Understanding the 'Tribal': Postcolonial Identity and Creative Writing

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In understanding the formation, legitimacy, claims and counter claims of postcolonial identities in North-East India one has to re-examine the nature of colonialism experienced by the indigenous communities of this region. Of the two types of colonialism, 'Settler Colonialism' involved a large number of colonists who came to the colony seeking fertile land to farm and turned indigenous people into the minority in their own land. Contrastingly, 'Exploitation Colonialism' involved fewer colonists who captured administrative machineries and ruled the indigenous people, who were still majority in their own land. In other words, in colonies where the indigenous people were not displaced from their land and where they still had their own cultural life-world and religion, colonial exploitation which was mainly at the economic and political level also stretched to the psychic and the spiritual life of the people. It may be mentioned here that colonialism in countries like Africa and India, (particularly the North-Eastern region of India) was of the second variety and so tribal communities in particular have suffered from a unique form of cultural dispossession which alienated them from their roots and landed them to a crisis at the spiritual and cultural level. Such a form of colonial domination manifests in the form of psychic violence which according to Albert Memmi is a 'colonization of the mind'.[1] Colonialism in these countries therefore with its effect on the life-world

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of the indigenous people, stretched its boundaries to the cultural sphere which involved indigenous religion, the lived experiences and values that were central to their being. Along with its apparatus of domination at the social, economic and political sphere cultural representation of the natives by the colonizer became another strategy of domination which influenced the self image of the natives. Edward Said has argued that Orientalism could not represent itself and had to rely on the West to produce the histories of its colonies which in turn affected the postcolonial imagination and the self-image of the indigenous people.[2] Apart from religion and culture, language becomes another contesting field for colonial imposition contributing to Imperial domination.

In response to the systematic violence done to their own languages, some postcolonial writers and activists either advocated a complete return to the use of indigenous languages or used the imposed English language to appropriate the dominant European tongue re-forming it in new literary forms. In the former category one finds the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o who says that African writers should write in African languages while in the latter category one has writers like Chinua Achebe and writers of the so called Third world who like Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* adopted the strategy of writing back to the empire: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse." Literatures that emerged in the postcolonial countries had to address the grand project of a cultural and political imperialism and so Gayatri Spivak talks of the impossiblitity of reading nineteenth century literature by a Third World audience,

> ...without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored. These two obvious "facts" continue to be disregarded in the reading of nineteenth-century British literature. This itself attests to the continuing success of the imperialist project, displaced and dispersed into more modern forms.[3]

Such an appropriation is particularly visible in postcolonial novel writing in postcolonial societies like Africa and India where authors struggled to represent indigenous themes and conflicts, within the parameters of a western genre like the novel. Postcolonial literatures in

English therefore has to contest the imperial 'worlding' of the indigenous life-world and reproduce a counter-narrative of their own societies as distant cultures, exploited but with rich intact literary heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted. Here the issue of representation becomes important - the indigenous life-world as represented by the indigenous *self* and that represented by the *other*.

In the context of representation of indigenous people of North-East India by themselves and by the *other* another dimension of dispossession needs to be addressed - the loss of the indigenous script and the importance of the 'spoken word' in transmitting a cultural and a written tradition.[4] A deconstruction of the term tribe, used as a signifier by white ethnographers and missionaries who came to North-East India in their 'civilization' mission becomes inevitable from a postcolonial perspective as 'tribe' according to several postcolonial thinkers has been a colonial concept. Charlotte Seymour Smith writes:

> ...the concept of tribe was largely a colonial creation...tribal division and tribal consciousness were largely a creation of the efforts of colonial rulers to impose order and supralocal unity among the previously largely autonomous local communities, and where there was previously a loose and contextually relative sense of ethnic identity, colonial rule often imposed a tribal division which then acquired increasing concreteness due to the need to adapt to the administrative and political demand of colonial rule.[5]

By a kind of perverted logic, colonialism had turned to the past of the colonized tribe and distorted, disfigured and destroyed their culture, often even their indigenous knowledge systems and literatures. The systematic demolition of cultural roots, the conflict between the traditional belief system and the modern cultural and religious institutions, and the widening gap between the individual concerns and collective demands are some of the main issues that disturbed indigenous people of all colonized societies.

In North-East India a cultural uneasiness and dilemma has always persisted in the incompatibility of a communitarian life lived during pre-colonial days and the modern statecraft that was superimposed on a people.[6] An interesting dimension of this complexity was the colonial

cartography drawn by the nineteenth century explorer's imagination, which was a bewildering colonized geography extending from Africa to the north-eastern frontiers of India and beyond.[7] The construction of the 'others' who inhabited such geographies was primarily a colonial and racist construction which gave birth to disciplines like Anthropology and devised mechanism for assessing civilizations. Colonial imagination stretched beyond geographical maps to territorialize people with similar histories and cultural practices. What the first chief commissioner of Assam, Colonel Richard Harte Keatinge stated while narrating his responsibilities in North-East India is very significant:

> There is no part of our vast Indian frontier about which we have so little military or geographical information as the north-east...there is no like extent of it bordering upon savage tribes, so sparsely garrisoned; yet in this remote corner of our empire there is more English capital invested in land than in any like extent of our dominion[8]

Therefore a self recovery of the indigenous people through their representational agencies also involved a recovery of their cultural specificities not only in relation to the colonizers but also with reference to other indigenous cultures with which they were clubbed. But can the postcolonial Indian imagination in a collective sense address ethnographic and historical misrepresentation of indigenous people and cultures of North-East India? Consequently how would indigenous communities in North-East India appropriate both western and mainstream Indian representational categories and stereotyping of the indigenous as 'native' or 'tribal'? Gayatri Spivak's query, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[9] evokes two senses of representation: the scholarly representation of knowable objects and the democratic representation of political subjects. The question exposes the slippage between a scholarly project of portraying "others" and a political project of speaking for "others," both of which deny these "others" voices and the complex subject position that would be irreducible to static images or statistical averages. Such representational modes one could argue creates a category of 'internal orients' like 'internal minorities'.[10] Writer-activist Mahasweta Devi says, "The tribal and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never been a meeting point. The mainstream simply doesn't understand the parallel..."[11] Later

in the same conversation she mentions "Each tribe is like a continent". In the 1940s leading anthropologists like Verrier Elwin and G.S. Ghurye tried to theorize and understand tribal identities. Elwin is accused of being 'protective' or 'romantic' towards tribal life-world and claimed specificities for their representation while Ghurye propagated assimilation theory.[12] Elwin like Mahasweta Devi lived among indigenous people like an insider, allowing their life-world to unveil itself through narrative agencies. Devi is more confident about the authenticity of the life-world of her characters as she says;"I know that area like the palm of my hand. I have seen the person I have called Mary Oraon..."[13]. One can read such descriptions against Robert Lindsay's narrative on his experiences in the Khasi Hills in 1789 where he finds the beauty of the land like the Garden of Eden but is shocked to find 'wild looking' people dancing on the land.[14] Postcolonial critique generated by such a mode of imperialist representational mode invites a critical stance on the issue of representation. It is also a political imperative in a postcolonial sense to look into the history of nomenclature of indigenous communities in North-East India, which is being interrogated by contemporary scholars on North-East India. The politics of naming has been central to the idea of representation.[15] In such a representational context Aime Cesaire remarked:

> The colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other as an animal, accustomed himself to treating him like animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal....[16]

Stuart Hall also argues that representation, culture and language are tightly connected in the process of producing meaning. He writes:

> In part, we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the way we classify and conceptualize them, the values we placed on them.[17]

Politics of representation leaves room for misinterpretation and unfair assessment of culture and values associated with a community. Therefore one has to evolve a hermeneutic strategy of recovery,

> ...from the lost terrains of historical and temporal sense of being that finds its closure within contemporary language games.Such lost terrains consist of (a) an originary sense of place and the subsequent loss of the place and (b) The construction of an other as an antithesis to the self in the form of racism, xenophobia and other such forms of violence.[18]

Literary intervention has been a dominant mode of postcolonial recovery in North-East India. Creative authors of indigenous communities of the region particularly those writing in English have appropriated the dominant colonial weapon-the English language to represent themselves and their communities. But a critical question that one has to encounter is –can their writings be called "Tribal Literatures"? In the context of postcolonial literature the word 'tribal literature' used in the Scandinavian Writers' Conference in 1967 sought to denote by this term the distinctive feature of representing people, things and ideas with their cultural authenticities.[19] But will the rubric "Tribal Literature" fit into the postcolonial descriptive categories like "Third World Literature or "Indian Literature" or will this term make up for the in-between in "post" and "colonial"? Or will it be the "blank space" of postcolonial literature in the sense of unidentified and unexplored peoples and regions?[20] Postcolonial critic of the Indian sub-continent Aijaz Ahmad has vehemently argued against the theoretical category of "Third World Literature" because of "its equally homogenizing impulse to slot very diverse kinds of public aspirations under the unitary insignia of 'nationalism' and then to designate this nationalism as the determinate and epochal ideology for cultural production in non-Western societies;..."[21] In the same vein he says:

> I find it all the more difficult to speak of a 'Third World literature' when I know that I cannot confidently speak as a theoretical coherent category of an 'Indian' Literature...
>
> The difficulty lies, rather , in the very premises that have governed the narrativisation of that history, which has (1) privileged High Textuality of a Brahminical kind to posit the unification of this literary history; or (2) assembled the history of the main texts of particular languages (in a very uneven way) to obtain this unity through the aggregative principle; or (3) attempted to reconstruct the ...themes in several languages but

> with ...the canonizing procedures of the 'great books' variety, with scant attempt to locate literary history within other sorts of histories in any consistent fashion.[22]

Postcolonial narratives are considered to be contested terrains where the discourses of imperialism and its subjected others struggle for control over the field of representation. In such a contestation the category of "Third World Literature" or "Indian Literature" definitely does not provide for a conceptual or normative framework for the inclusion of 'difference' characterized by "Tribal Literature" or a tribal world-view. In her most widely-read essay, "Where Have All the Natives Gone?" Rey Chow examines the construction of images of the 'native' which, despite their ubiquity, remain elusive. 'Native' works, bifurcated as either timeless (the art museum sentiment) or historical (the ethnographic museum), are determined in post-imperialist discourse by the search for 'authenticity.' The concept of time in a tribal life-world cannot be represented within the western notion of a linear or chronological time internalized by dominant postcolonial societies. Chow argues that questions about the native are questions about the irreversibility of modernity: if technological reproduction is inevitable, so is cultural displacement.[23] Therefore, in a theoretical sense it is a postcolonial imperative before indigenous writers of North-East to transcend the qualitative space given by the connotation attached to the term tribe from a colonizer's point of view discussed above. The complex and dynamic nature of postcolonial identity formation is undoubtedly manifesting itself in the manner in which writers from indigenous communities of the region are positioning themselves against dominant cultures which they attempt to counter through their literary texts.[24] From a literary perspective it is important to examine the author's conception of the symbiotic relationship that exists between fiction, the society and the author. Representative authors from indigenous communities of the region writing in English and published by mainstream publishing houses have projected the specificities of their cultural life-world. But the question is can these literary work be placed under the rubric "Tribal literature"? In other words are the writings of these authors at least over the past decade necessarily 'tribal' in its content? Again how do writers writing in their own indigenous languages encounter the postcolonial? What is the postcolonial discursive space

represented by "Tribal Literature" in the emerging genre of "Literature of North-East India" - a canon that is gradually getting attention in the institutional space of metropolitan universities in India and abroad?

It has been widely debated the world over as to whether those who write in unrecognized tribal languages are a part of the postcolonial canon or not. The literary voices from below or the margins written in a lesser known language, without the privilege of being expressed in an alien cosmopolitan tongue is the predicament of a majority of writers in the post-colonial tribal world of the North-East. Unfortunately most of these writers do not occupy primacy over the English language writers. In the very popular mode of theorizing the post-colonial in English or in French, writers writing in their native tongues often get excluded from the post-colonial canon unless they also write in English. This throws up a double problematique: (1) indigenous writers writing in English on indigenous themes get reduced to only a special genre within the Post-Colonial rubric and (2) writing in English takes away much of the refinement available in tribal and indigenous languages. This problematique can neither be resolved within the rubric of the uncontaminated "tribal" or "indigenous" nor it could be reduced to the mere post-colonial. One might say that this displaces the tribal into the post-colonial, while it cannot recover the 'tribal' in the very form of the 'tribal literature'. Then when and how does one exactly remove this binary division between the 'tribal' and the 'post-colonial'?

As one looks for a space of intervention, ethics of self-representation interferes with the realm of 'top-down' working of the English language in producing a gentry of English language writers in the indigenous communities. This is also a moment of transforming the agency of the indigenous writer into the dominant canons of language and literature to *write in* or to *write back*. The contemporary phase for post-colonial theory considers this aspect of 'transformation' by describing how cultural and political schemata of the dominant 'imprint themselves upon the bodily experiences and motivate agents in powerful ways'.[25] If this is how the dominat imprints work, there is 'little payoff in separating the world of emotion and affect *from* the world of language and self-representation'.[26] So again what is then the possibility of an ethical intervention in what is unavailable for reflection and representation? Can we hear the pre-ontic murmer of the tribal self and the tribal world

beyond the devices of representation?

One has to take an epistemological stance here moving beyond both the anthropological as well as the ethical. The epistemological stance here does not concern with an object or subject of knowledge, it rather concerns here with a choice of what is beyond the alterity of the tribal. By beyond the alterity, one would mean a non-nativist non-symptomatic reading of ways of world-making as it happens in tribal literatures of India's North-East. For example, how do tribal spiritual experiences constitute the multifarious lived experiences of the tribes? Can this be defined in a language of representation? Or, does it produce an alternative to existing 'modern' ways of writing about oneself? Mrinal Miri articulated this epistemological stance, when he argued,

> One thing that can certainly be said in favour of the tribal vision is that the disjunction between the disengaged original self and the samsaric world of the received view of spirituality (...) does not exist in this vision. The world of the tribesman is seamlessly continuous between the inanimate, the animate and the human; she/he is concerned with the contingencies of time and space as anything else in the world. Self-knowledge for the tribesman, therefore, must be bound by these contingencies. The episteme of the tribal vision is similarly continuous between the natural, the moral and the spiritual.[27]

This epistemic continuity acts as the mediating factor between incommensurable worlds of alternatives and assists in recovering the tribal world from its representational contours. But it is also to be noted that such a recovery would serve as a decoy that would also substitute the ethnology and anthropology of the tribes by a visionary understanding of the 'signifying spaces' of the tribal universe. The question is, does such a signifying space that establishes continuity between apparently disjointed spaces of self-representation and spaces of signification within the tribal world act as a 'condition' for recovery of the tribal world?

These are questions which would enlarge the scope of postcolonial discourses on identities in North-East India both methodologically and politically, specifically addressing the issue of 'tribal identity'. If the idea of tribe has to be retrieved from the colonial descriptive categories and recast through self representation, postcolonial tribal narrative, both

literary and non-literary, can be said to be one which is conspicuous of an emerging identity-in-difference: firstly, it provides the terms in which the author gains a sense of his or her identity as 'other' and secondly articulates the ideological framework in which he or she understands the world as an insider of an indigenous life-world. Postcolonial narratives thrive on a celebration of identity-in-difference and it is in articulating this identity-in-difference that "Tribal Literatures" can occupy a very prominent place within the genre of Postcolonial Literature beyond the hierarchy and individuation which categorizes canonical/ institutional postcolonial studies. One finds that in the institutionalization of postcolonial studies in metropolitan universities, even in conceptualizing categories like "Literatures of North-East India" the word 'tribe' has not been problematized adequately in relation to the 'postcolonial'. Simon During writes:

> It is important not to forget that the postcolonial paradigm appeals largely to whites and diasporic Indian intellectuals working in the West. It does not appeal to those closest to the continuing struggle against white domination – to Koori activists in Australia or the South African PAC, say; to offer another instance, I do not think there is a Maori word for 'postcolonialism'.[28]

Here During insists that concept or term such as "postcolonialism" is utterly foreign and irrelevant to the Maoris in their struggle for autonomy and self-determination. The Maoris of New Zealand or Kooris, the aboriginal people of Australia, perhaps do not have a word for 'postcolonialism' in their native language, because they have no need for it. Probably many tribal languages in India also may not have a word for 'postcolonial' in their languages. Postcolonial critics have admitted to the ambivalence of their own critical predicament of having to say "no" to a structure which one critiques, yet inhabits intimately, because of the hegemonic mode of self vigilance of a theory that paralyzes thought into binaries and yet cannot represent 'the unrepresentable' of native culture and history. Creative writing has the potential to claim cultural or linguistic autonomy, as never fixed and isolated but always on an ongoing articulation of differences. In doing postcolonial studies in the mixed space *between* centre and periphery, between First and Third Worlds

postcolonial intellectuals have always experienced the unstable combination of power and powerlessness, identity and difference. Alternative textualities produced through the agencies of creative writing, particularly by indigenous writers from North-East India could be the in-between of the literature of the First and Third Worlds without seeking a narrative closure , in the sense in which Barthes would describe as 'going beyond the sentence'[29]. It is in transcending the limits of a meaning in a sentence that the closure of the sentence is saved. In the process of reinscription and negotiation of identities through creative writing, the literary self can assume a new meaning in the in-between of subjective and intersubjective experiences. This new dimension in literary representation emerges as the process of agency both as a historical development and as the narrative agency of historical discourse. The emergence of such a process of urgency allows the articulation of native and subaltern in tribal discourses to emerge as relocation and reinscription. The possibilities of creative writing as a representational agency lies in this relocation and re inscription and therefore has great potential for articulating alter/native identities.

Notes

1 Nadine Gordimer in the New Introduction to Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, London: The Orion Press Inc., 2003.

2 Edward Said, *Orientalism* New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p. 24.

3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism",*Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 1, "Race," Writing, and Difference" (Autumn, 1985), pp. 243-261.

4 See Esther Syiem, "Pushing Frontiers:The Continung Evolution of Khasi Literature" in B War ed. *Tribal Literature Of North-East India*, Shillong 2009.pp9-16.The author refers to the work of R. S. Lyngdoh to examine the dichotomy and ambivalence in the context of Khasi literary tradition, which may be relevant for such an examination in the literary traditions of other communities in North-East India.

5 Charlotte Seymour-Smith, *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1986), p. 281.

6 See Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, "State, Insurgency and (Wo)man's Human Rights: Two Cases From North-East India" in R.Dhamala and S.Bhattacharjee eds. *Human Rights And Insurgency: The NE-India* New Delhi, Shipra Publications.2002.pp126-139.

7 See Liisa Malkki's "National Geographic:The Rooring of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholar and Refugees" *Cultural Anthropology*,7(1). pp24-44, 1992 as quoted by Dolly Kikon in her essay, "From Loincloth, Suits, to Battle Greens," in Sanjib Baruah (ed.), *Beyond Counter-*

Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India , New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 83.

[8] See John F. Mitchell's *Report (Topographical, Political and Military) on the North-East Frontier of India,* Calcutta: Superintendent of Government printing, 1883.p 9.Quoted by B.Kar in "When was the Postcolonial?"in Sanjib Baruah ed.*Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, p50.

[9] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" was originally published in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

[10] See David Lloyd's "Genet's Genealogy: European Minorities and the Ends of the Canon", *Cultural Critique,* University of Minnesota Press,1987 pp 161-185.Lloyd speaks of internal minorities within a minority group which may be extended to 'internal orient'.

[11] Mahasweta Devi, "The Author in Conversation" in *Imaginary Maps*(Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) Thema, Calcutta 1993, p ii.

[12] Rualzakhimi Ralte's "Representing the Tribal in Indian Literature"in B.War (ed.) *Tribal Literature of North-East India,* Shillong 2009.p159.

[13] Mahasweta Devi, "The Author in Conversation" in *Imaginary Maps* (Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) Thema, Calcutta 1993, pxi.

[14] See Robert Lindsay, *Anecdotes of An Indian Life,* Shillong, NEHU, 1997.

[15] See J.N. Chowdhury's *The Khasi Canvas* (A Cultural And Political History), Shillong 1978 and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf's *The Naked Nagas: Headhunters of Assam in Peace and War,* Guwahati: Spectrum Publishers, 2004.

[16] Aime Cesaire as quoted in Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 30.

[17] See Stuart Hall's *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices.* London: Sage, 1997.Quoted in S. Khaiminthang's unpublished thesis "The Tribal World of Chinua Achebe's Novels: A Postcolonial Perspective", 2011.

[18] See Prasenjit Biswas, "Ethnophilosophy: Conceptual Artefacts, Wisdom and Critique of Anthropocentrism in India's Northeast" in Seminar Proceedings entitled *Literatures And Oratures As Knowledge Systems: Texts From The North-East,* Centre of Advanced Study, Department Of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 2009.

[19] As quoted by Anuradha Ghose in "The Notion of Identity Formation and the Paradigm of Cultural Resistance in the Novels of Chinua Achebe," *Chinua Achebe: An Anthology of Recent Criticism,* edited by Mala Pandurang, Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006, p. 34. Quoted in S. Khaiminthang's unpublished PhD. thesis "The Tribal World of Chinua Achebe's Novels: A Postcolonial Perspective", 2011.

[20] The 'blank spaces' were unexplored regions where the colonialists thought the cannibals and monsters lived. See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest,* New York, Routlegde, 1995.

[21] Aijaz Ahmad, "'Indian Literature': Notes towards the Definition of a Category" in *In Theory: Classes, Nations Literatures,* Delhi OUP 1994.p243.

[22] Ibid.pp243-44.

[23] Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), p. 48.

[24] See Tilottoma Misra eds. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* (2 Volumes)New Delhi, OUP, 2011.

[25] Arjun Appadurai, "Life after Primordialism" in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997,p.148.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Mrinal Miri, "The Spiritual and the Moral" in Tilottoma Misra (ed.) *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi,2010, p.116.

[28] Simon. During , "Postcolonialism and Globalization." *Meanjin* 51.2 (1992): 339-53.

[29] Roland Barthes and Lionel Duisit, An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative, *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, *On Narrative and Narratives*, Johns Hopkins University Press (Winter, 1975), pp. 237-272.