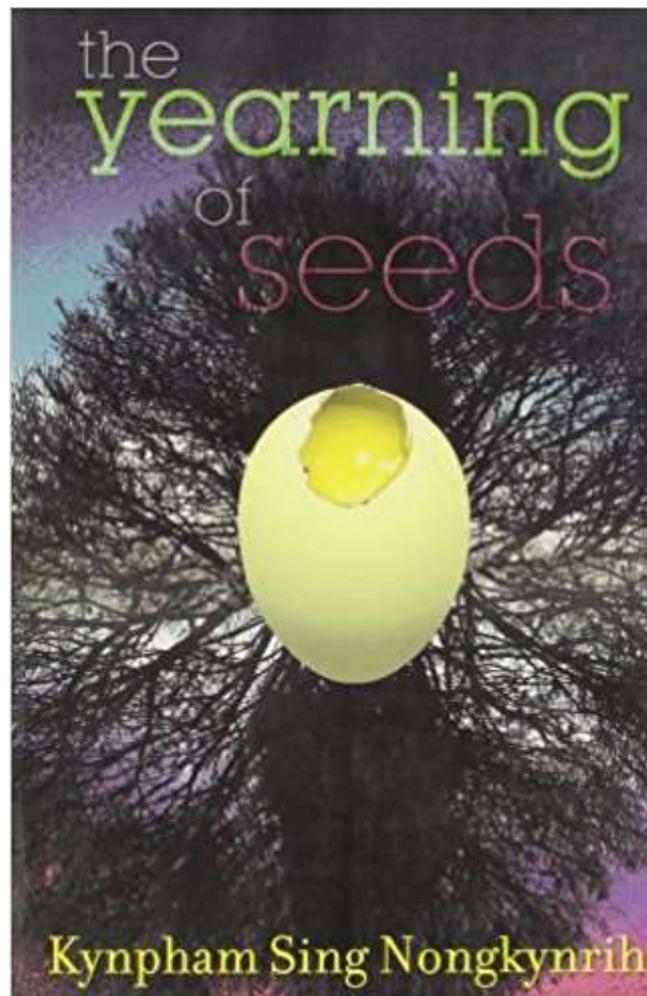


**Dark Interior:  
A Comparative Study of  
John Ashbery's *Where Shall I Wander* and  
Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *The Yearning of Seeds***

**T. Swaminathan, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar  
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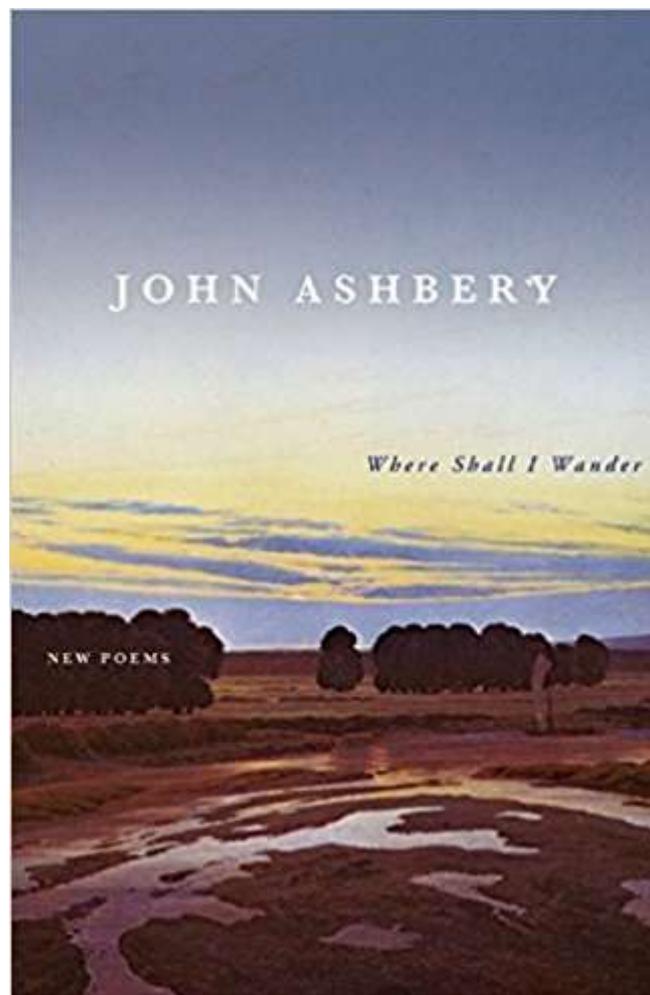
Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Yearning-Seeds-Sing-Nongkynrih-Kynpham/dp/9350290812>

**Abstract**

Modern poets write on a variety of themes in various forms and styles. Themes like Love and Nature have been touched by almost all poets. Though the poets describe all their positivity in

their different themes, there will be a dark interior in most. The age of paranoia had begun soon after the World Wars. The drastic change in cultural and political situations around the world had sown the seeds of mistrust and terror. This alarming condition is reflected by poets like Yeats, Eliot, Auden, and others. The disturbing themes - death, disaster and darkness have been the undercurrent of John Ashbery's poetry. He is a major American poet known for his experimental poetry. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is an Indian poet recognized for his multiplicity and appeal. Though these poets are different in each and every aspect, death and terror seem to prevail in both their poems. The darkness in the poems is not portrayed merely as outward, but hidden in the multitude and presented like a gray strain in the interior. This paper attempts a comparative study of the select poems from John Ashbery's *Where Shall I Wander* and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *The Yearning of Seeds*.

**Keywords:** Modern man, post-war politics, death & terror, disaster, inner darkness, John Ashbery, experimental poetry



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Where-Shall-Wander-New-Poems/dp/0060765291>

## Introduction

John Ashbery is a major American poet known for his experimental poetry. He has written more than twenty volumes of poetry. He has won many major awards including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and National Book Award. Kynpham Sing

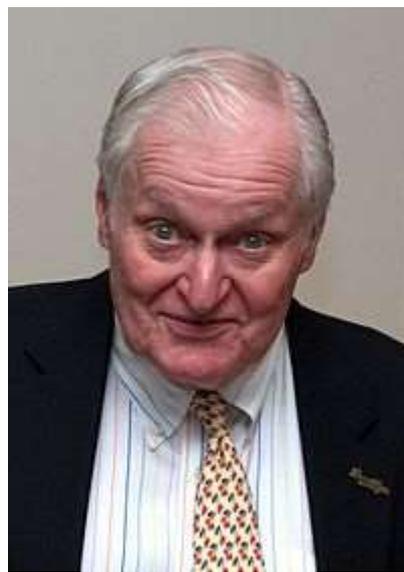
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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:6 June 2018

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Nongkynrih is an Indian poet and short fiction writer from Meghalaya. He has published two volumes of poetry in English and three in his native language, Khasi. He has awarded a Fellowship for Outstanding Artists 2000 from the Government of India. He has also received the first North-East Poetry Award in 2004 from the North-East India Poetry Council, Tripura. Some of his poems have been translated into Welsh, Swedish, and several Indian languages.

The age of paranoia had begun very soon after the World Wars. The drastic change in cultural and political situations around the world had sown the seeds of mistrust and terror. This alarming condition is reflected by poets like Yeats, Eliot, Auden, and others. John Ashbery and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih also exhibit such frightening situations very similar to these poets. Though these two poets are different in each and every aspect, death, and terror prevail in both their poems. The darkness in the poems is not portrayed as merely outward, but hidden in a multitude of things and presented like a gray strain in the interior.



John Ashbery 1927-2017

Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Ashbery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Ashbery)

### Wake-up Call

The very first poem “Ignorance of the Law is No Excuse,” from the anthology *Where Shall I Wander* begins with a warning. Ashbery states: “We were warned about spiders, and the occasional famine” (WSIW 1). Modern man is very much worried about insects and occasional famine than a great danger which awaits them. He is lost in the technological world “just by standing,/ listening to the hum of wires overhead” (WSIW 1). Only fear prevails in all, even though they hurriedly walk back, to become a pure rock crystal for their salvation. Their life style goes down to the bottom-most step where they can only lament and breathe. The poem ends with the warning -“Only beware the bears and wolves that frequent it/ and the shadow that comes when you expect dawn” (WSIW 1). Through this poem, Ashbery warns that the modern man who sinks in the technological world cannot expect real dawn.

### Warning from *The Yearning of Seeds*

Similar warning can be found in Nongkynrih’s poem “Sundori” from *The Yearning of Seeds*. The poem describes people killing each other madly, as described in Wilfred Owen’s poem “Strange

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meeting”:

Yesterday one of my people  
Killed one of your people  
And one of your people  
Killed one of my people.  
Today they have both sworn  
To kill on sight. (TYS 12)

The poet wishes to wipe out this bloody madness by the Umkhrach river’s angry summer floods. He sends a message through a “fearful night breeze” (TYS 12), which could probably be a fearful message. He pleads with the people to keep their windows open, so that the fearful message would reach all. But, modern man fails to grasp the message, the dark situation in which he lives. In this way the poet utters his warning to his readers.

### Description of the Darkness

Ashbery’s poem “Involuntary Description,” seems to be an involuntary description of the darkness. The poem begins with the description of the landscape, where Ashbery carries his worries along with him on the road. He blames that the moderners are always doubtful and vainly expect something to happen. In Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” the poet is firm on his choice and “took the one less traveled by” (223). Here the moderners need not have to choose the road like Frost, because “The road came back to get them/ just as darkness was beginning” (WSIW 16). From the poem, Ashbery cautions the readers regarding the arrival of the darkness, which is unavoidable in the current scenario.



Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

Nongkynrih’s poem “The Fungus” also deals with darkness. It clearly states the theme of the present study. The poem begins like this:

Where I live  
it is cold and dark inside.  
....  
So dark, you never know

its hour. (TYS 81)

In general, fungus symbolizes the occurrence of a situation which will be unexpected and has a long lasting effect that is bizarre and unimaginable. It is a metaphor for decay or rottenness. The poet expresses his interior darkness as “I keep like fungus/ to this cold and dark interior/ and in everything I do” (TYS 81).

### **Insecure Environment**

The opening lines of Ashbery’s “And Counting” remind of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” Ashbery describes how the modern man builds his villa in a grand style which can be compared to Kubla Khan’s pleasure-dome, “Where Alph, the sacred river, ran/ Through caverns measureless to man/ Down to the sunless sea” (51). The modern man is always in a dangerous environment. He has neither firm roots in the soil nor any connection to the sky. The hanging situation of the modern man is clearly portrayed in this line: “The Villa sat on a cone of volcanic rock high above a waveless sea that stretched away to a cloudless horizon” (WSIW 26). The grand picture of the villa is not a mere description, but an unsafe environment in which modern man is subjected to live.

Nongkynrih’s poem “Waking Sounds,” depicts an alarming situation similar to Ashbery’s poem “And Counting.” The rise of dawn is a wonderful beginning of the day, but the poet is awakened at the breaking of dawn by the deafening bursts of gun fire. In this terror-filled dawn, the poet goes for a casual walk and enjoys the beauty of hills. Thus the poet is able to combine the beauty of the hills with the horror created by gunshots which can be seen through the following lines:

How chaste were the hills! How strangely,  
divinely lovely that morning when guns  
were dispensing panic and lusting bullets  
bent on seeking blood. (TYS 27)

The poet highlights a list of events that occurred in Shillong. He records the worsening political situation, and condemns the new Chief Minister as a prime porker and an old one as fox. Here the fox mocks the people that the future is up in the air and whatever is going to happen is going to happen. The intruders take the responsibility of the peacekeepers. The marauders make fake encounter and the slain marauder is an innocent taxi driver. The above description may be shocking to the reader but the poet simply states: “What had seemed so divine was actually/ a flamboyant funeral spectacle” (TYS 28).

### **Portrayal of the People**

In the poem “Interesting People of Newfoundland,” Ashbery records the life of interesting people like Larry, a man who makes a fool of himself for money, and a Russian who calls himself a Grand Duke; Doc Hanks is a real good surgeon, who can perform surgery even in half drunk stupor, and a blind man, who produces spectral sounds on a musical saw. Newfoundland is a place where the people are fun-loving and funny to the core. The poet relishes the moments in Walsh, where he enjoys a ride to the wood like Robert Frost in “Stopping by the Woods in a Snowy Evening.” Frost is stopped by the beauty and reminded of his duty to move on, whereas Ashbery is stopped by some bog and returns home for a nap.

... We took long rides  
into the countryside, but were always stopped by some bog or other.

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Then it was time to return home, which was OK with everybody,  
each of them having discovered he or she could use a little shuteye.  
(WSIW 28)

The poet admires at the complete beauty of Newfoundland and enjoys everything, becoming “a part of all that happened there, the evil and the good,/ and all the shades in between” (WSIW 29). In the last few lines, the poet brings an end to the enjoyment stating “It was too much of a good thing/ but at least it’s over now” (WSIW 29). The poet expresses that, even for the fun-filled people in Newfoundland, their ecstasy is exhausted. All their delight is merely a display, “It’s coming to a theater near you” (WSIW 29). Ashbery warns that modern man can find his joy only in his past memories like watching a play in the theatre and cannot expect it in real life.

Nongkynrih’s “Funeral Speech” is in contrast to Ashbery’s “Interesting People of Newfoundland,” where Ashbery makes fun of Newfoundlanders, while Nongkynrih makes fun of a dead man. Nongkynrih imagines a situation of delivering a funeral speech to a dead person called Robin. The epigraph given in the poem is a Latin proverb which states, “Say nothing but good of the dead”. From this, it is clear that the poet is going to say good things about the dead man. The poet gives all praises to the dead man in a sarcastic way, “his medical report said/ there was no more blood in his alcohol” (TYS 111). In the end, the poet recoils in horror and leaves the funeral in haste.

### **Political Status**

Ashbery’s poem “Wolf Ridge” is about the political situation where “the caucus raised its din” (WSIW 36) referring to the politicians who are known for their meaningless utterances. The poet is warned about knowing witty words of the politicians by his plastic fish named Sturgeon. He views the invisible damages done to the world. He wants to change the damages, but could not find the people as who get lost in playing hide-and-seek. He states: “They wanted a bad dinner,/ and at this time a bad dinner was late” (WSIW 36). The politicians have destroyed the cultural and social identity of the people and they are still hungry to exploit the natural resources. From the poem, one can infer that politicians are not capable of resolving any problems, but only good to raise empty noises.

Nongkynrih’s “Play of the Absurd,” may seem to talk about Sisyphus. But it really deals with the absurdity of war caused by the rulers. The poet highlights the tragic incident that occurred in the Barents Sea. The loss of hundreds of men’s lives in the Russian submarine ‘Kursk’ is referred by the poet as “a derelict submarine tomb”(TYS 46). One nation wages war with another nation with the motto:

‘To dream the impossible dream,  
to fight the unbeatable foe,  
to bear with unbearable sorrow,  
to run where the brave dare not go...’ (TYS 46)

The poet again recollects the death of the sailors in the submarine and Chechen-Russian conflict which has led to Chechen war. He wonders how the origin and the reason behind every war is always mysterious. The poet expresses “The truth is, a wise man said, ‘mysterious,/ elusive, always to be conquered’” (TYS 47). He confirms that Albert Camus has believed Sisyphus is happy for his attempt and it satisfies him. Likewise the Russian soldiers, Putin, and the Khasi rebels are all happy in their wars. The poem ends with a fearful note: “Tombstones shall spread the tentacles of

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death/ and succeeding generations shall chronicle/ another insane history” (TYS 48). Both Ashbery’s “Wolf Ridge,” and Nongkynrih’s “Play of the Absurd” bring out the dark side of politics.

### **Lack of Enthusiasm**

Ashbery’s poem “More Feedback,” presents the contemporary man’s failure in enjoying the ordinary things in life. It also describes the oscillation of the human mind. Their absurdity reaches to the highest level, but their work which keeps them up till late night gives no joy nor sorrow. The life is hectic to them. Even the daily living is fear-filled with the blood of fate and battles. This is presented as “The pure joy of daily living became impacted/ with the blood of fate and battles” (WSIW 46). All that the people can do is wait which is more crucial than the end. “We could always wait a little. Indeed,/ we are waiting now. That’s what happens” (WSIW 46). The modern man never hopes to turn back to gain inspiration from the past, nor does he get any upliftment in the present. He is fated to wait and has to wait forever.

Nongkynrih’s poem “Iraq,” recollects the fear and death in the war situation. The poet wonders whether the great walls will protect the people as the “barbarians carry out their butchery from the sky” (TYS 35). He mentions that the great walls will not protect the people from missiles and bombs dropping from the sky. The situation turns worse when the people “make invaders/ their protectors” (TYS 35). Their story continues to rise from their wounded breast like bees daily stinging themselves to death. In a shocking mood, the poet exclaims, “This is freedom! Terrifying/ freedom”(TYS 35). The poem ends with the poet recollecting the mass murder by car bombs. The modern man lacks enthusiasm in his life, and not aware of the danger that conquers them. These ideas are reflected in Ashbery’s “More Feedback” and Nongkynrih’s poem “Iraq.”

### **Depiction of Death**

In the poem “Novelty Love Trot,” Ashbery feels that he has not attained permanent consolation from reading books and listening to music. As for religion, he finds all Americans are inspired towards hell rather than heaven. Ashbery states:

As for religion, it’s about going to hell,  
isn’t it? I read that 30 percent of Americans believed in hell,  
though only one percent thinks they’ll end up there,  
which says a lot about us, and about the other religions.  
Nobody believes in heaven. Hell is what gets them fired up. (WSIW 50)

But the poet is the only American, who believes in going to heaven. At last he finds heaven in the form of nature in this world. Even then he finds himself somewhere else, feels dejected and isolated. He is intending to get back to his composition for his peace of mind, but he can think only of an elegy.

Nongkynrih’s poem “Requiem,” is a mourning of the death of a young girl. The poem is effective in portraying the sorrow and the mourning situation. The poet floats his moaning into the still autumn night and brings out his grief. Later the poet raises the question, “What was wrong with Meri?” (TYS 50) The poet does not describe the cause of death. He simply portrays the funeral. The poem ends with a note, “They were happy she had gone so peacefully” (TYS 51). But it is a comfort offered by eschatologists. In the middle of the poem there is a line stating “No doctor came...” (TYS 50), which make the readers to understand the reason for the young girl’s death. Though Ashbery’s “Novelty Love Trot,” and Nongkynrih’s poem “Requiem,” are about death, they really mention the death of spiritual and moral values in people’s lives.

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## Conclusion

One can find in the above discussed poems of John Ashbery and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, there is an undercurrent of death and terror prevailing over all other major themes. This dark theme can be seen in the other poems of the selected anthologies too. In Ashbery's *Where Shall I Wander*, poems like "O Fortuna," "Coma Berenices," "The Weather, for Example," "Lost Footage," "The Template," "From China to Peru," "The Snow Stained Petals Aren't Pretty Any More," "Counterpane," and Nongkynrih's *The Yearning of Seeds*, poems like "When the Prime Minister Visits Shillong the Bamboos Watch in Silence," "Forebodings," "Winter Song," "The Lament of Riti," "The invitation," "Killers Instincts," "Death Bell," also narrate the similar theme of the present study. There is a strain of darkness found which is identical in these two poets. Ashbery's darkness is really a diluted darkness, diluted to gray as he brings anything and everything in his poems like a postmodern poet. Nongkynrih's darkness is the core of the darkness, where his wrath over the political, social and environmental conditions is conspicuous. Both poets exhibit a warning to their readers about dangerous themes - death, disaster, and darkness.

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