

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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One Night

KEISHAM PRIYOKUMAR

Keisham Priyokumar is a civil engineer by profession and he has three works of short fiction in Manipuri to his credit. He is the only Manipuri author to win a maximum number of awards for his work Nongdi Tarakkhidare in 1997. In 1998 he received the Sahitya Akademi Award. He edits Wakhal and Sahitya, two literary journals and Sahityagi Pao, a literary bulletin. The present story is translated from the Manipuri by Robin S. Ngangom.

What if, while asleep, the head was battered with something held in the hand? Or, what if a machete were to hack unawares? Suddenly, Stephen was wide awake. He stared at the opposite bed. Lingpao was lying with his legs outstretched. He had not moved at all. Stephen breathed a little. But thought — I used to hear a loud snore every night. Now it seemed he was not even breathing. Was he still awake? Stephen could not close his eyes again. In the glimmering light of the electric bulb, his eyes swept the blurred objects of the small room. Near the wall, the rice-pot, stove, a few bottles, basket, plate, bowl, still lay undisturbed in their original places. Where was the machete? The one leaning on the wall? He got into a panic. Looked carefully. Lingpao lying on his back, turned in his sleep towards the wall and lay on his side. Stephen who had almost got up did not. He remembered the machete he kept under the bed before. He craned his neck out and looked under the bed. The machete lay untouched, a little further inside. He exhaled a little. But his eyes would not close.

How late was the night? It was late indeed. Not a solitary human voice could be heard. Except for one or two dogs barking

far away it was deadly quiet. On other nights he would already wake up once or twice by this hour. Was sleep not possible tonight? He tried to repress the rising fear in his heart. He again looked at Lingpao sleeping opposite. This time too, he was lying without having stirred at all. Was he really asleep? Would I have to wait for dawn without a wink this night?

In a tiny room, at the far end of this horizontal office building, it was almost four years now since they had been living together. But nothing had tormented his thoughts so cruelly as it did today.

“—Would you still like to lodge together?”

The official had asked, after summoning the two of them, earlier in the day. They both did not answer. They could not answer this question straight away. That they would be asked such a query never occurred to them. For a few seconds, they looked at each other. As if by accident. For only a few seconds. Then lowering their heads, they remained seated. It appeared as if they were waiting for each other to make a reply.

“—Nothing will happen between the two of you, even then can we predict human beings? If something bad does happen, we'll also be dragged in.”

The official continued:

“So the chowkidar's job, the sweeper's job will have to be performed jointly by one man. Or, since we have not provided living quarters, one has to live in a rented room. The two of you have to decide by tomorrow.”

This time too, they did not respond. They emerged from the room. Having lived together for so long, having befriended each other, it seemed they were suddenly separated by a remoteness. All of a sudden, they could not talk face to face.

“A Kuki and a Naga living in the same room. If they murder each other at night, will not this office get a bad name?”

It was the conversation in the next room. Stephen clearly heard what the head clerk, Kulabidhu, said. Stephen also knew that Lingpao heard. If this happened before, he could shrug it aside as a joke. Now he could not join the others who were talking and laughing noisily. He wanted to run away somewhere. Lingpao too, at a loss, stood rooted near the threshold. Stephen didn't know if he now considered Lingpao an alien.

"Lingpao, didn't you say your village is called Pashong? Look, this paper says someone called Songkhulun Chongloi, his wife and their three-year-old daughter have been killed in a field near the Ihang River."

Typist Tombi said, displaying the newspaper. Let alone Lingpao, even Stephen's entire being got a shock when he heard the news. Lingpao almost snatching, almost wresting the newspaper, read it haltingly, as if feeling his way about. His hand shook badly. His eyes too turned red. He handed back the paper, dropped it almost, and went out without a word. Stephen knew – Songkhulun was Lingpao's own brother.

"—Your killings, attacks, and burning down each other's houses are not going to end just like that. Many more will die. Yesterday or, was it earlier, have not some Tangkhuls been killed in Monlom?"

Tombi asked, turning towards Stephen. In jest or in seriousness, he did not want to talk about it with somebody else. Without answering, Stephen also walked away, as if he could not decide where to go.

... Stephen looked at Lingpao intently. Like before, Lingpao hardly moved. Was he unable to sleep like him? Maybe he was asleep. How would he sleep? When he heard that his younger brother, who was only about thirty, together with his wife and child, were dead. He returned late at night, reeking of liquor, his eyes bloodshot. He went straight to bed. Did not even eat his dinner. Stephen had thought Lingpao might have gone to Pashong already.

Wanted to ask. He also wanted to talk, expressing his grief. But seeing Lingpao's state, he did not have the courage. Let alone talk, he felt a rising fear in his heart. With the silence of the night mounting. Stephen again lay on his back and looked at the ceiling. His eyes did not see the matting above, torn in places. In his mind's eye, he began to see their village Sanakeithel, a broad flank of the mountain near Ihang River peopled by it. And also the Kuki village Pashong, nestling on a mountain not very far away. Remembered again — his mother, his wife Mary, and his three small children. At a small market of Sanakeithel, his mother, sitting throughout the afternoon, would sell greens and herbs plucked from the forest. At this market, Pashong folk too would come to do their buying. The level fields on the banks of the Ihang River belonged to the two villages. The two villages would together catch the fish of this river, whenever they wished ... And now? Stephen suddenly drew a long breath.

... Songkhulun? Face, chest, belly, smeared with blood, from cutting meat ... laughing easily ... the butcher Songkhulun ... Because he befriended his elder brother, before he returned to Pashong, he would often leave a cut of meat for them ... Like Lingpao, without returning home, he would stay overnight once in a while.

Songkhulun ... For this dam they're going to build on Ihang River, they're also going to recruit men from the adjoining villages. Why don't you join in?

I've no education. No, they'll ask me to live in Imphal. Let me continue living in my own village.

You want to spend your days cutting meat, isn't it?

I don't like cutting meat, too. I feel bad killing animals all the time. It's not good to sin. I'm doing this to keep alive. Who knows, I may die like an animal one day.

Don't say that, Songkhulun. The Lord will protect us.

True. He thinks only for the good of mankind.

They were talking to each other on a moonless night. Ukhrul's mountain range, fields, river, Sanakeithel village, were pitch dark. But the hymns emanating from the nearby church grew louder with their echoes. As if the world was still alive. Songkhulun too started singing hymns in his native tongue. After humming for a while, his voice rose in clear rhythmic tones. Even now, he could hear indistinctly the song Songkhulun was singing at home, as he came out to attend church. Without warning, a few teardrops fell. Stephen did not wipe them.

How silent was the night. That the fear in his heart seemed to be melting gradually amidst the silence, Stephen himself was not aware. He heard the sound of Lingpao snoring and closed his eyes very slowly.

—How long is it before daybreak?

This is the first sound he heard from Lingpao's lips since yesterday morning. Stephen woke up abruptly. Opening the window near his bed, he looked out. It was dark everywhere. The neighbouring offices of the Lamphel wetland, trees and bamboos, were all subdued in their inky darkness. Even stars were not visible in the sky. He closed the window.

Some time left. Couldn't sleep?

How will I?

Only these words. Inside these words, were buried all the fires in his heart.

Won't you go to the village later today?

I don't know. How should we go without the armed escort?

Couldn't get the escort yesterday, too?

No. Before the burial, I want to see Songkhulun, my sister-in-law, and my niece.

He did not continue. Getting up, he took the broom from the corner and, opening the door, went outside. He gently shut the door behind him. The opening of the doors of adjoining rooms could be heard. Closing his eyes, Stephen once more tried to sleep. Again he got up swiftly, removed the machete he kept under the bed, and leaned it against the wall in an open space where it could be seen. Then he went back to bed again and lay down. In order to sleep well during whatever was left of the night, he closed his eyes. He also seemed to know the answer he would give to the official later in the day.

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.

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

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