

# The NEHU Journal

Special Issue on Literature

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# *The NEHU Journal*

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# *The NEHU Journal*

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## 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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## U Manik Raitong, Icon of Love and Creativity: An Appraisal

ESTHER SYIEM

The story of *U Manik Raitong* is rooted in the orature of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills but it was only in the early part of the twentieth century that any attempt was made to record the story in writing.<sup>1</sup> To date, there have been several adaptations of it in prose, in verse and in drama. The present study, however, is based upon the oral version, one that lays persistent claim to the imagination of *U Hynniew Trep U Hynniew Skum*.<sup>2</sup> The nodal point of the tale lies in the presentation of a situation as dramatic and as timeless as are the echoes of *U Manik Raitong's* 'sharati' or flute. This is the inheritance that has been delivered by *U Manik Raitong* to the present generation. The story has inserted itself into the psyche of a people who are still receptive enough to the enchantments of *U Manik Raitong's* dirges. The following is a brief rendition of it:

There was once an orphaned youth, *U Manik* by name, who had no living relative in the world. He was nicknamed *U Manik Raitong*, meaning the lonely one, absolutely bereft of all family support. So overcome was he with the loss that had struck him early in his young life, that he roamed the village like one mad. At night, however, he would put away his sackcloth and ashes, eat, bathe and dress himself up. Then he would take up his flute, and play the most compelling dirges on it. Unknown to him, *U Syiem's* wife who had often heard him, became completely bewitched by the tunes that he played on his flute. In

the event of *U Syiem* having to leave her to attend to matters of state in nearby regions, she was left all alone and was therefore lonely. Besides she had only just been married to *U Syiem*. One night she felt compelled to come to *U Manik's* hut, but was denied entry into it. She broke open the door in order to be able to hear him better. However much he tried to send her away she refused. It was thus that she came to him every night and as a result she became pregnant. However, not once did she disclose her identity to him. When *U Syiem* returned after long months of being away he found that *Ka Lieng Makaw*, his wife, had given birth to a son who was now a few months old. He was naturally angry when he found that his wife refused to disclose the identity of the father. He summoned his people and commanded all the men folk to assemble before him. Each one was ordered to bring a bunch of bananas with him. On that day he ordered each one of them to offer bananas to the baby boy in order to prove the boy's paternity. However, the baby boy refused each man's offer. Then, when *U Syiem* inquired if any man had been left out, there was general mention made of *U Manik Raitong*. It was a known fact that *U Manik Raitong* lived a life that was no better than a dog's. *U Syiem* took no chances, however, and had him come to court with a bunch of bananas. When the baby boy was offered the fruit he reached for it as if familiar with *U Manik Raitong*. The father having been identified, it was now the turn of the people to be shocked. *U Syiem's* anger knew no bounds and he ordered that *U Manik Raitong* be beaten to death as a criminal. *U Manik Raitong*, however, pleaded before the king to be allowed to choose death by burning. On the assigned

day *U Manik Raitong* dressed in all his finery, made his way backwards to the funeral pyre, all the while playing on his flute. The people had already set it alight themselves. When he reached it he walked round three times but before jumping into the burning pyre, he stuck his flute upside down into the ground. The queen too who was indeed agitated beyond control and who had also dressed up as *U Manik Raitong* had done, watched every development from her room. But when she saw *U Manik Raitong* jump into the funeral pyre she rushed after him in order to join him in death. The funeral pyre was transformed into a gushing spring of water, which exists even to this day, and if one were to visit *Raitong* one would discover that in the place where the flute had been planted upside down there grows a cluster of bamboos, whose leaves point downwards.

*U Manik Raitong* has been called the Orpheus<sup>4</sup> of *U Hynniew Trep U Hynniew Skum* race and the sound of his flute may still be discerned rising above the cacophony of contemporary life. The legacy of his flute is a poignant reminder of the heart's attempt to transcend itself. What makes the story come alive, is not so much the element of sexual romance, although this is a vibrant aspect of it, as is the dedication that *U Manik Raitong* gives to his art. Through it, he celebrates the best of himself and consequently the best of the human race. *Ka Lieng Makaw*, *U Syiem's* wife, is able to touch him only through it.

The story begins with *U Manik Raitong* occupying his own space, outside the bounds of human society. The primary image that one has of him is of a person riven into two by a desolating sense of loss. He is a son orphaned, a man bereft of clan relations. He bears the stigma of being completely alone in a matrilineal society, one that places great importance on the

proliferating strength of the maternal clan. He exists virtually alone, and in the eyes of society, handicapped beyond measure. Having had to endure the emotional turbulence of losing all at a very young age, *U Manik Raitong* chooses to flout societal norms by an exaggerated show of grief. During the day he walks around like one crazed, clothed in sackcloth and bathed in ashes whilst going about his daily work. At night, however, he steps out of his grief to take up the almost ceremonial garb of the artist who strives to understand, to transform and to create music out of sorrow. These nocturnal recitals fill the night and ultimately reach the ears of *Ka Lieng Makaw*. It is understood that the village regards him as a divided personality, a recluse best left alone so that when *Ka Lieng Makaw* enters his hut, one fateful night, she has to make a forced entry into it. She refuses to disclose her identity to him because her anonymity at this juncture is the only credential that will keep *U Manik Raitong* from rejecting her. When she does this, she is also forcing him to recognize her as an individual with similar needs. As *U Syiem's* wife, she would be identified with the normative and, therefore, someone reprehensible to *U Manik Raitong* who has chosen to live outside the purview of the social. Once admitted into his presence, however, she lingers on, enthralled by his creative outpourings and the inevitable love affair on a human plane is carried on to its ultimate conclusion, which results in the birth of a son. The story makes it very clear that, *Ka Lieng Makaw* was a newly wedded bride who had been suddenly deprived of the companionship of a spouse too busy to place importance on the affairs of the heart. The loneliness that she suffers from, finds an answering call in *U Manik Raitong's* dirges and the two are thrown together, borne upon the commitments of a love that was initially stirred by the haunting notes of the flute. Under cover of darkness the flute seems to assume an inexplicable dynamism that magnetizes everything which comes under its influence. When *U Manik Raitong* takes it up, he becomes transfigured as it were. One observes the meticulous care with which he prepares himself for his nightly

ritual at the flute that would transport him to realms both aesthetic and metaphysical. His is the mystical love affair that perpetually exists between the artist and his art. The only other person, who is admitted into this charmed circle, only because she has willingly surrendered her social self, is *Ka Lieng Makaw*. When initially, the sounds of the flute become audible to her she is able to restrain herself. But gradually as her defences begin to crumble she succumbs to the call of its mysterious strains and naturally falls in love with the artist. Some oral sources tell one that when *Ka Lieng Makaw* was denied entry, she tore down the planks of *U Manik Raitong's* door with an axe. The unexpected violence with which she forces herself into *U Manik Raitong's* hut is an indication of the inner ferment that seems to have taken hold of her as a result of her nightly exposure to the musical renditions of *U Manik Raitong*. Perhaps it is also a significant indication of, the traumatic effects of the loneliness that afflicts her and of the estrangement that she has had to suffer from society at large. As *U Syiem's* wife she is not expected to mingle familiarly with ordinary village folk. Outcasts both, the rationale of the flute serves to bring them together.

With *Ka Lieng Makaw's* nocturnal visits, the focus of the story shifts from the aesthetic to the erotic, which now becomes the principle of life governing them. In the oral rendition of the story, this is a phase that is clothed in the inscrutable layers of the night. It is, however, a leavening darkness, which finds fulfilment in the birth of a son, and, as one gleans from *Ka Lieng Makaw's* refusal to name her lover much later in the story as an attempt to preserve the sanctity of the relationship, also a time of emotional fulfilment. Nothing is spelt out in this phase, but it would seem, that *U Manik Raitong* and *Ka Lieng Makaw* realize its transitoriness, hence there is a dramatic sense of the swift passage of time. The life-centred principle of Eros finds remarkable expression during these nights of passion when *U Manik Raitong* hones his artistic skills to fine perfection. One understands this, simply by the fact that when *U Syiem* confronts him later in the

story, U Manik Raitong accepts responsibility for his role in the entire drama. The acceptance is also an affirmation of this particular phase of his life, which is a phase that has empowered him as a man and as an artist. The natural consequence of this recognition on his part would be the choice that he makes over the nature of death to be passed upon him. Rather than allow himself to be beaten to death like an ordinary criminal he chooses death by fire, anticipating as it were, the final process of purification wherein he would be released from society. Hence the ritualistic walk thrice round the fire and the planting of his flute upside down upon the ground.

Meanwhile as his relationship with *Ka Lieng Makaw* deepens, the arrival of *U Syiem* also becomes imminent. *U Syiem* may be identified with the unchanging order of social convention, flat and one-dimensional. As the one cuckolded, *U Syiem* is justified in expressing his anger and pain but he shows a great deal of cunning in his desperate bid to trap his rival. Being the kind of man that he is, a seasoned statesman used to solving issues quickly and efficiently he displays an immeasurable deal of quick thinking and forceful action. The village folk on their part have no substantive voice of support or opposition to offer. He is a leader in the real sense of the term in that he commands total subservience from all of them. His presence dominates the penultimate moments before *U Manik Raitong* is revealed for what he is. As *U Syiem* takes centre stage there is a sense of impending disaster in the unflinching quality of his will. He imposes an exacting form of retribution whereby the paternity of the child may be publicly proven. As public man he stands directly opposed to *U Manik Raitong*, the intensely private man. There is no evidence of *U Syiem's* forgiveness for his wife nor is there any mention made of any exchange of communication between them. When he returns he is coming back to both kingdom and wife, as *U Syiem* first and then as husband. Duty bound to his office, *U Syiem* puts a great deal of weight on the public self. His is a calculated response to his wife's infidelity directing him to act with the authority of *U Syiem* rather than with the emotional

excesses of a wronged spouse. As a consequence he commands an entire population to do his bidding in order that he may be proved right. Society yields him his culprit but fails to fill up the resulting emotional vacuum.

One is told that *Ka Lieng Makaw* has been incarcerated and on the day of *U Manik Raitong's* cremation she watches from her room. Most oral sources speak about *Ka Lieng Makaw's* obvious disturbance on the day of *U Manik Raitong's* cremation. As she watches him from the *ka pongshai*, literally an opening to bring in light, a window or a skylight, one is told that she has also dressed herself up in all her finery. Under *U Syiem's* controlling power in the brightness of day, a symbolic indication of the strength of *U Syiem's* rule, *U Manik Raitong's* real identity as father of the child is revealed. The cremation also takes place by day in the presence of all his subjects, pointing thereby to *U Syiem's* unrivalled authority; an assertion of, the legality of his rule as *U Syiem* and as husband. On the face of it, justice has been meted out and the verdict is clear to all. But the hidden face of truth is that the human personality is complex and multi-faceted, and *Ka Lieng Makaw* manages to escape *U Syiem's* ire in order to join *U Manik Raitong* in death. This is the crucial moment when *Ka Lieng Makaw* asserts her independence from *U Syiem*. In the presence of all she consciously flouts his authority and chooses death to a now, meaningless relationship.

On the appointed day, *U Manik Raitong* dresses himself up in full ceremonial gear. He plays his flute all the way to the funeral pyre, literally walking backwards to his death according to some oral sources. When *U Manik Raitong* has flute in hand, he wields it with the authority of a maestro. It empowers him with the ability to see more clearly and initiates him now as never before, into realms ordinarily unimaginable. His fortitude in the face of death has already revealed itself when he stoically accepts the sentence passed upon him, only asking for the right to choose his own kind of death. Death is not annihilation for him. It is merely

an end to his bondage to the physical, a mystical culmination of his musical opus where life and art mysteriously intersect. *U Manik Raitong's* art enables him to confront society face to face. It enjoins him to meet death with his back to it even as he pays ultimate homage to it in creating music in the face of the imminent destruction of the physical. This is a visionary moment for him and, it would seem that as he deliberately turns his back on death he faces society with his flute, to share with all and sundry, but especially more so with *Ka Lieng Makaw* a fleeting moment of transcending insight. Her response to the pressing intonations of his flute is, as it has always been, unconditional. We perceive that *U Manik Raitong* stands revealed in the light of day, not only as *Ka Lieng Makaw's* paramour but more importantly as the artist who has never compromised with the demands of his art. In full view of everyone, with the exception of *U Syiem* who, oral sources tell one, has retreated into his palace, *U Manik Raitong* encircles the funeral pyre thrice to re-affirm in symbolic terms his singular identity as an artist. He then deliberately plants his flute upside down into the ground before jumping into the burning pyre.

Given *U Manik Raitong's* determination to meet death in the regal colours of his vocation, the upside down flute may be understood to be the challenge that he makes to the repressive authority of *U Syiem* which is intolerant of any threat to its power and which seeks to dominate others. In effect the scene at the funeral pyre inverts the reigning influence of *U Syiem's* authority. It would also not be wrong to observe that *U Manik Raitong* goes to his death not as vanquished subject but as mature artist who has come to terms with himself, and who accepts life's variables. The moment of his death hinges on *U Manik Raitong's* attitude. Not once does he ever strike a triumphant pose over *U Syiem*. Rather, one is left with the indelible picture of a man who has so given himself up to his vision that, at its imperative he strikes the final note of response in the upside down flute. The story of *U Manik Raitong* cannot end with his death, for it presages his return in

another form and in newer ways.

*U Syiem* in the meantime absents himself from the entire scene. One could understand this as a tactful ploy on his part. But on the other hand, if one were to pay close attention to what remains unsaid, a matter of, what is usually referred to in written literature as being able to read in between the lines, the situation does not allow for the dominating presence of his personality. In as much as *U Manik Raitong's* flute fills the night, so does *U Manik Raitong's* presence fill the last scene to imbue it with his personal charisma implying thereby that in the final equation he stands opposed to *U Syiem* as representative figure of authority. *U Syiem's* power rests on the physical, on physical demarcations of space, on a physical show of strength, on physical certainties. He towers above *U Manik Raitong* in a visibly physical way. Yet in the final scene, the image that persists is of a growing sense of *U Manik Raitong's* stature as a human being, however prone it may be to error. The strength of *U Syiem* one learns is one-dimensional, delimiting in its capacity to strike but not to heal.

The thrust of the story rests on the miraculous transformation of the burning pyre into a gushing spring. Metaphorically, the trajectory of pain and suffering that *U Manik Raitong* traverses brings with it, its own kind of catharsis and consequent renewal. The discussion, however, does not centre upon whether the story is a tragedy or not. Poetic and dramatic compositions that view the story in their own specific ways have been cited.<sup>5</sup> The point to be made is that *U Manik Raitong* is more powerful in death than in life. In other words, the transcending power of his art lies in its ability to transmute the physical, to harness the crippling power of pain and to change it into art. The burning pyre is the matrix of creativity igniting the human soul to greater heights. In a moment of artistic integration, when life cuts through death and physical barriers fall away, the artist sheds the egoistic shell of the self to be initiated into a realm more mystical and hence more creative. The image of the gushing spring speaks of the inheritance that *U Manik*

*Raitong* has left to future generations. It is one of plenitude and of great motility. Beside it, grow the cluster of bamboos with their downward pointing leaves. The upside-down flute which *U Manik Raitong* inserts into the ground and which has now turned into a bamboo cluster with downward pointing leaves is a physical legacy of *U Manik Raitong's* art. They stand for *U Manik Raitong's* undaunted faith in the creative resources of his flute/music with its ability to interrogate the linear constructs of society, by replacing it with an intensely private yet orchestrating view of life, which underscores the human and re-defines the priorities of an entire race. Even as *U Manik Raitong* is inward looking, in that he is keenly alive to his own suffering, yet he is also outward looking in his ability to establish a lasting rapport with society, to provide sustenance through his art. The inner and the outer meet in the figure of *U Manik Raitong* to weave a cyclic pattern of growth and expansion in his life.

The final phase of the story is dense with far reaching implications. It asserts the truth of *U Manik Raitong's* aesthetics and brings to the fore a significant dimension of the Khasi imagination, hitherto untapped and therefore, hidden in darkness. *U Manik Raitong's* death unleashes the psychic energies of the imagination with as much force as the gushing spring in order to cleanse, to rejuvenate and to save society from itself. He gives it newer ways of apprehending life in all in its entirety, which puts the likes of *U Syiem* up for public censure. This is the reason why *U Manik Raitong* has to be silenced. He is the best critic of his own society since he has always lived outside it and he has nothing to gain or to lose from it. His objectivity in dealing with the accusatory stand that society takes of him in its abetment of *U Syiem's* will, is displayed in the way with which he handles himself in his final moments, as of a man supremely sure of his destiny. His stature is magnified tenfold as he dons his robes and as he accepts the inevitability of death without a qualm. In death *U Manik Raitong* celebrates life.

In biological terms his liaison with *Ka Lieng Makaw* has not been a sterile one. *Ka Lieng Makaw* bears him a son who we know recognizes his natural father but, no further mention has ever been made of him and he seems to have been relegated to obscurity. To understand the full import of the *U Manik Raitong* story, however, one has to see him as the vital link that gives continuity to the story on a realistic level. He is the living proof of *U Manik Raitong*'s creativity as in him is implanted the seeds of his father's genius which, in proper time will also take root in *U Hynniew Trep* society. At the physical level *U Manik Raitong* and *Ka Lieng Makaw* are responsible for placing in Khasi society their very own successor or the inheritor of their dreams. In the natural order of life his birth vindicates *U Manik Raitong*'s sufferings and rejections, and forces a society that once branded the father as *u raitong* or someone absolutely bereft of clan, to accept his child into its fold. By implication this is an unconditional acceptance of *U Manik Raitong* and everything that he stands for. Furthermore, even though this is a tale that has been harvested from a matrilineal ethos, which generally speaking, privileges the girl-child over the boy-child yet, ironically the recipient of that honour in the story is a boy not a girl. This is a double vindication for *U Manik Raitong* whose son and not a daughter is the natural culmination of the forces of creativity, both sexual and aesthetic. It also puts to question the very idea of *u raitong*, for it is through *u raitong* who is bereft of the clan that would define him, that the aesthetics of the Khasi race has been given substance. He makes his statement both aesthetically through his flute, and physically through a son who looks forward to a future that would affirm his father's passage through this world. In bringing to light the affair between the two, *U Syiem* enhances the mystery that now surrounds the name of *U Manik Raitong* and, which has also succeeded in discrediting his power and which gives credibility to *Ka Lieng Makaw*'s desires as a human being and as a woman. The truth is that *U Syiem* had no other choice. The only self-respecting solution left for him to deal with *U Manik Raitong*'s son is, in all fairness to give him a lease on life, which fact, oral

sources hint at.

The symbolic overtones of the upside down flute display the culminating possibilities of *U Manik Raitong*'s vision. It manifests itself defiantly through the irregular and the stark and draws attention to its immense resources. Its metamorphosis into a cluster of bamboos with downward pointing leaves strengthens the assertion that it makes of its faith in the human, the secular and the irrational. It shows one the role that art must inevitably take as initiator of change and iconoclastic agent of renewal. A parallel observation may be seen in the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's book where he elaborates upon the role that art plays in an oppressive state; crucial in the oppositional stance that it has to take in order to celebrate "absolute motion, which is life". Thus, in the context of the story, *U Manik Raitong*'s "art has more questions than it has answers" because it starts "with a position of not knowing and it seeks to know. In fact" it "has hardly any answers. There may be answers implied in the questions. But they are often hints, open-ended possibilities, and not certitudes. ...The state, (meaning *U Syiem*) on the other hand, has plenty of answers and hardly any questions. The more absolutist the state, the less it is likely to ask questions of itself or entertain questioning by others. ...Such a state regards those who ask questions as rebels, subversives, madmen"(1998:14-16). *U Manik Raitong*, icon of love and creativity must submit to the powers that be. He can only stake his claim upon a section of adherents who are attuned to his call and who give him a hearing and hence credibility to his quest for articulating his deepest self.

Thiong'o's book reconfirms the artist's compulsion to be true to himself whatever the consequences. It also speaks of the performance space of the artist as it may be used for its own ends and as it invariably opposes the political goals of the state. At the outset *U Manik Raitong* carves a niche for himself outside society. His performance space is a secluded one visible only when the sun has set and when the moon unsheathes its power at night. *Ka Lieng*

*Makaw* is drawn into the vortex of that space for ultimately art is dependent on the human; and as she begins to feed it with her responsiveness it makes itself audible to others. If one were to speak of the colours of *U Manik Raitong's* art one would begin by associating it with the shaded hues of the night under the waxing and waning of the moon, hidden in darkness and pregnant with multiple associations. There is a sense of fragility and vulnerability about *U Manik Raitong's* performance space but since its presence threatens the political space of *U Syiem*, a confrontation must take place. When this happens we see *U Manik Raitong* being fully prepared for it. Through his rigorous dedication to it *U Manik Raitong* has also been able to realize the physical dimensions of art, as it must exist at whatever cost, in society. Thus one perceives the visible presence of the upside down flute. Its metamorphosis into a cluster of bamboos with downward pointing leaves is a simple assertion of the kinaesthetic qualities of art, which must reflect change and growth. It is a statement effectively made for it demarcates its own space and enunciates its own terms.

In another way, but not entirely in a different context, one might choose to go beyond Khasi literature, to Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. She is a character who, in seventeenth century puritan America, is forced to pin the scarlet letter 'A' on her bosom as public censure of her adultery. Several decades later, when the author Nathaniel Hawthorne finds the letter, well preserved and tied up in a packet, and when he places it on his breast, he experiences a "sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 41). Hawthorne becomes the medium through whom Hester Prynne, icon of love and creativity in a patriarchal society, makes her story audible to others. It is a "tale of human frailty and sorrow" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p56), of the fall out of an adulterous relationship, of the unremitting will of the husband, Roger Chillingworth and of the prejudices of a bigoted society. It is a tale of transcendence and love and as in the story of

*U Manik Raitong*, it sets out to pose significant questions to society. Hester Prynne is a product of the patriarchal constructs of puritan America. She transgresses its laws but succeeds in making her stand as a woman and as an individual. A feminist in a male dominated society she expresses the right to love, to procreate and to nourish society with human resources. Where *U Manik Raitong* brings a son into the matrilineal set up, Hester Prynne bears a daughter who, in essence, reminds the patriarchal society of the time, of the indomitable stature of a woman. It is ironic that puritan America cannot easily dismiss her. It is also ironic that Khasi society has never really been able to do away with the enigma that is *U Manik Raitong*.<sup>6</sup> Much later in the tale, by virtue of her infinite compassion the letter that she wears on her bosom now signifies "Angel" rather than "Adulteress." Both stand out as icons of human complexity, not easily removed from society's view. In the final summing up one sees them as important yardsticks by which humanity is measured, only to be found wanting.

The story of *U Manik Raitong* raises issues that are close to the heart. It outlines *U Manik Raitong's* attempt to be true to himself and asserts the force of his convictions, which finds added justification in the transformation of the funeral pyre into a gushing spring. *U Manik Raitong's* death by fire symbolizes the end of the physical but immortalizes his restless search for meaning. The gushing spring charts out its unrelenting route into the remotest regions of the heart, and produces a sense of continuity in the image of its flowing waters. The elements of fire and water do not cancel themselves out but find meaning in the airy regions of space. The fire responsible for the elimination of the physical is replaced by the waters of regeneration, which are audible only in the more ethereal realms of space; wafted to future generations through the liquid tones of *U Manik Raitong's* flute. Growing beside the gushing spring the cluster of bamboos with downward pointing leaves bind up the loose ends of the story in a way that metaphorically refigures *U Manik Raitong's* walk three times

around the funeral pyre. United in death through the purifying element of fire, the story of *U Manik Raitong* and *Ka Lieng Makaw* remains linked to the upside down flute and to the mystiques of *U Manik Raitong*'s vision as it reaches an audience through the dynamics of love and creativity.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. U Rabon Singh, *Ka Kitab Jingphawar* (Shillong: Ri Khasi Press, 1908); U Primrose Gatphoh, *Ki Khanatang bad U Sier Lapalang* (Guwahati: Dispur Print House, 1980).

2. Refers to the Khasis and Jaintias.

3. Oral renditions from the Bhoi area tell about *U Manik Raitong*'s involvement with *Ka Lieng Makaw* before she was married to *U Syiem*.

4. Rafy, *Khasi Folk Tales* (Guwahati: Spectrum Pubs.1985), p.26-36.

5. Bina Lyngkhoi, *E.W.Dkhar's Ki Siej Khongpong: A Critical Study* (Shillong: 1999). Unpublished MPhil dissertation.

6. Many interpretations deal with the story in a moralistic way; refer for example, *Mawrie's Ka Pyrkhath U Khasi* (Nongkrem, 1987), p.94 which insists upon looking at it in a narrow and therefore, limited manner.

7. U Rabon Singh, *Ka Kitab Jingphawar* (Shillong: Ri Khasi Press, 1908).

8. U Primrose Gatphoh, *Ki Khanatang bad U Sier Lapalang* (Guwahati: Dispur Print House, 1980).

9. H.Onderson Mawrie, *Ka Pyrkhath U Khasi* (Nongkrem, 1987).

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11. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*. Signet Classic.

12. Sculley Bradley; R.C. Beatty, E.H.Long & S. Gross, *The Scarlet Letter* (New Delhi: Prentice hall of India, 1986).

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## 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,  
acid 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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