
The Postcolonial Picturesque: The Poetry of Northeast India

Pramod K. Nayar



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/9124>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.9124
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2008
Number of pages: 5-21
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Pramod K. Nayar, "The Postcolonial Picturesque: The Poetry of Northeast India", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 30.2 | 2008, Online since 30 December 2021, connection on 25 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/9124> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.9124>



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The Postcolonial Picturesque: The Poetry of Northeast India¹

This essay discusses the use of aesthetics in poetry from Northeast India. It detects the aesthetic of the picturesque and demonstrates how the aesthetic serves particular political purposes. Moving from a discussion of the “natural” picturesque where variety and harmony in the landscape suggest pleasure and beauty, the poetry turns to an aesthetic of suffering where civic- and ruin-picturesques map the transformation and degeneration of lands, the corruption of people and the collapse of harmonious identities. This shift within the aesthetic marks the savage/d picturesque and encodes the politics of the region.

The first exclusive anthology of poetry from the seven states of northeast India, *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* (hereafter *ACPNI*), edited by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin Ngangom, appeared in 2003. Individual volumes from numerous writers and collections of Garo and Mizo writings (several in English, but some in translation) have, however, appeared more or less consistently since the late 1980s. This essay examines the aesthetics adopted in this poetry.

The political, social and cultural concern common to the seven northeastern states of India – for purposes of this essay I shall risk the use of the homogenizing term “northeast”, even though each state, region and culture here is highly distinctive – has been integration and cultural identity. Problems of migration, insurgency, cultural and linguistic nationalism have been a part of the region’s everyday life for well over three decades now. Separatism versus integration (with mainstream India), westernization versus regional identity, English versus the tribal languages/dialects are subjects for academic and public debates in the region (Bhuyan 1992, Misra 2000).³ In a context where the politics

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Marta Dvorak of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* and the referees of the original draft of this essay for their comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Sanjeeta Aheibam for supplying some crucial volumes of poetry.

² I have used this anthology throughout. IT is referenced parenthetically with the author’s name, *ACPNI* followed by the page number. Some of the volumes are bilingual and have two titles. I have placed the non-English title in parenthesis.

³ The Northeast of India, with a geographical area of about 2.60 lakh sq. kms. is made up of eight states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. It shares only two per cent of its boundary with India, and the remaining 98 percent with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and China. Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland and other states have seen separatist movements since the 1980s. At the time of India’s Independence in 1947 many of the tribes in the region were made to sign the Instrument of Accession, usually through coercion. A heavy military presence (mainly

of integration and identity are the dominant forms, what kind of aesthetic is available to, or suitable for, its poetry? This essay explores a possible answer to this question. It proposes that this *politics* of integration demands and *aesthetics* that embodies integration, even as the aesthetics complicates the issues of identity and integration.⁴

Aesthetics, as Terry Eagleton (1990) has shown, is always implicated in ideology. If in the colonial context aesthetics were aligned with an imperial ideology and politics (Leask 2002, Nayar 2008), postcolonial nations use aesthetics for a different set of purposes. This essay builds on such a given: that aesthetics is a useful device for representation while coding political ideologies as objects of “beauty,” “appreciation” or even sentiment.

Poetry from North-east India – I shall use the shorthand “NE poetry” to describe the genre – reveals, arguably, the most sustained and romanticized descriptions of landscape and nature in the Indian writing in English tradition.⁵ In fact, a key homogenizing feature in the poetry has been that, despite the under the tyrannical Armed Forces Special Act), insurgency and counter-insurgency efforts have made most of the region a strife-ridden one. Excessive corruption has made civil society a difficult “space.” The relationship of the north eastern states with “mainland” India has often been of clear antagonism, mainly in terms of identity: Indian, tribal, Naga, migrants versus locals, and others. Nagaland has consistently tried to claim its sovereign status as being distinct from India. The Meitheis of Manipur, often lumped together with the Nagas, seek to assert their distinctive identity (they are predominantly Hindu as opposed to the largely Christian Nagas). Stereotypes of the racial make-up of people from the region – the people share a racial affinity with South-east Asia – persist in mainland India. Mainland India itself treats the question of their Indianness with suspicion. Such a racialisation of the region has produced motivations for militancy, facilitating militarization, the subversion of counter-insurgency and the legitimization of corruption (Baruah 2006: 172-175). This identity question is also complicated by the fact that tribes of the region have no recorded history of their antecedents. Their acceptance of both English and Christianity (the latter especially in states like Mizoram) has also created a different identity – since both of these are treated by mainland India as an unfortunate colonial legacy. Migration has skewed the economies of several states in the region and results in communal violence about land-ownership, business and employment. Ruthless exploitation of the natural resources by mainstream (mainland-India based) companies and the government has resulted in ill-will and strong sense of injustice in the region (Mukhim 2006). Insurgency took an organized form alongside the systematic representation of the Nagas, Meitheis and Mizos national question especially in the 1990s. The newer forms of insurgency have also resulted in civilian deaths and an increase in criminalization (for a thorough study of the developments see Nag 2002).

⁴ While Sumanyu Satpathy (2006) notes that nature is the dominant theme and that aesthetics has “historical, political and mythological associations,” there is no attempt in his essay to isolate the *features* of this politically charged aesthetic.

⁵ Keki Daruwalla (2004) is quite right to describe the genre as “old world” and neo-romantic.

emphasis on local cultures and place-specific myths, every volume, every poet has turned to nature as a theme. Lush landscapes, local myths and histories and a palpably sentimental approach to topography make this poetry richly chorographic, and remind one of the great “nature poetry” tradition of the English John Dyer, John Clare, George Crabbe and James Thomson. This landscape poetry embodies an aesthetic that has traditionally helped poets and painters portray the beauties of nature: the picturesque.

The picturesque in 18th and early 19th century English literature and the arts was characterized by descriptions of rural landscapes, focusing on agrarian-pastoral views, harvest, gardens, ruins and some built up areas. Three key aesthetic-political features of the English picturesque are important to our understanding of NE poetry. First, the picturesque was marked by an emphasis on harmony, variety and beautified (picturesque originally meant “fit to be painted”) landscapes where man and nature seemed to be complementing each other (Andrews 1989). Second, the aesthetic demanded that the landscape be modified, transformed and “improved” (a key term in the discourse of the picturesque in William Gilpin and Uvedale Price, the main proponents of this aesthetic, see Daniels and Watkins 1994). This aspect of the aesthetic of the picturesque was regulated by a politics of landscape, ownership and labour. Finally, the central politics of the aesthetic: its move to harmonize, integrate and render into still-beauty the conflicting, overwhelming diversity and forces of the land. For instance, English “picturesque views [of India in the late 18th and 19th centuries] ... represented the colonial landscape as an aesthetically pleasing still-life instead of a politically unstable mass of land” (Ray 90). The theme of “harmony” in the traditional picturesque also elided differences – especially of labour and class. The picturesque was a class-driven aesthetic, popularized and appropriated mainly by land-owning gentry (Barrell 1983, Copley and Garside 1994). It also embodied questions of identity, for instance, for women authors and artists (Bohls 1995).

My contention is that the picturesque in NE poetry swerves into, and is the anterior moment of, a *picturesque of transformation* that highlights not harmony but fissures, not placid still-lives but tension-writ landscapes and suffering. The picturesque in this postcolonial form underscores the chaos, dissonance and disjointed elements even when these are located in the most beautiful of landscapes.

The picturesque in NE poetry is constituted by two strands. The first strand is what may be termed the “natural picturesque.” The second strand, which often cuts or merges messily into the first, is embodied in an aesthetic of suffering. This second strand, what I term here the “savage/d picturesque,” suggests a *transformation* of the beautiful land and constitutes the NE poetry’s politics.

The Natural Picturesque

Variety, one recalls, was a key feature of the English picturesque: it was the harmony in variety that lent beauty to the land (Andrews 1989). Almost every single poem from north-east India refers, at least in its initial moments, to nature and landscape as exhibiting harmony between the elements – plants, animals, seasons, rivers and the wilderness. The poems invariably focus on variety in the landscape: from a diversity of topographical features to animal and plant life. Harmony in NE poetry is emphasized, I suggest, through a sensuous geography of pleasure. The visual vocabulary here is overlaid – and once again this marks a departure from mainstream Indian poetry in English, which is predominantly visual – with the aural and the tactile.

The picturesque aesthetic here is generated through (i) a descriptive vocabulary that presents a landscape of amity, harmony and complementary elements, (ii) an underwriting of this harmony with a strong sentimental response to the landscape.⁶

Concordia discors

Harmony leads, in the conventional picturesque, to a state of ordered variety in *nature*, a *Concordia discors* (Andrews 17-18, 52-54). In NE poetry this harmonizing has two levels. In the first, diverse sights, sounds and texture merge. In the second a strong humanizing, or a human-driven, harmony is suggested where the elements are connected to and transformed *via* the human, a process I term “anthropo-morphing” to gesture at the humanizing *and* transformative feature.

Arunachal Pradesh’s Mamang Dai refers to a constellation of mutually complementary details - the sun and the mountains - before concluding with

the flash of summer
revealed
intricate nature,
divinity in trees,
a river of stars. (Dai, *River* 13)

Manipur’s Thangjam Ibopishak in “Manipur, Why Shouldn’t I Love Your Hills, Marshes, Rivers, Fields, Open Spaces” also depicts a *Concordia discors*. The poem opens with a catalogue of elements: “Manipur, I love your hills, marshes, rivers,/ Greenfields, meadows, blue sky” (Ibopishak, *ACPN* 88-9). Ibopishak continues with more catalogues: “sweet fruits, flowers, corns, grain.” Then: “hills, marshes, rivers, pastures/fields, blue sky.” And finally: “hills, marshes, rivers, trees, bamboo/ emerald fields and pastures” (Ibopishak, *ACPN* 88-9).

⁶ Malcolm Andrews has argued that one of the key responses to the picturesque ruin was the sentimental one (1989: 45, 59).

From sunshine to language, linked by a certain “divinity,” nature here seems to rejoice in diversity and splendour. Harmony is suggested through a catalogue of features in a rhetorical unification of elements within the space of the poem. The asyndetic syntax in many of these poems suggests such a catalogue of parts that make up nature. Landscape and topography serve as markers of cultural identity, with each locale imbued with its history and legend, even as the visual vocabulary of many of the poems calls the reader’s eye to drag across the landscape.

Yet the *Concordia discors* is never complete without an anthropo-morphing in these poets. Nature and the elements seem to be intrinsically linked to the human – sometimes even changing each other’s shape and form. Thus, in Raghu Leishanthe’s “A Mizo Star” James Dokhuma (the poet in whose honour the poem is written) is:

A comrade ...
 With your hilltops in solidarity,
 With animals, birds, forests, and
 With hills, lakes, rivers. (ACPN 95-6)

“Our Fair Mizo Hill” by Rokunga opens with a fairly straightforward eulogy in rather archaic diction and style for the landscape: “thou art like the fairest dream-land” with its “sweet scent of joy.” Before long the scene has become more complex with the entry of humans: “People from every hill live in perfect harmony” (in Khiangte 37-8). Esther Syiem in “All About U Pyrhat” recalls a Meghalaya where “the drumbeats of the squirrel/matched the musical showers/of the porcupine’s bells.” When the dancer moved and the “revelry was fired with/laughter and merriment” the “field rat’s face/was fused with the moment” (Syiem 12).

This anthropo-morphing *Concordia discors* is gendered in both men and women poets. The elements of nature and landscape seamlessly morph into the woman’s features, just as the woman seems to take on the hues, smells and shapes of the landscape. The speaker in many poems shifts from the harmony of the elements in nature to their perfect harmony in the woman. This kind of anthropo-morphing picturesque (stereotypically) naturalizes the woman and feminizes nature. Thus in Nongkynrih’s “Lines Written to Mothers who Disagree with their Sons’ Choices of Women” the cherries of winter are “pink/and festive as her love” (ACPN 156). In Yumlembam Ibomcha’s “Story of a Dream,” in the setting of “sunlight of virgin gold” streaming over the valleys, “parties of young women/their hair redolent with the scent of herbs” walk in the presence of young men (ACPN 80-3). In Nilmani Phookan’s poem a woman returns home, “her hair uncoiled/down the path” (ACPN 56). Easterine Iralu’s “Genesis” also serves up a similar morphing picturesque where woman and nature merge:

Her daughters were seven,
with the mountain air in their breaths
and hair the colour of soft summer nights. (ACPN 219)

Robin Ngangom's "Ode to Hynniewtrep" also genders nature:

woman with hair of pine,
girl with breasts of orchid,
woman with mouth of plum,
girl with feet
of opaque stone. (Ngangom, *Words* 32-3)

The descriptions also show a harmony of a different kind: the synaesthetic source of pleasure. Sights, sounds, smells and texture merge, the borders of the senses overlap even as human form and nature form blur boundaries. Thus the "natural" picturesque is never about nature alone, but a vision where humanity and nature are seamlessly connected, each a metonym for the other. The *Concordia discors* of the "natural" picturesque is this connection.

The Sentimental Response

Malcolm Andrews (45, 59) has noted that the picturesque very often elicits a sentimental response in the observer. The genre of NE poetry, in keeping with the traditional picturesque and in contrast with the ironic modernist strain in mainstream Indian poetry in English, demonstrates a strong *affective* investment in the landscape. The poems do not simply catalogue the scene's elements: they underscore the sadness, pleasure and ecstasy at the sights. Thus Mamang Dai, having first catalogued the scenic elements, now records a response:

rising above foot soldiers
was our armour
an army of words
inscribed
on the immense shield of love. (ACPN 6)

Thangjam Ibopishak's catalogue of picturesque elements, a mix of the pastoral and the wilderness, alternates with "I love" (ACPN 88-9). In Robin Ngangom the tone is generally elegiac and full of sentiment for the landscape he has left behind. In "A Country" he writes:

Somewhere on memory's train
I was deep again in the warm plains

Somewhere in the retreats
Of timeworn villages (Ngangom, *Words* 47-48)

In "Native Land" his horrified response to the massacres of women and children cause him to "los[e] [his] tenuous humanity" (ACPN 154). Bevan L.

Swers's "Excursion '92 (Balat)" accuses Manipur and its border town, once of "languid eyes, tranquil face" of now "cast[ing] a pall over my heart" (ACPN 182). Nini Lungalang decides to return to her mountains because the air of her native land "breathes life in me" (ACPN 228-9). Desmond Kharmawphlang's "Letter from Pahambir" maps his emotions as he recalls the stories of his native land:

The stories burn our memories like
 A distant meteor searing
 The unnamed gloom; by their light I examine
 The great hurt I carry in my soul
 For having denied my own. (ACPN 137-9)

The poems clearly move, therefore, from a catalogue of natural elements to a *sentimental* response.

The shift of registers – from the rich visual vocabulary of topographic descriptions to sentimentality and affect – constitutes, I suggest following the work of Paul Carter (1987: 243), the *intentionality* of the NE picturesque. To begin with, these responses locate the human's personality, emotional make-up and consciousness in her/his native land – a feature rarely seen in other contemporary Indian poets in English. The NE poets are poets of memory – especially memories of the times when harmony prevailed and the land was at peace. This memory is almost always (sometimes entirely, as in Ngangom's work) linked with a strong emotional response: to recall the landscape is to trigger affection, melancholia and anger. This sentiment is shared – since all poets seem to map the affective response to the landscape – and might very well mark the formation of a community of feeling. The picturesque in the poetry marks the construction of a "North East" public sphere where sentiment rather than rational debate governs all poetic expressions.

By "public sphere" I mean the careful situating of a community within the local topos as a mutually supportive formation. Variety united into *Concordia discors* eliciting a sentimental response in NE poetry serves this purpose of community-building – there is almost no landscape poem in this writing which does not prefer the collective pronoun over the personal "I."

The Savage/d Picturesque

The picturesque in NE poetry presents a curious tension. On the one hand it maps the land as a site of harmony and picturesque beauty. On the other it also represents a land in tragic *transformation* where fissures, disunity and chaos reign.⁷ Intrinsic to this transformation is the folding of an aesthetic of harmony

⁷ The picturesque was an aesthetic of transformation. It recommended modifying the land in such a way as to make it more like a picture. Closely implicated in the ideology of improvement in 18th and early 19th century England, the picturesque promoted an active human intervention in the landscape in order to render it more aesthetic.

and plenty into one of suffering, the alteration of the picturesque of *Concordia discors* into what I term the “savage/d picturesque.”

The Aesthetic of Suffering

In the traditional picturesque poverty, hovels and the humble countryside were deemed to be aesthetically appealing (Andrews 1989), as exemplified in the paintings of John Constable, Joseph Wright of Derby and Thomas Gainsborough. There is, clearly, an intrinsic connection of suffering and poverty with the land in this aesthetic.

The aesthetic of suffering in NE poetry is, as in the conventional picturesque, rooted in the land (this “rootedness” in the land is described by Nongkynrih as the first key feature of modern NE poetry, 2006: 41). However, diverging from the conventional picturesque, labour is not always connected with human prosperity. Second, this poetry aligns wounds, anguish and despair with changes and wounds in the land.

Labour does not render the landscape beautiful or prosperous, thus marking a shift from the conventional picturesque.⁸ In rare cases the quiet harmony of the labour of nature and the labour of the humans are aligned, and poems might depict a flourishing, labouring (production, harvest, flowering) nature *as reflected in the labour and prosperity of the humans in the setting*. Anupama Basumatary’s speaker in “Earthy” describes how she picked “a cluster of mushrooms.” The prosperity attending this labour is reflected in the collections: “the live crabs lay with all ten legs at rest” and “a brimming basket of snails” (ACPN 23). The work of the human in collecting food and the work of nature seem to echo each other in their labour and productivity. DK Sangma in “Song on the Inauguration of a House” uses as a refrain the line “I will also cultivate the land” (in Marak 72-3). Examples could be multiplied: Howard Denison Momin, “The Song of the Magpie” (in Marak 79), Jonmoni Shira, “Daisy” (in Marak 108-110), and others. Numerous poems reveal a discourse of labour that ties in with, or perhaps generates, the discourse of natural plenty.

More frequent in this savage/d picturesque, however, is the *absence* of prosperity – a feature that goes against the traditional picturesque. Humans toil, but the lushness is restricted almost entirely to the mountainsides and wilderness. While this absence of prosperous consequences of labour contributes to the savage/d picturesque, it is not the most significant mode in NE poetry. In most cases, the savage/d picturesque *is constituted by the alignment of the horticultural-agrarian with the martial, the decaying and the dying*.

In Easterine Kire’s “Kelhoukevira,” the “golden fields” described mid-way through the poem is now “barren and desecrated” (Kire 22-23). Prem Narayan Nath opens his poem with a description of agrarian and horticultural plenty:

⁸ It must be noted that workers and farm hands labouring quietly was a motif in the picturesque paintings of Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable.

roasted potatoes, tea, sunflower, a glowing forest, wild streams. The forest is described as a peaceful setting: the cottage of space/ where every moment is enriched by sweet/ chirping of birds.”

It is indeed a curious mix of the wilderness with the pastoral. From such an opening section Nath makes an extraordinary shift: “I place the footprints of murderous men/ On every humble tree.”

Once again we see here an anthropo-morphing of nature, but one that gestures at violence and the savage/d picturesque. The tree remains “humble,” while the men have turned “murderous.” From then on, instead of a catalogue of plenty we have a catalogue of violence and despair, *all imaged in relation to the landscape*: “fruitless human blandishments,” “futile human pride” and “graveyards become cool in the breeze.” The landscape’s beauty is now incongruent, or is perhaps a savage/d beauty, because of the suffering etched on it. And this is how the aesthetics of suffering emerges in the landscape itself: “On the palm sorrowful days dot/ the sky.” And on the river “The lost boat of/ Hunger, conflict and hesitation/ Floats in.” (ACPN 46-48)

From the cheerful landscape of the first section, Nath has shifted registers to showing a tragic transformation. It is also important to note the language of violence and suffering: “I place,” “I tear off” and “I sculpture” in this section. The iteration of intrusive and destructive actions is the *land’s* trauma resulting from the injuries done to it. That the desecration and suffering are linked to the land makes this an *aestheticization of suffering* – of both the land and the people. This, I believe, is the key moment in the politics of the postcolonial picturesque in NE poetry. It also rounds off the structure of the picturesque by moving from depictions of the land and people in harmony (thereby rendering it picturesque) to depictions of the land and people traumatized and in dissonance with each other. Sites of happiness become the spaces of suffering, and the terrors of the land become the terrors of the people.

For instance, Prem Narayan Nath’s “Poems” show the wounds of the earth:

Like rumblings from the earth’s womb, the sound approached gradually
 Maybe the mountains are falling, maybe the skies have cracked – suddenly
 A translucent sound all of a sudden

In this poem we see the cumulative impact of the iteration, especially because it is always associated with danger and suffering:

Clouds of men in clusters litter the grounds all of a sudden
 Scores of dead bodies

NE poetry shows the “wounds” in a language – the breaks, the iteration, the abrupt shift of images and diction, all traumatic in terms of the language of the poem (for example, the subliminal pun in Nath’s “the sound emerges/Scores of dead bodies” with “scores” also gesturing at the non-musicality of the

sounds, perhaps?) – as linked to the wounds in a land and in the culture. For this purpose the aesthetic of suffering serves the poets admirably.

The iterative mode also admirably serves Sameer Tanti's depiction of a traumatized land/people. Tanti uses "Go, give them the news" (and its various versions) as a refrain throughout his poem. The news items are all traumatic: "the graveyards are to be dug up tomorrow," "the men are all lost," the "courtyards too are lost," there has been a firing, the homes and fields are mortgaged. In "Ballad of Bones," Tanti writes: "Rain falls/ Blood spreads/ Towards the green." The grimness of the event is reflected in the sparseness of the lines. In addition, the events and the land are aligned: "The stones wept/ From bones are scattered/ Crops, seeds..." (ACPN 66). The "bird-song" and "happy gurgling sounds" of the hills have been "replaced by the staccato/of sophisticated weaponry," even as the rivers run "red" and the seasons lose their magic (Ao, *Moods*: 48-9). In Yumlemban Ibomcha's "story of a Dream," "flowers of lovely colours/blossomed from the barrels of the guns" (ACPN 81). In Robin Ngangom's "Poem for Joseph" the homeland becomes unrecognizable with suffering (ACPN 152-53). In Almond Syiem's "On Top of a Hill" a hill is compared to a ravaged woman, the sun is "red, almost like our blood" and the trees have been "murdered" (ACPN 174-75). In Niranjana Chakma's "When Debate has No Room" the dead body of a gang raped woman lies in the grass "clad in the pungency of gunpowder" (ACPN 239).

In each case, it must be noted, the anthro-morphing of the land consists of violence, death and destruction. This is the *swerve* of the picturesque, a move from the "natural" to the savage/d picturesque. This transformation is the *politics* of the picturesque, where the elegiac poetry underscores the steady erosion of everything in the native culture.

The Politics of the Picturesque

One of the leading poets from the region, Mamang Dai, is the only one, as far as I know, who explicitly refers to this poetry as being about "transformation" (Dai 2006). The theme of transformation is linked to the politics of the genre.

The picturesque is the necessary anterior moment that allows the poets to capture the full depth of the trauma of the tragic transformation in their regions. The swerve of the natural picturesque of a *Concordia discors* of the land and its people into a savage/d picturesque is also the politics of this aesthetic.

The picturesque while exhibiting a theme of transformation through its aesthetic of suffering, also suggests a rooting of cultural identity in transformation: the consciousness of native *versus* foreign, us *versus* them and the violence attendant upon such binaries. The theme of belonging, and the related politics of location, ownership and cultural affirmation, is also imaged in terms of landscape. The politics of the picturesque has two clear components: a *civic*

picturesque of landscape and identity that has now become a problem, and a *ruin-picturesque*. In every case, the two components run seamlessly alongside each other.

In James Dokhuma's "Purvaiya: The East Wind" the wind and water are metaphors for more than just the season or the landscape. Dokhuma writes:

Assamese, Manipuri, Mizo, Tripuri
 And the host community of West Bengal – we are happy
 All sections tied together by East Wind.

All tributaries are flowing in the same valley of Purvaiya, (in Khiangte 46-47)

The *civic picturesque*, *this unity of many identities and communities in the lush setting of hills and rivers*, is what will eventually break down. Mamang Dai opens her "Birthplace" with a lush topos of recognition, familiarity and identity: "We are the children of the rain/ of the cloud woman,/ brother to the stone and bat." She then declares:

There were no strangers
 in our valley.
 Recognition was instant
 as clan by clan we grew. (Dai, *River* 79)

The suffering of the picturesque enables the poets to highlight the key theme in Northeast politics: belonging, memory, cultural identity and the question of the foreigner. Temsula Ao meditates on "this strange place" where "people are/exiled in their own lands" (*Tell* 18). Sophia Chanu, like Ao and Dai, also discovers that with the changes in the land, people feel as though they are "anonymous strangers/foreign shore migrants" (26). Paul Lyngdoh in "My Ancestry" shifts between the civic picturesque and the ruin picturesque, from the time when "riches were plenty" in his land and "today ... strangers hurl smutty abuses at me" (32). Desmond Kharmawphalang's "The Song of U Tirot Sing" also captures some of this alienation and the new cultural categories of "stranger" and "foreigner":

To us, the bond of blood is a reminder
 of the long trek of our wandering race,

I weep the bitterness of broken births –
 Return me to my land.
 Give the grass a chance to grow again. (in Paranjape 31-32)

In Chandra Kanta Murasing's "Forest – 1987" a similar merging of the civic and ruin picturesque shift is visible. Opening with "the fragrance of flowery garlands" the poem works its way through smell and sound ("the cock's call at dawn/and the deer's bark in the dusk"). In the second section we have a rapid descent into chaos, also imagined as sound and smell:

The hen in the forest now
 Roams and clucks from noon to dusk
 The haunting *madhavi* fragrance escapes the rustle of spring,
 It is acrid with the smell of gunpowder. (ACPN 254)

In Sophia Chanu's "Brain Drain," the smog in the lush valley is from "spent gunfire" (39). In Robin Ngangom's "Arms will Flower here Too" the place where "only rhododendrons/and cherries are meant to blossom" now has flowering weaponry. As a result poets do not write about the "great waterfalls" but "of a hundred arrows" (*Time's* 51-2). Desmond Kharmawphlang's "The Dreams of Earth" opens with "this ring of high hills," "swarms of clouds" and a community in this setting: "Loving friends, all, happy team, watching the earth." And then the transformation:

I died so many deaths – dying each
 Time someone ran a flag of invasion through my forefather's good soil

For me a terrible
 Grief for this betrayed land. (*Here* 38)

Yet again picturesque nature is aligned not with prosperity or pleasure but with violence and danger, less with community than with invaders. The *civic* picturesque of harmonious community life and recognizable identities has aligned with a *ruin* picturesque of strife and death. This marks the politics of not only the NE region but also that of the picturesque.

In every example quoted here, the poet refuses to seek a new trope to describe the changed conditions. It is not that the olfactory trope of the flower is replaced with another. Rather, the trope is retained, but given a particular swerve. As suggested earlier, it is the harmony and beauty of the landscape that renders its transformation more powerful and haunting. The pastoral or wild simplicity suggested by the picturesque in these poems swerves into the unimaginably horrific, and marks the politics of the picturesque. Amid the quiet clucking of hens we have gunfire, in the sleepy hills and hamlets we have armed conflicts.

In their introduction to the anthology, the editors state this purpose of aesthetics explicitly: "the writer from the northeast ... cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness" (ACPN ix). Desmond Kharmawphlang in "Letter to a Dear Friend" is conscious of this need to be a witness, and thus describes himself as a "recorder of bitter things" (in Paranjape 31). KS Nongkynrih elsewhere also describes the poet as a "witness" ("The Writer and the Community," 2006).

As in the traditional picturesque the aesthetic here is used to mark the *transformation* of the land. Only, many of the poets use the aesthetics of suffering to emphasize the transformation of the land into something alien, wasted and cruel. Monalisa Changkija's "Of a People Unanswered" describes the transformation of the countryside:

Yes, I've seen our rice fields
 turn into factories and mills
 our green hills
 reduced to barren brown

And then the speaker's query to the leaders and to the state: "But I wonder why you remain silent/ When I say we are hungry." (ACPN 216)

Hunger is also the motif of Ngangom's "Arms will Flower Here Too." In the picturesque land meant for flowers, we now have "hunger flowering/ from bamboos in the villages" (*Time's* 51-2). In Madhubir's "Let us Leave Mother," the speaker mourns the changes in the land: cows, sheep and goats eat meat and fish instead of greens, bird songs are replaced by the "shrill sound of vultures" (Madhubir 1-2). "Home" in Sophia Chanu's poem of the same title is now a "nightmare land" where "sun-drenched valleys" and "moon-kissed rivers" now only lie in "undying wait" (Chanu 56).

In Ngangom's elegiac "Imphal," the land is now "gnarled" and seems to have taken on the form of a "beast which stalks its own death." The "hidden paths" of the jungle that once led to "heroic" deeds are now linked to "ambushes." Every aspect of the land, once loved and beautiful is now dangerous and feared (*Time's* 64-65). In his earlier "Homeland I Left" he describes "gory bodies/dragged unceremoniously/through our rice-fields" (*Words* 10-11). Mamang Dai's "Prayer Flags (2)" opens with images of snow-capped mountains and houses in the valleys. These become spaces of waiting, longing and suffering, as the refrain "come home" runs through the poem (*River* 82-83).

The aesthetic element is now marginalized because of the social and political terrors that stalk the beautiful land. Paul Lyngdoh's poem, "Domiasiat" describes a corruption of the land. Once the morning sounds were "the love-calls of the ancient thrush" and the "happy laughter of children." Lyngdoh depicts a *Concordia discors* of harmony in variety. And then the savage/d picturesque where belonging, identity and topos seem to be at odds: rather than a harmonious picturesque you have an anti-picturesque of alienation and degradation. The name of the hamlet, "Domisaiat," now "reverberates a thousand times" because they have discovered vast deposits of uranium there. Lyngdoh writes:

alien feet scramble for a foothold
 on your lucre-laden soil,
 scooping every bit of it for sale. (ACPN 146-47)

Thus the "lucre" in the soil of Domiasiat transforms it into an object of plunder rather than of beauty.

The land's transformation is also the corruption of its people. Robin Ngangom's poetry, in particular, invariably deals with this aspect. In "From the Land of the Seven Huts" Ngangom mourns the indifference of the people to

nature, and yet nature seems to forgive. Thus, although they “kill more than a hundred trees every month,” their fates remain “swathed” in “sheets of rain” (*Words* 19-20). Desmond Kharmawphlang’s “The Conquest” opens with an anthropo-morphing suggesting the unity of elements:

I never get tired of talking about my
hometown.
In summer the sky is pregnant,
swollen with unborn rain.

The beauty of the setting begins to alter when the speaker mentions the British who came with “gifts of bullets, blood-money/and religion.” Then “there came those from the sweltering plains.” And now: “You stricken land, how they love/ your teeming soil, your bruised children.” (*ACPN* 134-35) Once again the lines demonstrate a savage/d picturesque of transformation, where the catalogue is now one of suffering. Kharmawphlang’s “Letter to a Dear Friend” is a chronicle of recent developments and changes in his native land. Reporting to a person who appears to be familiar with the landscape, but now resides elsewhere, he says:

You ask me about our hills – well,
they are still there – the stones
and rivers too – they are being
pimped for tourists ...
in many places disemboweled... (in *Paranjape* 31)

This theme of iconic stones and their degeneration of iconicity also occurs in Temsula Ao’s “Epitaph,” where gravestones now “lie/stuck on an alien hillside/inhabited by untamed tribes” (Ao, *Here and There* 73). If the natural picturesque linked woman and nature the aesthetics of suffering effects a transformation in Ngangom’s “Native Land”:

And the women heavy with seed
their soft bodies mown down
like grain stalk during their lyric harvests;
if they wore wild flowers in their hair
while they waited for their men... (*ACPN* 154-55)

The images of lush/pregnant women and rich harvests are used for a very different purpose here. Ngangom locates the lushness of the women and crops as a moment in a *destructive* sequence. The “women heavy with seed” becomes a trope for the fields and their destruction too.

In a later poem, “To Pacha,” Ngangom once again images decay in terms of the landscape. The country is now “withered” and “young boys and soldiers are butchering each/other by the dozen in the hills” (Ngangom *Roots* 34-35). The withering of the land and the collapse of youth into deranged violence seem to be linked in much of Ngangom, perhaps the most overtly political of the poets

writing today. In “Prospects of a Winter Morning” Ngangom opens with “A new valley that seems/ To rise from ashes every dawn.” The old man recalls the “hills the soldiers seized from him” and the days “wrapped in leaves of childhood.” The “bittersweet bells” now leave him confused between “a school, a temple,/and a garrison” (*Roots* 85).

A fine example of the swerve of tropes is Krittibas Chakraborty’s “Northeast”:

Even in the darkness your face shines
Like a full moon,

I will never know
How long you will burn, Northeast horizon! (*ACPN* 246-47)

The shining “face” of the northeast is part of its splendour when the poem opens. By the time the poem concludes, the shine and the glow have swerved away from serving the purpose of aesthetic appeal, and now function as a symbol of a political condition: the “burning” northeast. The same trope has folded into another. Likewise Mamang Dai finds that the glorious rains of the region now have a different effect: “the footfall of soldiers is drowned and scattered” (*River* 16). In Karmawphalang’s “The Conquest” the “pregnant” sky, “swollen with unborn rain” does not generate prosperity or fertility. For, instead of the natural picturesque that ought to emerge here in the place of “wet leaves” the “stricken land with its “teeming soil” only bears “bruised children” (Karmawphalang, *Touchstone* 2). Here the gynaeological and agrarian metaphors swerve into destruction and suffering as the poem concludes.

The aesthetic of the picturesque in poetry from Northeast India maps the shift from a landscape of beauty, harmony and prosperity of both mankind and nature to one of suffering, death and decay. The shift from the natural picturesque’s *Concordia discors* of harmony and beauty to the savage/d picturesque is facilitated by the very features of the picturesque: its attempt at integration, the aesthetic of suffering and the theme of transformation. If in the conventional picturesque the humble and the low marked beauty (Andrews 1989), in NE poetry it becomes the source of decay and death. The natural picturesque becomes an anterior moment to the savage/d or ruin picturesque as both land and humankind become victims of the tragic transformation. It is only through a mapping of the two sufferings of humankind (the civic) onto the landscape (the ruin) that the poetry manages to convey the depth of the tragedy which is northeastern India. And in this mapping lies the politics of the genre’s aesthetic mode.

Pramod K. NAYAR
University of Hyderabad, India

Works Cited

- ANDREWS, Malcolm. *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989.
- AO, Temsula. *Songs that Tell*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 1988.
- _____. *Songs of Many Moods*. New Delhi: Kohima Sahitya Sabha and Har-Anand, 1995.
- _____. *Songs from Here and There*. Shillong: NEHU, 2003.
- BARRELL, John. *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- BARUAH, Sanjib. "A New Politics of Race: India and its North-east," in Geeti Sen (ed) *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-east*, Oxford University Press and India International Centre, 2006: 164-175.
- BHUYAN, BC. *Political Development of the North East*. Vol. II. New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1992.
- BOHLS, Elizabeth. *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- CARTER, Paul. *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987.
- CHANU, A Sophia. *Feelings*, Ranchi: Writers Forum, 2000.
- COPLEY, Stephen and Peter Garside. Ed. *The Politics of the Picturesque*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- DAI, Mamang. *River Poems*. Kolkata, Writers Workshop, 2004.
- _____. "North East Poetry." *Muse India* 8 (2006) <http://www.museindia.com/cissue8.asp>. 18 November 2007.
- DANIELS, Stephen and Watkins, Charles. "Picturesque Landscaping and Estate Management: Uvedale Price and Nathaniel Kent at Foxley," in Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (eds) *The Politics of the Picturesque*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994: 13-41.
- DARUWALLA, Keki. "Poetry and the Northeast: Foraging for a Destiny." *The Hindu* (Literary Review) 7 November 2004. <http://www.hindu.com/1r/2004/11/07/stories/2004110700350500.htm>. 18 November 2007.
- EAGLETON, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- IRALU, Easterine. *The Windbover Collection*, NP: Np, 2001.
- KARMAWPHALANG, Desmond. *Touchstone (U Mawshamok)*, Shillong: NP, 1987.
- _____. *Here*, Ranchi: Writers' Forum, 1992.
- KHIANGTE, Lalitluangliana. Ed. *Mizo Songs and Folk Tales*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2004.
- KIRE, Easterine. *Kelboukevira*. Calcutta: JB Lama, 1982.
- LEASK, Nigel. *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770-1840: "From an Antique Land,"* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

- LYNGDOH, Paul. *Floodgate (KA Kbyrdop)*, Shillong: Meghalaya State Co-operative Union Press, 1991.
- MADHUBIR, RK. *The Shadow of Darkness*, Imphal: Vagya, 1998.
- MARAK, Caroline. ed. *Garo Literature*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2002.
- MISRA, Udayon. *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000.
- MUKHIM, Patricia. "Where is this North-east?" in Geeti Sen (ed) *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-east*, Oxford University Press and India International Centre, 2006: 177-178.
- NAG, Sajal. *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in North-East India*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2002.
- NAYAR, Pramod K. *English Writing and India, 1600-1920: Colonizing Aesthetics*, London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- NGANGOM, Robin S. *Words and the Silence*, Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 1988.
- _____. *Time's Crossroads*, Hyderabad: Disha-Orient Longman, 1994.
- _____. *The Desire of Roots*. Cuttack: Chandrabhaga, 2006.
- NONGKYNRIH, Kynpham Sing. "Hard-edged Modernism: Contemporary Poetry in North-east India." in Geeti Sen (ed) *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-east*, Oxford University Press and India International Centre, 2006: 40-44.
- _____. "The Writer and the Community: A Case for Literary Ambidexterity." 1 March 2006. <http://india.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw/cms/cms/module/index.php?objid=6285&x=1>. 18 November 2007.
- NONGKYNRIH, Kynpham Sing and Robin S. Ngangom. Ed. *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, Shillong: NEHU, 2003.
- PARANJAPE, Makarand. Ed. *An Anthology of New Indian English Poetry*, Calcutta: Rupa, 1993.
- RAY, Romita. "The Memsahib's Brush: Anglo-Indian Women and the Art of the Picturesque, 1830-1880," in J.F. Codell and D. Sachko Macleod (eds) *Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998. 89-111.
- SATPATHY, Sumanyu. "Locating Cultures: A Semi-Academic Essay On the English Poetry of the North-East." *Muse India* 8 (2006)
<http://www.museindia.com/cissue8.asp>. 18 November 2007.
- SYIEM, Esther. *Oral Scriptings*, Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2005.