

## **Politics to Poetics: Nationalist Rhetoric and Nationalist Reality in Select Poems of Robin S Ngangom and Agha Shahid Ali**

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### **Structured Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The different modes of conceptualizing nation and nationality like territory/ geography, linguistic oneness, shared religion or culture etc., have been attempted over the years by different theoreticians. Nevertheless, the ambivalence, ambiguity and consequent inadequacy have always been unmasked, implying the untenable nature of the terms. The politics of globalization, migration and diaspora has further problematized these concepts. The present paper intends to study select poems of Robin S. Ngangom and Agha Shahid Ali, poets from the two “troubled” lands— Manipur and Kashmir, respectively, in the light of “nation” and “nationality” studies.

**Methodology:** The proposed study will adopt an interpretative approach. Inputs from different fields like postcolonial studies, nationalism studies, and diaspora studies will be incorporated to this end.

**Findings:** The study exposes the limitations of such categorizing, which in one way or the other lead to the policy of exclusion(s) and create new marginalities. It shows that nationhood for both the poet Robin S Ngangom and Agha Shahid Ali is problematic and cannot be easily categorised.

**Value:** The relevance or value of the proposed study lies in the fact that it questions and problematizes the essentialist or the constructivist nature of a nation which is often highlighted by different theories about the nation. It unmasks the inherent inadequacy of the terms like “nation”, “nationality”, “nationhood” etc. indicating the contingent nature of it, rather than having any fixed signification(s).

**Keywords:** Nation, Exclusion, Marginalization, Robin S Ngangom, Agha Shahid Ali

In his 1882 lecture, titled “What is a nation?”, Ernest Renan avowed that the idea of a nation is a relatively new formation in history. He also categorically said that nations are not “natural” entities and that it is “constructed”. Benedict Anderson’s famous formulation of nation as an “imagined” political community also highlights the “constructed” nature of the nation. In his essay “A nation is a nation, is a state...”, William Connor further asserts that the essence of a nation is “a psychological bond that joins people and differentiates it in the

subconscious conviction of its members from all other people in a most vital way” (Connor, 1978, p. 300-301). Connor’s proposition brings forth another characteristic of a nation — that the people of a nation supposedly share a sense of homogeneity. Now, this notion of homogeneity in the “national imaginary” brings to the fore the possible exclusionary tendency. Notionally people living in a nation-state may be homogenous, but the lived reality contradicts this ideational image. Thus, the theories of the nation either highlight the essentialist or the constructivist nature of a nation.

In the postcolonial countries, the concept of nation was imported from the West. Nationalism in these countries came into being in the shape of the anti-colonial struggle and independence movement. In most cases, the common bond crafted during the independence movement was subsequently challenged by various divisive tendencies betraying the nation’s instability. Ernest Renan finds this instability of the nation as an inevitable consequence of its “constructed” nature. According to Renan, the “myth of nationhood, masked by ideology, perpetuates nationalism, in which specific identifiers are employed to create exclusive and homogeneous conceptions of national traditions. Such signifiers of homogeneity always fail to represent the diversity of the actual “national” community for which they purport to speak and, in practice, usually represent and consolidate the interests of the dominant power groups within any national formation” (Renan in Ashcroft et al., 2000, p. 135). In fact, a nation can never be full of homogenous people throughout its geographical territory. There must be a majority as well as a minority. The moment any nation or nationalism is based on the majority, there comes the policy of exclusion and division, which in its turn, gives rise to the voices of the dissents. A nation becomes a contested site of control and domination.

The factors like class, caste, religion, language and gender also define the nature of belonging in a multi-religious multicultural country and create different kinds of minorities based on class, caste, religion, language, ethnicity etc. Subrata K Nanda observes that in a multi-national state like India, the connotation of nationality or national identity seems problematic. He argues, “Normally, in these countries, people’s loyalty to their overarching nation/state competes with the loyalty to their respective nationalities. Stated differently, people in such cling to their civil-political identity without shedding or tampering specific cultural identity and the notions of ancestral “homeland” (Nanda, 2006, pp. 24-25). The problem arises when the territorial boundaries of these nations in a multi-national state do not correspond with their cultural / ethnic boundaries. In India, for example, the ethnic and ethno-regional

inequities were engineered by colonial boundary-makers whose arbitrary policy of map-making has thrown a significant challenge to civic nationalism. In this respect, it should be kept in mind that the total geographical territory of present India plus Pakistan and Bangladesh was not under British rule. There were 565 princely states in India at the time of Independence. After the country got Independence, these princely states were gradually annexed to the newly independent nation-state, and the old boundaries of the princely states were replaced by the new provincial boundaries. The new boundaries did not coincide with the older autonomous states. There were protests and resistance, and these voices of protests and resistance have been reflected in the literature of those regions since then. The North East of India and Kashmir are two such conflict regions and the contest sites of nations / nationalisms. In the subsequent sections of the present paper, the poems of Robin S Ngangom and Agha Shahid Ali, two eminent poets from Manipur (a North-East Indian state) and Kashmir, will be discussed in detail in order to show how their poems act both as the poetry of resistance and as the poetry of witness to the suffering meted out by the people of the marginally “other” regions in the hand of the nation-state.

In any discourse on the Indian nation-state, the Northeast has always been seen as “the other”. It is commonly referred to as the “periphery” or the margin of the Indian nation-state. The root of the problem dates back to the very inception of the birth of the independent Indian nation-state in 1947. The colonial political expediency led to the entire North East region being yoked together with the newly independent nation-state. Subir Bhaumik aptly calls this “the accident of geography”:

India’s North East is a region rooted more in the accident of geography than in the shared bonds of history, culture and tradition. It is a directional category right out of colonial geographical usage— like the Middle East or the Far East. A young Assamese scholar describes it as a “politically convenient shorthand to gloss over complicated historical formations and dense loci of social unrest”.<sup>1</sup> The region has, over the centuries, seen an extraordinary mixing of different races, cultures, languages and religions, leading to a diversity rarely seen elsewhere in India. (Bhaumik, 2009, p. 1)

The interests of the Indian nation-state have been at odds with the reality and the aspirations of the people of this region. Hence, we find in the literature of North East India a voice of resistance to British and later Indian attempts to administer the area. Ethno-cultural conflicts

are rampant in these areas, leading to violent political agitations and even insurgent and/ or separatist movements.

While writing about the poets and the poetry produced in the North East in his essay “Poetry in the time of terror”, Robin S Ngangom argues, “The writer from Northeast India, consequently, differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. [...] living with the menace of the gun, he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetics but must perforce master “the art of witness” (Ngangom, 2005, p. 171). Ngangom’s poems perform this “art of witness” faithfully. His most ambitious and overtly political poem “The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom” brings to the fore all the lived reality that the poet has witnessed. The introductory lines of the poem— “Not once can I say / I am the captain / behind this wheel of fire” (Ngangom, 1997, p. 9) — voices the loss of self-control which in the terminology of the discourse of nationalism can be called the right of self-determination or here the absence of it. The phrase “wheel of fire” indicates the turmoil that the people of Manipur are subjected to. Again, “misplacing / a bronze bell / somewhere, sometime” (Ngangom, 1997, p. 9) evokes a sense of wrong done to the people of the land, suggesting the transition of the status of Manipur from an autonomous state to a marginalized state of a newly independent nation-state. The image of a goat with a marigold garland between horns aptly betrays the overarching theme of sacrifice and victimhood portrayed in the poem. The political changes resulting from this transition subsequently brought social, cultural and economic changes that were in no way hopeful or beneficiary. The poet-speaker ruminates ruefully—

When I turn with a heavy heart  
towards my burning land,  
the hills, woman, scream your name.  
Soldiers with black scarves  
like mime artists  
turn them in seconds into shrouds. (Ngangom, 1997, p. 11)

The poem thus chronicles the saga of pain, pathos and despair born out of disillusionment and helplessness.

For the people of Manipur, “independence” does not connote the same thing as it connotes for the larger part of the Indian nation-state. The citizens here are bound by the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act or AFSPA since 1958, which endows undue power on the military

forces and has resulted in a large-scale violation of the fundamental rights of the citizens. The poet is very much critical of the excessive military repression of the Indian armed forces for turning his “fabled land” into a hellhole. The (mis)use of power by the military and the dishonest politicians have badly affected ordinary people’s morality, security, and safety. The “scars appeared on [the beloved’s] body” make “wound” on the conscience of the lover. The poet finds no hope since the morning newspaper brings no respite for the day:

Morning papers like watered-down milk  
hawk the same bland items:  
rape, extortion, ambushes, confessions,  
embezzlement, vendetta, sales,  
marriages, the usual. (Ngangom, 1997, p. 11)

The deadly weapons used to crush the insurgents resulted death, destruction and devastation—

For the trucks carrying  
the appliances of death and devastation,  
[...]  
the graves of youths who died in turmoil  
are the only milestones to the city. (Ngangom, 1997, p. 11)

Not only the human loss but also the ecocide has been a matter of mourning by the people of this part of the nation-state: “Instead of the musk of your being/ I inhale the acrid smoke/of gelignite and pyres.” (Ngangom, 1997, p. 11)

Essential commodities like oil, lentils and food for babies are uncertain because of social, political and economic instabilities. Even the poet accentuates, “fire water and air are slowly becoming commodities” (Ngangom, 1997, p. 11). Hence, the “patriotic” urge of the youths leads them to “fondle grenades” to defend their native customs and traditions, literature and performing arts. Needless to say, “patriotism” connotes different significations based on the subject positions of the inhabitants in a nation-state. The “patriotism” of the youths, fighting for secession and mourning the accession of the native state (Manipur) to the newly independent nation-state (India), to preserve the native rights (“native customs and traditions, / [our] literature and performing arts”) and the patriotism of the Indian military fighting to preserve the “national” integrity of the Indian nation-state are in complete conflict. This can be termed as a clash between civic / political nationalism and ethnic nationalism.

Thus, Ngangom's poem brings to the fore the problematics of nationalism and patriotism in a multi-national state like India. It documents the sorrowful "history" of the people of Manipur amidst the conflict between a nation-state and an erstwhile native Indian "free" state. The poem invites parallelism with William Butler Yeats's poem "Easter 1916" where there was a conflict between the Irish rebels fighting for the Independence and the British soldiers. In both the poems, the poets expressed their moral support for the brave youths fighting for "freedom". Ngangom believes that the present Manipur does not guarantee freedom for its people, and hence as a poet, he must address the "the double challenge of truth and liberty":

When a man of even an iota of conviction is in immediate danger if he speaks up, when a gun points at you if you don't observe a prescribed code of behaviour, how can I claim that I am living in a free society? ... I think the task that literature of the Northeast must address is what Camus called "the double challenge of truth and liberty." (Ngangom, 2005, p. 173)

Besides the North-East Indian states, Kashmir is another conflict zone that has been a matter of concern for a long period. Ananya Jahanara Kabir describes the plight of Kashmir in the following words: "locked within inhospitable terrain, but professed by all to be a singularly beautiful place, the Valley has, in the course of the twentieth century, emerged as a bone of contention for three nationalisms, Indian, Pakistani and aspirant Kashmiri." (Kabir, 2009, p. 1) The literature that has emerged from this "territory of desire" often uses resistance as a tool for aesthetic and socio-political engagement. Like Manipur, Kashmir's troubled state is embedded in the various historical forces which date back to the pre-independent and undivided India (comprising present India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) under British rule. Like Manipur, Kashmir was also a native Indian state when India got Independence. In 1947, the last Dogra king Hari Singh consented to merge Kashmir with India under dubious circumstances without taking the people on board. This pushed Kashmir into a perpetual political crisis.

Agha Shahid Ali, the diasporic poet who prefers the sobriquet "Kashmiri-American", hails from this unfortunate part of the world. Like every diasporic writer, his nationality (national identity) is engaged in the politics of homeland-host land dynamics in a broader context and Kashmir and America in a specific context. Though Ali's poems are preoccupied with the lay of his homeland (Kashmir), his early volumes of poetry are not overtly political; rather, they express the poet's nostalgic remembrances of his idyllic homeland. However, as things

became bad to worse during the 1990s, he explicitly took a political position and stressed only on his national identity as a Kashmiri through evoking images and objects associated with Kashmir— paisley, saffron etc. In a painful but powerful poetic voice, Ali has penned down the plight of ordinary people. Amitav Ghosh, Ali's friend and admirer, argues, "Kashmir's current plight represented for him the failure of the emancipatory promise of nationhood and the extinction of the pluralistic ideal that had been so dear to intellectuals of his father's generation" (Ghosh, 2017, p. 216). It is futile to debate whether Ali was a Kashmiri-nationalist poet, as few people have argued, but it is evident that Ali's poetry powerfully portrayed the unheard and lost voices in the war-torn state, highlighting the atrocities and acts of violence suffered by the ordinary people.

Ali's *The Country without a Post Office* (1997) most effectively captures the violence and savagery (through excessive military repression and ruthless terrorist violence) in 1990s Kashmir. The title poem of the eponymous volume, "The Country without a Post Office", was originally published as "Kashmir without a Post Office". The poem and the volume were evocative of an actual happening when post offices were not functional in Kashmir for quite a long time, and they (post offices) became "archive for letters with doomed addresses". The addresses are doomed because — "each house buried or empty. / Empty? Because so many fled, ran away, / and became refugees there, in the plains," (*The Veiled Suite* [VS], 2009, p. 202). "Papier-mâché" is an exquisite Kashmiri handicraft that Ali refers to in this poem, though ironically. The burning of the houses by the midnight soldiers creates for the poet an impression of papier-mâché, "inlaid with gold, then ash" (VS, 2009, p. 202). In this context, Ananya Jahanara Kabir remarks:

Summoning the weight of a community's experience of violence, Ali moves the fragile flammability of papier maché from a metaphoric substitute for the burnt houses to metonymic contiguity with the Kashmir conflict itself. ... His [own] poem approximates papier maché to not the living Kashmiri habitus, but its destruction by Indian soldiers ... (Kabir, 2009, p. 111)

As post offices are non-functional, there is no communication possible. In a desperate attempt, the speaker brings "cash, a currency of paisleys/ to buy new stamps, rare already, blank, / no nation named on them" (VS, 2009, p. 203). The absence of any name of nation suggestively indicates the Kashmiri people's non-acceptance of India as their nation and their aspiration for a new nation of their own. The poetic sympathy and solidarity with the

Kashmiri separatist nationalism hinted in the lines prove the poet's anger at and disillusionment with the postcolonial Indian nation-state, which turns violent on its own Kashmir providing gross injustice to the people in Kashmir. The speaker imagines himself going through the messages of undelivered letters of people in this crisis and then sending his messages which sound like "cries countless, cries like dead letters sent / to this world whose end was near, always near" (VS, 2009, p. 205). The apocalyptic image, however, is accompanied by the metaphor of "rain" which for Ali signifies a life living force, and the poem ends on a note of resolution resisting the oppressions of the tragic world— "And I want to answer: / I want to live forever. What else can I say? / It rains as I write this. Mad heart, be brave" (VS, 2009, p. 206). By sending messages of the misfortune of his homeland to "addresses, across the oceans" and "across continents" (VS, 2009, p. 205), the poet-speaker connects Kashmir with the rest of the world and thus compensates for the loss of communication created by the absence of post offices in his homeland.

Nation has multiple narratives— each one going against the grain of some other. Ali's narratives of the nation-space (both of Kashmir and India) bring to the fore the narratives of an individual who hails from this troubled part of the world and bears witness to the injustice meted out to the ordinary people of his beloved land (Kashmir). Notwithstanding the grief and pain of "paradise lost", his verse never mentions resorting to any violent means. Ali was a life-long believer in the principles of hospitality and generosity that "Kashmiriyat" upholds. This is obvious in the elegy "Hans Christian Ostro", which he wrote in memory of Hans Christian Ostro, a Norwegian traveller taken hostage by Al-Faran militants in August 1995 and later beheaded. The poet, deeply pained at the traumatic turn of the event, laments, "I cannot protect you: these are my hands" (VS, 2009, p. 236).

In fine, nationhood for both the poet Robin S Ngangom and Agha Shahid Ali is problematic since their homeland, Manipur and Kashmir, respectively, are "marginalized" territories and, more than often, are treated as "other". Whatever the "official" and / or "grand narrative" propounds, in practice, so-called "mainstream" nationalism always tends to be exclusive, giving rise to the marginalized and dissenting voices, which, in turn, goads separatist nationalism(s). The people of these two places get affected by the violence and counter-violence of state-sponsored forces and Militant forces. Coming from these conflict zones, the poetry of these two poets cannot help being the "poetry of witness".



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