

Writing Orality as a Postcolonial Strategy: A Reading of Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land*

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Oral narratives constitute an integral part of tribal cultures. For the tribal communities in North East India, these narratives serve as rich repositories of knowledge that are deeply rooted in the people's sense of identity and their view of the world around them. The oral literatures of the pre-colonial period are testimony of the beliefs and values that defined their identity as members of particular communities and as human beings. However, colonial encounters and the eventual coming of the English missionaries in the Northeast in the 1840s brought about drastic changes and alterations in the cultural and social setup of the tribal communities living in the region. The introduction of the written script and print culture, in particular, led to new practices and perspectives in their literary tradition.

Within the ambit of colonial discourse, in societies with a long history of written literature, the oral form "is generally identified with the illiterate and even the uncivilized" (Ao 104). Hence, tribal oral culture has oftentimes been misinterpreted by colonial discourse, which leads to identifying the communities as illiterate, ignorant, and backward. Tilottoma Misra argues that "the concept of the written word, especially in its printed form, being equated to modernity and progress, and the 'oral' being associated with a primitive, traditional, magical world, is a Western one" (25). What is apparent here is that the status of superiority given to the written text is inarguably linked to concepts of power and authority. Misra further explicates that "the colonial ethnographer often represented the colonized as being bedazzled by the superior technological advancement of the colonizers and the written records were considered to be the most potent emblems of power" (26). However, the contemporary reality is that many tribal communities continuously expressed strong resentment against "oppressive instruments" (Misra 25) like the written text as they have come to perceive it as a threat to the preservation of the pre-colonial traditional practices and values of their communities. Hence, contemporary writers from this region engage themselves with what the Naga poet Temsula Ao calls "writing orality" (107) as they employ the written mode in order to reinstate the value of the oral tradition and reconstruct their pre-colonial identity. They "rely heavily on elements from the oral traditions of the region" (Ao 106) while "creating a new literature of their own in a language which though not their own, nevertheless lend a kind of universality to the literature" (Ao 107). The essay will examine how the concept of writing orality is accomplished in *Boats on Land*, a short story collection by contemporary Khasi writer Janice Pariat. The stories in this collection attempt to disrupt the hierarchy of the textual over the spoken, a binary that Pariat believes is a colonial construct. The essay aims to show how the valorisation of the Khasi oral tradition in the text challenges the pre-established dominance of written literature.

The focus on reclaiming the importance of orality can be regarded as one of the key homogenising features in the writings from the Northeast. This is particularly evident in the poetry of the region. In her poem "An Obscure Place," Mamang Dai explores the oral tradition of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh. She writes, "The history of our race begins with the place of stories/ We do not know if the language we speak belongs to a written past." Similarly, Khasi poet Esther Syiem refers to the oral tradition as her identity, "I still chose to look upon you as the source of my identity from a distant time" (26). This shared passion, and objective is artistically expressed in the poem "The Old Story-teller" by the Naga poet Temsula Ao in which she asserts story-telling as a "proud legacy" and "primary treasure" (43) while simultaneously lamenting over the loss of the oral tradition in her community on account of her westernisation. In addition to this, many compilations of oral lores and folktales have emerged in recent years from writers of the different North East states, such as *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (2007) by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, *Handpicked Tales from Mizoram* (2008) by Margaret L. Pachuau and *Naga Tales: Dawn* (2017) by Achingliu Kamei to name a few.

Within this context, these written literary works can be read as expressions of resistance against prevailing colonial discourse, which glorifies writing and regards the spoken as a marker of primitive culture. The written literature from this region is, thus, marked by a mutual concern for the slow yet steady decay of oral culture and the attempt by postcolonial writers and citizens to retrieve the rich elements of orality which have been suppressed by the colonial discourse. In this manner, writings from the North East from different communities often express profound concerns for the imminent loss of traditional practices, customs, and values in the face of westernisation and colonial modernity.

Janice Pariat composes her works in English, the coloniser's language, but brings in the rich oral tradition of her community so as to create an awareness in the reader and evoke the power of the spoken word through writing. Writing orality, then, becomes an effective mode of resistance against the colonial construct of orality as a mode inferior to writing. The very act of utilising writing as a method of documenting oral histories, folklore, and beliefs signifies a reconstruction of pre-colonial identity and culture, thereby disrupting colonial discourse. In her essay "On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives," Mamang Dai asserts the importance of orality in sustaining the collective identity and lifestyle of the tribal community. Dai identifies orality as the bond that "links the individual to a group," which is "inseparable from the routine of daily life, the customary practices of a community" (4). Orality, therefore, functions as a crucial identity marker of individuals in the tribal community. This relationship between orality and community is further expressed by Esther Syiem, a Khasi poet, who states that the stories and tales from the Khasi oral tradition contribute more to building an individual's sense of identity in the community "than the one that history has bestowed upon him" (44).

Pariat's debut work, *Boats on Land*, is a collection of fifteen short stories published in 2014. The stories in this collection largely deal with the history, traditions, and cultural values of the Khasi society against a larger historical canvas. As in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Pariat infuses Khasi words and phrases in their original terms, and her work strongly challenges the imposed hierarchy of the written and the spoken. She not only attempts to glorify the dying oral tradition, but the stories are also heavily marked by what Misra calls a "mistrust of the written word" (27). Many of the stories suggest that Pariat equates writing with colonial power and the spoken word as an intrinsic part of tribal communities. This aligns with Ong's perception of writing as "an imperialist activity" because "though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever" (11). This authoritative characteristic of writing identified by Ong mirrors the cultural oppression exercised by colonial rule over tribal communities. Hence, in the stories in *Boats on Land*, Pariat attempts to rupture colonial discourse within which orality has always been disregarded as inferior to writing. From a postcolonial lens, it can be argued that writing orality enables writers like Pariat to take a postcolonial stance and 'write back' against colonial discourse in order to take back what was once lost and buried on account of colonialism. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin explicate the practice of 'writing back' as "the process by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture" (7). Writing orality also functions as a form of resistance, a common practice in postcolonial literature. By utilising the 'gift' of the coloniser, the written text, writers like Pariat have used it to assert the place of orality within the tribal communities of the Northeast in contemporary times. Ashcroft et al. further identify 'the obsession with origins' as an important aspect in the development of postcolonial studies (198). This engagement with 'origins' also includes an engagement with orality. What is noteworthy is that many of the stories in *Boats on Land* not only deal with orality as thematic content and subject matter but several of them are narrated in such a way as to evoke the mode and mood of story-telling.

Like the majority of the tribal communities in the Northeast, the Khasis underwent a gradual shift from a small oral-based community before their encounter with the British to becoming a Christian community under British colonial rule. Their first cultural encounter with the British colonisers was in the Burmese War of 1824 (Talukdar 27), and in 1841, the English

missionary Rev. Thomas Jones adapted the Roman script to write the Khasi language, thus laying the ground for the emergence of Khasi written literature. Since then, the extensive evangelical work of the missionaries beginning from the early nineteenth century continued to largely transform their cultural forms, especially their literature. Like many of their neighbouring communities, the Khasis did not have a script prior to the coming of Christianity. People solely relied on the power of the spoken word, known as the *ka ktien* in Khasi, for communication. Hence, the early history, traditions, and customs of the community are preserved and understood through woven oral narratives that existed in the pre-colonial domains; the spoken word protects their knowledge, preserves their culture, and shapes their identity. During colonial rule, the resistance against the imposition of the written script by the Christian missionaries was strong as the Bengali scripts and Assamese were “unintelligible to the Khasis” (Syiemlieh 518).

In *Boats on Land*, Pariat explicates this reliance on the spoken word of the Khasi community in the opening lines of her first story in the collection titled “Waterfall for Horses,” “We who had no letters with which to etch our history, have married our words to music, to mantras, that we repeat until lines grow old and wither and fade away. Until they are forgotten and there is silence” (2). These lines firmly locate orality at the heart of pre-colonial Khasi society and express its significance to the people’s understanding of themselves and the world around them. The stories heavily rely on the art of story-telling, the strong connecting link between man and nature, the strong belief in the supernatural as solutions and explanations to strange events, and most importantly, the power of the spoken word.

Set in and around Meghalaya and Assam, the stories in *Boats on Land* offer new insights into the world of India’s North East region, particularly the Khasi community in Meghalaya, by interweaving local and global events, myth and reality, the past and the present. The tales span a vast timeline from the British rule in India during the nineteenth century to Meghalaya’s accession to statehood in 1972 and the many political unrest which plagued the region in the late 1980s. Pariat employs magic, supernatural elements, and traditional Khasi beliefs to create stories about the Khasi people and their lives during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Most importantly, orality lies at the centre of these tales. Within this context, *Boats on Land* functions as a historical and cultural documentation of the communities in the region where readers are introduced into the world of tribal folklore, the supernatural, and traditional beliefs. Stories like “A Waterfall of Horses” and “Echo Words” challenge the constructed link between oral/ print culture and literate/non-literate societies and evoke the power of the spoken word.

In “A Waterfall of Horses,” the first story in the collection, Pariat valorises orality and artistically attempts to disintegrate the imposed hierarchy of the written over the spoken word, translated as *ka ktien* in the Khasi language. She writes:

For I mean not what’s bound by paper. Once printed, the word is feeble and carries little power. It wrestles with ink and typography and margins, struggling to be what it was originally. Spoken. Unwritten, unrecorded. Old, they say, as the first fire. Free to roam the mountains, circle the heath, and fall as rain. (Pariat 3)

These lines highlight the limitations of the written text and the impossibility of conveying certain aspects of reality through writing. On the other hand, the spoken word, in the form of *mantras*, is presented as a weapon that gives power to the powerless colonial subjects who have nothing but the ‘word’ against the guns and military power of the colonisers. The spoken word is associated with freedom and autonomy. The story, therefore, subverts the power relation between the spoken word and the written text as Pariat identifies orality as a free mode of expression that is not bounded by any restraints. This echoes Walter J. Ong’s statement that “oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing, never without orality” (8).

Set in a small Khasi village during the rule of the British Raj in the 1850s, “A Waterfall of Horses” tells a powerful tale of resistance of how the local people of Pomreng stood up

against the English soldiers posted in their village and eventually drove them out by chanting mantras and casting a spell on their horses. Central to the plot of the story is the strong traditional beliefs of the people in the power of mantras which, they believed, could bring harm to enemies. In the opening paragraph of the story, Pariat defines orality as “the perfect weapon for a crime. Light as pine dust. Echoing with alibis. Conjuring out of thin air, the ugly, the beautiful, the terrifying” (3). When the English soldiers started causing havoc in the small village and tortured innocent civilians, the village council sat down to do something about the soldiers, after which they decided to “fight them with words” (Pariat 22). The *mantra* chanted by the Nong Knia sent the soldiers’ horses “down the hill, a herd of savage horses, their bodies steaming, their manes flying out behind them” (Pariat 22). They ran straight to the waterfall, and as they leaped into the mist, “the pool at the bottom was the colour of blood for almost a week” (Pariat 22). Terrorised by the bizarre incident of the horses, the British soldiers eventually abandoned their camp in Pomreng. The chanting of the *mantra* by the village soothsayer, the *Nong Knia*, and the tragic consequences which followed signify the power of the spoken word. In this rich narrative, the spoken word is glorified as something deadlier and more powerful than the guns and military forces of the *bilati* men, a local term used to refer to the English soldiers. It is a tale of resistance against colonial forces, but what is significant is the way in which orality, an intrinsic cultural marker of the pre-colonial Khasi community, is being weaponised as the mode of resistance to drive out the English soldiers from the village.

Similarly, in “Echo Words,” the third story in the collection, Pariat highlights the powerful influence of the spoken word expressed through gossip and rumours and how they eventually ‘echo’ through the small community with frightening and even deadly consequences. The narrative is driven by the “ancient charms and mantras” uttered by one of the Khasi families, who were “still unconverted to the light of Christianity” (Pariat 55). The story begins with the arrival of the French lady who had come to Shillong to “write a book on the Khasis” (Pariat 49). During her stay in the small Khasi community, she is rumoured to have an illicit affair with Malcolm, a native Khasi who works for her as a translator. Malcolm’s in-laws are rumoured to have indulged themselves in traditional spells, magic, and mantras, which further resulted in the strange disappearance of the French woman and Malcolm. In this dark narrative, what is interesting is that readers are informed of the strange and bizarre incidents as they are recounted by the narrator, whose shop is the centre of the town gossip. Because “there was not much information to be gleaned about her” (Pariat 50), the identity of the French lady is largely constructed by the words of the gossipmongers, words powerful enough to cause harm and ruin her reputation within the community. The gossips and rumours become the only source of information that readers are presented with regarding the characters and the incidents in the story. Pariat draws characters like Mama Jos, who are equipped with “infinite wisdom and uncanny ability to pick up gossip” (Pariat 49). These gossips and rumours slowly take the shape of the truth as they are passed on from one person to another until they cause irreparable damage. In the story, words are equipped with magic and spells resulting in “a quiet civil war” in the small town (Pariat 57), and the people strongly believed that “old mantras worked even from great distances” (56). When the French lady and her translator Malcolm mysteriously disappeared, gossip and rumours about their affair occupied the town. Their disappearance was subsequently linked to the mantra chanted by Malcolm’s wife, Kong Banri, whose family was known to be *thlen* keepers.

In the story, Pariat does not hesitate to showcase old Khasi beliefs as powerful and deadly mediums, strong enough to ward off outsiders and inflict harm on anyone who brings disgrace to the members of the community. Alongside the valorisation of the spoken word, she also highlights the community’s strong resistance against the art of writing in the stories. The coming of the French lady, an anthropologist with an intention to ‘write a book’, is immediately perceived by the locals as a threat and a danger to the harmony and peace of the community. Among the many rebellions and resistance movements against colonialism during colonial rule in India, attempts to terminate symbols of power, such as written texts, were popular. This is evident in the historical accounts of colonial Assam, where “mistrust of the colonial project of documentation” (Misra 16) is very much present. We see a similar

sentiment in “A Waterfall of Horses” when the narrator’s mother tells her son about how she refused to be taught to read and write using the alphabet invented by the English because they have “no need for these things – books, and letters, and writing – and that everything (they) know about the world is in the sound of (their) words, *ki ktien*” (Pariat 12). The mother continued to explain that “there are mantras that hungry travellers can chant for an animal to appear before them so they can feed, and to bring clean water from a river, or fruit from a tree” (Pariat 13) and added that it was also powerful enough to bring harm to an enemy. This reflects the attitude of postcolonial Khasi society, where “there is still a distrust of the written as an alien intrusion” (Misra 24). In the Northeast, the art of writing was propagated to be more convenient and empowering for communication than the spoken word in order “to bring the region with its bewildering heterogeneity of tongues within a manageable system of government” and “to streamroll the differences between the varieties of tongues spoken in the region” (Misra 18). The natives were regarded as “pagans or barbarians and the colonizing power saw themselves as civilized, with an obligation to spread Christianity and civilization” (Talukdar 28). This condescending attitude of the British and their perceptions about the Khasis and the eventual turn of the power dynamics are clearly highlighted in Pariat’s stories. Hence, for writers of the Northeast, resistance also meant the preservation of their community traditions and customs, which the British, through their evangelical works, tried to erase. This is evident in “Echo Words,” where the small community of shopkeepers and traders express their disregard and annoyance against the French lady who has come to Shillong “to write a book on the Khasis” (Pariat 49). One of the local shopkeepers, Bah Lyngdoh, questions her intent and says, “Why?... Are we some rare, exotic animal species?” (Pariat 49). The European woman who has come “to write” is rendered powerless by the gossip and mantras uttered by the townspeople. Recognising the preference of the written over the oral as a colonial practice, Ashcroft et al. argue that writing “involves an entirely different and intrusive (invasive) orientation to knowledge and interpretation,” and “the invasion of the ordered, cyclic, and ‘paradigmatic’ oral world by the unpredictable and ‘syntagmatic’ world of the written word” (81). Pariat upholds this view of writing and documentation when she presents the French anthropologist as helpless and defeated in the face of the locals who represent the oral sources.

Pariat locates the oral tradition as an intrinsic part of the Khasi daily lives, where stories are told at every community gathering, especially in times of grief and sadness. Stating the centrality of the act of story-telling in the Khasi community, Kynpham Singh observes that the Khasis “have a story to tell about everything” (10) and that story telling served “the twin objective of instruction and entertainment” (11). It was a traditional practice for people to gather around the hearth and listen to the stories narrated by the elders. Pariat asserts this in the beginning of the story “Sky Graves,” where she writes, “Stories are told at festive, joyful gatherings, but the ones narrated at funerals are special because they reaffirm existence, of the listeners and the narrators” (145). In this story, she weaves an intimate tale of how the members of the community come together during funerals and tell stories “for the bereaved and the inconsolable” (Pariat 145) to offer comfort and peace. These stories, according to Pariat, signify “times of remembrance that haul the past into the present, and keep people alive even when they’re gone” (145). The act of story-telling in community gatherings like funerals is a common practice in pre-colonial tribal communities as story-telling is perceived to have a cathartic effect on the bereaved families and the members of the community present at the gatherings. Story-telling at gatherings denotes intimacy, care, and understanding within the community as it involves the act of narrating and listening simultaneously. “Sky Graves” begins with a funeral scene where people sit around the hearth listening to Bah Hem’s story. The unnamed narrator says that on such occasions, whenever Bah Hem begins his story, “the room would transform, assembled anew with words” (Pariat 146). Bah Hem’s gripping story is told in such a skillful manner that readers are pulled into the story as though we are part of the gathering listening to his story.

Apart from the valorisation of the spoken word and the practice of orality, elements from old Khasi traditional beliefs and folklore are artistically employed even in stories that deal with contemporary postcolonial settings, thus affirming the fact that there still exists a strong

bond between the tribal communities and their traditional beliefs even in the contemporary times. In “The Discovery of Flight,” Pariat presents Shillong as “a place small enough for everyone to be acquainted with almost everybody else” (223). It is in this close-knit community that rumours, gossip, and news thrive and spread like wildfire. In the story, the news about the sudden disappearance of a young man named Ezra, who went on a visit to his uncle in Sohra, “spread through living rooms and tea stalls across town” (Pariat 223). The landscape of Sohra is characterised by “sacred forest groves untouched for thousands of years,” and “suidtynjang – mischievous spirits that troubled travellers and led them astray” (Pariat 225). Through the theories and beliefs that the locals and the search parties came up with, Pariat throws light on the firmly established bond between traditional beliefs and the people, even in the postcolonial Khasi society.

Like many contemporary writings from the region, the stories in the collection are infused with supernatural tales and beliefs from the Khasi oral tradition. N. Scott Momaday points out that the oral tradition implies “a separate and distinct order of reality” that deals with “the realization of the imaginative experience” and not “an accurate representation of actuality” (222). These implications bear strong ties with the notion of supernatural beliefs being an intrinsic part of pre-colonial society. In tribal communities like the Khasis, the deep-rooted belief in magic, the supernatural, and the mystical was, to a large extent, a way of connecting with the natural world and making sense of the world around them. In the story titled “Sky Graves,” Pariat tells an interesting tale of how Bah Hem, the great hunter, killed a tiger whose death resulted in the ultimate death of one of the men in the village. An 80 year-old man who turned out to be the father of the dead man told Bah Hem, “They say all over this region — in Sohra and Jirang and other far-flung corners — there are what people call shape-shifters, men whose souls can inhabit animals...” (Pariat 162). In other cases, the belief in the supernatural also shaped their moral values, lifestyle, and social conduct. In stories like “Dream of the Golden Mahseer” and “At Kut Madan,” Pariat highlights how dreams encapsulate this ‘imaginative experience’ and foreshadow real incidents and tragedies that would take place. At the centre of these two stories is the disruption of the established boundary between the rational and irrational, thereby signifying a strong link between reality and the world beyond. The stories, therefore, challenge the logicity and order that characterised modernity. In “At Kut Madan,” a story set during colonial India, a local Khasi doctor in Sohra is consulted regarding the strange illness of an English girl named Lucy, the niece of a colonial administrator, who is plagued by her frequent dreams about golden eggs falling from the sky and a firebird. Lucy tells the Khasi doctor:

Kyntang told me that here dreams are as important as waking life. Do you believe that too? What does it mean? If you dream of being inside a firebird? It’s what I dreamed of... floating around there... a dazzling fire bird comes crashing down to earth, like a star that’s burst into a million flames. It drops fast, lower and lower, shrieking loud and clear. (Pariat 32)

Mr. Smithson, the girl’s uncle, refuses to believe that dreams are meant to foretell something and searches for a logical, medical explanation. He continues to seek the help of medical science in spite of the locals’ advice that the dreams signify imminent danger. However, the frightening dreams that haunt the English household foreshadow tragedies like the plane crash that happened a few days after the girl is sent back to London. The plane carrying English passengers crashed amidst the heavy storm, leaving no passengers alive, and the locals who saw the crash compared it to a firebird. By building a connection between haunting nightmares and tragedies that actually happened, Pariat unflinchingly legitimises the people’s faith in supernatural beliefs and reaffirms the significance of these beliefs in the daily lives of the Khasis. This also poses a challenge to Western rationality as the mystical, the otherworldly, and the extraordinary are embraced with ease to make sense of human existence.

For many tribal societies like the Khasis, supernatural and magical elements are not just simply tales passed from one generation to another but something strongly embedded in their psyches. It is through these traditional beliefs that they make sense of the world around them and find meaning in existence. In “Dream of the Golden Mahseer,” Puri, a water fairy believed to “trap men and take them away to their dwelling places underwater” (Pariat 74), is said to be responsible for the frequent disappearances of the narrator’s uncle, Mama Kyn. When Mena, one of the elders in the family, explained the works of the water fairy and how “they visit men at night” (Pariat 74), the entire neighbourhood quickly resorted to finding ways to ward off the mischievous spirit. In the story, Mena explained:

She must have followed him home from the river. Once that happens, he’ll always be under her spell... They’re beautiful creatures, these puri. People say they have waist-long hair and skin the colour of moonlight... The mischievous ones are alright, they don’t do much harm, they tempt and tease and only visit the men at night... but the malicious ones, they’re dangerous. They lead men to dangerous places, to cliffs and waterfalls, to whirlpools and deep lakes. (Pariat 74-75)

Following the advice of the elders, “a broom was always stationed by his door like a sentry on duty” (Pariat 76), which was meant to keep away the Puri. In stories like this, Pariat explores the relationship between the community and their loyalty to their traditional beliefs. The villagers did not seek any scientific or rational explanation but firmly believed that the strange disappearance of Mam Kyn was the work of the supernatural.

We see a similar narrative in “A Discovery of Flight,” where the community goes in search of a young man named Ezra amidst the fog-covered village of Sohra during the winter month. In the story, Pariat does not provide any logical disappearance to Ezra’s strange mannerisms and how he ended up dead on a cliff after months of searching. The story does not reveal the exact cause and manner of Ezra’s disappearance and his eventual death. Readers are faced with the dilemma of agreeing with any one of the many theories conjured by the locals in the story – “that he’s wandered into Lawkyntang, sacred forest groves untouched for thousands of years” or that “he had been whisked away by *suidjynjang* – mischievous spirits that troubled travellers” (Pariat 225). Similarly, when Bah Bremley suddenly vanished without a trace during his evening walk, it was believed by the locals that he had “wandered into the spirit world” and that “the tigers were his guardians and save him from death” (Pariat 226). Though the tale, in the case of the two disappearances, seems to oscillate between the possibility of accident and suicide, what Pariat attempts to explicate is the limitation of reason and rationality in the everyday experience of tribal communities and that there are things in life which cannot be explained with logic or reason. Several local search parties accompanied by police forces went in search of Ezra for many months but failed to come to any conclusion, leaving everyone, including the readers, baffled and perplexed. Likewise, in “Sky Graves,” the mysterious connection between the man-eating tiger and Kasa’s father, who died the moment the tiger was killed, lacks any kind of rational explanation. But Bah Hem, the narrator of the story, is a strong believer in the existence of shape shifters. As Kasa’s grandfather explains, “They say all over this region – in Sohra and Jirang and other far-flung corners – there are what people call shape-shifters, men whose souls can inhabit animals” (Pariat 162). If there are any scientific explanations or coincidental elements in the bizarre incidents in these stories, Pariat refuses to offer them as reason and rationality would diminish the value and significance of supernatural beliefs, which are very much part of oral culture. As aforementioned, the act of writing functions as a way of documenting these traditional beliefs, which, before the coming of print culture, had never been documented for the sake of record and preservation. Explicating the necessity of writing orality, Ong argues:

In the past few decades, the scholarly world has newly awakened to the oral character of language and to some of the deeper implications of the contrast between orality and writing.

The purely oral tradition or primary orality is not easy to conceive of accurately and meaningfully. Writing makes 'words' appear similar to things because we think of words as the visible marks signaling words to decoders: we can see and touch such inscribed 'words' in texts and books. Written words are residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit. When an often-told oral story is not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human beings to tell it. (Ong 11)

Within this context, writing is no longer necessarily perceived as a practice antithetical to orality but as a means to reconstruct pre-colonial tribal cultural values and practices. The narrator in "Echo Words" is a gossipmonger who is able to create a sense of awe and wonderment as he recounts the mysterious incidents that took place in the small town. As the story progresses, the reader assumes the role of an obedient listener who is pulled into the narrator's world of mantras, ancient charms, and magic. Stressing the importance of story-telling in tribal communities, Momaday rightly argues that story-telling is "imaginative and creative in nature...an act by which man strives to realize his capacity for wonder, meaning and delight" (88).

In the postcolonial Khasi community, and other communities of the region, there is a sense of cynicism against the written text, and many of the traditional institutions continue to exercise their authority using the oral form. In Pariat's stories about the Khasi society, information is passed on from one another through word of mouth. News about incidents and events gets circulated in tea shops, grocery shops, vegetable markets, and other public places. Like other writers from the Northeast, Pariat attempts to fix the gap created by colonialism between the written and the oral. As argued by Misra:

The oral discourses always tried to subvert the hegemonic colonial design to penetrate and map certain inaccessible areas of the tribal society where the spoken word continued to reign supreme. It is therefore significant that the new literature emerging from the region reveals serious efforts to present the spoken and the written as a continuum. (Misra 24)

In the stories in this collection, the colonisers or external forces are often portrayed as helpless and defeated in the hands of the local people who utilised old mantras and ancient charms to ward off external forces and intruders whom they regard as threats to the traditional system of society. The spoken word, which has always been marginalised by colonial discourse, is weaponised as a resistance tool against western education and literary interventions. Pariat not only glorifies orality but strategises it to strengthen a postcolonial stance against colonial modernity. Writing orality, thus, becomes a convenient mode for writers from postcolonial societies to 'write back' against colonial discourse, which tends to associate oral culture with barbarity. Taking Ashcroft's concept of 'writing back' within the context of orality, it can be argued that Pariat employs what Ashcroft et al. terms as "the seizing of the means of communication" (Ashcroft et al. 81) in order to establish the centrality of orality among the Khasi community.

Temsula Ao rightly argues that writing orality "transforms the oral tradition through recollection, inclusion, inversion and reinterpretation." Writing orality also "provides new artistic and theoretical framework for exploration of ancient oral literatures, which had hitherto been consigned to the realm of the 'primitive' and the 'uncivilised' by anthropologists and historians alike" (Ao 109). The rich oral tradition of the Northeast offers impetus to writers in the region to produce new literature with different dimensions, which further helped readers to reclaim the significance of cultural practices and values. Contemporary writers from the Northeast are inspired by the need "to articulate the anguish of a community at the loss of traditional culture for the sake of 'modernity'" (Misra 23). They rely heavily on orality as the foundation on which tribal community rests.

As aforementioned, even in narratives that do not deal directly with the act of oral transmission, analogies are drawn from the oral culture, which led to the emergence of the fusion of the written and the oral. This literary trend is becoming increasingly popular among Northeast writers who are strongly inspired by the need to preserve their community values and identity. It is in such a climate of revived awareness that writers like Janice Pariat sustain the continuity of the oral tradition through their writings, thus becoming what Ao calls “the literate, educated inheritors of the [oral] tradition” (100). For these writers, the act of inscribing orality on paper through writing is not only an attempt to revive a dying cultural practice but a mode of resistance against colonial discourse.

In spite of the revival of oral narratives in tribal communities, the rapid development in literary publishing cannot be ignored, especially with the advancement in digital technology. This echoes Margaret L. Pachuau’s statement that “literacy has opened possibilities to the world and human existence in such a manner that is deemed unimaginable without writing as a form” (Pachuau 201). Oral narratives help in the reconstruction of pre-colonial history, and it is imperative that we perceive orality and writing not as antithetical concepts but as an effective fusion that will continue to aid in community preservation. Explicating the relationship between the oral and the written, Alessandro Portelli also argues that “written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive” and that they have “a common characteristics as well as autonomous and specific functions which only either one can fill” (97). Writing orality, hence, signifies the rewriting of tribal history wrongly constructed by colonial discourse and a more authenticated documentation of the community’s rich cultural knowledge and heritage that have long been undermined by colonialism. It is no wonder that in many parts of the Northeast region, in spite of the growth of Christian beliefs and modernisation, members of a community are still quick to turn to pre-colonial beliefs, myths, and legends for solutions to problems and answers to strange occurrences and incidents. Mamang Dai observes that “the legend of U Thlen is still very much alive in Meghalaya” and that “in the dim, rain-wet hills of Sohra, better known as Cherapunjee, it is not difficult at all to conjure up the shadow of the serpent and hear the ghostly beat of a drum” (5). Hence, it is apparent that the stories, myths, and legends that make up the oral tradition of a particular community still bear strong relevance in the people’s sense of identity about themselves. Stressing the centrality of orality in shaping the community, she further argues, “We are here today as members of a particular community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we reposed belief in the ‘word’ as composed in our myths and legend” (Dai 4).

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