

**STORIES OF SURVIVAL & PERSEVERANCE: AN EXERCISE IN
TRANSLATION, SILENCE & DIALOGUE**

by

SUBHRALEENA DEKA

(Under the Direction of Carolyn Jones Medine and Peter O'Neill)

ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the ethical dimensions of cultural exchange and engagement with marginalized communities in Northeast India, utilizing philosophical frameworks from Ricœur, Levinas, and others. It argues for a fundamental shift away from superficial interactions towards genuine ethical dialogue, emphasizing the crucial roles of translation, imagination, rememory, linguistic hospitality, and the recognition of the inherent value of diverse narratives. Through in-depth analyses of literature, cultural practices, and historical experiences, the work illuminates the power dynamics that perpetuate misrepresentation and exclusion, advocating for a more just and equitable approach to cross-cultural encounters. It critiques the consumption of survival stories as mere entertainment, urging a transition to meaningful dialogue and a celebration of alterity, while also challenging the dismissal of marginalized narratives and advocating for a world where ethical responsibility and imagination guide our interactions with the “other.”

Index Words: Interdisciplinary, Languages, Literature, Northeast India, Marginal,
Minority, Ethics, Translation, Culture, Cultural exchange, Interactions,
Imagination, Rememory, Linguistic Hospitality, Dialogue

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2025

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August 2025

Acknowledgments

With the fullest gratitude from the depths of my heart and being, I dedicate this acknowledgement to those who have illuminated my path and sustained my spirit through the arduous yet profoundly rewarding journey of this project and my doctoral degree.

First and foremost, to my beloved husband, Andrew, whose unwavering love, boundless support, and constant inspiration have been the very bedrock of my existence. You saved my life, dear Andrew, and it is your steadfast belief in me that made the completion of my Doctoral degree possible. In moments of doubt, when the external world sought to silence, misrepresent, invalidate, betray, and "other" me, you were the unyielding force that kept me from wavering, always inspiring me to persevere. Through your partnership, I have been able to indulge in the deeply powerful act of bearing witness and giving voice to the marginalized, a testament to your profound impact on my work and my soul.

To my cherished parents, Navanita and Amarendra, and my dear brother, Angshuman, along with our extended family: your never-ending love, fervent prayers, and unwavering support have been a constant beacon through both the darkest and brightest of times. You have witnessed my best and my worst, yet stood firm, especially my parents and brother, who bore witness to a broken daughter and sister, and still persevered with unshakeable resolve. To my in-laws, Amy and Robert, and my brother-in-law, Stephen, your embrace and consistent support have been a true blessing. A

heartfelt thanks to my all my Grandmothers, the Dekka one, the Simmons one, and the Lawley one, for their powerful prayers that God cannot refuse to pay heed to!

My heartfelt thanks extend to my incredible friends across the globe—Rajat, Lubna, Himanshi, Ayush, and so many others—for simply being yourselves and for helping me navigate the toughest passages. You are more than friends; you are my extended family. To my 706-Athens, Georgia family at Beef O' Brady's, without whom attaining this degree would have been unimaginable: you are truly the best personification of what family not by blood should be, and I am profoundly privileged to be included in your embrace.

And to my furry companions, Barry and Scout, your innocent love and unwavering presence were a gentle comfort. You never left my side during the odd hours of day and night as I poured my heart into these pages, offering silent, unconditional support.

I am immensely grateful to my old mentors and new ones, each of whom has been instrumental in guiding me to this significant milestone. A special debt of gratitude is owed to Dr. Carolyn J. Medine, whose strong belief in my abilities and profound guidance in life have left an indelible mark. To my Doctoral committee, thank you for your invaluable insights and dedication.

Finally, to the myriad twists and turns of fate, for their marvelous perils and unexpected joys, and for the grandiose tapestry of it all that has shaped this journey.

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Preface

Since 2016, I have been trained to compare literatures and literary contents that have “comparables,” as Ricoeur and Levinas would call them.¹ My work compares survival stories about alterity, imagination, social leadership and responsibility, translation of cultures/knowing the other, and related ethics. Engaging with alterity is a process of mutual learning and growth. We can learn from the experiences, perspectives, and values of others, and, in turn, share our own insights and experiences.

My study foregrounds the power of the imagination that gives ordinary people, powerful in their own ways, the ability to persevere for the “other” and to have the potential to understand alterity in a practical way. Lack of Imagination is a shortcoming in being able to understand and to sympathize with the “other” in daily life. More important, lack of imagination leads to the non-reception of alterity by the powerful-- social leaders, writers, and majoritarian academics—who may fail to engage in dialogue with the “other” and who may conform to normative means of categorization, thereby limiting the individual and collective imagination of those they view.

When I was a young undergraduate in 2012 in Delhi University, in India, I learned not to make my ethnicity and statehood a commonly shared fact. Why did I come

¹ For Levinas, the “incomparable” essentially relates to the infinite, irreducible alterity of the Other, whose face breaks through our totalizing conceptual frameworks and resists towards homogenization into categories of sameness. Ricoeur, while acknowledging the unique and unrepeatable (the “incomparable”) within human experience, particularly in the realm of narrative identity and the self’s relationship to time, often seeks to bridge this with the “comparable” through interpretation, metaphor, and the pursuit of meaning.

to this conclusion? It happened that one day I was talking to a fellow country man (one employed by one of the most prestigious Universities in the nation) in fluent Hindi,² and after learning where I was from, said the following statements and asked me the following questions:

“Do you understand Hindi?”

“I heard young girls are made to go in a room and be locked up with men and boys.”

“You guys eat insects and stuff, right?”

“You have nothing to worry about. You are in civilization now.”

He went on to try to explain to me why he thought Hindi was the greatest language and why I should also respect it and treat it as such.

Later, on the same day, when I went out apartment-hunting with fellow students, everyone else around me was getting accommodation faster than I was. Most landlords and landladies wanted me to promise that I “would not eat or cook non-vegetarian” in the apartment kitchens because it will “make the house impure,” and it is “sin to eat non-vegetarian food.” There were some who simply would not even consider my application because I was from Northeast India.³ Since I was a girl from Northeast India, I am “definitely characterless, fooled around with boys, partied hard and would bring shame

² Hindi language learning was part of my school education. And I grew up reading, speaking, writing four languages, not to mention interacting in various dialects of some of those languages.

³ “As he searched the length and breadth of the varsity campus and other surrounding areas for accommodation, he was either turned away or asked for an exorbitant amount as rent — nearly twice the normal charge.”

‘I had to pay Rs 11,500 for a room that was available for Rs 6,500 to students from this part of the country. I found this accommodation in the Vijay Nagar area after searching for nearly one month,’ he said.” See Das and Joshi. “Delhi Won’t Lend a Home to Students from Northeast.” *Hindustantimes.com*. Hindustan Times, 2013, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/delhi-won-t-lend-a-home-to-students-from-northeast/story-kNXXvaU4C0CgiObnADzImK.html>.

upon the neighborhood” if they let me rent from them. One of my friends suggested that I lie about not cooking “non-vegetarian,” but it was my stubborn attitude that would not let me lie and be an enabler of ruthless discrimination.

I eventually found accommodation where I was “allowed to cook eggs” because the landlady’s doctor told them that eggs are necessary for kids, especially for protein deficient children and that the landlady should understand the importance of eggs. Their young son, who was two years old, needed protein, and their staunch vegetarian diet failed to provide him that protein. Whenever I would cook eggs for myself, I would cook some for the young boy of two as well, since his mother, my landlady, wanted to make sure her son was not protein deficient but did not want to cook the eggs herself because doing so was against her “religion,” the same religion in which I was reared in a different region of the country.

More importantly, I understood that food habits are based on geographic and climatic conditions and depended on what was available in abundance, historically speaking. The prejudices that I experienced are very common, and nothing has changed, even today, as an excerpt from a 2023 newspaper report reveals:

Ana (name changed to protect identity and ensure safety), a 22-year-old freelance writer from Assam who had come to the party to visit a friend, calls the neighbour a “belligerent drunk.” She mentions that the neighbour had run into confrontations with them previously as well and passed derogatory statements at the party, saying: “Why do so many prostitutes come here? Is there some prostitution going

on here?” Ana posted about the entire “racially targeted and xenophobic” incident early Saturday morning on X.⁴

After going through so much discrimination in less than a month of residing in the capital of the largest democracy of the world, I made up my mind that I would endure all of this and make sure that the stories of perseverance and survival of my people are heard by people all over the world. I have always been very passionate about the languages, cultures, festivals of Northeast India, in general, but my experiences in Delhi certainly motivated me to keep on going, especially for the sake of those who could not, for reasons out of their control. My parents could not afford to provide me with the funds to have the safest of accommodations and to eat even two square meals a day. So, I had to start working on the side to support my education and accommodations in Delhi.

Such experiences are why I continue my research on communities that are ostracized, the ones in Northeast India, and compare their struggles and perseverance with other such communities around the world.

A dialogue, engaging with alterity, can lead to personal and societal transformation. By encountering different perspectives, we can challenge our own assumptions and develop a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the world. The crux of my work concerns the role of alterity in survival and perseverance in the Northeast Indian region. I call upon my readers to address alterity ethically. I analyze the ethical stance in relation to and in comparison, with examples of those considered “other” around the globe. For my data, I draw from personal stories, newspaper articles, books,

⁴ See Monami Gogoi. “*What’s your rate* — Northeast women still have it bad in Delhi. Nothing has changed in 9 yrs.” The Print, 2023, <https://theprint.in/feature/whats-your-rate-northeast-women-still-have-it-bad-in-delhi-nothing-has-changed-in-9-yrs/1854316/>.

research papers, and research studies to document plurality, diversity, and the need for respectful dialogue in everyday encounters and exchanges, dialogue leading to respect.

The goal of my work is not to locate Northeast India in current classifications, such as the “Global South” or “cultural studies,” but, rather to regard my work on that region as a body of work that avoids broad categorizations in order to acknowledge significant internal diversity within regions and avoid oversimplification.

While Amartya Sen, Gayatri Spivak, Ngũgĩ Thiong’o, Megha Mazumdar are key voices engaging the “Global South,” I argue that a vast and diverse nation, like India, with significant internal differences in terms of economic development, political systems, cultural traditions, and linguistic and social structures requires a more nuanced analysis in relation to each region. Some categories and Euro-centric concepts can homogenize the experiences and perspectives of diverse populations within the “Global South,” obscuring important internal variations and contradictions. The term itself can be seen as a product of Eurocentric thought, reinforcing a global hierarchy with the Global North at the center, which forces scholars within such frameworks to pick only one side of the duality, ignoring the, often, messy middle.

Moreover, Mihai Spărișu in his *Remapping Knowledge: Intercultural Studies for a Global Age* (2006) points out that

the field of cultural studies, at least as it is largely practiced today in the West and its former colonies, is hardly in a position to offer any viable solutions for advancing global intelligence. On the contrary, it tends to inhibit such advancement, with its perennial oppositional discourses that are continuously co-opted by the very forces it allegedly struggles

against [adding these words here because UGA Grad School ETD thought this was a widow/orphan].⁵

Spariosu's book highlights a critical concern within contemporary literary studies – the potential loss of its unique identity and value in the face of increasing interdisciplinarity and the influence of social science methodologies. The adoption of utilitarian and quantitative methods from the social sciences threatens to dilute the core focus of literary studies, which traditionally involved close textual analysis, critical interpretation, and engagement with philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of literature. This shift in focus can make literary studies appear less distinct and valuable, particularly to administrators who prioritize measurable outcomes and societal impact. Scholars need to articulate the unique contributions of literary studies, emphasizing its capacity to cultivate critical thinking, enhance empathy, and deepen our understanding of human experience and culture. This can involve finding new ways to demonstrate the value of literary studies to broader audiences, including policymakers and the general public.

The pressure to justify its existence and demonstrate its relevance in addressing broader societal concerns can lead to anxiety and insecurity among literary scholars. This anxiety can manifest in various ways – demoralization and cynicism, career shifts, defensive or aggressive apologetics, and internal polarization. Some scholars may overcompensate by asserting the absolute primacy of literature and its capacity to encompass all aspects of human experience, leading to potentially extreme or even absurd claims.

⁵ Mihai Spariosu, *Remapping Knowledge: Intercultural Studies for a Global Age* (Berghanan: 2006), p. 2.

Dr. Spariosu was a great man, scholar, mentor who is sorely missed by his beloved students, and a great friend of Mircea Eliade. May his soul Rest in Peace!

The focus is not on one body of literature; rather, it is to look at literature from India's Northeast as part of a larger plurality of stories of alterity. My "Preface" argues that this study is not just a work of scholarly writing, but also my way of life. I was born and raised by survivors, and this reality is reflected in my arguments about the power of the imagination. It also is reflected in my writing style and voice which involve a process of understanding alterity and its complications. Key thinkers, like Friedrich *Hölderlin*, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, E. V. Ramakrishnan, Temsula Ao, Walter Benjamin, and Friedrich Schleiermacher have laid the foundation for my thinking.

The word "exercise" in the title of my work suggests bringing a theoretical framework to my experience and to the literature that I am reading in order to analyze deliberately in order to clarify my research questions to make my work available and accessible to readers from various levels of understanding. Given that my work addresses a misunderstood and "othered" community, I am consciously critical of the normative theoretical frameworks that I utilize, deconstructing as well as applying them in the face of the complexity of alterity. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 deal with these issues, while, at the same time, emphasizing the importance of imagination and seeking common ground for dialogue.

It is crucial to recognize that the dismissal of marginalized narratives echoes a dangerous pattern: the inability of dominant forces to understand or value experiences outside their own frameworks. This refusal to engage with "other" stories has profound consequences, not just for the individuals whose voices are silenced, but for our understanding of literature and history itself. Literature attains "global" or "world" status when it is recognized as literature and circulates beyond its culture of origin, a process

largely shaped by print-based institutions like the publishing industry. However, this global reach is deeply intertwined with political and capitalist forces, including imperial expansion and profit-driven publishing, which often privilege dominant languages and narratives. This can create a "translation gap" and marginalize diverse voices, highlighting how the politics of recognition and market dynamics significantly influence what literature is deemed "world" worthy. Ultimately, the dismissal of certain narratives perpetuates inequalities, underscoring the need for ethical engagement with diverse literary traditions.

We readily acknowledge the rich tapestry of oral traditions that have shaped our literary canon. Works like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Upanishads* were, for centuries, passed down through spoken word before being committed to writing. This preservation, while beneficial, highlights a stark double standard. We celebrate these foundational texts while simultaneously discounting contemporary oral narratives, particularly those emerging from marginalized communities.

This disparity reveals a deep-seated bias. The literature of my own region, for instance, often escapes recognition because it does not conform to Western expectations of genre. Colonialism has played a significant role in this selective validation, privileging certain narratives while actively suppressing or just ignoring others. To deny the same respect and authority to these "other" spoken words is to perpetuate a form of disenfranchisement, favoring the normative at the expense of authentic, lived experiences.

As Spariosu observes in *Remapping Knowledge: Intercultural Studies for a Global Age* (2006), the “empiricist heckles” against ethnographic accounts, labeling them as subjective “fictions,” reveal a fundamental misunderstanding. Following James Clifford, we must re-evaluate our understanding of “fiction.” These stories, even if they deviate from established norms, offer invaluable insights into diverse cultures and perspectives. To disregard them is to impoverish our understanding of the human experience and to silence voices that deserve to be heard

as commonly employed in contemporary textual theory, no longer means falsehood, or the mere opposite of truth. Rather, it “suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive.”⁶

In this sense, “even the best ethnographic texts—serious true fictions—are systems or economies of truth.” Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control (2006).

Just as a translator grapples with the challenges of conveying meaning across linguistic boundaries, we encounter challenges when trying to understand and connect with people who are different from us. Cultural encounters, including translation, by highlighting the limitations and possibilities of communication, can help us develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of dialogue with alterity.

⁶ See James Clifford and George E. Marcus, editors. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press, 1986; 2010, p 2.

Introduction

Stories of Survival & Perseverance: An Exercise in Translation, Silence & Dialogue critically examines and fundamentally argues for a re-evaluation of ethical dimensions of cultural exchange and engagement with marginalized communities, particularly those in Northeast India, employing philosophical frameworks from Ricœur, Levinas, and others to argue for a fundamental shift from superficial interactions toward genuine ethical dialogue. Moving beyond superficial interactions, it calls for genuine ethical dialogue, emphasizing vital roles of translation, imagination, rememory, and linguistic hospitality. The **core thesis** posits that by recognizing the inherent value of diverse narratives, we can challenge power dynamics that perpetuate misrepresentation and exclusion. Ultimately, fostering a more just and equitable approach to cross-cultural encounters. It critiques the commodification of survival stories as mere entertainment, urging a profound shift towards meaningful dialogue and a celebration of alterity, where ethical responsibility and imagination guide our interactions with the “other.”

The **methodology** of this study is interdisciplinary, weaving together philosophical **frameworks** from the likes of Paul Ricoeur (for hermeneutics, narratives, memory, and translation), Emmanuel Levinas (for ethics and encounter with the Other), Toni Morrison (for rememory and its connection to history and identity), and E. V. Ramakrishnan (for his contribution to positioning Indian Literature in a global context). It also draws upon a rich tapestry of literary analysis, cultural critique, and historical

context, particularly focusing on the unique experiences and expressions from Northeast India.

It asserts that translation, imagination, rememory, and linguistic hospitality are crucial in recognizing the inherent value of diverse narratives and challenging the power dynamics that perpetuate misrepresentation and exclusion. Ultimately, this work advocates for a more just and equitable approach to cross-cultural encounters by critiquing the consumption of survival stories as mere entertainment and instead urging a transition to meaningful dialogue, a celebration of alterity, and a world guided by ethical responsibility and imagination in interactions with the "other."

This dissertation is **structured** into six chapters, each building upon the preceding one to develop a comprehensive argument.

Chapter 1, titled "Politics and Translation of Literature," undertakes a rigorous examination of the intricate relationship between translation (both literal and cultural exchange) and ethical contestation, drawing extensively upon the profound philosophical insights of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur's sophisticated framework, particularly his seminal concepts of the "untranslatable" and the imperative to construct "comparables," provides an indispensable critical lens through which to analyze the multifaceted complexities of cross-cultural communication, with a specific focus on the rich and diverse landscape of Northeast Indian literature⁷. This chapter posits that translation is far from a neutral linguistic exercise; rather, it functions as a potent site of ideological struggle, where entrenched power dynamics can subtly or overtly distort, marginalize, and even subjugate the source culture's narratives. The chapter discusses how the growing body of English

⁷ Literature emerging from Northeast India and produced by Northeast Indians.

writings from Northeast India, by authors like Janice Pariat, Temsula Ao, and Easterine Kire, creates micro sites of cultural exchange, offering unique worldviews that resist being read solely through an outsider's lens. At the core of Ricoeur's contribution, as explored herein, is the crucial recognition that translation is not an elusive pursuit of perfect equivalence, but rather an ongoing and ethically charged negotiation across distinct linguistic and cultural divides, inherently fraught with limitations and significant responsibilities.

Building upon this foundation, the chapter further delves into the nuanced concept of translation as a powerful force for either cultural assimilation or profound resistance, particularly when dominant languages and their attendant narratives inadvertently impose their structures upon historically marginalized ones. It rigorously explores the ethical implications of potential misrepresentation that can arise when translators, consciously or unconsciously, perpetuate harmful stereotypes or diminish the intrinsic authenticity and vibrancy of the original text. Through a meticulous critical analysis of specific, illustrative examples drawn from the unique literary traditions of Northeast India, this chapter endeavors to illuminate the inherent challenges and pressing responsibilities in cross-cultural translation. It critiques how the mainstream Indian literary scene often overshadows marginal voices and how, historically, Rabindranath Tagore's exclusion of Northeast India from the Indian national anthem *Jana Gana Mana* reflects a deeper political marginalization, highlighting the translation gap and other power dynamics within publishing as well.

It passionately argues for an ethical approach that steadfastly prioritizes linguistic hospitality and unequivocally recognizes the inherent dignity and value of cultural

difference. Ultimately, Chapter 1 **meticulously lays the essential theoretical groundwork for understanding translation as a formidable tool, capable of either perpetuating epistemic violence or, conversely, fostering genuine, empathetic ethical dialogue, thereby setting the comprehensive stage for the subsequent chapters’ deeper, more focused explorations into specific case studies and their practical theoretical applications within the broader context of this study.**

Chapter 2, titled "Translation and the 'Other'," deeply investigates how the concept of translation—encompassing both its linguistic and cultural dimensions—provides a crucial framework for comprehending the intricate dynamics of “othering” and belonging within Northeast India. This chapter endeavors to reveal the profound ways in which communication and interpretation can either exacerbate division or cultivate genuine cross-cultural understanding. Building upon this premise, it critically examines the historical and contemporary intersections of prejudice and publishing, drawing significantly from Giorgio Agamben's philosophical insights. Agamben's work is introduced to explore how translation might serve as a powerful method for dismantling the “state of exception,” a condition he investigates where individuals or groups are excluded from legal and social protections, thereby highlighting translation's ethical and political ramifications. The chapter further contends that the language of translation, whether concerning cultures, identities, or linguistic forms, can be misused by influential figures such as writers, translators, publishers, educators, or politicians to perpetuate this 'state of exception' and foster the marginalization of entire communities. It also focuses intently on Northeast India, utilizing the concept of "translation"—both linguistic and cultural—as a crucial framework to understand the complex dynamics of 'othering' and

belonging within this diverse region. The chapter reveals how communication and interpretation directly impact whether divisions persist or genuine understanding is fostered among its varied communities. It also explores how influential figures can manipulate the language of translation, concerning cultures and identities, to perpetuate the marginalization of communities within Northeast India. Furthermore, the chapter illustrates these challenges through specific examples, including regional narratives like the story of *Tejimola* (a story of a young girl's perseverance in the face of oppression, a compelling example of how cultural narratives passed down through oral tradition, and later translated into written forms) in Assam, which is part of Northeast India's rich cultural tapestry.

Moreover, this chapter underscores that ideas possess significant power, and translation acts as a vital conduit for their circulation. It also critically analyzes the 1785 translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, showing how it attempted to align a sacred Indian text with Christian theology, thus othering it by reducing it to a curiosity that is a mere similarity of sorts to the Bible, and serving a colonial agenda rather than respecting its truly inherent value. It illustrates this by referencing historical examples, such as Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin, the Vulgate, and the other translations of Northeast Indian literature. A central concern is the inherent risk that the original meaning of a text may be compromised or lost during translation, particularly when a translation is made to serve the interests of a dominant state, potentially leading to the exclusion and dehumanization of the "other" - a state Agamben refers to as *homo sacer*. Ultimately, Chapter 2 probes a fundamental question: Can translation truly open doors and foster inclusion, rather than perpetuating the exile of the "other"? By exploring the thoughts of

scholars like Antoine Berman and Friedrich Hölderlin on the encounter between the “national” and the “foreign,” the chapter navigates the profound dangers and transformative possibilities inherent in the act of translation, advocating for a mediating space where diverse perspectives can genuinely confront and enrich one another.

Chapter 3, titled "Imagination with Respect to Survival: In Relation to Sites of Translation/Exchange," embarks on an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted nature of human imagination. This chapter posits that imagination serves as a powerful force for engaging with realities beyond our immediate experience, capable of fostering understanding through critical or compassionate engagement with the "other." It examines imagination's capacity to contemplate absent or non-existent objects, thereby liberating us from the confines of instantaneous reality and transporting us to mental worlds. Building on Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory, the chapter highlights how imagination empowers individuals with a profound sense of freedom, enabling them to transcend the limitations of the actual and the real by structuring our understanding of reality and shaping perceptions of self and others through narrative. It acknowledges that imagination can simultaneously lead one to flee the world or to shape it. Northeast India, with its complex history of cultural exchange and survival amidst conflict, provides a compelling backdrop for this exploration, demonstrating how imagination becomes a vital tool for communities to navigate their identities and histories. Imagination can foster understanding, but also be toxic when influenced by prejudice, leading to the othering of communities, like Northeast Indians facing ethnic slurs like “momo” or “chinky,” and the Union Tourism Ministry’s “Paradise Unexplored” advertisement campaign for the entire region, a whole seven states.

Furthermore, this chapter delves into the ethical complexities introduced by encounters with the "other," where the presence of alterity can disrupt the self's perceived power. It investigates how narratives are crucial for both shaping understanding and enabling survival, with rememory acting as a vital mechanism for confronting historical trauma and asserting collective identity. The chapter also addresses the Husserlian paradox of subjectivity, which underscores the inherent limitations of our own perspectives and the dangers of projecting biases onto the "other." It highlights how acts of violence can cripple the imaginative faculties of perpetrators and force victims to retreat into imagined realities, generating intergenerational trauma that necessitates acknowledging violence to bridge epistemological gaps. Ultimately, Chapter 3 emphasizes how imagination, alongside the exchange of ideas, aids in coping with the "terror of history" by allowing for the conceptualization of "possible worlds" that transcend dominant narratives. The heartbreaking story from Harekrishna Deka's poem *Where did Gopal Vanish*, where a mute boy speaks his first word "Dhoom!" (symbolizing a bomb explosion that killed Gopal), powerfully conveys how trauma can both silence and force new forms of expression, revealing the vital role of imagination in processing unimaginable pain and demanding to be heard at the same time. It concludes by stressing that translation, in its broadest sense, is a crucial tool for preserving and disseminating these stories of perseverance, encompassing the transfer of oral traditions into written narratives and cultural experiences into a wider human understanding.

Chapter 4, titled "Spirit of Survival and Perseverance as Sites of Imagination and Translation," thoroughly explores the profound connection between the human spirit's resilience and the transformative power of imagination and translation, especially within

the unique context of Northeast India. This chapter contends that for marginalized communities enduring extreme adversity in this region, imagination emerges as an indispensable tool for processing trauma, cultivating resilience, and envisioning alternative, more hopeful futures. Concurrently, translation acts as a crucial bridge, not merely for conveying these deeply personal and collective experiences across linguistic and cultural divides, but also for actively shaping collective memory and asserting distinct identities. The chapter meticulously examines how diverse narrative forms, ranging from ancient oral traditions to contemporary written accounts, serve as dynamic sites where the enduring spirit of survival is continuously re-imagined and re-translated. The analysis delves into how communities transform experiences of violence, displacement, and oppression into powerful stories that not only bear witness to their suffering but also profoundly celebrate their unwavering spirit and capacity for resistance. Drawing on the compelling works of key literary figures and rich cultural practices from Northeast India, this chapter illustrates how imagination facilitates a transcendent "going beyond" the immediate realities of hardship, empowering individuals and groups to forge meaningful existences and envision a dignified future. Specifically, the chapter incorporates examples from Assam, showcasing how its vibrant oral and written traditions embody the indomitable spirit of its people. Furthermore, particular attention is given to the significant literary contributions of writers from Northeast India, such as Temsula Ao, whose works powerfully articulate the resilience, struggles for self-determination, and quest for recognition of indigenous communities. Through these detailed case studies, Chapter 4 aims to demonstrate that the spirit of survival extends

beyond mere endurance; it actively engages with imagination and translation to construct new possibilities and powerfully assert human dignity in the face of adversity.

Chapter 5, titled "Moving Beyond Survival Stories as Entertainment and Acknowledging the Importance of Dialogue," undertakes a critical examination of the ethical imperative to transcend the superficial consumption of survival narratives, particularly those emanating from marginalized communities, and to instead engage with them as vital catalysts for profound dialogue and mutual understanding. This chapter argues for a crucial shift from merely "surviving" to truly "living," moving beyond a simplistic binary of survival or death to embrace a more nuanced understanding of enduring human experience. It challenges the prevailing tendency to treat these stories—often born from extreme adversity and resilience in regions like Northeast India—as mere entertainment or exotic curiosities. Such a perspective, this chapter contends, not only diminishes the inherent dignity and profound significance of these narratives but also perpetuates a subtle yet insidious form of epistemic violence. By reframing survival narratives as essential sites of knowledge production and empathy, the chapter rigorously demonstrates their critical role in dismantling entrenched power hierarchies and fostering a more inclusive and equitable global understanding, urging the "other" not to reduce these experiences to mere amusement.

Within this framework, the chapter delves deeply into how communities in Northeast India have moved beyond simply enduring the "state of exception" to actively re-imagining and transforming their own conditions. It emphasizes the crucial responsibility of the external observer to acknowledge the full humanity of those who have faced violence, fostering genuine communication and dialogue. A central focus is

the transformative role of translation, which, when approached with ethical awareness, can powerfully facilitate cross-cultural exchange. For instance, the chapter highlights the groundbreaking work of Bhupen Hazarika, a revered artist from Assam, Northeast India. Hazarika's mastery of translation, evident in his ability to translate the essence of his people's experiences into globally resonant music and art, exemplifies how imagination and linguistic bridges can transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. His iconic philosophy of "Manuhe Manuhar Babe" (Man for Man's Sake), often conveyed through his translated works, served as a powerful vehicle for fostering cross-cultural understanding and empathy, thereby demonstrating how translation, far from being a passive act, becomes an active instrument for promoting dialogue and solidarity, and enabling marginalized communities to assert their agency in shaping their own narratives.

Finally, Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, "Few last words," brings to a comprehensive close this study's exploration into the ethical dimensions of cultural exchange and engagement with marginalized communities in Northeast India. Throughout this dissertation, we have rigorously demonstrated the imperative for a transformative paradigm shift from superficial interactions to profound, ethically grounded dialogue. Drawing consistently upon the philosophical insights of Paul Ricœur and Emmanuel Levinas, we have underscored how vital concepts such as translation, imagination, memory, and linguistic hospitality are in fostering genuine understanding and respect for diverse narratives. The chapter reiterates the critical role of social leaders, and educators, writers, translators, politicians, etc. in amplifying marginalized voices and ensuring alterity is preserved with its reality. Bhupen Hazarika's Assamese songs, like "Mahabahu Brahmaputra" and "Aai O Aai" serve as poignant examples of how art can

embody rememory and linguistic hospitality, transforming personal and collective loss into powerful expressions of resistance without directly confronting oppressors. His music, giving form to the silence of the oppressed, demonstrates how dialogue can be fostered through indirect yet deeply resonant means, strengthening community bonds and preserving narratives. The dissertation ends with a call for ongoing compassionate encounters, asserting that we are all translators, and our ethical responsibility lies in adopting processes like dialogue that help us understand the fullness of other languages, cultures, and ideologies.

From the exploration of the political intricacies of translation in Chapter 1 to the examination of imagination's role in survival (Chapter 3), and the critical analysis of how narratives move beyond mere entertainment to become sites of dialogue (Chapter 5), this work has illuminated the persistent power dynamics that perpetuate misrepresentation and exclusion. Examples from Northeast India, including the vibrant literary contributions of authors like Temsula Ao and the cultural significance of figures such as Bhupen Hazarika, have consistently showcased how these communities actively utilize imagination and translation to navigate trauma, assert identity, and envision dignified futures. This final chapter thus consolidates the study's call for an urgent reorientation towards acknowledging the intrinsic value of every narrative, advocating for a world where ethical responsibility and the imaginative embrace of alterity fundamentally guide all our interactions with the "other," moving us towards a more just and inclusive global consciousness.

This work seeks to illuminate the intricate dance between survival, imagination, and ethical engagement with alterity, particularly within the context of Northeast India.

By weaving together philosophical frameworks, literary analysis, and cultural critique, this work aims to demonstrate that genuine understanding necessitates a move beyond superficial representations to a commitment to authentic dialogue, through the act of “rememory,” the practice of “linguistic hospitality,” and the recognition of the inherent value of diverse narratives. The Preface began with an intent to locate the diversity of voices in this venture and to suggest its urgency. Readers are hereby urged to resist the temptation to reject, to devalue any stories/theories related to oral traditions. Their preservation and acceptance are a win for many marginal communities around the world, and is a mark of their timeless perseverance. Their circulation is often contingent upon their eventual exchanges and cultural transactions, a privilege not always afforded to marginalized narratives. The narratives of Northeast India, often rooted in oral traditions and not typically conforming to Western forms, and historically have been undervalued and excluded from mainstream recognition most times. To deny these stories the same respect and authority granted to canonical works is to perpetuate a form of epistemic violence. This work is an attempt to raise awareness so that ethnographic accounts are seldom dismissed as subjective and fictional, ahistorical, lacking the objectivity of scientific observation and written narrative. As Mihai I. Spariosu, drawing on Clifford and Marcus, reminds us, “fiction” is not synonymous with falsehood. Rather, it encompasses the imaginative and interpretive dimensions of human understanding, which are essential for grasping the complexities of cultural experience. By embracing a more nuanced understanding of narrative and representation, perhaps societies can move towards a more just and equitable world, one where alterity is not merely tolerated but celebrated. Ultimately, this work advocates for a future where dialogue, ethical

responsibility, and the power of imagination guide our interactions with the “other,” fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the diverse tapestry of human experience.

Growing up in Assam, Republic Day Parades, meant for celebration, often coincided with curfews, a stark reminder that peace was a fragile, often absent guest, I recall the chilling stories from my father, who in the 1970s, held the severed head of his friend, a brutal act by illegal immigrants that words still fail to describe. He spoke of the “necessary encounters” by the Indian Armed Forces, the rapes, the torture, the beatings, the constant fear of bombs, and his own mother being molested by CRPF soldiers. These are not distant historical facts; they are real memories etched into the collective consciousness of Northeast Indian people, whispered not openly, but always lingering beneath the surface. The silence often adopted was not an absence of pain, but a language of survival and perseverance.

This work, therefore, is an urgent call for linguistic hospitality, a concept from Paul Ricoeur that I have embraced not just academically, but as a way of life. It is about creating a space where the other is not just tolerated, but truly welcomed in their profound difference. It means moving beyond the “pity porn” culture that consumes violence as entertainment from a safe distance, without ever truly confronting the “bare life” that Agamben speaks of. When I translated Harekrishna Deka’s poem *Nayak* I felt the weight of its critique against political leaders who make promises and then vanish like the wind, leaving behind broken roads, and hungry “bilious faces.” This lack of a true hero makes the everyday perseverance of ordinary people all the more profound. Their

quiet strength, their spirit of survival, is a testament to the power of imagination, the ability to envision a future beyond immediate terror.

This research into Northeast Indian literature call, the oral tradition of *Tejimola*, and the defiant songs by Bhupen Hazarika during the Assam Movement are not just literary examples; they are echoes of this tenacious spirit. Hazarika's "Mahabahu Brahmapautra" and "Aai O Aai" bring the silence of the oppressed into form, music, and words, addressing woes without directly empowering the perpetrators, which is Mikhail Bakhtin's reversal of heteroglossia in its true sense. They show how art can be a powerful rememory, connecting generations and asserting identities even when the national anthem itself, *Jana Gana Mana* conspicuously omits the entire Northeast Indian region.

This dissertation is a plea for dialogue, not just for conversation, but a profound, Levinasian face-to-face encounter where the "I" is disrupted by the irreducible alterity of the other. It is not about acknowledging that translation is never truly adequate or only linguistically literal in its equivalence, as Ricoeur reminds us, but in that very inadequacy lies the beauty of its striving, the happiness of its working with difference. This dissertation is my contribution to ensuring that the stories of survival and perseverance from Northeast India, and indeed from all marginalized communities, are not merely heard, but deeply and ethically understood, transforming silence into a powerful, living dialogue.

Chapter 1

Politics and Translation of Literature

The evolution in communication that began with printing increased the need for methods of efficient communication between various communities around the globe. And in our current times, the need for proper communication among different entities of modern society,⁸ like education, business, religion, and politics has increased manifold; in this light, English quickly became the dominant universal language in these arenas, and continues to hold that positionality. As Benedict Anderson writes, “Print-capitalism created languages-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars. Certain dialects inevitably were 'closer' to each print-language and dominated their final forms.”⁹

The flow of capital, media, people, and culture across national and regional boundaries has created situations in which the world’s societies are more interdependent, and, sometimes, in competition with one another for positions of power in the global context. As Kalapura Jose writes, “the introduction of modern printing technology greatly enhanced Indian languages and literary works... Viewed objectively, there have been a large number of initiatives of committed persons to usher in better printing technology in

⁸ In many places in the United States, laws were the first material to “be printed by local presses.” See Douglas McMurtrie. “Introduction.” *A History of Printing in the United States: The Story of the Introduction of the Press and of its History and Influence during the Pioneer Period in each State of the Union*. RR Bowker Co., 1936, vol 2.

¹⁰ See Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities*. Verso, 1983, pp 48-60.

India.¹⁰ The Orientalist reasons for such development, without meaning to, have aided in the transmission of local voices.

Now, literatures of various kinds are being translated more than ever, and there are communities, like many of those in Northeast India, that are seeing a rise of authors writing in their native languages or dialects and in the English language. The growing collection of English writings from the eight states of Northeast India is indeed, a young body of literature, but one that is powerful because it is narrativizing the life of people who come from that region, creating a medium of storytelling that is accessible to the global audience. These texts stand outside those generated by Orientalist writers and translators, texts often embedded in colonial structures.

The literature from this part of the world is often compared to and evaluated against the mainstream Indian writings in English and other languages from the main body¹¹ of India that tends to overshadow all sorts of writing from Northeast India with respect to degree of importance. Indeed, these texts, on one level, have created a Northeast Indian identity and highlighted questions generated out of colonial and contemporary political concerns:

While the region is an artificial spatial entity created by poorly thought-out ad hoc decisions largely made on the justification of “national security,” in recent years, an incipient Northeast Indian identity has come into being due to a shared history

¹⁰Jose reminds us, however, that the collaboration between “Orientalist scholars and their Indian collaborators could make an interesting theme for historical research.” See Kalapura Jose, (2007), 19-20.

¹¹ “Online survey was conducted by North East India Image Managers (NEIim), a group of media and communications professionals hailing from the Northeast and working in metros. The respondents from Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and were not from northeastern part of the country.” See *Hindustan Times*, (May 4, 2012).

of militarization and experiences of racialization faced by denizens of the region.¹³

Toni Morrison points to a kind of parallel construction in her chapter titled “Black Matters” in *Playing in the Dark* (1993), in which she talks about her curiosity about the “origins and literary uses of this carefully observed, and carefully invented... study of American Africanism.”¹² that provides a way through which we can meditate on issues like chaos and civilization, power and the lack of it, politics, fear and violence, and the most delicate nature of freedom.

English's dominance in global communication has spurred increased translation, including a growing body of English literature from regions like Northeast India. These works, though often overshadowed by mainstream Indian literature, act as “micro sites” of cultural exchange, making diverse experiences relatable to a wider audience by bridging cultural gaps and creating shared understanding, accessible by relatability in context. Here relatability referring to the process by which diverse experiences, particularly those from marginalized communities like Northeast India, are made understandable and accessible to a wider audience. This is achieved through ethical translation and the creation of "comparables" that bridge cultural and linguistic divides, fostering shared understanding while respecting the original narratives' inherent differences and complexities.

¹³ Ibid.

¹² Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 6.

Is this “relatability” because of how these texts are translated for particular audiences? This chapter deals with the politics behind such movements of translation of a socio-cultural ethos and with language and literature in a global context.

Translation is being used as a means of expression on an ever-rising scale as a mode of translating cultures. Janice Pariat, a well-known creative writer from Northeast India says that

stories will be told and retold as long as they are relevant, and thankfully, they seem to always be so. They function as histories, reservoirs of identity and ways of seeing. (2023)¹³

This is, for many cultures, a movement from oral tradition to written tradition, usually English. Tribes and communities from Northeast India traditionally depended on oral traditions of storytelling to pass down myths, legends, and other stories from one generation to another. In this process, myths and stories evolve with time.¹⁴ One of the best examples of such a phenomenon is the story of *Tejimola*. Uddipana Goswami refers to her *Tejimola Forever* in *Tejimola: Never Say Die* and writes:

An archetypal character, playing out the common motifs of folktales in a common tale type, there seems to be nothing apparently outstanding about *Tejimola*. And yet, ever since Lakshminath Bezbarua anthologized the oral narrative of the tortured and tormented young woman in the eponymous tale, she seems to have

¹³ See Suroor Ali Khan. “Exploring How We Interact with Nature: An Interview with Janice Pariat.” *TalkingAboutBooks.com*, 2023, <https://talking-about-books.com/2023/06/22/exploring-how-we-interact-with-nature-an-interview-with-janice-pariat/#:~:text=JP:%20I'm%20not%20quite,identity%20and%20ways%20of%20seeing>

¹⁴ See S. C. Dasgupta. “Comparative Literature in India: An Overview of its History.” *Comparative Literature & World Literature*. Jadavpur University Research Archives, 2016, vol 1, no 1, pp 10-19.

captured the imagination of many prominent Assamese/*Axamiya* writers of fiction, poetry and lyrics. She made her debut in written literature in 1911 through Bezbarua's *Burhi Air Xadhu (Grandma's Tales)*, the first collection of *Axamiya* folktales. The early years of the 20th century was a time when immense efforts were made to instill, and reclaim in many forms, nationalist pride into the people of Assam. Bezbarua himself made the connection between folk literature and nationalism in his introduction to the anthology. Interestingly however, among the many folk characters he had retrieved from oral literature, it was Tejimola who seems to have caught the imagination of the *Axamiya* nation like no other.¹⁵

This story suggests that translation of, as Edward Sapir put it, oral literature demands addressing “the sense of symbolism... and of collective imagination built up in [an] entire literary [tradition], and translating a worldview is no easy task.”¹⁶ As Dasgupta puts it, “...stories, poems, songs and performances from oral traditions that were found in most parts of the country had their own knowledge systems that could provide valuable and sustainable alternatives to contemporary urban modes of life and living and in several cases also reveal certain cultural dynamics and value systems that were constantly replenishing mainstream expressive traditions.”¹⁷

Since India's Northeast region has been stereotyped in its representations by mainstream history and literature and by the media's ignorance of the area, producing

¹⁵ See Uddipana Goswami. “Tejimola: Never Say Die.” *NE Lit Review*. The Seven Sisters Post Literary Review, 2012, <https://nelitreview.tumblr.com/post/22947515545/tejimola-never-say-die-uddipana-goswami>.

¹⁶ Sean Patrick O'Neill, “Translating Oral Literature in Indigenous Societies: Ethnic Aesthetic Performances in Multicultural Settings, *Journal of Folklore Research* vol 50, no. 1-3, 2013, pp. 219.

¹⁷ Dasgupta, pp. 10-19.

inappropriate coverage, which we will discuss in subsequent chapters, translation of oral tradition can be fraught with political issues¹⁸. Under such circumstances, for the writers of the region, writing in the English language becomes not only a medium of communication, but also crucial for debunking stereotypes and misrepresentations. They transmit their own worldview, thereby, refusing to be read through an outsider's positionality. Since the region has been a hotbed of political tensions, decades of militancy, and interference of military forces, along with tremendous human rights violations, there may be the expectation of stories from this region to be ridden with violence.¹⁹ But there remain other subjects that form the basis of writing in English, for instance, writing about survival and perseverance as recorded in oral traditions.

Translation of cultures into English by that culture's own writers is becoming more and more common. LeAnne Howe argues that the translation of Native American tribal stories creates a "rhetorical space" that involves storytelling as a "living character who continues to influence our culture" and that the culture, in turn, feeds the growth and evolution of the "character."²⁰ She points out how oral traditions and written materials are usually a synthesis or symbiosis of old nuances and new ones – symbiosis of culture and character. Simon Ortiz beautifully describes the continuity of oral culture in his poem, "Acoma Pueblo":

It doesn't end.

¹⁸ O'Neill, Sean Patrick. "Translating Oral Literature in Indigenous Societies: Ethnic Aesthetic Performances in Multicultural and Multilingual Settings." *Journal of Folklore Research*, vol. 50, no. 1-3, 2013, pp. 217-50.

¹⁹ See A. R. Baishya. "Rewriting nation-state: borderland literatures of India and the question of state sovereignty." *Iowa Research Online*. University of Iowa, 2010, pp 138-143.

²⁰ See Howe, LeAnne. "Tribalography: The power of native stories." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (1999): pp. 117-126.

In all growing
from all earths
to all skies,
in all touching
all things
in all soothing
the aches of all years,
It doesn't end.²¹

Northeast Indian writers create a similar rhetorical space in which oral traditions co-exist in symbiosis with the written ones and in which they are a synthesis of old world and new world ideas. They are very organic in nature as they are always evolving, as they are told and retold, as Janice Pariat points out.

Such a worldview, however, is an uncommon way of thinking in modernity, though there are societies around the world who make such worldviews the basis of their survival. And, these “marginal” societies, cultures and tribes’ narratives may be lost or silenced, in the play of power politics. For instance, the rich history of Assamese literature--Assam is the largest state in the Northeast Indian region--goes back centuries, yet is overshadowed by the growing dominance of mainstream India-centered literatures combined with Indian writings in English. Assam, in the modern literary scene at the turn of the 20th century, had only a handful of texts written in English that began to be discussed, like *The Kaziranga Trail* by Arup Dutta (1979), that became one of the favorites among children.²²

²¹ See Simon Ortiz. *Going for the Rain*. Harper and Row, 1976, pp 112.

²² Arup Kumar Datta, *Kaziranga Trail*. Children's Book Trust, India (1979, 1984).

Dutta's literary presence in the larger literary world gave hope to many in the region that they need not be afraid of affirming their own identities. I remember going to some of the famous bookstores in Guwahati, the city where I grew up in Assam. Some of these bookstores, like The Modern Book Depot and Baruah Book Agency have been in existence since the time my grandparents were young high school students, and are still thriving. The number of items on the shelves by authors from the Northeastern states, especially ones written in English and Northeastern languages, other than Assamese began growing little at a time, from a row of books to a wall and now, to entire sections that extend to the back rooms of the stores.

We would find works of various famous writers from the region, like Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika, and Mamang Dai.²³ Works of poets, like Robin Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, Esther Syiem, and Mona Zote are also making ripples among the local readers. They are no longer simply popular reading materials; rather, they symbolize affirming and being proud of one's identity as viable and living. They are essential texts that validate and celebrate the diverse cultures and experiences of the Northeast, demonstrating that these identities are vibrant, evolving, and undeniably living.

The emergence of new, contemporary authors on the literary scene, like Aruni Kashyap, Siddharth Deb, Anjum Hasan, Janice Pariat, and Kaushik Barua, have, with their supple language, have made sure to continue the tradition of storytelling. They continue to write about the states of existence of communities and tribes, their trials and tribulations, while keeping in touch with myths and legends that have been passed down

²³ See Erendé Sangma. "19 Books by Northeast Indian Authors That Are So Good." *BuzzFeed.com*, Buzz Feed, 2020, https://www.buzzfeed.com/erende_sangma/books-by-northeast-indian-authors.

through generations. They provide a vital connection to the region's diverse cultures, histories, and experiences, affirming the identities of Northerners and showcasing them as dynamic and living forces. This literary flourishing demonstrates that these identities are not static relics, but rather constantly evolving and vibrant parts of the cultural landscape. Looking back at this trajectory of growth, it clearly attests to the longevity and cultural productivity of this body²⁴ of literature.

Generally, modern writers and artists in India always have had to contend with the politics of cultural exchange between the colonized and the colonizer in the historical past. In a letter written to the British historian E.J. Thompson, the Bengali critic Dineshchandra Sen referred to Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for literature, as “a European writer of Bengali” in 1911, suggesting that Tagore was supposed to articulate a grievance against all cultural renegades, rather than writing only for the middle and upper classes by romanticizing his ideas of struggle in everyday life; Sen was highly involved in writing about the oral traditions, class and caste distinctions, and other realities, as evident in Dineshchandra Sen's *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, published in 1912. We see Tagore both representing and misrepresenting Indian culture. Far from being a failure on the part of the postcolonial writer or artist, we suggest, the urge to crossover is essential to addressing modernity, but, in that urge to represent a complex culture, a can undercut representation of certain Indian peoples, like those in the Northeast. Rosinka Chaudhuri, in *The Literary Thing* (2014), a fascinating study of the beginnings of modern poetry in Bengal, employs an

²⁴ *ibid*

interesting phrase to describe the phenomenon: “creative cross-contamination²⁵.” It must not be doubted at any point that the spirit of modernity is confused, many-hued, and contaminated as well – but not in a negative sense of the term. It only becomes a problem if a writer, who is also a social leader of sorts, like Tagore, misuses his influence to spread untrue, biased facts about other/alterity.

For example, Tagore wrote India’s National Anthem, “Jana Gana Mana,” but, in it, there is no mention of any of the Northeastern states or of the region. He has always tried to represent Northeast India as a less-intelligent, less-civilized version of the Bengali language and culture, and the national anthem is the highest proof of that. Such is the urge to crossover, if not checked. Tagore initially believed that Assamese was a lesser language derived from Bengali,²⁶ and while he acknowledged his mistake in the 1930s, he made no honest attempt to correct the national anthem to reflect the nation better.²⁷

In Stephen Greenblatt’s essay “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion” (1981), especially on pages 36-40, he demonstrates how Shakespeare’s plays, in their historical moment, involved the production and “containment of subversion and disorder,” a phrase which we will use, cautiously, to scrutinize the rise of vernacular literatures in India, particularly in relation to the dominant narrative of nationalism. Just as Shakespeare’s plays often explored and then contained potentially disruptive forces, the rise of certain vernacular literatures, like Bengali literature under

²⁵ Rosinka Chaudhari, *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry, and the Making of a Modern Literary Culture*, OUP, 2014, pp. 332, 376, 400.

²⁶ See Tora Agarwala. “The ‘older-than-Bengali’ Assamese script now a step closer to getting digital recognition.” *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/the-older-than-bengali-assamese-script-now-a-step-closer-to-getting-digital-recognition/>.

²⁷ As recorded by *Vintage Assam*, an initiative to digitize Assamese history to make it more accessible. <https://www.instagram.com/vintageassam/p/DBMZkxvz1Ea/>

figures like Tagore, can be seen as a process that simultaneously celebrated regional identity while also potentially containing or marginalizing other, less dominant voices. In the context of Indian nationalism, this “containment” could manifest as the promotion of a specific regional language or culture (like Bengali) as representative of the nation, while subtly suppressing or ignoring the distinct identities and languages of other regions, such as the Northeast. This process reinforces a particular vision of national identity, often one centered on the dominant culture, and can inadvertently contribute to the subversion or silencing of alternative narratives and perspectives.

The case of Tagore and the national anthem, which overlooks the Northeast, highlights how this “containment” can occur, even within seemingly celebratory expressions of national unity. It reveals how the rise of one prominent vernacular literature can, in its very act of defining the nation, inadvertently marginalize others. In such a scenario of a *mélange* of literature and ideologies, in a nation like India, the question as to what constitutes “Indian identity,” and the elements drawn by Indian selves to “self-fashion” in and outside the colonial context remains murkily answered. The ethical attempt would be to listen to each community, rather than consuming communities under or ignoring them in a national, global, capitalist secular identity of the nation-state (like the NE Indian communities are made to do by whichever political camp rises to power in the Central Government).

In the post-independence era, the Northeast of India has sadly enough, acquired the reputation of being a hotbed for insurgent activities and has come to be regarded as a politically disturbed area with instances of frequent violence, communal clashes, and identity issues. Be it Assam, Manipur or Nagaland, militancy has been the burning issue -

and to some extent the only reason - for being in the limelight of the national media. Hardcore militant groups, like ULFA, NSCN (I-M), NSCN(K),²⁸ have been labeled the troublemakers and have taken the upper hand in igniting the minds of the Eastern youths towards secession. Sanjoy Hazarika writes:

India's Northeast is a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometers wide at its slimmest which is referred to as the Chicken's Neck. The region has been the battle ground for generations of subnational identities confronting intensive nation states and their bureaucracies as well as internecine strife²⁹.

But the state of Northeast India, in general, is not as violent as this sounds. People continue living in their traditional way of life that existed before the formation of a nation state. It is neither a subnational identity that they are trying to negotiate in the global, modernized world, nor are they trying to pledge their allegiance to the prejudiced practices of power put into practice by the government in mainland in the name of peacekeeping. The problematic of history and memory of the region must be taken into account in such instances.

Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from A War Zone* (2006) is apprehensive in relation to many issues related to the Naga, the Northeast Indian, freedom struggle. After the transfer of power in 1947, the Nagas, along with several frontier groups refused to join India and launched a resistance movement, continuing a

²⁸ ULFA – United Liberation Front of Assam, NSCN (I-M) – National Socialist Council of Nagaland Isak-Muivah, NSCN (K) – National Socialist Council of Nagaland Khaplang are labeled separatist, militant groups in India's Northeast.

²⁹ *Strangers of the mist: Tales of war and peace from India's northeast*. Penguin Books India, 1995.

broad South Asian tradition of anti-colonial retaliations against the British in the 19th century. Such conflicts between the so-called ‘native Nagas’ and a new post-colonial state resulted in a continuance of the colonial projects:

Sequestering, pacifying and subjugating the Nagas. The colonial state saw the Nagas as subjects, and the Indian state was unwilling to see them differently, as its national leaders were engaged in the process of nation building through citizenship and territorializing India’s inherited frontiers. With their demand for a sovereign nation, the Nagas therefore... appeared as reluctant citizens who were not attuned with the “great modern desires” to forge a new postcolonial Indian nation (2009).³⁰

The Nagas’ quest for a separate identity, their desire not to merge with the independent Indian state, their rebellion and the resultant subjugation of the rebellion by the Indian Army, led to various atrocities on both sides, which resulted in the suffering of the common people. It is a battle that continues, one of ideas and arms, new concepts and old traditions of power, bitterness and compassion.

We must note that the task of nation-building was an orientalist project of taking pride in classical India and reclaiming the grandeur of its rich past started when the new nation-states were being created, being mapped, and new revenue laws were being put into effect in order to domesticate the common people. And in this process, the stories told by writers from regions like Northeast India, had to be homogenized to the new

³⁰ See Dolly Kikon. “From loincloth, suits, to battle greens: politics of clothing the ‘naked’ Nagas.” *Beyond counter-insurgency: Breaking the impasse in Northeast India*. Delhi University press, 2009, pp 81-100.

identity; they were not seen as holding value equivalent of those written by most authors from India's mainland.

To tell the neglected and suppressed story is why authors are writing in Northeast Indian languages and in English for an immediate local and a transnational global audience. This has given rise to an increasing collection of translations to and from the English language, and into different global languages as well. Perhaps this is one of the ways the communities are being subversive to some mainstream, discriminatory power politics. This would justify why bookstores like The Modern Book Depot and Baruah Book Agency have only increased in their sales and readership with time, ironically set in an age where the printed reading material is soon vanishing into a form of historical relic to be collected and kept in a library/mausoleum of sorts.

These writers, however, as Mitra Phukan suggests, walk a tightrope. "An important feature that binds writers in English from this region, as opposed to those who write in their mother tongues, is the fact of 'reach,'" Phukan writes, because whether we like it or not, "English is a language that has a much larger reach than any other language of the world. Therefore, those who write in English are always conscious that their writings are likely to reach a readership outside their own communities." This, however, brings in its wake certain practical issues. The culture, traditions, ways of living that are embedded within the writings, are often incomprehensible to readers outside the area. Therefore, things need to be explained. Yet there is the danger of a work of literature becoming an anthropological treatise if too many explanations

are sought to be given. The writer in English from this region therefore always has to walk a tightrope.”³¹

One way to walk this tightrope is to publish with alternate, non-mainstream publishing houses, which are having incremental success in publishing some authentic marginal work from a region about which, as Edward Gait declared, little was known in the rest of the Indian³² (1906).

The building of the nation-state and the suppression of the desires of the Northeast region created a catalyst, symbolized in identity-based movements, some of which began in the 1950's and continued, around territory issues that were demarcated by various languages and cultures.³³ Especially in Assam, the production of all kinds of literature from the region began. Even if, under the control of the nation-state, such literature could not be included in most school curriculums by education boards, this literary production was sustained because the people of the region were moving towards a re-realization of the power and necessity of their kind of storytelling, the desire to preserve their languages and cultures. Storytelling became a means of directing sentiments of mistrust and opposition to the mainland center.

This was not to say that internal conflicts did not exist; however, my point here is that the bigger fight was against the stereotypes and heinous policies forced upon the region by the all-powerful center. And these were not the only issues that the people from this region had to and continue to face, even today, as people from this region are

³¹ See Mitra Phukan. “Writing in English in the North East.” *MuseIndia.com*. *Muse India*, 2013, issue 48, <https://museindia.com/Home/ViewContentData?arttype=feature&issid=48&menuid=4026>.

³² *A History of Assam*. Thacker, Spink & Company, 1906.

³³ See footnote #23.

mistreated in Delhi and other metropolitan areas in mainland India, necessitating perseverance and survival strategies. This mistreatment and need shows in literature that is more and more popular.

The Task and Politics of Translation

How does literature from a marginalized people function when it is written in or translated to English? What are its potential political powers in its place and in global discourses? If translation is “the business of carrying across a message/written content from one text to another, from one person to another and from one language (source language) to another different (target language),” how is meaning preserved, “without causing any loss to the original message”—particularly when a translation creates an identity of its own?³⁴ The questions posed regarding the function and political power of marginalized literature, particularly when written in or translated into English, serve as foundational inquiries for Chapter 1 of the dissertation. This chapter rigorously examines the intricate relationship between translation and the ethical dimensions of engaging with such literary works. It delves into how translation endeavors to preserve the original meaning and establish a distinct identity for the translated text, while concurrently navigating the complex challenges inherent in cross-cultural communication and representation. Ultimately, Chapter 1 explores the profound responsibilities and potential political impact associated with making these diverse narratives accessible within global discourses.

³⁴ B. Sowndarya and S. Lavanya, “Nature and Scope of Translation,” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* (n.d). 7-9. <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Conf.TS/Volume-1/3.%2007-09.pdf>.

Walter Benjamin in his *The Task of the Translator* and Giorgio Agamben in his essay, “Notes on Gesture,” help us to draw out a close connection between translation and politics. Benjamin gives us an insight into one of Agamben’s most powerful linguistic tools, one that will be revealed to have a profound political significance as well: language as a gesture.³⁵

It is Agamben’s view that the human voice has the innate potential to turn into language, thereby lending itself the potential for creation of grammar and discourse. Agamben brilliantly follows the journey of the transition of voice to language in infancy, and I believe it is this process of growth of a language of sorts that determines its potential, by lending, perhaps, attaching political and ethical dimensions to linguistic gestures. It is such language and translation that is employed by various writers/leaders of society, in order to define/describe identities and cultures. In addition, this may also be related to the concern about aesthetic education, in co-relation to Benjamin’s notion of “educative violence.”

The practice of translation is a linguistic practice, and as a linguistic practice, it is not free from politics of language, even if the translator, is a specialist, “well-conversant with the grammatical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features as well as the socio-cultural context of both the source language and the target language,”³⁶ engages in interpretation. We may think of language, as Catford does, as “language-behavior,” and translation, essentially, as a “theory of applied linguistics.”³⁷

³⁵ See Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture.” *Philosophers on Film from Bergson to Badiou: A Critical Reader*, edited by Christopher Kul-Want, Columbia University Press, 2019, pp. 208-217.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁷ J. C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 19.

Benjamin is concerned with these issues as he analyzes, as many commentators of Benjamin's essay, "The Task of the Translator," have noted, translation a form or mode, something unrelated to either a reader or an author³⁸. The "law governing the translation" is in the text itself. Benjamin is not so much interested in translation itself, but in translatability: a potentiality that precedes any actual translation and operates as such, as the translation's law, a law that lies occluded in the original, with which Agamben agrees: "To understand [translation] as such, one has to return to the original. Because it is in the latter that the law of translation lies hidden, as in the original's translatability³⁹."

Benjamin argues that,

It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original [for] a translation issues from the original - not so much for its life as from its afterlife.

If "all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines," we never quite get it right, which is the point of the hermeneutic cycle, as per Agamben and Ricoeur. What we look for is not word-to-word, but closest to the original "echo" or reverberation of the origin language, trying to make it "heard" by the reader who speaks another language. The style of the translator is always there. There is no pure translation, because there is only one original. Different languages merely interact with each other with the translator being the vessel of interaction.

³⁸ See Walter Benjamin. "The task of the translator: An introduction to the translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*." *Readings in the Theory of Religion*. Taylor & Francis, 2016, pp 136-139.

³⁹ Ibid.

Benjamin's essay is an attempt to inquire into this law, translatability, that governs translation. Benjamin emphasizes that certain relational concepts, including translation, retain their proper, perhaps even their most proper sense, when they are not, in advance, exclusively related to the human being, the translator or the community that is translated. Benjamin concludes from this that

one would need to risk the translatability of certain linguistic constructions even if they were untranslatable for human beings. And, according to a strict understanding of translation, should they not be precisely that, to a certain extent (untranslatable)?⁴⁰

Translation may thus always include a degree of untranslatability – otherwise an appropriation is introduced into the concept. “In such a liberation of the notion of translation,” Benjamin goes on, “one must ask whether the translation of certain linguistic constructions is desirable.”

By reading Benjamin's essay next to Agamben's works, it becomes possible to see, however, that Benjamin is not merely moving away from practical, human concerns. His essay could also be read as an attempt to rethink, by way of this distance, something that is also of value for human beings but may challenge the value of the “human” along the way. Indeed – this is what the comparison with Agamben may reveal – the notion of translatability and the potentiality that it names might ultimately be much more valuable for “human” beings than an actual translation, demonstrating to them, as one translator explains, words can be defined in translation, but there may be no “adequate equivalent”

⁴⁰ See Walter Benjamin. “The task of the translator: An introduction to the translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*.” *Readings in the Theory of Religion*. Taylor & Francis, 2016, pp 131-139.

in another language because the words are “tied to an experience that is unique to a specific culture or society.”⁴¹ For instance⁴², he nuanced interpretations of "πρὸς" (pros) in John 1:1 across various Bible translations highlight how a single word can significantly alter theological understanding, as seen with choices like "with," "toward," or "beside." This demonstrates Walter Benjamin's concept of untranslatability, where a perfect linguistic transfer is often elusive, revealing the unique cultural and experiential ties embedded within original texts. Ultimately, the inherent "potentiality" of translatability, acknowledging words as deeply connected to specific cultural experiences, can be more valuable than a singular translation, fostering a richer engagement with foundational religious texts. This complex interplay invites deeper

⁴¹ Rob Burgner, “Why Some Words Don’t Translate Between Languages,” *True Language*. <https://www.truelanguage.com/why-some-words-dont-translate-between-languages/#:~:text=Sure%2C%20words%20can%20be%20defined,a%20specific%20culture%20or%20society.>

⁴² As per translations available in Interlineal Bible for **John 1:1**

- Greek Orthodox Church 1904: Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος, καὶ ὁ Λόγος ἦν **πρὸς** τὸν Θεόν, καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ Λόγος. Roughly translating to - In the Beginning/(First and) foremost, the Word was (in existence/being), and the Word was (existing) **by/toward/with** (πρὸς: *with/after/like to/toward/beside*) God, and God was the Word.
- KJV/NIV: In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was **with** God, and the word was God.
- Luther 1912: Im Anfang war das Wort, und das Wort war **bei** (*by, with, beside, for, in association with*) Gott, und Gott war das Wort.
- Riveduta Bible 1927: Nel principio era la Parola, e la Parola era **con** (*with*) Dio, e la Parola era Dio.
- Giovanni Diodati Bible 1649: NEL principio la Parola era, e la Parola era **appo*** (*At, nearby, in someone's regard, behind, after. See Latin apud: below*) Dio, e la Parola era Dio.
- Vulgata Clementina: In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat **apud*** (*Among, with, at, by. Comp ἐπί: (on, upon, with) Deum, et Deus erat Verbum.*

Even a single word can significantly alter the way we interpret a passage. Here, the original Greek **πρὸς [pros]** can take on multiple meanings. It is very helpful if one is acquainted with different regional and temporal dialects of a language in order to better understand.

exploration beyond a surface-level reading, emphasizing the profound impact of linguistic choices on meaning.

Issues in Publishing

Many works by authors belonging to different linguistic backgrounds, nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures are being translated every year; and yet the works that are chosen to be translated are a few compared to the number of works produced each year in different parts of the world. In the United States alone, the number of books published every year range between 600,000 to 1,000,000, with only a handful of those are chosen for publication being translated into different languages.⁴³ Translation is a business like any other venture. Books are translated because of market demand, genre and potential audience, and other factors, including attaining copyrights and translation rights from the authors. Publishers desire to make a profit on published. As one translator puts it, “sometimes something you love as literature gets turned down for commercial reasons.”⁴⁴ There is, therefore, a politics of translation that effects Northeast Indian literature.

Northeast India literature is not as well published as other Indian literatures. The “translation gap” reveals a systemic failure within the American publishing industry,⁴⁵

⁴³ See Steven Piersanti. “The 10 Awful Truths about Book Publishing.” *Ideas.bkconnection.com*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2023, <https://ideas.bkconnection.com/10-awful-truths-about-publishing>.

⁴⁴ Debbie Ridpath Ohi, “How Books Get Translated: An Interview with Translator, Publisher and Author Lawrence Schmiel” (6 December 2016). <https://debbieohi.com/2016/12/how-books-get-translated-an-interview-with-translator-publisher-and-author-lawrence-schmiel/>.

⁴⁵ See Maria Dement. “Why are So few Translated Books Published in America?” *Altalang.com*. Alta Language Services, <https://altalang.com/beyond-words/why-are-so-few-translated-books-published-in->

rooted in a myopic focus on profit and a deeply ingrained cultural insularity. The notion that economic calculations alone justify the marginalization of translated literature is a thinly veiled excuse for a lack of vision and a refusal to invest in cultural exchange.

While financial risks are inherent in publishing, the industry's risk-averse approach effectively silences diverse voices and perpetuates a homogenous literary landscape. The reliance on established bestsellers from abroad, rather than cultivating new talent, underscores a lack of editorial courage and a preference for predictable returns over artistic merit. The language barrier, often cited as a primary obstacle, is less a logistical hurdle than a symptom of a broader cultural deficiency. The fact that so few American editors possess fluency in foreign languages speaks to a profound disinterest in engaging with the world beyond English-speaking borders.

The argument that sample translations are costly ignores the long-term benefits of enriching the American literary scene with diverse perspectives. The “vicious cycle” of limited investment, in which the difficulty of placing foreign books discourages further submissions, is a self-fulfilling prophecy, created and perpetuated by the industry's own inertia. Furthermore, the claim that the diversity of languages hinders the development of expertise is a disingenuous attempt to deflect responsibility. In a globalized world, a truly cosmopolitan publishing industry would actively seek to cultivate expertise in multiple languages and cultures. The reliance on agents and personal recommendations reinforces existing power structures, favoring established authors and those with privileged access. The emphasis on author promotion in English underscores a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of translation, which should be to bridge linguistic and

[america/#:~:text=Nevertheless%2C%20even%20when%20a%20good,with%20international%20agents%20or%20publishers.](#)

cultural divides, not to require foreign authors to conform to American expectations. The dominance of English and American pop culture, while undeniable, should not be used as an excuse for cultural isolationism. The assertion that American diversity negates the need for translated works is a dangerous fallacy, conflating internal multiculturalism with genuine cross-cultural exchange. The “translation gap” is not a natural phenomenon but a manufactured one, sustained by a publishing industry that prioritizes profit over cultural enrichment, and a society that remains stubbornly resistant to embracing the richness of global literature. The greater agenda/campaign behind each translation may or may not be beneficial for any society as a whole then. The translator, in such a scenario becomes an immensely powerful figure, to whom is attached immense responsibility.

The American publishing industry's approach to translated literature is marked by a pervasive sense of risk aversion and a perception of translation as a niche market. Publishers, driven by profit considerations, often shy away from investing in translated works, preferring to minimize potential losses by focusing on already established international bestsellers. This cautious approach limits the exposure of American readers to a wider range of global literary voices. Furthermore, the industry's tendency to downplay the role of translators, often omitting their names from book covers and relegating them to the copyright page, reflects a belief that readers are somehow averse to translated works. This lack of visibility not only devalues the crucial work of translators but also reinforces the perception of translation as an undesirable or intimidating aspect of a book.

The Northeast Indian Publishing Gap

The dominance of the English language within the global publishing landscape further contributes to the marginalization of translated literature in the United States. The widespread availability of English-language books creates a sense of self-sufficiency, leading many American readers to believe that they have access to a sufficiently diverse range of literary perspectives. This insularity, however, limits their exposure to the rich and varied literary traditions of other cultures, fostering a narrow worldview. While the United States is undeniably a diverse society, the diversity of American authors can sometimes create a false sense of cultural exposure. As Daisy Rockwell pointed out,⁴⁶ “But they’re all like, living in Brooklyn!” suggesting that even diverse American authors are often operating within an assumed and shared cultural context, thereby not providing the same depth of cultural experience that translated works would. This combination of factors creates a challenging environment for translated literature in the American market, hindering its growth and limiting the potential for cross-cultural understanding.

In the same light, we, on the one hand, have mainstream/mainland India that does not allow the Northeast to establish and define its own identities, and, on the other, we have writers from the region writing in English to reach a global audience that would help describe and preserve their unique identities. Translation plays a crucial role in whether the people of the Northeast are able to communicate their unique culture and identity. The translator, in such scenarios, can be seen as a social leader with some degree

⁴⁶ See Daisy Rockwell. “The Loneliness of Translation: An Interview with Daisy Rockwell.” *C-j-l-c.org*. Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism, 2022, <https://c-j-l-c.org/portfolio/the-loneliness-of-translation-an-interview-with-daisy-rockwell/>.

of influence, who might have the power to portray various cultures and identities in certain ways they may think is correct.

The systematic neglect of Northeast India's history, culture, and contributions within the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) syllabus has fostered a climate of ignorance and discrimination. While the NCERT maintains that the region is adequately represented, the reality paints a different picture. A supplementary textbook, intended to educate on the Northeast, exists but is not part of the core curriculum, rendering it largely ineffective. This exclusion from mainstream education means that students across India are not systematically exposed to the rich heritage and pivotal role the Northeast has played in shaping the nation's identity. This disparity in coverage is particularly glaring when compared to the detailed attention given to international events, such as the Vietnam and Korean Wars, within the NCERT syllabus. The Bezbaruah Committee, formed in 2014, after the murder of Nido Tania,⁴⁷ a nineteen-year-old from Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India, to address the concerns of people from the Northeast, specifically recommended integrating the region's history and culture into the core curriculum. However, these recommendations have yet to be fully implemented, leaving a significant gap in the national narrative. This omission perpetuates a sense of alienation among people from the Northeast and fuels prejudices and stereotypes among the wider population⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ See Tanima Biswas. "Daylight Attack with Iron Rods Killed College Student Nido Tania." *Ndtv.com*. NDTV, 2014, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/daylight-attack-with-iron-rods-killed-college-student-nido-tania-550373>.

⁴⁸ See Prathaindic.in. "The Erasure of North East India's History from NCERT Syllabus: A Glaring Omission." *Prathaindic.in*. Pratha – Indic Renaissance, 2024, <https://prathaindic.in/the-erasure-of-north-east-indias-history-from-ncert-syllabus-a-glaring-omission/>.

The consequences of this educational neglect are tangible and deeply concerning. Surveys reveal that a substantial majority of individuals from the Northeast experience discrimination in cities like Delhi. These discriminatory experiences occur in various settings, including restaurants, but more importantly, in educational institutions and housing markets, and, often, are attributed to ethnic origin.

Furthermore, the surveys highlight a widespread lack of awareness about Northeast India among the general population, which contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes and discriminatory behaviors. This lack of understanding underscores the urgent need for comprehensive educational reform and public awareness initiatives to promote inclusivity and respect for the diverse communities of Northeast India. And it suggests a need for translation of Northeast Indian literatures.

It might be possible that any translated literary work may not be free from being subjected to prejudice before it arrives on the shelf of bookstores from a mainstream press. The Sahitya Akademi, despite its stature as India's premier literary body, perpetuates a hierarchical system within the realm of translations by limiting its annual translation prizes to the country's twenty-two official languages. This restriction inherently diminishes the visibility and recognition of literary works from the multitude of other languages spoken throughout India. This institutional bias is further reflected in the content of academic journals. An analysis of twenty-seven issues (from 2004 to 2020) of *Translation Today*, a peer-reviewed publication by the National Translation Mission, reveals a disproportionate representation of translations from Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Bangla, and Marathi, reinforcing the dominance of these languages in the translated literary sphere.

This linguistic hierarchy extends into the academic realm, as evidenced by the author's own experience as a student of English Literature. The curriculum predominantly featured translations from a select group of languages, including Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Bengali, and Marathi, while works from languages like Odia and Telugu received significantly less critical attention. The limited scholarly engagement with these lesser-represented languages underscores the systemic neglect that hinders their broader appreciation. As Daisy Rockwell, a translator of Hindi literature, aptly observes, the “power balances of the world”⁴⁹ “extend to languages, creating an unequal playing field that obscures the richness and diversity of India's literary heritage. Aruni Kashyap, in an interview calls this a “crisis” as:

Hindi and Bengali have widely spoken South Asian languages and surely will have more power inherent in them. This is natural, and I have no problem with that. It would be foolish to grudge that there are around 250 million Bengali speakers as opposed to only 20 million Assamese speakers or 3 million Bodo speakers. But this becomes a problem if people in positions of power refuse to treat all languages equally.⁵⁰

The observed linguistic hierarchy within Indian literature is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a direct reflection of an underlying, often unspoken, hierarchy of cultures and states. The greater recognition afforded to languages like Bangla and Punjabi, compared to lesser-known regional tongues, stems from the perceived supposed

⁴⁹ See Rachel John. “The real crisis in Indian literature is the translation pyramid. Bangla sits at the top.” *Theprint.in*. The Print, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/the-real-crisis-in-indian-literature-is-the-translation-pyramid-bangla-sits-at-the-top/625198/>.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Phukan.

importance or large-scale advertising of their associated cultures. This prominence is not necessarily a measure of literary merit, but rather a consequence of historical, political, and demographic factors that elevate certain cultures within the national consciousness. Languages linked to historically dominant or politically influential regions, or those spoken by larger populations, naturally command greater visibility and perceived importance. Furthermore, the accumulation of “cultural capital” through established institutions and networks, reinforces the prominence of certain literary traditions, while marginalizing others.

The construction of a national identity often plays a role in this hierarchy, as certain languages and cultures are prioritized as central to the national narrative. This can lead to the neglect of regional languages and cultures that are deemed less integral to the overarching national identity. The lack of resources and infrastructure further exacerbates this imbalance, as smaller language groups often lack the support needed to promote their literary works. Translation services, publishing houses, and academic programs are often concentrated in regions associated with dominant languages, leaving other languages underserved. This systemic inequality does not diminish the richness and vitality of lesser-known cultures and their literary traditions. However, it underscores the urgent need for a more equitable and inclusive literary landscape, one that recognizes and celebrates the full spectrum of India's linguistic and cultural diversity.

Chapter 2

Translation and the “Other”

This chapter will argue that the concept of "translation" — both linguistic and cultural — serves as a vital framework for understanding the complex dynamics of "othering" and belonging in Northeast India, revealing how communication and interpretation can either perpetuate division or foster genuine understanding and recognition of marginalized identities. It courageously delves into the intricate tapestry of identity and belonging within Northeast India, challenging the rigid dualities that often divide communities.

Samrat Choudury and Preeti Gill’s recent edited volume, *But I am One of You: Northeast India and the Struggle to Belong*⁵¹ delves into the intricate tapestry of identity and belonging within Northeast India, highlighting a work that courageously challenges the rigid dualities that often divide communities. It seeks to capture the shared humanity obscured by surnames, clans, and tribes, presenting poignant accounts from both current residents and those returning to their homelands, all wrestling with the profound question: “where do we belong?” The essays reveal the complex interplay of cultural integration and the persistent pull of “othering,” exemplified by stories like that of a Sikh

⁵¹ Samrat Choudury and Preeti Gill’s edited volume, *But I am One of You: Northeast India and the Struggle to Belong*. Harper Collins India, 2024. The power of erasure is so strong that this book does not come up in scholar.google.com, it appears in a regular Google search though, which makes me wonder about the linguistic demographics working for organizations like Google in SEO optimization roles.

family finding acceptance within a majority Christian state, even amidst the hardships faced by non-Nagas during the 1990s.

This 2024 book arrives at a crucial time, amidst ethnic strife in Manipur and the deep fault lines exposed by the NRC exercise in Assam, offering a compassionate perspective that transcends the starkness of factual reporting. The book emphasizes how people confront the marginalization of Northeast Indian narratives, which are often silenced within mainstream discourse. It underscores the theme that discrimination and isolation are reciprocal, highlighting the “othering” perpetrated by both North Indians and certain groups within the Northeast. It dissects the use of derogatory terms like “chinky,” “Mayang,” “Dkhar,” and “deshwalis,” which serve to reinforce divisions and perpetuate the notion of an “us” versus “them.” The book further probes the subjective nature of belonging, questioning the validity of arbitrary cut-off dates and physical markers as determinants of indigenous identity. It explores the socio-political anxieties that drive the construction of “son of the soil” identities, often manipulated by political forces, and the devastating impact of armed uprisings on the region's social fabric.

I would also like to point out that, for those from Northeast India, translation can be seen in day-to-day activities as well. In every encounter, a self comes encounters (an)other, and there are always ideas exchanged, either through reading some literary work or simple human dialogic interactions. And, buried in what seem like simple exchange may be socio-political, cultural, ethical, linguistic or any other elements related to humanity. In the process of such encounters, a self may assume she deduces correctly about any other. There is a sort of dialogue of ideas, which mostly takes place in one's mind, as one encounters (an)other—one full of preconceived and, often prejudiced ideas.

The murderers of Nido Tania certainly perceived certain factors about him before deciding to murder him in cold blood.

Giorgio Agamben helps us to think through the relation of prejudice to publishing. In Agamben's *Infancy and History* (1993), in addition to discussions on poetry, philology, and criticism as practices that maintain the original cohesion that exists between poetry and politics, the acts of storytelling and translation are also discussed as linguistic activities in which the experiment with language, the experience of the language, can take place, potentially leading to more honest relations with the other.

In Agamben's work, translation appears as a method capable of dismantling the state of exception that Agamben is interested in. But from a comparative reading of Benjamin's essay and Agamben's work, it may appear that there also exist connections between translation and Agamben's work at another theoretical level.

It is well known that Agamben's insistence on potentiality is not simply philosophical but also ethical, and ultimately, political. It is upon the theory of complexity of language that Agamben's notion of community is built, particularly concerning a space in which language is exercised to make people believe they have freedom, but also to exclude and marginalize. The language of translation (of cultures, identity and language), therefore, can be wrongfully used by some writers, translators, or leaders of certain communities to fuel the "state of exception"⁵² and marginalize whole communities of people. The role of a leader of words, in society, is a very crucial one. Here leaders could be publishers who "say without shame that they can't 'sell' when it is their job to find a way to sell works with literary merit."⁵³

⁵² See Giorgio Agamben and Andreas Hiepko. "Introduction." *Homo Sacer*. Suhrkamp, 2002.

⁵³ See footnote #32. Say what the book is and why cite here.

A leader could also be a book agent, educator, or politician, like the ones who have refused to act according to the Bezbaruah Commission in mainland India as mentioned above, or a common citizen, like a murderous shopkeeper, as in the case of Nido Tania – basically a leader is any person wielding some power and influencing the people from their own community and related ones to act in a prejudiced and heinous manner.

Translation and Encountering Otherness

Ideas matter, and translation circulates ideas. For example, Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin, the Vulgate, accessible because it was in the "common tongue," became the primary one in Western Europe into the Middle Ages, educating and influencing a large section of the population, either through being read or being preached from. We also see a similar success in the story of *Tejimola* in Assam.

As we discussed earlier, in processes of translation, the originality in the source language may be compromised or lost. This may be the case, particularly, if a text serves a sovereign state. Hence, such distortions or losses may be considered sacrifices for the well-being of the state, without being acknowledged as cases which might permit state punishment, including homicide (Agamben and Hiepko 2002). In such cases, for Agamben, when a human being is entirely excluded from a community, losing even the most basic of human rights of authentic representation, he becomes the *homo sacer*, entering a "zone of indistinction between sacrifice and homicide."

Can translation open and include, rather than exiling the other? Antoine Berman, in his *The Experience of the Foreign* (1992), investigates Friedrich Hölderlin's

understanding of the “national” and the “foreign” in encounter. Benjamin points out that there may be a connection between radicality of Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles and his mental break-down and subsequent schizophrenia. Benjamin writes:

Hölderlin’s translations are prototypes of their kind... For this very reason Hölderlin’s translations in particular are subject to the enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator with silence; ... in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language.

Hölderlin’s translations are an integral part of his poetic trajectory, and he calls his conception of language, and poetry as his “experience of the foreign.” We might argue that Hölderlin, in translating enters a “zone of indistinction, to use Agamben’s term, in which the determination of meaning becomes difficult. Hölderlin dissects the simplicity of the schema of *Bildung*, of self-cultivation, itself; he states that it is neither the “apprenticeship of the infinite, nor of the finite.” The movement towards the self and the movement towards the foreign do not succeed each other, rather the latter is like a mere conditionality of the former.

His poem *Mnemosyne* expresses the danger that lies in the love of the foreign, which may be controlled by the love of one’s own (homeland). He pertains to the “double law” of the spirit, by which he meditates upon the state in which the spirit escapes the “mortal immediacy” of the homeland, while becoming threatened by the light of the foreign. A balance may be reached in a mediating space between the experience of the foreign and experience of one’s own. Poetry helps in attaining that mediating space in

which the “reign of Differentiated” may be situated by the relation between dialogue (*Gesprach*) and language (*Gesang*). Translation, can be seen as creating that space, a space in which the measured and disproportionate confront one another in a poetic act. Hölderlin opens doors for us thoroughly to reflect on the “act of translation in the baffling multiplicity of its registers.”

Is Text an Active Subject: Schleiermacher, von Humboldt, and Berman

Hölderlin, in his reactivity to text in translation demonstrates its power, making us see an original text as an “active subject.” Berman in his analysis of Hölderlin, also speculates on the similarities in the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm von Humboldt. While each had different trajectories, each was concerned with language, symbolic power, and, thereby, the theory of hermeneutics. Both see language as the space in which the “inter-expressivity of subjects” operates and is understood. Language is not seen as an expression or postulate of thinking, shaping reality, as Friedrich Leopold, Baron von Hardenbert, Novalis did, but, rather as the “ultimate medium of any relation of man to himself, to others, and to the world.” Both thinkers reflect on translation as the “language of environment” or “own being.”⁵⁴ There is a distinction between oral interpretation and written translation, through which the difference between interpreter and translator is validated.

In Antoine Berman's analysis of Friedrich Schleiermacher's "On the Different Methods of Translating," he outlines Schleiermacher's delineation of two primary translation approaches: either bringing the author to the reader's language or vice versa.

⁵⁴ See Berman. *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and translation in Romantic Germany*. Translated by S. Heyvaert. State University of New York Press, 1992, pp144-145.

Berman strongly advocates for the latter, emphasizing the preservation of the original text's "foreignness" as crucial for genuine translation. He argues that by bringing the reader to the author's language and cultural context, translators facilitate a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, countering the tendency to assimilate foreign works into the reader's familiar framework, which risks ethnocentrism and the destruction of the original work's essence. Schleiermacher, for Berman, suggests that every author deems the role of serving the objective, not the subjective, while the translator immerses in an "intersubjective act."

Every author and his text are subjected to the modification of language and expression of the subject. Once one cleaves to the "subjectivity of the subject and to the intimacy of the mother tongue," text is removed from all levels of objectivity. Hence, one must look at language as an "active subject" as opposed to "things perceived." This theory also negates the very idea of a mother tongue, be it one's own or of the other. If seen as an active text, it may impose a biased interpretation, which can also implicitly compromise the translator's own mother tongue by making it an instrument of distortion rather than genuine linguistic hospitality. An authentic translation also tries not to sever all relations with the other/foreign, which means risking a questioning his or her own national culture and language. The translator enters an intermediate space, within a cultural field, created by language itself, in which the mediating function of translation can be fulfilled, highlighting the translator's burden of representing the original without undoing its peculiarities and authentic characteristics, while also trying to find a way to connect it to the subjects of the source language, nation, and culture.

Many translators try to maintain the authenticity of form, if allowed by the languages being translated from and translated into. For instance, as Berman points out in his *The Experience of the Foreign* (1992), A. W. von Schlegel proposed a theory of translation that is similar to a theory of poetic language. For example, Schlegel endeavors to translate Shakespeare to German in a faithful and poetic manner, thereby respecting the text's "faults" and "obscurities" in relation to German, while refusing to modify the content/form/metrics. Schlegel was a unique and extremely proficient scholar, because he was very well-versed in "principal modern European languages" like Greek, Latin, medieval French, old German, and so on, including proficiency in Sanskrit as well⁵⁵. His vast knowledge of literature allows him to give a "radical cosmopolitan" direction to *Bildung* itself, as he calls upon foreign metrics to enrich the "poor" and "crude" German language in order to make it more of *Kunstsprache*.⁵⁶ Due to his scholarship, the "intuitions of German Romanticism" became available to the larger world. He and his brother Friedrich, especially with the publishing of the journal *Athenaeum*, influenced the direction of European Literature.

The roots of Schlegel's critical and philological works lie in his proficiency in translation. He is credited with the "unity of the three figures" – criticism, philology and comparatist studies – which he combines with translation. In his *Dialogue on Poetry*, Schlegel says "to translate the poets and to render their rhythm is an art."⁵⁷ This refers to the union of the "speculative theory of poetry/translation" along with the "literary theory of universal poetry/metrical form."⁵⁸ Thus, from a Romantic point of view, as pointed out

⁵⁵ See Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*. SUNY Press, 1992. P. 129.

⁵⁶ Means roughly "communally constructed cultural jargon" in German.

⁵⁷ See Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*. SUNY Press, 1992. Pp 135-140.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

by Berman, theoretically, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Boccaccio are “the union of the high and the low, the base and the noble.”

But what if the languages belong to different language families? Is not the engagement in translation also related to learning to say things in different ways, about practicing other modes of speaking and writing about the world? Because of the multiplicity of meanings, of words, any effort at communication requires interpretation, as we indicated previously. It might seem that there is no proper way to relate or match words and meanings. It may be that in this helpless state or stage of language and translation, one that is interpreted by writers/translators/leaders as a state in which judgments must be made considering the original intention of the writer.

One way to address this conundrum is as Paul Ricoeur does in his *On Translation* (2007), in which he chooses to emphasize not the impossibility of communication but the potential creativity of language: It is always possible, Ricoeur suggests, to say the same thing in another way, even when we face the “incomparables.”

Ricoeur's reflections remind us that translation involves risk: that, beyond the danger of incomprehension, there may be unsuccessful translations and there is always the risk of conquest and domination instead of hospitality. Ricoeur also points to another shadow side of translation: that the very act confesses that language keeps secrets, for recognizing that there is no perfect translation means being faced by the unspeakable. But while this may seem to endanger the self momentarily with what cannot seem to be said, this shadow side actually is essential to maintaining the effectiveness in the role of a translator, which would be impossible if borders and boundaries were obliterated. The unspeakable provides a key to managing the risk of domination, for the humility involved

in admitting that there are things you cannot know or say can act as a brake to notions of superiority and attempts to colonize an “other” or a foreigner. Thus, one of the resources that Ricoeur offers for approaching translation is the constant recognition of otherness, even as one tries to meet with and learn from the other.

The trend of dealing in tokenism by giving preference to stories of violence and death makes gestures of inclusion illusory, since they seldom challenge the dominant structures of power and occlude the real failure on the part of academe to diversify. Identity is not simply a matter of positionality, and existing pedagogies do not present any means of recuperating sensibilities disintegrated by society and the labor market. Such problems cannot be solved by university canon reform. The neutral shibboleths of difference and diversity cannot replace real-life suffering and struggle for survival and dignity, as Dorothy Figueira points out in her essay “Whose World Is It Anyway?” (2017).

And in today’s time, stories relating directly to violence and civil unrests find a huge market and readership in a flash. It is neither my intention to side-track these stories and accounts of violence, nor to undermine them, only to argue that it falls upon us, in academia, to inquire into the agenda behind such trends. Are the stories of survival and perseverance not important anymore? We need to reinvestigate such stories because people in Northeast India have managed to overcome obstacles nonviolently, and do so on an everyday basis, living full lives while being surrounded by political, ideological, ethnic, and communal unrests which are violent most of the time. In such a scenario, the “other” becomes the community of people who are living hallmarks of perseverance; and in India, language becomes the basis of community building—and, sometimes that may

involve storytelling in a language that is not one's own as well. The crisis arises when the agency of the language of this "other" is taken away or pushed to the background.

There may arise the need to try another route for identity preservation, when the first attempt fails to function; one may decide that the meaning can be made better with different words. This may seem like mere play of words, but translations are not permanent in nature. As Benjamin's work suggests, there will always be someone who may think that they may be able to produce a better version of the original compared to the ones that came before. There is yet another way of looking at the act of translation. The existence of a plurality of languages demands translation in order for one to relate to someone who is different from the self. At the heart of this is the desire to know about other people, to share in what they might know, to learn what they hold dear, and to grow in the learning.

Ricoeur noted that one reason for translation is because of the "curiosity about the foreigner." A similar curiosity arises for those of us looking over the ramparts of our disciplines into the arenas of others; we want to know how they live and to be able to convene and converse with them. Those of us who engage in literature and theology, whether we hail from theology or from literature, cast our eyes over the disciplinary boundaries to observe each other reading texts, and so to wonder what kind of light their texts might have to shed on our disciplines.

But what happens when translation is used as a means to dominate, as Agamben describes the "state of exception"? This is where politics of translation finds immense authority in the space created by language, because most translations start with the construction of comparables. Ricoeur states:

The construction of the comparable has even become the justification for a double betrayal insofar as the two incommensurable masters were rendered commensurable through the translation--construction. So there remains a final translatable that we discover through the construction of the comparable⁵⁹.

And sometimes, in such constructions of comparables, the source language and culture are put on a lower pedestal for political or other reasons. For instance, in the Charles Wilkins translation of *Bhagavad Gita* (1785), the “Geeta” was equated to “a theology accurately corresponding with that of the Christian dispensation.” While choosing not to equate this text to the likes of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, the translator already consciously chose to position this text at a lower standard, compared to the European classics, perhaps in the hope to see it as some sort of proto-Christian text, thereby creating a wrong relational positionality. Such a pattern can be seen being followed by most of the mainland leaders from India who try and advocate for the Northeast Indian cultures, languages and its peoples.

The problematic here is the need to compare the uncomparables. The attempt of translation then becomes a political one, as the original needs to be translated to suit the needs of the source language. Is this the only way in which the self can communicate with the “foreigner”? In such instances, translations become weaponized means to win wars of intellect. The Wilkins translation of “Geeta” was thought to be good enough to be placed

⁵⁹ See Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*. Routledge, 2006. Pp. 37-38.

in opposition to the best French versions of the most admired passages of the Iliad or Odyssey, or of the 1st and 6th books of our own Milton, highly as I venerate the latter, the English translation of the Mahabharat.⁶⁰

The Bhavagad Gita is now a “classic,” but we can see in the discussions of Wilkins’ translation, its movement into that status, from “curiosity” to classic, even though it is not *sruti*, the highest form of classical literature in Sanskrit.

Such attempts of translation not only have a tendency to bring parts of other cultures into the self’s own culture, but also to endanger the existence and independent authority of the foreign or “other.” On the “Advertisement” page in the Wilkins’ translation of Bhagavad Gita, it is clearly specified that it was “one of the greatest curiosities ever presented to the literary world.” The Bhagavad Gita has inspired many over the ages like Robert Oppenheimer, Simone Weil, and Gandhi.

Wilkins translated the Bhagavad Gita into English in 1785, long before the Vedas, especially the Rig-Veda was translated into English by Wilson.⁶¹ In the hierarchy of Classical Indian Sanskrit texts or scriptures, *srutis* are considered to be at the topmost rung. *Sruti* in Sanskrit means “that which is heard.” Thus, the Vedas are the eternal truths that the Vedic seers, called *rishis*, are said to have heard during their deep meditations. The Vedas are not considered the works of the human mind, but an expression of what has been realized through intuitive perception by Vedic *rishis*, who had powers to see beyond the physical realities, thereby it is mostly a phenomenon of observation and deduction.

⁶⁰ See Charles Wilkins. translator. “Introduction.” *The Bhagavad-Geeta*. C. Nourse, 1785.

⁶¹ First Volume was published in 1866. Rest was published in 6 volumes between 1880-1888.

Bhagavad Gita, on the other hand is a part of the *itihasa* or history – it is a part of the *itihasa* named Mahabharata. *Itihasa* is a category classified under *Smriti* that is given second place after *sruti*. *Smriti* means “that which is remembered.” *Smriti* scriptures are derived from the Vedas, and they are considered to be of human origin, not divine origin. They were written to explain and elaborate the Vedas, making them understandable and more meaningful to the general population. *Smritis* lay down the laws which regulate Hindu national, social, family and individual obligations. *Smriti*, in a broader sense, covers all Hindu Scriptures, save the Vedas. And yet, the popularity of Bhagavad Gita is much greater than the Vedas.

Maybe one of the reasons behind this fact is that Europeans translated and lauded this text as “a very curious specimen of the Literature, the Mythology, and Morality of the ancient Hindoos” – as pointed out by Warren Hastings in his letter to Nathaniel Smith, which has been included as part of the Wilkins translation of Bhagavad Gita. He mentions that this book was taught in schools and was devoured by the students alongside other texts.

The text may have functioned in colonial control, as well. India was under partial colonial rule since 1757, and there had been efforts on the part of the colonizers to understand the literatures and scriptures of the “ancient Hindoos” so that administration may become smoother. Hastings understood that the Bhagavad Gita was used more as a means to inculcate spiritual discipline among the peoples rather than an intellectual one (maybe borne out of European reason and logic). The descriptions of “spiritual existences”⁶² in corporeal forms seemed, to Hastings, to be a blemish or fault in the work,

⁶² See Charles Wilkins. translator. *The Bhagavad-Geeta*. C. Nourse, 1785.

while at the same time equating the “Geeta” to the theological values of Christianity might have been a colonial strategy. There was a need to understand all scriptures in relation to, or as part of the Christian domain, maybe because that was the only way in which they could be understood/accepted by the colonizers.

Hastings further wrote that the Indians were very secretive about and protective of their scriptures because foreign rulers who ruled over them in the past did not make any or little effort to inquire into any of them. And hence, if the British colonizers showed some interest, it might be easier to use them to placate the natives. Also, Wilkins mentions that the natives were very protective of their scriptures until they encountered “the liberal treatment they have of late years experienced from the mildness of our government, the tolerating principles of our faith.”

What is really interesting, is that Wilkins published the first English translation of Bhagavad Gita in 1785, and by 1835, Thomas Macaulay used “Minute on Indian Education” to institutionalize education in the English Language in colonial India. Soon after, the “Christian teacher rightly educates the heathen mind, he not only fulfils the great commands of his Divine Master, but also incidentally aids and supports the British rule.”⁶³

Can such views be considered as a form of the “third text,” the demonstration of pure, objective meaning, that Ricoeur cautions translators to stay away from in his *On Translation*?⁶⁴ If translators try to induce their own understanding of an original text into

⁶³ See Bellenoit and Bellenoit. “Missionary education, knowledge and north Indian society, c. 1880-1915,” *Oxford University Research Archive*. University of Oxford, 2005, pp 9-11.

⁶⁴ This third text is not a concrete idea/entity, rather, it refers to a sort of theoretical construct, which might be capable of representing an ideal form of translation, one that attains perfect equivalence. This form is unattainable because of inherent differences that exist in various cultures and languages. See Paul, Ricoeur. *On translation*. Routledge, 2007.

the translations, often misunderstood space of intersubjective understanding, can such work really be called true translation?

Ricoeur, in his *On Translation*, warns translators to stay away from or overcoming the need to create such a text itself, which he calls the third text, which, as Walter Benjamin suggests, simply tries to transmit a message through translation without attention to form.

But if we look at the relatedness of language purely based on theoretical deductions of meanings, is the “true aim” of a translation achieved, when it can synchronize with the intention of the target language, while not letting go “an echo” of the original? And if this “echo” is lost, to an extent, what value of the foreign or other remains thereafter in the translations and to the audience of the translations? Such practices of translations have occurred in history, as we see in the Wilkins example. Translations are often situated and occasional, in a sense that they do particular kinds of cultural work for the cultural exchange, particularly in oppressive regimes. And if the echo of the original is overcome by the language of the colonial, it may be a translation or even a political document. Perhaps we can hope modern translators are not trying to see themselves in every text they try to translate.

And the representation of the other is influenced by such historical translated representations to a large extent. In fact, the existence and supreme nature of the self is validated through the existence and representation of the foreign other by the self. For instance, in the process of translating the Bhagavad Gita into English, Christianity was used as a point of connection and measurement of the British self and the Indian other. Such examples further problematize the ethical function that a translator plays in the

construction of the translations through relations between the self and the foreign, as particular times in history fashion it.

In another example of such renditions of the foreigner by the translator(s), Borges talks of the futility of those translations in which the translators fail to successfully translate the actual meaning of the original, maybe even intentionally. In his examples of translations of *The Thousand and One Nights*, he points out how small shifts in languages help bring in the “mysterious nature” of the Orient to the eyes of the Western audience in Edward William Lane’s translation.

Borges’ question is: where does the loyalty of the translator lie? Borges talks of Lane’s translation as a “mere encyclopedia of evasions,” as it is filled with statements like, “I suppress a repugnant explanation” and “Here, the story of the slave Bujait,” which are wholly inappropriate translations for Borges. The mere fact that Lane was thinking about appropriateness of characters and stories points to the fact that, even after he had lived “five studious years in Cairo, almost exclusively among the Moslems,” he fell prey to his inherited British reticence, as he was more interested in selling his translation as appealing to the well-to-do, rather than focusing on not betraying cultural values of the original. and the “delicate central solitude of the masters of the earth.” Such renditions, in turn, destroy the “good-hearted naivete of the original,” as Borges points out.

These different ways of representing history through translation and of analyzing its objects, the other and the foreign, in the wider sense may have been used for projects of constructing a universal history of peoples, cultures and politics, which has led to politically-driven normative constructions of ideas of civilization and the self that may

relate to power struggles. It is also evident that, at different times in history and under different economic, political, and cultural pressures, the comparative value of the instrumental form of translation on one side, and of the aesthetically inflected sort on the other, will fluctuate in relation to one another and to different existing criteria.

In *On Translation*, Ricoeur argues that the pursuit of perfect equivalence in translation is a futile endeavor, highlighting the "final untranslatable" that persists despite efforts to construct comparables. He posits that focusing solely on literal translation and on the search for exact correspondences overlooks the crucial element of "meaning," which encompasses cultural and subjective nuances. This inherent untranslatability reveals the limitations of translation, suggesting that it is not a seamless movement towards the "other," but rather a process of approximation and negotiation. The translator, therefore, engages in constructing "comparables" at the level of meaning, acknowledging that true equivalence remains elusive. He writes

So, there remains a final untranslatable that we discover through the construction of the comparable. That construction is accomplished at the level of "meaning," the only word that we have not commented on, because we took it for granted.⁶⁵

Meaning does not mean translating in a biased manner, seeking a unity of meaning and sound of the signified and the signifies, or, as Ricoeur suggests, in opposition to the prejudice one still finds in the early Husserl, suggesting that the meaning is complete in the translator's act of "conferring meaning, of *Sinngebung*" (Ricoeur 2007)⁶⁶. Translation can be justified if only the translator sees beyond such limitations and overcomes the appeal of the "third text."

⁶⁵ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, p.

⁶⁶ See Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*. Routledge, 2006. Pp. 38.

We can learn much from Ricoeur by attending to his reflections on translation. In his understanding, hospitality binds and directs the efforts of creativity and curiosity that enables one to cross borders and bring people together. And choosing to underline hospitality reminds us that the work of translation between disciplines would involve a large amount of trust that the self must put in the other or foreign, and it cannot be taken for granted as if it is inevitable.

These cultural expressions, born from the unique struggles and resilience of marginalized communities, effectively demonstrate identity not solely through direct comparison but within a sort of crucial middle zone of untranslatability. They offer profound insights into the enduring power of survival and perseverance, transforming lived experiences into sites of imagination and translation that resist dominant narratives and celebrate alterity.

Translating Northeast Indian Naga Identity

Easterine Kire is a prominent writer from Northeast India, who has tried to translate nuances, history, traditions and myths about particular communities in that region through her works over the years, thereby translating many of those sensibilities into the English language, a medium that has a great international readership. She has tried to map a complex web of such sensibilities through poetry, children's literature, and novels that mark changes in Naga society as it has moved from the nineteenth century into the twenty-first. For instance, *From A Terrible Matriarchy*, which was published in 2007, comments on the lives of three generations of women situated in a sensitive period in Naga history, and Kire continues that project of portrayal of the trials and tribulations

faced by people in her recently published *A Respectable Woman* (2019) that is set in the wake of the Japanese retreat from that general area after the Second World War.

Alongside such historically influenced fiction, we also see other works that deal with the spirit of survival, like *When the River Sleeps*, published in 2014. Stories like these, are usually rooted in tradition, but also woven into the contemporary scenario.

A good example is Temsula Ao's "A Pot Maker" from one of her short story collections, which represents the very spiritual and tactile experience of molding wet clay as a craft handed down from one generation to another, from mother to daughter. What becomes very important here is the passing down of persevering sensibilities that become crucial for the daughter's survival in her adult life.

The act of molding clay in Temsula Ao's story suggests sensibility through a deeply tactile and spiritual experience, embodying a form of knowledge that transcends verbal articulation. This hands-on, generational transmission—from mother to daughter—conveys essential persevering sensibilities for survival that are implicitly understood rather than explicitly taught. Such a process highlights something profoundly unspeakable and untranslatable in a linguistic sense, as the wisdom and resilience are woven into the very fabric of the action and the material itself, representing a mode of identity passed down through embodied practice rather than through conventional narrative or translation.

Being a Translator

I have been translating poetry written by Harekrishna Deka from Assamese into English for over four years now. Since he served as an IPS officer, after serving as a

Professor and Scholar of literature, in the latter half of the twentieth century, he gives us first-hand accounts of the struggles he saw among people around him, especially in his line of duty. He was in that sensitive position in which violence mars the lines between right and wrong, good and bad.

While following government orders to weed out certain insurgency groups, people like Deka are usually caught between protecting the people they are supposed to serve and endangering their lives over and over again. The latter half of the twentieth century marked a time of tough changes because of the changes in power structure, the urban-rural divide, the interplay of politics, insurgency problems, and so on. Deka's poems mark the ordeals of people, and deal with the trials of existence. His writings also showcase the intricate emotional layers experienced by human beings in the course of their lives, translating volumes of cultural and ethical sensibilities for readers into a readable form. I would like to analyze a poem I recently translated, originally written in Assamese by Deka, to demonstrate the decisions that must be made in the process of translation.

The title of the poem is নায়ক (*Nayak*), which means “hero” in many Indian languages (Sanskrit, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali, etc.). When I finished my first draft of the translation, I could not help but revisit the title of the poem again and again. A *Nayak*, according to the *Natyashastra*, is a character who has a certain depth and can be differentiated from a *nat* based on certain characteristics. A *nayak* is always self-controlled and showcases sympathy and empathy for people around him or her. For instance, a *nayak* may be self-controlled and vehement like a God, or self-controlled and calm like a merchant. But the bottom-line is that a *nayak* is a character who has an impact

in any narrative. The *nayak* has agency not only to influence his or her own storyline, but also others around them. Interestingly, the *nayak* in this poem has a strong impact, yet in a morose and toxic sense of the term.

Here a few lines from the original as well as my translation before I emphasize my viewpoints further:

... আৰু তেওঁলোকে স্থাপন কৰিলে তেওঁলোকৰ নায়কৰ বাবে

... And for their hero they unveiled

সঁচাকৈয়ে এটা মূৰ্তি |

A sculpture indeed.

মোৰ কেৱল মনত পৰে ভগা-ছিগা বাটবোৰ,

I am only reminded of broken roads,

থৰক-বৰক দলংবোৰ, নিৰাশাত

Rickety bridges, hopelessly

ডুব গৈ থকা মলিয়ন ঘৰবোৰ, ছনপৰা পথাৰবোৰ,

Decaying houses, desolate fields,

আৰ্চেণিক-প্ৰদূষিত নাদৰ পানীবোৰ I আৰু,

Water in streams fused with arsenic. And

The poem talks of a person of consequence, a politician who has great power over welfare schemes and other political crimes. This politician made promises to the common

people before elections, promises which he failed to keep and follow through to any degree--a situation not uncommon in contemporary times in Northeast India. However, the impact of such a situation is most prominent in the people who are suffering. The suffering existed before the elections, and it continues to fester, perhaps becoming worse with time. The poem suggests this suffering in the

ভোকাৰুৰ মুখবোৰলৈ, বুগীয়া শিশুবোৰলৈ,

Hungry faces, bilious young ones,

চকু গাঁতত সোমোৱা গাভৰু মাকহঁতৰ শেঁতা মুখবোৰলৈ,

Sunken eyes on pale faces of young mothers,

এটা থম্ থম্ পৰিৱেশলৈ |

Dismal times.

The leader promised change and relief, but does not follow through on his promises:

আপুনি কৈছিল, ‘এই সকলো সলনি হ’ব |’

You said, “Everything will change.”

আমি কিছুদূৰ একেলগে খোজ কাটিছিলো | কিন্তু মই পিছ পৰি ৰ’লোঁ |

We matched steps for a few miles. I was left behind.

আপোনাৰ খোজত বতাহৰ বেগ লাগিছিল |

Your pace matched the wind’s.

একো সলনি হোৱা নাই I বতাহ যেন গোট মাৰি আছে |

Nothing changed. Wind had come to a standstill.

মূৰ্তিটোৰ শিলৰ কঠিন ওঁঠতো

The stone-cold lips on the statue

কথাষাৰ থমক্ খাই বৈছে |

Could not utter a word.

The ordeals that people faced in their day-to-day lives do not change; rather, those became worse with time. The leader is like the wind, outpacing his constituents. No word is spoken to either justify the lack or to apologize for it. The sick became sicker, the dying died, and the malnourished were in steeper food crises.

This poem is important because it reflects the struggles of the common people, the ones that still survive and are trying to live. The *Nayak* in this poem becomes like a character in a completely fictional narrative, like one in a movie on-screen; he is devoid of any willful agency. The hero is but fictional in our real world. The lack of a hero and leader makes the narratives of the common people's perseverance and hopeful spirit more important than narratives of violence only—or of rescue by a powerful leader. The *nayak* in the poem, and in the real world, acts mostly in the manner of the power-driven, a lot of times Euro-centric definition of hero, like Odysseus or Theseus: a character who, in most cases, serves his personal cause, leaving the community to fend for themselves.

The poem “Nayak” masterfully subverts the traditional concept of the heroic figure, revealing a political leader who, instead of embodying virtue and empathy, perpetuates suffering through broken promises and inaction. The “*nayak*” in this context becomes a symbol of failed political rhetoric, a cold statue without meaningful words, a

stark contrast to the lived realities of the people he purports to represent. The poem's focus on the deteriorating conditions of the community, the “broken roads,” “rickety bridges,” and “hungry faces,” underscores the devastating consequences of this betrayal. This subversion of the heroic ideal is not merely a literary device; it serves as a powerful critique of political power that prioritizes self-preservation over the well-being of the community.

The act of translating this poem into English itself, for me, is a form of resistance, a means of bearing witness to the suffering and amplifying the voices of the marginalized. As a translator, I take seriously Ricœur's work on memory and history, which highlights the importance of “keeping memory alive,” resisting the erasure of the past. The “broken roads” and “rickety bridges” become symbols of a broken social contract, a betrayal of collective memory. By making these experiences accessible to a wider audience, the translator challenges dominant narratives and preserves the memory of these struggles. This is particularly important in contexts in which political power seeks to erase or distort history.

The choice to translate into a “globally” accessible language, while acknowledging the potential loss of linguistic nuance, reflects a strategic decision to ensure that these stories of struggle and survival reach an audience that might otherwise remain unaware. Agamben's concept of the “state of exception” can be applied to the poem's portrayal of political power, where the *nayak*'s actions create a situation where the needs of the people are disregarded. The “hungry faces” and “bilious young ones” become examples of “bare life,” excluded from the political community. Furthermore, Agamben's focus on remnants, those left behind, emphasizes the resilience of the

common people, who, despite the *nayak's* failures, continue to persevere. In this context, the translation becomes an act of giving voice to these remnants, acknowledging their suffering and celebrating their enduring spirit. This decision reflects both the writer's and translator's, desire for the common people to be seen and heard.

Some may argue that the demand for publications and translations into the English language may result in some loss of the value of other languages, especially those which do not have a lot of native speakers. But I believe that a lot of writers prefer a “globally” accessible language so that their stories of struggle and survival can reach an audience that might, perhaps, care enough to read and remember them --not treat them like a monstrous stepparent would, erasing them, like, as we have argued, the Indian school curriculum erases Northeast India.

When I was a child growing up in Assam, I saw a lot of political, ethnic, and religious turmoil around me. I could never have a normal birthday party growing up because the state would be under curfew restrictions on Republic Day, which also happened to be my birthday. People around me were suffering due to various circumstances that were not of their own creations. And yet, even in the midst of all that and perhaps because of all that, the beauty of oral storytelling was handed down from one generation to another.

Every other night, bedtime, or afternoon nap-time would be very eventful for us children, because an elder of the family would tell us some story to help us remember that hope is never lost. I also remember hearing a lot of stories from my grandparents, parents, uncles, and aunts as part of my education in oral folklore and traditions. One of those stories was one we have mentioned here, that of *Tejimola*, a story of a beautiful

young girl's perseverance in the face of oppression and death. There have been numerous renditions of this story for much more than a hundred years now. Different writers in the contemporary literary world have also written their own versions of the story.

Aruni Kashyap, a noted author, writing now, also gives his rendition of the story in the form of a short story titled "Skylark Girl" (2019). Kashyap also touches upon another important aspect of language in translation. In the same story, he describes the turmoil a writer from Assam faces because he is asked to justify his presentation about folklore as opposed to a presentation on the stories of the general unrest and violence that the region faces that he could have chosen.

In the midst of turmoil, people from that region keep going back to stories like that of *tejimola*. Why? Each time the stepmother tries to repress Tejimola's existence, or harm her, she manages to persevere. Though the stepmother kills Tejimola, the girl's spirit returns in a form or object of nature—a plant or tree or flower—which allows her to cry out, despite her death, and to be heard. She thereby weaves her existence with nature into the contemporary times. There is a sense of defiance and a demand for justice in *Tejimola's* voice, one ultimately heard by her father. Tejimola returns to human form. Her spirit of survival, perhaps, is reflected in the survival of the old bookstores in Guwahati, that we mentioned earlier in this chapter, suggesting that the spirit of the people always find a way to thrive. This message is passed down through storytelling from one generation to another, without which every new generation would be at the mercy of violence enacted upon them.

The story's reinforcement of collective memory marks the importance of each translation and retelling. The translator/writer, in such a scenario becomes an immensely

powerful figure, with immense responsibility. The poem, *Nayak*, attacks the false promises made by politicians in the recent past and demonstrates the trickle-down effect of the attitudes of power structures on the psychology of certain peoples, while the telling and retelling of Tejimola's story offers strategies of resistance that, perhaps, can take the place of a turn to violence.

As a translator, I hope that I turn the **readers'** attentions to something even more important: the desolate state of people who are still alive and struggle to have a safe and healthy life, asking them, at the least, to have compassion and, at the most, to act.

The Function of the "Other" in Resistance

There have been instances when the work of "others" has been translated in Northeast India for purposes of rebelling against certain kinds of dominations. For instance, recently in India, there were mass protests over the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Bill, now known as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).⁶⁷ The bill was based on the granting of citizenship based on religion, which was against the secular nature of the Constitution of the democratic Republic of India. What ensued was waves after waves of violent protests that were organized by the common people as well as political factions in most parts of the country. And the brutality of the state and police increased soon after.

In the midst of all this violence, the popularity of the Urdu poem *Hum Dekhenge*, originally written by poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, rose in India. People were reciting the poem

⁶⁷ See Nikhila Henry. "CAA: India to enforce migrant law that excludes Muslims." *Bbc.com*. BBC, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68538260>.

in protest marches, in universities and other institutions, and on the streets. This poem has historically been a symbol of protest against oppressive regimes. It acts as a symbol of freedom of expression.

In the year 1985, Pakistani singer Iqbal Bano sang this song in Karachi stadium, while wearing a black *sari*, a form of attire banned in the oppressive regime of Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan. She chose poetry as a means to show dissent. The crowd in the stadium were energized after the performance, and soon after, Iqbal Bano was banned from singing publicly anywhere in Pakistan. People in India also sought refuge in Faiz's verses to express their dissent against the unconstitutional nature of the CAA.

This is the famous/infamous poem:

ہم دیکھیں گے

لازم ہے کہ ہم بھی دیکھیں گے

وہ دن کے جس کا وعدہ ہے

جو لوحِ ازل پہ لکھا ہے

ہم دیکھیں گے

جب ظلم و ستم کے کوہِ گراں

روئی کی طرح اُڑ جائیں گے

ہم محکوموں کے پاؤں تلے

یہ دھرتی دھڑ دھڑ دھڑکے گی

اور اہلِ حکم کے سر اوپر

جب بجلی کڑ کڑ کڑکے گی

ہم دیکھیں گے

جب ارضِ خدا کے کعبہ سے

سب بت اُٹھوائے جائیں گے

ہم اہلِ صفا مردودِ حرم

مسند پر بٹھلانے جائیں گے

سب تاج اُچھالے جائیں گے

سب تخت گرائے جائیں گے

بس نام ربے گا اللہ کا

جو غائب بھی ہے حاضر بھی

جو منظر بھی ہے ناظر بھی

اُٹھے گا انالحق کا نعرہ

جو میں بھی ہوں اور تم بھی ہو

اور راج کرے گی خلق خدا

جو میں بھی ہوں اور تم بھی ہو

ہم دیکھیں گے

لازم ہے کہ ہم بھی دیکھیں گے

ہم دیکھیں گے

Here is a transliteration of the same –

ham dekheñge

lāzim hai ki ham bhī dekheñge

vo dīn ki jis kā va.ada hai

jo lauh-e-azal meñ likhkhā hai

jab zulm-o-sitam ke koh-e-girāñ

ruuī kī tarah uḌ jā.eñge

ham mahkūmoñ ke pāñv-tale

jab dhartī dhaḌ-dhaḌ dhaḌkegī

aur ahl-e-hakam ke sar-ūpar

jab bijlī kaḌ-kaḌ kaḌkegī
jab arz-e-ḵhudā ke ka.abē se
sab but uThvā.e jā.eñge
ham ahl-e-safā mardūd-e-haram
masnad pe biThā.e jā.eñge
sab taaj uchhāle jā.eñge
sab takht girā.e jā.eñge
bas naam rahegā allāh kā
jo ḡhā.eb bhī hai hāzir bhī
jo manzar bhī hai nāzir bhī
uTThegā anal-haq kā na.ara
jo maiñ bhī huuñ aur tum bhī ho

aur raaj karegī ḵhalq-e-ḵhudā
jo maiñ bhī huuñ aur tum bhī ho

The reason the poem is famous is because the poem has beautiful verses about freedom from oppression. It may be infamous for a certain section of people, for instance, the government in India, perhaps, since they see this as the cause of uprising and protests. It has emerged as a formidable symbol of defiance against authoritarian rule, resonating deeply within movements of protest. Its resurgence in India, notably during demonstrations against the Citizenship Amendment Act, exemplifies the inherent power

of translation to transcend linguistic barriers and transmit potent ideas across diverse populations. This poem, historically a rallying cry against oppressive regimes, allows communities to articulate dissent and unify in their quest for justice, showcasing how translated verses can become powerful instruments of collective expression and resistance.

However, the journey of such powerful narratives is often fraught with challenges, particularly concerning the politics of translation and the pervasive impact of a lack of imagination. The Indian government's misinterpretation of "Hum Dekhenge," stemming from an apparent inability to grasp its true meaning in Urdu, highlights a broader issue of dominant powers failing to engage with or comprehend the "other". This reflects a deficiency in imagination that obstructs empathy and can lead to the marginalization and misrepresentation of diverse experiences, a struggle acutely familiar to communities and literature from Northeast India.

In this context, Northeast Indian literature offers crucial insights into unique regional experiences, often navigating a complex history of political tensions and human rights violations. Authors from this region, like Harekrishna Deka, whose poetry the document's author translates, provide authentic accounts of life amidst adversity. Deka's work, informed by his experiences as an IPS officer, intricately details human emotional layers and societal struggles, thus conveying profound cultural and ethical sensibilities to a wider readership through translation. This process is not merely linguistic; it is an ethical endeavor to bridge understanding and challenge pervasive stereotypes that often reduce the region's rich narratives to simplistic or violent tropes. Here are the Hindi and English translations of the same.

हम देखेंगे

लाज़िम है के हम भी देखेंगे

वो दिन के जिस का वादा है

जो लौह ए अज़ल पे लिखा है

हम देखेंगे

जब जुल्म ओ सितम के कोह ए गरां

रूई की तरह उड़ जाएंगे

हम महकूमों के पाऊँ तले

ये धरती धड़ धड़ धड़केगी

और अहल ए हकम के सर ऊपर

जब बिजली कड़ कड़ कड़केगी

हम देखेंगे

जब अर्ज़ ए खुदा के काबे से

सब बुत उठवाए जाएँगे

हम अहल ए सफ़ा मरदूद ए हरम

मसनद पे बिठाए जाएँगे

सब ताज उछाले जाएँगे

सब तख़्त गिराए जाएँगे

बस नाम रहे गा अल्लाह का
जो गायब भी है हाज़िर भी
जो मंज़र भी है नाज़िर भी
उठे गा अनलहक़ का नारा
जो मैं भी हूँ और तुम भी हो
और राज करे गी ख़ल्क़ ए ख़ुदा
जो मैं भी हूँ और तुम भी हो
हम देखेंगे
लाज़िम है के हम भी देखेंगे
हम देखेंगे

The concept of imagination is paramount in bridging the chasms of cultural and political understanding, especially when confronting narratives from marginalized regions. A critical absence of this imaginative faculty often underpins the misinterpretation and dismissal of diverse experiences. This is starkly evident when dominant powers fail to grasp the true essence of a protest, much like the governmental misunderstanding of "Hum Dekhenge," thereby perpetuating the historical marginalization of Northeast India. Without the imaginative capacity to empathize with different lived realities, mainstream perspectives often resort to simplistic or distorted representations, thus reinforcing existing power structures and silencing authentic voices that seek to articulate complex truths.

Therefore, the act of translation transcends mere linguistic conversion; it becomes a profound act of resistance and witnessing. By rendering works from Northeast Indian authors, such as Harekrishna Deka, into more accessible languages, translators facilitate the revelation of nuanced realities that often remain obscured by mainstream narratives. These translated literary pieces serve as vital testimonies to the resilience, struggles, and unique cultural fabric of the region, directly challenging the systemic erasure and misrepresentation. In doing so, translation not only disseminates the artistic expressions of marginalized communities but also exposes and contests the inherent power imbalances, urging a more empathetic and ethically engaged reception of their stories.

I translate this poem to English as:

Calls (the rightful people) to Arms

We shall see!

We are bound by duty to see!

What shall come on promised day,

Written as was on tablets of history

We shall see!

When immense mountains of cruelty and tyranny

Is blown sky-high like fluffs of cotton;

Is when marching steps of the downtrod

Shall make the earth shudder and quake beneath their feet

When skies atop the tyrant rulers' heads

By streaks of lighting shall be split asunder

We shall see!

When from *Kaaba* – the sacred square

Idols of false Gods shall be uprooted:

When rootless and unwanted to us

Seats of power shall be bestowed.

All crowns shall be tossed up into the air

All thrones to dust asunder

We shall see!

Only the Lord's name shall prevail

One who is invisible and omnipresent,

The scene as well as its viewer

Then 'I am the truth' shall be the cry

That shall rejoice the sky,

That includes you and I!

These two translations—the Hindi translation and my own-- are just two examples out of the many translations of this poem within a short period of time into many Indian languages to be recited as a sign of protest.

Ultimately, the circulation of narratives, whether through the resonant verses of "Hum Dekhenge" or the deeply personal poetry of Harekrishna Deka, underscores the critical interplay between translation and imagination. When approached with ethical

responsibility, translation can cultivate genuine dialogue, enabling the stories of marginalized communities to transcend their origins and find universal resonance. These translated works become vital sites where perseverance is re-imagined and identities are asserted, contributing to a more nuanced global understanding that resists simplistic categorizations and embraces the rich tapestry of human experience. The reason why it became a symbol of religious warfare according to the Government is because of the following line:

jab arz-e-ḵhudā ke ka.abē se
sab but uThvā.e jā.eñge
ham ahl-e-safā mardūd-e-haram
masnad pe biThā.e jā.eñge.

This roughly translates to “when idols of falsehoods would be broken away from the holy ground of God, the oppressed and wronged would be given a seat of recognition and honour.” Some in India believed the poem was talking about destroying idols of Hindu Gods, and, therefore, the brutality of the government and police followed. This, however, is another example of bad translation, translation without proper knowledge of the source language/culture/author and in which politics and translation interplay. And yet, in translation, in their own way, people also found a way to revolt against religious tyranny to an extent. The translated versions of the poem became political weapons.

This is perhaps an example of the “piston-stroke” that George Steiner mentions, discussing translation in *The Hermeneutic Motion*. Steiner talks about the danger of the

hermeneutic cycle because of its incompleteness, and thereby the piston-stroke is the fourth stage which completes the cycle. After figuration, configuration, and refiguration, the piston-stroke is of essence so that the self can be recovered from the “a-prioristic movement of trust” that can put one off balance. It can be understood as the initial, perhaps uncritical, openness and receptivity required when engaging with the "other" or "foreign self" through translation and cross-cultural encounters. This foundational trust, while essential for dialogue, carries the risk of disorienting the self, necessitating George Steiner's "piston-stroke" to recover one's own perspective. Within the chapter's exploration of imagination and ethical engagement for survival, this concept highlights the delicate balance between embracing the foreign and maintaining self-awareness to foster genuine and transformative understanding, ultimately contributing to a refiguration of the self and the other. Steiner does not prescribe the continuation of the same cycle or a different one, or the breaking away from the hermeneutic cycle after the piston-stroke. But we can definitely agree that it is surely a break from the cycle as it marks the beginning of something different. Perhaps *Hum Dekhenge* was the beginning of something different for the people of India in the face of crisis and a good example of the other using translation as a means to transcend the barriers of oppression, which in turn adds to the figuration of the other/foreign self.

Conclusion

The intricate nature of translation is moving beyond a simple linguistic exchange to reveal its profound ethical and political dimensions. Beginning with Benjamin and

with Agamben's state of exception, we discussed the authority that language in translation creates. Furthermore, our analysis reveals how such translations can be weaponized as a tool for cultural domination, exemplified by Charles Wilkins' attempt to align the *Bhagavad Gita* with Christian theology, as well as Jorge Luis Borges' recognition and critique of Edward Lane's work, which illustrates how cultural biases and a desire to maintain dominance can lead to distorted representations of the “other.”

Ultimately, there are arguments stating that translation demands a delicate balance: a commitment to bridging cultural divides while acknowledging their inherent limitations, requiring ethical engagement and a constant vigilance against the impulse to control, misrepresent, or erase the “other.” Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the “untranslatable,” is such an argument, mitigating against politicized translations. Ricoeur underscored that translation is not about achieving perfect equivalence, but rather constructing “comparables,” acknowledging the inherent limitations of bridging cultural and linguistic gaps. Ricoeur's emphasis on hospitality and the avoidance of “third texts”—translations that impose the translator's biases—highlights the ethical responsibility to respect the otherness of the source material.

We also showcase translation as a potent form of resistance, demonstrated by the widespread use of Faiz Ahmad Faiz's *Hum Dekhenge* during protests in India, wherein a translated poem became a rallying cry against oppression. This demonstrates that translations can be highly political in a liberative mode.

My discussion, finally, invokes George Steiner's “piston-stroke,” which signifies, at least, casting suspicion on or, at most, creating a break from the hermeneutic cycle, suggesting that acts of resistance through translation can initiate new understandings.

In the contemporary world, it may be extremely difficult to undertake the practice of translation without one's work having some sort of political influence. Such a situation may almost seem to be an ideal one. In such situations of crisis, we need to move towards some form of the practice of translation that may have a proper balance of politics and other willful intentions for translations, perhaps one that involves imagination while translating various cultures and languages. What we can also focus on are the different ways through which our teaching of literature in original languages and literature in translation can be liberatory, so that the power of literature to bridge the "widening gap between the specialists of literature and the common reader" is realized creatively and imaginatively, rather than simply relying on preconceived, prejudiced ideas (Dasgupta 2016). As scholars of comparative literature, and with learned nuances of translation under our wing, we must try bridging such linguistic isolations, building understandings that may be lifesaving for entire communities of people.

Chapter 3

Imagination With Respect to Survival: In Relation to Sites of Translation/Exchange

Imagination, can be a force for entering realities other than our own, either critically—without the desire to engage—or with charity, concern, and compassion—with the desire to engage and know the “other.” The imagination can be associated with the capacity to contemplate on either non-existent or on objects absent in our immediate or actual surroundings. Contemplation enables us to escape the confines of instantaneous reality, thereby liberating us from the subjection to our immediate surroundings and transferring us to other worlds in our minds, which are somewhat cut off from our actualities, though some would argue that the imagination can represent only something that we have experienced with the senses.

With respect to this suggested nature of the imagination, some may argue that the ultimate power of imagination lies in its ability to empower the subject with a profound sense of freedom, that is innately strong enough to break the limits of what is actual and what is real. Building upon this discussion of imagination's nature, Paul Ricœur's framework of narrative provides a crucial lens through which to understand how we navigate the complexities of identity and otherness. Ricœur argues that narrative, through emplotment, organizes the contingent events of our lives into coherent wholes, effectively mediating the paradox of change and permanence inherent in time. This process is not merely a recounting of facts, but a construction of meaning, whether in the

form of historical accounts or fictional stories. In the context of the previous analysis, where imagination was shown to both connect and divide, Ricœur's narrative theory illuminates how stories can either reinforce existing biases or challenge them. While imagination allows us to envision realities beyond our immediate experience, narrative provides the structure through which we understand and interpret those realities. However, Ricœur also cautions against the dangers of over-identifying with narrative identities, particularly when those narratives disintegrate or undermine the self, as this can lead to ethical pitfalls. Instead, he proposes that narrative should serve as a foundation for ethical reflection, allowing us to consider diverse perspectives and cultivate empathy. Therefore, the narratives we construct and share, whether about ourselves or others, have the potential to either perpetuate harmful divisions or foster a deeper understanding and connection⁶⁸. Literature's capacity to cultivate compassion, while potent, is not without its critical edges, especially when viewed through the lenses of Agamben, Levinas, and Ricœur. While it can open us to the "other," it also risks reinforcing existing power structures or creating a superficial sense of empathy that avoids genuine ethical engagement. imagination is presented as a faculty that allows us to

⁶⁸ Primary works of Paul Ricœur being referred to in the discussion are:

Time and Narrative (Temps et récit): This is his major three-volume work that delves into the relationship between time and narrative. It explores how narrative structures our understanding of temporality, both in historical and fictional accounts. It is where his concept of "emplotment" is most thoroughly developed.

Oneself as Another (Soi-même comme un autre): This work explores the concept of identity, particularly "narrative identity," and its ethical implications. It examines how we construct our sense of self through the stories we tell about ourselves and others.

"*Narrative Identity*" (an article from 1991): This article, and other essays, further explore the dangers inherent in the process of identifying with narrative identities and so moves to subordinate text to action.

On Translation: This work deals with the issues of translation, and the "untranslatable."

These works collectively provide the theoretical framework for understanding Ricœur's views on narrative, imagination, identity, ethics, and translation.

contemplate objects "absent in our immediate or actual surroundings," enabling an escape from "instantaneous reality." However, a counter-argument, echoing Descartes, suggests that even seemingly novel imaginary objects like centaurs or chimeras are ultimately composed of "basic elements... replicas of what we have already encountered in the perceptual world," implying that imagination's productive capacities are fundamentally rooted in pre-existing sensory experiences. This raises the question of whether imagination truly creates a new reality of its own, or a reality housed in another big one, perhaps one that is discriminatory⁶⁹.

Levinas's emphasis on the "face-to-face" encounter, in which the "other" disrupts the self, can be critically applied to literature. Does a fictional representation truly constitute an ethical encounter, or does it merely provide a safe, distanced experience of otherness? For example, a novel depicting the plight of refugees might evoke sympathy, but does it compel the reader to take concrete action? Does it truly disrupt the "I" or merely provide a temporary emotional catharsis? Levinas would push us to question whether the literary representation truly confronts us with the irreducible alterity of the other, or if it reduces the other to a digestible narrative.

Agamben's concept of "bare life" exposes how literature can inadvertently perpetuate the very exclusion it seeks to critique. If literature merely portrays the marginalized as victims, devoid of agency or potentiality, it risks reinforcing their status as "bare life." For instance, a narrative focusing solely on the suffering of a community affected by violence might fail to acknowledge their resilience and capacity for

⁶⁹ See Saulius Geniusas in "Between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur's *Philosophy of Imagination*." *Human Studies* 38, no. 2 (2015): 223–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24757332>.

resistance. Agamben would prompt us to ask: does this portrayal empower or further marginalize? Does it reveal the political forces that create “bare life,” or does it merely aestheticize suffering? The potentiality of the “bare life” must be shown, not just their suffering.

Ricœur's narrative theory, while highlighting the ethical potential of storytelling, also exposes the dangers of over-identification and the limitations of narrative itself. A narrative that simplifies complex social and political issues or presents a romanticized view of the “other” can create a false sense of understanding. For example, a story that portrays a conflict as a simple clash between good and evil might obscure the underlying power dynamics and historical injustices. Ricœur would remind us that narratives are interpretations, not objective truths, and that they can be manipulated to serve particular agendas. Furthermore, if a story “emplots” the “other” within a narrative structure that is consumable by the “self,” does it really allow for the other's voice to be heard? Does the “emplotment” create a true encounter, or a familiarization of the “other,” that negates the “other” as “other”?

Therefore, literature's capacity to cultivate compassion requires a critical approach. It is not enough to simply tell stories of the “other.” We must also interrogate the ways in which those stories are told, the power dynamics they reflect, and the ethical obligations they impose. We must be wary of narratives that create a superficial sense of empathy or reinforce existing stereotypes. By engaging with literature critically, we can harness its potential to challenge injustice and promote a more nuanced and ethical understanding of the “other.”

While on a personal level, imagination gives one the ability to traverse bounds of immediate reality; on a macro/community level, imagination can be very toxic for some. Northeastern women experience a unique form of discrimination rooted in both their gender and ethnicity, making them exceptionally susceptible to prejudice, social harm, and violence. Society often perceives them through a lens of racialized "othering," simultaneously exoticizing them as wild due to biased reports of conflict in their regions, and as subservient, aligning with traditional expectations of female timidity. This dual prejudice is evident in instances like Molly and Mary, in the movie *Chak De India* being objectified and referred to as "chowmein," highlighting how these women are reduced to consumable objects, underscoring a political dimension to this gendered and racialized divide. The quintessential factor at play here seems to be imagination at large. This objectification crosses into **fetishization**, where Northeastern, and by extension, East Asian women are exoticized through an imperialistic male gaze, often linked to references to Chinese cuisine⁷⁰.

If we take the innocence of this freedom of imagination into account, it is difficult not to see the described cases of censorship as gratuitous cases of violence against human nature. In what follows, we will examine how what may be considered given in imagination remains without place within the bounds of actuality.

At the same time, besides enabling an individual to escape the boundaries of actuality, imagination also lends entitlement to the individual to re-constitute the world that surrounds them. With respect to the first tendency, a subject/individual could liken an imaginative experience to a dream, and then with the second tendency in mind, one

⁷⁰ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Volume 16, 1975, pp. 6-18.

may even conclude further that the dream(s) in question is not content to remain in a dreamlike state, it is the need to realize that dream that becomes the driving force. While imagination has the power to put into question what presently exists and provide the incentive to re-constitute an individual's socio-historical reality, it also gives power to the collective to use imagination induced by existing norms to impose restrictions upon certain people. Imagination is thus by far not always entirely innocent. Rather, its tremendous force, and thus potentially its danger, lies in its capacity to re-shape the very world that embraces our everyday actions, feelings, and thoughts, which may very well be the constitutive aspect of imagination.

Imagination: a Cautionary Tale

Imagination can thus embody the tendency to flee the world and the tendency to shape it simultaneously; albeit different individuals may manifest that in different ways. How can one and the same power enable one to escape and to build, to flee and to form, to suspend and to constitute, and to negate and to mar at the same time? With such questions, we stumble against an apparent incongruity, which borders between the spaces of (ir)reality. While we cannot doubt that imaginary objects may be unreal because of their absence in the immediate reality, we need to simultaneously recognize imagination's capacity to transform reality.

In mainland India, people from Northeast India are harassed on a daily basis in various ways, like the use of presumptuous ethnic slurs to address them - “chinky,” or “momo,” or “chowmein”-- which portray the ways most of the mainlanders view people

from that region as outsiders, perhaps more as belonging more to the neighboring countries like that of China than India. A social worker Alana Golmei reported⁷¹:

“Reingamphi, a young woman from Manipur who was suspected to have been raped and brutally murdered at her rented accommodation in Chirag Delhi in 2013. She was the main breadwinner of the family, her parents being rice cultivators with meagre incomes back in her home state. Then there was Mary Ezung from Nagaland, who was found dead in Delhi’s Safdarjung Enclave. Her post-mortem report clearly stated that she was brutally assaulted and murdered. Julie, a young woman from Mizoram, was murdered in her rented flat nearby in Munirka. One 19-year-old girl from Assam was raped at a guest house where she was working.” (2017)

Such is the plight in the capital of the largest democracy in the world.⁷² It may be so that these ideas and norms are a part of the language practiced by the majority of people around them, and thereby they allude to those via their imagination, which also points out to the lack thereof.

Northeast Indians are also often portrayed as somewhat exotic and of mysterious nature by a lot of mainstream media, which contributes to a creation and sustaining of a sense of “otherness” about the people hailing from the region. Not to mention, it is the mainstream media along with the national power politics that adds to the lack of imagination on part of all those biased against people from Northeast India. In most Hollywood movies and TV shows, Northeast Indian characters are usually represented as speaking some broken Hindi, and dressing very differently from other characters around

⁷¹ Please refer to footnote #65 for complains about grammatical errors.

⁷² See *World’s Biggest Democracies*. <https://www.statista.com/chart/31744/biggest-democracies/>

them. The movie *Chak De India*, for instance, depicted such a violent misrepresentation when the fictional Indian women's hockey team was recruiting from Northeast India, and some passerby from mainland India used ethnic slurs like "chowmein" to address a national women's hockey player from the Northeastern region. And in such instances, justice becomes far-reaching or sometimes almost impossible to attain. the choice to cast Northeastern actresses in Northeastern roles, along with dialogue reflecting their **alienation** from teammates, lends the film significant credibility.

Another powerful scene, in the movie, shows a clerk "welcoming" the women to India, to which they indignantly retort, "Would you be happy being treated like a guest in your own country?" This seemingly casual comment from the clerk highlights the normalized perception of Northeastern individuals as **outsiders**, often presumed to belong to Nepal or China. This subtly implies that while the Indian government may politically **marginalize** the Northeastern region and view it as non-Indian, it still expects its people to identify as part of the Indian nation, revealing a stark power imbalance and **hypocrisy**.

Levinas's philosophy - preoccupied with the god, man, and historic progress - relates to a definition of justice of sorts. He did not ignore the critical theories of his times, nor did he repudiate those. He rather chose to engage in phenomenology and psychoanalysis to stake a claim in Husserl's phenomenological method, at the same time, deviating from this method of epistemological concerns by focusing on the possibility that there may arise a certain responsibility for the "other," and that in itself might be a poignant experience⁷³. He further makes this kind of an approach the centrality of ethical

⁷³ See Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, pp 35-37 and 58-63.

meaning. However, this is only assuming that the powerful self in most cases feels any kind of humane obligation to take actions bound by ethics. After all, it might be the ethical experience of heteronomy, if ever experienced, that might constitute any human subject or “other” in the ways of a transcendental principle. As a human being, one is essentially not above all absolute sources of interpretation; and if one’s self-postulation can be considered a secondary Monet of sorts - a spontaneous projection and reflection, it may not be strictly the activity of one’s self that posits itself in one’s mind. **Unless such subjectivity is in some way taken out of its immanence, a consciousness of the self of such a nature may not arise in the first place. And such a process of “enucleation” of the self may be realized by a need of accountability for one’s self, and sadly, such a strong appeal to ethics is seldom seen in today’s world**⁷⁴. Now, undoubtedly, in such a process, the first account one gives or formulates in one’s mind to the other is for the sake of one’s self. That there may be possibility of ethical thinking, one where philosophy may foremost be other than some metaphysics of experience as being intentionality, or a schematic transcendentalism. A common dilemma that arises is about the nature of being human - if humans might be humans primordially in the sense as of *zoa logika*, or if humans are humans because of existence of “other” humans. In a similar manner, we might be able to posit that before the nature of justice is dispassionate in measurement, along with the ability to calculate the dues, it goes through a tumultuous relationship with the “other.” Justice, for Levinas, just like ethics, begins as a state of feeling of responsibility that erupts within the self, which points to an openness to the “other” (1981). It is in fact a gift, according to Levinas, this feeling of responsibility, which

⁷⁴ Ibid.

points towards a vulnerability of the self to the point of substitution; it is precisely this fear of substitution that perhaps shapes the heinous behaviors and policies practiced by some.

An apt example of such a nature of violence of this experience of “responsibility” might be one from our living reality in India - of Northeast India and its people being othered and exoticized; and one of the most prominent instance of the same is the way in which the Central Government run its ad campaign (2013) for the region

Union tourism ministry has started promoting Northeast India in big way.

The brand entity of ‘Paradise Unexplored’ designed for Northeast India is marketed in international⁷⁵ arena.⁷⁶

- a journalist reported in 2013. The entire region of Northeast India has seven states and one more in the chicken neck region. Yet the central government decided to club all of that rich diversity and numerous identities into one region called “paradise.” And to add to the deep-rooted hurt and ill-will that already existed, it termed the region as “unexplored.” It seems like a democratic government whose people still has some renditions of colonial power-politics.

And is how certain leaders of society decide to describe/define the alterity, thereby the translation being ridden with ulterior motives for a motion to gain power over the community of alterity. It is clearly evident that Northeast India remains “unexplored”

⁷⁵ Please ignore the grammatical errors committed by the journalist here. This points to another systemic problem of a lack that exists in language education curriculums in certain regions in India and, would require an entire book project if I were to delve into that.

⁷⁶ See Bikash Singh. “Branding Northeast India as the ‘Paradise Unexplored.’” *The Economic Times*, India Times, 2013, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/travel/branding-northeast-india-as-the-paradise-unexplored/articleshow/18092047.cms?from=mdr>

in their point of view because most mainlanders, including national lawmakers and policy makers do not feel like the people from northeast are of the same nation as them. Those people are seen as aliens and are treated (in)differently, in fact, clubbed together as one homogenous whole, with the intention of only profiting off of the region and its people - thereby dehumanizing the entire communities to merely objects of trade.

Ideally, in the presence of an “other” or the Northeast Indians as the self, one beholds the other through sight/vision, they should be generous and use language to communicate that. The ethical necessity for this reaction can be justified from **Levinas's** beliefs that vision is an in-depth, sometimes violent way of relating to the other. This process may treat the “other” as an object and as a theme, and it is then when violences against the “other” can/does occur. If we consider this a form of adequation, we might be able to justify such a sight/vision is unable to respect what is infinitely the “other” - the alterity that has its own narrative of existence and being, does not need to be part of the self’s narrative in order to continue to thrive. The self also seeks to absorb that alterity and draw it into the play of the narrative of the self. So then, the vision, in such a manner, is just one instance of the habitual economy of the self - a kind of economy or transaction that almost always fails to do any amount of justice to the other. Some more interactions and transactions that can be considered a part of such a self-centered economy are - (mis)representing/(mis)translating the alterity, recognizing and knowing the other based on presumptuous realities, any form of policy making that might affect the other directly or indirectly. The underlying factor at play here is that all of such activities and transactions would prove to be unjust to the other, for any attempt at appropriating the alterity under the guise of helping them would be done at a lack of understanding the true

state of the other, thereby the possibility of reducing the “other” to a shadow version of the self. That is precisely why, in the relationship of knowing the other, under the guise of generosity, there arises a certain kind of language that results in a relationship of pure non-adequation - the kind of language that I will delve deeper in my last chapter. Such a formation of relationship and language than any encounter with (an)other undergoes is in the realm of ethics, however the ethics of the “self” here fails to do justice in most cases. As Agamben mentions in *Homo Sacer* that –

“the killing of a man not as natural violence but as sovereign violence in the state of exception (and is just).⁷⁷”

And the usage of ethnic slurs is a good instance where such a habitual economy of the self is unjust to the other. It is indeed true that in order to understand ethnic slurs best, it is important we look at the historical contexts, origins and development, perhaps in the hope that we glimpse upon moments of non-adequate relationships forming between the self/powerful and the other.

Casting Northeastern actresses in *Chak De India* to play Northeastern roles, coupled with dialogue that highlights their **alienation** from teammates, really boosts the film's credibility. One particularly impactful scene depicts a clerk "welcoming" the women to India, prompting their indignant reply: "Would you be happy being treated like a guest in your own country?" This seemingly casual remark from the clerk underscores how normalized it is to view and treat Northeastern individuals as **outsiders**, often implying their true "place" is in Nepal or China. It powerfully suggests a hypocrisy: while the Indian government may **politically marginalize** the Northeastern region and

⁷⁷ See Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, pp 19-20.

deem it non-Indian, it still expects its residents to identify as part of the nation, exposing stark power imbalances⁷⁸.

So, an encounter with the other directly interrupts the ease of the economy of the self, and the tendency of conceiving of the world as a space where the self holds power. This makes possible the checking of power, possibilities and heralds in insecurities. It interrupts the powerplay of the self. We, as readers, can also note that this transfer of the ethical/unethical dilemma is like a plague that engulfs the self's being. The turn from sight/vision of the alterity to a misguided language of faux generosity ultimately, may lead to a crossing of sensory attributes that might resemble a form of synesthesia - a sequence of events evident in some of the examples already provided so far in this chapter. Ultimately, as Levinas points out as well, the "primordial" relationship that the self has to face in the process of encountering alterity is done via language, meaning discourse. Such a relationship may involve non-totality in the face of the other, as Levinas points out

... in a discourse, in a conversation which proposes the world. This proposition is held between (*se tien entre*) two points which do not constitute a system, a cosmos, a totality.⁷⁹

This perhaps can help us conclude that discourse/language is a nature of relationship in which the self and the other maintain a distance of infinite separation, one that can perhaps be bridged only by the purest of intentions to be just to the other. And while this may seem an ideal state that may not be attained, the self needs to accept the

⁷⁸ See Robert J. C. Young in *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 173.

⁷⁹ See Levinas. *Totality and infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Edited by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer, 1979, pp 96.

fact that the other has a knowledge system of its own. Now, the self-choosing to find out or not find out about the knowledge system of the other, and, to what degree the knowledge of the other's cultures with which the self may familiarize, rests on the kind of portrayal of the other that is accepted and upheld by the self.

The ethical failures and systemic oppression described in the experiences of Northeast Indians in mainland India, comparable to the historical examples of the Irish in the United States, are deeply intertwined with the ongoing theories of imagination. Specifically, they highlight the failure of imaginative empathy and the weaponization of harmful imaginaries. The dehumanizing treatment, exemplified by the "Paradise Unexplored" tourism campaign, reveals a profound lack of recognition of their humanity, reducing them to mere objects of exploitation. This contrasts sharply with Levinas's concept of justice as a feeling of responsibility towards the "other," revealing how often the powerful self fails to extend ethical consideration. The absence of "enucleation," or self-questioning, further underscores this ethical lapse, where the "vision" of the other becomes an act of violence rather than a moment of genuine encounter.

Agamben's concepts of the "state of exception" and "bare life" provide a critical framework for understanding this oppression. The use of ethnic slurs and the systemic exclusion of Northeast Indians from full societal participation mirrors Agamben's description of "sovereign violence." They are relegated to a state where their lives are devalued, and their rights are compromised, mirroring the historical experiences of Irish immigrants in the US. The "habitual economy of the self," as demonstrated by the dominant culture, perpetuates this "state of exception," reinforcing the other's marginalization.

Furthermore, the misrepresentation of Northeast Indians in mainstream media, as exemplified by “Chak De India,” underscores the power of narrative in shaping perceptions, a concept central to Ricœur's work. The “Paradise Unexplored” campaign represents a deliberate imposition of a narrative that ignores the lived realities and diverse identities of the region's inhabitants. Conversely, the resilience of the Irish in creating counter-narratives highlights the importance of reclaiming one's narrative. Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates how ethical failures, systemic exclusion, and the manipulation of narratives converge to perpetuate the oppression of the “other,” demanding a critical examination of power structures and a renewed commitment to ethical responsibility.

Essentially, these examples serve as a cautionary tale about the dangers of a deficient or weaponized imagination. They underscore the ethical imperative to cultivate an imagination that fosters empathy, challenges stereotypes, and recognizes the full humanity of the “other.” The ability to imagine beyond the self, to truly “see” the other's perspective, is crucial for building a just and compassionate society.

The imaginative and discursive space of getting to know the other harbors large room for misunderstandings, mostly because of biased notions of the self. And such misunderstandings still remain rampant in the modern world we live in.

On the afternoon of July 15, 2004, a powerful and unprecedented protest unfolded in Imphal (capital city of Manipur), India, when 12 Manipuri women **disrobed** in front of the Indian paramilitary headquarters. Holding a white cloth emblazoned with "Indian Army Rape Us" in red paint, they demonstrated an unparalleled display of **anger** in India. Their protest was a direct response to the **rape and murder** of 32-year-old Manorama by paramilitary forces. Despite the horrific nature of the incident and widespread local

outrage, the national media initially ignored it. It wasn't until photographs of the "Imas" (mothers) of Manipur's protest were published that mainstream media began reporting on the event, sending reporters and covering stories that even won awards. However, the core demand of the protest, the repeal of the **Armed Forces Special Powers Act**, went unheeded, and Manipur soon faded from the national news cycle. Arijit Sen reported⁸⁰

“Ironically, in December 2008, the same group of 12 22 women travelled from Manipur and staged a sit-in protest in New Delhi. The media did not find that protest as newsworthy. (There was only one more TV crew and a couple of print journalists.)”

Maybe it should not be understood as a mere suggestion that the contradiction that we face here and whose resolution comes at the price of cancelling one of the tendencies mentioned earlier – to think that one may not be biased if the self gains some knowledge of the other’s culture and language. Narrative plays a critical role in shaping understanding and enabling survival. The concept of "rememory," whether explicitly named or implicitly present, becomes a vital mechanism for confronting historical trauma and asserting a collective identity. This underscores that narratives are not merely descriptive but performative, actively shaping lived realities. For instance, the "becoming white" process for the Irish serves as a compelling example of cultural translation, where identity is negotiated across linguistic and cultural divides. This reinforces the ethical responsibility inherent in translation and dialogue: to move beyond mere representation and foster genuine understanding, acknowledging the irreducible alterity of the "other."

⁸⁰ See Arijit Sen in “Marginal on the Map: Hidden Wars and Hidden Media in Northeast India,” Reuters Institute Fellows Papers, University of Oxford, pp. 21-22.
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/marginal-map-hidden-wars-and-hidden-media-northeast-india>

If we turn to Husserl's paradox of subjectivity, which he addressed in sections 53 and 54 of the *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl writes:

How can a component part of the world, its human subjectivity, constitute the whole world, namely, constitute it as its intentional formation, one which has always already become what it is and continues to develop, formed by the universal interconnection of intentionally accomplishing subjectivity, while the latter, the subjects accomplishing in cooperation, are themselves only a partial formation within the total accomplishment? The subjective part of the world swallows up, so to speak, the whole world and thus itself too. What an absurdity!

While this may echo the dilemma we think we face, it still does not justify how imagination can place the subject outside the world as well as in the world. If we take consciousness into account, which is always conscious of some objective realness, or that the subject cannot be conscious without being conscious of an object; we can refer to this as intentionality, like Ricoeur does. We can safely conclude in this scenario that phenomenology concerns itself with an examination of experience "as it in fact immediately presents itself, that is, as a structure of meanings, of intentional relations of subject engaged in a world."⁸¹ (Ricoeur 1981).

And this would consequently necessitate a hermeneutic turn. While for Husserl, meaning may be "located in the subject's intuition of the things themselves," for Ricoeur, "intuition is always a matter of interpretation."

And when intuition is guided by one's examination of experience, appears to be different from them reflects the kind of objectivity they see around them, especially

⁸¹ See Paul Ricoeur in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, 1982, pp. 10.

ideologies followed by their caretakers, mostly parents, that becomes their language of experience. Hermeneutical phenomenology elucidates how humans make meaning in relation to sacred texts and to their shared history, as Ricoeur points out. It distinctively informs the meaning that may be given to a past behavior, the institutional actors, and to all the past narratives. Ricoeur uses the process of historical analysis to discover the imaginative possibilities that arise anew from the search for meaning in the present of the past narrative. George Steiner's concept of the "piston-stroke" within the hermeneutic motion provides a crucial framework for understanding how literature, and its related practices like translation and discourse, can actively challenge the harmful imaginaries that perpetuate oppression, as seen in the experiences of Northeast Indians and Native Americans. The prevalent misrepresentations and dehumanizing narratives, as discussed, represent a stalled or corrupted hermeneutic cycle. Mainstream culture, influenced by biased notions and historical power dynamics, engages in a continuous process of "figuration," "configuration," and "refiguration" that reinforces harmful stereotypes. In the case of Native American imageries in popular culture, and the "Paradise Unexplored" campaign for Northeast India, these stages are marked by a lack of genuine understanding and a projection of the "self's" biases onto the "other."

The "piston-stroke," according to Steiner, represents a moment of interruption, a break from this cycle. It is a moment of critical reflection, where the self confronts the limitations of its own understanding and recognizes the need to move beyond its preconceived notions. In the context of literature, this can be achieved through narratives that challenge dominant stereotypes, amplify marginalized voices, and force readers to confront their own biases. For instance, literary works that authentically portray the lived

experiences of Northeast Indians, can act as a “piston-stroke.” They disrupt the established narratives, forcing readers to re-evaluate their assumptions and engage with the “other” on their own terms. This interruption allows for a potential shift in understanding, moving beyond a cycle of misrepresentation and towards a more ethical engagement with alterity.

Furthermore, the act of **translating marginalized voices** can also serve as a “piston-stroke.” By bringing stories and perspectives from different cultures into the mainstream, translators can challenge dominant narratives and create spaces for dialogue and understanding. However, as discussed earlier, this requires a commitment to ethical translation, avoiding the imposition of the “self’s” biases and respecting the integrity of the “other’s” voice. The “piston-stroke” is not simply a moment of intellectual understanding; it is also a moment of ethical reckoning. It demands a willingness to acknowledge the limitations of our own perspectives and to embrace the responsibility to act justly towards the “other.” In the context of Northeast India experiences, this means actively challenging discriminatory practices, amplifying marginalized voices, and working towards a more just and equitable society.

In essence, Steiner’s “piston-stroke” offers a framework for understanding how literature, translation, and discourse can break the cycle of misrepresentation and oppression. By actively challenging harmful imaginaries and fostering ethical engagement with the “other,” we can create a more just and compassionate world.

In the poem *Rock, Paper, Scissors*, the author Palencia points out how after her son picked up a round rock, felt it, and licked it, she did the same, and as she felt “its cool grain,” and understood the nature of rocks in a new method - one that was unthinkable

almost before she learnt that from her child. One knows things not only because of what is internal to an individual, but because there are phenomena that occur independent of oneself that impact everyone, or that one sees, and are therefore grounded in facts outside one's mind - a complete analysis of imagination and language. Literature, in its potential to ignite the imagination, carries a profound responsibility to bridge the gap between self and other, a task particularly crucial in dismantling the deeply ingrained biases that perpetuate oppression, as seen in the experiences of Northeast Indians and the historical misrepresentations of Native Americans.

Drawing on Levinas, we understand that true ethical engagement requires a disruption of the self-centered "cogito." Literature, by presenting the "face" of the other—their lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and unique perspectives—can create this disruption. However, as the Northeast Indian examples demonstrate, mere representation is insufficient. Ethnic slurs and reductive portrayals in media highlight a failure to truly "see" the other, to recognize their irreducible alterity. Literature must move beyond superficial depictions to foster genuine encounters, challenging readers to confront their own biases and acknowledge the ethical responsibility they bear towards the other. Agamben's concept of "bare life" exposes how dominant narratives can dehumanize and exclude. The "Paradise Unexplored" campaign, like the historical misrepresentations of Native Americans as "savages," reduces entire communities to objects of exploitation, stripping them of their agency and potentiality. These narratives, fueled by a distorted imagination, create a "state of exception" where the other is deemed less than fully human. Literature, to counter this, must give voice to the marginalized, revealing their resilience and challenging the structures that perpetuate their exclusion. It

must show the potentiality of the “bare life.” Ricœur's narrative theory underscores the power of stories to shape our understanding of identity and history. The misrepresentations of Native Americans in popular culture, from children's toys to films, illustrate how harmful narratives can be internalized from a young age, shaping perceptions and perpetuating stereotypes. The “Indian in the Cupboard” example, as Theodore Jojola points out, reveals how these narratives are often fabricated in the “minds of ancient Europeans,” reflecting their own biases rather than the lived realities of Native peoples. Similarly, the misrepresentation of Northeast Indians in mainstream media perpetuates a false narrative that obscures their diverse identities.

The Husserlian paradox of subjectivity, as articulated in the *Crisis of European Sciences*, further complicates this issue. How can the subjective “I” constitute the world while simultaneously being a part of it? This paradox highlights the inherent limitations of our own perspectives and the need to acknowledge the existence of other subjectivities. In the context of Northeast India and Native American experiences, it underscores the danger of projecting our own biases onto the other, failing to recognize their independent agency and knowledge systems. Literature, therefore, must strive to create narratives that challenge these biased notions, fostering imaginative empathy and promoting a more nuanced understanding of the other. This involves dismantling harmful stereotypes, amplifying marginalized voices, and encouraging readers to critically examine their own assumptions.

A Commitment to Imagination

It requires a commitment to ethical representation, recognizing that the stories we tell have the power to shape not only our perceptions but also our actions. Only by embracing this responsibility can literature truly contribute to a more just and compassionate world. This move from a descriptive phenomenology oriented to perception, to a hermeneutic one oriented towards interpretation or understanding is necessary in order to re-think imagination in terms of language. One could read the entire history of the development of phenomenological accounts of imagination as a continuous shifting of attention from one tendency of imagination to the other. While Edmund Husserl's (2005) and Jean-Paul Sartre's (1962, 2004) contributions in an unprecedented way highlight imagination's utopian tendency, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1993), Gaston Bachelard's (1994) as well as Cornelius Castoriadis' (1997) accounts underscore the constitutive tendency. Jean-Paul Sartre's studies of imagination tend to represent the utopian tendency with vigorous emphasis. Yet by conceptualizing imagination in terms of its capacity to reach out for non-existent objects, absent objects, objects that exist elsewhere, or objects whose existence is neutralized, Sartre has in effect suppressed the constitutive tendency of imagination. In both *Imagination* and in *The Imaginary* - the two works that are known to be exclusively dedicated to the analysis of the imagination - Sartre interprets imagination as an escapist tendency that encourages one to flee from real problems as well as from the need to resolve them. Here, imagination is seen to share a lot of similarities with bad faith, which initiates a flight from facticity and liberates one from responsibility. *The Family Idiot* (1981) by Sartre, which was also his last work, shows us a similar notion of imagination in the figure of Flaubert, who being incapable of modifying his worldly state of affairs, is shown to fall back upon an imaginary resolution

to his difficulties. In the analysis of Sartre's and Ricoeur's philosophies of imagination, besides such an escapist notion of imagination, in such works as *What is Literature* and *A Plea for Intellectuals*, Sartre furnishes a significantly different understanding of imagination, which conveys to us that even though there is no prose without imagination, prose does not fall victim to the escapist tendency that lies at the core of other forms of arts, such as poetry, painting, and music. Unlike the poet, the prose writer employs words as signs directing the reader to clear meanings in the process of communicating a judgment about this world, according to Sartre. Literature is known to lift life from the amorphous level of the lived to a thematic structure that may sometimes be restrictive. While some argue that Sartre's philosophy of the imagination relies upon two significantly different sources, besides offering a pictorial theory of imagination, which draws its inspiration from Husserl's phenomenology, Sartre also conceptualizes imagination as spontaneous and self-determined. And it seems not just reproductive but also productive imagination plays a significant role in Sartre's work, notably in his account of aesthetic experience. With these analyses in mind, it may be clear that Sartre presents us with two significantly different conceptions of imagination. Yet the following question remains - what exactly is the relation between these two significantly different notions of imagination? In Sartre's works, this question remains unexplored. In contrast to Sartre, Cornelius Castoriadis - thematizes imagination almost exclusively as a *vis formandi*, which, according to him, is intrinsic to all other human activities, experiences, and thoughts. Castoriadis writes:

To put it bluntly ... it is because radical imagination exists that 'reality' exists for us - exists *tout court* - and exists as it exists.

Castoriadis outlines a distinction between two basic forms of radical imagination, namely the imagination of a singular human being and the social imaginary. Yet just as Sartre's strong emphasis on utopian imagination seems to be drawn from the recognition of the constitutive capacities of imagination, similarly, Castoriadis' focus on radical imagination does not make him lose sight of reproductive imagination. Nonetheless, the question concerning the exact relation of these two types of imagination remains unexplored even in Castoriadis' works. This is where Paul Ricoeur's phenomenology of imagination occupies a special place. In this context, Ricoeur seems to be the only writer to have worked extensively on bridging such gaps.

Imagination is supposed to act as an agent in the creation of meaning in language and through it. According to Ricoeur, in *On Translation* images are constructed and given voice before they are seen, and, paradigmatically, they are voiced out in the form of poetic metaphors which in turn create new meaning by metaphorical reconciliation of pre-existing opposing meanings. If interpreted ontologically, a poetic imagination

“creates meaning by responding to the desire of being to be expressed” (Ricoeur 1967).

Imagination tends to function by divulging new possibilities of being in the world by means of semantic innovation, which in turn points toward social transformation. Ricoeur writes,

“Without imagination, there can be no action (or reconciliation or just peace)” (ibid.).

While Ricoeur may write in a context describing how imagination and language work to make possible the interpretation of sacred texts, the same line of thought can be

applied to lived realities as well. Tejimola, in the short story named the same, sang about oppression to her father in the form of a tree. A symbol is considered a sign as long as it stands for something, but a symbol may not merely be a sign; rather, a symbol can signify two or more meanings simultaneously. In contrast to allegory, that simply relates one meaning to another without residue or ambiguity, a symbol points at more than one meaning by way of enigmatic suggestion or evocation. One could hope and argue that contemporary language can be restored to its poetic and symbolic power, thereby recovering language in its symbolic fullness. This would require demythologizing myth as a false explanation of reality and claiming myth's capacity to describe a state of affairs that is yet to be fully realized. This is a good instance of the process of temporalization that makes present actions meaningfully operational by interpreting them with respect to a recollected past and a projected future. Historical, normative tradition and genuine innovation have the potential to belong together. Tradition can work as the living transmission of an innovation that is always capable of being reactivated by initiating a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity. Reciprocally, innovation, and for that matter, even imagination remain forms of behavior governed by precedents for behavior derived from history and culture in most cases.

An “other” Existence

Poetic language reveals a capacity for nondescript reference to those ontological aspects of our being-in-the-world that cannot be spoken of directly. ‘Seeing-as’ would imply ‘saying-as,’ as well as ‘being-as’ (Kearney 2017). Narrative works, that are both historical and fictional, function as poetic symbols ultimately in their referential capacity. The important point that we can focus on is that historical narrative, thus understood,

requires imagination for its reconstruction. If we believe that any narrative is properly understood, that rests on the capacity of memory based on pre-narrative structures that influence and limit human imagination to act in the world in a significant manner that may be symbolic in nature. If we would want to express this more simply, we could say that human beings are continuously transforming a sequence of life events into a unified structure and weaving a story, creating a plot that has the potential to influence them for life. Ricoeur recognizes a role for poetry in transitioning from speculative theory to an ethical one because poetry is oriented towards and for action. He writes –

“It is the function of poetry in its narrative and dramatic form, to propose to the imagination and to its mediation various figures that constitute some many thought experiments by which we learn to link together the ethical aspects of human conduct and happiness and misfortune.⁸²”

The author in the poem “Laitlum” in *The Yearning of Seeds* by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih weaves a narrative of border communities through his unique understanding of the world. And it is precisely this connection with the larger world that drives his words, with a description of border communities living side-by-side with each other, going on about their activities of survival, without openly attacking one another every day. He succeeds in sharing this imagined reality alongside the normative narratives in society

A light moon in the east: rising
a russet sun in the west, shimmering:
...

⁸² Paul Ricoeur, *Life in Quest of Narrative*, vol 22 no 3, quoted by Kearney, On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva, pp. 114.

And two friends spouting fountains by a field
green with potatoes. Another, her face towards
the pageant of dark boulders, is sizzling
... Between all of us
is the essence of Laitlum –
... in the great friendship of high hills⁸³.

But what if were to address the feelings of meeting the “other,” a powerful ruler perhaps, or someone who is not part of the community you came from. The other can be the alterity, who is usually the marginal in such discussions, but it can also be the powerful/majority if viewed from the marginal’s perspective. Nonglynrih writes in his poem “The Invitation”

However important or exciting
the invitation, it is always
with cold feet that I undertake
to leave these hills.
...

Away from home
fear comes like a cringing dog⁸⁴.

Here, confronted with the limits imposed by reality, the self experiences frustration, disappointment, and pain. As a response to reality, the self takes flight into the imaginary, as those that fit into normative narratives take center stage. Something seems to have occurred with respect to the subject in this interval of time; it is as if a

⁸³ See Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in *The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, p. 112.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 86.

certain deracination of the very subjectivity of the subject appears to have transpired. There is a movement - a resultant of external forces in action that are actively making the subject/self feel like an “other.” This typical subjective displacement from host/self to hostage/other self marks a huge difference. A host is usually associated with initiative, willingness, invitation, reception, and welcome, on the one hand, while, on the other, a hostage gets associated with very different connotations, such as passivity, unwillingness, unpreparedness, and violence most of the time. There is a narrative shift in the case of the parents of the child in this case. They have been othered and violated by the simple action of voice alone. And this invading of one’s narrative of identity leaves traumatic marks. The hostage subject is always already accused in its being, thus entailing the necessity of no longer writing of the identity and ego as universal or transcendental structures. Rather, the subject in this scenario is shown the necessity of writing in the first-person singular form, from the point when this process of trauma of accusation begins. Simply put, it is from a “me” who has already been summoned before “I” had the opportunity to pay attention. The continuity of consciousness is interrupted in this regard, and whenever the consciousness of the “other” is in question, their reality is reduced and relocated in the mind of the host.

The problem with normative structures that bring forth such insensitivity is that it incorporates biased ideologies into narratives of origin, for instance, linking the human moral choice to cosmological cycles of fate, destiny, or predestination. The identities of the alterity/marginal are seen as anomalies, determined by some force beyond themselves to do what they do and practice, thereby justifying their alienation in the eyes of the rest of the population around them. While meditating on the origins of such prejudices and

moral practices may prove helpful to the larger society, in reality, such an awareness is difficult to be imagined by most. Pre-existing structures, and strong adherence to the same diminishes the scope of imagination of individuals, which in turn assists their moral compasses to demonize certain alterities, and thereby oppress certain communities, like the ones in Northeast India. Temsula Ao, in her short story “Soaba,” writes

If there was one single factor, which further alienated the Nagas, it was this form of punishing ‘errant’ villages. It was the most humiliating insult that was inflicted on the Naga psyche. By forcibly uprooting them from the soil of their origin and being, and confining them in an alien environment, denying them access to their fields, restricting them from their routine activities and most importantly, demonstrating to them that the ‘freedom’ they enjoyed could so easily be robbed at gunpoint by the ‘invading’ army. Curfew, a word that did not exist in the people’s vocabulary, became a dreaded fact of life for living in the towns.

If human identity is narrative in character, where memory and imagination are intermingled, so much so that they are necessarily reinvented and reconstructed more than once at least in their lifetime, we see a good example of how the collective in Naga villages navigating through survival necessities. By virtue of reimagining the other in an empathetic process, or maybe by trying to locate oneself as another, the possibility of re-narrativizing - kind of forgetting after remembering - a different and freer future emerges. While the imaginary knows no censorship, as may be suggested by a morality based on abstract rules, narratives do involve an element of ethical solicitation based on an ethics of experience, that mostly revolves around cultural paradigms of suffering and action, happiness, and dignity, which further opens up a variety of ethical possibilities.

Alterity or otherness has different origins, varied lived experiences, and comes with diverse degrees of nuanced imagination of the self. Extreme political disorder, individual traumatic exposures, violent socio-political clashes around the world, instances of rape - are but a few kinds of narratives that encounter alterity in different forms as well. In a poem titled “Where Did Gopal Vanish” by Harekrishna Deka, a boy who had a speaking disability suddenly uttered his first word “Dhoom!” - symbolizing a bomb explosion that took the life of Gopal. He writes -

“হাটলৈ যোৱা গোপাল ঘৰলৈ ঘূৰি অহা নাই।

উভতি অহা বোৰা ল’ৰাটোৰ মুখতহে মাত ফুটিল,

‘ধুম।’ ঠাৰে-চিয়াৰে বুজাই দিলে, আকাশ ভাগি পৰিল।”

Gopal never saw the exit of the village market.

The mute boy made it back, and made noises that started making sense,

As the skies started tearing down in liquid pain, he uttered “Dhoom!”

(my translation).

The trauma was so massive for the boy, that he started speaking in a tongue that was recognized by everyone around him. While such a situation of suddenly starting to speak should have been a case of celebration and relief, in this case, it was a mark of violence, that was endured not just by the boy, but also the community he lived in. The language to deal with such trauma does not seem to exist, and more so, the irony was that while language was gained, language was also lost. This may be an instance of how power struggles maim and mute voices of communities. They are “othered” in a way that their voices simply become faint whispers underlying stories of gory violence. Their stories and narratives are silenced. So, are such alienated communities and individuals

handicapped in different ways by structures of power and politics? In such a scenario, the “alienated other” becomes the community of people who are the living hallmarks of perseverance. The crisis arises when the agency of the spoken word of this “other” is taken away or pushed to the background. The need to fit subjects of scrutiny into certain structures of established systems further adds to the need of the “self” - the audience, in this case - to perhaps fulfil their mental capacities of humane emotions and interactions. But is it certain that it might help the “alienated other” in any way? Does it help those who had close connections with the victim(s)? Why does the “self,” that is away from many acts of violence, not pay heed to the narratives of the ones who still live in constant situations of endangerment even now?

It would also be interesting to know how the social (and individual) imaginary changes with respect to such situations. The social imagination could serve an ideological role of grounding a social identity as well as a utopian role of the turbulent projection of alternatives in relation to the present. Therefore, a poetics of creation can be linked to an ethics of action, like Ricoeur points out.⁸⁵ In this regard, it may seem that a good life would be possible only if an individual or a community adheres to existing, established institutions. Thus, hermeneutic philosophy, in such cases, can be elucidated as one that centers on a relationship between poetics and ethics. It may lead to a process where one or a collective may adopt a process that pivots towards demythologizing one's historical narrative, and then reimagining and projecting that story into the future, that may lead to looking at one's life as if it were more than being a part of a nihilistic game. It becomes a

⁸⁵ Ibid. pp. 114-117.

way of resisting the toxicity of existing narratives, and preserving the originary myths, while infusing new ones - the kind that creates unique identities.

When the encounter with the face of the other is interactive and interrupts the habitual economy of the self, the power play of the self takes a murderous turn sometimes. Sight/vision of the other itself becomes a violent moment for the self; the other may resist being taken over by the self as much as it is not reducible by the vision, rather it breaks away from the self that might encapsulate its being. Yet the temptation to end the autonomy or the alterity or murder it is always at play in the ensuing encounters, brought about by already established, existing structures of the self's reality. Another - example of existing structures causing handicap to communities is made prominent in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone*, that is apprehensive with many issues related to the Naga freedom struggle in Northeast India. The Nagas' quest for a separate "identity" and the resultant subjugation of the rebellion by the Indian Army led to various atrocities from both sides, which resulted in the suffering of the common people. It is a battle that seems to be ceaseless - of ideas as well as arms, new concepts along with or against old traditions of power, bitterness and compassion. The communities have learnt to continue with their livelihoods by taking into stride the handicaps thrust upon by the powerful. Ao starts one of her short stories titled *A New Chapter* (2006) with the following lines:

Gradually the earth seemed to be settling down, as though after a protracted period of violent storms that had ripped through her heart... People were talking of sowing and planting crops in the fields as in the old days before the upheavals... Schoolchildren were seen rummaging through the rubbles of their

homes to see if any book could be salvaged as school buildings were now being repaired...

This opening scene may be written in a very simple manner, but it speaks volumes about the obstacles surrounding that community, irrespective of their age, gender, wealth, and health. The scene tells its readers that the region had seen tremendous amounts of violent “upheavals,” the people probably had to run away and hide while their town was massacred along with those who could not escape, but they had to push themselves and try to normalize their existence as much as they could, for the sake of the young children, in memory of those that had vanished, and in honor of their motherland who had given them shelter in the best and worst of times. It is this spirit of pushing through that makes it possible for those communities to give out their occasional sigh of relief; the fact that they did not give up even in the face of extreme violence and in the aftermath of it. They found a language of their own and used it imaginatively to promote a vision for the future. A different kind of language, an alterity, that made it possible to imagine a unique method of survival

His main job there, it seemed, was to play football for his battalion (Assam Police Force) and he and his colleagues won many shield and trophies. But during a particularly rough final game between the Assam Police and the Assam Regiment for the coveted East Zone Trophy, he was injured badly. His knee cap was shattered, which meant that he would never be able to play competitive football again. Nor could he perform the usual duties of a constable because of his permanent physical handicap⁸⁶.

⁸⁶ Ao, Temsula. *These hills called home: Stories from a war zone*. Zubaan, 2006, p. 35.

That, whether a handicap is inflicted by pure chance, carelessness of a professional health worker, or by society's heinous power struggles, the language of love and perseverance finds a way and language to survive. And no matter what the case is, if the larger populations perceive one as an "other," they tend to construct narratives based on pre-conceptions, that handicap one's self-narrative in the eyes of the majority, thereby, those becoming their imaginative intellect.

In the same story, titled "The Curfew Man," Ao describes this character Satemba who chose not to think about the "rightness or wrongness" of the methods the central government was using in order to control the Naga population. He took such a stand, for a short time in his life, in order to find a good source of income, but only to lose the full use of his knees as a result of that, which shows the helpless plight of people in that region. It is not simply aggressive methods of control applied by those in power, but the struggles that a common man like Satemba faces everyday – threat of unemployment, maintaining a certain standard of living, and so on. There is also the struggle of ideology. Satemba tries not to think about the ideological conflicts between the Naga militant groups and the central government forces – but both groups have different ideas of power and sovereignty, based on their historical experiences that are stored away in their memories. Memory serves as a site of internal conflict in such stories. Retrieval of memories has become an instrument of resisting the injustices of the present. In between warring sides, it is common people like Satemba and his wife who face the dilemma of ideologies. Who would they turn to for support? Whose side are they on? Do their lives matter even the slightest to any of the warring sides? Their vulnerability is preyed on by those in power. Ricoeur argues that through stories individuals or communities learn to

plot their own lives and to project possibilities for their societies, while ethical intervention in history occurs simultaneously via responsible decisions that take place during stressful times between the horizon of expectation of the future and the space of experience (Kearney 2017). And such uses of narratives also has the potential to enable one to identify their positionality imaginatively with respect to other people, thereby extending the circle of selfhood.

Conclusion

This chapter undertakes a complex exploration of imagination and language, grounded in phenomenological and hermeneutic perspectives. It looks upon Husserl's focus on subjective intuition with Ricœur's emphasis on interpretation. This transition necessitates a hermeneutic turn, recognizing that intuition is always mediated by interpretation. Steiner's "piston-stroke" is introduced as a mechanism for disrupting harmful narratives, fostering critical reflection and ethical engagement. This disruption, achieved through literature and discourse, challenges the "self's" biases and opens space for genuine encounters with the "other." The text also delves into the divergent views of imagination held by Sartre and Castoriadis, highlighting Ricœur's unique contribution in bridging these perspectives by emphasizing imagination's role in creating meaning through language, particularly poetic metaphor, and linking poetics to ethical action.

Narrative emerges as a central force in shaping identity and perpetuating stereotypes, as demonstrated by the misrepresentations of Native Americans and Northeast Indians. Drawing on Levinas, the passage underscores the ethical imperative to recognize the "other's" alterity, challenging the "self-centered cogito." The experiences of

marginalized groups highlight how dominant narratives can “other” and dehumanize, creating “states of exception” as described by Agamben. The concept of the “hostage self” illustrates the disruptive impact of trauma and oppression on identity and agency. However, the text also celebrates the resilience of marginalized communities, emphasizing the power of re-narrativizing and reimagining the “other” through empathy.

And then we turn to the real-world consequences of power and oppression, using examples like the “Curfew Man” story and the “Gopal Vanish” poem. These narratives illustrate how power structures and societal biases create conditions of exclusion and violence, silencing marginalized voices. However, the text also emphasizes the resilience of these communities, highlighting their ability to find language and create narratives of survival. The importance of a language of love and perseverance is underscored, demonstrating how even in the face of extreme adversity, marginalized individuals and communities can find ways to resist and endure. The discussion regarding the traumatic effects of violence on language also shows the cost of oppression.

Finally, I examine the role of literature and language in challenging oppression and fostering a more just world. It argues that literature can disrupt harmful narratives, promote empathy, and facilitate social transformation. The importance of ethical representation and amplifying marginalized voices is emphasized. Poetic and symbolic language are presented as tools for reclaiming agency and creating new possibilities. The demythologizing of harmful narratives and the creation of new, more inclusive stories is seen as a crucial step towards resisting the toxicity of existing power structures. The text concludes by reaffirming the ethical responsibility to engage with the “other,”

recognizing that the stories we tell have the power to shape not only our perceptions but also our actions, ultimately contributing to a more compassionate and equitable society.

In the midst of such hostile behaviors it is only of utmost importance for the alterity to keep their spirit of resistance and survival going. And one of the most effective ways of doing that is to make sure that the narratives of the margin - the alterity - is defined by those who are living such marginal realities themselves, as Aruni Kashyap points out in his poem “Freedom” from the collection *There is No Good Time for Bad News* –

... Often freedom was written
between the legs of women
left bleeding; on the penises of men
who only spewed white froth
from their mouths, not information.

Freedom, we are still waiting
for your arrival. Until then
you will be performed
and explained, because ancient stories,
tell us: Definitions have always
belonged to the definers.

In certain crucial times, when the unstable or decomposable nature is brought to attention, usually people believe or should believe in imagining their return, so as to preserve human dignity. But can the fragile consciousness of the individual or collective

be trusted to survive or even realize, depending on the positionality of different sides or beings? It is one's own certainty and inner self that can alleviate them from any skepticism of the self and remove themselves from being narrativized/(mis)translated in any negative light by a lot of pre-existing structures and ideologies. Regardless of any violation inflicted upon the "others," it is important to note how these "others" choose to empower their bodies as well as living narratives based on old and new narratives of self-worth – a process that stands outside the logic of proper exchange. There is this innate tendency to carve out a niche for one-self, where they can practice their language of imagination.

Chapter 4

Spirit of Survival and Perseverance as Sites of Imagination and Translation (or the Lack Thereof)

If we consider the singularity of ethical experience, and ethics as first philosophy—that is, ethics as challenging the traditional understandings in philosophy, particularly in the encounter with the other/the Face—then, the traditional, rational experience of the ethical, aligned with Hegelian Spirit, allowing excess, dephasing, or diachrony for the other, cannot take us out of history. The Spirit is aligned with knowledge and, as Levinas argues, is, in history, a dominant reasoning will that seizes something and makes it one's own.⁸⁷ Such a perspective necessitates an ethical posture, shifting, an alterity of sorts, from a solely objective inquiry to one grounded in profound responsibility for the Other. We, as human beings are capable of critically examining traditional methodologies that might inadvertently totalize or appropriate the narratives of marginalized communities, instead prioritizing an encounter with irreducible alterity. Such process thus centers on acknowledging the ethical summons inherent in each narrative, fostering a relationship built on non-domination and a deep respect for the unique and ungraspable dignity of every voice. In a practical sense, this can translate into a methodological commitment to "linguistic hospitality" and authentic "dialogue" that

⁸⁷ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics as First Philosophy* (1984). "Philosophy Texts", Jurgen Braungardt, 2025.

honors both the explicit content of survival stories and any inherent "silence" or untranslatable aspects of experience. Rather than seeking to fully explain or categorize the Other's narrative within pre-existing frameworks, my research embraces the limits of understanding and the demanding alterity of recounted/rememoried experiences. This ensures that the study avoids consuming narratives as mere data, promoting instead an ethical engagement where the researcher's own positionality is continuously re-evaluated in light of the Other's or Self's irreducible presence.

Such a notion of history makes cultural formations of identity ever precarious, perhaps untenable in the face of power. Such dichotomies of power are certainly examples of identity formations, which are borne out of a rigid imagination, not a free one. Mircea Eliade described the "terror of history" in his *Cosmos and History* (1959) as a state of human existence in which figures like Napoleon, about whom Hegel thinks of as the world soul and whom Eliade described as "history on a horse," that cannot be overcome if there is no religious faith of any kind, and perhaps, for the modern citizen the "Universal Spirit"⁸⁸ is not the Hegelian hero but the power of imagination – the imagination that empowers survival, the belief that one can make life better for the next generations, if not for oneself. Perhaps that is why Eliade talked of believing in a power that is beyond the human mind's capacities in books like that of *Bengali Nights (La Nuit Bengali)* (1933), where his belief in ancient Indian philosophies was very heavily displayed.

⁸⁸ See, Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, https://monoskop.org/images/b/b1/Eliade_Mircea_The_Sacred_and_The_profane_1963.pdf, pp. 112-113.

When considering the profound singularity of ethical experience, especially through a Levinasian lens-- the ethics of the "other," focused on the ethical responsibility to recognize and respond to the other's alterity in the "face-to-face" encounter, which causes the disruption of the *cogito*-- through which ethics precedes all else, historical and cultural identity formations become fragile. If the ethical encounter, as expressed through excess, dephasing, or diachrony, transcends historical narratives, then rigid, power-driven imaginations creating divisions become inherently problematic. Such imaginations, while offering personal escapism, can be profoundly toxic on a community level, particularly in the face of historical trauma. Pondering Eliade's construction of the "terror of history," we see that imagination, or its absence, can drive both survival and destruction. It can become a transcendent force, a belief system, yet also a tool for enforcing oppressive norms.⁸⁹

"Rememory," as Morrison presents it, emerges as a vital process that may preserve or navigate historical trauma. Morrison introduces this concept in her novel *Beloved*:

"I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know.

⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas: *Totality and Infinity (Totalité et Infini)* and *Otherwise than Being (En étant près de l'autre)*: See Levinas. *Totality and infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Edited by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer, 1979.

Mircea Eliade: *Cosmos and History*: This work is directly cited concerning the "terror of history."

Bengali Nights (La Nuit Bengali): This work is also directly cited, as a work that displays Eliades belief in ancient Indian philosophies and the perseverance of spirit. See Eliade. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Harper Torchbooks, 1959.

Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not.

Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.”

“Can other people see it?” asked Denver.

“Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what.”⁹⁰

It seems to be a highly appropriate, overarching argument, as this section bridges the foundational ethical framework established by Levinas with crucial concepts of history, identity, imagination, and memory. By introducing rememory through Morrison's

⁹⁰ See Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, (1984) 2004, pp. 43-44.

Beloved immediately after discussing the Levinasian ethical posture, we effectively transition from abstract philosophical principles to the concrete manifestation in how traumatic histories are experienced and transmitted. This directly sets the stage for exploring how narratives of survival and perseverance are remembered and communicated, thus fulfilling the "Imagination and Translation" aspects of the chapter title and underpinning the study's focus on "dialogue" and "silence" in cultural exchange.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, rememory powerfully illustrates how past traumas remain intensely present, as seen in Sethe's chilling experience that "the picture... is still out there... waiting for you." This underscores its double-edged nature: it can relentlessly terrorize, trapping individuals in a cycle of relived pain and preventing forward movement, much like how Sethe is frozen by her past. Yet, *Beloved* also reveals rememory's potent capacity for healing, demonstrating that while confronting trauma alone might not release suffering, it becomes a site for collective processing and "putting memory in place" when engaged with through communal intervention and shared dialogue, ultimately offering a path toward liberation. Even if witnesses can record their experience, they cannot perfectly reproduce it. Furthermore, attempting to reproduce the experience does not release the witness from their suffering. While physical pain dissipates and wounds eventually heal, witnesses' memories leave a scar on their minds. Such memories are what we call trauma. The memories of those individuals who experienced traumatic events—or rather, their archaic remnants—are the memories of those who are struggling to live. However, precisely because the existence of "the other" is formulated through such memories, even when those memories begin to fade, this "archaic remnant" cannot be forgotten. But herein lies the problem of the relationship

between literary expression and memory, and, moreover, rememory. Of course, both archaic remnants and memories that have not been written down recede and are consigned to oblivion with time. This may be the basis for a need of representation and expression, through which a person, or even a community might attain some conclusion about their (re)memory with respect to the place they came from, or the place they live in, which finally forms the foundation for their identity.

Unlike simple memory, rememory is the active re-telling and re-interpretation of the past, as we see in the action of the Thirty Women in *Beloved*, for, as the women go to save Sethe, they remember themselves and the community that they need, one centered on Baby Suggs and 124. This positive form of rememory involves allowing communities to contend with the suffering. This narrative reconstruction becomes a form of cultural preservation and resistance, as seen in the storytelling traditions of Northeast India and Native American communities. Implicitly, this connects to Levinas's ethics, highlighting the responsibility to acknowledge the "other's" suffering. The silencing of marginalized voices, like Sanjib's⁹¹, in Aruni Kashyap's "Skylark Girl," represents a failure to engage with their lived realities, a violent disregard for their alterity.⁹²

Ricœur's emphasis on narrative identity underscores how stories shape our understanding of self. The act of retelling, of weaving past and present, is a crucial process in making sense of trauma. However, this process is not neutral;

⁹¹ The person who goes to New Delhi to present at a conference on the rendition of a story of "Tejimola," but is not taken seriously by the a-lot of the audience, including the panelist. See Aruni Kashyap's *His Father's Disease*, 2019, pp. 18-21.

⁹² Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. This work is referenced in relation to the concept of "rememory." See Morrison. *Beloved*. Vintage, 2004. Pp 43-44.

recording/writing history itself is an interpretation, vulnerable to prejudice, highlighting the ethical responsibility of educators and social leaders to avoid perpetuating biased narratives, recognizing that education can become propaganda. The idea that stories are a form of survival, a way for the “others” to embody their own narratives, is powerfully shown. Ultimately, Sanjib’s experience⁹³ argues for an ethical engagement with the “other,” reminding us that the narratives we construct shape our reality and our actions, demanding a commitment to justice and compassion.⁹⁴

Recently, orders by the central government, along with the cooperation of higher education authorities in India, have made it extremely difficult for people to conduct any kinds of research about topics related to social sufferings – mostly for Jammu and Kashmir, and Northeast India, because apparently it might contribute to security threats against the nation.⁹⁵ Such orders are a means to handicap these border regions even further. Nevertheless, there are many writers in the nation, as well as outside, who choose to write about the sufferings of their own people, mostly in English, which is also a sign

⁹³ See footnote #97.

⁹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. University of Chicago Press, 1984 and *Oneself as Another*. University of Chicago Press, 1990. Ricoeur focuses on:

- Narrative identity: His theories on how individuals construct their sense of self through storytelling.
- And, Hermeneutics: His work on interpretation and understanding. His work on the imagination, and the connection between poetics and ethics.

⁹⁵ “Central Government has deployed Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) to aid the State authorities for carrying out counter insurgency operations and providing security to vulnerable institutions and installations. 498 Coys of CAPFs are deployed for border guarding duties along the international borders of Nepal, Bhutan, China, Bangladesh and Myanmar with NE States. 405 Coys of CAPFs are deployed in the North Eastern States for Internal Security and Counter Insurgency Operations. Further, the Government of India is assisting the State Governments for augmenting and upgrading their police forces to deal with insurgency. Towards this end, 61 India Reserve Battalions (IR Bns) have been sanctioned for the NE States. These include 11 Battalions each for Assam, Manipur and Tripura, 7 each for Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, 6 for Meghalaya, 5 for Mizoram and 3 for Sikkim.” See Annual Report 2021-2022 by Ministry of Home Affairs, India 16.

of resistance; in that process, we come to terms with our (re)memories, while negotiating our identities in our current places of residencies. And perhaps, that practice of writing is one of the many practices that defines the modern spirit of resistance and survival of human beings, proving that the spirit of modernity is confused and many-hued, but not always in a negative sense of the term.

Stephen Greenblatt, in “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion,” as we have noted in previous chapters, demonstrates how Shakespeare’s plays repeatedly pertained to production and “containment of subversion and disorder⁹⁶.” We may use this term to understand the rise of regional writers from so-called marginal areas in India. In such a scenario of a *mélange* of literature and ideologies, the question as to what constitutes identity, and the elements drawn upon by Indian selves to “self-fashion” in and outside the colonial context still remains murkily answered, mostly because of the extent of India’s and Northeast India’s diversity. In the post-independence era, Northeast India, sadly, acquired the notoriety of being a hotbed for insurgent activities and has come to be regarded as a politically disturbed area with instances of frequent violence, communal clashes, and identity issues. Morrison’s rememory and Ricoeur’s ideas of narrative suggest that this history is something that can be retold in over, and over again, from below or from the margins, as well as by the powerful, in the hope that a certain group of people do not manage to hold all the power, inflicting narrative violence on marginal groups of people. As Carr points out in *What Is History?* (1961; 2018):

⁹⁶ See Stephen Greenblatt. “Invisible bullets: Renaissance authority and its subversion.” *Glyph* 8, 1981, p. 36

It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context.⁹⁷

We suggest that to counter discriminatory versions of history, writing and retelling stories is the best instrument against versions of history being accepted as the absolute truth of the past. The fundamental reason behind this is that, for centuries, literature has been effective in exposing systemic problems around the globe. It is, indeed, the language of perseverance that must be taken seriously by the larger world audience as well, because narratives preserve the spirit of those who made it through tough times and are dealing with the burden.

At the same time, if we tend to characterize marginal stories/actions only as resistance, this might have the negative effect of reducing local stories to mere reactions against Euro-centric colonial measures and ideologies, proving to be damaging to the identities of such communities. We do not need the language of resistance/perseverance to reinforce a complete “othering” of non-dominant cultures; rather, we want such stories to maintain their power, relevance, and record of agency: defining the uniqueness of marginalized cultures and communities as well as showing how they resist power. Stories of violence may, inadvertently, offer the existing power structures the status of being the “reality” without which the “other” cannot be imagined. Reading the stories of the “other” as narratives of agency is a way of breaking the binary of colonizer/colonized, which maintains the inequality of the other, and of addressing why cultures are not only

⁹⁷ See Edward Carr in *What is History?* Penguin, 2018, p. 9.

“post” but have their own integrity. We can see such communities, ones that have existed for hundreds of years before they were forced to conform to and oppose the neo-power structures for their survival and existence, simply refusing to be part of the economy of the powerful Western self and center.

Temsula Ao’s works present such a stance of resistance through the native force of storytelling. Like Alice Walker, in her essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Ao suggests that we must look at other sources than written history to understand and to find the voices of those who have been oppressed. For Walker, her mother’s garden, quilts, and other sources document Black life, and her book of essays is a monument to memory and storytelling. Temsula Ao, much like Alice Walker in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," advocates for a counter space, like her mother’s garden⁹⁸ — a rhetoric of resistance that challenges and reclaims narratives often erased or marginalized by dominant historical accounts. Walker's seminal essay argues that to truly understand the resilience and creativity of Black American women, one must look beyond traditional, written histories that largely omitted or misrepresented their experiences. Instead, she turns to "other sources, celebrating the profound artistry and intellect expressed in mediums like her mother's vibrant gardens and the intricate patterns of quilts, which served as powerful, tangible testaments to Black life and a means of preserving identity and spirit amidst oppression. In a similar way, Ao, in her short story “The Last Song” (2006), she writes,

⁹⁸ Walker, Alice. *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*. Harvest, 1983, pp. 241-243.

Thus, on a cold December night in a remote village, an old storyteller gathers the young of the land around the leaping flames of a hearth and squats on the bare earth among them to pass on the story of that Black Sunday when a young and beautiful singer sang her last song even as one more Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined children.

Without political violence, the old woman passes on the story of perseverance to the younger generation. The younger generations listen to such stories and start weaving them into their existence, carrying them forward, and perhaps retelling such stories, in their own ways, to the generation after them--an act which ensures that the spirit of perseverance lives on.

In order to understand the significance of the performances of resistant behavior, we need to understand that such a manner of behavior is not removed from identity and subjectivity. Some scholars in socio-political disciplines may argue that resistance and perseverance may be a defense mechanism of the other. However, resistance and perseverance are much more, and defense, if at all, is just a tiny figment of the purpose of survival, of not giving up. Most important, if we see resistance in the identity of the other, we might see other selves, a form of relational quality. In such a relationality the agency of the individual other is not undermined; resistance, as a semi-permanent state of being of marginal communities, is a sign of identity that enables them to be recognized by a global audience, making local memory global, while at the same time still being popular in niche, marginal communities—retrieving memories that might be lost. This resists, as

E. V. Ramakrishnan points out in his *Locating Indian Literature: Texts, Traditions, Translations* (2011), the impulse simply to provincialize Indian literatures⁹⁹.

We should acknowledge that so-called “normative” ideologies are always at play, especially with respect to established power structures, ones which contribute tremendously to this quest for a proper balance of one’s personal or a community’s sense of identity via ethics and imagination. Indian English writing, for instance, has grown and evolved as it has faced the challenges of two centuries of colonization and its after-effects, which cannot be completely negated in less than a century. It is difficult to dissociate oneself from the effects of colonization in the historical past and to deal with the demands of the Euro-centric ideologies in the present-day globalized world. Just like E. V. Ramakrishnan says, “The narrative contract presupposes the ethics of imagination as a condition of enunciation... For without an investment in the ethics of imagination, all stories we will tell will sound hollow and untrue¹⁰⁰.” Every study of modern art or literature, right at the outset, poses for itself the awkward problem of defining its identity and “place” in modern literature. Does it have to do with a particular chapter in human history or does it concern human sensibility across the ages? Is there a modern way of constructing identity—of creating paintings, writing novels, building cities that may be devoid of any bias? In addition, how do writers negotiate the traditional with the modern ideals of democracy,¹⁰¹ for example, particularly in the liminal spaces, in-between, where

⁹⁹ See E. V. Ramakrishnan in *Locating Indian Literature: Texts, Traditions, Translations*, 2011, p 97.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 60

¹⁰¹ See Conor Gearty, 2016. “...the human rights approach after the Second World War was that it deepened the universal language of liberty (the 'rights of mankind' after all) while rendering permissible action against dangerous (socialist, egalitarian) liberty in the name of security. The new European constitutions made truly radical politics impossible (Mandel 1998). Special provisions in

power makes possible the occurrences of heinous atrocities. Literature, as one of the main modalities of encounter in between the normative contemporary and traditional, helps shape hybrid realities through creative processes, helping people negotiate their identities.

The drive for representation and expression, particularly in marginalized communities, is rooted in the fundamental human need to construct and to articulate identity. However, in regions like Jammu and Kashmir and Northeast India, government restrictions, as detailed in the 2021-2022 report by the Ministry of Home Affairs, impede this process, limiting research on social suffering. In addition, as we have seen, historical trauma, the “terror of history” described by Mircea Eliade in *Cosmos and History*, profoundly impacts marginalized communities. However, writers in these regions, choosing to write in English, create a form of resistance, reclaiming agency and challenging dominant narratives. The ongoing violence in Northeast India, as depicted in Temsula Ao's “The Last Song,” as we have seen, necessitates retelling history from diverse perspectives. E.H. Carr, in *What Is History?* emphasizes that “facts speak only when the historian calls on them,” highlighting the need to challenge dominant historical narratives. Ao's stories, focusing on perseverance, like that of the old storyteller passing down tales of survival, offer powerful examples of literature reclaiming agency.

The discussion of the power of the imagination connects to Levinas's ethics of the “other,” highlighting the ethical responsibility not only to narrate, but also to acknowledge and respond to suffering. The silencing of voices, like that experienced by the Assamese writer Sanjib in Aruni Kashyap's “Skylark Girl,” exemplifies a failure to

the European Convention allowed the ties in signatory states to attack threats to freedom in the name of freedom.”

recognize the “other's” alterity. The government restrictions, as detailed in the Home Affairs report, serve to silence these voices, hindering the crucial work of rememory and further marginalizing communities. Ultimately, they underscore the ethical implications of how we imagine ourselves and others, highlighting the power of representation and expression to resist oppression and to reclaim agency.

Our communities in the Northeast and a few other places in India have founded their various languages of survival through the power of imagination. While they may not have a say when a lot of people in power co-opt their stories, they still continue to persist and live for the sake of the next generations. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in his poem “Jorhat” from his collection *The Yearning of Seeds* (2011) laments how his community is a “vanishing tribe” just like the one-horned “rivet skinned rhino.”¹⁰² Caught between the “rosy promises” of politicians and the never-ending violence seems to be the modernized natural order of things. Such instances mark the fleeting moments of survival in the face of “terror of history,” the terror faced by ancestors, that still lives with the present generations, and somehow seeps through into our existence.

In Northeast India, we see a marginalized people imagining their return, narrativizing themselves so as not to be determined solely by metanarratives, to preserve human dignity. As embodied archives of culture and history, as living narratives based on old and new narratives of self-worth, they affirm a process that stands outside the logic of proper exchange as equal human beings and of officially recorded history. Memory and

¹⁰² See Kynpham Nongkynrih in *The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, p. 124.

history are collections of stories, and learning the cultural stories of different peoples, along with the stories of historians may be either illuminating and illusory.¹⁰³

The experiences of marginalized communities, such as Native Americans and those affected by the NRC in Northeast India, powerfully illustrate the challenges of preserving identity and narrative in the face of dominant historical accounts. Leanne Howe's concept of Native American stories as "living theater" underscores the dynamic and interconnected nature of these narratives, linking past, present, and future in a continuous, evolving tapestry. Similarly, the book "But I am One of You" reveals the NRC as a system that divides, and uses rememory to show the suffering that it causes. Craig Howe's declaration, "Tribalism will not die" speaks to the enduring power of cultural identity and the resilience of marginalized communities in the face of oppression. However, authors from these communities often face a unique dilemma, feeling pressured to assume roles as "moralists, commentators, politicians, reformers, socialists," and so on, rather than simply to tell their stories.

As recent scholarship has explored, history and collective memory function both together and in tension. How do we use both to educate? The educator committed to social justice must move beyond a passive acceptance of established educational narratives and facts. As E.H. Carr elucidates in *What is History?* (1961), the very process

¹⁰³ See Seymour Itzkoff, (1962), pp.132-134. "Edward Hallett Carr, in his book *What Is History?* maintains that the historian's most important role is the synthetic one of giving meaning to the facts and events of the past. This is the theme of his book: "The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaning- less." History then, is a continuing and unending dialogue between the present and the past with the historian serving as guide and interpreter."

of selecting what becomes a fact or a "normative educational fact"¹⁰⁴ is inherently subjective. This selection is deeply influenced by human interpretation of education's meaning and purpose. Therefore, a social justice educator must critically examine *whose* interpretations have shaped the dominant educational discourse, recognizing that these interpretations often reflect existing power structures and may exclude or devalue the experiences and knowledge of marginalized communities. This critical awareness is essential for identifying and challenging biases within the curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practices, ultimately working towards a more equitable and inclusive educational system. From the point of view of language and culture, education can thus be seen as an idea, with many dimensions that are both explicit and institutional. And if the powerful normative tendency is not to include minority in real terms, the education becomes propagandic in nature. This is where **social leaders** like educators, translators, writers, politicians come in, and depending on the viewpoints they harbor, they can either be engulfing or not of the other's culture and language. There are always ways in which traditions, cultures and languages survive against a lot of odds.

Orality involves, as Amardo Rodriquez reminds us, involves "variability and changeability of the spoken word,"¹⁰⁵ which seems historically unreliable to written cultures. A lot of Native American stories, as Leanne Howe points out, are connections to the past, present, and future, that do not have an end, and their strong connection with

¹⁰⁴ See E Carr in *What is History?*, 1961:2018, pp 10-12.

¹⁰⁵ Amardo Rodriguez, "Notes on Orality, Performativity, and Postcoloniality," in *Liminal Traces*. Brill 2011. p. 35.

nature itself would render them strong enough to survive the terrors of their past, while persevering in the present. Those stories are performative, a sort of “living theater.”¹⁰⁶

Written literacy can discriminate. Perhaps most powerfully, in Northeast India, we can see the human cost of the NRC (National Register of Citizens) exercise in the book *But I Am One of You*, portraying it as a system that has morphed into an instrument of division, rather than a legitimate effort to identify illegal immigrants. The stories of “doubtful” voters and illiterate individuals, whose ancestors may have been in the region for hundreds of years, but have been mostly illiterate in the modern sense of the term, struggling to prove their citizenship at Foreigners Tribunals, paints a stark picture of injustice and suffering. The book utilizes the concept of rememory, encouraging the recollection of forgotten experiences, to illuminate the fluid and often fraught nature of Indian identity. The authors' personal connections to places like Police Bazar in Shillong, kitchen gardens in Kokrajhar, and Gorkha temples in Aizawl, all of which serve as emotional anchors, weaving together individual memories and collective histories. Ultimately, *But I am One of You* is presented as a vital resource for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Northeast India, advocating for unity and empathy in the face of ongoing challenges.

The United States has invented different metaphors in an attempt to describe a more inclusive nation, describing the presence of different ethnicities in metaphors from a “melting pot” to a “salad bowl,” in recognition of varied identities. Can a nation, with a collective memory, be imagined in such a manner that it may encompass a variety of

¹⁰⁶ See Leanne Howe, *Tribalography*, 1999.

identities and memories, and can we celebrate such a reality? As authors from unacknowledged parts of the world tell their stories for a global audience—often, in English— they potentially raise historical awareness. Yet, when the other is characterized as those who made it through tumultuous violence, as the ones who survived to tell the tale, their identities become fixed and essentialized.

This problem underscores the need for diverse storytelling and for the counter-balancing role of literature in raising historical awareness and challenging dominant narratives. It is imperative that we create spaces in which diverse voices can be heard and celebrated, so as to rewrite history and to reinterpret events through a multitude of lenses. This requires a commitment to ethical representation, a willingness to challenge our own biases, and a recognition that true understanding comes from embracing the complexity and multiplicity of human experience. As Edward H. Carr writes:

If we can widen the range of experiences beyond what we as individuals have encountered, if we can draw upon the experiences of others who've had to confront comparable situations in the past, then - although there are no guarantees - our chances of acting wisely should increase proportionately¹⁰⁷.

The short story “Skylark Girl” by Aruni Kashyap in his collection *His Father's Disease* reflects such a dilemma very poignantly, and points to the lack of imagination of the powerful self. Based on a true incident experienced by one of our prominent Assamese writers at a conference in Delhi, India's central capital state/city. The writer is left scrambling for ways to make people understand the value of the folktale that he is

¹⁰⁷ See E Carr in *What is History?*, 1961:2018, p 14.

trying to re-tell. Retelling is like rememory for the communities from Northeast India, especially those stories of perseverance. As the writer in “Skylark Girl,” Sanjib points out to the people in the conference from mainland India:

Because the character, who is repeatedly killed by her stepmother, refuses to give up on life. You know, people find it inspiring. We have, after all, refused to give up on living, despite all the violence. The Eighties and the Nineties were so horrible. Sanjib spoke slowly, in Hindi, which was better than his English. But he was annoyed that the moderator continued to ask him questions in English.¹⁰⁸

Sanjib is being marginalized on many levels. First, the person in a position of power, like our “moderator” here, fails to hear what the panelist is actually saying, as he asks questions like “Why is it so popular?” with a cringe on his eyebrows, and “Why hide behind a folktale, Sanjib?” It is as if a process of selective hearing takes over, and the moderator, in this case, a sort of social leader, tries to coax information out of Sanjib that is not primary material in his paper, manipulating Sanjib’s voice.

Second, language leads to discrimination. Sanjib, speaking in Hindi, was brushed away as if the language does not exist as a scholarly language for the moderator, as if English was a better medium for Sanjib to speak than Hindi, a language spoken by the majority of people in central and northern India. The moderator suggests that such a language could not be used for having important conversations, marking Sanjib as a person from the periphery of the nation. Such instances of being silenced by leaders in

¹⁰⁸ See Aruni Kashyap in *His Father’s Disease*. Context. 2019, p. 15.

society get in the way of audiences hearing stories of rememory, survival, and perseverance and silence traumatic memories, interrupting self-fashioning of identity.

Negotiating Identities in Translation

Identity, in part, involves a negotiation with the past that helps to shape the present, in order to give hope of future continuity. Toni Morrison's concept of rememory points to such a process, when undertaken as a form of ethical engagement with the past. The haunting presence of the woman Beloved embodies the traumatic memories of slavery, demanding a confrontation with historical suffering. This act of remembering, or “re-remembering,” is not simply a passive recollection but a profound ethical imperative. It compels the characters, and the reader, to acknowledge the “other's” pain, echoing Levinas's emphasis on the ethical responsibility to the “face” of the other.

In this context, translation becomes more than linguistic transfer; it's a process of ethical mediation. The act of conveying the rememory of trauma requires a translator not only to render the words but also to make them carry the weight of historical suffering, ensuring that the “other's” voice is heard and respected. This is shown in the act of Baby Suggs preaching, where she calls upon the memories of her community.

Part of the modernist project in twentieth-century, especially in the West, involved figures such as Pablo Picasso and TS Eliot at its helm who were involved at simultaneously, locating the modern element in ancient poetry and traditional tribal art, and re-contextualizing it in the present: in the here and now of modernity. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was an almost credible enactment of this modernist outlook, with intermingling echoes—many of them verbatim—of Homer, Ovid, the Bible and the Upanishads. The poem is like a tall tower composed of bits and pieces of other towers.

This may be the manner Picasso had in mind when he defined modern art as a sum of destruction—and the title of Eliot’s poem is somewhat in keeping with this definition. The minds of modern subjects feed on such types of chaotic cultural transactions. It has a tendency to establish links: between Ovid’s poetry and the Upanishads, for instance; or, as in Picasso’s case, between the dissimilar aesthetics of the French post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, the Spanish Renaissance artist El Greco and the tribal mask-makers of Africa. To Western modernists, looking to the Orient or Africa for creative inspiration couldn’t have caused any anxiety about borrowing from outside the domain of one’s own heritage. During the eras of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the European artistic tradition took pride in itself for being cosmopolitan in nature. Imaginative cultural adoption was equated as a modern trait, and it still is given that status. It must not be doubted at any point that the spirit of modernity is confused, many-hued, contaminated. And that sometimes people fail to describe/define this spirit in respect to otherness. Yet it is necessary to continue to discuss such spirited narratives for the sake of continuing some form of dialogue. And how that kind of spirit manifested itself during the twentieth century in the literary arenas of two of prominent Northeast Indian languages is a case study in itself. G. N. Devy wrote¹⁰⁹ – “Most of Indian Critical Talent has been wasted,” in his well-known 1992 polemic *After Amnesia*.

After Amnesia was an attempt to shake up the field of literary studies in this country. Devy’s main points of contention against students and professors of vernacular literature is that they are only borrowing Western models of analysis that had very little relevance in the Indian context, and that they had, on top of that, forgotten their real

¹⁰⁹ See G. N. Devy in *After Amnesia*, 1992, p. 17-18.

bhasha (referring to any regional language) heritage. Indian literatures are, indeed, an interesting honeycomb of combined ideas. Here “Indian” is conveniently used as a sort of shorthand for a complex body of work composed in close relation to hundreds of languages. Its essence lies in the multiplicity of its histories and sub-traditions. The problems arise when we try to make sense of this complexity. Devy argues further that this complexity must be broken down by adopting the “theoretical” approach peddled in India by the colonizer with a view to civilizing the natives, thereby perhaps aiming for a broader perspective on understanding how communities deal with the terror history brings about.

And India is not the only region where problems like these arise. The United States has a checkered history as well, when it comes to talking about the so-called marginal or liminal. When structuralists such as Levi-Strauss tried to dissect Indian (Native American) cultural material to expose the operative categories, they looked at myths, rituals, and patterns of social organization without paying much attention to the effects of context or change over time (1983). And when Roman Jakobson, George Lakoff, and Eleanor Rosch¹¹⁰ speculated on the nature of human thought, they were working narrowly within their own languages and cultures. Considering what each of these theorists—from Ricoeur to Bakhtin-- has proposed, we could arrive at new, possible explanations for the intended meanings and unintended consequences of people's actions in the past. Applying any of these theories to the study of Indian history entails

¹¹⁰ Jakobson's *Linguistics and Poetics* (1960), published in *Style in Language* (edited by Thomas A. Sebeok), Lakoff's *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (1987) and Rosch's "On the Internal Structure of Perceptual and Semantic Categories," 1973; "Cognitive Reference Points," 1975.

analyzing written texts or spoken language for subtle and perhaps multiple meanings – a way through which a terror of history could be decoded and dealt with in a healthier manner. This terror arises mostly because of a lack of understanding of the marginal by the powerful. Surviving the terror that history always projects on present generations of marginal ethnicities is almost always a test of their imagination. Mostly because the people who survived have to pick up the pieces and persevere against all odds, through the power of their imaginations.

Negotiation of identity and self-fashioning for both the individual and the collective, therefore, are integral to modern identity, to establishing a modern self. For recognized identities, national identities, literature can but the question that arises is representation or co-opting. Part of the modernist project in the 20th century, in the West, involved figures such as Pablo Picasso and T.S. Eliot who were involved in locating the modern element in ancient poetry and traditional tribal art, and re-contextualizing it in the here and now of modernity. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was an enactment of this modernist project, with intermingling echoes—many of them verbatim—of Homer, Ovid, the Bible and the Upanishads. His poem is like a tall tower composed of bits and pieces of other towers. This may be the manner Picasso had in mind when he defined modern art as the sum of destruction—and the title of Eliot's poem is somewhat in keeping with this definition.

For instance, T S Elliot, in his *The Wasteland*, according to some, represents various cultural nuggets that, Elliot, in the canonical practice of English texts/works to creating or re-creating recognizable “Englishness” or “Americanness,” co-opts. For the colonized writer, identity may be co-opted by a majority culture writer or distorted in the

negotiation with colonial ideologies that influence the process of identity negotiation across cultures in the world. These often conflict-driven cultural transactions may offer a skewed image of the colonial other.

The minds of modern subjects fed on such types of chaotic cultural transactions as they sought to understand identity. Such action has a tendency to establish links: as in Picasso's case, between the dissimilar aesthetics of the French post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, the Spanish Renaissance artist El Greco, and the tribal mask-makers of Africa. To Western modernists, looking to the Orient or Africa for creative inspiration did not seem to cause any anxiety about borrowing from outside the domain of one's own heritage. During the eras of the 19th and 20th centuries, the European artistic tradition took pride in itself for being cosmopolitan in nature. Imaginative cultural adoption was a modern trait—indeed, the Europeans had colonized all these spaces--and it still is given that status—as the other is a possession, adapted into majority culture. It must not be doubted at any point that the spirit of modernity is confused, many-hued, and, we might suggest, contaminated.

Similar affects are examined by E. V. Ramakrishnan in his *Locating Indian Literature: Texts, Traditions, Translations* (2011). According to Ramakrishnan, the minds of modern subjects feed on such types of chaotic cultural transactions. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the European artistic tradition took pride on itself for being cosmopolitan in nature. Adoption of other cultures—particularly those categorized as “primitive-- for European self-fashioning became a part of mainstream the negotiation of modern identity—understanding the self through the other. Such Western self-fashioning, in the so-called Oriental context, and specifically in India, can produce a failure to

understand voices in all their own forms if we do not look at “language as a discourse and literature as contending ideologies,”¹¹¹ pertaining to the diversity that the subcontinent has to offer.

That modernist spirit manifested itself during the 20th century in the literary arenas of two of prominent Northeast Indian languages. G. N. Devy wrote in his well-known 1992 polemic, *After Amnesia*, “Most of Indian Critical Talent has been wasted ... in pursuit of theory, much of which has been totally irrelevant to literature in India.”¹¹²

After Amnesia was an attempt to shake up the field of literary studies in India. Devy’s main points of contention were that they were only borrowing Western models of analysis that had very little relevance in the Indian context and that they had, on top of that, forgotten their real *bhasha* (referring to any regional language) heritage. Indian literatures are, indeed, an interesting honeycomb of combined ideas. Here “Indian” is conveniently used as a sort of shorthand for a complex body of work composed in close relation to hundreds of languages. Its essence lies in the multiplicity of its histories and sub-traditions.

However, in considering what each of these theorists has proposed, we could arrive at new, possible explanations for the intended meanings and unintended consequences of people's actions in the past. Applying any of these theories to the study of Indian history entails analyzing written texts or spoken language for subtle and perhaps multiple meanings – a way through which maybe a terror of history could be

¹¹¹ See E. V. Ramakrishnan in *Locating Indian Literature: Texts, Traditions, Translation*, 2011, pp. 83-85.

¹¹² See G. N. Devy in *After Amnesia*, 1992, p. 106.

dealt with in a healthier manner. This terror arises mostly because of a lack of understanding of the marginal by the powerful self. Surviving the terror that history always projects on present generations of marginal ethnicities is almost always a test of their imagination. Mostly because, the people who survived have to pick up the pieces, and persevere against all odds, through the power of their imagination.

Similar affects are examined by E V Ramakrishnan in his *Locating Indian Literature: Texts, Traditions, Translations* published in the year 2011. According to him, the minds of modern subjects feed on such types of chaotic cultural transactions. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the European artistic tradition took pride on itself for being cosmopolitan in nature. Cultural adoption was equated as a modern trait and it still is given that status, which in turn is supposed to be a part of the mainstream modern identity. But, for instance, in the so-called Oriental context, and specifically in India, we will probably fail to understand the huge number of voices in all their own forms if we do not look at “language as a discourse and literature as contending ideologies...”¹¹³ pertaining to the diversity that the subcontinent has to offer, as explained by Ramakrishnan (2011). It is indeed interesting to note how identities have been shaped across the subcontinent with respect to history and modernity. In Toni Morrison uses the image of the Mississippi to illustrate how memory moves back into its place, through the imagination’s making sense of life, and how the literary author engages history, making rememory, like that movement of water. African diaspora identity is forged in water, and *Beloved*, the character, might be a culmination of all re-memories that the water has

¹¹³ See footnote #113.

beheld and held for centuries. The women, Baby Suggs, Sethe and Ella share those memories that must be re-contextualized in the novel. Morrison writes:

Still, for me...the act of imagination is bound up with memory...

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places.

"Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering.

Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory - what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding."

[L]ike water, I remember where I was before I was "straightened out."¹¹⁴

This is the work of rememory, validating one's own experience and memory of it.

The water image, with respect to history and memory, is important, in addition, because water bodies like oceans, seas, rivers, and so on have been in existence and have been silent spectators to all kinds of historical events. Tennyson in his *The Brook* echoes a similar allegory for water:

I murmur under moon and stars

In brambly wildernesses;

¹¹⁴ Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2nd ed., ed. William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p 85.

I linger by my shingly bars;
I loiter round my cresses;
And out again I curve and flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on forever.¹¹⁵

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in his *The Yearning of Seeds* talks of the Kynshi river in Meghalaya (Northeast Indian state) that has seen the “braves” of the land, and much more:

... However treacherous their customs,
Kynshi goes on
With its flat sweeping flow¹¹⁶

Translation, in this sense, is like the movement of water, seeking a channel and proper shape. Translation becomes an act of “refiguration,” in which the translator actively participates in the construction of meaning, though following a channel, a flow. The translator must navigate the complexities of historical context, cultural nuances, and ethical implications, ensuring that the translated narrative remains faithful to the “other’s” experience, just like authors from Northeast India navigate these complexities as well.

Harekrishna Deka, in his poem “Where Did Gopal Vanish,” writes about Gopal’s mother’s plight after learning of her son’s death. In the poem, his blood is like a river that the mother follows:

¹¹⁵ Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson Baron. *The Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Thomas Y. Crowell, 1928. p. 136-140.

¹¹⁶ See Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in *The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, p. 45.

গাঁৱৰ মানুহে নুবুজাকৈ থকা নাই।

The village people understood.

গোপালৰ চোতালত চুবুৰীয়াৰ ভিৰ।

And they flocked to Gopal's courtyard.

এসোঁতা তেজ হাটৰ পৰা নেদেখা হৈ

A River of Blood only eyes could see

গোপালৰ চোতাললৈ বৈ আহিছে।

From the market to the courtyard.

তাৰ মাকো বোবা হৈ গৈছিল।

It muted his mother.

মুখত যেতিয়া ফুটিল, 'গো পা ল',

Could only utter, "Gopal,"

শুনিছিলনে গোপালে? মাকজনী অচেতন হৈ

Did Gopal hear her? And then she

চোতালতে বাগৰি পৰিছিল।

Fainted in the courtyard.

Harekrishna Deka's "Where Did Gopal Vanish" poignantly illustrates the power of language to convey profound emotional trauma, particularly in the face of sudden, violent loss. The poem's stark simplicity, evident in the direct translation, belies the immense weight of grief it carries. The villagers' silent understanding, "গাঁৱৰ মানুহে নুবুজাকৈ থকা নাই," speaks to a shared experience of suffering, a collective recognition of the

mother's impending agony. The arrival of the "River of Blood," underscores the subjective nature of trauma. It is a visceral, internal experience, not easily shared or articulated. This image, flowing from the marketplace to Gopal's courtyard, suggests a disruption of normalcy, a violent intrusion into the domestic sphere, a destroying of peace and rhythm of simple life.

Drawing upon the philosophical frameworks of Ricœur, Morrison, and Levinas, we can illuminate how acts of remembering, particularly rememory as depicted in *Beloved*, and the act of translation itself, become potent forms of ethical engagement, cultural preservation, and resistance. In Harekrishna Deka's "Where Did Gopal Vanish," the mother's fragmented utterance, "Gopal," is a form of personal rememory, a desperate attempt to reconnect with her lost son, as she follows the trail of blood, back to his identity. This act, though seemingly simple, embodies a profound ethical imperative. It is a refusal to let Gopal's existence be erased, a defiant assertion of his memory in the face of violent loss. This connects to Morrison's concept of rememory, in which, as we have seen, the past is not a distant, abstract entity but a living, breathing presence that demands to be acknowledged. Just as Sethe in *Beloved* grapples with the haunting memories of slavery, Gopal's mother confronts the immediate trauma of her son's death, forcing herself and the community to bear witness to the pain.

The mother's initial muteness, "তাৰ মাকো বোৰা হৈ গৈছিল," highlights the paralyzing effect of grief. Language, the primary tool of communication, fails her in the face of unimaginable loss. Her eventual utterance, "Gopal," is a desperate, fragmented cry, a plea for recognition and connection. The question, "Did Gopal hear her?" emphasizes the isolation and despair that accompany such loss. The mother's subsequent fainting,

“চোতালতে বাগৰি পৰিছিল,” signifies a complete surrender to grief, a physical manifestation of her emotional devastation. In the context of translation, capturing the raw emotional power of these simple lines requires more than mere linguistic equivalence. The translator must convey the cultural nuances and the unspoken pain that permeate the poem, ensuring that the mother's voice, however broken, is heard and understood. The poem's power resides in its ability to access the universal language of grief, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers.

Furthermore, the poem's depiction of communal response, the “চুবুৰীয়াৰ ভিৰ” (the neighbors' flocking), underscores the importance of community in times of crisis. While the mother's grief is deeply personal, it is also situated within a social context. The villagers' presence, though silent, offers a form of support, a collective witnessing of her suffering and the loss of her son, their community member too. This aspect of the poem connects to the concept of rememory, in which the community plays a crucial role in acknowledging and bearing the weight of trauma. The act of remembering, whether through shared stories or silent presence, becomes a form of ethical engagement, a way of honoring the “other's” pain. In translating “Where Did Gopal Vanish,” it is essential to convey this sense of community, to capture the subtle ways in which the villagers' presence contributes to the poem's emotional impact. This includes not only translating the words but also conveying the cultural understanding of communal grief and support that informs the poem's narrative. And the mother's cry, “Gopal,” is a direct address, a plea for recognition. It is a confrontation with the “face” of the other, even in his absence. The villagers, by flocking to Gopal's courtyard, acknowledge the mother's suffering, fulfilling their ethical responsibility to the “face” of the other.

Levinas's ethics, with its emphasis on the irreducible alterity of the “other,” challenges the translator to move beyond a purely linguistic approach. Translation becomes an ethical encounter, a moment of responsibility towards the “other's” voice. The translator must strive to avoid “co-opting” or assimilating the “other's” experience into his or her own cultural framework. This requires a profound respect for the “other's” language, culture, and history, recognizing that translation is not simply a transfer of words but a transmission of ethical significance.

Ricœur's concept of “hospitality” in translation, through which the translator welcomes the “other's” voice into his own language, resonates with Levinas's emphasis on ethical responsibility. This “hospitality” requires a willingness to acknowledge the limitations of one's own perspective and to embrace the “other's” alterity. The passage also raises critical questions about the power dynamics inherent in translation and rememory. The potential for “co-opting” cultural narratives highlights the need for ethical vigilance. The translator, like the historian, must be aware of his or her own biases and the potential for misrepresentation.

The act of rememory, while essential for healing and reclaiming agency, can also be fraught with complexities, particularly when dealing with traumatic experiences. The selective nature of memory, one reason it is not seen as epistemologically equal to history, which suggests its own completeness, underscores the need for critical engagement with the past. We need to rely on such rich content, as Deka's poem, as well as historical accounts, for exploring the ethical and hermeneutic dimensions of the human being in translation. By drawing on the insights of Ricœur, Morrison, and Levinas, we

can gain a deeper understanding of how these practices function as acts of ethical engagement, cultural preservation, and resistance.

In *Beloved*, as we have seen, the character Beloved emerges from water, and the characters in the novel must achieve balance between the sacred trinity - past, present, and future – in order to realize identity. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a masterclass in heteroglossia. The novel's narrative is not a monolithic voice but a chorus of diverse perspectives, memories, and languages. The voices of Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and Beloved herself, along with the collective memory of the enslaved community, create a polyphonic tapestry that resists any singular interpretation. This resonates with Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, which emphasizes the presence of multiple, often conflicting, voices within a single text or culture. The rememory in *Beloved* is not a singular, unified experience but a fragmented, contested terrain, where different voices struggle to articulate their truths.

Bakhtin's heteroglossia challenges the translator to move beyond a simplistic notion of linguistic equivalence. Translation, in this context, becomes an act of mediating between multiple, often incommensurable, voices and languages. Ricœur's hermeneutic philosophy provides a framework for understanding this process. The translator or the self, like the novelist, must navigate the complexities of cultural context, historical memory, and ideological conflict, ensuring that the polyphonic nature of the source text/one's identity is preserved in the target language. This is particularly relevant in the translation of marginalized narratives, wherein the voices of the oppressed exist in a state of tension with dominant discourses. The translator must strive to create a space in which these voices can be heard in their full complexity, avoiding the homogenization or

assimilation of diverse perspectives. In addition, the translator brings his or her own experience to the text. In the poem “Where Did Gopal Vanish,” Harekrishna Dekha drew from his experiences as a member of the Police force and Civil Services in India.

We continue our translation of “Where Did Gopal Vanish,” with this in mind, as we think about the seemingly harmless young man who comes into the village where Gopal lived.

কালিয়ে আহিছিল অচিনাকি ডেকাজন

The unknown young man from yesterday

গাওঁখনে আতৌ-পুতৌকৈ ৰাখিছিল,

Welcomed by the entire village,

আলহীক এসাজ ভালকৈ খুৱাইছিল।

Was fed a full sumptuous meal.

কি আছিল তাৰ টোপোলাটোত ? কাকোষে চুব

But what was in his bag? The one

নিদিছিল ! হেনো কৈছিল, ‘ইয়াতে আছে

Not allowed to be touched by anyone! He simply stated, “In this bag

মংগলৰ তাবিজ।’ কোনেও বুজাই নাছিল।

Lies the Propitious Amulet.” Nobody understood the real meaning

ডেকাজন যোৱাৰ কিমান পিছত গোপাল

Didn’t Gopal leave for the market

হাটলৈ গৈছিল ?

Right after the young man left?

এৰাল দিয়া গাইজনীয়ে জানিলেহেতেন।

Gopal's grazing cow surely knows.

পিছে তাই সাক্ষী হ'ব নোৱাৰে।

Unfortunately, she cannot be a witness.

This “young man,” it seems, may have been an immigrant illegally crossing borders to inflict violence, or he could have been a terrorist under-cover or a rogue central government agent trying to make sure the region was still labeled violent and unstable, just to make sure the army rule was continued. “Where Did Gopal Vanish” masterfully utilizes the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia to illustrate the complex interplay of hospitality, trust, and the ever-present threat of violence. The village's initial, seemingly unanimous, welcome of the “unknown young man” represents a dominant voice, a cultural norm of open-armed hospitality. However, this singular voice is immediately challenged by the subtle undertones of suspicion, the unspoken questions surrounding the man's guarded demeanor and enigmatic bag.

This introduction of conflicting voices, this dialogic tension, is central to Bakhtin's understanding of language and narrative. The young man's cryptic statement about the “Propitious Amulet” introduces a further layer of ambiguity, a “hidden transcript” that undermines the surface harmony of the village's welcome. Therefore, the poem becomes a site of conflicting discourses, mirroring the anxieties and uncertainties of a world where borders are porous and threats are often concealed.

The poem problematizes the idealized notion of hospitality, revealing its vulnerability to exploitation and betrayal. The “unknown young man,” potentially an illegal immigrant, terrorist, or rogue agent, embodies the anxieties surrounding border crossings and the infiltration of hostile forces. This deliberate ambiguity, a hallmark of Bakhtin's heteroglossia, forces the reader to confront the multiplicity of possible interpretations, resisting any simplistic or monolithic understanding of the situation. The silence surrounding the young man's departure, and Gopal's subsequent death (including many other villagers who die in the explosion), amplifies this tension, leaving the village, and the reader, to grapple with unanswered questions and unspoken fears. The “grazing cow,” a silent witness who “surely knows,” embodies the marginalized voice, the perspective that remains unable to be heard, further enriching the poem's polyphonic texture.

Beyond the immediate act of violence, the poem shifts its focus to the alterity and perseverance of the survivors. The mother's grief, as we previously discussed, is a poignant testament to the devastating impact of loss. Yet, amidst the despair, the poem hints at the community's resilience, their capacity to pick up the pieces and rebuild. This focus on survival highlights the enduring human spirit, its ability to adapt and persevere in the face of adversity. The alterity of the survivors, how they are fundamentally changed by the event, is a crucial aspect of their experience. The psychological and emotional scars, the shattered sense of security, and the altered perception of the world are all part of this transformation. Their perseverance, then, is not merely a matter of physical survival but also a process of psychological and emotional reconstruction. The act of remembering, of bearing witness to the suffering, becomes a crucial step in this

process, allowing the survivors to reclaim their agency and find meaning in the midst of tragedy. These “stories of survival,” imbued with the polyphonic echoes of the past, become powerful acts of resistance, a testament to the enduring human capacity to find hope and rebuild in the face of devastating loss.

It is important to look beyond or behind, especially those stories of survival – instances of people who survive, pick up the pieces, and persevere against all odds. The functioning of modern governments and politics, societal taboos, and the traditional nuances that are closely related to views of religion and state and that are a part of the normative culture, and thereby the dominant one, emerge as the root causes of violence and the creation of crisis that communities of people face around the world, because they are more often not inclusive and hospitable. And people like Gopal, the villagers, and his mother are left scrambling to pick up the pieces after recurring incidents of violence.

In a global world, as dynamic and multi-faceted productions of culture which continue to be formed and reformed in local and global time and space, communal/collective identities tend to defy static definitions, and the concept of defining such a community has to be approached as an organic phenomenon, impossible to be contained by static terms. The fragile individuals and communities in alterity continually create and adapt visions of change that are not part of the institutionalized structures of power. And to call the action of these persons a movement would be to misunderstand its fluidity. It is, rather, ways of life, engaging with constructed, ever-evolving realities, which, like the image of water, become a dynamic force for survival and perseverance, inspired to support their own realities over time and keeping their imagined communities going. Two major components of such realities are belonging and (re)action, in which

mediational identity meets a practice of certain persevering attitudes, morality, ethics, and subjectivity in a shared sense of belonging, which powers survival and perseverance.

Translating and Rememory-ing Identities: An Ethnographic Example

A beautiful example of such practices can be found in the observance of the *Tij* festival in Nepal among the Naudada community, where women come forward to celebrate their relationships with the rest of society and their connection to the Goddess Parvati.

Geographically located in central Nepal, a neighboring country of Northeast India (there are parts of the border where you can just walk into Nepal and back), these communities of people share similarities with respect to traditions and culture, and also through the similar kinds of violence with which they deal. In 1990 and 1991, scholars Dorothy Holland and Debra Skinner witnessed the people of this community come together to the place of the festivities to observe the women's ritual. The place of gathering was marked by a temple surrounding that area, along with a few communal buildings, which, of course, have the picturesque hilly terrain of Nepal in the background. The women who were beautifully dressed in saris and were dancing: a strong marker of this festival is the songs sung by women as they dance. They compose and practice the songs well in advance of the day of the festival to put on a good show for the Goddess. Holland and Skinner noted that

The songs were and had been for a long time, critical of women's treatment in society, and, we concluded, based on some 15 months of ethnographic research stretched over a six-year period, that the making and singing of *Tij* songs for the

festival constituted an important strand of women's activism in Naudada. An impression of one of the most popular types of *Tij* songs can be gained from the following lines. The song is an example of *dukha* (meaning suffering/hardship according to *Natya Shastra*) songs; it points to the limited resources and rights of a wife caught in a bad marriage.¹¹⁷

One of the songs is about a husband who is always drunk. Every morning, he wakes up and goes to the hotel to drink alcohol, while the woman is left alone to manage the entire household by herself. And if the woman/wife asks the husband not to drink, she will be met with derogatory remarks and probably violence.

This situation is very similar to the state of women in the tea gardens of Assam. Usually, a woman there is considered as the person responsible for the upkeep of her family and her residence, while also being employed in the tea plantations. Women carry a bigger share of both the community and domestic roles, as compared to the men there. They are seen doing all the household chores as well as working in the fields. The work types are mainly divided into two groups – productive and reproductive as is highlighted in *The Status of Women Empowerment in the Tea Gardens of Assam* by Kakali Hazarika. The work women do in the fields is termed as productive. Women also contribute to the proper maintenance of family by taking care of children, rearing them, and looking after other family members as well. This kind of work is termed as reproductive work.

¹¹⁷ See Dorothy Holland, et al. "Social Movements and Collective Identity: A Decentered, Dialogic View." *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2008, pp. 95–126 (pp. 113). *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30052741>. Accessed 17 June 2025.

Picking or plucking is the most vital process in obtaining the premium excellence of tea-leaves. We all know Assam Tea is famous all over the world. Any good tea is a blend of Assam tea with other kinds of tea. Women in the plantations of the tea gardens of Assam have been removing tea-leaves without harming the quality for a long time, as Kakali Hazarika concluded in her study. It has always been said that women are the finest at this sort of work due to their smaller hands and excellent deftness. Hence, the demand for women in tea plantation is always high. However, they are not paid what they deserve. In fact, there has always been a gap between the men's and women's income. Women provide the lowest-priced labor for the most imperative responsibility in the tea industry. Even after more than fifty years of India's independence, the salary inequity is still prevalent. But we hardly see women complaining. They have made peace with that and try to find other cultural spaces in which to manifest their distress.

In "Women Population of North East India – A study in Gender Geography," Bimal K Kar (2002), shows us that the women's salary contributes significantly to the maintenance of the household. Once the woman in the household gets her monthly salary, all of it goes towards the necessities of the household. She obtains permission from her husband to spend the required amount in buying the necessary things required for the month for the family. The woman is seldom seen making decisions alone when it comes to money.

The man of the household hardly makes any contribution to its upkeep. It is a common habit to spend a part of his money on cheap, local alcohol. Men often come home in a drunken state, and are often the cause of domestic violence. All the woman's

earnings are spent for the family. The men of the family can spend their money as they wish.

In addition, the woman does the household chores endlessly every day. There is hardly any time to take care of themselves. They are always caught in the web of both productive and reproductive works. There is yet another scenario involving girls. The daughters of a household, no matter how small or young, are seldom sent to school. They are made to share the mother's workload and take care of the house while the mother is away to work in the gardens. Women, hence, contribute almost endlessly to the economy of the State, as well as to the well-being of their families in the house.

Women from the tea gardens of Assam show their resilience in the form of dances, like *jhumur*, and songs during *Bihu*, the biggest and most important festival of Assam, which is one that is not based on any kind of religion.¹¹⁸ Similarly, the women in Nepal have successfully created their own space in *Tij*, where songs criticizing women's positionality in society are given an audience. These songs and dances are not just meant for the audience, but as much for the women who are performing them as well. The dance is one of the rare times when they can be their own storytellers and use that power to showcase their identities of perseverance and resilience. Much like the women in Morrison's *Paradise* who commune through Candomblé to draw their pain and to talk about the trauma and wounds their bodies went through. As Shaun Myers observes, "the rooted practices linking black corporeality and divinity open up spaces in *Paradise* that

¹¹⁸ See Mann Barua. "The Ecological Basis of the *Bihu* Festival of Assam." *Folklore*, Taylor & Francis, 2009, vol 120, no 2, pp 213–23.

facilitate an undoing of diasporic and gendered traumas, even if the novel ultimately but ambiguously casts women's deaths as a requisite of patriarchy.”¹¹⁹

It is important to note here that, while we usually read and hear about the struggles of marginal communities as a whole, there are more struggles within such communities. Therefore, fully studying any culture is very complex in nature, as we try to make sure that all such voices are not lost. And it is also important to understand and acknowledge the need to have people from such communities voicing their own opinions and defining themselves, so that their alterity is preserved with its reality, and is not subsumed into the powerful self's reality. It is one thing for realities to be interwoven, but completely taking over the identities of the others is murderous.

So, the question is, who has such native knowledge, and who can represent it? In the past, there have been instances in which “native informants” have tried to “decolonize” curriculum and claim spaces in the academy for marginal studies to take place. But it is very difficult to cover all aspects of such alterities with justice in mind, especially as such complex communities are difficult to describe with various modern elements infused in them.

First, we see how cultural practices can be sites of resistance. The *Tij* festival in Nepal and the *Bihu* celebrations in Assam offer compelling examples of how marginalized communities, particularly women, utilize cultural practices to resist oppression and articulate their identities. During the *Tij* festival, as observed by Holland

¹¹⁹ See Shaun Myers in “Transnationally Rooted Practices of Candomblé in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*.” *Souls*, vol. 16, no. 1–2, 2014, p. 115, *Taylor and Francis Online*, doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2014.935243.

and Skinner, women's songs critique their societal position, transforming the celebration into a form of activism.¹²⁰ Similarly, women in the Assam tea gardens express resilience through *Bihu* dances and songs, providing a space to manifest distress, akin to the women's commune in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. These practices, like “rememory,” are not just performances but vital acts of self-definition, allowing women to become storytellers and showcase their perseverance. However, it is crucial to recognize that these communities are not monolithic, and internal complexities, as seen in the varied roles of women in Assam, require nuanced understanding. This underscores the importance of allowing marginalized voices to define themselves, preventing the murderous subsumption of their alterity into dominant narratives, a concern echoing Levinas’s ethics of the other.

The concept of rememory, as seen in Morrison's works, is intrinsically linked to the preservation of cultural memory through which those who are “othered” perform the articulation of identity. The *Tij* and *Bihu* celebrations, by transmitting stories and experiences through songs and dances, function as acts of collective rememory. Translation, in this context, extends beyond linguistic transfer to encompass the conveyance of cultural and emotional significance. The analysis of written and spoken language, as suggested by theorists like Jakobson, Lakoff, and Rosch, becomes a tool for understanding the “terror of history” and its impact on marginalized communities. However, it is essential to approach these analyses with sensitivity, recognizing the limitations of Western theoretical frameworks when applied to diverse cultural contexts.

¹²⁰ See Dorothy Holland and Debra Skinner. 1995a. "Contested Ritual, Contested Femininities: (Re)Forming Self and Society in a Nepali Women's Festival." *American Ethnologist* 22(2):279-305. 281.

By prioritizing the voices of marginalized communities and engaging with their narratives ethically, we can move towards a more nuanced and just understanding of human experience, ensuring that alterity is preserved with its reality. Eliade's "terror of history," the overwhelming dread developed by human beings in the face of traumatic historical events, is countered by marginalized communities through active engagement with their past. Cultural practices like the *Tij* festival and *Bihu* celebrations, which become positive forms of rememory, serve as vital coping mechanisms, allowing communities to reconstruct narratives and find meaning. These acts of resistance, both cultural and academic, challenge the forces of erasure and reassert agency, transforming historical trauma into resilience. Ultimately, surviving the terror that history usually projects on generations of marginal groups of people is always a test of their imagination, as they creatively reclaim their stories and identities.

Third, we draw attention to the appropriation of cultural elements by dominant forces, as is exemplified by T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Pablo Picasso's art. Such appropriation raises ethical concerns. Eliot's poem, with its intermingling of Homer, Ovid, and the Upanishads, demonstrates a modernist tendency to re-contextualize ancient and tribal art within a Western framework. This cosmopolitan approach, while celebrated, risks disregarding the original context and significance of these elements.

We see how this appropriation also effects the "other." G.N. Devy's critique in *After Amnesia* further highlights this issue, as he argues that Indian literary studies have relied too heavily on Western models, neglecting their "bhasha" or regional language heritage. This mirrors the structuralist approach, like that we, in Levi-Strauss's work on Native American cultures, which dissects myths and rituals without considering context

or change. These examples underscore the need for culturally relevant approaches, challenging the “terror of history” by prioritizing authentic representation and avoiding the pitfalls of cultural appropriation.

The Curious Case of Pity Porn and its Subversion

The ongoing violence and trauma experienced by marginalized communities demands a re-evaluation of how narratives are constructed and interpreted. Ricoeur's concept of “narrative emplotment”¹²¹ becomes relevant here, as it highlights how events are woven into meaningful stories. By challenging official narratives that minimize or justify violence, marginalized communities can disrupt dominant emplotments and offer alternative interpretations that center their experiences. This act of re-narrating history, as exemplified by the use of rememory, is a form of ethical resistance, a way to challenge the power structures that perpetuate violence. Furthermore, Levinas's idea of responsibility to the other, even when that other is suffering from violence, is a call to action. It forces us to look beyond the surface of official reports and see the human cost of these events.

Stories and headlines of extreme violence are narratives that are read, heard, and followed by many in today's world. I remember that I was a young undergraduate in my final year, when the infamous Nirbhaya gang rape (2012) took place in Delhi, the capital of India. Social media all over the nation swarmed like flies around the incident and any entity even remotely related to the incident. In fact, some international news channels

¹²¹ See Saulius Geniusas in “*Between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur's Philosophy of Imagination.*” *Human Studies* 38, no. 2, 2015, pp. 223–241 (pp. 236). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24757332>.

also covered it. At that time, the different units of social media focusing their attention on the event which garnered public rage against the criminals was quite well justified as they spread the news like wildfire. I remember joining prayer vigils and candle marches in honor of the woman who was violated in an unthinkable, inhumane manner.¹²² The irony is that it took seven solid years finally to hand out death sentences to most of the men involved in the incident by the judicial system, but it took hardly three to four years to produce movies that were influenced by the incident, a TV series based on it, and much more, while the audience welcomed it and absorbed it all. There is this strange need to feed off of people's sufferings that we see today.

While it is absolutely not wrong in any way to talk about such issues, to find the systemic problems attached to those, and to try prevent such acts from happening, if it all that is possible, such actions may be questionable if we as readers, listeners, and viewers, can only find a connection to humanity by giving way to such trends and becoming witness to such instances from the comfort zones of our homes and movie theatres. It may reflect some perverse notion of the need to partially know, but not get involved or understand in any real way, since stories relating directly to violence and civil unrest find a huge market and readership in a flash, irrespective of even the quality of research and work. For instance, works like that of *A Burning* by Megha Majumdar¹²³ and *The White*

¹²² The specifics of the incident are extremely violent, graphic, and traumatic, which I will avoid going into here. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/what-is-nirbhaya-case/articleshow/72868430.cms>.

¹²³ "The publishers have framed the novel as a literary thriller, burdening it, I worry, with an unfair expectation. True suspense is in short supply; in fact, the story is marked by an undertow of bleak inevitability..." See Parul Sehgal. "A Terrorist Attack Sparks the Plot of Megha Majumdar's Powerful Debut Novel." *Nytimes.com*. *The New York Times*, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/books/review-burning-megha->

Tiger by Aravind Adiga, may have won many awards and garnered a lot of attention as they about personal struggles of characters, but, at the same time, they do little either justly to showcase the different communities of people they are writing about or to give narrative depth to most characters. The research was very poorly done in both the instances. Neither book dealt with the imagination and spirit of perseverance. In *White Tiger* the Indian world was portrayed in stark duality – the very rich Brahmins who are always mean, conniving, and ruthless; and the lowest castes are always the ones who are mistreated. Yet there is more to this reality than portrayed. Oversimplification to get works published and circulated sometimes degrades the lived realities of people.

And yet, the common public, especially the American one, drown themselves in such works, as they feel a poignant connection to humanity through such stories - a culture of “pity porn,” as I call it: the need to view/read violence from a distance, especially from the comforts of one’s existence, without understanding the true natures of vulnerability, differences, alterity, and lack of privilege, which has overtaken most of the audience in today’s world. For example, while there was initial outrage and swift calls for justice in the Nirbhaya gang rape case, the production of exploitative media, which shaped the narrative and reception, allowing audiences vicariously to experience suffering from a safe distance, without genuine empathy or engagement. The swift cultural production can be contrasted with the glacial pace of the legal proceedings, which, at least, might have offered structured interpretation. This consumption of violent

narratives, lacking a focus on resilience, perpetuates the “terror of history,” denying victims and survivors the space to heal and reclaim their stories.

People in many parts of Northeast India have managed to overcome terrorizing obstacles and do so on an everyday basis; go on to live full lives while being surrounded by political, ideological, ethnic, and communal unrests which are violent most of the times. For instance, fourteen civilians and one member of the security forces were killed in the state of Nagaland one night in December 2021, after Indian forces mistook a group of laborers for militants and opened fire.¹²⁴ Such incidents are nothing new. I remember growing up listening to such tragic news of bomb blasts rocking different parts of the city of Guwahati. The Government officials merely responded to this incident by saying they were “anguished” for the civilians who “lost their lives” and it was the result of an “intelligence failure.” If we look at such statements closely, we might realize how stories are re-told from a perspective that simply does not justify such violent incidents. By simply saying “lost their lives,” the officials restrengthened their position of power. But can we say the innocents were “murdered”? And would our stories be heard if were to openly start saying such facts? Intelligence failure makes us civilians collateral damage. Is that what “bare life” has been reduced in a nation which is supposed to be the world's largest democracy? Aruni Kashyap describes a similar violent incident in his short story titled *Before the Bullet* from his collection *The House with a Thousand Stories* where the

¹²⁴ See Tora Agarwala. “Nagaland: 14 civilians killed by forces; soldier dies of injuries as violence erupts.” *The Indian Express*, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/nagaland/nagaland-14-civilians-killed-by-forces-soldier-dies-of-injuries-as-violence-erupts-7657872/>.

protagonist Digonto was shot down by an army officer for not being polite, and how it was covered up as a “necessary encounter.”

In the Northeastern part of India was always treated differently,¹²⁵ as radically other. And yet we Northeastern citizens are supposed to feel good about the idea of a collective democratic notion of India. We love the nation as much as the rest of the country does, but the same nation’s power structures have failed to protect and safeguard our lives and uniqueness time and again.

This can destroy the image of the self. Steiner talks about Emmanuel Levinas’ *Otherwise than Being*, about the violent nature of human behavior, the capacity for self-centered action fueled by the need to have and maintain power over the other: the “de-substantiation of the self” in which the self remains hostage to violence¹²⁶. This feeds the cycle of social exploitation. We see an army officer in Aruni Kashyap’s “Before the Bullet” as one who has lost self and who can destroy others.

“He(Army Officers) didn’t like the confidence of men who had been educated in Delhi or London or the US. What if the story of a young local man who didn’t dismount from his bicycle, who spoke in English at the army camp in a village where people didn’t even know how to speak in Hindi, went around? It could create a hushed confidence in the minds of the villagers.

... The officer’s voice was calm. ‘Aim at his head.’

¹²⁵ As explained in earlier chapters.

¹²⁶ See George Steiner in “Levinas.” *CrossCurrents*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1991, pp. 243–48 (pp. 247). *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24459838>. Accessed 17 June 2025.

‘Sir?’

‘Do as I say, and if you miss, I will shoot your head.’

The soldier shivered.¹²⁷

We see one who justifies the heinous power politics of the center, thereby killing more innocent people in their so-called “encounters” with “rebel groups.” This is like the thirty-eight Dakota tribe members who were killed under direct orders from President Lincoln, as Leanne Howe dramatizes the incident and after-effects¹²⁸ in her book *Savage Conversations*.

In contrast, stories of perseverance, such as those by Temsula Ao, offer a vital counter-narrative. Ao's “The Last Song” and other works emphasize strategies of resilience and hope across generations, even amidst violence. This mirrors the concept of rememory, in which narratives reclaim history and assert cultural identity and advocates for preserving native languages and traditions while acknowledging shared humanity. Similarly, Aruni Kashyap's “The Skylark Girl” and Rajanikanta Bordoloi's *Bhanumoti* celebrate endurance and the human spirit's ability to overcome oppression. These narratives emphasize the act of translation and of culture and memory as means to survival. The terror of history, as described by Eliade, is countered by these narratives of perseverance, which empower communities to transcend their trauma. It is not that these narratives are free from violence, but that violence is not sensationalized for its own sake.

¹²⁷ See Aruni Kashyap in “Before The Bullet,” *His Father's Disease*. Context. 2019, pp. 64-65.

¹²⁸ See Leanne Howe in *Savage Conversations*, 2019, pp. 2-10.

Temsula Ao, the prominent writer from Northeast India, writes (2006) in one of her short stories of how a potmaker sees the skill and material memory of culture both passed on and made new:

... But if both mother and daughter were involved in turning out these pots, is it possible to differentiate between the two batches? Onlua... believed that she had just witnessed a profound revelation in the two batches of still moist pots, standing side by side in perfect symmetry inside the shed.

A new pot maker was born.¹²⁹

Onula's character sees the passing down of an art, a skill - but also the passing of sensibilities and spirit of perseverance in its purest form - a means to survive from one generation to another. It is this movement of pushing through that makes it possible for those communities to give out their occasional sigh of relief; the fact that they did not give up even in the face of extreme violence and in the aftermath of it.

Another story by Ao titled "The Last Song," talks of the song that was sung in rebellion by a woman against armed forces, a woman who was ultimately raped to death. The story does not simply highlight the girl and her life, but also the younger generation who learn of her story and learn of their ideals of freedom from the elders passing it down to them.

The story does not sensationalize the event, but builds community within and across borders. While an elderly woman is narrating the story with the beliefs of the

¹²⁹ See Temsula Ao in "A Pot Maker," *These Hills Called Home*, 2006, p 68.

people intertwined in it, the writer points out that while, in some other region nearby, perhaps a whole community or village of people is being terrorized and massacred, it is important to remember both the terror and these fleeting moments of normalcy so that they have the mental strength to overcome the next wave of violence. Such stories become legacies of oral traditions, these become motivational stories of perseverance for generations to come, adapted and translated into various other stories and forms of literature. These not just keep the history of a region alive, but also the spirit of resolve of its people.

Such stories have been part of Indian history since colonization. For example, the first novel¹³⁰ written in the Assamese language, and published in 1890, *Bhanumoti* also touches upon the enduring attitude of two lovers and the ideals of the region that they uphold to the very last, which managed to change the ruthless, violence-loving king of that time. What is important here is not the love story only, or the characters in particular, but the spirit of resistance that lived on even after the deaths of the protagonists, and were carried on by the community: the power of imagination and the power of translation and exchange of the mind that helped them cope with the “terror of history,” as well as the belief in supreme justice of some sort. The diverse voices found in these stories, and the varied ways they are used, are also a clear example of Bakhtin's theory of Heteroglossia. Ultimately, the power of imagination and the exchange of ideas, as shown in these examples, helps people cope with the “terror of history,” imagining, as Ricoeur calls

¹³⁰ Novel, as per the Western definition of a “novel.”

them “possible worlds” alternative that can transcend the limitations imposed by dominant narratives in creative acts of self-fashioning.

Rememory, empowers communities to reclaim and reinterpret history.

Translation, in its broader sense, is a crucial tool for preserving and disseminating these stories of perseverance, encompassing the translation of oral traditions into written narratives and the translation of cultural experiences into a broader understanding. The idea of rememory empowers communities to reclaim and reinterpret history, particularly that which has been suppressed or distorted. Crucially, it also involves the translation of specific cultural experiences into a broader human understanding, bridging gaps between diverse peoples by highlighting shared themes of resilience, identity, and justice. This process fosters empathy and recognition, allowing unique narratives to resonate universally and contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced global historical consciousness. This ethical approach to storytelling, grounded in Levinas's ethics of the “other,” challenges the “pity porn” culture and prioritizes authentic representation.

For writers, this may open a space of communication and self-claim. Ann Pellegrini and Janet R. Jakobsen point out in *Love the Sin* (2004) that people on the periphery “have to speak the language of a consensus from which they are already excluded¹³¹.” Such writing can also be revolutionary, as writers write in deconstructive ways, claiming agency, while refusing to be commodified.

¹³¹ See Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini. *Love the sin: Sexual regulation and the limits of religious tolerance*. Beacon Press, 2004, p. 28.

But what if the goods refused to go to the market? What if they maintained among themselves another kind of trade? (A form of) Exchange without identifiable terms of trade, without accounts, without end... without one plus one, without series, without number. Without a standard of value.¹³²

Such writers show us that the “othering” of marginalized voices occurs when their stories are reduced to mere accounts of violence, silencing their authentic experiences and denying them agency. Writers, even those writing in English, can demonstrate that it is imperative that marginalized communities control their own narratives, preventing their experiences from being subsumed by dominant interpretations. This can interrupt consumption, and perhaps, build bridges between communities, making readers see that the real rebellion is in the endurance that is shown by those who survived -- that no matter the might of those who seem to triumph in struggles of power, that momentary triumph will never be enough to overshadow the tenacity of those who lived.

¹³² See Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the other woman*. Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 196-197.

Chapter 5

Moving Beyond Survival Stories as “Entertainment” & Acknowledging the Importance of Dialogue

Each television show, movie, or documentary dealing with victims of violence is devoured by global audiences,¹³³ who are perceiving and forming notions about the alterity before their eyes. They see it through the eyes and minds of those who create and distribute entertainment based on the life of some victim(s). In a way, the language of the victim fails to reach the audience at all; rather, it is the language of those who own those entertainment outlets that is fed to the large audience. Therefore, the translation of any situation or the story of any victim is not faithful to alter-existences¹³⁴ in a highly globalized world. We encounter different individuals or communities from varied ethnic, linguistic, cultural, social, historical, and political backgrounds. In each of those encounters, we become translators in our own right, consciously or subconsciously, entering a micro site of exchange or interpretation. Every translation has a translator or

¹³³ According to a 2023 survey done by Vivint, 76% of Americans watch true crime-based shows out of curiosity, 46% watch it for entertainment, and 45% for mystery. See Vivint. “Popularity and Impact of True Crime Content.” Vivint Blog, 2023, <https://www.vivint.com/resources/article/true-crime-numbers#:~:text=Fans%20were%20most%20likely%20to%20get%20their,Z%20tuned%20in%204.6%20hours%20per%20week>.

¹³⁴ According to a YouGov survey done in 2024, about 38% of Americans believe that crime-based shows “Trivializes serious crimes for Entertainment value,” while another 30% are unsure about their opinion. <https://today.yougov.com/entertainment/articles/50142-true-crime-how-it-affects-americans>

translators. A translator is, in Latin, an *interpretes*, a negotiator between different languages and cultures.

Looking at these sites of negotiation, we invoke Paul Ricoeur's concept of "linguistic hospitality" as a strategy for better addressing the "other." Ricoeur, associating this strategy with mourning, a mourning for the perfect translation, which leads to the happiness of working with the other, writes:

And it is this mourning for the absolute translation that produces the happiness associated with translating. The happiness associated with translating is a gain when, tied to the loss of the linguistic absolute, it acknowledges the difference between adequacy and equivalence, equivalence without adequacy. There is its happiness. When the translator acknowledges and assumes the irreducibility of the pair, the peculiar and the foreign, he finds his reward in the recognition of the impassable status of the dialogicality of the act of translating as the reasonable horizon of the desire to translate. In spite of the agonistics that make a drama of the translator's task, he can find his happiness in what I would like to call linguistic hospitality.¹⁰⁷

Such a strategy makes us pause before offering foreign interpretations to the other, violating the essence of the value of existence of the other, in instances of "educative" violence."¹⁰⁸ Ricoeur points out that the "construction of the comparable has become the

¹⁰⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation* p. 22

¹⁰⁸ Examples might include:

- Like the time when Bollywood chose a female actor from the Indian mainland to portray the poignant story of the boxing legend Mary Kom in the movie by the same name, disregarding the fact that there were so many talented, nationally renowned female actors

justification for a double betrayal through translation-- (meaning) construction.”¹³⁵ That is to say, whenever the other cannot be understood in her terms, the powerful self, in order to understand the “other” better or be “inclusive,” can mistranslate, creating violence. On a “simple” level, for example, might be the act of using an American version of somebody’s name who originated from a different community/country or culture. On a much more complex level, state laws are created and expected to be followed by all groups based on what the ones in power know or understand about, for example, spirituality¹³⁶, as pointed out in *Love the Sin*. The construction of meaning through comparables can be achieved without an in-depth knowledge about the other.

Linguistic Violence in the Unwillingness to Understand Alterity: Anthems & Songs

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) India in 2019, when the Central government tried to deport generations of Muslims to a land that was not their home, led to protest. Faiz Ahmad Faiz’s poem, *Hum Dekhenge (We Shall See)*, became very

who originated from Northeast India. It was important because Mary Kom is from Manipur, a state in Northeast India.

- Like homosexuality was made punishable in various socio-cultural ways as pointed out by Jakobsen and Pellegrini in *Love the Sin*.
- Like Hölderlin’s translation of *Sophocles* - referring to the prototypes and modified meaning.
- Like various Native American stories being seen as fictional through unfaithful ways of translating myths and culture - as pointed out by Nancy Shoemaker and LeAnne Howe in *Clearing a Path*.
- Like the missionaries’ views about African traditions in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.
- Like the Central Government and mainland India does not try (and thereby fail) and understand the cultures, myths, ideologies of Northeast India - explicit in works like *These Hills Called Home*, *The Yearning of Seeds*, *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, *His Father’s Disease*.

¹³⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation* p. 23

¹³⁶ See Pellegrini, et al. *Love the Sin*, p. 3-4.

popular as a song of protest. This was sung by Pakistani woman singer, Iqbal Bano, wearing a black saree, to defy the authoritarian regime of Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan. The song became symbolic because she was a woman performing on a public stage, wearing a garment that had been banned by the government as un-Islamic. All public performances of the song, which was characterized as a threat to national security, were banned.¹³⁷

The song became important in India when the Citizenship Amendment Act tried to set religion as the basis of citizenship in immigration. Language played a role in this issue, in the government's push-back on resistance. The officials of the Indian government did not properly understand Urdu, or simply refused to acknowledge, the actual meaning of the words as sung in Urdu. The government in India, thought the song was about destroying idols of Hindu Gods, a bad construction, through comparables, of the "other."

A timeless example of this is the national anthem of India *Jana Gana Mana*, in which there is no mention of the Northeast Indian region though every other region/state, including major mountain ranges and rivers, find mention in the anthem. The original is in Bengali language (as written by Rabindranath Tagore), and the following is my translation to the English language:

জনগণমন-অধিনায়ক জয় হে

O thou Ruler of the minds of all

ভারতভাগ্যবিধাতা!

¹³⁷ Noor Shahid, "How 'Hum Dekhenge' travelled from Pakistan to India as a Symbol of Resistance," Brown History, 23 May 2023. <https://brownhistory.substack.com/p/how-hum-dekhenge-traveled-from-pakistan>.

O Bestower of India's destiny

পঞ্জাব সিন্ধু গুজরাট মরাঠা দ্রাবিড় উৎকল বঙ্গ

(Invoking the hearts)

of Punjab Sindh Gujarat Maratha Dravida Orissa Bengal

বিন্ধ্য হিমাচল যমুনা গঙ্গা উচ্ছলজলধিতরঙ্গ

Vindhyas Himachal Jamuna Ganga mingling with the Indian Ocean.

The Indian national anthem, *Jana Gana Mana* presents a complex case study in the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, particularly concerning the representation of Northeast India. While the anthem aims to evoke a sense of national unity, its explicit geographical references conspicuously omit the Northeast region. The lines “*Punjab Sindh Gujarat Maratha Dravida Utkala Banga / Vindhya Himachal Jamuna Ganga uchchala jaladhi taranga*” meticulously list various regions, rivers, and mountain ranges, creating a powerful image of India's diverse landscape. However, the absence of Northeast India, a region with its own distinct cultural, linguistic, and historical identities, raises critical questions about the anthem's claim to represent the entire nation. This omission can be interpreted as a form of symbolic exclusion, where the region's existence is effectively rendered invisible within the national narrative.

This absence, therefore, is not merely a matter of geographical oversight; it reflects deeper issues of cultural and political marginalization. The Northeast has historically experienced a complex relationship with the Indian mainland, marked by periods of conflict, isolation, and a sense of being “othered.” The **anthem's omission can be seen as a continuation of this marginalization, reinforcing the perception that the**

region is not fully integrated into the national consciousness. Furthermore, the deliberate selection of geographical markers within the anthem suggests a specific vision of India, one that prioritizes certain regions and cultural identities over others. This selective representation can be interpreted as a form of cultural hegemony, where the dominant narrative erases or diminishes the significance of marginalized perspectives.

The original Bengali language of anthem, while celebrated for its poetic beauty, also contributes to the discriminatory politics of language, translation and interpretation. The subtle nuances of the language, the cultural references embedded within the lyrics, and the historical context in which the anthem was written all play a crucial role in shaping its meaning. However, these complexities often are lost in translation, particularly when the anthem is performed or recited in other languages. The act of translating the anthem, therefore, becomes an exercise in navigating cultural differences and power dynamics, in which the translator must strive to preserve the original meaning while also ensuring that the anthem resonates with diverse audiences. The absence of the Northeast region, as a result, becomes even more pronounced when considering the translation process, as its omission is not only a matter of geography, but also a reflection of the challenges of cultural representation within a multilingual and multicultural nation, and how it potentially silences an entire region of peoples. What remains untranslated by those in power silences the “other.”

Perhaps, however, that same silence embodies the methods of survival and perseverance of alterity in the face of such dangers. That silence becomes a mode of survival for the sake of the “others” languages, histories, cultures, ideologies, and more

importantly, for the sake of future generations. Identity is maintained in works by authors we have discussed, like Linthon Chanu, Temsula Ao, Aruni Kashyap, Chetan Shreshtha, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, and Janice Pariat, among others, opening the opportunities for communities to define their own spiritual needs.

Silence can negotiate and preserve communal memories and identities, even in otherness/alterity, when as Luce Irigaray puts it, “the goods get together” and refuse to come to the market to be mere “goods of exchange” between those in power and politics, or both¹³⁸. The strategic silence employed by marginalized communities, particularly those from Northeast India, becomes a fertile ground for imaginative resistance. This silence, much like powerful written narratives reclaiming their Northeast Indian identities, allows for the creation of an internal sanctuary in which languages, histories, and ideologies can be re-examined and reconfigured. Authors like Temsula Ao, Aruni Kashyap, and Janice Pariat, choosing English as their primary language of expression, engage in a complex act of rememory, echoing Toni Morrison's concept in *Beloved*. They reclaim the past, not as a static entity, but as a dynamic force that shapes their present and future. This imaginative act, a continuous dialogue between inherited trauma and contemporary struggles, becomes a crucial aspect of identity formation, allowing them to negotiate their alterity without succumbing to the homogenizing pressures of the colonizer or mainland Indian narratives.

This silence fosters a unique form of cultural translation, exemplified by LeAnne Howe's work in reclaiming and reinterpreting Native American narratives, demonstrating that translation is not merely linguistic but also a profound act of cultural negotiation.

¹³⁸ See Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the other woman*. Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 196-197.

The choice to write in English, as seen in the works of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Chetan Shreshtha, can be seen as a form of Ricœur's "linguistic hospitality," wherein the language of the colonizer is repurposed as a vehicle for resistance. This "dialogue" between the marginalized and the dominant, as envisioned by Levinas, at the site of language, requires an ethical commitment to the "face" of the other, even when that face is obscured by misrepresentation or historical amnesia.

Maybe that is precisely why a majority of authors from Northeast Indian or of Northeast Indian origin choose to write and publish primarily in the English language. English holds a contentious space in India. It is the language of British, colonial power, and, at the same time, is not one of the preferred regional languages of mainland India, though it is one of the official languages of the Constitution. Just as Steiner and Paul Celan wrote in German, Indian writers may choose to write in English to raise issues about the constitution of national identity and to abrogate and appropriate the language of power to represent their own experiences, while still realizing the anxieties in doing so.

As Ricoeur writes in *Memory, History and Forgetting* that

the past is no longer subject to change and so, for that reason, appears to be determined. According to this opinion, the future alone can be held to be uncertain, open, and in this sense undetermined. If, in fact, the facts are ineffaceable, if one can no longer undo what has been done, nor make it so that what has happened did not occur, on the other hand, the sense of what has happened is not fixed once and for all. In addition to the fact that events of the

past can be recounted and interpreted otherwise, the moral weight tied to the relation of debt with respect to the past can be increased or lightened.¹³⁹

Perhaps choosing to speak and write in English in order to fight the imminent greater problems being faced by some groups of people who speak a different, preferred language than the other, is then a way of increasing the “debt” on the powerful self and decreasing the debt on the alterity. By strategically choosing to speak and write in English, oppressed groups can wield it as a powerful instrument. This adoption of the dominant language allows them to penetrate and challenge the very “consensus” that historically excluded them, amplifying their voices on platforms previously inaccessible. This linguistic shift enables them to actively reshape narratives, articulate their experiences on their own terms, and ultimately demand recognition and accountability from the powerful within a widely understood idiom.

And knowing the lyrics to the national anthem gives power to those othered--in this case the people from Northeast India. They recognize the systemic oppression they are subjected to from a very early age, as early as formative years in the school system where they are made to learn the lyrics of the anthem, sing it, and respect it without question. The need for such forms of resistance arises because of violence inflicted in various ways.

Violence is, we suggest, a social phenomenon rather than a solitary act, which tends to be usually seen in all communities/societies of human beings. It manifests in various ways -- physically, emotionally, or mentally, and systemically, in state systems

¹³⁹ See Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, and Forgetting*. Translated by Blamey, Kathleen and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 285.

and laws.¹⁴⁰ It is also important to take into account ethnic and cultural characteristics, the multi-layered identities that include race, ethnicity, religion or spirituality, status of migration, physical abilities, gender and sexual orientations, and so on. Discrimination, rises from misunderstandings of alterity—as do war and other forms of violence.¹⁴¹

A poignant example of multi-layered social violence can be seen in the characters of the twin sisters Masooma and Parwana in *And the Mountains Echoed* by Khaled Hosseini. In the novel, the people in the village prefer Masooma over Parwana because Massoma fits their standards of female beauty. And how, with time, Masooma too, has internalized all such violence, especially evident in the way she responds to a note thrown in the direction of the twin sisters as they were walking back home from their school one day; and it took Parwana “such effort to plaster a grin on her face.” The note said, “I want to marry you. I’ve got a cousin for your sister. He’s a perfect match. They can graze my uncle’s field together.”¹⁴²

Massoma responds, “Don’t mind them Parwana... They’re imbeciles.” What hurt Parwana most was Massooma’s response. The note was not explicitly addressed to either of them, yet her sister assumed it was for her, and not Parwana, who is characterized as an animal. Colorism, patriarchy, and gender come together in this story. This also is a

¹⁴⁰ See Violence Prevention Alliance. “The VPA Approach.” *World Health Organization*, <https://www.who.int/groups/violence-prevention-alliance/approach>. Accessed 22 March 2025.

¹⁴¹ Holocaust (1933-1945), Rwandan Genocide (1994), Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009), Basque Separatist movement (1959-2011), Trail of Tears (1830-1850), Gorkha Separatist Movement (1907-present), United Liberation Front of Assam (1979-present), Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), Armenian Genocide (1915-1917), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (1986-present), Rohingya Genocide (2016-present), Tibetan Refugee Crisis (1949-present), Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996), Uyghur crisis (2014-present), Chinese occupation/genocide of Mongol (1755-1758, 1919-1921, 2011-present), Assam Movement (1970s-1985), Spanish overtaking Aztecs (1519-1530), Anti-Hindi agitation (1937-present), Portuguese in South Americas (1500s-1700s), etc.

¹⁴² See Khaled Hosseini in *And the Mountains Echoed*. Riverhead Books, 2013, p. 59.

good example of how cyclic the nature of violence can be, as it is carried on through generations by means of conditioning the young minds to the same molds of biased notions as the elders before them followed—here, colorism in relation to female beauty. Yet what Parwana does later, as she cripples her sister physically, does not absolve either of them of the cyclic hatred and violence they are a part of, but it does bring to the fore the question of ethical/unethical violence.

Violence operates in various layered and multifaceted contexts, yet is, in general, intersectional, impossible to define through just one category. For example, girls in some places in India and Nepal, when they attain puberty and have their first menstrual cycle, are made to stay in a thatched bamboo shelter with no hygienic facilities, and no weather-proof facilities either. Yet, ironically, in Guwahati in Assam, a state in Northeast India, men and women from all over the world gather at a temple dedicated to Mother Goddess Kamakhya, to pray for great success in their lives in a system that shuns girls for the duration of their menstruation.¹⁴³ All such violence takes place in a nation where powerful women leaders and freedom fighters--like Kanaklata and the Queen of Jhansi existed in history and in which there are powerful matriarchal/matrilineal societies, like the Khasi community in Meghalaya,¹⁴⁴ in Northeast India.

¹⁴³ Originally, I had planned to include a brief, first-hand case study exploring the priests' perspectives on the menstruating Goddess and the red water, believed to be her vaginal blood. However, this essential research document was maliciously deleted by my ex-husband after I remarried. This act, a non-physical form of violence, has caused significant mental and physical harm, and I consider it to be a form of abuse.

¹⁴⁴ “In one of the world's last matrilineal societies, women control property and inheritance and dominate public spaces.” See Zinara Rathnayake. “Khasis: India’s indigenous matrilineal society.” *BBC Travel*. BBC, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210328-why-some-indians-want-more-mens-rights>.

We see that violence is deeply intertwined within the social context, that it is a part and dilemma of the basic human condition. Yet some forms of violence are so heinous that it becomes impossible to justify as some form of natural, unavoidable outcome. It is simply one self choosing not to acknowledge the other's alterity as a form of existence outside its own. An intriguing example to note here is one from Northeast India, and very comparative with respect to cultural awareness. Arijit Sen reports

A closer look at the numbers reveal that in the last five years (2005- January 2011), a larger number of civilians have been killed and families affected in the Northeast (1,772) when compared to Kashmir (1,139). But the media's apathy towards the Northeast of India remains unchanged. Why? Policymakers would ascribe the bias towards Kashmir to the greater importance of international boundaries with Pakistan and China vis-à-vis Burma or Bangladesh. Yes, there is a measure of truth in that. But the fact is that Kashmir is also an international media hotspot, and an integral part of the Indian national consciousness. The Northeast is neither. This indifference that influences Government attitudes as well as the media is unstated and remains an accepted framework of reference towards the region¹⁴⁵.

¹⁴⁵ See Arijit Sen in "Marginal on the Map: Hidden Wars and Hidden Media in Northeast India," Reuters Institute Fellows Papers, University of Oxford, pp. 11-13.
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/marginal-map-hidden-wars-and-hidden-media-northeast-india>

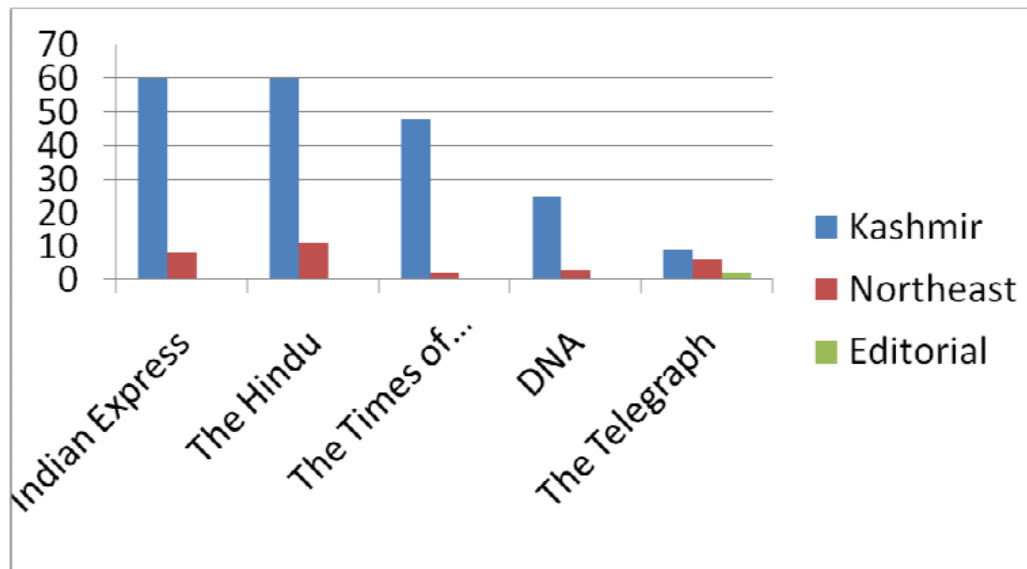


Figure 1¹⁴⁶

In such cases, violence may be seen to be directed towards identity, or rather to disregard towards someone or a community's identity. If one were to explore violence that is seen to be against identities, perhaps the lived experiences of victims can be understood better, but there has to be willingness on the part of the self to acknowledge alterity. Desrosiers, in "Tackling Puzzles of Identity-Based Conflict," offers extensive criminological evidence that suggests there have been cases of violence¹⁴⁷--from hate crimes, gender-based violence, to genocidal violence, etc.--that may have been aggravated by personal characteristics, like the features of most Northeast Indian people, which gives them the notoriety of being called "chinky," which is equivalent to Americans using "n...r" on

¹⁴⁶ Data sourced from The Hindu, "Media Matters: Skewed Coverage" by Sevanti Ninan, August 31, 2009.

¹⁴⁷ See Marie-Eve Desrosiers. "Tackling Puzzles of Identity-Based Conflict: The Promise of Framing Theory." *Civil Wars*. Taylor & Francis, 2015, vol 17, no 2, pp. 120-140.

public and formal platforms as a norm to describe Black Americans. All such acts of violence leave behind psychological, emotional and spiritual scars on people that are difficult, if not impossible, to erase or forget.¹⁴⁸

We cannot forget or minimize systemic hate, in relation to identity. Identity-based violence has been associated with violence enacted by members of one group on those outside of a specific racial, religious, national, or “other” group. As such, violence against groups who are deemed some form(s) of antithesis to the ‘norm’ group is a mechanism of power to maim their trajectory of growth as part of the society and to reinforce who “belongs” (“in-group” members) and who does not belong (“out-group” members). For instance, in the Holocaust, forms of extreme, dehumanizing violence were committed against anyone who was understood to deviate from the socially constructed normal or desired identity of Nazi ideology.

In the post-Cold-War era, international efforts and activism have focused on reducing identity-based violence in order to maintain harmony and co-existence between differing groups, with the aim of promoting equity among those that are socially and economically marginalized. Discussions on how violence is committed against specific groups have grown to include a number of marginalized identities, such as sexuality, disability, age, and gender as prominent markers. Yet, it seems that despite efforts to promote harmony and inclusion, violence against identities in the form of hate crimes is one of the biggest global challenges in modern times, affecting the lives of many millions. If there is no effort at the sociological and cultural level, then all such

¹⁴⁸ See Barbara Perry in “Where do we go from here? Researching hate crime.” *Internet journal of criminology*. ODIHR, 2003, pp. 125. And see Richard Jenkins in *Social identity*. Routledge, 2014, p. 120.

legislations and definitions are of no value. This is a prime example of language losing power: when language, perhaps because of lack of dialogue, loses its meaning and value in being effective for the right reasons. Pellegrini and Jakobsen point out in *Love the Sin* (2004) how those groups of people in the periphery – “have to speak the language of a consensus from which they are already excluded”¹⁴⁹ – the lack of which is enough to brand someone as an extremist – an opposing force to the power-withholding center, but sometimes still a part of heteroglossia as it lends power and legitimacy to the core structure by merely practicing their hybridized differences. For instance, the model minority myth in twentieth century America was in fact an instrument aimed at “domesticating” the African-American people by giving them a utopian idea of the model citizen supposedly seen in Asian-American immigrants, which is also a fine example of how imaginations of certain sections of people are attempted to be controlled by those whose imagination is bound by certain structures as well. Hence, in situations like these, what may be more important for us as readers to see is the imagination-driven self-fashioning that is the basis of perseverance for communities like these. While the tension between the self and other will always be present, something that even Long points out, and self-limitation of the imagination is usually seen by those in power as a necessity that helps maintain order in the face of external (external refers to marginal communities most of the times) chaos, this limitation may quintessentially point to insecurities that the center/power faces because they probably believe in an Other that may be significantly more powerful than their self. This gives a sharper definition to the self, drawing a starker contrast between its inside and outside and thus enabling and limiting its creativity. It

¹⁴⁹ See footnote #134.

also limits the self's tendency to equate the systems it develops with the actual world. If the Other remains larger than the self, it will quash such delusions of grandeur. Stephen Greenblatt pointed out three historical pillars of external authority: the Church, the word of God, and the state, which is also reflected in *Love the Sin* in relation to the systemic methods of oppression maintained by the state. He points out that the individual fashions the self not against these authorities but against these authorities' dark twin, that may be called (an)other. The relationship between the self and both the authority and this alien other gets tortured very quickly. Multiple authorities exist in reality and certain authorities happen to be other individuals' aliens. And the authority with which the individual fights the alien other can also become a source of anxiety for those oppressed by the state and religion. Its claims on the self are too totalizing. Moreover, it is important to note that all of this fashioning happens in language, and so the boundary between self and other becomes porous. Such arguments bring us back to silence and non-action as means of action. If we look closely at different peripheral or marginal communities in relation, in opposition, and more importantly, in discord to the state and church, it would certainly give us some answers of differences we witness around us, which would essentially make it clearer the needs and methods of different creative, imaginative ways through which communities exist, sometimes silence and non-action. Luce Irigaray in her essay *When the Goods get Together* writes:

But what if the goods refused to go to the market? What if they maintained among themselves another kind of trade? (A form of) Exchange without identifiable

terms of trade, without accounts, without end... without one plus one, without series, without number. Without a standard of value.¹⁵⁰

They were no longer numbers and were not attached to a system of monetary valuations based on the conditions of their bodies – and that becomes their language of coping with their “terror of history” – thereby their defining mode of belief in something supreme. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, Ella and Sethe showcase a language which becomes a trade language of sorts between women in their community. In times of crisis, they help each other and support each other. They defy norms by running away from the system of slavery. They also defy norms by not becoming goods of exchange between men. Ella, for instance, in *Beloved*, realized the importance of rituals of a collective nature in order to protect a fellow human being, which in her case was Sethe. And these rituals were their own creation, not connected to any dominant forms of religious rituals directly. They were not “domesticated” by the new revenue laws, property laws, and so on that were being formulated and put into effect by the governing bodies in place. Baldwin writes in his short story *Sonny’s Blues* (2013) the importance of listening to the creations of their own; “Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that (it) could help us to be free if we would listen, that we would never be free until we did.”¹⁵¹ It was important to listen to the past of one’s own people, and acknowledge it, in order to move forward.

This principle resonates deeply within the literature emerging from Northeast India, a region historically at odds with the central state and often overlooked by mainstream narratives. Authors from this diverse geographical and cultural landscape frequently

¹⁵⁰ See footnote #135.

¹⁵¹ See James Baldwin in *Going to Meet the Man: Stories*. Vintage, 2013, p. 250.

depict characters and communities who, much like Irigaray's "goods," refuse to conform to imposed valuations or dominant systems. For instance, in Easterine Kire's *When the River Shifts*, the focus shifts away from political leaders and towards the lives of ordinary people profoundly impacted by the Naga struggle for sovereignty. Similarly, Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* exposes the harrowing realities of violence and insurgency in Assam. These literary works collectively forge a distinct narrative "language," offering alternative perspectives on history and resilience that directly challenge official accounts, asserting an autonomy of experience outside the conventional "market" of national discourse.

Furthermore, within Assamese and broader Northeast Indian literature, we encounter a rich tapestry of creative and imaginative coping mechanisms that mirror the self-devised "rituals" found in the provided examples. Indigenous communities across the Northeast frequently draw upon their oral traditions, folklore, and profound connection to nature as vital sources of resilience and identity. This is evident in how traditional ecological knowledge and ancient storytelling practices become fundamental ways of "coping with their terror of history", fostering a collective wisdom that guides survival. These narratives, often integrated into modern fiction and poetry, provide an insight into a worldview that resists commodification, instead emphasizing community, sustained living, and a deep reverence for ancestral memory—much like Baldwin's call to listen to one's own creations to achieve true liberation.

That is also where women play a major role as well. Men were either killed, or rented out, or were made to work till they dropped in this nation history of slavery. It was mostly up to the women to hold the reins of continuity and history and thereby, pass it on,

even after being subjected to atrocious violent ordeals like rape, for instance. The imagination is thus a mediation, an intermediary space, that is objectified in the physical world. This intermediary world then may become capable of achieving a harmonious fusion between philosophy, theology, history, poetry, and all other creative endeavors. And maybe such a synthesis directs us towards a homology between different types of esotericism, be it – religious, philosophical, poetic, and so on – as they all seem to be concerned with the search for a deeper/inner meaning. And perhaps, this inner meaning is the new belief that the modern humans have, which might be the tool to protect them from the “terror of history” as Eliade calls it. Eliade had to look beyond the faith to prove his own ideologies, and perhaps, the modern human also looked beyond just the ones accessible to them and found something that might just help them persevere, as it has all these decades. It is perhaps, as Paul Celan wrote in his *Tenebrae*, that translation through the imagination, creativity with respect to some greater good/justice/God, is what probably helps certain communities of people to rememory in order to survive the trauma, the terror that the privileged, powerful and history bequeaths upon them.

We are near, Lord,
near and at hand.

Handled already, Lord,
clawed and clawing as though
the body of each of us were
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,

pray to us,
we are near.
Wind-awry we went there,
went there to bend
over hollow and ditch.
...

To be watered we went there, Lord (1983).

There needs to be a recognition that violence against oppressed identities is not contained within a single act but is a manifestation and reinforcement of structurally embedded marginalization of alterity groups, which, as a consequence, contribute to the overall trauma experienced by certain communities. Also important to note is the fact that such trauma of identity-based violence can potentially be inherited by immediate future generations, especially those who live with survivors. For instance, first-, and second-descendants of Holocaust survivors are known to exhibit personal trauma, fear and pain over collective memories of the genocidal violence perpetrated towards Jewish populations.¹⁵² Therefore, identity-based violence is shown to be situated within historical, cultural and social power structures that maintain the legacies of oppression directed towards specific social groups. While identity-based violence is often committed to advance a particular social agenda, such as spreading racist sentiment, homophobic rhetoric or sexist attitudes, it is also a mechanism to uphold the very hegemonic power structures within society that allow it to occur. This tapestry of social violence means that

¹⁵² See R. Lev-Wiesel in "Intergenerational Transmission of Holocaust Trauma: The Case of Secondary Traumatization and the Concept of Postmemory." *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 2007, 8(1), pp. 101-118.

one does not have to be a direct victim to experience the harms associated with this violence.

Arguably, when one person is targeted because of their identity, those who share in that identity also share the potential to be victimized. Iganski (2001) demonstrates this using a “waves of harm” model, arguing that identity-based violence has an extended impact on other group members when one person is targeted.¹⁵³ Acts of violence towards one person have a ripple effect, which carries messages-- that they are also the target--to all those who share in the victimized identity. This moves through to neighborhoods and communities, and eventually becomes a mechanism to reinforce society’s core structures of marginality.

Such violence happens at personal levels as well. Khaled Hosseini points out in *And the Mountains Echoed* how Roshi,¹⁵⁴ whose family was hacked to death by her uncle over property feuds, was treated by journalists and other people who always want to “check [her] out,” thereby reducing Roshi to an object, perhaps almost an animal that is caged by the violence inflicted on her by her own uncle. The violence became part of her identity, giving people like Idris. (say who this is) some pleasure because he entertained the thought that he had the willingness to help her, but never really did, a form of pity porn and an aggrandizement of the powerful self thereby making himself feel perversely helpful in a savior-complex.¹⁵⁵ As Amra, the nurse points out about Roshi to Idris,

¹⁵³ See P. Iganski, in “Hate crime and the city.” *British Journal of Criminology*, 2001, 41(4), p. 629.

¹⁵⁴ Roshi’s entire family was hacked to death by her uncle with an axe, due to feuds over property, and part of her skull was cut through by the axe, leaving part of her brain exposed.

¹⁵⁵ See Matt Huston. “The Savior Complex.” *Psychologytoday.com*. Psychology Today, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-high-functioning-alcoholic/201702/the-savior-complex>.

“This is hospital, not zoo.”¹⁵⁶

As identity-based violence upholds and reinforces systems of power and marginality, the manifestation and the emotional and social harms are experienced in an intersectional manner. In the story by Hosseini, it took Roshi years of healing, and finally publishing her memoir--with no mention of Idris at all. The lack of mention reduces the existence of the powerful “self” into nothingness by the perseverance of her “otherness.”

And, for readers engaging this story, without dialogue, I am positive a story like Roshi’s would not be understood properly in real time by a larger audience. The challenge is in the struggle to portray and to interpret alterity in such a way that it does not become an object of entertainment alone. Hence, without proper dialogue, such violent occurrences perhaps cannot be lessened.

James Baldwin pointed out this problem of not knowing about and not engaging in dialogue with alterity very well in his debate¹⁵⁷ with William Buckley, as he said:

“...in the Deep South. In the Deep South, you are dealing with a sheriff or a landlord, or a landlady or a girl of the Western Union desk, and she doesn’t know quite who she’s dealing with, by which I mean, that if you’re not a part of the town, and if you are a Northern Nigger, it shows in millions of ways. So she simply knows that it’s an unknown quantity, and she wants to have nothing to do with it because she won’t talk to you, you have to wait for a while to get your telegram. OK, we all know this. We’ve all been through it and, by the time you

¹⁵⁶ See Khaled Hosseini in *And the Mountains Echoed*. Riverhead Books, 2013, p. 134.

¹⁵⁷ See GBH and the Library of Congress. “Debate: Baldwin vs. Buckley.” 1965-06-14. *Film and Media Archive, Washington University in St. Louis, Library of Congress, American Archive of Public Broadcasting, Boston, MA and Washington, DC*, https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_151-sn00z71m54.

get to be a man, it's very easy to deal with. But what is happening in the poor woman, the poor man's mind is this: they've been raised to believe, and by now they helplessly believe, that no matter how terrible their lives may be, and their lives have been quite terrible, and no matter how far they fall, no matter what disaster overtakes them, they have one enormous knowledge in consolation, which is like a heavenly revelation: at least, they are not Black.”¹⁵⁸

Violence that is seen to be directly or indirectly based on one's identity brutalizes and degrades the very essence of the essence of the nature of the human being.

Such acts maim the spirit of the violating “self” who does violence. The imaginary powers of such a self becomes bound by prejudiced, institutionalized viewpoints. For those injured, they may dissociate themselves from lived reality, retreating into their own imagined realities.¹⁵⁹ Further, it can be argued that violence generates post-traumatic stress that may be passed on intergenerationally. And while there can be no absolute recovery, there is a need for acknowledging the acts of violence on the part of the perpetrator and how the oppressed suffer to close epistemological gaps of knowledge and interpretation, so that there can be acknowledging of not knowing of alterity, which might be the basis of violence in the first place. This may perhaps point towards a significant gap in our epistemological understanding of how the post-victimization state or perpetrator-state is interpreted.

Chapter 5 has critically examined how survival narratives are often consumed as mere entertainment, leading to the misrepresentation and appropriation of alterity rather

¹⁵⁸ See footnote 163.

¹⁵⁹ See Basia Spalek in *Crime Victims: Theory, Policy and Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 425-430.

than genuine understanding. We argued for a crucial ethical shift towards Paul Ricoeur's concept of "linguistic hospitality," advocating for a dialogue that respectfully engages with the "foreignness" of the Other, even in the absence of perfect translation. This approach underscores the pervasive nature of linguistic and systemic violence, which, through various forms of exclusion and misunderstanding, profoundly impacts and silences marginalized identities. Despite these pervasive challenges, the chapter highlighted the formidable power of strategic silence, imagination, and self-fashioning as vital modes of resistance and perseverance for oppressed communities. By understanding identity-based violence not merely as individual acts but as manifestations of deeply embedded power structures, we recognize its intergenerational impact and the urgent need for ethical acknowledgment from the "self." Ultimately, true engagement with survival stories necessitates a commitment to dialogue that honors alterity, fostering a more just and empathetic world where marginalized voices are not merely heard, but ethically encountered.

Chapter 6

Few last words

Throughout history, many populations have been forcibly removed from their homelands, like the Native Americans in the United States, thereby resulting in their languages, cultures, traditions, spiritualities, and religions becoming marginalized or lost. As we noted, many authors from oppressed or diasporic communities choose to write in English. Perhaps they seek the same opportunities and social, political and economic status, of those whose languages are powerful, like English, French, Mandarin, Hindi, and Spanish. Perhaps they seek to preserve oral traditions for future generations who will not speak or hear indigenous languages and the truths of indigenous myth. Perhaps they see English as the language of political advocacy, taking the place of local languages, that, at one time, demonstrated identity and fueled resistance.

A return to one's indigenous language can be a way of countering and restructuring alterity through rememory that acknowledges violation and restructures it into a useful narrative. The enduring impact of traumatic experiences, particularly those too profound for direct articulation, is often preserved and expressed through various forms of cultural and artistic "rememory." Toni Morrison's concept of rememory from *Beloved* highlights its intertwining with imagination and translation as a means of refiguring the past and giving voice to silenced narratives of trauma and resilience. This concept is further illuminated by Paul Ricœur's argument in *Memory, History,*

Forgetting, which posits that rememory involves not just factual recollection but also the interpretation and reinterpretation of their meaning.

The Assam Movement (1979-1985) provides a compelling case study of how marginalized communities utilize art and cultural expression as a form of resistance and identity preservation. During this period of intense social and political upheaval, Assamese songs, particularly those by Bhupen Hazarika, became crucial tools for mobilizing resistance against the central government and addressing the complex issue of illegal immigration. During the Movement, people in Assam relied on Assamese songs defining their unique identity for motivation and as a sign of resistance towards the Central government, as well as the illegal immigrants. One of those songs, by Bhupen Hazariki titled “Mahabahu Brahmaputra,” is about the rich history of Assam, with Brahmaputra river as its witness

মহাবাহু ব্ৰহ্মপুত্ৰ মহামিলনৰ তীৰ্থ

Invincible Brahmaputra Union of Holy Altars

কতযুগ ধৰি আহিছে প্ৰকাশী

Manifest through the Ages

সমস্বয়ৰ অৰ্থ....

Of the meaning of Harmony

The song still instills pride and a sense of distinct identity in the people of the region, especially because the river is called “Brahmaputra” in Assam. It stands as a testament to the region’s rich history and cultural heritage, with the Brahmaputra River serving as a symbolic witness to centuries of harmonious coexistence. Its lyrics evoke a sense of shared identity and collective memory, fostering unity among the Assamese people in the

face of perceived threats. This musical rememory acts as a form of cultural reassertion, resistance, and preservation.

Hazarika also wrote, composed, and sang “Aai O Aai,” after undivided Assam was divided forcibly into smaller states by the Central Government in the name of peacekeeping

আই অ' আই

Mother O Mother

আই অ' আই

Mother O Mother

গুচি গ'লা তুমি এবুকু

You left us with

বেদনা সারটি

A chest full of sadness

These songs bring the silence of the oppressed into form, music and words addressing the woes of people without addressing the perpetrators directly, thereby not lending them power. These songs, function as a form of cultural translation, transforming personal experiences of loss and displacement into powerful expressions of collective resistance. The melodies and lyrics served as vehicles for rememory, allowing the Assamese people to connect with their past and to reaffirm their cultural identity in the face of external pressures in the present. They also embodied a form of “linguistic hospitality,” in that the songs acted as a welcoming space for shared emotions and experiences, strengthening the bonds of communities.

In essence, the songs of the Assam Movement became a vital means of preserving and asserting Assamese identity, demonstrating the power of art to facilitate resistance and cultural preservation. The Assam Movement (1979-1985) provides a powerful illustration of how marginalized communities utilize art and cultural expression as a form of resistance and identity preservation. During this period of intense social and political upheaval, Assamese songs, particularly those by Bhupen Hazarika, became crucial tools for mobilizing resistance against the central government and addressing the complex issue of illegal immigration. Hazarika's "Mahabahu Brahmaputra" stands as a testament to the region's rich history and cultural heritage, with, as we saw, the Brahmaputra River serving as a symbolic witness to centuries of harmonious coexistence. The song's lyrics, "Invincible Brahmaputra Union of Holy Altars / Manifest through the Ages / Of the meaning of Harmony," evoke a sense of shared identity and collective memory, fostering a sense of unity among the Assamese people in the face of perceived threats. The songs are noteworthy for bringing the silence of the oppressed into form, music, and words, addressing the woes of people without directly confronting the perpetrators, thereby not lending them power. This suggests that in contexts where direct verbal dialogue with oppressors is impossible or disempowering, art, such as music and poetry, can serve as a pre-linguistic or indirect form of communication and resistance. It allows for the collective articulation of grievances and identity without validating the oppressor's power structure. This "dialogue" is primarily internal, strengthening community bonds and preserving narratives, even when external dialogue is denied or dangerous. It represents a form of agency that operates outside the oppressor's imposed linguistic and political frameworks. This musical rememory acted as a form of cultural

reassertion, resistance, and preservation, reaffirming the region's distinct identity and historical significance.

Furthermore, Hazarika's "Aai O Aai," composed in response to the forced division of a previously undivided Assam, poignantly captures the sense of loss and betrayal experienced by the community. The simple, yet deeply emotional, lyrics, "Mother O Mother / You left us with / A chest full of sadness," express the profound grief and disillusionment felt by the Assamese people. This song, like many others from the movement, served as a powerful outlet for collective mourning and a means of articulating the community's shared trauma. In this context, music became a form of "dialogue," a way for the Assamese people to communicate their grievances and assert their right to self-determination. The songs' abilities to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers made them effective tools for mobilizing public sentiment and fostering a sense of collective identity.

The act of rememory, as articulated in Morrison's *Beloved*, is deeply intertwined with imagination and translation. It is a way of refiguring the past, of giving voice to the silenced narratives of trauma and resilience. This process, as Ricœur argues in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, involves not only the recollection of facts but also the interpretation and reinterpretation of their meaning. The lyrics of the Indian national anthem, "Jana Gana Mana," become a site of contestation, a stark reminder of the systemic exclusion faced by Northeast India. Knowing the lyrics, and recognizing their omissions, is a form of power, a way to acknowledge and resist the ongoing oppression. This recognition, achieved through the act of remembrance and dialogue, becomes a catalyst for resistance, a way to challenge the dominant narrative and assert the right to self-determination. The

silence of alterity, thereby, becomes not an absence but a pregnant space, filled with imaginative potential, ethical responsibility, and the enduring power of memory, a space where, in Irigaray's terms, the oppressed refuse to be mere "goods of exchange."

Heading Towards Dialogue

Dialogue, in the context of acknowledging and respecting alterity/otherness, emerges as a crucial bridge across the chasms of misunderstanding and prejudice that have been extensively discussed here. In light of cultural misrepresentation, systemic oppression, and the silencing of marginalized voices, dialogue becomes a fundamental ethical imperative. It is not merely a verbal exchange but a profound engagement with the "face" of the other, as Levinas would emphasize. Through dialogue, the "self" is compelled to confront its own biases, assumptions, and limitations, opening up a space for genuine understanding and empathy. Mihai I. Spariosu in his *Remapping Knowledge*, noted that when the "self" engages in genuine dialogue, it begins to resist the "power-staged representations" that seek to contain literature and reduce otherness. By confronting its own biases and assumptions, the "self" moves beyond a "disciplinary scientific mentality" that often performs a "sacrificial ritual" on "unrepresentable" cultural difference. This dialogic process thereby opens a space where literature can reclaim its "imaginary or liminal features" and point to alternative worlds, preventing its reduction to mere "semantic or representational level" imposed by old power systems¹⁶⁰. In addition to intercultural dialogue, perhaps there is a need for intracultural dialogue in a site like India, one which would explode homogeneity and reveal the contesting internal

¹⁶⁰ See Mihai I. Spariosu in *Remapping Knowledge: Intercultural Studies for a Global Age*. Berghahn Books, 2005. Chapter 1, "Intercultural Studies," p. 21.

narratives that, to use the work of Tracey Sherard on Baldwin, “have had profound impacts on the consciousnesses and destinies”¹⁶¹ of marginalized peoples. A critical distinction exists between intracultural and intercultural dialogue. While the songs of the Assam Movement powerfully demonstrated the efficacy of *internal* dialogue in strengthening community bonds and resistance, true respect for alterity necessitates *external* dialogue—a willingness to engage with those outside the immediate community, especially those in positions of power. Tracey Sherard’s work on Baldwin suggests that intracultural dialogue in India could start conversations about issues that have profoundly impacted marginalized peoples. While internal dialogue is vital for self-preservation and cohesion, it can inadvertently reinforce internal boundaries and potentially deepen the chasm with external power structures if not complemented by outward engagement. It is a necessary first step, but needs more for broader societal transformation and true recognition of alterity by the dominant group. The “silence” of internal dialogue, while powerful within a community, can remain unheard externally, perpetuating misunderstanding, especially without honest dialogue. For instance, the Assam Movement, in its reliance on songs as a form of cultural expression, demonstrates the power of dialogue in fostering collective identity and resistance. The songs, acting as a form of rememory of a cultural past, facilitated a dialogue between the past and the present, allowing the Assamese people to articulate their grievances and assert their right to self-determination. However, this dialogue was primarily internal, strengthening community bonds. True respect for alterity necessitates external dialogue, a willingness

¹⁶¹ Tracey Sherard “Sonny’s Bebop: Baldwin’s ‘Blues Text’ as Intracultural Critique.” *African American Review*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1998, pp. 691–705. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2901246>. Accessed 2 June 2025. 704.

to engage with those outside the immediate community, particularly those in positions of power. Without this external dialogue, the “other's” voice remains confined, their experiences unacknowledged, and their alterity disrespected.

Furthermore, the act of translation, whether linguistic or cultural, can be understood as a form of dialogue. As Ricœur suggests, translation involves not merely the transfer of words but the interpretation and reinterpretation of meaning. This process requires a willingness to engage with the “other's” perspective, to understand their cultural context, and to acknowledge their alterity. When dialogue is absent, translation becomes a tool of homogenization, erasing the nuances and complexities of the “other's” experience. The examples of misrepresentation in media, such as the casting of mainland Indian actors in Northeast Indian roles, or the bastardization of cultural markers, like instances of name-calling people from Northeast India, underscore the consequences of failing to engage in meaningful dialogue.

Dialogue, therefore, becomes the foundation for “linguistic hospitality,” creating a space in which the “other's” voice is not only heard but also respected. It is a way of challenging dominant narratives and asserting the right to self-representation. In the context of the Indian national anthem, “Jana Gana Mana,” dialogue becomes essential for addressing the systemic exclusion of Northeast India. By engaging in open and honest conversations about the anthem's omissions, we can begin to create a more inclusive and representative national narrative. Ultimately, dialogue is not about achieving consensus or resolving all differences. It is about fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding, in which the alterity of the “other” is acknowledged and celebrated. It is a continuous process of engagement, a commitment to listening, learning, and growing,

ensuring that the silence of the marginalized is transformed into a powerful voice of resistance and resilience.

Similarly, many languages have speakers who have been denied the authority of naming themselves and the world so as to delegitimize the history and the knowledge they already possess. To delegitimize a language as a credible source of knowledge and definition of the world is to make a space so that the conqueror's/translator's language can become the source of the very definition of being. This was true with the English conquest of Ireland, Wales, Scotland; or the Japanese conquest of South Korea; or the U.S.A.'s takeover of Hawaii. It was done with the enslaved and the Native Americans. All these displacements ban or weaken the languages of the conquered, and then impose by gun, guise or guile, the language of the master narrative and accord it all the authority of naming the world.

In the process or history of encountering the foreign or other, the first thing the individual from the outside does is to find parallels between his or her source language and the other one. The idea may be to help the translator, through the methods and ideologies he or she is most familiar with, to name and describe the selves, the world, and the history and knowledge the other already possesses; yet this can be so authoritative on the part of the one who is encountering the other that it might deny the other his own language and culture as a credible source of knowledge, definition of the world in the larger society, and even of history.

Memory and history operate in tension, moving towards dialogue. Under oppressive systems, the dilemmas of language, memory, place and identity can emerge as counter-memory to the master narrative—as a means to persevere for different peoples

around the world. We, therefore, could argue that history is initially shaped, not by the records of an organized society or nation state, but by the records of people's lives, their traces or footprints, including the memories they harbor. How such traces or remnants are recorded, stored, and inserted into historical accounts is an important subject not only for writers and critics in the fields of history and literature, but also for the common people. We have suggested ways that those unrecorded traces or remnants—those internal experiences that were never spoken about analytically, written down, or explained to another person by those who were there—can be brought to light in art. Simply by looking back at our own lives it is apparent that even if someone had no sense of the course of history and lived, as it were, unconnected to politics, they would, as if by their own personal reasoning, be guided, determined, and manipulated by it. It is for this very reason that the lives and memories of all those forgotten by history are so poignant. In most instances, living memories die with the body and mind of the individual.

The reason why the minds and memories of these victims have become a void in history, and their silence a black hole, is because no one besides those who were swept up by the catastrophe—those individuals upon whose minds such experiences are etched—can speak or write about their memories. Furthermore, it is not that those who experienced the upheaval choose not to speak about their memories, but rather that they are unable to speak about them because, sometimes, those memories are unspeakable – like Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved* did not talk about the ordeals during her slave days in front of Denver, her only living daughter.

However, the void of their silence does not stop at the point of the individual; the unspoken, unrecorded, undocumented memories and experiences have—via the pain of

those who witnessed the catastrophe—become stored at a deeper level. Those memories, in turn, become a cultural memory - a language of sorts. This is because when individuals cannot speak of the remnants of trauma engraved upon their minds, the trauma becomes engraved at a deeper level, upon a cultural unconsciousness. Such remnants themselves fill the blanks of a given culture's shared memory – they become a part of the shared experiences of trauma, like Art Spiegelman was burdened with all the unspoken memories of his parents who survived the concentration camps during Hitler's regime. *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* – the comic book within Spiegelman's comic book *Maus* (2011) is a perfect rendition of how such trauma can affect the next generations as well. Denver in *Beloved* also felt the trauma her mother had experienced indirectly by sharing the same living space as her – 124 Bluestone.

My father's friend named Dilip Huzuri (a teenager when he was killed in 1970) was murdered heinously.¹⁶² His head was severed by force by a group of illegal immigrants after they had murdered him in cold blood. My father says that was the first ever most horrifying degree of murder of an innocent child he had encountered in his life. He remembers holding the severed head of his friend and not being able to describe in words what he felt; he says he still does not know how to use words to describe that feeling. He also recalled days when the Indian Armed Forces would use "necessary encounters" and beat young people up, rape them and torture them making it unsafe to even get out of homes. My father's mother was beaten up & molested by CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) soldiers. My father was tortured by CRPF soldiers. I grew up with CRPF soldiers slapping people around. These stories are not talked about openly in my

¹⁶² See Sanjib Kumar Baruah. "Beyond Patriots and Traitors." *Economic and Political Weekly*. 1980, vol 15, no 20, pp 876-878. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i400192>

family. But it always lurks beneath the surface. Some nights you hope you are not rocked by a bomb going off. Every morning and every evening, you hope your parents come home safe without being killed by soldiers or illegal immigrants. The woes of generational trauma are so great, sometimes silence is easier.

The inability to articulate the horror, even years later, speaks to the enduring power of trauma. This isn't forgetting, but a memory too intense for words. The shared trauma described, with stories of violence from both illegal immigrants and the Indian Armed Forces, shows how rememory affects entire communities. Fear becomes a constant, shaping daily life and creating an Agambenian "bare life" state. The family's silence, while a coping mechanism, risks perpetuating the trauma cycle. Dialogue, as Levinas suggests, is vital. It is about acknowledging suffering, confronting the "face" of the other, and breaking the silence. Here, Ricœur's translation concept is crucial. Articulating these memories, translating the unspeakable, is an ethical act. It's about bearing witness, reclaiming agency, and ensuring the past isn't forgotten. Sharing these stories, even if fragmented, is a form of resistance.

We might also wonder how it might be possible to represent the traumatic silence of peoples' memories so as to make them more visible in a way that they are rightfully seen alongside survival and perseverance. As any such representation might itself be a true test of the most basic epistemologies; this is something that has always concerned theories on the practice of literature and art and ontological enquiries about the shared nature of othered memories and archaic remnants. It is in this way, I believe, that literature and art as cultural texts may share common ground with philosophy and ethics.

At the same time, the fact that the “other” and the violence the “other” goes through may never be properly acknowledged by the people outside of their own communities.

For instance, Temsula Ao writes in her short story *A New Chapter* (2006):

... in order to justify the presence of the armed forces who were in danger of their very lives in the ‘troubled’ area (not to speak of the many perks they enjoyed for the ‘punishment posting’), it was necessary for them to have ‘encounters’ with the ‘rebel’ groups.¹⁶³

Ao portrays the need for those in power to keep violence going in order to justify the heinous power politics of the center, thereby killing more innocent people in their so-called “encounters” with “rebel groups.”

While the alterity persists and perseveres by virtue of the other’s own language and imagination, the fact remains that they are misunderstood by most of the larger audience. Their realities fail to be translated in a faithful form because of lack of dialogue. While the translator must be familiar with both the source and target languages, it is also pertinent for the translator and readers to be receptive to heterogenous “creative reflexes,” and ideas. The need to recognize each language and body of literature for its distinct qualities, traditions and heritage, might facilitate a “component of self-criticism”¹⁶⁴ in literatures and related disciplines, and even in general society among human beings.

For instance, in southern India, a development in realistic fiction and modern poetry was observed after a huge tide of translations were made available from different European, American, African, and Latin American traditions, especially in Malayalam

¹⁶³ Temsula Ao, *These Hills Called Home*, p. 122.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. pp. 122-123.

literature. Also, translated texts from the beginning of the 21st century show an inclination towards everyday idioms, and especially towards poetry, like Nirala and Paniker's translations in this century¹⁶⁵ (Ramakrishnan 2011). This seems to be in accordance with Lefevere's views about looking at literature as a system, which is an integral part of the ecosystem of a culture or society; but it is a contrived system at the same time, because of texts (objects), writers, and distributors. He calls readers and writer refractors as well.¹⁶⁶ He attempts to depict how translations or, in his words, "refractions" play a significant role in the evolution of literatures over time and in different regions.

When it comes to poetry and music, the use and transactions of languages can be best described in Matthew Arnold's words:

Below the surface-stream, shallow and light,
Of what we say we feel--below the stream,
As light, of what we think we feel--there flows
With noiseless current strong, obscure and deep,
The central stream of what we feel indeed.¹⁶⁷ (1869).

And which Steiner best describes in this way: "We may be using it (language) either at the most technical semiotic level or in a sense almost too large for proper definition."¹⁶⁸ (1998). Recognizing this limitation opens a kind of hospitality that encourages the swift fluidity between dynamics of preserved identity and state of temporary fusion, or between *lexis* and *melos* as Northrop Frye calls it. This kind of empathetic linguistic hospitality is a great asset, especially when we may be looking at languages belonging to

¹⁶⁵ E. V. Ramakrishnan. *Locating Indian Literature*. Pp. 83-86.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 183.

¹⁶⁷ Matthew Arnold, "Below the Surface-Stream". *St. Paul and Protestantism*. Part II.

¹⁶⁸ George Steiner. *After Babel*. P. 423.

different language families. Even here, the engagement in translation is related to learning to say things in different ways, about practicing other modes of speaking and writing about the world¹⁶⁹.

And while, in the contemporary world, it may be extremely difficult to observe a practice of translation without having any sort of influence, perhaps social leaders and, indeed, everyone, can try to move towards a form of translation practice that may have a somewhat balanced entities of politics, comparables, and other willful intentions in order to reach a state of comparison and happiness by acknowledging differences between adequacy and equivalence--the state of Ricoeur's "linguistic hospitality"--thereby perhaps preventing the act of co-opting the "other's" ideologies.

Alterity's persistence through language and imagination is often met with misunderstanding due to failed translation, resulting in a lack of dialogue. Translators and readers must embrace diverse creative reflexes, acknowledging each language's distinct qualities. This fosters self-criticism, crucial for societal understanding. The example of Malayalam literature, as per E. V. Ramakrishnan shows translation's transformative power, echoing Lefevere's view of literature as a dynamic system. Arnold and Steiner's insights into language's depth emphasize moving beyond surface interpretations. Ricoeur's "linguistic hospitality" encourages fluidity between identities, crucial for diverse language families. The Assam Movement's songs, like "Mahabahu Brahmaputra," demonstrated internal dialogue, but external dialogue is vital. In a world of influenced translation, aiming for balance is key. Ricoeur's "linguistic hospitality"

¹⁶⁹ Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Pp. 243-244.

acknowledges adequacy in contrast to equivalence. Dialogue facilitates this, preventing co-option of “other's” ideologies and ensuring faithful representation.

In order to begin the journey of trying to understand the “other” or alterity, we need to be aware that there are more than seven thousand languages that are still being used by different linguistic communities around the world, and in order to understand some of that alterity without bias, are called to engage in dialogues and compassionate encounters. Language is one of the quintessential elements of identities of human beings. The impossibility of different communities of human beings to stay isolated in modernity, of course brings with it the beautiful phenomenon of encountering different languages, cultures, and so on. It also, however, brings about the transactions of different languages, along with socio-cultural ideologies – in which each individual translates something “foreign” or “other” into a language of understanding that she is familiar with, in order to connect with the “other” and to make sense of the different encounters she might have on an everyday basis. While continuing in this process of transactional translations, one may be disheartened by the unachievable phenomenon of a perfect or total translation. According to Ricoeur, the fact that makes the process worthwhile, beautiful, and fulfilling is the process that leads to a translation where the components of the other’s language, culture and ideologies are adequately and equivalently translated. This, in fact, is potent enough to make us realize, that we are all translators in some way in our own rights, and it is the process we choose to adopt that differentiates us from one another.

Social leaders, guided by ethical responsibility, play a critical role in fostering understanding and respect for alterity. This responsibility is amplified by the

interconnectedness of dialogue, translation, rememory, and imagination, concepts central to the works of Ricœur, Levinas, and Morrison. Educators, echoing Ricœur's emphasis on hermeneutics, must cultivate dialogue, encouraging students to interpret diverse perspectives. In all cases, ethical responsibility demands Levinasian engagement with the “face” of the other, rejecting simplistic narratives. Incorporating Morrison’s concept of rememory points to a need to ensure that historical injustices are acknowledged. This should promote imaginative engagement, fostering empathy by encouraging us to understand the “other's” lived experiences. Writers and singers, like Bhupen Hazarika during the Assam Movement, wield the power of narrative. They must engage in Levinasian dialogue, respecting the “face” of the other, avoiding harmful stereotypes. Their imaginative power should build bridges, not walls, ensuring authentic representation.

Translators, as Ricœur emphasizes in *On Translation*, are ethical mediators. They must facilitate dialogue between cultures, going beyond linguistic equivalence to ensure accurate representation. They must carry the weight of rememory across divides, preventing the erasure of the “other's” voice, much like LeAnne Howe does in her work with Native American narratives. Politicians, facing creating Agamben's “bare life” must prioritize dialogue, ensuring policies are inclusive and equitable. They must acknowledge rememory, addressing historical injustices and avoiding divisive language. The Indian national anthem, “Jana Gana Mana,” serves as an example of how dialogue can address systemic exclusion.

If social leadership uses this power of translation and dialogue to usurp power or maintain it, all value is lost. Currently, we witness disconnect between people because of

a lack of capacity for unbiased encounters and dialogue. And a good example for this is in the spirit of the song “Sound of Silence,” originally written by Simon and Garfunkel, soon after John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Garfunkel pointed out that the song tried to capture “the inability of people to communicate with each other, not particularly intentionally but especially emotionally, so what you see around you are people unable to love each other.”¹⁷⁰ And the verse of the song that clearly points towards this sentiment is

—

And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
No one dared
Disturb the sound of silence.¹⁷¹

Perhaps the “songs that voices never share” are the narratives and stories of the other. If there is no intention of having clear dialogue, people that assert a powerful self “talk” and “hear” without “speaking” and “listening” faithfully to the stories of alterity.

My favorite versions of this song are the original one by Simon and Garfunkel, and the rendition by the band Disturbed. Both renditions aim at reaching an “ethereal and ambient” quality that touches people at a deeply emotional level, while letting the

¹⁷⁰ See Alli Patton. “The Profound Meaning Behind Simon and Garfunkel’s *The Sound of Silence*.” AmericanSongwriter.com, Savage Ventures, 2023.

¹⁷¹ David Draiman, et al. *Sound of Silence*. Stanza 3.

“vulnerability of the vocals” stand out.¹⁷² David Draiman from Disturbed notes that no matter how many times they performed the song live, he would always witness “pockets of crying” and “eyes welling up,” which he attributes to the brilliance of Simon and Garfunkel.¹⁷³

An interesting occurrence with respect to this legendary song is that recently, on 14th of October 2023, AT&T partnered with Gallaudet University to come up with an advertisement¹⁷⁴ for hearing aids and decided to use the song “Sound of Silence” for its campaign. Unfortunately, all the emotional language and original intent of the song was nowhere to be found. Moreover, by portraying that people with hearing disabilities can only and solely achieve success via the hearing aids (imbedded in helmets) they made, they essentially reduced the entire disabled population to not having any innate ability or intelligence to achieve success on their own terms; reducing the value of success stories like that of Helen Keller and Beethoven to mere nothingness. Yet another instance where social leadership, in this case AT&T fails to dialogue in an unbiased manner, thereby misrepresenting meanings, while giving rise to silence of both misunderstanding and alterity.

The lack of connection between people, as Garfunkel observed, stems from a lack of emotional communication. The “songs that voices never share” represent the silenced narratives of alterity, unheard due to a refusal to listen. Simon and Garfunkel's original

¹⁷² See KERRANG!. “DISTURBED’s David Draiman explains the band’s cover of The Sound of Silence.” *YouTube*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uKXHxV9AUc>.

¹⁷³ See Blabbermouth.net, “DAVID DRAIMAN ‘Teared Up’ The First Time He Listened To DISTURBED’s Cover Of *The Sound of Silence*.” *Youtube*, 2016, <https://blabbermouth.net/news/david-draiman-teared-up-the-first-time-he-listened-to-disturbeds-cover-of-the-sound-of-silence>

¹⁷⁴ See Gallaudet Bison. “Sound of Silence: AT&T 5G Helmet | AT&T and Gallaudet University.” *YouTube*, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knGJ0T477UM>.

intent, and Disturbed's powerful rendition, aim to evoke deep emotional connection. But, when that spirit is lost, and the song is used to manipulate and misrepresent, the “sound of silence” becomes a symbol of unchecked power and the continued silencing of the “other.” Ultimately, ethical leadership demands that we use our power to amplify, not silence, the voices of alterity, ensuring that dialogue and translation serve as bridges to understanding, not tools of oppression.

The complex ethical landscape surrounding cultural exchange, particularly with marginalized communities, necessitates a fundamental pivot from superficial engagement to authentic, ethical dialogue. As this study has underscored, prevailing power dynamics often perpetuate misrepresentation and exclusion, reducing rich narratives of survival to mere entertainment. True resolution, however, hinges on fostering an environment of genuine understanding, where the inherent value of diverse perspectives is not just acknowledged but celebrated. This requires embracing linguistic hospitality, recognizing the unique "otherness" of distinct experiences, and moving beyond passive consumption to active, empathetic engagement.

Ultimately, achieving a more just and equitable approach to cross-cultural encounters relies heavily on the diligent application of tools such as nuanced translation, imaginative empathy, and the practice of "rememory." These mechanisms collectively empower ethical dialogue to dismantle exclusionary frameworks, challenge prevailing biases, and illuminate pathways toward reconciliation. By consciously guiding our interactions with marginalized narratives through a lens of profound ethical responsibility and imaginative foresight, we can foster a world where understanding transcends

boundaries, paving the way for lasting resolution and the meaningful co-existence of disparate voices.

Understanding alterity begins with acknowledging the sheer diversity of human beings and languages and engaging in compassionate dialogue. As we navigate a world where isolation is impossible, translation becomes an everyday act, a constant negotiation of “foreign” experiences. While perfect translation remains elusive, Ricœur reminds us that the pursuit of adequacy and equivalence fosters genuine connection. This act of translation, in its broadest sense, makes us all translators. Social leaders, guided by ethical responsibility, play a crucial role in this process. By embodying the principles of dialogue, translation, rememory, and imagination, they can bridge divides and foster understanding. Educators must cultivate dialogue and incorporate rememory; writers and singers must prioritize ethical representation, translators must ensure cultural sensitivity, and politicians must prioritize inclusive policies.

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