationalist narratives. This historical memories are later transformed into an assertive violence reconfiguring the whole social set-up including literature. For example, witness the existential picturing of the ‘he’ in the story:

He heard the news of his own death. Among the surprising events, he felt a sudden sense of laughter too. He also laughed without knowing why he did so. He went to the morgue and saw the dead body. The dead wears a combat dress. Not only are the marks of bullet injuries, there also other injury marks.

As he returned home, his mother had a heart rendering cry. Both his younger and elder sisters had also signs of a cry on their faces. And his father was said to have gone to morgue. (Sudhiranjan 82)

In his characterization of a typical Manipuri life in the story, Sudhiranjan tries to provide some meaning to the protagonist's surreal question: 'Why was he arrested by the Army? And how did he die' (Sudhiranjan 82)? The answer to such questions lies in the reinterpretation of W.E.B. Du Bois' hard hitting phrase 'quasi-colonial status' (Du Bois 183) in his characterization of the lives of laborers who are settled in the slums of large cities, negroes of United States, etc. The idea of freedom, i.e. being free from colonial power, limits the political space of the minorities of any kind- race, class, gender, religion, etc. In their struggle for this lost political space, postcolonial India's subaltern peripheries frequently challenge the nature of power structure of Indian democracy: 'Minoritarian affiliations or solidarities arise in response to the failures and limits of democratic representation, creating new modes of agency, new strategies of recognition, new forms of political and symbolic representation...' (Bhabha XVIII).

Read with Bhabha's observation, political alienation becomes the basis of the making of the protagonist of the story. While the alienated self tries to find a link with the inclusive selves, the military intervention of the Indian state is a stumbling block. The stark lack of agency on the part of the alienated (excluded) selves becomes a space crisscrossed by several interests – interests that belong to the authoritative majority. Thus framing a political mechanism to bring the alienated selves back to an inclusive society is still remote.

### **Of Love, Life and Politics**

The second story under discussion is "Khongul" (Footprint), a story which tells the unbreakable familial ties that surpasses various legal and social boundaries. This story, apart from the intricate politics of exclusion and inclusion involved in the violence, tries to depict the non negotiable human relationship at the time of insurgency.

The story is about an underground cadre, Boyai, visiting his home in a dark night and his meeting with his family which unfolds the hardship of these people who are living on the other side of the legal and social boundary. The short scene in the house, which Boyai once left, brings several significant turns in his mind: the little lovely nephew, his mother's proposal of surrender to the government, his sister's marriage, the dog that can still recognize him, the sudden coming of one of his followers that shortens the rare meeting, etc. His

life embodies a baggage of crucial questions – love of family and comrades, love of a ‘motherland’, love of his own life, fear of ‘security’ forces, the dark road ahead metaphorically symbolized by the dark night, etc. He is a ‘guest’ to his own home today.

The various faces of Boyai – a rebel, a brother, a revolutionary, etc. – are disclosed in his short meeting with his family. Thus a reader is immediately given the ‘other’ faces of the rebel. However, the answer to the question how a ‘rebel’ is made is left to the conjecture of the readers. There is a crucial question raised in the story:

“Brother, won’t it be really possible for you to return home?”  
Ibethoi just asked without proper thought.

“Why not it be?”

“If so, come home, let us live here together.”

The mother, taking it seriously, asked, “Someone, whom your sister-in-law knows, is also said to have surrendered. He has returned home.”

The father, as if he knows Boyai’s decision, just says, “That is for others. That is not simple. That may be more dangerous. Its very crucial indeed.”

Boyai says nothing. He shows neither acceptance nor rejection. Everyone is silent for a while. (Sudhiranjan 75-76)

Sudhiranjan leaves the various meanings of Boyai’s silence to the reader’s conjectures. But what meaning can one draw at this crucial stage of the story? Is it that “the narratives of rebel organizations are often vague and confused” (Baruah 21) or is it that the present political practices are just an extension of the colonial practices contextually modified to serve the interest of the protagonists of postcolonial India’s political theatre?

As stated earlier Northeast is, to the centre of postcolonial India, a land of savages, underdeveloped region, a burden of India, a land of hostility. Thus with the mask of a civilizing mission, various developmental activities are carried out by the state army. Such acts, read together with laws like Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958), are synonymous with the colonial practices, defined by the phrase, ‘white man’s burden’. Boyai’s silence hints at his dilemma between his long cherished narrative articulated by his weapon and the ‘extended’ colonial

practices unleashed through military and economic intervention of the Indian state. Both the Indian state and its non-state counterpart have taken strong positions that leave hardly any space for public intervention and open debate because both the contesting parties strengthen their activities through a 'declarative discourse' (Oinam 183). The plight of Boyai is that leaving one of the contesting parties of the conflict amounts to joining the other party i.e. state; and there is hardly any middle or dual view that can provide him a peaceful life. This dilemma is the meaning that his silence carries.

As the brother leaves his sweet home, the sister's imagination dwells into her unreturnable past – her dear childhood, the irresistible wind of revolution that has blown away her brother, etc. In the next moment she remembers her lover, Shyam who joined the state security force in his hunt for a job. Thus she spent one of her many sleepless nights. Next morning, she found the courtyard filled with a number of footprints. Footprints of Shyam. Footprints of her brother, Boyai. Footprints showing signs of coming and going that crisscrossed each other. Indicatively his brother was arrested by her lover. However the author leaves arrest of Boyai to the reader's conjecture. Our attention is suddenly drawn to the footprints. Like the footprints that crisscrossed each other, her love of her brother crisscrossed with her love of her Shyam, the brave soldier. The author's picturing of the innocent girl metaphorically alludes to the dilemma of the common people caught between the contestants of the conflict.

### **Conclusion**

The intricate politics behind the acts of violence apart, the destruction of the innocent lives in the name of earning or defending a political space is aptly presented in the stories. Thus Sudhiranjan proposes a literary alternative to the various ways of looking at the violence in the Northeast which leaves hardly any space for public or open debate thereby rendering the voice of the common people unheard. Reading such stories enables the readers hear the voices of the estranged *others* whose voices hardly matter in the political corridor of postcolonial India.

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