

Poetic Concerns Of Yumlam Tana: An Analysis Of Select Poems

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Abstract: Yumlam Tana is an English poet from Arunachal Pradesh, India and his poems have been appreciated by the readers and acclaimed by critics. The paper shall attempt to critically analyse the poetic concerns of Tana whose works attempt to make an authentic portrayal of the Nyishi society in particular and all tribal societies in general. Caught in the vortex of modernity and globalization the tribes have found it tough to establish equilibrium between the various economic, cultural and socio-political developments/ changes taking place around them and their cultural heritage. Tana deals with the varied aspects of the everyday lives of his people trapped in such circumstances. The researchers shall objectively analyse how the poet views the situation and his take on it.

Keywords: Home, Culture, Mainland, Root.

Yumlam Tana is a noted English poet from Arunachal Pradesh, India whose poems have found space in a number of edited volumes besides his anthologies being published by reputed publishers. He has two anthologies to his credit till date: The Man and the Tiger (1999) and The

Wind also Sings (2015). Deeply aware of the state of affairs of his *home* and the everyday life of his people he attempts to bring to the fore the “tribal people and their sufferings in general which any society experiencing the pangs of growth in modernity and development can relate to and sympathize” (Tana back cover). In his own assessment:

I have tried to examine the questions that are relevant to such a social milieu I belong to as a member of my tribe, Nyishi. In this context, poetry to me is about trying to understand my tribal roots and examine the drastic changes that occurred in our short period of history by the extension of civilization, especially the after-effects of colonial events from circa 1947.... I live with harsh reality of dissent and doubt that threaten to splinter society into exclusive groups of myopic, inward-looking individuals who cannot see the beautiful world beyond the immediate caste and community affiliations. (Tana xii-xiii)

The assertion makes it clear that Tana is aware of the distinctly audible dissenting voices prevalent in the society that he attempts to portray and conscious of the issues of identity and rootedness. In this aspect he bears resemblance to many other authors from India’s north east who have utilised art as a means of making the voice of the periphery audible outside the region. According to Nigamananda Das:

In his poetry we see his constant clinging to the mores of quest for identity, a major concern of post-colonial Indian English literature..... and his poems allude to Nyishi legends, superstitions, rites and rituals, customs, and costumes etc..... He dilates on tribal rituals and the primordial sentiments and exposes a constant pre-occupation with tribal anthropomorphism. (Das 4-5)

In a lucid style Tana speaks of a vibrant society at a time when forces of globalization, post/ neo colonialism and spread of information technology are making their impact on the tribal way of life. He seriously introspects on the visible changes in the social milieu because of all these and places his opinion with confidence.

On Leaving the Village expresses Tana’s concern for a society where the younger generation is fast imbibing values of distant albeit socio-politically dominant societies. He addresses the phenomenon of many children of his tribe, and even of Arunachal Pradesh by extension, leaving their homes in the hills to study at Christian missionary schools located at

most instances in the plains of Assam. He satirically comments on the outcome of such an endeavour which tragically culminates in the gradual disowning of one's own traditions, customs and even language:

Apart from many other important things,
Two of the most empowering tools for life,
Hindi and English –
One was the so-called national language of India
And the other, tongue of the rich and famous. (5)

The idea of the *other* in north east India is sharp and distinct. Whereas in most parts of India the translated versions of the prefix *non* signifies externality of an individual in a particular social context, in north east the tribal communities have been straight and distinct in defining the *otherness* in concrete terms. For instance the Nyishis call the non-tribals *Hariangs* and similarly the other tribes have their own coinages for such *outsiders*. He is saddened at the adoption of foreign mores at the cost of the rich Nyishi culture. He speaks of the resultant scenario in poignant terms:

Then we learn the ways of the clever Hariangs –
.....
Their songs and dances, their religion,
And learnt to see people and places, ourselves included,
From their perspectives: (6)

Further he adds,

All these and everything else
That made them the more civilized than us
We learned
That we forgot everything about ourselves,
Our customs, our traditions, our history, our world view.
Now after us,
Our children have disowned their mother tongue (6)

I Knew of a Place in the Mountains is a lament at the loss of the old world values in fast changing contemporary times. Tana talks about the arrival of the non-tribals seeking their livelihood, development of markets flooded with cultural artifacts less to do with the native culture and tradition, arrival of religious preachers to wean the natives away from their indigenous belief systems and the associated distancing of the new generation of his people from the earlier generations as well as the threat of getting culturally corrupt. He laments:

The place I knew of in the mountains
Is long gone now. (42)

My Brother, You Live in the City is another poem on the cultural intrusion gravely threatening the indigenous belief system of the tribals. The ‘city’ is symbolic of the space where unlearning of the tribal socio-cultural values takes place and tribes “living with cultures intact” (Tana 8) are reduced to academic significance only: specimens in a museum and not someone throbbing with life force. The speaker of the poem is a native saddened at the changes that he could notice in his city bred tribesmen who, according to him, have adopted the ways of the non-tribals and in the process an unsavoury gulf has been created between them. He is also critical of the education system of the times which for him does not serve any proper purpose:

And in that thing that you call education,
Which I take to be some odious and loathsome,
Dangerous weapon of self-annihilation. (9)

Tomorrow presents the poet’s desperation at the exploitation of resources in the pristinely beautiful hills of his homeland and of the people who are cunningly being robbed of their land and resources in the name of development and a better tomorrow. He is sad that his people have been unable to look into the words and offers of a better future with caution and critical acumen and prevent themselves from swayed away in the tide. He comments:

We have bartered our today
And lost our past
– At a great cost of everything else with us –

Only for this damn thing called tomorrow

Which we do not know if it exists at all for us. (11)

The poet is conscious of the ways in which the new generation is growing up and is worried that many have given up speaking their own language and do not consider it their duty to honour their traditions and customs. He talks of times when the corrupting effects of *civilization* had not bothered them and life could be lived in all its beauty and simplicity. *Will I Hear the Jew's Harp Again?* poignantly recounts such a past set against the contemporary times when being civilized has become synonymous with accepting the traits of an alien society socio-culturally far removed from theirs.

A Dirge from the North-East, as the title suggests, laments at the cultural intrusion of the Indian *mainland* into the tribal societies of the north east putting them at an alarming situation wherein their unique social values and cultural traits are under threat of annihilation: a phenomenon apt to be termed *cultural imperialism*. The extent of cultural intrusion is so intense and immense that even that naming of a geographical space peopled by non-Aryan tribes has been done without taking local sentiments into consideration. The tragedy of the situation is that even the *home* seems to have been coloured by the views of the *non-natives*:

The trespassers, not knowing what to call the place,
Named it, in alien tongue, Arunachal Pradesh,
Albeit the land of rising sun. (13)

He continues to state with caustic humour:

That is how 'Gekar Sinyi' became the Ganga –
May be to purify the brackish waters
Saturated with innocent tribal superstitions. (14)

The tribal societies of the region are witness to Sanskritised nomenclatures of places, rivers, monuments, institutions much to the dismay of conscious citizens. The nomenclature of Arunachal Pradesh (land of the rising sun) and Meghalaya (abode of clouds) is an indication in

this regard. In the passage quoted above the poet expresses his anguish at the naming of a lake in Itanagar which the locals call ‘‘Gekar Sinyi’’ as Ganga, probably after the river hold in high esteem by the Hindus. Another crucial issue that the poet has raised is that of unawareness regarding the region and its people in the *mainland*. What can be more disheartening for the people of this space than their brethren living in the other provinces expressing their unawareness of such a region in India:

Yet you would not know
Where my home state is
Or pretend not to know
Just in order to put us to size. (15)

He also raises the issue of natives of the region being mistaken for Japanese or Chinese tourists and the sense of being looked down upon by the mainland and instances of such neglect which strengthen the sense of otherisation leads to strengthening of voices demanding sovereignty. The sad case is that one is exhorted to join the mainstream without precisely answering to the wishes and apprehensions of the natives of the region. Tana is critical of such a scenario and expresses his fear that if such be the state of affairs then very soon the quantitatively smaller, socially peripheral, politically under represented tribes would soon lose their identity in the pretext of cultural assimilation. This is against the spirit of a multi-cultural Indian society which preaches unity in diversity:

What is this mainstream that you talk about often?
Is it a big stream
Where all the tributaries lose their identities
Where the smaller fishes live
In perpetual fear of the big fishes
In a fish eat fish world? (16)

To Our Benevolent Masters discusses the issue of alienation experienced by the people of the region in the other parts of the country. Out of sheer angst Tana draws similarity between the

British colonialisation and the resultant exploitation of India and Indians and the current state of relationship between the *mainland* and the *periphery*:

Benevolent masters,
Should know that slavery and apartheid
Have long disappeared in Africa and America.
You should treat your countrymen
With equal respect and dignity. (29)

For him not much has changed in the region in the exploiter-exploited equation other than the change in the identity of the exploiters. What adds to the tragedy is that the shift of power centre from the foreign rulers to Indians has not given much to the people to cherish.

When an Indian is Knifed in Australia is on the apathetic attitude and indifference of the *mainland* Indians towards the sufferings of the natives of this region. He describes about the numerous incidents when people of the region experience racial discrimination and mindless violence in the cities but the people there hardly show any deep concern whereas if somebody from the *mainland* is abused or assaulted in a distant country nationwide hue and cry is raised by the people and the partisan media gets active. Such prejudices deeply hurt the poet and hence seek an answer:

In the land of satya and ahimsa –
In the land of the Mahatma and Buddha –
In the land where the people venerate
The pri and the baba equally,
There cannot be intolerance and hatred –
There cannot be malice or prejudice.
Man from the mainland India,
We seek an answer. (33)

Tana is a chronicler of his society. The border areas of Arunachal Pradesh (then North Eastern Frontier Agency) were the stages of the 1962 Indo-China war which shook the self-

esteem of the entire nation. The poet is sad that two of the biggest nations of the world clashed for the sake of enhancing the size of their maps – the bone of contention being Arunachal Pradesh. Unfortunately none of the big powers thought it necessary to honour the views of the people of this politically and militarily sensitive zone. Their motive was:

.... to have a mastery over us,
To claim our lands and its resources,
To increase the size of their maps
For strategic considerations,
For ambition and Hubris,,
Not out of concern for our language and culture
Or for us, the children of the dawn. (38)

Song of the Driftwoods is about the plight of the people affected by rivers. The images used adds to the beauty of the work. The rivers have been compared with politicians: just as politicians do not keep their pledges similarly rivers also ransack the habitations without caring about the lives of the people. The Nyishis are excellent weavers much like the other tribes of the state and *A Trophy Poem* depicts the poet's opinion and concern about the art. The creations of the loom add another dimension to the rich tribal culture. Mesmerised by the beauty of the designs woven by the artisans the poet says:

.... Words then align themselves
into the shape of a trophy,
A coveted trophy poem, when Nyishi weavers inspire! A
Tapestry of copious forms and warm colours running
Riot all over its beautiful canvas! (22)

But he is equally conscious of the challenges to the traditional art from forces of the market which has taken its toll on tribal societies. The machine made products have flooded the markets at cheaper rates thereby lending the craft economically unviable as buyers desire a cheaper bargain. In this tussle the handicrafts are losing artisans and connoisseurs

..... But in the wake of

Automation and the onslaught of cheaper bazaar
Goods, your daughters do not have
The time or the knack for a dying art...
And you should know better ! (23)

In spite of the many issues plaguing his society the poet is optimistic amidst the pictures of apathy and gloom. *Let's Hope Anyway* echoes with a positive note, a hope that one day all those who have deviated away from their roots shall return. He has used the metaphor of *Bos frontalis* (a semi-domesticated animal locally called mithun) who roams freely in the wilds only to return to the salt licks placed by the owners:

Someday,
You will come back to me
As does the *Bos frontalis*.
Piebald and white-faced,
Returns to its salt licks
.....
To my house –
And it will be your second coming. (97)

The expression 'second coming', which has Christian undertones, adds to the seriousness of the purpose which is of utmost significance as it shall generate self-consciousness among the tribesmen about their rich cultural heritage and they would be able to decipher their sublime inherent worth. In such a juncture and for leading the masses to such an end a poet's role is immense. He is the one who is to speak for the vulnerable and needy. And Tana pledges to perform this act:

With a renewed vigour
He will speak out for the poor and destitute
Of all places and times –
For he has known nothing,
Save to sing the song of victory

In the land of the displaced and the oppressed. (81)

As spoken in *Dead Fish* an artist without any bindings and responsibility towards his society is similar to a fish out of water. He cannot be silenced or undesirably motivated by the strongest of forces for it is a poet's duty to make everybody realize and understand the truth behind an experience or the developments unfolding in the society. Yumlam Tana might appear propagandist at times but he is in fact a reformer trying to create awareness among his tribesmen regarding the rich socio-cultural heritage of their tribe in the wake of modernity and globalization.

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