**Semester 2: ENGH: Paper- HCC-T-3: The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom**

Contributor: Partha Pratim Bandyopadhyay, Department of English

**General Introduction**: As stated in the introduction to “A Poem for Mother”, Robin S Ngangom is a modern Indian poet born in Imphal, Manipur. In his bilingual poetry he has always endeavored to express the strange, autobiographical experience of being born into a north-eastern hill tribe and then being displaced physically and psychologically from his family, community and the hills. Much of the modernity of his poetry as well as the cryptic and emotion-packed images and symbols he creates are derived from this lifelong experience of being homeless, rootless and agonized. The present poem is deeply autobiographical – a summary of his life rendered meaningless by senseless displacement in the backdrop of the poverty and underdevelopment of Manipur, the systematic exploitation of her natural resources, and the continuing tribal violence that has disfigured the beloved body of the motherland. The poet takes up the persona of a divided self – an outsider, an alienated son come home, and a suffering son of the soil who grows to become the pained conscience of his race. The internal conflicts and crises of his personality are thus also projected as crucial problems that his society faces – the personal and the social are merged, inseparable. The feelings of pain, betrayal and loss alternate with caustic satire at militant ideologies, state repression and exploitation, and the distortion of history. The poetic voice ranges from irony to lyrical mourning – making the poem rich in dramatic quality. The verse moves like prose through gory images and details drudgery and suffering in dry, prosaic manner, but the poetry lies condensed in the emotional import of the wry images. Like Wilfred Owen, poet of World War I, the poetry lies in the pity.

**Prose rendering (in Italics), explanations and commentary**

**Section I: Stanza 1:** *I cannot claim that I am in control of my own life, or this state of affairs in the country*.

The poem begins with this disclaim that displaces the poet from a seat of authority – he has not been the creator and been its converse – a particle of life driven by forces beyond, and possibly unknown to him. The ‘wheel of fire’ is a composite symbol – it is, at once, the poet’s life become painful and circular, leading nowhere, the ignited state of the hill states under tribal militancy, and a traditional image (taken from farming in the hills) robbed of its positive, productive sense and brought to mean inescapable destruction. Just as ‘fire’ has its positive and negative implications, the ‘wheel’ while suggesting movement and driving, also suggests unending, repetitive motion leading to meaninglessness and boredom. The ‘captain behind this wheel’ suggests a driver or pilot, and when the poet denies being so, the question of who the driver is rises and leads to emptiness and mystery.

**Stanza 2**: I *have an unclear memory of having misplaced a bronze bell – where or when I do not remember. I am aware that I left behind (when I went away) hearths when I should have cared for them. Now as I rush back home I realize I have changed, how or why I do not know.*

Misplacing a bronze bell is a sin he remembers through the hazy memory of childhood days. The exact occasion is forgotten but the childish mistake remains in memory with the weight of a heavy guilt – we must remember here that many Manipuri tribes are converted to Christianity and as such have the conception of original sin. This act of misplacement now takes symbolic dimensions: bells are associated to worship, their positions in the household are often numenal, and the misplacement is a crime against both divinity and family. The poet now probably understands his own estrangement from his family as a return of the misplacing of the bell. The memory is bereft of place and time, coming from a distant childhood far both in time and the psychic disorientation that has happened between. Yet it is embedded in his unconscious, like a chimera that reminds of having committed something that stigmatizes him for life. Related to this is the memory of untended hearths – hearths are household fires that stand for the warm sustenance of the family, the centre around which the family gathers. As such, it is a sacred fire to be cared for by each member of the house – its going out signifies destruction. He had left the hearths, cared not for his home, because he had to leave, and leaving was not to his will. Here we come face to face with the paradox – the poet blames himself and suffers for deeds not willed by him – the image of man as a puppet in the hands of inscrutable fate. Nevertheless, a sense of wrongdoing has driven him in his exile, and his return to his people is an act of atonement. Upon return, he ironically realizes that he is rendered unable to atone because he is changed inwardly. His estrangement for over a decade has cut out a different, lonely life for him – he does not any more fit into the patterns of traditional tribal life. This realization is both a shock and a self-enquiry – who is the poet then, and where does he fit?

**Stanza 3:** *To define myself, I could say many things about myself, but all would be useless. Being so changeable, without constancy, I envied the fixity/constancy of water and stone. They have character while I have none: I was groomed as a sheep by my community, but now I am like the sacrificial goat that is driven amidst fanfare to the town square, decorated with a marigold garland.*

Following the theme of inexplicable and unwanted change discovered in himself in the previous stanza, the poet looks into himself and acknowledges the transformation in an ashamed tone. From a sheep to a goat of sacrifice is a fall from grace – from a boy who is a treasure to the community to a useless creature fit to be killed in an act of communal purgation. The poet’s envy for the ‘character’ of water and stone is a mark of his hunger for unchangeable nature – something recognizable, dependable and believable. Human nature is no more so, and that is the tragic realization. There is a half-conscious wish to be like water or stone that remain the same for ages – this wish being the obverse of the senseless flux human life is subjected to. Then, when the poet speaks of his change from a sheep to a goat, there is an explicit admission of the moral fall resulting from some original sin – like the misplacement of the bell or the disrespect of the hearth. There is also a self-conscious tendency to degrade his own self and make it an object of ridicule, a subhuman creature – expressed in the image of himself as the sacrificial goat here – which is also found elsewhere in the poem. This is another typically modernist trait in the poet. The use of the word ‘enchanted’ is remarkable: it comes from the storehouse of tribal superstitions, but the enchanter in this case is a bundle of forces and factors foreign to the tribes, reinforcing the idea that the ‘change’ is unapprehended.

**Stanza 4**: *When I was twenty-four, my youthful search for beauty and eternity took me to the world of art, the mythical land of Bohemia where death does not exist. I believed it to be an enchanted land where time has stopped - a country where art has the power to gift immortality to man. I was inexorably drawn to this country and adopted its ways.*

The poet, moving out of his groove in the community, had gone to receive a western education, studying English literature that infused into him a love for art and brought him to ancient western art forms that professed the immortalizing powers of art. Anguished by the sufferings known since childhood, he jumped into the illusion that art was the elixir to all misery. Bohemia was really a country in eastern Europe, thought of by western people in the middle ages as a fantastic land with outlandish people and strange laws. When artists began to be isolated from the mainstream of western societies following the Enlightenment of the 18th century, their manners and conceptions came to be called Bohemian due to contradiction with mainstream thought. Thus Bohemia came to be associated with art and the ideal world it seeks to create. Along with immortality, it has several other charming ideas for the young mind – free love, irreverence for social norms, equality of all men, free flights into realms of imagination, liberation from the strictures of the workaday world. For the young Manipuri poet, these spelled an enchantment and he probably found in it a private escape from the agonizing contradictions of his own soul, as well as an idyllic liberation for his society. It is interesting to note that he says ‘I invited myself’ – meaning that the plunge into ideality that art offered was a psychic need from deep within, a strategy of survival at that youthful stage of life. The other interesting point is that the kingdom of art is his ‘affable neighbor’ - meaning that he derived emotional sustenance during the difficult days of youth.

**Stanza 5:** *Driven by the love of art, I spent time at the back stages of theatres, where I saw the sordid realities going on behind the shining, illusory surfaces of artistic production. Here I saw poor boys and girls come to act in plays for a little money – it was not glory but sustenance in exchange of hard work and often physical and moral compromises. Thus I was soon acquainted with the darker sides of the world of art, and my great dreams and hopes fell apart. Disillusioned and heartbroken, I now spend evenings trying to drown my despair in drink. Love, that came to me dressed in artistic forms and fired my youth, soon left me dry and empty.*

The poet’s journeys in Bohemia soon took him to theatres (Manipuri theatre is a rich and popular form of art combining traditional dance forms, religious rituals, folktales and modern socio-political interpretations of traditional stories taken from epics). There he saw the exploitation and greed and misery that underlies the lofty ideals of art, and understood that like everything else, art was very often a sham. A parallel disillusionment came in his personal life with the breaking up of love affairs, probably because they were based more on youthful dreams and bohemian tenets of art than on reality. Performers in the theatres, poor girls and boys from far-off villages, came for livelihood and were made to work under inhuman terms. Art was an industry like every other, with all its cruel mechanisms of the powerful over the weak. For an idealist like the poet, the effect of this knowledge was shattering, as was his experience of lost loves. He was soon left with a wry, wretched feeling and a sense of oldness. This wretchedness is expressed in the evenings of solitary drunkenness, when the poet broods and sentimentalizes over the losses of youth and positive philosophy of living.

**Stanza 6**: *The following is the story of my people – as farmers we seem to have sown suspicion instead of seeds in our fields, and hatred grew out of suspicion and burnt down everything. The land began to suffer, farming and other normal activities having stopped, and people turned beggars. Some were richer, and therefore gloating, and the poor and the rich raised accusing hateful fingers at each other. The land was filled with quarrels and howls of hungry dying souls (incessant bickering), and it has risen to such unbearable heights and has been going on for so long that all natural pity for the hungry has dried up.*

This stanza begins shifting the focus from the poet’s personal life to the life of the people – yet we see everything in the social sphere through the poet’s eyes and colored by his sad and sarcastic viewpoints. Therefore the personal and the social are merged in the poet’s consciousness – it is the point where the poet ceases to be individual and grows into a representative voice of his people. He surveys here the land and begins a commentary on its state and history in the voice of a conscientious commentator, moving between harsh, bitter realism and sharp blasts of pent-up emotion. The descriptions often border upon the grotesque and the absurd. The use of ‘suspicion’ as seed and ‘hatred’ as crop is an early example of this. The story of tribal feuds begins like this: people (tribes) suspecting each other started hating and fighting, and that spelt doom for the agricultural economy of the hills. The social fabric, depending on communal rituals observed with mutual trust and fellow-feeling, disintegrated to reveal the rich-poor divide. The richer people began to insulate themselves and felt safe and refused to look at the poor, and the poor grew violent and began breaking the law. Thus internecine hatred produced the fire that destroyed life and resources. The phrase ‘gloating neighbours’ signifies the rise of a bourgeois class in the tribal society, and therefore disintegration. The ‘incessant bickering’ between the haves and have-nots is a rough crush on the poet’s sensitive mind, he is driven by it to a pitiless indifference that points to the sarcastic treatment of history in the following stanzas.

**Stanza 7:** *Our history makes our murderous intentions clear – we slaughter each other and burn up all traces of killing so that we may seem innocent and our black deeds are hidden from the eyes of history. We have forgotten why we fight, the reasons are lost ‘somewhere inside’ and we are all lost in the labyrinth of allegations and counter-allegations. We are like senseless animals whose instinct is to fight. We lock horns like bulls, determined to fight but know not why, and after some loss on both sides, go back to our dens. We keep our history clean and take pride in it, while on the other hand we kill our own people or enslave them. We who fight each other on unclear motives also write our own history, as we want it to be. We distort the existing history wherever required, and what we write instead must be believed by posterity, with whatever malicious intent it may be written. When such false (make-believe) history is written, memory is exploded, from the strain of being forced to forget, and from imprinting falsehood upon truth.*

The stanza makes two bitter statements – that senseless killing for decades has defaced the hill people morally and physically, and that the moral depravation has reached a point where the differences between truth and falsehood are obliterated. After years of bloody revenges, no one knows why they go on, but bloodshed has become automatic and routine. Since the reasons are no more clear to those who kill, militant ideologies with made-up motives for violence have erupted and pervade organized militant groups who think themselves revolutionary outfits and invent their logic to rationalize the bloodshed. They profess to be patriots, and keep up a sanctified history of the motherland that may inspire the young to join militancy in the name of protecting that sanctity. Under this concocted ‘pristine’ history, the great carnages of the present are buried, or glorified as sacred and sacrificial. The voice of reason is stopped up by this reign of terror. Society is at war with itself – and values and conceptions are jumbled. Reality and truth are defined by the dominant militant groups, and foisted on civil society. The result is a rape of history – historical narration is heavily distorted, politically engineered, speaking only of what militancy approves. Only the pained conscience of the powerless people hold the suppressed, bloody truths – and therefore memory burns in private remembrance, on a short fuse, quickly to extermination. This repression of history, or its misrepresentation, is a permanent scar on the conscience of the race. The poet’s dry tone in the last lines of the stanza brings out the depth of the scar – he as poet, as the conscience of his race, suffers alone from the loss of innocence.

**Stanza 8:** *When Christmas comes, it is time for boys living away to return. But they are afraid when they should be jubilant – the way home is laid with terrors. The roads up the hills are laid with explosives, there are gunmen in the roadside bushes, awaiting their return, to avenge killings of which the returning boys are really innocent. The boys take roundabout routes to avoid death as they are sure the enemy will celebrate the Holy Birth with their blood. Yet, many of them reach home dead, found and shot on some hilly road.*

The hills have turned a sinister zone of death, a land of irrational, random fatal accidents. All normalcy of daily life is rigged by fears of violence and bloodshed – the rule of law is vanished. There are only rival militant tribes waiting to kill each other, and they do not leave out anyone on account of his personal innocence – one must pay for the crime committed by one’s tribesman. Under these circumstances, boys return home at Christmas en masse, over roads fraught with deadly dangers. Ngangom probably had the experience himself, being a student at institutions outside Manipur, and the experience may have underlined the sour irony of the stanza. The hill tribes are mostly Christianized, and thus Christmas is festival time when families make desperate bids to cast off the cringed lives lived for the rest of the year. But the militants do not understand mercy (the spirit of Christ, the Holy Child), they await this occasion to waylay innocent boys who are easy kills. There is a deep dark irony when the poet says the boys are ‘escorted by hate and fear’ – two fine escorts for homecoming. It is a tense game of life and death the boys play when they take ‘circuitous routes’ to avoid death – a game that directly contrasts the relaxed, joyful mood of Christmas. The boys risk death to celebrate a birth – the paradox is sharp and produces a dark humour. It is this dark, grotesque comedy that is hinted by the line ‘will revel too much in the birth of a merciful son’. Christ the Merciful Son shall cause the deaths of many other sons – their ‘dreams will come dressed in red’. Christmas here turns to an occasion of mass killing of innocents, of bereavement and burial, and the ‘red’ of celebration turns to the gushing of young blood.

**Section II: Stanza 9:** *I touched your breasts that cure all illness with my loving hands, but was shocked to see that my touch produced scars on your body that came of the past tortures on you. Angrily I ask who beat you and marked the soft, glowing skin (moonskin) of yours with wounds, and who carelessly tore you up like a toy doll. My question and indignation ricocheted on me as I realized I am the criminal who thus raped my motherland.*

In section II, the poet returns to his personal, autobiographical voice, and looks into the causes of destruction in his (his people’s) own psychic perversions. He who now turns to the eternal feminine for healing succor has been the brute beast who has ransacked all innocence and torn up all purity. The shock of discovering the sin in the self is the central theme of the stanza, and it leads us to the unease of facing the mirror of truth alone. The pristine feminine self indicated by ‘my love’, ‘healing breasts’, ‘moonskin’ is a composite self that merges goddess, lover, mother, and motherland, to whom the sick, weary men turn for redemption. But there is no redemption, since the sin lies within the sick. It is this grim paradox that the stanza upholds – and turns the dweller of the hills into grave introspection to discover the darkest in himself. The poet, in bringing the sinner to face himself, makes a sardonic jab at an innocence that comes of the lack of self-knowledge.

**Stanza 10:** *When I watch my burning country with sadness, I can hear nature calling out to you, woman, for rescue. But the helpless call of the hills is covered up in seconds by clouds of smoke from guns of soldiers who, faces wrapped in their black scarves, look like mime artists. Trucks from the plains carry arms and ammunition up the hilly roads, soldiers in those trucks and armored cars pretend to come as saviors of the hill people, and hill-dwellers living away make innocent visits to the homeland they have so heard about. For all these comers, the roadside graves of innocent young men who died in sudden skirmishes serve as milestones. The hills are muted, invisible behind the smoke of gunfire. When one searches for the sweet earthy smell of the motherland, one receives instead the bitter, acrid smell of gelignite (an explosive) and burning bodies.*

The woman whose defiling has been discovered in the last stanza is the soul of the hills – their goddess and spirit and essence. She is the human incarnation of the beauty and purity of the hills, imagined as the earth-mother and idealized in the living forms of femininity – mother, lover, sister, wife, daughter. It is to this lost, defiled womanhood that the hills cry out, though in vain. Military infiltration from the plains, happening under the pretext of curbing terrorism in the hills, has clamped down all life under gunfire. The mist that shrouds the hills is symbolic – state repression has created an ideological mist that confuses all and straitjackets all – and the irony deepens when we realize that the mist is not the natural smoke that rises from the hollows, but the spiraling smoke from explosions and gunshots. The scarved soldiers appearing like ‘mime artists’ is a fine irony – only their guns speak and they are dehumanized, seeming agents of sinister evil, in a concerted dance of death. Their cold-blooded killing is a mimetic performance whose meaning is uncertain. The governments have taken up the duty of stopping violence with violence, and send up soldiers who perpetuate the terror. There is a sharp taunt in the phrase ‘eager rescuer’ – the garb of the rescuer is flimsy and shows up the repressor underneath, and the eagerness is mock, covering greed and cruelty. The national government, which has never cared for development in the hills, now sends troops to put down tribal violence. This is only a pretext of asserting control over the economy of the hills and its rich natural resources. This sly political design is commented upon in these lines. Subjected to terror from tribal militants as well as state forces, normal life is stunted – everything natural and traditional to hill life has been replaced by artificial, repulsive things, like the smell of gunpowder in place of the aroma of hilly plants. The hills are now a waste land, a land of the dead, as all who come are shown the way by the innocent dead lying by. Altogether, the stanza offers a vision of peace-loving people throttled by internal and external violence, driving the experience of daily life to grotesque, surreal ends.

**Stanza 11:** *Mammon (the Roman God of wealth, meaning here greedy people from the plains) came to visit the city(Imphal) with loads of sand and mortar, and transformed its face by cutting down trees and carrying them down to the plains like dead bodies for dissection. The morning newspapers, carrying the pictures of daily life in the hills, taste like diluted milk, repeating news of the usual and the daily violations of civic law: rape, extortion, ambushes, vendetta, embezzlements on one hand, and trivia like sales and marriages on the other. The endless repetition of these has created a nausea in the public mind about all public affairs, expressed in the adjective ‘bland’.*

The stanza is internally broken into two statements, though they are inwardly connected as they add up to the same experience of sad boredom. First, the invasion of capital from the plains is reported; it captures the city and begins changing its character – the rapid changes of a trade-based economy replace the lush green of the agriculture-based Imphal. The slaughter of trees and carrying logs down the hills like cadavers is indicative of the plunder of natural wealth and growth of trade at the expense of hill people. The masters (Mammons) of this new economy are outsiders, and the local people turn to their slaves, forced to watch in silence the loot of the nature that has bred them for centuries. The trees are not just natural wealth, they have a spiritual life mingled with the spiritual life of the people, as the phrase ‘like cadavers for dissection’ indicate. In a nutshell, these three lines describe the death of a traditional economy in the hands of a modern one – and its universality is hinted when capital is symbolized by Mammon. Secondly, the poet turns to the unbearable boredom of daily life, reported in newspapers. Happenings of crime are so routine matters that no one is alarmed any more or moved – the humane feelings are numbed. The flow of terrifying crimes mixes seamlessly with ordinary affairs like marriage and sales. This is suggested most effectively in the manner they are listed together – vendetta, rape, embezzlement, marriage, sales – the reader/citizen is become insensate, dumb with pain. He turns passive to the affairs of the world, and withdraws into a private shell. This is where the two situations in the stanza are linked: the capitalists from outside taking over the state encourage militant groups and criminals, even with covert support, to keep up the lawlessness, and that, reported by the newspapers to common people, keep them in a state of enervation, passivity and paralysis.

**Stanza 12:** *People gathering in the streets, or houses or dark alleys, or restaurants, discuss the state of affairs. These conversations are carried on with fear and mutual suspicion, and end up acknowledging the final certainty that this hellish state will never change. Everybody knows where to remain silent – dangerous topics are never brought up. Everyone has his private opinion of who is responsible and what should be done, but these opinions are never spoken. But the opinions are as many as their holders and the enemy of the people is never identified since the opinions change daily. Each morning the enemy therefore appears with a new face, and all thought and discussion fail. Reduced to this helpless isolation of the citizen, freedom is a private thought revolving within one’s self, growing feeble with time that grows in grimness.*

The stanza continues with the theme of boredom and urban paralytic life, and explores the social sphere of panic and hypocrisy and self-deluding egotism. There is a strong tone of satire in the stanza, aimed at a spineless, hypocritical public, as well as an awareness of the pulls and tensions that cause this public character, and sympathy for it. People gather in clandestine groups as if during a curfew, and speak with a constant fear of being overheard and betrayed. This atmosphere of mutual distrust and yet friendliness on the surface is created by continuing state terror imposing its psychological shadow on the people. The really significant issues are taboo, there are ideological barriers on all sides. People talk in hints and suggestions, and everybody pretends to be radical and prudent and correct in his analysis and conviction, when everybody is really sly and opportunistic. Each claim to identify the causes accurately, but is too prudent to spell them. The satiric laughter explodes when the poet says the enemy changes face each morning – the solidity of opinions is thrown apart to show up the shallow hearsay and gossip. This decadence of civil society is the result of decades of forceful repression of public opinion, and the outrage of public conscience by militancy. Freedom is a matter of protest and struggle, and since this society is self-divided and bloated with false private egotisms, its dreams of freedom recede to the horizons of imagination.

**Section III: Stanza 13:** *Uprightness (as it is believed and preached by militant fundamentalists) is not to show any bodily affection in public. Integrity means one must not drink. Being a worthy citizen is to pay the militant groups heavy subscriptions so that they may go on buying ammunitions. Patriotic service is to exploit public property, and when that is exhausted, to start stealing and achieving expertise as thieves. Chastity is to bar women from wearing dresses that expose their legs. Moral purity is to refrain from expressing love because that will amount to highly punishable obscenity.*

The stanza hands out a cryptic satire of the reductive ideology of the fundamentalist groups that have come to rule Manipuri society. These groups have issued dictates which comprise of moral strictures and duties to be obeyed at the risk of death. The dictates make clear the aim of building a regimented, morally rigorous society upon values and definitions that the dictates clarify. The way abstract moral qualities like uprightness and integrity are defined by forbidding little natural actions (caressing or drinking) proves the hollowness and hypocrisy behind them – the qualities have no relation to these material acts, and the observance of such dictates can never ensure the fostering of such qualities. Thus an absurd and laughable gap opens between the dictate and the value it is supposed to build, and that is the satiric intention of the poet. Moreover the dictates go against natural and innocent instincts of humanity, and are therefore unnatural and repressive – a society governed by such dictates approaches absurdity. The fundamentalist groups compose a patriarchy that attempts to address the social evils of drunkenness, indiscriminate sex and the surrender of youth to narcotics, but they do so in blunt, military ways that expose the shortfalls in their ideology. Further, their restrictive orders go against the customs of hill society, and therefore provoke obedience in public and flouting in private. The restrictions over sexual expression/behavior and drinking are puritanical in nature – characteristic of a reactionary, medieval and feudal ruling class that forbids for the ruled just those sensual fulfillments that they maximize in their own lives. A citizen is considered patriotic and proper as long as he keeps his allegiance in the right place, paying ‘generously’ to the funds of militant groups. This systemic hypocrisy is proven when looting the state goes by the name of patriotism, and theft becomes the rampant approved practice in the end. The attempt to preach ‘uprightness’ and ‘integrity’ recoils and unleashes a lawless society whose members aspire to be ‘paragons of thievery’. The wish to curb sexual crimes by ordering women to cover their legs further exposes the narrow patriarchal character – women’s bodies are seen as objects of provocation while men are innocent creatures lured by the evil inherent in woman. Finally, when moral purity consists of suppression of love, the fundamentalist ideology is stamped as vain and idiotic. The satire upon this empty-headed but rigid ideology is delivered in cryptic sentences that state the absurd dictates in close, matter-of-fact sentences, apparently without emotion or protest. This mode follows the silent accepting stance of the people, and adds causticity to the satire.

**Stanza 14:** *The smallest everyday needs are no more certain in the land, oil and potatoes and even food for babies are unavailable. Transport is uncertain and rare. It is beginning to seem that even fire, water and air will become commodities hard to have in near future.*

The state of emergency and the hardships of daily living are brought out in this short, sharp stanza. The lines are short, with single words often, describing the horrible situation in a dry, drained voice. The essential commodities that arrive at the hills from the plains are hard to get and even babies are starving. The disruption of trade and commerce caused by militancy, state policies and ordinances, and the profit-making strategies of industrial producers and traders add up to create such a famine. The basic conditions of living are dried up – the hills are become a waste land. There is only place for the dark absurdist humor of the comment that natural resources like air and water will have to be sought and purchased now onwards. The short, pithy stanza replaces the discursive mode of the previous stanzas with statement of bare facts – pointing to what all the big social, political and economic experiments have come down to.

**Stanza 15:** *Patriotism, it is said, is today’s need. It practically means demanding separation from the state and nation Manipur is included in, and reminding ourselves of the losses incurred by the people due to the merger. Patriotism is paying respect to those whom history calls martyrs, even though they may have really died not knowing why. Patriotism is to try and preserve the old customs, traditions, literature and arts, and through them the racial identity of the people, and also to impose them on the people without considering their state or opinion. Also, patriotism means providing unconditional support to terrorism and killing in the name of certain ideals, and to betray and self-seek while singing the high idea of universal fraternity. Patriotism and militancy are helplessly confused, to love one’s country has come to mean endorsing continuing social unrest.*

This stanza returns to critique the ideology of the fundamentalists, who give a loud call for patriotism, and mean unquestioning allegiance to their ideas and actions by it. Like uprightness and integrity, they define patriotism by public conduct that conforms to their own agenda, and call anything contrary unpatriotic. The central patriotic slogan is separation from the Indian state to which the hill states had been appended when India became independent, and this demand is provoked on the sly by foreign nations such as China (who consistently demands that these territories belong to them historically). The movement for secession from the Indian state has been shaped by the fundamentalists into a war against India, and ‘patriotic’ people are incited to join and provide the militants their much-needed popular base. The war is justified by the facts that these hill states were free and self-governed (by kings) before Indian independence, and that the Indian government has always meted out ill-treatment for these people. These facts, recalled from history, bring up a rationale for a ‘patriotic’ separatist movement, and history is made to serve. Those killed in this separatist war are treated as national heroes (martyrs) and glorified in a purposeful rewriting of history. The construction of this ‘patriotism’ emphasizes all that is singular to the people – their customs, art, literature – to develop a Manipuri identity that faces the threat of erasure before the onslaught of forces military, economic and cultural. So far this ‘patriotism’ may seem revolutionary, but there are reactionary forces functioning underneath this surface. This patriotism is foisted on the people undemocratically, and made compulsive. It validates and even glorifies all violence by the militants, and keeps up ubiquitous terror that the poet expresses with a grotesque image – playing the music of guns to the child in the womb. Treachery and betrayal continue under the high ideal, the ideal is distorted and used to play the dirty game of power within the preachers. The ideal has really become a rigid fearsome discipline for the masses, and a pretext for grabbing power, money and glamour for its creators.

**Stanza 16:** *After all the human talking is done, the hills begin to speak in voices that men do not understand. They speak a history different from ours, from the one we make and remake and discuss. We are aware of that other history, and fear it because it, like an old friend (hunch-backed), watches us in silence and knows all that we attempt to hide. We enact, perform history through our lives, and love and hate each other, and try to lie and hide the actions that spring from love and hate. But that other, unspoken history remains awake always in our conscience, and we inwardly live in fear for our final judgment. The world is a theatre, its stage is hard and uneven (coarse), and we come and go with time, and history records us all in ways we do not know.*

After the polemical previous stanzas satirizing the puritanical impositions on the people, this brief lyrical stanza looks into the heart of the individual. The more we try to suppress facts from the public eye and write out make-believe histories to our advantage, the more we immerse into self-doubt and guilt, because we know that somewhere everything that is thought and done are recorded. It is an uncanny feeling, but more certain than anything known rationally, and more powerful. That is why we all fear that history where no human deceit or suppression works. It seems to the poet that that history, enshrined in nature (represented by the hills which are witness to everything and resemble the ‘hunch-backed friend’ in being timeless and silent), speaks beyond human knowledge and smiles at the tiny foolishnesses of man. This private sense of failure to hide one’s sins is common to all – from the suffering poor to the ideologues of militant fundamentalism. The poet seems to indicate that this fear is the driving force behind the creation of make-believe histories, whose creators frantically try to escape and know they cannot.

**Section IV: Stanza 17**: *Today I alone look back at my life and see it as an uncared-for thing, without grace, love or purpose (left-handed gift). Living listlessly, I have never received love of woman or family, and my land of birth has been a wasteland. My life has had no meaning or direction, floating about with myself never in control. It has been a strange thing made by forces foreign and unknown to me, to whom I have been a slave all through. My actions have not been mine – I was led through them as if blindfolded. I have passed through emotions – love, fear, anger – done the rounds of feeling and experience, but nothing came of them in the end, and I returned always to emptiness and despair.*

In this first stanza of the concluding section, the autobiographical tone returns. The poet is taking a stock of his own life, and by now his life is also his people’s life. So, his own experiences of meaninglessness and despair are born simultaneously from his own career and the terror-ridden, impoverished, paralytic life of his society. His life could have some meaning had he had the love of a woman – living with daily cares and familial pleasures. Having had none, he has no roots, moving like flotsam, like a rudderless ship. While mastery over one’s actions gives some sense to living, the poet has been a slave to an unknown fate. Turning back now to view this, he is rid of feeling strong enough to mourn. His dejection and psychic paralysis is symptomatic also of his people – the forces shaping his fate are the same as those that have doomed his land. He has become the symbol of his race. This elegiac note takes us back to the incomprehension and melancholy of the first section.

**Stanza 18:** *There is as if a state of mourning in nature. The season wears a look of penitence (wearing sackcloth) and leaves shed from the ash trees drop everywhere. The sky is full of shredded clouds. At night, the sky looks like a sheet bolted and held up by the stars so that it does not fall over our heads. But we who sleep under this sky do not let each other dream (imagine a better future). Love is lost among human beings, we know only to suffer and to inflict suffering on those closest to our hearts. This is the way the world goes, and perhaps will go on forever. My experience of the world gives me this sad understanding.*

The poet looks around and finds a reflection of his morose state in nature. The time of year is perhaps winter, the end of the seasonal cycle, and the trees are bare and hills wear a dry, icy face. It seems human penitence is mirrored in this paleness – the season seems penitent itself, an example of pathetic fallacy. The ash trees have an association of the graveyard – the image of death everywhere around is strengthened. The sky above is full of torn clouds suggesting the fragmentary nature of existence on earth. While the day presents this dejection, the night brings on a terrible, almost apocalyptic image. The night sky is ominous – the stars look like nuts and bolts barely holding the sky from falling down. There is a moment of breathless fear as we contemplate the sky falling, crushing everything on the earth’s surface. Then the human cause of this cosmic doom is revealed – men under this sky live in mutual hatred and stab each other’s dreams of peace. The wretched world has taught them only to hate and be hated, and the lesson has dehumanized them. It is an unholy world from which love has departed. At the end the poet turns fatalistic, viewing the state of humanity with a dark realism, and concluding that it is the eternal fate of mankind to be sinning and repeating a sordid history of bloodshed. A heart thus diabolical is a hell in itself.

**Stanza 19:** *I remember Diwali, the festival of lights and the triumph of good over evil, that happened during my childhood. Sadly today the lights are no more lighted; the hills are immersed in perpetual darkness, as if the land is full of widows who are traditionally barred from this festival due to their unfortunate widowhood*. This stanza is again a brief lyrical expression of shock and sorrow at the loss of the state of innocence. The poet is pained by the memory of his childhood when the festival of lights took place with pomp and general happiness, signifying hope and faith in the goodness of man. Those days are now gone, crushed under a blanket of terror. So much of death in the hills has cast its moral shadow, all the people seem to have become empty of hope and enthusiasm. They seem to have joined the bands of widows who refrain from the festival, being religiously considered anathema. The land is full of widows today – widows in the sense that they are lifeless. The land’s passage from light to perpetual darkness is symbolic of a passage from movement to stillness, from consciousness to dissolution.

**Stanza 20:** *The land is perhaps tired of producing, being soaked with blood for so long. The farmer has lost his vital connection with his field, and men have ceased to be men – they have lost all humanity and motivation to carry on with the chores of living. Perhaps everyone has resigned to death, admitting that it is the only possible conclusion.*

The stanza surveys the fallen state of fertility in the land in grotesque images of bloodshed. The land is soaked with spilled blood in place of water, and this has destroyed natural productivity in a manner that is horrible – it signals a change in the basic character of nature. The loss of natural productivity means the erasure of all life, as also the disruption of the eternal chain of relations between man and nature, expressed in the feeling that the farmer and the land he tills have ceased to know each other. This is human disjunction at its most basic level, man without his work is no man anymore. It is death-in-life, and physical death is only a natural consequence not to be lamented. Therefore a total enervation has set in which welcomes the final physical annihilation, with no torment at all worth feeling.

**Stanza 21:** *Addressing the feminine self the poet has repeatedly taken recourse to as ‘my love’, he expresses his helplessness before a insensate society. He hates the laws that are revengeful and vindictive but is unable to tell so because no one shall agree or understand. Only the darkness of the solitary night hears him and sympathizes. The conscientious heart in this cruel land is subjected to such loneliness. It is his private realization that the murderous history will repeat itself, but he is powerless to do anything. This impotence gives birth to agony and pessimism that can only be confessed before the beloved.*

When the rest of society turns a deaf ear, the poet turns to his love – the woman who is by turns his lover, mother and motherland. He is alone in his protest against the unjust, motive-laden laws of the land that take a man to account for his past and for crimes not committed by him but by his tribe. He is fully aware that these laws shall effect in continuing internecine warfare and shall never establish peace or justice in the hills. Such laws are set up by fundamentalists in power at the moment – they are a travesty to justice – and are aimed at punishing enemies. All this goes unspoken, and the unjust laws drive the society on to its abysmal darkness. The poet’s voice can only cry out in the lonely night, to some unknown authority beyond humanity, and to the image of the beloved in his mind who embodies all violation and torment. The isolation of the poet is indicative of the impossibility of redress. The suppression of the voice of conscience is also proof that no history of the huge injustices will ever be known, and that the false history glossing over the wrongs shall go on unabated. The state of the poet’s mind in this stanza is deeply agonized, his failure to speak up for truth drowns him in guilt and a feeling of being useless.

**Stanza 22:** *When I am dead I wish to leave a legacy I yet possess: a life free and bereft of uneasy reflections (without mirrors), the song of the free blue air blowing through the pines, and the beautiful clear sky of winter*.

Feeling sick and resigned about socio-political matters as they stand, the poet turns to his private, poetic self to see whether he has anything to bequeath to posterity, or something that his people will remember him by. He finds the things he has loved, and the way he has lived are the only things he can leave as a message – a life without mirrors - a life unlike the one he has lived facing the mirrors of self-questioning and silent torment, and his love for the pristine beauty of nature in the hills, exemplified by the winter sky and the singing air between trees. The images ‘blue ode between the pines’ and ‘winter sky’ prove his essential romantic nature – he considers these unchanging beauties from beyond the human world to be true legacies, knowing like Wordsworth that they contain the essence of ideas and values that form the moral nature of man.

**Stanza 23:** *But (leaving a legacy) where can I run? Can one escape his motherland, or his beloved? No, the land and the feminine spirit which is its essence have imprisoned my heart for eternity; wherever I go, they pursue me and hold me captive. I shall never be free of the guilt I feel towards these. My conscience is the real prison where I suffer. The crimes of my people are upon me, they constantly remind me of being myself the collective conscience of my race.*

Leaving something for posterity brings up the thought of departure, and the poet is faced with choice – should he, can he leave his motherland? He has been living away most of his life, but in that exile the pulls of the motherland have grown inexorable. His spiritual involvement with his land and people, growing with his age, have become independent of spatial difference – going away is mere physical distancing with no psychological effect. The only identity he has is born out of the painful, yet meaningful engagements with his land and people. These have entered his soul. Therefore going away is no more relevant; his country, people, community, the beloved feminine, all merged into one consciousness, have become him. Wherever he goes for the rest of his life, he shall carry all these within himself. The process of union of the individual and the social, continuing through the poem, has been complete.

**General comments**:

**Structure**: The poem is divided into four sections arranged in a definite thematic pattern. Section I, beginning in a personal, autobiographical tone, reviews a disordered life, and towards the middle moves to the ‘story of my people’. From ‘I’ to ‘we’ is a smooth move, hinting that the personal is the social. The two (individual and collective) voices speak in distinctly different tones – the individual is highly emotional and agonized, the collective is wry, grim and satirical. Section II begins merging the two, thus mixing social realism with intensely poetic sensibility. The past and the present of the hills come to be narrated by a persona who emerges as the conscience of the people. From this section, the alternation of voices begins also to give experience a grotesque, surreal turn – the real is coexistent with its psychic image. Having established this thematic technique, section III goes into ideological debate in the satiric collective mode, but ends with a question of personal morality. By section IV the social irony is over, and the lyrical individual voice subsumes the collective, having become representative of the land, dissolving boundaries of person and society. Thus the two voices carrying the two themes of individual and collective crises, end in the truth that the poet, by his negative capability, is one and all.

**The verse**: The poem is in free verse, unbound by rhyme or meter, depending instead on internal rhythmic alternations of voices and themes. The discursive stanzas dealing with politics or history are long with long lines full of sardonic energy, while the emotive stanzas are short with short lines, pithy and piercing with pain. In sections III and IV when discourse and emotion merge, the lines take an even shape, indicating a balance achieved over the tension.