

A Heritage of Hate: Poetic Witness to Ethnic Ruptures in the Poetry of Robin S. Ngangom

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<https://doi.org/10.47509/SAA.2026.v26i01.04>

KEYWORDS: Manipur. Naga. Kuki. Territory. History. Identity. Ethnic Violence

ABSTRACT: Manipur has been a site for identity-based conflicts and enduring socio-political unrest since colonial times. The abovementioned issues are the highlights of this paper, albeit from a literary perspective. This paper seeks to understand the poetic representation of ethnic violence and the communities' collective failure to uphold social harmony and peace in the state, specifically in the poetry of Robin S. Ngangom. Also, this paper discusses the Naga–Kuki War (1992–1998) and briefly engages with the ethnic clashes that erupted on 3 May 2023 between the Meiteis and Kukis. These ethnic wars are devastating episodes that have resulted in the loss of lives and property, and large-scale displacement within the state and country. Historically speaking, Manipur has contested histories, disputed territorial claims, and identity politics that keep the state on the edge. In this context, a rereading of Robin S. Ngangom's poetry becomes essential, as it serves as both a repository of collective memory and a mode of ethical resistance to mindless violence and killing. It also examines how poetry engages with ethnic and territorial claims and the devastating results of such claims. The significance of his poetry lies in foregrounding violence (often seen as overused and redundant) that is often glossed over in discussions of Manipuri literature, culture, history, and politics. Through reading Robin's poetry, the paper shall demonstrate how Manipuri poetry offers an intimate understanding of lived experiences marked by sustained violence and loss. Manipuri poetry, especially Robin's works, incisively documents human suffering and vulnerability and sustains a hope for renewal, however fragile it may be.

INTRODUCTION: THE ANATOMY OF THE PASQUINADE

Historically, the former kingdom of Manipur was shaped by major battles fought against the enemy armies, warring tribes along its frontiers, and wars brought by the British Raj and its allies. At the same time, the kingdom was also equally moulded by internal conflicts arising from disputes over water sources, hunting grounds, forest rights, land

sharing, tribe honour, and other seemingly ordinary or idiosyncratic frictions that, over time, acquired disastrous consequences. What began as minor disagreements often amplified into inter-village, inter-clan, and even inter-ethnic wars. There is no denying that the history of Manipur and its peoples unfolds in cycles of conflict. It is chronicled on pages darkened by the blood of the innocent again and again. In Manipur, the hills seem to nurse old grudges against one another and against the valleys. Rivers run thick with suspicion. One tree learns to despise another. Cattle lock horns across territories

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both inherited and imagined. And even the air appears unevenly shared as though each community breathes a different, alienated oxygen. Within such an atmosphere, men seem compelled to take up arms at the slightest provocation in defence of land, kinship, and honour, while women are expected to keep vigil, marching in torch rallies to welcome or to mourn sons and husbands tasked with securing victory and upholding the pride of the community. From this long inheritance of enmity emerges what may be called a ‘heritage of hate’—one that continues to erupt, with tragic regularity, into senseless violence.

Such a spectacle of senseless violence is once again on public display, saturating print and digital media platforms and propelling Manipur into renewed national visibility. As has often been the case, journalists, YouTubers, politicians, religious figures, and concerned citizens from across the country and beyond descended upon Manipur following the outbreak of ethnic clashes between the Meiteis and the Kukis on 3 May 2023. In witnessing these events, one is compelled to recall the haunting lines of Robin S. Ngangom’s poem “The Dead”:

Day after day we merely witness
scenes from the living, and
day by day we go on dying
how long does the dead remain dead? (2006, pp.
82–83)

For many who arrived to document the violence, what unfolded in Manipur appeared as a grim spectacle; a live performance of hatred and savagery. Robin had long been stating the obvious: the self-destructive nature of Manipuris, “We the worthy pupils/ from the third world hills/ will embrace the principles of the enemy/ we will not thirst for knowledge but only a vain hope for peace/ shall burn our hills (“Arms will Flower Here Too,” 1994, p. 52).

When the hills are aflame, homes are ransacked, and life itself is under threat, where can one possibly run? Robin complicates this predicament by suggesting that survival often entails living as a refugee within one’s own land. It is in this context that he poses the following questions:

But where can one run from the homeland,
Where can I flee from your love? (“Strange Affairs....,”
2006, p. 71)

The juxtaposition through which Robin S. Ngangom presents a torturous homeland (run from) alongside an inescapable love (flee from) is striking. In these lines, Robin shows that the homeland is not merely a geographical space but an emotional space from which there is no escape. The rhetorical questions the poet poses in these lines exclude the possibility of a breakaway, suggesting that displacement, whether physical or psychological, offers no unquestionable release from the claims of belonging. The lines thus reforge the notion of ‘homeland’ during ethnic conflicts not as a space left behind, but as a confining presence that follows the subject like a shadow. Robin thereby ties the man to his geography, in which the homeland becomes an emotional condition, however contested the space may be, with competing claims and counterclaims. It is a condition that cannot be escaped without a profound loss of self, even as remaining within it entails enduring suffering, much like a lover hopelessly bound to an unrequited love.

In the Manipuri poetry violence, killing and ethnic wars¹ often assume the character of a tragic farce, a sad pasquinade. However, this tragic farce exacts a devastating cost in human lives, property, and socio-political harmony. Violence, without a doubt, leaves behind deep cuts in the minds and hearts of those who have gone through and endured trauma. This repetitive and absurd cycle of violence finds powerful expression in “Poem for Joseph,” where the Manipuri poet Robin S. Ngangom captures the plight of a victim of the 1992–98 Naga–Kuki ethnic conflict:

You said, you didn’t regret
how ethnic cleansers had palmed
your newly-built home off on a people
well on their trail back to pure blood. (2006, p. 74)

‘Joseph’ carries with him the condition of one reduced to living as a refugee within his own land. On the other hand, Robin’s use of the phrase “pure blood” exposes the dangers of identity politics and ethno-nationalism, where territorial and ethnic belonging is transformed into an exclusionary and violently enforced principle. Such rhetoric, as found in the poem, echoes what Appadurai describes as “predatory identities.” These identities are shaped

by deep anxieties about belonging and sameness, and driven by the urge to resolve these fears through exclusion, expulsion, and erasure. Appadurai defined 'predatory identities' as "large-scale group identities that seem to require—as a rigid requirement of their mobilization and force—the restriction, degradation or outright elimination of other identities, usually numerically, culturally and constitutionally 'minor' ones" (2000, pp. 131-32).

What is happening in Manipur is indeed a farce. It is a farce because there seems to be a profound indifference in the corridors of power in Delhi, where Manipur's suffering registers as little more than a distant murmur. Abandoned to this neglect, communities are left to determine their own fates, through reconciliation or by the sword. Robin captures this colossal neglect and insensitivity, both perceived and real, as follows:

Margins are superfluous in the big centre's book
Although memory is not silent and speaks up at times.
[...]
On the continuum of farce
it doesn't matter if we're moving forward or backward
or if a government is serving rats on its menu. ("15
August 2008, Northeast India," 2023, p. 137)

This ominous atmosphere that broods over the land finds a haunting expression in Robin's poetry, as captured in the following lines:

There is something sadly inevitable
about this land, something inescapable,
like a beast which stalks its own death,
like an ominous prophecy
of men clad in red going to war,
like an arrow when released
seeks the man who strung the bow. ("Imphal," 1994,
pp. 63-64)

Robin raises a series of urgent and unsettling questions through his poetry: why does this land remain so deeply fractured by hatred, suspicion, and cycles of revenge? Why has ethnic identity become a primary axis of division, fragmenting the land into competing claims of homelands? And why are its inhabitants unable to imagine a shared sense of belonging, choosing instead to territorialise identity along rigid ethnic lines? But without any answer. At least for now.

ROBIN S. NGANGOM: VIOLENCE, COMPLICITY, AND POETIC RESPONSIBILITY

Robin S. Ngangom (1959–) needs little introduction. He is a poet, translator, and critic of distinction and occupies a unique position among contemporary poetic voices from India, particularly from the northeast. His lyrical works have chronicled the plight of the people affected by the ethnic wars, especially the Naga-Kuki War of 1992 and issues which led to the birth of distrust and enmity among the peoples inhabiting Manipur. The Manipuri term used in this context is Naga-Kuki Lan, where *lan* translates as "war." In Manipuri usage, the term *lan* can denote large-scale ethnic clashes, uprisings, and wars fought against enemies as well as small skirmishes, feuds, tussles, etc. Apart from the plight of the hills and the people who call these hills their homes, Robin's works are distinguished by their sustained engagement with the unfathomable pain generated by recurrent violence, hopelessness, internal monologues, and ethnic hatred in Manipur. His poetry persistently chronicles the anguish of a society fractured along ethnic lines, yet ironically bound together by a shared immersion in a culture of hate. By transforming violence into poetic testimony, Robin's works emphasise literature's responsibility to confront social and political ills which impact societies.

Robin emerged on the Manipuri literary scene in the 1980s. Under other literary and historical circumstances, he might have been taken as a poet surrendered to the tenderness of nature, or as a romantic vowed to beauty and longing. Instead, the ceaseless churn of violence, hatred, and contradictions that shroud his homeland refashioned his poetic imagination. Robin's poetry indeed strays beyond pastoral comfort and romantic (day) dreaming. His poetry breathes out of a mutilated land where violence and displacement cling to the air like heat on skin, and human values soften, fray, and slowly dissolve into silence. Manipur appears in his works as a gravitational abyss, a 'black hole' that draws everything into its, where escape is neither imaginable nor sought, only endured, named, and inscribed into creative diction. In this way, Robin's

poetry functions as an ethical reckoning with historical catastrophe, transmuting personal loss and collective trauma into an enduring act of poetic witness.

He is coarse and unashamed in his portrayal of his land and its people, not out of a lack of love for his homeland or its inhabitants, but out of an ethical compulsion to speak uncomfortable truths. When the 'sons of the soil' fail to reconcile and bring lasting peace, when the youths walk the path of fratricide, the eyes turn to the centre for intervention. However, as has been seen and felt, peace seems to be a concept suited for microphones and policy papers. Therefore, Robin chides in his unique style:

There now arrive those who say that they can fetch peace
 wrapped in embraces and garlands and tongues,
 they say they can soften the bludgeoning of ruthless hands. They also extended soft palms, which became mailed fists
 that strangled justice,
 and what shall become of orphans and old parents
 whose shoulders succumbed to the weight of red blankets
 in far-flung hills? ("We Are Not Ready for the Hand of Peace," 2006, p. 89)

His poetry is outspokenly political and provocative. He seeks to expose the cracks within his society, hoping to provoke reflection and change. The wit and irony that permeate his work should not be dismissed as mere provocation; instead, they should be seen as articulations of stark realities that are often wilfully and unashamedly concealed. This impulse is manifested powerfully in his poem "Racial Progression":

We all claim to be brave simple and honest
 in the brochures for tourists.
 We are a persevering people: even after we die
 our bleached bones will prick and scar
 passersby on the highways.
 Come to our forests and visit our lodges.
 Come and share with us our glorious culture. (1988, pp. 20-21)

There is little doubt that Manipur's surface appearance, often projected as an 'exotic' destination to attract tourists, conceals a far more troubling and violent history. The poet foregrounds this disjunction

by suggesting that a land celebrated for its rich culture and traditions is also marked by a culture of suspicion, internal antagonism, and covert plotting, where violence can indiscriminately engulf even the innocent passerby.

When lives are lost in Manipur, the streets of the valley are drenched with fear and distrust; misinformation and disinformation circulate through the foothills and dales, and trenches are dug at asserted spots. Under such circumstances, pressing questions emerge. What role can poetry play in such moments of crisis? Can poetry disarm those who have taken up arms and create a path of peace? More fundamentally, can poetry intervene in social consciousness and reconfigure dominant modes of thought? Robin himself interrogates the relevance and validity of poetry for those engaged in the mundanity of everyday life and the relentless struggle for survival, "What matters if I can't explain to them/ the nuance of an ode or a ghazal,/ the irony and flint of a Mayakovsky/ or a Guillen, how to impress upon them/ their miserable plight/ when all they want to do/ is smoke and chatter away time ("Poetry," 2006, p. 16). However, poetry has long been recognised as a potent literary and cultural medium capable of inciting critical reflection, shaping perception, and enabling deeper engagement with a community's deep-seated social realities.

Robin is a warrior with words. His wound is deep. He also feels others' pain. And he wages his poetic war against the violence and atrocities that have scarred his land and society, which have pushed Manipur into public notoriety. He repeatedly foregrounds the predicament of Manipuri poets whose creative impulse does not arise from ideals of beauty or transcendence, but from poverty, bloodshed, corruption, and deep-rooted hostility. Reading his poetry reminds one of the relationships between poetry and society, which has long remained a central concern within literary theory. From P. B. Shelley's conception of poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" in *A Defence of Poetry*, where Shelly argues that "a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth," to more recent critical traditions, literature has been understood as deeply imbricated in social realities.

As such, Robin's poetry only proves that literature is never ideologically neutral; rather, it functions as a site where ideology is produced, reproduced, and contested. Therefore, Robin S. Ngangom does not fear adopting an absurdist register to articulate terror and death, suggesting that only in death does one transcend pain or belonging, for the dead has "no homeland,/ no forwarding address [...]" ("The Dead," 2006, p. 83). That is the kind of Manipur one can find or un-find in Robin's poetry.

The Naga-Kuki War (1992–98) may be understood through three interrelated factors, which are briefly outlined here. These are: first, militancy, or the means, manifested in gun culture; second, identity politics, or the way, structured through ethnic division; and third, territory, or the goal, around which mindless annihilation is legitimised.

OF MUSE & MUSKETS (GUN CULTURE)

Let us talk about intent and capability. While intent denotes the desire to assert power or dominance, capability lies in the availability of weapons that allow such desires to be operationalised. Recent episodes of ethnic violence reveal an alarming proliferation of arms, both legal and illegal, which has markedly escalated the intensity of the conflict. The weaponry in circulation in Manipur ranges from crude, country-made firearms to sophisticated assault rifles capable of sustaining prolonged battles. It is no wonder that countless lives have been lost, and many more irreversibly scarred, as a consequence of this deeply entrenched gun culture in Manipur.

Consequently, Manipur has emerged as one of the most heavily armed states in India, owing to the sustained presence of multiple insurgent groups and the ready availability of weapons. There are too many forces working to destabilise the state. Nevertheless, it is against this backdrop of insidious militarisation and human cost as a consequence of it that Robin uses sharp sarcasm, equating Manipur itself to a gun:

My home is a gun
pressed against both temples
a knock on a night that has not ended
a torch lit long after the theft
a sonnet about body counts
undoubtedly raped

definitely abandoned
in a tryst with destiny. ("My Invented Land" 2023, p. 144)

The image of a home held together under the pressure of a gun is swiftly followed by scenes of theft, rape, and abandonment unto death, rendered with an irony that borders on the poetic, the restraint of a sonnet. Such juxtapositions between grotesque violence and the maturity of poetic diction intensify the sharpness of Robin's irony, making it all the more unsettling. Moreover, he compels the reader to confront harrowing images of children burned alive inside blazing huts, forcing atrocity into the minds of the readers. He writes: "I ceased thinking/ of abandoned children inside blazing huts/ still waiting for their parents" (Ngangom, 2006). These are lines inspired by the 1992 Naga-Kuki War.

The more pressing critical task, therefore, is to interrogate the structural conditions that have enabled the proliferation of armed groups in Manipur and to ask why its three major communities have been driven into competing regimes of militarisation, where survival itself appears increasingly contingent upon the possession of firepower. But is it something a poet of love and nature would want to see? Not at all. Therefore, he questions, "How did they plant love and hatred/ with the muzzle of guns?/i'm saddened not to know/ to whom this voice belongs" ("To Those who went away leaving us: A Tale of Manipur," 1988, p. 17).

Manipuri poetry carries an uneasy tenderness, where the softness of poetic diction lives alongside the harsh clangour of gun culture. While poetic inspiration is often imagined as arising from private emotion or a distant, transcendent muse, landscapes saturated with political violence demand a rethinking of this romantic musing. What kind of poetry takes shape when imagination is forged amid bloodshed and mutual annihilation? When the muse itself seems to speak in the cold language of the musket?

It is so ironic that the firepower the insurgent groups possess emboldens their political, ethnic, and territorial aspirations. Yet the dangers inherent in such demands (sovereignty, homeland, etc) are well recognised, for, as Kabui cautions, "the reorganization of states in the tribal and hill areas of

the Northeast will open a Pandora's box of ethnic and community conflicts in the region" (Kamei, 2002). Claims for separate states or homelands are thus pursued not through peaceful negotiation but through armed struggle. Consequently, these militarised movements generate parallel centres of power in Manipur, severely straining and often overwhelming the state's mechanisms of law and order.

Ultimately, a dominant mindset has taken root in Manipur whereby the safeguarding of ethnic, ideological (power), economic, and territorial aspirations is imagined as achievable primarily through the gun. Given the centrality of arms proliferation to this condition, it is necessary to address the circulation of firearms in Manipur and briefly trace their historical emergence for this discussion. Long before contemporary conflicts, Manipuris were already familiar with the knowledge of gunpowder through trade networks and the exchange of ideas. But it was the British who brought the muskets into Manipur for their political and territorial goals. B. C. Allen reports in the *Gazetteer of the Naga Hills of Manipur*:

"Five hundred muskets had already been supplied by the British Government to the Manipuris to assist them in recovering their country [from the Burmese], and their valuable present was shortly afterwards supplemented by the gift of 1,500 more, a gift which added enormously to their value as a fighting force. Gambhir Singh then proceeded to advance against the Burmese, and succeeded in occupying the Kubo Valley which he held till 1824." (2010, p. 20)

He further adds that "The possession of muskets gave them [the king's Army] an immense advantage over savages armed with spears and bill-hooks, and turbulence and insubordination were suppressed with stern severity" (2010, p. 89). In *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* published in 1911, Thomas Callan Hodson observed that many of the hill tribes had already possessed muskets. Regarding gunpowder, he observed that the Kukis supplied it to the Nagas, which they probably got the know-how from the Meiteis (p. 38). Who knew that two centuries later, sophisticated assault rifles would rule and bleed the land!

The gun culture in Manipur is so deeply entrenched and pervasive that the gun itself has

become a recurring poetic image, emblematic of fear and social upheaval. With biting irony, Robin reflects on the nature of "firepower" through his searing verse:

It is all very fine, therefore,
long-suffering brother of the night,
your AK-47 commands respect.
But they too have the means
to procure the cunning gun,
the crafty grenade. ("Two," 1994, pp. 48-49)

As said before, the AK-47, as an agent of death and devastation, becomes a recurring symbolic constant in Manipuri poetry. It is seen as an agent of death, but also the destruction of community and the much-needed socio-cultural bonds.

The enhanced capacities afforded by modern weaponry (country- and foreign-made) have emboldened communities, intensifying their retreat into self-fashioned ethnic and territorial cocoons. Within this insular logic, violence emerges as the primary means of asserting dominance and political ascendancy. This pattern has persisted and shows little sign of abating, as the impulse to 'teach a lesson they will not forget' has become deeply embedded in the collective psyche of the communities in the state. Thus, Robin has no qualms in expressing what happened in the past and has been continued to date:

One day arrogant they waged war.
Losing they won and brought heads of enemies
washed blood-strained swords in virgin waters
their descendants still fight today –
with shadow-warriors.
For offending the old gods
they were cursed, to be turned
into blind and deaf people
worshipping new gods of greed
and narcotic death. ("To the Blind, the Deaf," 1994, p. 59)

As the dominant community, the Meiteis historically bore the responsibility of safeguarding the kingdom's boundaries from Kangla, protecting its sovereignty, and ensuring the allegiance of smaller communities to the Meitei king. Over time, however, this balance of power shifted, increasingly resting not on historical authority but on the differential firepower of competing groups.

Beyond the insurgent groups already operating in and around Manipur, there has been a noticeable militarisation of ordinary civilians, often in the form of militias or irregular forces, mobilised through both legal and illicit means since the 1992 Naga–Kuki conflict. This trend is starkly evident in the recent (2023) resurgence of violent tensions between the Meiteis and the Kukis. The continued hostility and conflicts, and on top of that, the circulation of arms among civilian populations, raise the likelihood that smaller communities may also resort to self-armament. If that happens, insecurity will deepen more, potentially transforming Manipur into an increasingly volatile and fragmented space within the Indian state.

OF ‘OTHERING’ THE OTHER (ETHNIC DIVIDE)

An emotional disconnect based on ethnic lines has long marked relations among the communities of Manipur. Whether this estrangement is historically produced or seemingly fated remains an open question. What is evident, however, is the recurring cycle of ethnic clashes, returning with unsettling regularity, as though little has been learnt from the past. It is therefore unsurprising that Robin confronts this emotional disconnect in his poetry, “Today we will bury the foetus of tradition./ We will not try once more/ to spin history where there was/ no connecting yarn” (“Arms will Flower Here Too,” 1994, p. 52).

While this paper does not offer a historical or political analysis of the crisis in Manipur, it nevertheless approaches it through a literary lens, acknowledging that the boundaries between the public and the private, as well as between the political and the non-political, have become increasingly blurred, even in the poetic landscape. Given that the root of the conflict lies in contested ethnic identities, it is necessary to address this dimension at the outset. In the “Introduction” to his book *Ethnicity*, Fenton (2010) writes, “ethnicity refers to the *social construction* of descent and culture, the social mobilization of descent and culture and the meanings and implications of classification systems built around them. People or peoples do not just possess cultures or share ancestry; *they elaborate*

these into the idea of a community founded upon these attributes (p. 3). While there are thousands of definitions of ethnicity, this particular one is apt for a state like Manipur. The process of othering the ‘other’ or the ethnic divide begins from the deep-rooted notion of us ‘differing from them’ which is built upon the notions of history, religion (a new factor which emerged in 2023 clash), culture, geography, underdevelopment (limited resource), and imagined bad blood (ethnic rivalry). In Manipur, it must also be noted that one of the fundamental causes of the violent clashes is a process of competitive identity formation closely tied to geographical location and territorial belonging. As scholars of ethnicity have long argued, ethnic identity is not a primordial given but a socially constructed and politically mobilised category (Barth, 1969; Brass, 1991). In this context, attention may first be directed to the Kukis, who in recent years have emerged as the ‘poster child’ of offence and defence, with considerable firepower, defiance, and bold political demands in Manipur. The Meiteis and Nagas, by contrast, have already been extensively discussed in existing scholarship.

The Kukis are a complex tribe. Nevertheless, the Meiteis called them ‘Khongchai’, and the first mention of the Khongchais in the *Cheitharon Kumpapa*, the Royal Court Chronicle of Manipur, is in the year 1741 CE, during the reign of Meetingu Mayampa Alias Garibniwaz (1709–1748 CE) when the Khongchais abducted nine Chothe Payas (Parratt, p. 153). Presently, the Kuki-Chin tribes include the Thadou, Paite, Hmar, Vaiphei, Gangte, Simte, Zou, Biete, and the Mizos. There are attempts to cover these tribes under a new name, Zomi (Kabui, 2003, p. 23). The grouping of the Kukis under one umbrella and the associated nomenclature is historically complex and the British administrators highlighted this predicament. According to C. A. Soppitt, a British administrator in Burma and North Cachar, the Kukis were known as ‘Dakinsaro’ by the Cacharis and the Kacha Nagas (British nomenclature) called them ‘Langtame’ (p. 2). According to British records, the first reference to the ‘Kukis’ was in 1777, when these tribesmen attacked British subjects in Chittagong, when Warren Hastings was the Governor General of Bengal, a time when the term Kuki was not

even known to the tribes themselves. Since little or scant material is available on the Kukis in local chronicles, British accounts must be approached with considerable caution.

As regards the Kukis in Manipur, they were settled systematically during the reign of Maharaja Nara Singh (1792–1850) with the assistance of the British Political Agent, W. McCulloch, who served from 1844 to 1867, with a brief interruption in 1862–63 (Johnstone, 1896, 2003, pp. 25–26). He further reports, “They were first heard of as Kukis, in Manipur, between 1830 and 1840; though tribes of the same race had long been subject to the Rajah of Manipur (p. 25). The ‘subject of Manipur’ belonging to the Kuki tribe are called ‘Old Kuki’ to distinguish earlier settlers from more recent Kuki migrants for anthropological and administrative purposes. This designation was applied to several Manipur hill tribes sharing linguistic affinities. In this context, Gangmumei Kamei notes, “Among the so-called ‘old Kuki’, there are tribes like Anal, Moyon, Monshan, Lamkang, who were already in Manipur since the first century A. D. When Poireiton migrated to Manipur and Tarao, Aimol, Chiru, Chothe, who were already tribute-paying tribes of Manipur in the twelfth century as indicated in *Loyamba Shilyen* and the Kharam and Koireng who were in Manipur around the 11th century” (2002, pp. 28–29). Similar clans and sub-clans have also been classified as ‘old Kuki’ in *The Lushai Kuki Clans* (1912, 2024) by Col. J. Shakespeare (p. 149). Interestingly, Col. L. W. Shakespeare, in the book *History of Assam Rifles: With Illustrations and Map* (1983), reports that the Kukis, who predominantly inhabited the North Cachar Hills, began migrating towards Manipur following sustained Lushai offensives against them (p. 30). Their movement coincided with British strategic interests, as the Kukis were considered particularly useful for settlement along “exposed frontiers,” as Sir James Johnstone observes (p. 26). These settlers were subsequently recruited into Manipur’s armed forces, with Kuki irregulars forming a component of the state’s military establishment even before 1891. The British had a difficult time dealing with the Kuki raids in the Chittagong Hills Tract and Cachar side, so they formalised the Kuki Levy in 1850, viewing the Kukis as a more effective force to deploy in

frontier warfare and to manage raids in what the colonial administration defined as British territory.

British colonial administrators were far from benevolent toward the indigenous communities in and around Manipur. Their hostility was particularly evident in their treatment of the Kukis, whom they frequently portrayed through colonial descriptions as uncouth and inherently warlike. Moreover, the rigid ethnic divisions imposed upon the so-called “subjects of their study” continue to destabilise the hills and valleys of Manipur. In hindsight, British observers also noted hostilities among ruling groups and tribute-paying communities, as well as among clans and sub-clans; however, such observations frequently functioned to legitimise colonial intervention rather than to alleviate existing tensions. The Kukis themselves have long faced difficulties in consolidating their diverse clans under a universally accepted nomenclature, in contrast to the Nagas, who successfully institutionalised a collective identity, at times even incorporating groups historically identified as “Old Kukis” into their fold. As a result, Kuki identity remained fractured, with no single term gaining consensus due to competing designations such as Chin-Kuki-Mizo, Chikim, or Zomi (Gangte, 2024, p. 226). In the aftermath of the 2023 crisis, however, the term “Kuki-Zo” appears to have gained wider acceptance as a unifying label encompassing the clans and sub-clans within the broader Kuki fold.

Nevertheless, Robin’s poetry does not obscure this contested past. Instead, it confronts the past directly, underlining the shared and cumulative responsibility of all communities in the historical processes that have contributed to the present crisis. By refusing a particular narrative of victimisation or victimhood, his work incriminates every group in the complex and layered conditions that have created these fiascos. So he writes:

My people make a bonfire
of your ancestral granaries
and cede your primordial hills
to vultures from the plains.
You who earn like a dog
and eat like a horse
one day you’ll find
no earth, no trees or rivers
and would even sell

a handful of blue sky
to prolong your decadence. ("To My People," 1988,
pp. 42-43)

Robin further captures the predicament of the state by invoking its glorified, nostalgic past, describing it as a "beneficent and fabled land," a vision starkly contradicted by the the images of poverty, hunger, and decadence. Contemporary Manipur is far from being glorious or idyllic. It bears the marks of a tragic transformation from a kingdom to a state, one that Robin is acutely aware of and deliberately incorporates in his poetic critique:

In this small patch of land,
forgotten by history, isolated by nine ranges,
in ignorant bliss, Kangleipak lives.
Once prime land, beneficent and fabled
And now playground of black-marketeers,
Haven for fortune hunters where
Non misses a heartbeat
As you feed money, sell honour, peddle justice. ("I'm
sorry to see poetry in chains," 1988, p. 70)

Taken as a whole, the stanza functions as an elegy for Manipur. It mourns not only what the land has lost but also what it has been transformed into. It presents a state that remains materially alive yet exists under conditions of historical erasure and political neglect. Through an ironic gaze, the poet offers a contemplation on Manipur's moral, political, and societal decline. The opening lines situate Manipur as both geographically enclosed and historically marginalised, with the phrase 'forgotten by history' signalling deletion and the 'nine ranges' evoking both physical and political confinement. The notion of 'ignorant bliss' introduces a critique of collective numbness which suggests a fragile calm that masks systemic decay. Robin continues:

We are all guilty
like men all over the earth,
we know why poverty
had walked the countryside naked,
we have seen hunger flowering
from bamboos in the villages.
We wanted peace for ourselves
by stealing the peace
of these gentle hills. ("Arms will Flower Here Too,"
1994, p. 52)

OF ONE LAND AND ITS SPLINTERED SPACES

Manipur presents the paradox of a shared territory that is nevertheless experienced, imagined, and claimed in profoundly different ways by its communities. In the postcolonial era, as nation-states rise, there are mini-projects along the lines of nation-states based on religion, language, and ethnicity in India. Similarly, a complex project is underway in Manipur. Taken together, hills and valleys, centre and margin, home/homeland and frontier are not merely physical divisions but lived and contested spaces through which identities are produced, and antagonisms sustained. Here, one needs to go back to Soja's (1998) observation, where the notion of space has shifted from something given and natural to something produced, lived, and political:

"Just as space, time, and matter delineate and encompass the essential qualities of the physical world, spatiality, temporality, and social being can be seen as the abstract dimensions which together comprise all facets of human existence. More concretely specified, each of these abstract existential dimensions comes to life as a social construct which shapes empirical reality and is simultaneously shaped by it. Thus, the spatial order of human existence arises from the (social) production of space, the construction of human geographies that both reflect and configure being in the world." (Soja, 1998, p. 25)

The spatial fractures are neither natural nor inevitable; instead, the space has transformed into a site of exclusion, enmity, and contestation. As Edward W. Said (1994) observes, "Territory and possessions are at stake, geography and power. Everything about human history is rooted in earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation, but it has also meant that people *have* planned to have more territory and therefore must do something about its indigenous resident" (p. 5). Although Said gave this opinion in the context of imperial expansion and its impact on indigenous populations, his notions remain strikingly relevant to the struggles over territory and the spatial relationships forged among ethnic communities in Manipur. Under such conditions, as said above, land ceases to serve as a shared ground for coexistence and becomes a

charged terrain where power and belonging are asserted, denied, and violently negotiated.

It is against this backdrop of contested space and belonging that Robin reiterates the fundamental human right to a home; when homes are violently uprooted, their occupants are inevitably displaced. This predicament is what one can find in his “Poem for Joseph.”

“It is never too late to come home.”
But I need a homeland
where I can recognize by myself,
just a map or even a tree or a stone,
to mark a spot I could return to
like a pissing animal
even when there’s nothing to return for. (2006, p. 74)

In recent times, Manipur has witnessed an intensified ideologisation of geography and space. Territories are no longer understood merely as physical locations but are invested with ideological meanings tied to particular communities, histories, and political aspirations. Such territorial imaginaries are sustained through propaganda, claims to authority, and expansionary projects, resulting in the weaponisation of space and the reconfiguration of spatial relations to serve ethnic agendas.

But, while the wars are waged over claimed territories, others see the violence and bloodshed, Robin sees the treacherous road the victims must take to survive as displaced people in their own home. The attacks come so suddenly, and the flight must take off immediately or face torture and death, that they must run without their belongings, “The warning disguised as a message/ came before the village was up and about,/ and when they left/ they didn’t carry pots or blankets/ or even machetes./ As they went to the outpost of guardians/ they left chickens running in the yard and the dog lazying on the steps. (“Flight” 2023, p. 160). And yet, such journeys are taken up to save themselves, not to reach a specific location. So, they imagine the freedom of the birds that do not have bounded territories and are free to fly anywhere and everywhere. The comparison and the expression are quite poignant, so the poet continues in the same poem:

“Flights like theirs
do not have destinations,

and only once they wish for wings.”

Again, as human beings who must survive at all costs, they end up living like second-hand citizens on unfamiliar lands. So, the poet quips: “The taste of the herd will return them/ to dark dingy towns where/ they can sell used clothes, wild meat and herbs./ The most vulnerable will sell bodies./ Because in spite of the landmines/ they still shared limbs” (“Flight” 2023, p. 160).

This spatial fragmentation also resonates with postcolonial analyses of territorialisation, wherein space becomes deeply entwined with identity formation. As Achille Mbembe argues in *Necropolitics* (2019), regimes of control often operate through the regulation of movement and populations within bounded territories. He further observes:

“The writing of new spatial relations (territorialization) ultimately amounted to the production of boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property arrangements; the differential classification of people; resource extraction; and, finally, the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaries. These imaginaries gave meaning to the establishing of different rights for different categories of people, rights with different goals but existing within the same space—in short, the exercise of sovereignty”. (p. 79)

In Manipur, where a sense of kingdom and postcoloniality coexist, and the spectre of the past still haunts, there is a sense of sovereignty that exists within being under the constitution of India. It is an odd mix, but one seldom speaks about. Where opposing powers run through the length and breadth of Manipur, such spatial fixity has produced communities whose emotional and political affiliations are anchored to historically inhabited locations, generating what may be described as affective geographies.

CONCLUSION: WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

From the discussion above, it is established that from the Naga–Kuki War of the 1990s to the ongoing Meitei–Kuki conflict in 2023, the dynamics of ethnic violence in Manipur have grown increasingly complex. In recent years, processes of narrative-

making (on social media and similar platforms), the infusion of a religious angle into the conflicts, the spread of misinformation, and other intersecting forces have further complicated these conflicts. Within these fractured territories, both physical and emotional, Manipuri poetry, particularly the work of Robin S. Ngangom, assumes critical significance as a forceful expression of suffering and silenced voices. By turning poetic attention to the displaced, the unheard, and the unnamed dead, Robin's verses expose the profound contradictions of a society in which the promise of peaceful coexistence dissolves into a persistent and hopeless longing for peace.

Thus, Robin S. Ngangom turns his critical gaze inward, interrogating the complicities of his own community. He does it while resisting ethnic absolutism and formulating narratives that externalise blame. Given the extraordinary circumstances in Manipur, Robin's poetry performs a critical function that extends beyond documentation or lament. It reasserts literature's ethical and political responsibility at moments when silence itself becomes complicity, and the detached posture of the passerby risks hardening into consent. His stoic yet self-critical stance finds its fullest expression in a confessional voice that indicts both the self and the collective. To shoulder this emotional juggernaut, he turns to sarcasm and irony, not as evasions, but as charged emotional strategies through which anguish is sharpened into critique:

I burnt my truth with them,
and buried uneasy manhood with them.
I did mutter, on some far-off day:
"There are limits", but when the days
absolved the butchers, I continue to live
as if nothing happened. ("Native Land," 2006, p. 81)

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