

# The NEHU Journal

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Special Issue on Literature

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# *The NEHU Journal*

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# *The NEHU Journal*

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NEHU

## The Writer and the Community: A Case for Literary Ambidexterity

Literary ambidexterity is essentially a discourse on the virtues of knowing two languages and writing well in both. In a vast and complex country like India, these languages would mean one's mother tongue and the language of interaction. In my case, they would mean Khasi, the language of my tribe, and English.

Heard and spoken since birth, the mother tongue is of fundamental importance to creative literature. This also relates to the nature of creative writing itself and the need for communication.

As a practitioner of poetry, I believe in a poet who is a witness, one with the seeing eye, a retentive memory and the innate instinct to catch the soul of his generation. My own poetry is deeply rooted and I see my role as a poet as that of a chronicler of subjective realities. I have talked, in my poems, of leaders lording "like the wind" and fickle "like Hindi film stars changing dresses in a song." I have talked of my impoverished land, and with sardonic humour, of real people who are at once individuals and types. I have tried to capture the changing times, aspects of my culture and issues on the fringe.

But chronicling realities is not an end in itself. Pablo Neruda believes that a poet should always live close to his people: "I have gone into practically every corner of Chile, scattering my poetry like seed among the people of my country." Neruda seems to point up the poet's need to communicate with his people. If the foundation of a poet's art rests on his people's life and character, then what

better audience is there than his own people? And if the audience is his own people, then what better language is there to communicate with them than his mother tongue?

I too wish to address my people directly. I would like to tell them of the colossal threat to our land posed by the ceaseless flood of humanity and the growing aggressiveness of migrants. I would like to speak to them of the perils of terrorism and the greater peril of lawmen turning terrorists. I would like to tell them of the absurdity of trying to deny their own roots and the anarchy that follows in forgetting their own identity. I would like to talk of our great festivals, of Weiking, and the vitality of their part in our social life:

Weiking! Weiking!

Spring is back, begin your whirling motions  
and let our life live on.

.....  
Whirl on, whirl on,

what if some of us  
sneer at us for fools?

We are not here to pay obeisance  
to the gods for a plentiful harvest  
(do we ever have a harvest now?)

whirl on, whirl on to a time  
when women stood by their men  
and men were tigers guarding  
their homes with jealous swords.

(‘Weiking’: self-composed)

But most of all I would like to remind my people, as a poet raconteur, of the virtues of their ancestors’ ways and the necessity of perpetuating them. I would like to talk of our myths and legends and let those, who will, cull lessons from them:

Faraway  
from the year dot

Ren, the Nongjri fisherman,  
Ren, the beloved of a river nymph  
Ren, who loved so madly  
    who left his mother and his home  
    to live in magic depths  
also left a message:

“Mother,” he had said,  
“listen to the river,  
as long as it roars  
you will know that I live”.

(‘Ren’: self-composed)

Symbolically, Ren is asking later generations to listen to the sound of his people’s life. But the sound of a people’s life and their ways can be voiced only through the mother tongue. The mother tongue is the sound of life itself, and in this sense, writing in it would mean for me helping the sound of my people’s life grow stronger.

Czeslaw Milosz and his poem “My Faithful Mother Tongue” have only strengthened this conviction. But the shocking reality that Milosz speaks of his mother tongue as “a tongue of the debased, / of the unreasonable, hating themselves” is unfortunately true of the Khasi language as well. As Milosz again puts it, “perhaps after all it’s I who must try to save you [mother tongue].”

It is in trying to do this, that literary ambidexterity can play a critical role. It is neither desirable nor profitable to keep one’s own writings confined to one’s own language or the language of interaction.

A native author’s work with any literary merit must be brought to the notice of other literatures. As Neruda suggests, it does not matter if one’s poems have sunken their roots deep into one’s native soil; it does not matter if they are born of indigenous wind and rain or have emerged from a localized landscape. If they are worth their salt they must “come out of that landscape... to

roam, to go singing through the world....”

To do this the author must be able to translate his own work into the language of interaction. But if he is not ambidextrous in this sense, then his work must risk lurking forever in the dark recesses of his own small world.

On the other hand, if he writes only in the language of interaction, he must be able to translate his work into his own mother tongue or risk being cut off forever from the heart and mind of his own people.

**Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih**  
**Associate Editor**

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## Windsong in March

EASTERINE IRALU

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Out of his window Rhys could see the wind bending down branches of trees and scattering leaves on the ground below before it released the trees only to be infused by a renewed energy that sent it through the hapless trees breaking off boughs in its path and tearing away petals that it unceremoniously strewed on its wanton way. He double bolted the windows and reached out a hand to draw the curtains against the darkening skies but he withdrew as the wind came up at the closed window and beat on it like a child asking to be admitted inside the room. Outside, the sound of the wind in the pine trees was relentless – a wild, high-pitched howl that came and went and came back again to break against the walls of the house in an eerie silence that did not last long before the howling began in the heart of the trees once more. A few people could abide to live in the house in the month of March. The house was more a mansion than a house, set magnificently as it was in a clearing in the woods of Nongthymmai, Upper Shillong. Pine trees so cleverly concealed it from view that a trekker would see it only when he was almost upon it and the sight would make him step backward to rub his eyes to confirm that the picture of the grand old English house and its sprawling grounds was no mirage. In early Spring, the short showers leave the lawns covered with a variety of alpine flowers in shades of white, deep violet and baby blue. A frail coloured

sunshine yellow breaks through the grass on long slender stalks.

In February, his mother had packed her bags and left for their town house, all the while pleading with Rhys to come away too: "You must be half-mad Rhys, to stay on in this house, and on your own too! I tell you no one's going to come up here in March, not the milkman, no not even the caretaker." But Rhys was a grown man now, in fact, he was more than grown at forty-four and would have his way. He didn't mind the occasional creaking noises that the house made or the footsteps that echoed down the hallway on quiet nights when there was no moon. The sounds had grown on him and become as familiar as the sounds that pass between old friends — the sighs and the murmurs of contentment that surface between words and comfortable silences. On some evenings such as these Rhys caught himself listening for a footfall — soft, light and unlike the others — a shy footfall propelling an infinitely dear person toward him. How many years had he waited for the sound of that lightly stepping foot that never came. Every March he waited and waited unwilling to leave the house in case she should choose that particular month to come to him.

As he drew the curtains at the window, darkness was setting into the woods beyond and the silhouettes of the trees stood out starkly in the purple haze of a sky from which the sun had fled long since. Somewhere, on a branch of an ancient pine a lone owl hooted into the dark. Rhys turned from the window to switch on the lights in his part of the house. His movements were easy and unhurried. He had grown to love the solitude of the house that people shied away from. Built by his great grandfather in 1889, it first became home for Angharad, the bride who had braved the 3-month long journey by ship from London to Calcutta. Lovely Angharad who came to stay, for she loved these low hills that rose uniformly out of the valley. She loved the trees, gnarled in places, that held the wind and then let it go suddenly, howling as it went. And she loved the wind that chased the leaves up her garden path and tossed back her hair as she ran out to catch it by armfuls when it swept down

the hill again. In later years they spoke of her as the girl who loved the wind. Angharad, “much loved”, for that was what her name meant in the Welsh tongue, had left behind as legacy, her unquenchable love for these hills upon which the wind grew, to generations of grandchildren and great grandsons.

“It’s a Wuthering Heights of a house!” cried Kyra when she first saw the house. And when the wind came up chasing leaves up the garden path she ran into the wind, happy as a child letting it muss up her waves of black hair not caring that it was catching at the edges of her wide orange skirt and swirling it round so that she looked like a wind fairy, a yellow and orange wind child. Rhys, quietly watching her from his place on the porch, felt such love for her gushing into him, a whirlwind of love surging up and flooding him. “Come and live in it then, seeing as you like it so much” said Rhys to the young woman. She turned around, her eyes still holding the joy she had drawn from the wind, and asked, “Are you serious Rhys?” Rhys nodded yes and in the next moment he was at her side whispering fiercely into her hair, “Kyra, Kyra, you’ve stirred something deep inside me today – I’ve not felt like this before – such love for anyone, come away Kyra, can’t you see, dearest, this house is simply waiting for you to mistress it?” Even as he said it he saw the alarm that rushed into her eyes to replace the laughter of a few moments ago.

“Rhys, you can’t mean that – I’m taking my vows next week, or had you forgotten? Oh Rhys I thought you were my friend.”

“I am, Kyra, I am but I feel differently too today. Seeing you run into the wind like you did made me realize that you fit in so well here, like a, like a second Angharad. Won’t you reconsider? Kyra, this is a clumsy way of putting a proposal together but time is running out on me. Kyra, dearest, it’s not the house or anything else, I love you I know I do, won’t you marry me?”

“Please stop saying things like that Rhys, you quite terrify me this afternoon.”

“I’m terrified too, terrified of losing you and I mean all that I’m saying.”

“No Rhys, can’t you see I can never marry you or any other man? Oh Rhys I want to be good, I want to be faithful to God, don’t go on anymore.”

“All right Kyra, but I’ll be here waiting for you if you should change your mind someday.”

“I won’t Rhys.”

A month later Rhys found the letter in the mailbox.

“Tonight my dearest Rhys, my heart, the moon is full and rests tranquilly upon the white night clouds – it spreads its misty light over the flowers and gardens below – it’s a night made for love, for declarations of undying love – a night for gathering into arms and hearts the love that some rare blest mortals find once in a lifetime where chance seems to play a part but really the “chance meeting” is not chance at all, it is part of some great destiny, some cosmic plan – a cosmic blueprint for love if you will, and we two are caught up in its soulling, melding dance, your thoughts and my dreams travelling through each other – like waters of the ocean running together and into one another. Romeo and Juliet, Catherine and Heathcliff – were they not more than lovers? Were they not love personified, embodied, immortalized and canonized as they went beyond the darkness of death, victors over death by the sheer power and virtue of their love? And you and I are emissaries of just such love, a death-challenging love.

Tonight the moon vies with me but can you see my heart is mightier, my love is brighter than the moon’s white light that bathes the earth over and I am still not finished with telling you how much I love you. An eternity of intensity. I wonder could a heart burst unable to contain all the love it receives? Mine almost feels it could and if it should, don’t bury it, keeper of my heart, shoot it across the skies and I shall fill it length from length, breadth to breadth, inch by

inch with a canopy of love for you, for you. Tonight I place for safe keeping my heart, no more reluctant, no more mine into your waiting hands and turn away heavy as dross back to my God. Jacob for Rachel waited half of half a lifetime and I have spent just such a time looking for you – yet forgive and understand tonight on this crude altar as I break our hearts together it is because my slow faith builds to believe that those who let go are given back happiness beyond believing.

You are fire, born of fire, all consuming, all destroying – I am wind, a maenad March wind bringing trees to their knees and whipping up the skies – FIRE and WIND - one flames the other – I am born again from fire renewed by the flames that leap and you are energized by me finding new life when I pass over you rekindling your embers into tongues and arches and balls of fire till we dance to the death destroying one another for we cannot help our natures – while the True One, unwilling to bind me to Him by bonds of wind or fire will me to come to Him of myself, to the unchanging rock rooted in forgiveness and you, having known now how I feel can you understand that in turning away from loving you to loving Him I am performing a tremendous act of will – an immense turning against my very self, life-denying, death-defying act of will? I hope I can make true to you as nothing else I do ever can that there is a greater love than earthly loves, a greater life beyond where all the questions you have ever asked will find answers that hold as sure as the rocks beneath.”

Fifteen years on the letter still lay where Rhys had carefully kept it in a bottom drawer of his writing desk. The truth that Kyra loved him made him incredibly happy. But in the early years he had raged against the God he felt had stolen from him what he had always thought was his – her allegiance. It was followed by days of walking the deserted hills in a frenzy of soul searching and long nights of coming to terms with the knowledge that Kyra had understood all these years, if only in part. Now he was no more unhappy as he had been at first – the desolation that gripped his

soul at her loss was gone because he had since learnt that he had never lost her, not now nor in the beyond where they would never be apart. But tonight he was unusually restless, his mind resistant to the impulse to surrender to the magic of the wind-suffused night. It was almost as if he were waiting for something to happen.

After a lull, the wind began to rise, racing round the house, tapping at windows and hurling itself insistently at the door. Rhys heard his name whispered on the trees and whistled down the hall and then very softly called at the window. "Kyra!" he sprang up out of his chair "that's your voice, Kyra, I would know it anywhere." He ran to the door and flung it open but there was no one there. "Kyra!" he shouted out at the darkness, "Come home, Kyra, come home love, please," he pleaded by the open door. The wind did not stir. Out of the night came the call again, soft as a child's voice and the wind whistled it round the house, round the yard and into the trees and away down the valley. "No!" cried Rhys, "don't go away Kyra, I can't bear it!"

"Rhys —" called the voice coming back up the garden path to the house. Rhys ran out of the house shouting Kyra's name, running as Angharad had run so many years before – he ran wildly into the wind and it caught him up into itself releasing fold upon fold of wind that swathed him as a babe is swathed in blankets that are cloud soft; the clouds of wind bore him up.

It was March again – a peach-blossom fragranted free March when the young man pointed out to his companion the first star rising above the woods. "Hush" he said, "We'll see them soon." In the distance an owl hooted. The wind grew, picking up speed and strength as it rose higher and circled the trees singing its high pitched song. When it reached a crescendo, the young man whispered excitedly "Look, its them, Kyra and Rhys!" The girl looked long and hard at the two figures racing past in mid-air or rather, mid-wind, holding hands. "Surely that's Anghrad and her husband." "No its Kyra and Rhys" repeated the young man emphatically. "You don't mean Sister Kyra?" asked the girl. "I

sure do, but you know something? She always, always loved Rhys and Rhys, her." "Maybe that's why he never married."

"Of course, why else? Do You know my mother says, those who see Kyra and Rhys will be blest with a happy marriage?"

The girl did not say anything but she looked down at the ring on her left hand and smiled.

### NOTES ON THE TRANSLATORS

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*Bonomali Goswami retired as the Publication Officer, NEHU, Shillong. He has to his credit two novels and many short stories written in English. He is a recipient of a BBC award for his stories.*

*Dr. Margaret Zama teaches English at Mizoram University, Aizawl. She has translated two novels written in Mizo into English for Katha.*

*Liza Das teaches English at IIT, Guwahati and is a translator.*

*Robin S. Ngangom is a poet and translator. He teaches English at NEHU, Shillong.*

## Book Review

*Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* edited by **Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih** and **Robin S. Ngangom**, NEHU Publications, Shillong, 2003, pp.270 + xii, Rs. 230/- .

Undoubtedly it is poetry that unites us. It is the poets who will *not* keep us away from one another, who will not separate us. This is the strongest feeling one gets when one reads these poems from the very different regions of the Northeast of our country.

History and time become the subsequent strengths of these poems, although these are not immediately noticeable in the lines of many poets. It is strange that a poet from Mizoram might be speaking of the same values as a poet from Assam or Manipur; the humane intensity of the poems remains a matter of understanding and ultimate celebrations:

One by one we'll recover  
the ornaments of grace.

In a number of poems one is touched by the poet's treatment of the local and the personal, that moves toward an involvement in the collective longing for renewal and the search for a better world.

I have seen several times  
the sighing hand of his  
among countless hands.

It was Robert Frost who said once that politics deals with grievances, poetry with grief. I do feel that it is important for us to have this anthology at this time, now when a lot of turmoil and violence has shaken the peaceful air of the Northeast. The poems help us see that devotion and anger, hunger and passion, desire and loyalty are not supportive of each other, but lift our minds.

for managing to love  
 an object of scorn,  
 although  
 they place around my neck  
 a garland of threats.

These poems have a universal appeal that cannot be denied. Their reach is more to sympathy than to rightness, and more to compassion than to belief. But from the poetry of these peoples, of different cultures, the miseries of contemporary dilemmas are apparent. I felt both pleasure and pain in reading the poems; they pointed out to me what all good poetry in the world is about, irrespective of where they are written, in their insistence that to expect justice out of a long history is impossible to attain. They certainly convey, in spite of our differences, our commonality and mutuality.

This is a remarkable anthology; there is much hope, and considerable faith in these seemingly simple lines that come from places where

the haunting *madhavi* escapes the rustle of spring,  
 acrid with the smell of gunpowder.

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*Translating Nations*, edited by **Prem Poddar**, Aarhus University Press, Aarhus, 2000, 269p.

The notions of nation and nationalism have engaged the minds of social scientists for over two centuries now and yet they seem as elusive as they were in the beginning. Scholars from various

disciplines have come together to come to grips with these notions at different times but more vigorously during the last fifty years or so. No other notions have perhaps sustained the academic interest for so long and across the disciplinary boundaries. There are lull periods in the history of these notions but there never has been a total cease. With the publication of the book under review it is clear that young scholars in the field of literature have taken these notions in a big way though there is no dearth of senior, and indeed very influential, writers from literature in this field. Further some of the most exciting theories and debates related to these notions have been seen in the post-colonial literature. One of them is about their future, which has been a matter of much speculation by both anthropologists and literateurs.

*Translating Nations* is one of the latest works in this field. It includes ten articles, including the introductory one by the editor. The book is a collection of different voices on the nation but spoken in similar language, or made similar by the editor's translating! The vocabulary of the nation that has been built up over the years is abundantly distributed over the various chapters; often making the authors appear interchangeable. This is a serious problem in any translation of culture, whether it is a cultural idiom or a cultural symbol. This well justifies the focus of this book which deals with the problems of representing nations by translated texts for they are not only translated but are often transformed.

One of the current themes in social sciences in many parts of the world is violence. The study of violence is intimately connected with the field of human rights studies, which is also a growing field today. This theme has not escaped the attention of the contributors to this volume and they have been able to touch areas that a social scientist normally cannot reach due to her/his obsession with facts and evidences. In fact, the violent aspect of the nation is one of the most important, if not the most important, themes of this book, as evident from the introductory chapter itself.

There is no dearth of dilemmas in the book, often lurking behind innocuous concepts. The authors, including most prominently the editor himself, show a strain between nationalism and trans-nationalism. While they articulate various identities, they show their own ambivalence about it. Nationalism seems to indicate personal security but intellectual insecurity whereas trans-nationalism gives intellectual security but personal insecurity. There is some kind of craving in this book for both, for one can easily blend both, harbouring one inside and the other outside. In short, this book depicts what most of us intellectuals truly are. It is a naked form of ours that many of us might not have seen. It is certainly worth seeing in black and white for our own benefit.

*T.B. Subba, a Professor of Anthropology, NEHU. He is the Editor of The NEHU Journal.*

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***Humanities and Pedagogy : Teaching of Humanities Today*** edited by **K.C. Baral**, Pencraft International; New Delhi, 2002 price Rs.100/-; PP 159.

Humanities and Pedagogy Teaching of Humanities Today attempts at a constructionist's viewpoint on the teaching of humanities today, particularly in the Indian context with its association of inter-disciplinary (post modern?) concepts. The essays holistically brought together are part of an international seminar held in Shillong under the auspices of the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages.

The essays are structured on two largely defined points or categories, one is the need for modern or post-modern dialectics cutting across disciplinary barriers and the other attacks the very need and basis of such a *diktat*. For example J.C. Mahanti's essay: "Literature as a Discipline of Thought: the Why of Literary

Pedagogy” demythicises the need for “the new critical, structuralist, post-structuralist, post-colonial nationalist, post-modern Marxist and Feminist...” modes of pedagogy pleading on the other hand for the innate good sense of literature with “teachers who proceed from their experience of life and literature...”

Similarly S. Nagarajan’s critique restores the Keatsian sense of ‘negative capability’, which is the intrinsic logic of a text. He contends that this is the spirit or ‘approach’ to the study of literature. However Nigel Joseph’s “The Idea of ‘Truth’ in the Humanities” is a radicalisation of the teaching of humanities; “A greater openness, within each humanities’ discipline, to developments in the other humanities as well as to those in the social and natural sciences”. The cornerstone of today’s pedagogy as one might put it is the “opening out of disciplines”. Nigel Joseph’s exegesis refreshingly avoids jargon and clichés to speak for a humanistic yet inter-disciplinary approach to the study of humanities. Cross-cultural some might call it yet Joseph’s metabolism is shorn of any jargon-hype or the present polemics of post modernism.

This then evinces that the essays hinge on an internal dialectic of ‘truth’ on the one hand and the sophism of modern thinking and intellectual trends on the other. By highlighting an inter-disciplinary yet pragmatic rationale Joseph does not deliberate any idiom or an arid Waste Land. His is “a plea for cultural rapprochement ...a genuine eclecticism.” The cross-cultural hypothesis is indeed very much present in the essays, the ‘Indian’, reading of an American or English text. That is why perhaps as A.V. Ashok in “English in India Today: Discipline, Post-discipline and Indiscipline” asseverates (almost triumphantly one senses) there is today the prevalence of English Literature “deconstructors”. So we have the departments of English Studies and not necessarily that of English Literature. The pedagogy borders on this kind of subversivism. This also is perhaps a heresy: a decolonising of literature (i.e. English Literature) and thought. English studies in India today remain largely disturbed as a result of such a refrain: a post-modern clique has attempted some kind of an iconoclasm, or a transcendence of certain verities.

The language literature / epistemological connection is Mohan Ramanan's answer to literary problematics. On the one hand there are the advocators of the *bhasa* primacy as the dominant cultural synergy and on the other there are at times the effete-ness of English teaching. What should the teachers of English do in such a crisis caught as they are in troubled tunes or in that of a post-modern indiscipline, its wave of antipathy attacking the very citadels of a cherished tradition? Mohan Ramanan's "English Agonistes, Reflection on English in India" debates with fortitude on the middle path, 'the humanist centric vision of teaching and learning. Once again this to my thinking is an invitation to cross-culturalism to invade the territories of our higher education in the humanities disciplines.

There is thus "modernism's epistemological failure" as Glenn Bowman argues in the last essay of the book: "Constituting the Space of Identification in Anthropological Discourse". The epistemic or knowledge processes are caught in this tangle between theoretic devices and the need to synergise, the need to synthesize. This is the basic problematic, which the book articulates in attempting to revisit dichotomously the epistemic domains of literature, philosophy and culture. M. M. Agrawal's "Education as a Cultural Process" speaks critically of a "cultural alienation of education". Has education served its purpose of cultural assimilation or has it led to the growth of more alienation? This is the ontological question here. The essay is a nostalgic reflection on getting 'education back to where it belongs'. K.C. Baral's "Critical Theory and Pedagogy" applies certain critical precepts to the author/text/reader polemics. Literature is applied criticism, which seems to go against the Arnoldian standpoint of criticism.

The essays/papers are interrogative in nature asking some very fundamental questions as to the need of addressing the teaching of the humanities with discourses or subtexts. However pedagogy is some kind of a given assumption, most of the essays fail to take into account the cognisable reality or the 'why' of pedagogy: the teaching methodologies as it were.

Today the scenario has witnessed a virtual expansion of the classroom; such ramifications have been due to the influence of the media and technology. In this cultural context the essays of D. Venkat Rao and Bernard Sharrat capture this new technological revolution and ambience; applying it to the practices of teaching / learning. D. Venkat Rao in his "Critical Pedagogy and Global Networks, Re-turning English Today" argues that "Digitalacy is literacy...in digital media;" a seminal statement. Sharrat in his essay "Teaching, Multimedia and the Internet" delightfully countenances the argument for a virtual classroom. On-line learning is self-learning. The essay borders on Distance Education aspects of pedagogy.

The book collectively provides not only ample food for thought on dialogic discourses but is a daunting intellectual exercise in the need for a re-defined pedagogy mostly shorn of exhibitionism or vapid writing which is clichéd. The articles are insightful, evolving cultural contexts or broad frameworks to take us into the embattled areas of knowledge /information dichotomies.

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## NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

1. All contributions should be sent in electronic form as well as hard copy printed on A4 size paper in double space and with adequate margin on the left side. Notes and references should be numbered in Arabic numerals, with details provided as endnotes. The title of the paper, the author's name and address should be typed on a separate cover-sheet. Telephone & fax numbers, e-mail ID's and **a brief biographical sketch** should be provided.
2. Non-English words should be italicised or underlined. Spelling should be British. Quotations should be reduced to a minimum and where used should be put under double inverted commas or if necessary indented. Quotations of more than 50 words from published or copyright sources should have the permission of the author/publisher enclosed with the manuscript.
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