



Musings from Meghalaya: A Reading of Riquoma Rq Laloo's Select Poems

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Abstract

Writers from North-East have always managed to grab attention from publishers and foreign media with the kind of writing where a range of culture and tradition finds its expressions, unique and distinctive in nature. If added in the map of world literature, North-East literature can be a converging site where varied literary genres chart out their terrain and play out their own original music. This region shares 90 percent's of its borders with neighboring countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar Nepal and China and only a thin corridor often referred to as Siliguri Corridor or Chicken's Neck connects the region to the rest of mainland India. Thus strategically isolated; this region is marginalized at different levels. The collective body of literature born out of this region is called 'North-East Literature' which is an amalgamation of Indian Literature is considered as one of the bodies of works amongst New Literature. Unfortunately mainland writers like Jeet Thalyil in his *60 Indian Poets, 2007* and Ranjit Hoskote in *Reasons for Belonging, 2002* do not consider North-East Literature as part of Indian Writing in English in spite of the innumerable contributions from this region.

Key words: North-East Writers, Jaintia Literature, Riquoma Rq Laloo





Introduction

Literature from the North –East comes with a mélange of colors as the subject matter of their writings ranges from the culture and tradition to the socio-political and economic condition to ethnic clashes which are the ongoing problems in North East India. The often imagined exotic world of the North- East people and their culture as understood by the mainland India is dispelled by the literary themes that becomes the eye opener for the readers, scholars and the rest of India. Literature from North-East has gained its currency due to the new importance given and discussion and debate on the problem and politics of exclusion from mainstream Indian writing in English Literature.

Writers from North-East have always managed to grab attention from publishers and foreign media with the kind of writing where a range of culture and tradition finds its expressions, unique and distinctive in nature. If added in the map of world literature, North-East literature can be a converging site where varied literary genres chart out their terrain and play out their own original music. This region shares 90 percent's of its borders with neighboring countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar Nepal and China and only a thin corridor often referred to as Siliguri Corridor or Chicken's Neck connects the region to the rest of mainland India. Thus strategically isolated; this region is marginalized at different levels. The collective body of literature born out of this region is called 'North-East Literature' which is an amalgamation of Indian Literature is considered as one of the bodies of works amongst New Literature. Unfortunately mainland writers like Jeet Thalyil in his *60 Indian Poets, 2007* and Ranjit Hoskote in *Reasons for Belonging, 2002* do not consider North-East Literature as part of Indian Writing in English in spite of the innumerable contributions from this region.

The chorus of voices that echoes from this region is the common problem of loss and longing, rootedness, insurgency, politics of exclusion by the mainstream writers and laments over the





loss of past glories due to the impact of the modernization and urbanization etc. Though these are the common sentiments of the people of the North –Eastern states, the literary output from these states show unique distinction- rich in both oral and written literature forming a tapestry of culture and tradition found in their myths, legends, folklores, songs, music art, style, linguistic pattern with strong indigenous flavor which is different from the rest of India. Their narratives carry legacies of traditions of many generations, cherished and highly considered as sacred. If India is considered as multicultural and multilingual, North-East region can be taken as a multi-ethnic region with its ethnicity, culture, food habits and colorful festivals. Most of the communities from this region can pride themselves for possessing such a vibrant storytelling tradition. Some of the major tribes of this region are –Adis, Nishis and Apatanis from Arunachal, Aos, Angami, Kukis and Semas from Nagaland, Miris, Bodos and Rabhas from Assam, Mizos from Mizoram, Khasis, Jaintia and Garos from Meghalaya, Tripuri tribes from Tripura, Paites, Rongmais from Manipur and many more tribes and sub-tribes. People from this region depend on nature for many things. Their faith, language system, tradition and culture are born from nature’s lap, from its beauty and bounty. Most of them are worshippers of nature

Writers from North-East speak of the people, their region to representing the burning issues which affects the life of the people. The region has a good number of regional as well as English writers. Most of them are bilingual writers. The region is blessed with many well-known writers such as Indira Goswami the winner of Janapith award and has managed to break barriers to be recognized as a mainstream writer.

Poetry from North-East has distinct position in the Indian Literature even though they are excluded from mainstream literature. There are lot of common themes which binds the poetry from this region that categories them into a distinct genre. They often mesmerize over the glorious past and compares with the present events, the common North Easterner’s problem-torn between militarism and militancy. Modern Literature from North East finds expression in the passionate expression of social and psychological presentation of life. To this effect, Jayanta





Mahapatra in the forward note of the “Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-East” aptly said,

“Undoubtedly it is poetry that unites us. It is the poets who will not keep us away from one another, who will not separate us. This is the strongest feeling one gets when one reads these poems from the very different regions of North-East”.

Some of the common themes that we find in the writings of North-East Literature are the love for the native land, their people, culture, the pristine Nature unexplored and undisturbed by the techno- savvy modern world which has degenerated and make us all conscious of our precarious existence . The poets from this region are united by their attachment and love for the people, common problems like ethnic clashes, insurgency issues and marginalization from the mainland India. Their poetry also to a large extent deals with environmental issues which have garnered overwhelming political attention as they have in many ways affected the life and living condition of the common people.

Some of the well-known poets and writers from North-East at present are Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Ananya S Guha, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, Robin S Ngangom, Anjum Hassan, Paul Lyngdoh, Almond D. Syiem, L. Kharmawphlang, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, Monalisha Chekachang, Mona Zote, Malswami Jacob, Aruni Khayshap and Mitra Phukan.

Jaintia Literature

Around 1980's there has been an emergence of a group of young poets whose works reflect the conflicting issues of the turbulent times in North-East. This group of writers can be called as the recorders of the experience of the time. Most of these poets were based in Shillong, Meghalaya. The paper endeavors to showcase the writings of Riquoma Rq. Laloo from the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. Though his writing does not hold prominence among the Shillong Circle of Poets, none the less, he is considered as a budding poet from the Jaintia Hills.





The Jaintia Literature has over the years been passed down from one generation to the other, orally. The folklore of the Jaintia Hills is a whole discourse on its own. However, unlike the Khasi folklore, where most of the stories have been documented, the Jaintia folklore is still in an undocumented stage. One can not only but, admire how the Jaintia people have preserved and enriched their language and literature by passing on stories from one generation to the next as oral literature.

Over the years, many scholars have written on the linguistics, social and cultural aspects of the Jaintia people. There is a whole new diverse world which has attracted the attention of this community. However, the Jaintia Literature has been over looked by many. More prominent and established writers from Meghalaya over shadow the works of the Jaintia writers making it difficult for the writers to establish their own to create an impact on the readers.

Despite slowly making its way into the canon of Northeast literature, there are many hurdles faced by these writers such as, lack of funding and sponsorships, limited number of people who understand the language and lack of a strong base, has led to the snail pace growth and development of the Jaintia literature. Another important reason is the preconceived notion that the Jaintia tribe is a sub-tribe of the Khasi tribe when this in fact, is not the case. The two tribes often branded as one is another reason for the lack of exposure of the Jaintia literature.

Themes in Riquoma Rq Laloo's Poems.

Riquoma Rq Laloo, is an upcoming Jaintia writer who represents the world of Jaintia literature. He has established himself as a writer with his book, *Ki dak thoh ne purea hei ktien Pnar* which means 'the alphabets of Pnar Language' published in the year 2010, with the aim to preserve, promote and make people aware. Prior to this, he published, 'Songs and Poems' and '*Ka Pyrdit*' in the year 2007. In '*Ka Pyrdit*', he writes in Pnar, Khasi and English.





The English portion are the translated poems which is for the benefit of those who do not understand Pnar language. Riquoma, in his poems deal with day to-day experiences and views of life. The subject matter in his poems does not cater to only certain age group but covers both the young and old. In all his poems, there is a sincere longing for peace, unity and harmony. He speaks to the current generation with a vision of future perspective.

Riquoma Rq Laloo is a modern voice from Meghalaya. His poems echo the voice of the people of Jaintia Hills, where the common sentiment of preserving Nature, which is part and parcel of their culture and is a shared value of the Jaintia people, is projected. He is the first poet to have produced a text book on the Pnar alphabets. He has established a niche for himself through his writings which are grounded in the culture and tradition of his native land. In the process, his literary output has helped in preserving the language, tradition and culture of his people. Before him, there have been other writers, however, they failed to receive the acclaim that they had hoped for. Riquoma Rq Laloo, is a budding writer bringing about reshaping the literary map of the writers from North East; with wider accessibility about his works which may familiarize the people about the Pnar language into English.

His latest collection of poems, *Symboli ïa mylliñ: Lest we forget*, is written in the Pnar language using the Pnar alphabets. *Symboli ïa mylliñ: Lest we forget*, a collection includes devotional songs or tonic-solfa. This collection gives the readers an in-depth insight on the influence of culture and traditions of his hometown which permeates throughout his writings. His poems depict the picturesque natural landscape of Jowai, his hometown, the lush green trees, the rivers and streams, the day to-day activities of the people which form the core subject matter and are integral parts of his writings. Through his poetic lens he surveys the length and breadth of his homeland- it's glorious past, it's degrading present and the uncertain future. His patriotism and affection for the native place inspire him





to write. Readers of his works find it amazed to find comparisons made with his love and concern for his home land to the love of a parent towards their children.

Riquoma Ri Laloo's poems resonate with voices for positive action in favor of preserving Nature, which is deeply rooted with the indigenous culture and belief system of the tribals in North East. Though his poems are directly related and are located at the backdrop of his native land- The Jaintia Hills, his poems gain universality where the concept of 'Nature' and 'Nurturing' plays an important role. The writer has added meaning to his poems with eco-centric values, where Man's relation with Nature remain indispensable, strong and unconditional like that of Mother and her child. This is indicated in the poem, "*Chnoṅ tre*" (My hometown) where he addresses Nature as 'mother' by stating "*Chnoṅ tre toh kam ka Bei wa chisien don ioh*" (Just as everyone has one mother, one also has only one hometown).

The poet is nostalgic about his experiences of the pristine Nature during his childhood days as he compares it to this present world. He tries to re-live that unspoiled Nature when it was in its pure and untouched state and laments at the present scenario where Nature is in its ravaged condition. This can be observed in the lifestyle of the modern generation especially the youth, who are seen to be more attuned to the western culture and traditions; devaluing the importance of one's own indigenous culture and tradition. The tribal from the North East are often blamed or criticized for being born naked in the cradle of nature to jumping into jeans.

The poet is also aware of the predicament of his people. He is realistic about the fact that this close bond with nature is broken by the encroachment of various schemes and projects in the name of development which destroys the natural habitats of the animals, plants and other creatures along with humans. As a result, the harmonious and stable relationship with nature has been punctured with technological intervention and destruction of natural resources such as, drilling the Earth and unregulated extraction of coals and





pebbles from beneath the earth for in the name of development. Thus, the poet voices his resistance against the destructive activities of man.

In his poem, “*Han pher pho leh*”, tone of lamentation, reminiscing and reliving on the past echoes throughout the poem. This is evident in the following lines,

“Nachwa ki snji um ië o’u mutdur, wow man pho hadōh katni; dui diaw I la-ŋam man ki por, kat how iō dawiār lut ki. (Few years back, never would have I imagined, of your drastic change; Sadness and loneliness is all I feel now, When I reminisce about the long gone beauty.)

“Tyrchaiñ I man pho wei wa phōh, Bōnjait ki roŋ hapha daïoh; iapha waroh kynmō lut ki, Kynmō maïa ki man ka snji.” (Your glow and beauty shimmers, with all the colors in you; You are remembered by one and all, Reminisced with love only.)

An important aspect of his poetry is, his repeated references to the past as revealed in his poem, “*Sui Kynmō don hi*” (Memories remain) which speaks of his fond longing for the once pristine, Natural World which he experienced as a young boy. It also reveals his state from innocence to experience where the poet is now exposed to a world where nature is in a deplorable condition. There is a voice of urgency underlining the poems where the poet pleads for preventive action against further degradation of our Natural World and places his faith in the present generation to nurture nature- vis.versa and in return, expects Nature to take care of us.

Through his poems, he also registers his protest against the exploitation of the mineral resources like coal and uranium which are extracted from coal mines. As a result, the Jaintia Hills which is rich in natural resources has become a digging ground of its own graveyard by the people in the name of development and urbanization. The mineral resources extracted from the Hills cause imbalance in the ecosystem, which could result in hazardous natural calamities. He also makes the reader conscious of the adverse law





of Nature that 'every action has its equal reaction' and in this context the poet forewarns us of a bleak future and urges us to take enough care of the present where Nature has its direct role in sustenance of the Earth around us. Environmental hazards due to urbanization and the resultant dangers to the people become an echoing voice of the poet. The interrelation with the living environment and human form an understanding of the indispensable and interdependent bond that is established in his poem. As we see the world pass by in the modern and urbanized world, its impact on the society is going through a transformation where human society will be dominated by the capitalist urban modern culture replacing nature and indigenous life. It is a matter of concern as this phenomenon could lead to a disastrous situation of homogenization that could result in an ecological imbalance in the natural existence of various species.

In this context, Riquoma Rl Laloo is also a representative of his time with his minute detailed observation of the changing landscape of his native place. Ecological concern is strongly visible in the poetry of the northeastern poets. His poetic vision, style and versification bring out the dominant characteristic of the literature of his time. Reading through his work, one can feel the tone of lamentation over the deterioration and the destruction of the ecosystem from its pristine existence as a result of modern urban developmental projects. He gives the reader an apocalyptic view about the unspeakable dangers that are seeping throughout the state of Meghalaya in various forms. He is critical of the extraction of natural resources and exhausting it to their emptiness propelled by greed for economic gain. These hazardous and unregulated activities in the name of urbanization and developmental project could lead to destructive natural calamities in the near future. The capitalist mentality of the people is being criticized by the poet which pushes them for unlimited desire for wealth. His poetic voice is a cry of appeal to the youth of the present generation to take up responsibilities to eradicate the evil practices of the society. In his poem, "Pyrthai" he writes,





“Kat cha wa uiñ kat cha walai; sa du ki roñ, hai re hai” (wherever I go, wherever I turn; my oh my! I see only temptations).

‘Temptations’ here refer to the evils that have crept into the society, which lure the youth into unspeakable dangers. ‘Temptations’ here can also be indicative of the evils of modern day technological interventions which have brought about greater harm to men. He reposes his faith in the younger generation and cautions them about the temptations of our ever evolving modern world and reminds them to preserve their traditions and cultures. This aspect of the poet is revealed in the poem, ‘*Han Pher Pho leh*’ as stated,

“Kam lai ki por, ïah I man pho; Du neiwa beh ïa ki roñ thaba; Dustur riti ham ïeh wan mo, U pher, u wiar næ u kylla.”

In spite of his criticism of the sad realities of his people and his native place, his poems also speak of the beauty of his place endowed with Nature’s bounty. In his poem, he invokes the magical aura of the lush green mountains with clouds hovering in the sky, with sparkling rivers beneath the dense forests. His description of the flora and fauna resonates in the poem,

“Ka Ri U lyoh” which means the abode of clouds in describing the beauty of the state of Meghalaya. He says, *“Ki lōm wa ïyrñam” (the green mountains), “U lyoh wa tymmoh, wa tawiar na khap” (the clouds that hover over you from across the corners), “Ki khlō wa rben choñ sah ki mrad; ki um ki wah wa tōid jai jai” (Your dense forests which are so full of life; Your streams and rivers which so gently flow).*

As a minute observer, he also talks about the ever dwindling number of birds and animals and the decrease of greenery all around his home state due to deforestation. In his poems, *“Han pher pho leh”* and *“Pyrthai”*. He rues-





“Kaman kamni smat pho u kylla; I wa nachwa cheiwon wiar i? Mynsien wa tmaŋ la ŋam hapha” (How change overtook you so quickly; where has all of it gone? With a heavy heart we are only filled with nostalgia). ‘it’ here refers to the flora and fauna that have vanished with the passage of time. And yet again in the poems, “Han Pher Pho leh” and in “Pyrthai” he observes-

“Ki lōm ki wah da madan, Ki sim ki doh waroh da la-ŋam; Wapār walai da jan wiar, Sei man bru leh da sñiaw sahiar.” (The mountains flat and rivers discoursed, birds and animals all gone; Insects and bugs almost gone, Humans too, I wonder.)

Like any other tribe of the North East, the Jaintias also have a very close bond with Nature and it is very much reflected in the cultural and traditional practices of the people. Their dependence on Nature is seen in many aspects, especially in their belief, faith and value system which are intricately intertwined with Nature.

The poet also infuses values that are philosophical when he addresses the youth about the importance of ‘*Kamai yei Hok*’, which means the earning by righteous means with a sense of dignity and integrity. He also reminds them about the temporariness of man’s life on this Earth and it is therefore, important to make a meaningful impact while we live on this Earth. The philosophy of ‘*Kamai yei Hok*’ is reflected in the poem, “U Mod” (A Monument), in which he states:

“I man bru iōŋ i, heini ha pyrthai, Wym em wow neh r’ta, du kiwa daw lai; Man hi eh i, kai thaw uiñ ke iōŋ i, Chibet chipor ha pyrthai sñi. Man da khlad da lai i neini, U Mod u bōh ha ka pateiñ iōŋ i; İow sah kynmō İei wa da dep da lai, Ha mynsien iōŋ ki, cha wa wan wa lai.” (Our lives on Earth are short lived, No one is here for eternity; This Earth is merely a park, And we wander on it with very little time. After our time has come and gone, the only thing we leave behind is our memorial stone; so everyone will





remember of what has been done, And that will forever live in their hearts) Hence he vouches for life lived well for its worth and *in the poem, "Lehbha" (good deeds)* he states:

"U ia kyllōid mynsien, u iarap kyllian; I sñiaw bha leh u em, dei toh pynbian; U syn-it te ym hoi, toh u em sñiaw para I, wei pyndōh pyndam, mynsien ad nōd bichni. Lehbhaia kiwi tæ mylliñ ham ñiawtañ, Ki kām wan hi sæ wow khanatañ; Ham khyruiñ de chadien cheiwa sih wa roi, Chaphrañ bait u tia cha ka thoñ leh u poi." (To live with a free heart of helping one another; to live and laugh with a light spirit; To live with sympathy for others, and remove all pangs of jealousy. Do good to others and don't keep count, the good deeds will tell their own stories; Don't look back to what is bad, forward we move till we reach our goal.)"

The two poems reflect on the positive and realistic outlook of the indigenous tribes which also attributes to the general notion about the simplicity of the tribal people which makes them more attuned with nature where innocence and purity is found.

Riquoma Rq Laloo's poetic voice echoes the sound and music of North-East Literature, rich with the aroma of the native air, musings over the breathtaking natural landscape where nature seems at its best. Though the theme in his poems deals with the realities of the socio-political situations, destructions and degradations of the environment in and around his state due to modernization, Riquoma's poems exhibit positive notes for the future. The reader of his poem is left with a sense of responsibility towards one's own environment where nature breathes its pure air.

The tones in his poem express sincere feeling and genuine emotions which overflows in his language style and technique. The intensity of his expressions reveals volumes of the poet's attachments towards his land and his people. Throughout his poems Riquoma, leaves behind a beautiful connection that he has with his beloved land-its air and environment through the years, the evolutions of traditions and culture where nature plays its eternal music. Poetry is





that literary genre which gives adequate space for touching upon wider spectrum of themes. Riquoma Rq Laloo, the sensitive poet with a keen eye for details captures the imagination of his generation which is going through a revolutionary change. His poetic visions manifest the beauty of the past glory, the degrading present and the uncertain but the hopeful future. His poems are a source of inspirations for the youth who are at the cross road and are unaware of the responsibilities towards their culture and traditions. His poems awakens in the reader the hard realities of his native place, its changing landscape, sound and sight with the passage of time.

Riquoma Rq Laloo is a budding poet from Jaintia hills and an upcoming writer whose verse resonate hope for his people. His writings express sincere sentiments and strong rootedness to his native place, its people and its cultural nuances. The picturesque Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya comes alive with the music of his poetic rendition. His poems bridge the eternal bond between Nature and Culture and Tradition

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