



The Poetics of Survival: A Study of Ibopishak's Poetry

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Abstract: This paper examines the poetry of Thangjam Ibopishak through the conceptual frameworks of postcolonial trauma and subaltern studies. Engaging with the historical and socio-political backdrop of post-independent Manipur, the study explores how Ibopishak's work confronts systemic silencing, fragmentation of identity, and the aesthetics of survival. Rather than relying on redemptive narrative or nostalgia, his poetry navigates a terrain marked by irony, alienation, and grotesque satire. The analysis draws attention to the formal elements of his verse, such as fractured structure, dissonant tone, and symbolic excess, to trace how poetic form itself becomes a site of resistance. Through selected close readings, the paper considers questions of voice, complicity, and the ethics of representation in literature emerging from conflict zones. By situating Ibopishak's work within the broader landscape of Northeast Indian poetics, the study also reflects on the material and epistemological challenges of reading from the margins. This inquiry does not seek resolution; instead, it foregrounds the tensions that animate Ibopishak's literary imagination and its continued resonance in contemporary discourse.

Keywords: Manipuri Poetry, Postcolonial Trauma, Subaltern Studies, Dystopian Satire

I. Introduction

A revolution is not merely a political event. It is also an effective rupture, a shattering of meaning, a deep wound inscribed in the individual and collective psyche. In the context of post-independent Manipur, Thangjam Ibopishak's poetry does not simply reflect this dislocation; it embodies it. This paper examines his work through the lenses of postcolonial trauma theory and subaltern studies, exploring how his poetry stages a struggle for expression in a world that systemically denies speech, agency, and justice.

Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as an unresolved, intrusive experience helps us understand the fractured temporality and disruptive force in Ibopishak's poetry. Simultaneously, Gayatri Spivak's formulation of the subaltern as one who cannot speak—not because they lack voice, but because dominant structures refuse to hear—illuminates the poet's negotiation with silencing forces. Ibopishak's poetry, saturated with irony and dystopic imagery, becomes a fraught but persistent attempt to articulate the unspeakable.

As Robin S. Ngangom outlines in his essay "Poetry in a Time of Terror," Manipur transitioned from a princely state to a colonised territory under the British, and later to a restive component of the Indian Union. This sequence of ruptures produced not integration but estrangement—cultural, political, and existential. The imposition of new administrative systems, coupled with militarisation and corruption, created a social fabric where violence became not an exception but a rule. Ibopishak's poetry engages with this terrain not as reportage but as radical introspection.

II. Fractured Form and Aesthetic Strategy

In "Turning My Back Now," the speaker expresses a desire for a "disease of indifference" so that he may allow the world to decay without resistance. The line breaks are abrupt, the rhythm jagged, reflecting a fractured consciousness retreating into apathy as a mode of survival. Enjambment in this poem is not merely formal—it enacts a psychological refusal of closure. Similarly, in "Don't Kill Me, I was Born in this Land," Ibopishak's use of harsh consonants and truncated lines creates an atmosphere of breathless fear. Here, the formal properties of the poem intensify the speaker's entrapment in a violent, absurd reality.

Ibopishak employs irony not as relief but as an indictment. In "Coffin Market," children are imagined making holes in their chests to play a new game, inviting bullets into their bodies. The image is grotesque, but its purpose is not shock for its own sake. Rather, it dramatises Lauren Berlant's concept of "crisis ordinariness," where conditions of extreme violence are naturalised into daily life. The syntax here is deceptively simple, the voice childlike, enhancing the horror through contrast.

Ibopishak's poetry may be situated alongside other voices from the Northeast, such as Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, who have documented insurgency and resistance. Yet Ibopishak distinguishes himself through his unwavering refusal to offer mythic redemption or nostalgic return. While poets like Mamang Dai draw upon indigenous cosmology to reassert identity, Ibopishak remains tethered to the brutal now. His work circulates through modest platforms—regional journals, mimeographed translations, and oral performances—existing largely outside the dominant publishing economy. This marginality lends his work both its vulnerability and its power.

III. Gendered Silence

Yet critical questions must be asked. Does Ibopishak's use of satire risk aestheticising violence? In attempting to portray absurdity, is there a danger of inadvertently trivialising suffering? Moreover, the pervasive themes of suicide and annihilation may raise concerns about the ethics of representing despair. Is his poetry a form of protest, or does it gesture towards nihilism?

Another area of silence in his oeuvre is the absence of gendered experience. The voices of women—particularly in contexts of conflict where sexual violence and domestic loss are prevalent—are conspicuously missing. The absence of women's voices in much of Ibopishak's poetry invites a broader question about how gender mediates the experience of conflict. Another dimension that remains notably absent in Ibopishak's poetry is the gendered experience of conflict. The erasure of women's voices and perspectives raises critical questions about whose suffering is deemed speakable. While his work powerfully critiques political and existential violence, it also reinforces a masculine framework of resistance—one shaped by death, defiance, and systemic confrontation. In doing so, it risks marginalising forms of trauma that are more intimate, embodied, or borne in silence. The absence is not merely representational; it shapes the scope and resonance of the poetry's political charge.

IV. Conclusion

Despite these critiques, Ibopishak's contribution to Indian literature is vital. In regions where institutional violence forecloses free speech, poetry assumes an urgent function: to bear witness, to resist forgetting, to remember aloud. His refusal to offer false hope or transcendence must be understood as a political choice. In the preface to *The Ghost and the Mask* (1994), Ibopishak writes that his poetry arises from "reactions from the relationship between man and society," from "life's painful suffering", and the quest for meaning. He asserts that poetry is not merely a bullet aimed at power—it is also a way of making sense in an increasingly unliveable world.

This function is apparent in "The Land of the Half-Humans," where bureaucratic violence is rendered through the metaphor of bodies without heads, and heads without bodies. Even the act of eating is reduced to "millstone grinding," suggesting mechanical survival rather than meaningful life. The poem satirises the disjunction between the thinking and the doing, between policy and lived experience. The animalisation of humans becomes a trope for moral degeneration—a dystopia that echoes Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, not in tone but in intellectual strategy.

Ibopishak's poetry urges the reader to confront uncomfortable truths: What does survival mean in a society structured by fear? Can art matter in the face of systemic erasure? Is silence complicity? These questions linger, and in their refusal to resolve, they make space for critical thought. In a world increasingly defined by authoritarian suppression and polarised identities, Ibopishak's voice remains profoundly necessary for its unyielding irony, moral clarity and anguished refusal to look away.

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