

The NEHU Journal

Special Issue on Literature

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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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Innocence Wears Another Look

VANNEIHTLUANGA

Vanneihluanga (b. 1957) is a businessman and social worker. He writes stories and plays and occasionally critical essays. His stories have received wide acclaim for their social criticism and religious message. The present story is translated from the Mizo by Dr. Margaret Zama.

Pu Sena was a prominent pillar of his community and had enjoyed a social standing that few could achieve. The locals looked up to him for advice and counsel and felt reassured by his mere presence. One had only to consider the way he lived and contributed to both society and the church, besides cultivating a circle of acquaintances, to measure the extent of his influence. Besides this, he was an accomplished sportsman who particularly enjoyed Mizo sports such as hunting and fishing. It was a matter of great pride that he could bring home a slain elk with its impressive antlers blatantly displayed from the back of his Government gypsy allotted to him for official use. There did not seem anything wrong in this occasional petty misuse of government resource in a system crammed with officials engaged routinely in corrupt practices. The locals too justified fully such minor lapses in the light of the fact that Pu Sena was a righteous man, not corrupt like the others.

His wife bore Pu Sena another son in his later years. Needless to say, the boy was pampered and loved by the family, and addressed endearingly as "Mazama". By age twelve, Mazama had made a mark for himself at school as a good and smart boy. Unlike the other children of officers who were his peers and who were plagued by behavioural problems, Mazama was often held up as a role model

to them. His family too was very proud of him. He took after his father and was by nature fiercely competitive and rather loath to lag behind his peers. Whoever knew him often commented on the fact that Mazama was definitely destined for greater things in life.

Once, during their school break, Mazama and his friends sat chatting in a building site next to the school. One of their new friends happened to be a boy from a village recently settled in Aizawl, and he related to his friends about how he had downed three birds with his catapult in his previous village. This piece of information set Mazama thinking deeply, for he had never before cast a stone at a butterfly, much less a bird, and he had so far, never really been fascinated by a catapult. But he now felt a great urge to have a similar achievement in order to be on par with his new friend. So that evening, he got his father to make him a catapult without any further delay.

Mazama's father not only willingly obliged him, but went on to tell his son about his many exploits as a boy with his catapult, and express great disdain on the total lack of interest and absence of skill in the children of today. From that evening, Mazama learnt to use a catapult and was determined to master it as he was now completely convinced that downing three birds with it was one sure way of keeping up with his friends.

One Saturday morning Mazama was invited by his friends in the neighbourhood to an outing at their garden not far from the Sairang main road. As this was an excellent opportunity to prove his prowess, Mazama and his father practised with the catapult all morning. After his morning meal, Mazama excitedly got into the vehicle with his friends, fully equipped with his new catapult and about twenty home-made pellets that reassuringly rolled and knocked about in the bag slung across his shoulders.

Once the boys arrived at the garden, they excitedly and noisily engaged themselves in various activities. Some headed straight for the stream to bathe while others cut down bunches of bananas to

eat, while still others started stalking birds. As the birds were much too wary and timid, Mazama had a difficult time targeting them. He finally sat down discouraged, under the shade of a tree. Suddenly, a small bird whose name he did not even know, came and perched on a branch of the tree under which he sat resting. It had a grasshopper between its beak. Mazama very carefully drew his catapult and took aim. As he let go, there was a simultaneous sound of the target being hit. The little bird hurtled through the air, flew again for a short distance, and then spun down haphazardly amidst the banana plantation below.

Mazama hurriedly went after the bird and discovered that it was still alive and had fallen due to dizziness only. As it saw him approaching, the bird pitifully tried to take off again. As he had never taken a bird's life before, Mazama reluctantly caught hold of the bird, and feeling it struggle against him almost let it go again. But the thought of the possibility of such cowardice on his part reaching the ears of his friends, and the teasing that would ensue, buttressed his resolve and so, with renewed courage, he tightly gripped the bird by the neck and threw it on the hard ground with all his might.

Thus Mazama watched on LIFE, certainly not the handiwork of man, leaving the beautiful bird. A few minutes before it had revelled in its freedom, had warbled, its black feathers shining with life in the sunlight. And its young had eagerly awaited its homecoming. As Mazama slowly picked up the little bird, he could feel the life gradually drain from it. And as he placed it on his palm, the bird feebly opened its mouth once more, and then remained as it was placed, stilled forever.

Mazama visualized the building site where he sat with his friends, and the huge antlers of his father's slain elk, and felt that he now had something to tell them too. Since his friends were not ready to leave yet, he climbed up towards the Sairang main road, all the while looking forward to how he would relate his hunting experiences of the day to his family at dinner time. There was no

room for any other.

II

At about this time, along the Aizawl-Silchar highway which witnesses hundreds of trucks ply daily, a loaded truck was toiling uphill, its engines sounding like the roar of many demons. Its driver was a divorcee, dark-skinned with a broad forehead and perfect jaw line, known popularly as “Valtea” by all the girls who served tea in the stalls along the highway. He knew his truck inside out as he would his tobacco pipe he owned. It was said that he could hold forth on the complex mechanics of the interaction between oil, steam and oxygen that fed life to the truck’s powerful engine, more expertly and interestingly than talk about the Holy Land.

Owing to family constraints, Valtea was unable to continue with his studies and hence entered his present profession, first as a handyman and later on graduated to being a driver. His motto throughout his long career had always been, that just as a butcher knows the details of the entrails of animals, and doctors those of humans, so also must a driver know everything there is to know about the vehicle he drives. Though he did marry once, it was not long before his wife divorced him on the grounds that he loved his truck more than he loved her! The fact that he had never had a mishap during the ten years of his entire career was in itself a mark of his great dedication and love for the job. His reputation was known throughout the driver community and the Drivers’ Union would often hold him up as a shining example for them to emulate.

Yet despite all this, Valtea had one seemingly trivial flaw he could not overcome, and it was not drinks. Ever since his childhood, he could never resist going after any living creature even though it be a humble lizard crossing his path. This urge still remained ever so strong that while driving, should he sight a bird or better still, a grazing deer, his first instinct was always the desire to run over it, and throw all caution to the winds. All considerations about who he was, or who his passengers were, would immediately take the back

seat. Should he sight a bird perched nearby, the urge to hurl a stone and bring it down was hard to resist. This trait of his obviously explained his unusual gift of catching them and having ready meat at his table most of the time.

Valtea was unable to fathom the reason behind this trait in him. It certainly was not due solely to his love of meat. Perhaps he felt that not being highly educated he had nothing to brag about on that score, and therefore felt the need to be able to boast about his exploits as “pasalatheï”, one who can catch game. He never really considered this trait a flaw in any way.

While he was thus preoccupied with these thoughts, Valtea realized he had covered quite a distance. As he passed Sairang village he deliberately lowered his speed, and just as he was telling himself that he need not hurry as the high way was his home, two jungle cocks engaged in mortal combat, came hurtling down to the main road from the woods above. Valtea braked at once, assuming that they were domesticated birds. But on getting a clearer view realized they were not. He found it hard to believe that he should witness such a rare sight on the outskirts of town, so he rubbed his eyes and looked again, but it was real. As the birds fought on, they forgot their fear of the big truck and one of them flew and landed right in front of its tracks. The second bird flew after it and continued its attack. At the sight of this Valtea could no longer hold back.

He sped his great engine at full speed, determined to run down the two combatants. At that moment, a young boy with a bag slung across his shoulder and catapult in hand, came onto the road from below and, seemingly unaware of the speeding big truck, was in the act of running across the road.

Valtea gave a loud cry. With feathers flying about, the truck came to an abrupt halt. Little did the huge machine, its might and power so seemingly beyond man's control, realize the extent of the damage it had done.

Valtea leapt out of his seat and ran to the front of the truck.

He saw that he had indeed run over one of the jungle cocks. But beside it, there lay a young boy of about twelve years, with what seemed like a school bag slung across his shoulder. Beside one of the wheels was a catapult.

Thus Valtea watched in great distress as LIFE, certainly not the handiwork of man, was leaving the young boy. It was only a short while back that this boy was the centre of his parents' lives, one in whom his teachers and neighbours had seen great promise, a boy determined to be on par with every one. But now, he no longer held any of these admirable traits whatsoever. A few minutes back he had been filled with the desire to reach home and be with his parents, but now, the effort to do so was completely gone. As the dismayed man gently lifted up the child, he could feel the life gradually drain from him. And as Valtea placed him on his lap, the boy feebly opened his eyes once more, and then remained as he was placed, stilled forever.

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.

Jayanta Mahapatra, a renowned Indian poet writing in English. He currently edits **Chandrabhaga**, a prestigious literary journal. He lives at Tinkonia Bagicha, Cuttack, Orissa, 753001

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.

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.

Dr. A.S. Guha, Regional Director of IGNOU, Shillong, Nongthymmai Pohktieh, Shillong 13.

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

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