

Interrogating Memory in Robin S. Ngangom's *The Desire of Roots*

Aditi Jana

Shahid Matangini Hazra Govt. College for Women, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Robin S Ngangom's poetry is all about the culture, the community, and the plurality of Northeastern India. To read Ngangom is to explore different modes of memory. My paper aims at investigating some selected poems from his collection of poems entitled *The Desire of Roots* under the theoretical framework of memory. Ngangom's memory poems remain multidirectional as they address complex social realities and trigger serious issues of belongingness, identity crisis, and ethnicity. I propose to examine how the poet's poems on remembering and forgetting become political in his world of experiences. This paper unearths the discourses of "multidirectional memory", "folklore", "collective memory", and "trans-local memory" woven into the poems. I intend to study how memory operates to restore the past and reconstruct history. The research question revolves around the interconnection among history, identity, race, politics, and ethnicity.

Keywords: Memory, Remembering, North-East, multidirectional

The multicultural, multi-ethnic North-East India remains an alluring, intersectional field for memory study. Since time immemorial, the Northeastern region of India has charmed people with its impeccable scenic beauty and ethnic plurality. In Manipur, the complex issues of history, identity, and culture always interact with each other through the modes of memory. By recapitulating the past, the Manipuri poet Robin S. Ngangom unearths the societal truth. Individual or personal memories become instrumental in transporting one to the very roots of communal, collective, and social discontent. One can converse with the history of violence, trauma, ethnic uprising, and insurgency by getting back to the rich archive of memories, associations, and "mnemonic practices"¹. Jeffrey K. Olick says that as a social

phenomenon memory resides in the context of the society. Memory and history are intertwined. Histories can be re-discovered and re-formulated through the acts of remembering and forgetting the experiences – personal and political, individual and collective. Memories are shared experiences. They are never unique. In a lecture on “Multidirectional Memory”, Michael Rothberg says, “Memory has been always in course of a dialogue with other memories.. . . Memories are always linking up with different moments of time and spaces. Memories are structurally multidirectional.”³ The collection of poems entitled *The Desire of Roots* invites one to the world of anxieties, atrocities, and animosities. Ngangom’s poems originate from the turbulent, complex memory – moments unfold their cultural, and ethnic histories. The rootedness of his imagination in the bloodstained Manipur unfolds its history of multidimensional and multidirectional complexities.

The horrible experiences of insurgency and the ethnic uprising have a cumulative effect on the poet. He penetrates “the mildew of years” (9) formed by the political, social crisis in Manipur. The act of remembering helps him connect the past and the present. The poet even tries to forget the instances of “the black vigil” and “fevers of men and women” accompanied by the insurgency at a crucial moment in the country. The reference to the Manipuri myth of Hynniew Trep creates an image of a country that can be emotionally alive in the midst of peaceful surroundings. Hynniew Trep is Khasi’s seven huts. Khasi is known as the land of Seven Huts. In the beginning, there was emptiness everywhere. God created the beautiful guardian spirit named Ram-ew to get married to Basa. They were blessed with five children. Ram-ew asked God to create something more meaningful to protect the earth. God sent his seven clans to the earth. He fixed a golden ladder on the Lumsohpetbneng mountain as a bond between man and God on the condition that the seven clans will exist on the earth as long as men remain righteous. Unfortunately, as people became rebellious of the divine norms and constraints, the ladder disappeared ending the golden era. The seven clans remained on the Khasi hills forever amidst darkness and evil. The myth becomes a metaphor for the reign of anarchy and terror in Manipur. Since time immemorial the numerous clans and tribes of Khasi have been fighting for their rights and identity in a grave socio-

economic and socio-political climate. His bruised memories are beautifully expressed through the images of “seasons of anxiety”, a wet smoky room”. The poet belongs to the seasons of anxiety. Ngangom reformulates his identity – both individual and collective by the very act of remembering the past. In “Introduction” to *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Astrid Erll says that history is just a mode of cultural memory (7). Trauma, memory, myth, political history, and remembrance of the family are the various modes of recalling the past.

Memories of Robin S. Ngangom are more cultural, and more social than personal. The myths, the legends, the folklore, and the human feelings that he shares with us belong to the whole community. Jeffrey K. Olick differs from Maurice Halbwachs in the question of whether memories are personal or social. Orlick opines that even the most personal things are social. Human beings are bound to call up social frameworks. 4. The crisis faced by the Meitei people, the Kuki, and other indigenous people is not a personal experience. Rather this becomes a communal crisis faced by most of the dwellers of Manipur. So, the social theorist Orlick emphasised the “social, cultural or collective perspective of memory.”⁵

Ngangom’s social awareness helps him store personal memories. Though he is detached from his beloved, through his journey down memory lane he can reclaim her in the stark villages with fogs billowing up from gorges and on the dizzy mountain paths. Memories have a therapeutic effect on the poet. According to David Gerbar, “Recollecting those positive emotions of a time we consider to be simpler and more positive can help counteract emotions of anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Recalling a love for the past helps promote hope for the future, and reassures us that life is meaningful” (qtd. in Alissa Roy). In the poem titled “Monody” the poet wants to compensate for the loss of the past with memories. Memories shelter him. They transport him to his beloved. He articulates in his present state of detachment:

If I cannot touch you
let memory follow the road
to the house of birds
on the way to your door,
days coloured by water and smoke

with pines ambling down
 the bends of your mountain and
 rain on a Christmas eve
 when you came to comfort me. (1-9)

The portrayal of the waning of their love in the troubled immense socio-political context of Manipur remains unforgettable. The phrase “immense hurt” speaks of the enormity of pain caused by his personal loss and social issues. The very act of remembering strengthens his sense of belongingness.

In the poem entitled “To a Woman from Southeastern Hill”, the poet cherishes the memories of his adorable lady belonging to the hills. He soothes his bruised self through the healing reminiscences of his beloved. Recalling her “cloud-covered mystery” (14) he craves for her mystical voice, “Your voice is soft because mountain streams/taught your heart” (18-19). He recalls the memories in the present scenario where the Manipuri boys spend time with dolorous guitars, and the poet transforms into a “plaintive cry.. /the love song you’ve exiled” (24-25). Trapped in the political and communal chaos the love between them cools off. Identifying himself with the depressed land of Manipur he realises that being born at an unearthly hour he becomes a victim bound to experience trauma. The sarcastic self-portrayal in the expression “a composer of bitter verse” remains unique in its power of evoking pathos. In “A Libran Horoscope”, he uses a remarkable storytelling method to crystallise childhood memories. He recalls how his childhood days were free from fears and worries as he had his “mother’s love/ to protect me from knives, /from fire and death by water” (13-15). Mother’s love protected him like an amulet. In those days he was fond of playing with moonflowers and sunstone. But the soothing images disappear to give place to fire and gun.

Due to the intolerable crisis of ethnicity, identity, plurality, and insurgency, the poet turns out to be a man of caustic personality. The psychological refugee in him muses on the bygone pre-scientific, pre-civilised days when there was no discrimination of religion. Though people were not civilised at that time they could love each other. But in the present context, people live in suspicion. They have become civilised with the modern outlook at the cost of shedding others’ blood. Ngangom satirises all sorts of oppressive ideologies running

rampant in society. The primitive ages of being innocent of the cruelties and violence of the postcolonial era appear to be a safe refuge for his agonised soul. The personal experiences become collective memories when he refers to his lady's roots in the land of Chhura, a popular undisputed Mizo folk hero. Ngangom here uses transcultural memory to transcend the narrow borders of provincialism. The tropes of transcultural memories trigger his unfulfilled dreams and desires. The paradoxical nature of the mythical Chhura becomes emblematic of the powers and weaknesses of the indigenous people.

The trans-local association recurs in his reference to a Khyrim woman in the poem entitled "Genesis's End". The poet invites us to the colonial history of Northeast India when the Khyrim had sovereignty and existed as a princely kingdom. In the post-colonial era Khyrim as a part of the Khasi kingdom got included in Meghalaya. The common concern of the hill people of the North-Eastern region of India is beautifully encapsulated in this poem. He speaks to the woman he loves:

You also hummed ballads of freedom
and wrote on suntanned granite
the genealogy of your people
and your man-wounded heart. (21-24)

The memories of the hill people humming of freedom, and the carving of the history of their descent on the hills intrigue the poet to spell out their sense of home. Their desires, aspirations, struggle, and oral tradition make them synonymous with one another. They can identify themselves through memories.

Memory being multidirectional has a futuristic aim and claim. Avishek Parui speaks of the "futuristic", and "retrospective" activities of memories in the launching of the book titled *Culture and the Literary: Matter, Metaphor, Memory*. He emphasises what to remember and how to remember as memories shape the future. It not only recalls the future but also provides us with tools to make the future. To him, memory is more often to do with looking forward. Another important issue related to memory studies is "forgetting". According to Avishek Parui, "Memory is more about forgetting than remembering."⁶ In a poem titled "The First Rain", Ngangom thinks of the options left to him: "Is it better to rejoice and forget/ or to

remember and be sad?" (10-11). The bitter experiences of leading an exilic life outnumber the sweet memories of childhood. That's why forgetting is a better option for him. His desire to become an escapist is an avenue to the much-required relief. So, memories play a significant role in the process of decision-making: "/I'll leave the cracked fields of my land /And its weeping pastures of daybreak" (71-72). He wants to leave the fascinating flora and fauna of Manipur to alleviate his agitated mind. The claustrophobic surroundings choke his sensibility. In the present context, he looks forward to evading the effect of painful, traumatic memories. To live he is bound to forget. Aleida Assmann comments in "Canon and Archive" that remembering and forgetting constantly interact with each other. It is selective by nature. From the psychological point of view, incongruent and painful memories are displaced, overwritten, hidden, and probably erased (97).

Memory with its capacities for restoring and erasing the past paves the way for stabilising the future. For Ngangom memories play a crucial role in awakening the consciousness of people. The folklores, the legends, and the beliefs of the hill people in Ngangom's poetry of nostalgia, and reminiscences remind the readers of the poetry of Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire. For all of them, memory becomes the mode of identification. Memories mature them. They can identify themselves with the roots of North-East India by recalling their personal and political past. The strong ethnic group consciousness is a remarkable trait in all of them. Like Ngangom, Dai can also reclaim her identity in a memory poem titled "Gone" where she says that they had long journeys in their blood. She recalls a burnt black hill that is monumental with their people's faces. Easterine Kire muses on her ancestral past, the arctic sky, the ancient people, and the sound of the didgeridoo in a poem titled "Riddu Ride". Like Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire Ngangom retires to the haven of memories to reclaim and regain a sense of belongingness and completeness.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Olick thinks that human beings are shaped by a combination of fantasies, interests, traditions, and opportunities. According to Renate Lachmann in "Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature", the

mnemonic functions of literature can represent and convey knowledge (306). See

<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110207262.3.151/html?lang=en>. Accessed on 30 March 2023.

2. See [https://www.bing.com/search?q=Jeffrey+K.+Olick+\"Memory+is+not+a+thing%2C+it+is+not+an+object.+Memory+is+an+ongoing+process\"+\(istorex.org\)+.&cvid=d904e9914dbb4e219e544cd6028ee8db&aqs=edge..69i57j69i64.4643j0j9&FORM=ANAB01&PC=U531](https://www.bing.com/search?q=Jeffrey+K.+Olick+\). Accessed 27 March 2023.
3. See Michael Rothberg's "Multidimensional Memory and Postcolonial Studies in Contemporary Germany", <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Michael+Rothberg+%E2%80%93+Multidirectional+Memory+and+Postcolonial+Studies+in+Contemporary+Germany+-+Bing+video&docid=603486194088298110&mid=11B3D1337811F4F280EF11B3D1337811F4F280EF&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>. Accessed 27 March 2023.
4. See [https://www.bing.com/search?q=Jeffrey+K.+Olick+\"Memory+is+not+a+thing%2C+it+is+not+an+object.+Memory+is+an+ongoing+process\"+\(istorex.org\)+.&cvid=d904e9914dbb4e219e544cd6028ee8db&aqs=edge..69i57j69i64.4643j0j9&FORM=ANAB01&PC=U531](https://www.bing.com/search?q=Jeffrey+K.+Olick+\). Accessed 27 March 2023.
5. See [https://www.bing.com/search?q=Jeffrey+K.+Olick+\"Memory+is+not+a+thing%2C+it+is+not+an+object.+Memory+is+an+ongoing+process\"+\(istorex.org\)+.&cvid=d904e9914dbb4e219e544cd6028ee8db&aqs=edge..69i57j69i64.4643j0j9&FORM=ANAB01&PC=U531](https://www.bing.com/search?q=Jeffrey+K.+Olick+\). Accessed 27 March 2023.
6. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev6wAQ85BdE> . Accessed 27 March 2023.

Works Cited

- Assmann, Aleida. "Canon and Archive". *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning, PDF, 2008, pp.97-107
- Dai, Mamang. "Gone." *Poetry International*, www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-17001_GONE. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.
- Erll, Astrid. "Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction." *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning, PDF, 2008, pp. 1-18.
- Kire, Easterine. "Riddu Riddu." *Cafe Dissensus*, cafedissensus.com/2017/06/15/easterine-kires-six-poems/. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.

- Lachmann, Renate. "Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature". *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning, PDF, 2008, pp. 301-310.
- Ngangom, Robin S. *The Desire of Roots*, Red River, 2019.
- Orlick, Jeffrey K. "From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products." *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning, 2008, pp. 151-162, doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262.3.151. Accessed 23 Mar. 2023.
- . "Memory is not a thing, it is not an object. Memory is an ongoing process.", www.istorex.org/post/jeffrey-k-olick-memory-is-not-a-thing-it-is-not-an-object-memory-is-an-ongoing-process-1. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.
- Parui, Avishek. "Book Launch – Culture and the Literary: Matter, Metaphor, Memory by Dr Avishek Parui | 6 April 2022." *You Tube*, 6 Apr. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev6wAQ85BdE.
- Rothberg, Michael. "Multidimensional Memory and Postcolonial Studies in Contemporary Germany." *You Tube*, 3 June 2021, www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Michael+Rothberg+%e2%80%93+Multidirectional+Memory+and+Postcolonial+Studies+in+Contemporary+Germany+-+Bing+video&docid=603486194088298110&mid=11B3D1337811F4F280EF11B3D1337811F4F280EF&view=detail&FORM=VIRE. Accessed 18 Mar. 2023.
- Roy, Alissa. "The Science of Nostalgia." *Reporter*, reporter.rit.edu/features/science-nostalgia. Accessed 24 Mar. 2022.