

## Semester 2: ENGH: Paper HCC-T-3: Robin S Ngangom: A Poem for Mother

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**Literary Background:** Indian English poetry began in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and has run up to the present through several ideological phases. It started with following the ideas and styles of expression used by English poets of the Romantic Movement and using them in the Indian context. This was a phase of imitation that went on for most of the century, but Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions began to inform the body of such poetry during the latter half. Then came a more ideologically conscious phase of representing indigenous themes in verse forms and expressions culled from Indian poetic traditions, and a more politically engaged poetry began a commerce of ideas between India and the West – to be shaped in poetry as an aesthetic dialogue. This phase came in the wake of Indian nationalist movements, and public discourses over foreign rule. The third phase has begun since India's independence, when Indian poets, using English now as an Indian language, have broken free of Western regulatory influences and emerged into a free arena of expression of their poetic experiences. Writing in English, they now find out their own Indian idioms through experiment, and develop poetry that responds to the nation today. The three phases mentioned above go approximately along the three stages of 'adopt, adapt and adept' identified by colonial and postcolonial literary theory (refer to Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*).

For a detailed study, refer to Bruce King's introduction to *Indian English Poetry*.

### Introducing the poet

Robin Singh Ngangom, born into a tribal family in Manipur, is one of those Indian poets who write in their mother tongue and English. Being born in 1959, the years of his growth saw the Indo China war, famines and epidemics rocking north-eastern India, divisive policies of the national government and exploitation and neglect of the people of the north-eastern hill states. Ngangom was uprooted early from his community and sent away for a western education conducted by Christian missionaries, which resulted in his emergence as a student and teacher of English literature, and a bilingual poet. But it also resulted in a lifelong painful sense of detachment from his own community, land and culture, and a realization of leading a futile life as a go-between among contrary ways of life. These themes dominate his poetry which otherwise records the sad plunder of the hills, and the long decades of terrorist insurgency that have transformed life in the hills to a bizarre nightmare. Much of Ngangom's poetry is deeply autobiographical – his own predicament and experiences attain universality and grow symbolic of the life of the tribes.

Ngangom's poetry aligns the themes of isolation, detachment, fragmentation of the self and loss of identity born from his lived experience with the same ideas recurrent in western modernist poetry and fiction. This makes him a poet of the post-independence mature phase of Indian English poetry – when Indian poets have assimilated western ideas and adapted them to their own, Indian sensibility. His poetry is thus both local and international – raising questions political, cultural and existential across borders. The verse he writes is free of rhyme and meter, creating, like prose, space for polemical ideas, and depending on imagery, pause and shortened lines for emotive effect.

## **A Poem for Mother: a summary**

The poem begins by addressing Palem Apokpi, the poet's real-life mother. He had left home ten years ago to become a man of the world, and on returning now the hills seem foreign ('grown on me'). However, underneath the grown man there still lives the shy boy who was always hungry and lost his teeth eating food stolen from the larder. He is still the romantic adolescent who ran after girls and caused trouble and shame for his mother. Remembering his raucous boyhood, he admits that the useful lessons from the mother were wasted on him, and that he selfishly abandoned his family and community leaving nothing of himself back. Yet, all through his exile he increasingly came to realize what mother meant for him. Next, he recognizes the hard toiling life of the mother – the traditional household worker silently serving the men of the family or fanciful daughters-in-law. Her life of hardship shows now on her face – she has forgotten to smile, the face is creased and white hairs have appeared. Even this day, she must have gone along her never-wavering routine – rising before dawn, sweeping the house, bathing and cooking. She has gone on like this all her life, also trudging to markets with loads of vegetables, earning for the family. Visualizing the life of the toiling mother, the poet is bowed down with a guilty conscience – he has learnt nothing, inherited nothing of her skills or hard work. He begs forgiveness for having betrayed her dreams and hopes of rest and comfort in old age. He has been too small and insignificant to fulfill his mother's earnest wishes.

## **Analysis and commentary**

The first stanza records the poet's homecoming from exile, and the pathetic attempt to reclaim his boyhood and adolescence. He is pained by the realization that his homeland has grown alien to him. Yet there was no other way – the paradox faces children of the hills that they must leave home and community in order to be educated and find a place in the larger world. This involves the loss of their individual and communal identity for which they gain no alternative. He remembers the pain of going – 'how I hated leaving home' – and that pain propels him to enliven his younger selves, the growing boy bursting with natural instincts like hunger and sexuality. This is a desperate and pathetic attempt to step back into a lost self, yet providing some solace.

The second stanza begins remembering, with sadness and a sense of failure, the worldly wisdom the mother had imparted to her children. With perhaps no formal education, she learnt through her life that money is hard-earned and time must not be wasted – two truths strong enough to sustain the tribal life they led. But the son was deflected from the rigorous discipline of tribal life and learned to idle and debauch, which has brought him to nothing. He feels sorry now that he trifled with the advice, and that he left so totally, taking no part in family or community life. Beyond these misgivings however, there is the sharp agony of the boy losing his mother in his exile. The figure of the mother, in absentia, had grown in the boy's imagination as a composite memory – of Palem Apokpi, of home, of motherland. The poet's mind, admitting its careless faults, yet goes above them to face the void in himself created by the absence of the essence – the origin signified in the mother. It is from this stanza that the mother figure grows in symbolic stature, and the moods of penitence and atonement set in.

The third stanza traces the thankless toil of the mother, growing old with pushing on household chores. The tone of sympathy and acknowledgement is clear; the lines caress her tired old face and pay silent respect. There is an unspoken penitence working through the stanza – ‘worried about us’, she has not been able to smile for a long time.

The fourth stanza continues in the same vein of acknowledgement and penitence, detailing out her harsh chores from temple bells at dawn to trudging home at dusk from the bazaars. The Manipuri tribal societies the poet is writing of are often matriarchal, and the women do all the hard work while men idle away their time. The stanza ends with a vision – of the old, haggard mother walking up her life’s road with loads on her head. The deepest chord of sorrow is struck, and the figure becomes a symbol of humanity toiling and suffering eternally. This universal note is emphasized in the question – ‘Must you end toiling forever?’ The question, standing alone outside the stanzaic pattern, rings out the appeal to social conscience – an appeal that goes without an answer. The figure of the lonely mother walking home at dusk is a timeless portrait of suffering humanity saddled to the daily drudgery of life; the portrait recalls the Greek sufferer Sisyphus, pushing his stone up the hillside.

The fifth and last stanza is an apologia – the poet admits himself a complete failure. His failure is a fall from natural grace – he has not learnt anything of the traditional customs and lifestyle of his race, signified by the ‘stable ways and culinary skills’ of his mother. The word ‘stable’ is important here – it means the authenticity of tribal life he has given away in favor of a floating, meaningless existence. He has failed his mother’s dreams and his own, denied her repose in old age, been no worthy son. The stanza ends with absolute self-negation, with a feeling of smallness, insignificance, hollowness, like T S Eliot’s Gerontion, and an admission of being the modern man tossed by inscrutable forces out of his natural orbit.

### **Critical evaluation**

The poem joins the moods of apologia and elegy – apology to mother and motherland for debts unpaid, elegy for the death of the natural, responsible, dutiful son he could have been had he not gone away. Emptiness and helpless grief emerge as major feelings in the end, and we are left speechless before a destiny cruel and ironic, failing human comprehension.

The poem is in a way a record of a failed emotive journey for selfhood, with the mother as the focal centre that would give meaning to the self. Thus the motherhood (centrism) is manifold – Palem Apokpi on the surface, family/community as mother, the north-eastern hills as mother beneath the surface of consciousness. First, an attempt is made to repossess the mother as a shy/naughty boy who filled her with maternal cares and complacency. But boyhood is past and the man is changed, distanced from the aging, toiling mother. The distance is acknowledged – the mother/centre is deflected from the self, and the self looks at its centre from beyond unsurpassable walls. Next, an attempt to regain through empathy with the suffering mother is made, and it fails because the son has deviated from the pattern. What remains is the apologia of the lost, rudderless soul – the ‘small man’ – the self without the centre. The tragedy is deeply personal, and also symptomatic of modern man.