Little Nationalities: Writing in English in the North-East

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Abstract: This essay studies the narrative expressions in the fictional work of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*. I look at some of the region's common literary tropes, specifically the indigenous and ethnic representations, and examine how the multiple layers of linguistic expression and new narrative representation allow writers to engage with topics of oral and indigenous narrative. The essay brings the argument forward by addressing the problems of linguistic representation in the Indian postcolonial scholarship. The linguistic framework of writers like Salman Rushdie and Mitra Phukan and their idea of constructing "new Englishes" (Phukan 2013; Rushdie 1992) is adapted appropriately to work towards cultivating and maintaining a unique collective "Englishes".

Keywords: Indigenous literature, orality, language, postcolonial

> Every man is a story. Every nation is a bristling galaxy of stories. To be able to share one's story—shouldn't that be a basic human right? Where there is denial of the freedom to tell our stories, invisible prisons are created. The denial...violates our humanity. I believe that every story has its space in History.
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> —Easterine Kire, "Should Writers Stay in Prison? Of Invisible Prisons"

The above quote taken from a speech of Easterine Kire, delivered at the International PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) conference at Tromso, Norway, gives a good starting point for the discourse of this essay. The quote conveys a message of writers' basic right and need to express and engage with narratives, irrespective of the kinds of material they engage with. For Easterine Kire and many other writers from the North-East, it is the claim for a narrative space that allows them to tell stories of everyday experiences (social, cultural, political) and the tribal worldview they associate with. Alongside this claim is the necessity and need for literary expression and liberation in the process of telling a story of a community. This is particularly important for these writers as the creative process often involves multiple negotiation of maintaining balance between oral and written, myth and the contemporary, tradition and modernity, the pagan and believer, local and global, and therefore compels linguistic innovation to preserve the community's narrative in written form.

This quote also relates to Homi Bhabha's essay *The Right to Narrate* in which he talks of the process of cultural translation that takes root "by propagating and protecting what [he] calls the "right to narrate"—the authority to tell stories, recount or recast histories" (Bhabha 2014). Bhabha mentions the narrative right that has been a hesitant act for some writers and makes an important remark by asserting the need to give "authority to those speech-acts that are made under pressure, those disturbed and disrupted dialogues of

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humankind" (Bhabha 2014). This, to me, is a relevant exercise for contemporary writers from the North-East whose narrative is as yet to find a voice, acknowledgement and recognition outside of the geographical and discursive world of the North-East.

In this essay, I argue the necessity of finding a theoretical method that will aid in examining the aesthetic narrative of indigenous literary works of North-East. This involves translating orality into textuality, in the ironic context of having English and its global capital as its medium of communication. In carrying out such an attempt, I am cognizant of the problematic of English as a colonial language, which I address in the essay.

The essay looks at Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014). The select text is written originally in English and hence the process of translation and therefore mediation in the written form is not a conflict. I examine the linguistic pattern in the narrative of the text by borrowing the term 'transliteration' which I define, for the purpose of this essay, as the ability to create a comfortable space for shifting cultural borders and boundaries through the English language that is molded according to the individual needs of expression. Harish Trivedi's extensive contribution and engagement in translation studies leads to new perspectives on translation in relation to postcolonial societies. In his essay "Translating Culture Vs. Cultural Translation", Trivedi makes an urgent need to "protect and preserve some little space in this postcolonial-postmodernist world, where newness constantly enters through cultural translation, for some old and old-fashioned literary translation" (2005). This reflects Trivedi's concern, particularly, to the many indigenous languages of the world that are yet to be translated from the native ground and the fear of being translated "against our will and against our grain" (2005). I align myself with Trivedi's definition of translation as "an act of invention that produces a new original in another language" (Trivedi and Bassnett 1) and define 'transliteration' as a state of being able to express indigenous / ethnic lifestyle locally without having to follow a standard set of linguistic narrative.

Mitra Phukan notes a similar form of expression in her essay "Writing in English in the North East" where she talks of the several "Englishes" being forged in the work of writers in English from the region. Phukan's discussion is based on how writers' from the North-East, as compared to other Indian writers in English, exhibit a level of comfort and authority in transforming their narratives into their unique collective "Englishes" (Phukan2013). In the light of trying to ascertain what a folk or a mythical element is to the author and what may seem to be less ethnic to an outsider these writers shape the English language according to his or her own unique way, with the demands of the material that he or she is working with. Taking authors from two different states, Phukan says that the "diverse experiences of Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao, and the cultures they write from, inevitably shape the vocabulary, the cadences, even the sentence structures of their work, because of the different languages that they call their Mother Tongues" (Phukan2013). While inventing their own form of English is a Pan-Indian postcolonial phenomenon, the writers are making this transition from the oral to the literary without the mediation of another writing tradition. The discourse on this requires examining the approach of the writers from the North-East who write with an awareness of the community's socio-political realities and the needs and expectation of the local readership.

In terms of the narrative transition from oral to written and the shift from native to a global language, I examine the linguistic documentation and expression used to engage with themes are often indigenous in nature, that extensively and often exclusively discusses community- specific indigenous knowledge and ethics. A preliminary observation affirms that, 1) using the English language tool presents a dilemma of writerly

framework that these writers have to negotiate and in doing so produce texts that represent a perspective of national culture and ideology and 2) they have to often, due to linguistic constraints, exclude elements that may be unsuitable for expressions in English.

Postcolonial studies invites challenging grounds of discourse and inclusion, especially of literary works produced from smaller region, on questions of canonicity. The problem of postcolonial studies begin from trying to define the literal meaning of the term to challenging questions on which national literatures or authors can / should be justifiably included in the postcolonial canon. This uncertainty trails to a larger discourse in postcolonial scholarship on the problem of colonial language that constitutes a strong imperialist notion, which reduces other languages as unsuitable for carrying out literary dialogue. Language is often a central question in postcolonial studies. The linguistic assertion by the colonizers for wide implementation of their native language during the period of colonialization continues to govern postcolonial spaces including the contemporary literary world. In a succinct essay on postcolonial demotion of the native language titled "Language", Jennifer Margulis and Peter Nowakoski refer to Ngugiwa Thiong'o term "cultural bomb" (qtd. in Margulis and Nowakoski 1996) which relates to Ngugi's practice of English language in Africa and his departure from writing in English. The "cultural bomb" narrates the brutal process of "erasing memories of pre-colonial cultures and history and installs the dominance of new, more insidious forms of colonialism" (Margulis and Nowakoski 1996). What it also expresses is that the act of submitting to the colonizer's language is an indirect form of negating one's own culture and allowing history to be fabricated through foreign linguistic expression. Jennifer and Peter also talk of the dominance of the colonized language and how postcolonial writers are beginning to reciprocate it:

> In response to the systematic imposition of colonial languages, some postcolonial writers and activists advocate a complete return to the use of indigenous languages. Others see the language [e.g. English] imposed by the colonizer as a more practical alternative, using the colonial language both to enhance inter-nation communication...and to counter a colonial past through de-forming a "standard" European tongue and re-forming it in new literary forms. (Margulis and Nowakoski 1996)

This act of "de-forming" the European language in works of literature is a relevant exercise for contemporary writers from the North-East India or for any indigenous writer. The use of varied "Englishes",as defined by Mitra Phukan, in the narrative of literary works from the North-East is an apt reminder to deconstruct the myth of a standard language or a suitable narrative to define a 'good' work of literature. Salman Rushdie similarly proposes in working towards the idea of constructing "new Englishes". He says, "Working in new Englishes can be a therapeutic act of resistance, remaking a colonial language to reflect the postcolonial experience" (qtd. in Margulis and Nowakoski 1996) and further suggests an alternate way of deploying the colonizer's language in his book *Imaginary Homelands* (1992). He says that rather than ignoring or escaping from the use of colonial language (as Ngugi does by shifting from English to Gikuyu), the English language must be the starting point for postcolonial writers to solve problems that confront emerging independent colonies:

> One of the changes [in the location of Anglophone writers of Indian descent] has to do with attitudes towards the use of English. Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the opinion that we can't simply use the language the way the British did; that it needs remaking for

> our own purposes... To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. (Rushdie 17)

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) explore the ways in which writers encounter a dominant, colonial language. They describe a process that undergoes a dislocation of a standard language, which is replaced by a local variant that reflects a distinct cultural outlook. This process evaluates and exposes, through the literary texts, the history and culture of a community in a suitable English language. Ashcroft et al. use the term abrogation for such kind of delineation, which is explained as, "a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or "correct" usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning "inscribed" in the words" (37).

Literature from the North-East is largely born out of its traditional oral art form that defines the literary, socio-political and economic thought of the community. While this kind of literary narrative is new to the mainstream readers, indigenous writings across the world had always had a rich literary tradition which can be seen in the writings of Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, and part of African-American writings. In the literary works of North-East, the aspects of orality in the form of narrative comes through the cultural history evolved from a distinct account of myth and folklore. For example, Temsula Ao's poem "Stone- people from Lungterok [meaning six stones]" talks of the genesis of the Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland from the mythical six stones, a community of tribal people who believe themselves to have emerged out of the earth. Similarly, Mamang Dai's continuity and engagement in oral tradition is maintained with a strong notion that there is always history in our words, that the jungle is not just a patch of greens, that there are voices, that the rivers are not just a flow of water and that all this has a landscape (Publishing Next 2015).

These examples inform that language is closely connected to different cultural experiences and hence, it is only important and relevant to frequently revisit, reinscribe and deauthorize the imperialist notion. The need for language to find a valid platform for literary expression, that may not necessarily or readily fit into the larger national narrative and yet is indispensable at the same time to assert the importance of minor literature, reminds us of an expression from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987): "... make language stammer, or make it 'wail,' stretch tensors through all of language, even written language, and draw from it cries, shouts, pitches, durations, timbres, accents, intensities" (104). Similarly, in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Ngugi posits that, through language people not only describe the world, but also understand themselves by it. He theorizes the close relation between language and culture in the following description:

> Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world ... Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (16)

Ngugi uses the term mental universe in the essay to explain how "English became more than a language...and all the others had to bow before it in deference" (11). In relation to this, he expresses the negative impact on the imposition of foreign language by stating:

> the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a peoples culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized. (390)

The essay further determines the impact of the imperial power structure imposed on the colonizer by exterminating the essence of local. Ngugi narrates the colonial practice at the elementary school where the imposition of the English language affects the mental conscience of the young students and explains the definite reality of annihilation of nativity of the community:

> one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school...A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue...children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community...English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences and all other branches of learning. (386)

In "What is a Minor Literature" Deleuze and Guattari states, "A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language" (16). The objective of this argument is to deconstruct the idea of a major language that continues to be the central approach in classification of a good literary work. Beth Brant, an Aboriginal writer, puts a similar argument forward as she says, "Why is a white-European standard still being held up as the criteria for all writing? Why is racism still so rampant in the arts?" (qtd. in *Reading Native Literature* 8). This thought shares similar expression in the context of North-East writings that are often judged against the standard narrative technique of mainstream Indian literature. It is highly imperative to understand that a minor literature, irrespective of the language can be the start of a discourse.

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (hereafter mentioned as *WTRS*) is written in English and hence does not require translation. *WTRS* presents a narrative that allows the reader to explore a unique, almost mythopoeic, narrative of a tribal community in Nagaland. Importantly, Kire's use of words in the native language require the readers to be acquainted with the land and culture, as the mythological imagery of the book opens up to a setting that is intimately familiar to her. This familiarity of the book's narrative that is close to Kire's community and the 'English' language she chooses for expressing the ethnic elements can be interpreted as her choice of adopting the platform of literary production to registering an act of resistance. Kire's act of resistance develops in her narrative participation that denies an explanation and disassociates the task of acquainting readers to the tribal narrative.

The spirit world of the Nagas is immediately introduced in the novel and readers attend to Vilie's assuring explanation of the sleeping river which so far has only developed in his dream. This assurance affirms that the conviction of the community to the world of nature is not just a story that is passed on but is an aspect that journeys much beyond its mystic interpretation as these spiritual activities revolve around everyday lives of the people. Consider Vilie's description of the sleeping river, "When the river is asleep, it is completely still. Yet the enchantment of those minutes or hours when it sleeps is so powerful, that it turns the stones in the middle of the river bed into a charm. If you can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river and take it home, it will grant you whatever it is empowered to grant you" (3). The indigenous narrative of supernatural belief, which is a significant practice among the Nagas, finds a clear expression as Vilie encounters various people, situations and places that exude the 'other' power. The unique reverence and harmony that expresses the oral tradition is captured in a section from the book as Vilie trek through the forest:

> He tried to think of the rules of hospitality. If he took firewood or gathers herbs from the forest, he should acknowledge the owners. What was it his mother used to say when they had gathered herbs so many years ago? *Terhuomia peziemu.* Thanks be to the spirits...It was her way of pronouncing a prayer of thanksgiving to the provider, to *Ukepenuopfü.* (80)

Kire's narrative choice of the indigenous oral tradition come as a refusal to adopt the narrative mode of mainstream Indian novel as she emphasize on illustrating ethnic elements through her use of language, expression and themes.

The seminal book *The Empire Writes Back*(1989) mentions the political domination of the European imperialism and its effect on contemporary literature. As postcolonial study is a re-appropriation of content in language and literature, what it also does, as Ashcroft et al say, is that it replaces the hegemonic colonial discourse and rejects the process of the centre, by granting authenticity to the ones at the margins. One of the key measures to identify the problematic of the postcolonial in language and literature is to "decenter the assumptions of authority" (205) and make an essential shift in postcolonial literary theory by "re-placing of the hegemonic European discourse either by indigenous theory, the construction of 'indigeneity' and indigenous textuality—in which post-colonial theory is implicated...or by various 'strategies of subversion'". (Riemenschneider 205)

The challenge for writers from the North-East, who largely engage with local themes, is the continuous need to explain the importance of narratives that includes local essence. Writers from the region look at their embedded culture as a process of preservation and continuity of the people. This concept of continuity is essential given that the works, which can be placed under the category of realistic fiction, re-define permanence of culture and tradition. In an academic lecture titled "The Peripheral Imagination: Writing the Invisible India", Aruni Kashyap concisely talks about the narrative representation of literary texts from the region that is often more than just an imaginative story. He says:

> One of the most important mediums connecting different cultures is realist fiction. More we read about a certain people, community and the nation through their fiction, closer they become for us. (The Peripheral Imagination 2012)

This is precisely why texts such as *WTRS* is important to discontinue or at least blur for once, the quest for the great (North- East) Indian novel. The brilliantly executed ethnic details set an image of Nagaland that is primeval, distinctly local and universal at the same time. A section from the novel aptly establishes this as it discusses the world of spirits and its significance to the community. We take a look where Vilie recollects the seer's advice on the significance of the spiritual world, "Take your guns with you but use it sparingly. Sometimes the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder" (31). Such spirituality is expressed in the book through the mystical existence of the universe and the man's place in it where the spiritual world is recognized through the community's cultural knowledge, and its authenticity is vouched in the belief that this knowledge comes from the communal storehouse of belief. On the extensive presence of the otherworldly universe in *WTRS*, Kire defines the spiritual geography as a unique narrative to the body of her work:

> The spiritual is normally not so easily defined as this or that. The book opens up a complex universe where you find territorial spirits throughout the landscape whether it is in the forests or in the fields, all a recognizable part of Naga spiritual geography. The book is also about power, and learning to exercise spiritual authority. (qtd. in Sarman)

For most indigenous communities from the North-East English is the writing language. The English that they write in is not the same English as an author from the mainland would use. Therefore, writers from North-East face challenge as they not only have a very restricted use of language but also have to find a language for the wide range of indigenous topics that often has little or no theoretical vocabulary to capture its specificity. In his review of *WTRS,* Dibyajyoti Sarma mentions an important distinction that needs to be considered as he says:

> Most mainland India communities have their own languages and literature traditions. An author belonging to these communities has a tradition [of a diverse literary practice] to fall back on, whether or not the author wants to identify with it...For most Northeast authors it is a direct leap from the oral tradition to the English. (Sarman)

This leap from the oral to the English often requires scholars and writers to provide extensive footnotes and endnotes in an attempt to explain the North-East to the rest of the nation or in providing the context to the region's secessionist struggle.

In translating from oral to written or archiving the oral history in written, the thrust of these writers is not to sell North-East expression but it is a space for them to understand their own cultural distinctiveness and for the mainstream readers and scholars to be cognizant of the incompleteness of an Indian postcolonial genre without inclusion of the work from similar margins. This understanding and identification is crucial, especially for indigenous writers, as they seek a narrative to express and situate themselves in the current discourse of literary studies. Nirmala Menon's *Remapping the Indian Postcolonial Canon* (2016) reflects this approach as she seeks to establish a more representative and varied postcolonial discipline by locating the diverse literatures in "multiple postcolonial languages" (2). In relation to this she says:

> for postcolonial scholars, invested in understanding and creating a theoretical discipline of Postcolonialism, it is in our interest to enrich the field in order to expand the conversation multilingually...So it is less the need of Hindi (or Bengali or Kannada) to be heard in English than the postcolonial theoretical field's necessity "to hear" differently." (145)

While Menon deepens her stakes for an inclusive linguistic diversity of postcolonial geographies I make a similar argument between North-East literature and mainstream Indian literature to establish a ground to recognize the distinct indigenous vocabulary existing in the Indian literary postcolonial spaces.

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