Chapter 3

Themes of Fear, Violence and Terror in Modern Manipuri Poetry
Terror and Violence; From global to regional

Violence and terror have come to stay as corruption a global phenomena. The two terms correlate to each other as violence instills terror and again, terror propagates violence. The two co-exist and off late, they have reached new dimensions due to certain inhuman events all over the world. First, the term terror can be defined as a form of ‘political repression and violence intended to subdue political opposition’ (source: Wikipedia) within a historical and political framework. Terror comes from Latin term terror meaning ‘great fear’. It can be said that fear is innate in human beings, it is one of the most primitive human emotions. It has also been one of the ancient political strategies known to man, terrorizing for political gain. But, in recent times, terrorizing has turned into ‘terrorism’, one prominent ‘political phenomenon on the world stage’ (Majumdar XIII).

The terrorist act of attacking the World Trade Center changed the definition of terror. It is not only the image of unimaginable violence, of seeing planes plummeting into buildings, the fire, people leaping to their death, but also the destruction of the capitalist symbol.

The World Trade Center in New York symbolized the success and glory of a unipolar capitalist world, and yet it was not only attacked but swiftly destroyed by a few unarmed non-citizens. The morning of 9/11 showcased the vulnerability of power against the rage of the powerless. (ibid)

Post 9/11, the US declared ‘war on terror’ and ended up bombing two of the poorest countries in the world, Iraq and Afghanistan. The destruction of these two countries, the mass loss of human life pose only one question, that is, can violence curb violence? The deadly war on terror still continues.
Other than two nations indulging in this war on terror, another form of terror on the home turf is the various secessionist movements within a country. The various revolutions have taken a toll on human lives as well as property in the last few decades in countries like India, Chile, Syria etc. The revolutions have their seeds in the colonial period. The various freedom fighters used violence and terror to mobilize their ends. In India, the extremist freedom fighters used various strategies of terrorism during the freedom struggle.

The 'revolutionary' movement took the forms of assassinations of oppressive officials or traitors, Swadeshi dacoities to raise funds, or at best military conspiracies with expectations of help from foreign enemies of Britain. It never, despite occasional subjective aspirations, rose to the level of urban mass uprisings or guerrilla bases in the countryside. The term 'terrorism' hence remains not inappropriate. (Sarkar 125)

In order to repress the guerrilla warfares of the revolutionaries, a number of acts and laws were passed by the British colonizers during the Indian independence movement. Some of the acts were Regulation III of 1818, The Press Act of 1900 etc. Even after independence, these means of violence are used by several secessionist groups in India to meet their demands, the latest being the Naxal movements. The history of the rise of these groups is another matter, which will be discussed in the course of discussion in this chapter.

The Post-colonial India still exercises some of the Acts promulgated by the Britishers and further amended over the years to curb the insurgency problems/conflicts in the country. One example is Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958 (Assam and Manipur).
On the eve of Independence, where the Indian nation-state was in its formative stage, the widespread nationalism could not touch some of the current states of India. One of the causes was perhaps the separate, indirect rule by the British Colonizers. The NE* States though independent kingdoms were indirectly managed by the British Administrators. It might have been, perhaps, the policy to conserve the distinct tribal identity and also leave the region free for the Christian missionaries.

The colonial policy of indirect rule, allegedly aimed at promoting the cultural survival of the hill tribes, fostered separate religious, social, and national identity in these regions....the insulation of the region from its neighbours for many decades offered Christian missionaries a magnificent opportunity for the unrestricted proselytizing and conversion. (Majumdar XXVII)

Thus, the NE regions could not be touched as much as the other states of India by the wave of nationalism that swept the entire nation. Isolation along with the physical separation (Geographical) from the so called 'mainland' India was deepened by the merger agreements that followed after independence during the nation-building phase. The policy of hastily unifying the Indian Nation State after independence left many leaders of the concerned regions (Kashmir, Manipur etc.) unsatisfied. Perhaps, this led to rise of the many insurgency groups mushrooming in these parts of India. Even though the colonizers have left, the role of the ruler and the ruled is again repeated in the form of the insurgents and the center and the war still continues.

..in northeast India, it seems, the war continues without an end in sight. It is both undeclared and permanent (and arguably the same is true of Kashmir). Attack and defense, oppression and resistance, nation building and separatism, national security and self determination- these wheels turn, only to keep the chariot of war moving perpetually onwards.' (Baruah 26)
The long struggle of the insurgents in the North-Eastern states has only been fueled by continuous imposition of draconian law AFSPA and the poor handling of the concerning issues by the center. The failure of the Nation-State in providing a stable political and economic situation in the NE region further sharpened by the identity problem. The NE region has been in isolation from the pan-Indian identity in terms of culture as well as physical geography. Thus, the various post independence movements of the North East India are also caused by the issues of identity. The last five decades have seen unprecedented violence in this region. The government's counter-insurgency operations have so far yielded a continuation of the struggle held during the colonial period. To add to this woe, different ideologies have resulted in a rift between the militant groups. Bhagat Oinam writes,

'Violence as a means of protest and as a means to contain such protest has been the inclination of the insurgents and the Indian state. The contest was once binary- between the Indian state and the insurgents as two opposing camps. But over time, the contests have shifted from binary to a multi-cornered one.' (ibid)

The North East India has witnessed a series of social, economical and political changes in the last few decades, and most prominently after Indian independence. These changes have been the core reason behind today's volatile situation of the NE states. Sajal Nag, a historian from Silchar says,

'The North East India has been a veritable war zone since independence. Secession-ism, insurgency, counter insurgency, communal and ethnic conflicts and armed conflagration have rendered the region into a virtual killing field. The major source of violence has however been over hegemony of the post colonial Indian state and the resistance of people to such domination over them.' (Bhattacharjee 67)
Thus, in case of Manipur, as discussed in the previous chapters, the murky merger agreement has been a source of many problems for the state. It does not, however, mean that there have not been other situations that prompted the conflicts that the state is facing. Together, such forces, to include the trauma of Second World War and the subsequent economic regression that took place in Manipur, led to an environment of chaos where corruption was openly invited and exploitation became a part of life. To add to this, insurgency movements started mushrooming, leading to violence and a traumatic atmosphere. Sajal Nag again observes,

'On October 1949, Manipur was integrated into Indian Union under dubious circumstances. Opposition and resistance followed. The Provincial politics entered its messy phase. Economic deterioration began. Unemployment reached menacing proportions. Complaints of unequal citizenship gathered momentum. The complaints and opposition graduated to an organized resistance Movement.' (ibid)

But, quite contrary to the economical situation of the state, education sector bloomed. New waves of western thoughts and literature brought in rapid progress for the youth of this generation. They became aware of the exploitations and suppression that they suffered over the years. They were also disillusioned by the unstable Government of their state led by politicians who were only concerned about retaining power. The political leaders who were supposed to lead the masses, did not have any unity even though their ideologies were the same. They were busy fighting for their own interests.

'After the war (WWII), they (middle class Manipuris) formed the State Congress and started demanding the introduction of responsible form of Government. Their demand was however, limited to the level of their sectional interests...In August 1947,
when the Government formed the interim Manipur State Council in collusion with the group of congress leaders, the State Congress was split on the issue of division of posts and power.' (Singh, *Unquiet Valley* 249)

Thus, the main aim of the political parties was to 'destabilize the Government so that they could again try to come in power' (ibid). However, the communist party led by Hijam Irabot and few others understood that the future of Manipur was bleak under the power hungry Maharaja and the Congress party. Therefore, he tried hard to mobilize the masses, mostly the farmers and the workers.

'He (Irabot) established the District Organizing Committee of the Communist Party of India and under its directions planned to launch an armed socialist revolution' (ibid)

However, he could not succeed in his plan as it was suppressed by the Indian Army along with the native elite. Nevertheless, following his lead, armed youth of Manipur have been fighting ever since against the draconian ways in which the people of Manipur were subjected under the then King and the Indian Union.

**Terror and Violence; Different Forms**

The entire region of the North East India has been afflicted by violence whether from the tussles of armed insurgents and the military forces or between the ordinary masses and the government of India. The ethnic conflicts amongst the tribes have also been a bane to the life in Manipur. Life in this condition of violence for a continuous period of time has bred a culture of fear and terror in the minds of the people living in this area. Robin S Ngangom, a prominent poet form NE writes,
'We have witnessed growing ethnic aggressiveness, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious bigotry, the marginalization of minorities and the poor, profit power struggles in government, and as a natural aftermath of these, the banality of corruption and the banality of terror. (Majumdar 243)

To understand fear and violence, it’ll be insufficient to only dwell on the physical form of it. Fear and violence, as such can be therefore, looked at from different angles. The most eminent is the physical kind. When there is causality born out of violence, like death, torture, rape, fake encounters, there arises the fear of losing one’s life and honor. Then again from this physical form of fear comes the mental trauma of an individual, affecting the psychological state of mind.

This form of terror in NE is different from what was felt in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. In the case of 9/11, terror came from an alien, outside force causing destruction and devastation on such a vast scale that the immediate consequences were setting the wrong right by punishing the perpetrator. In the case of the NE, the terror comes from within and the perpetrators are its very own people.

In the northeast we are plagued by a different set of imbalances-the 'terror' is within us, the players, ostensibly 'our boys'. (Baruah 107)

The ongoing conflict of insurgency and counter insurgency operations and the resulting effects of it in the society has bred terror in the mind of the people of the area. In this state of mind, one cannot place his trust in either of the party, the State and the Non State, i.e., the militants. The insurgency seeds that were planted during the independence took deep roots and from then onwards Manipur has been run by two parallel governments. Initially, sympathies of the mass seemed to be with the Militants, but after going through much violence and killings now the stand of the
common people is staggering. They have started questioning the moral claims of the two power blocks, masking as the liberator and the protector because they are neither reliable nor justifiable, as all acts of violence are not. There arises a confusion of the two parties, who is the protector and who is the oppressor? The character of these two conflicting parties becomes interchangeable. Does one feel safe when one sees armed military force or, the insurgents prowling in the night? The answer is mistrust and suspicion. People feel dislocated and alienated in this condition and fear is generated from unpredictability. This state of mind is what these poets have tried to capture in their poems in different ways. Some talk of the silence that’s been imposed because of the fear while others try to go deep into the psychological state of the people.

**Violence and Fear in literature.**

The tumultuous times also rocked the literary grounds. As literature has always been a reflection of life and the two go together, the themes of literature produced at this time mirror the social conditions. As mentioned in the previous chapter, pre-independence Manipuri literature can be called more or less, romantic. But after the traumatic events (World War II, Merger Agreement), the context of literature of the period shifted from romanticism to realism. The writers opted for realism because they were not content with the hunky dory phrases of love but preferred depicting contemporary life and society without romanticizing it like their predecessors. Renowned English poet from Manipur, Robin S Ngangom observes,

'Poets began responding to the altered circumstances by breaking with their romantic predecessors and choosing a diction which will suit the times. They became more inward looking and consequently tried to adapt the world to themselves by adopting ironic and alienated stances.' (Misra 298)
Thus, against the romantic streak that is seen in the earlier poetry what is most obvious is that the themes change and befitting the themes, the diction, and the stylistic features of poetry. Poetry, thus, became more prosaic in diction as well as in form. Th Ibopishak Singh writes in ‘I want to be killed by an Indian Bullet’,

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

The latter half of the 20th century witnessed this new style of literature, most particularly in poetry. The main themes of the poetry were unrest, violence, fear, anger, alienation, displacement, corruption etc. The pioneer poets were Elangbam Nilakanta, L Samrendra in particular as already discussed in the chapter 2. They started questioning the society and the individual in their poetry. E Nilakanta poem, 'Manipur' can be regarded as a landmark of the beginning of a new genre of literature for Manipur.

Following the lead of these pioneers, during early 1970s, a group of poets emerged in the literary scenario of Manipur. They were radical and bold in their composition and managed to evoke the contemporary social milieu with vivid imageries and symbols. Shri N Biren (1946-2011) can be considered as the leader of this group and his influence can be seen in the latter poets of Manipur. He is a prolific writer with poetry anthologies, a book of criticism and several short stories and plays to his credit. His poetry is marked by alarming symbols which depict the hard reality of the society. He writes in Tangkhul Hui,

Men came for construction of a new road
Boulders poured down
Up heaped concrete chips in piles
A tender 'kombirei' blossoming so delicately
Got crushed under the boulders
The construction workers didn't pay a heed
Instead the roller ran over it
The driver with grime and sweat
Showing dirty teeth burst into laughter
Harsh and deadly
A huge tangkhul dog sitting nearby
Howled aloud
Broken hearted.

In this poem, Shri N Biren uses the symbol of 'kombirei', a local flower of Manipur associated with myths and legends. This flower, a necessary item in many religious rituals of the Meiteis can be seen as the representation of Manipur itself. Thus, in the imagery of the flower being crushed under the road construction roller, the poet brings in the discourse of modern world versus the question of morality. The poet seems to be hinting that the 'constructive' wave brought in by modern knowledge can be 'destructive' for a close knit society like Manipur. So it is ironical that 'construction' here works as the cause of crumbling values of the society. The 'driver' 'didn't pay a heed' but laughs a 'harsh' and 'deadly' laugh with no one other than a dog to mourn the death of the flower. The poem can be interpreted in many layered meanings. But one cannot deny the fact that the poem is a reflection on the society the poet lives in. In another poem Rotten Pengba, he writes,

At the filthy fish corner in the market
Where obnoxious putrid odour of decayed flesh suffuses
A decomposed rotten *Pengba*

On a low circular bamboo stall

Dreams-

Shrimati Rasheswari

who poises radiantly aplomb

On the left side of Shri Govinda

There's no difference between her and me.

In this poem again, the symbol that is used, the fish 'pengba' ( Manipuri state fish and also associated with many rituals) lies rotting in a fish market. The poet is personifying the dead fish, as it contemplates life and compares itself, hence the irony, with the idol of the goddess inside a temple. In comparing god with a rotten fish and finding out that there is no difference between their predicaments but the fish is better, one can see the rebellious nature of the poet. He is raising a question to the devout *Meitei Vaisnavites* that god is useless and is stuck inside the temple whereas the rotten 'pengba', at least gets sold. In another poem, where Shri Biren talks of religion, he lashes out in 'I won't Get Baptized', 'I wont get baptized / I have no religion / God is what one fantasizes.'

Thus, Shri Biren revolutionized the early 1970s with his radical poetry. He encapsulates the core of Manipuri essence by using symbols as the *Kombirei, Pengba* to name a few and makes them a site for violence. In doing so he delineates a society deeply troubled by the resulting conflicts. He was followed by a host of younger writers namely Yumlembam Ibomcha, Thangjam Ibopishak, R K Bhubonsana etc who were also fed up of the changing order of the society. They incessantly followed Shri Biren's style of writing. One thing that is commonly noticed in this group of writers is the eminent influence of T S Eliot and W B Yeats. A renown critic of Manipuri
L Joychandra Singh says,

'It is idle to deny T S Eliot's influence on Shri Biren. How could he afford to remain impervious to such winds of change effected by Eliot who bestrode the literary world like a colossus?' (QJ 21-34)

Although, certain Eliotic style of writing can be seen in Manipuri poets of the post independence era, they still have to travel a long way to get Eliot's distinction. Another poet who was deeply influenced by the English poet is R K Madhubir. A comparison is given below,

Straw men
Made of straw
Both body and mind
Living robots
Dressing casually
Flock together
In the street
In the market place.

The above lines are from *Straw Men* by RK Madhubir and below are the famous lines from T S Eliot's 'Hollow Men',

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw.
Though much influenced by Eliot, RK Madhubir has churned out a number of poems which lay bare the corrupted Manipuri society. Educated and being aware of the different trends of writing styles and techniques made him a satirist of great charm. He writes in his poem, *Moneyput State*,

Mr. Rong and MSS from Manyfool
Passed Manyfool Secretariat Services Examination
Serving as seniormost secretary
To the Government of Moneyput (Madhubir 34)

Thus, this new set of writers played with words, used wit, humour and puns to satirize the system. The time and situation demanded drastic measures and poetry became a way for these poets to show their feelings about the hollowness of the society. This is what most of the poets of the post independence era did, delve into the issues of politics and society. Thus, it is not unusual for them to find inspiration from a great poet like Eliot.

Of the many poets of this era, two major poets whose poetry needs further study are Thangjam Ibopishak Singh (1948-) and Yumlembam Ibomcha Singh (1949-). These two poets along with a third one, W Ranjit, published two volumes of a book titled *Singnaba* or *Challenge* (1972), which indeed challenges the society of that time. These young poets are well read and they are aware of the degenerating society in which they are living. Their voice in these books is harsh, bold and is rather a shout that shatters the facades of the society. They have been condemned for their poetry on the ground that their work is vulgar and lacks proper poetic essence.

Their poems are like sudden bellows by vulgar young men in the dead of night. If you believe that whatever you say should be
uttered without inhibitions and regurgitated like vomit, it stinks.
That cannot be art.’ (Misra 298)

Thus the question is, whether one should maintain a decorum for poetry and write subliminal poetry even if it is far from reality? The answer seems to be hidden in what Shri Biren has to say,

‘Literature is not a place of resting and extracting some pleasure. Literature itself is life. We do not live anymore with our previous meaning. We are now living in a highly complex and mechanical life. We cannot help but see to it that literature too has to be this way.’ (Sanasam VI)

Thus, desperate times call for desperate measures. Likewise, the purpose of literature seems to depend on the context of the socio and political milieu, what really molds the poet gets reflected in his work. Thus the educated but disillusioned poets brought out a series of poems dedicated to the time. As they could not physically help the deteriorating society, they took up pen and paper to raise certain questions. The questions of fast diminishing morals, raising corruption, killings which generate violence and ultimately fear and trauma. Thus, fear and violence are major themes for these poets. The ongoing discourse will further analyze the themes.

**Thangjam Ibopishak Singh**

Thangjam Ibopishak Singh (b 1948) is one of the prominent poets of the North East India. He is based in Imphal and he writes in Manipuri. His poems have been translated into English by various translators. He has produced seven volumes of poetry so far. He received Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry in 1997.

Thangjam Ibopishak Singh has very subtly yet ironically used these themes of violence and fear in his poetry. One such poem is ‘Poetry’. He has used the ‘self’ to
express the problems a man is facing in the society that has been corrupted by greed for power and money. He says,

Now in this land
One cannot talk loudly
One cannot think loudly.

When the state is run by the government as well as the revolutionaries, one cannot express his ideas freely. He is paralyzed by the thought of getting heard. He says that he will ‘play you (poetry) like a flower’.

Thus, in many poems one can feel the silence of the individual or the whole mass as a matter of fact in response to all the brutal activities happening in the society. Are the people of this land suffering all the ills of the society passively? Or have they become numb from continuous oppression and become inarticulate? Or are they simply silent because they are tired of all the violence? Silence can be also read as manifestation of fear from the threat from the prevailing violence. But for how long can they be silent? As a volcano before eruption, future violence is embedded in this silence. As Ibopishak writes in 'Volcano',

‘… Volcano you cannot erupt
Volcano, stay asleep…
Lava, remain slumbering…’

In another case Shimanta Bhattacharya, a poet from Shillong talks of silence in a different way. His poem Between Bomb Blast talks of how people of the NE region have become so much used to violence around them that they are no longer worried about it. In an ironic way he says,

After the explosion, the silence blithely
Resurrects itself, there is no report of causalities
People are so used to blown to bits these days
Prayers shiver down sodden wicks on Diwali.
So long as the silence lasts, there is no cause for panic.

Even if the poet doesn’t want to get involved in the situation, he is sucked into it. He says that he will close his eyes and turn his heart into ‘mud’ and only think of himself and the flower. But as Czeslaw Milosz says, ‘there is no such thing as an innocent bystander. If you are a bystander, you are not innocent’, the poet is drawn into the situation. Still he proclaims that he will become selfish, trying to flout all norms of traditional morality and value. This is the situation of a common man, stuck in between the power struggle of others. There is low morality among people where only the fittest/powerful can survive.

In another poem Story of a Dustbin, the poet has used the metaphor of a ‘dustbin’ to present the common people of the society. The poem shows the core of Manipuri society filled with corruption and injustice. The poet says that if these atrocities keep increasing, one day the people will explode into revolution like a dustbin when it goes par the capacity of endurance.

I am a dustbin

in the form of a half-cut tin coal tar drum

 carrying the whole world over my head

Load and loads of rubbish.

…Yes surely someday certainly

My unbearable breast

Surely some day
Will explode with a bang. (George 822-823)

The poet also uses the image of ‘kaboklei’, a white summer bloom. When the poet saw the flower blooming near the dustbin, he started hoping for a peaceful existence. Maybe things are going to change for better. But the next moment, the flower is cut in the stem and thrown. The poet shed some tears but the tears got lost in the dirt. Then there came a black servant laughing and threw dirt over the flower. Here the black servant can be a symbol of the army personnel posted in Manipur. Every now and then crimes relating to army personnel happen in Manipur.

On the ground grows

A whitish sapling of kaboklei

..But one day during its early budding

A heavy spade pierced

Into the entrails of my heart

As it got thrown away (ibid)

The symbol of flower being plucked and thrown and the black servant laughing over it can be related with rape and violation of woman. On the other hand the white flower can be a symbol of peace, truth and purity. And its destruction can be interpreted as the failure to maintain peace by the state or the non state in the society. The poem seems to be a portrayal of the position of the common man and the way he is helpless and powerless in the corrupted society of Manipur.

Ibopishak also talks about how a man has to live with terror and uncertainties in Manipur. In his poem, *I want to be killed by an Indian Bullet*, he writes this fear.

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 asked them: 'When will you kill me?'

The leader replied: 'Now. We'll kill you right now. Today is very auspicious. Say your prayers. Have you bathed? Have you had your meal?' (Misra 56)

The poet has turned the five elements that a man needs to live as agents of death in this poem. When a person lives in constant fear of death in a troubled society, the very means of life threatens him. 'Death' as such has become a normal occurrence in Manipur. One more thing to be noted in the poem is how these agents of death talk casually to the victim. The poet further asks,

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?' (ibid)

The kinds of death the poet is talking about can be read in the newspapers daily. This is something that the people of Manipur live with, an accepted normalcy in their daily life. Terror and possibility of violence is deeply embedded in their psyche that it has become a part of their existence. The poet has captured that psyche in the peaceful talk of the victim and his killers and how it almost sounds like a business arrangement in this poem.

Recently though, his tone seems to have mellowed down. The 'angry shout' of the angry young man has matured and the effect shows through the entire range of his new poems. He still writes about violence in the society. In Killing Fields, he writes,
Why kill a man
Why man kills man
A dog doesn't kill a dog
A cat doesn't kill a cat
A cow doesn't kill a cow
The animals kill only when they become mad
It's only mankind that kills in cold blood (Ibopishak 30) (translation: self)

Yumlembam Ibomcha Singh

Yumlembam Ibomcha Singh (1949-) is a poet, short story writer and a columnist in a leading daily in Manipur. He is a sensitive writer who captures the surrounding environment in his creative mind and expresses through his poetry an amalgamation of reality and imagination beautifully blended. He has many books to his credit out of which two are poetry collections. They are Rajkumari Amasung Uchek Machasing, published in 1992, Sandrembi Thoraklo Nahum Ponjel Sabige published in 1973 and the two volumes of Singnaba which he published with Th Ibopishak and W Ranjit in 1972. He won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1992.

As a sensitive poet, Yumlembam Ibomcha Singh delineates the predicament of the people in the difficult times differently from his contemporaries. He dwells more on the surrealistic, psychological sphere of human mind in his poems. In one of the interviews with Robin S Ngangom, he says, “Linear, realistic stuff seems terribly inadequate to depict the times”. Therefore, we can see imagery of dreams, most of the times nightmares in his poems. The deep rooted fear in the realm of human psyche or the unconscious self is more often reflected in the dreams. His poems try to capture this state of mind by using dark humor as he believes sometimes a ‘huge mad
laughter’ is more effective.

In his poem ‘*Story of a Dream*’, he tries to portray the violence ridden society using gory imageries. He says, 'It is our home, quite dark inside/ On the floor, their entrails spilling,/ Bodies of children lie about.'

With such hair-raising images, he talks about the nightmarish time he is living in. Everyday news brings only news of death. The place has become a place of ‘running blood’. There is a sense of mass fear amongst the people. When getting out of the house it is left to fate if one will survive the day.

Manipur, known for the natural scenic beauty, is now a play-field of guns and bombs. The poet says,

Some people were strolling too
Gun barrels stick out in neat rows
From both the left and right side of the road
Muzzles of guns-
Even in the nooks and shaded spots
Of fields and meadows

But the poet also dreams of bullets becoming mellow grapes, almonds and raisins and the gunfire sounding like ‘soothing strain of the flute’. He dreams of a normal life in a normal place.

Sunlight of virgin gold streamed over hills and valleys
..Women on their way to the marketplace,
Women returning, greet each other cheerfully
And laugh in unison
Such normal life has now only become a far-fetched dream for the people of Manipur. Women are busy fighting for the security of their families, the society. The poem ends with a question,

Who else would dream such a dream?

The poet is trying to say that such dream can be seen by only those people whose lives have been affected and exposed to the disturbances surrounding them. He says almost farcically,

Whether winter or summer
Whether bombs burst or don’t burst
Beautiful women walk gracefully…
… Man look at beautiful women

People who have not much power and cannot do much resort in talking about it as pastime, 'We discussed serious matters at Hotel Rajdhani- / Bandh blockade and matters of AFSPA, Sharmila, Kamala…'

But after such serious talks all they can do is ‘returned home whistling’.

Even though the poet is writing about the traumatic life of people, he does not stop dreaming of a world where only peace will prevail. In the backdrop of violence, he is hoping for a harmonious world for his society, a place where people can live without fear as reflected in the poem For The Next Birth,

Let us only meet
As the price of this birth
Freely, even if only for a few minutes
Let us embrace
For a moment without fear

**RK Madhubir (1942-2004)**

R K Madhubir is one the few poets from Manipur who writes in English as well as in Manipuri. As mentioned above, Madhubir is one of Manipuri poets deeply influenced by English writers like T S Eliot, W B Yeats and the likes. His poems reflect Eliotic 'stream of consciousness'. In *Waiting for Darkness*, he writes,

I know this is injurious
But how relaxing I am
By having it for a few moments
I forget the sorrows and anxieties
Even though for a few moments
I am etherized like a dead log
thus
I take rest in restless span of life
at least a few moments
yes etherized and restless
A few moments

The poet writes about the state of drunken stupor where he forgets the 'anxieties' of life. The internal monologue that is going on in his head continues, 'Is there a man unable to stab? / Is there a man who do not know how to stab?'

Madhubir does not indulge in too much of writing on violence directly as some of his contemporaries, but the recurrent leitmotif like crumbling buildings, deserted temples, a sense of hopelessness in his poems indirectly indicate the state an individual faces in a troubled society.
Blood and death are other recurrent symbols in Madhubir's poems. He uses these symbols to bring out the existential crisis of the people of Manipur. To him the world looks bleak and 'death' is everywhere. In *Libation*, he writes,

Death and death and death  
everybody everything is now death  
the sky had ceased its roaring  
the seas has stopped their shouting. (Madhubir 5)

Another aspect of Madhubir's poems is use of myths. He uses Hindu and sometimes Christian myths to explore the reality of the modern times. Thus, he inverts the myths to achieve his goal. In Look in the Dark he writes,

Look in the dark  
You'll see Christ daringly running  
Like a fugitive from enemy's camp  
to save himself from crucifixion  
And Krishna you'll find lying dead  
As pauper on railway platform (ibid 1)

In an article on Manipuri poetry in English translation. Nigamanand Das, a prominent writer says,

Madhubir’s vision is recurrently obsessed by inversion of myths.  
It is his typical method of exploring realities in poetry.  
(www.museindia.com)

Materialism is yet another aspect that he attacks in his poetry, excessive of which has eroded the society. He weaves in dream sequences and portrays a surrealistic vision in his poems. He writes,
In the dark you'll see numerous vehicles plying..

On the streets of metropolis..

at the sight of the painted ladies

in the cabaret of byzantine hotels

singing and dancing with buzzing of jazz

and suddenly he brings in the imageries of destruction and ruin in the

poem,

A ruined big city

Not a single soul at all

Thousand plastered pieces of walls I see..

I see factories stopped

I see courts deserted..(ibid 2)

Another recurrent motif in Madhubir's poems is war. He uses imageries of war and its aftermath to depict the cruel time that the people of Manipur have to go through in the modern times. In *Five Ws* he writes,

War, bloody war I like

Yes, I am enraged

All my limbs terribly excited

Hot blood runs in my nerves. (ibid 8)

But in another poem he says that war is welcome if it can end all the other wars. Here the question of 'can violence end violence' comes up. The center's solution of all violent ways of the insurgency movements is by using violence against them. Pradip Phanjaobam, editor of a daily newspaper in Manipur says, 'insurgency cannot have a solely military solution is widely acknowledged..' (Baruah 152)
Madhubir echoes this sentiment in his poem *Trump Card*,

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War is welcome
If war can end all wars
..and we are burnt
to be reborn..(Madhubir 13)
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**Saratchand Thiyam**

Saratchand Thiyam (b 1961) is a young poet and travel writer from Imphal. He is an engineer by profession but his love for literature has won him the Sahitya Akademi Award for his travelogue ‘*Oh Lovely Greece*’ in 2006. He has published 9 books including the travelogue and translations.

The youngest poet among the three, Saratchand Thiyam tends to dwell on the feelings of fear and mistrust generated by the violent incidents happening in the society. He has captured the angst of the people as a result of the banalities of violence and terror. The increasing incidents like army personnel picking up young boys from their houses at night, girls being raped and news of death every day and the feelings and emotions with which the people of the state are living, can be clearly seen in his poetry. His poems are messages of how these killings are affecting the life of an individual and how hope is diminishing day by day. Another important aspect of his poetry is his universal appeal. Pain and fear felt by people is always similar whether it is in the remote place like the NE India or a village in Africa. He is very subtle and very sensitive in his portrayal. He writes in *Sister*,

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Sister, I won’t allow you to go
Every road is reverberating
With the deafening utterance of boots
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Hide inside the house, sister
Don’t you go at all

Here he explains the anxiety of every individual in the society. No one is safe. One cannot dare go outside the house. The land is ruled by the ‘deafening utterance of boots’. Physical fear and mistrust of the so called protector of the land is seen here.

He says, 'Look sister, every courtyard / Has become / Mangarak Kanbi'

‘Mangarak Kanbi’ is a name of the gorge where in early times the people of Manipur used to throw the corpses that died of unnatural causes. Now every home of Manipur has become such a place. It means to say that everyone is touched by these inhuman happenings in the society. The fear is intensified here. In fact, the poet tries to picture the stark realities of the modern world hidden behind a so called modern world.

The poet uses the word 'sister' for a special purpose in this poem. Women who are at the margin of the marginalized tend to be the commonest victim in a society. When Kamala Das writes of the violence against women, she is most of the time writing about the suffering of women in a patriarchal society. Her voice is a protest against those forces which question a woman’s freedom and security. But in Manipur where history is the witness of how women have been an equal partner of men in the field of politics and economic activities, the violence done against them is different. Their pain is not of seeking equality, or an identity, but the fear of a society crumbling down which they have been guarding since time immemorial, the fear of being raped and murdered by the army personnel, the fear of losing a father, a son, a husband.

Saratchand Thiyam also talks of the fear felt by people of the land because of the gun culture prevalent in the society. There is daily news of insurgents and
government forces indulging in the crossfire and most of the time, it is the innocent
people who bear the brunt. Saratchand says in *Gun Muzzles*,

In that direction a gun pointed
There is bound to be news
Of blood and tears

He further says,

Gun muzzles too face each other sometimes
And grief becomes the lot of ordinary people

The news of innocent people dying in the crossfire between the insurgents and
government officials is not a new thing to the people of the region. And the
predicament of the people is that they cannot complain to either of the party for the
loss of life.

No one to impute blame
Yet almost impossible to bear…
..The grief of every gun’s muzzle
Comes to touch the life of an ordinary person
Impossible to avert
Nowhere one could run to
Impossible to hide

They are the passive sufferers caught in the chaos of the state.

Ordinary folk who also love their land
Are covering bodies with a white cloth

Every person is so caught up in this mess that they have forgotten the normal daily
life of an individual. In another poem titled ‘Clounds of Olive’, he talks of the disturbed
land and the effect of it on an individual’s life. A person cannot even reply to a friend’s letter. The poem goes like,

She is unaccustomed to not replying letters
This letter which never got a reply
Points out today that
She and other things around her
Must be facing undoubtedly
Monstrosities and torment

These ‘monstrosities and torment’ have disrupted the lives of the people in such a way that they have discarded their normal habits. The poet wonders if the woman mentioned in the letter has gone away to fight because her only son might have been abducted by the ‘thick clouds of olive’. Olive is the color of uniform of the Indian Army. This color is now associated with fear and a threat to life in lieu of what is happening in the region.

**The Question of Reading Violence in Poetry**

The prevalence of the themes of fear, violence and terror is not just a significant aspects of the writings by the writers of Manipur alone but a necessary fact of writings of the entire the N E states of India, in literature is not only about Manipur but of the entire North Eastern State of India. Though people from the center tend to look at the eight sisters (NE States) as a homogeneous of space with one single identity, culture, tradition, each state has its own unique identity which cannot be defined by a single term. But what is common for theses states is the history of exploitation and domination in the sphere of language, religion and space. The surge of creative writing characterized by pain and pathos is common to the writers of the
entire NE region. Mamang Dai, a poet from Arunachal laments

What shall I do my love
If my reflection disappears?

Or when Hiren Bhattacharjya, an Assamese poet, says

There is fear
In the soles of her feet..

…The merest clack and a shiver
Runs down the house.

Thus the poets of the affected areas are writing about the difficult times and the trauma which every individual has to go through. At such times the poets seem to be mirroring society in their poetry. They only have to be truthful and account for what is happening around them in order to mirror the society. Robin S Ngangom aptly says,

'the task that literature of the Northeast must address is what Albert Camus called the double challenge of truth and liberty. Truth, because what can the writer hope to accomplish now except to tell the truth? When the unspeakable is out there, being enacted and quickly consigned to oblivion, when cruel things are done but never undone, and when media machines are busy feeding the world one-sided lies, the writer can only tell the truth about what he knows.' (Majumdar 246)
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* NE stands for North East