

# Tribal Mizo Poetry: Resignification through Identitarian Performance

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With the unprecedented eruptions in the posthumanistic narratives, the consistencies and stabilities attached to the phenomenon called knowledge or the questions of epistemology comprising the knowledge of the world and its legitimacy have been undermined by the ontological inquiries concerning the existence of the worlds itself. This shift from the epistemic to ontological is boiled down in the contraction glocal which problematizes the fixity of existence and opens the doors for a discursive reading of the monolithic narratives. Such non-elite and provincial narratives which purport to be the only extant repositories of culture and history, find their teleology and definitions in danger of being subsumed by the grand narratives of progress and globalization. Though you don't have to be a skeptic to announce that culture as a phenomenon stands problematized today yet the fiefdom of culture and diversity would make one think otherwise i.e. the one who rallies for the reification of myths and legends inscribed in a particular collective imaginary through culture musealism or preservation, is a prude purist who is an oddity in this emerging regime of production and capitalism. Needless to say, culture needs to be salvaged from its one dimensional interpretation mediated by temporality and spatiality. It requires to be measured in terms of cultural genealogy which is in a state of flux and reinvents itself in every epoch, complicating time and space as opposed to its overdetermined suggestions confined to historical consciousness. The subjects of this global regime culture's must then become, like Hannah Arendt's figure of refugee, "the paradigm of historical consciousness." (Agamben 6) History and culture then must not be relinquished as the temporalities and moments of past which have met with a discursive death due to the fickle epistemes and the newly found projects of modernity and postmodernity. History is to be seen in the light of 'history in the making' and culture as 'cultural reincarnation' which shall replace the biopolitical (where all the human abilities, *the bios* is invested in the projects of production) with historical and ethico-cultural moment aiming to rehumanize the dehumanized. Tribals in India with the recently acquired cursed tag of Gramscian subalterns are facing the crisis of history and culture whereby the narrative of glocal, otherwise deified in the progressive culture, is subsuming the Humanist local with its post- and anti-humanist narrative wherein only the resources for more and more production for the capitalist economies matter and not the rudiments of humanity and the attached empathy, innocence and animation.

The most important discourse of the postcolonial moment in countries like India has been the representation, the problematic of speaking as has been manifested conveniently by Gayatri C. Spivak. The revamped political regimes and the reenergized cultural apparatuses in the aftermath of decolonization ushered in a complex of cultural and political narratives in the newly imagined republics like secular India making it difficult for certain communities like Tribes to sustain their ethnic and originary continuum in the national project of progress. Tribal narrative, in an attempt to preserve its heritage and history, is agonizingly perched on a precarious crossroads

whereby their existence and identity have become antagonistic to each other. Flawed models of development in India has resulted in the reterritorialization of the inner and outer spaces of many Tribal communities robbing them off their own natural rightful resources like water, forests and land consequently forcing them into a carnivalesque of culture, a subversion of totalities, a state of cultural and political diffidence. Mizo tribes, along with other North Eastern states of India, due to their distinct epistemologies of cartographies – cultural and geopolitical – need to be politicized as they stand problematized now more than ever. Their attempts at contestatory politics brings them to reclaim their identity as it is their identity which has dragged them into the politico-economic crosshairs wherein their histories have entered into a revision called metahistories by Bruce Sterling. He remarks, “A culture’s metahistory helps it determine whether they fit into the trajectory that is considered the right track” (Sterling 37) and adds, “future metahistories would be gaudnarratives about time that they are yet inconceivable...” (38) Hence, reclaiming, representing and rebuilding is what remains for the Mizos which they try to expedite through literature, a performance enabling their narrative a political purchase qualifying them for being political subjects. Theirs is the narrative emanating from the fractured developmental project of the nation and an urge for a national belonging through their revisits into the realms of their own cultural histories, enchanted land of natural beauty and transcendental signifiers of Gods and local deities. Writing about their legendary heroes and their trails and travails in the face of hostile surroundings and locations voices the postcolonial angst of a nation’s apathy towards their own citizens overshadowed by the overwhelming discourses of modernity and capitalistic economies.

Pramod Nayar likes to call such literature like the Tribal Mizo literature as affective “performative” which

(i) contest(s) the fractured nature of the postcolonial’s pedagogic imperative of the discourses of development, progress of “unity in diversity” (India’s best-worn cliché); (ii) reconfigures the public sphere to include victim’s illogical, hysterical and emotional narratives and finally; (iii) provides the link between the postcolonial condition of continuing exploitation (of, say, neocapitalist and corporate takeover of tribal lands that result in massive displacement), the failure of the state (say, in addressing the demands of prisoners, torture victims and women) and social injustice (embodied, obviously, in the caste system and the unequal nature of land ownership, wages and welfare) and a global culture of Human Rights narratives (Nayar 6)

Mizo literature with its oral tradition of literature had been cornered from the popular imagination owing to the Mizos’ complex relationship with the rest of the Indian discourse but certainly their literature acts as an affective performative to articulate their silences and collective emotions of the body-politic (though the term has a whiff of hegemony) and not merely select few individuals. Tribal Mizo literature had been oral in tradition but their discursive tryst with printing and publication about their ‘stories’ is equivalent to subaltern finding a voice. The folk songs and poetry under scrutiny here are not the outright depictions of the Mizo strifes and victimization but the idyllic and the pastoral narratives hint at a return to the basics, to reclaim the plundered (remotely squandered too) glory and pride amidst the dialectics of the social and the economics. The pains of a culture in crisis are cocooned in the

return to the primitive character of the songs and poetry eulogizing the beauty and grandeur of the Mizo land and Gods and legends. The uncomplicated and fluent style of compositions speaks volumes about the simplicity of the folks and their unassuming lifestyles and demands from their existence contrary to the complex semantics of the metropolitan centers and its problematics. A topos of belonging and survival is performed in the poems which extends to their collective pride in being one and a fear of getting obliterated from the national narrative. Such collection of poetry wherein the personas are trying to relive their sense of beings gestures at the “failures of democratic nations” to offer inclusive citizenship and “undermine unified narratives of national belonging” (Schaffer and Smith 19). Their songs and poems, as discussed here, glorify their cultural heritage which is otherwise coded as primitive and obsolete by the scientific and anthropological discourse and which further is mobilized by the narrative of a progressive and globalized India. The theme of “national belonging” in postcoloniality is often metaphorically articulated in the theme of nation as family (Schultheis) but the political and economical apathy towards tribes like the Mizos and their culture in India itself subverts the myths of nation as home promising spaces of security, warmth and care thereby negotiating one of the foundational fictions of the postcolonial nation. Hence, forwarding their culture and identity through myths and legends in poetry and songs is the Mizo literature’s action plan to restore agency for itself and disrupting the entire pedagogy of nation as an indiscriminating custodian of its citizenry.

As discussed above, printed or published literature of the oral dominated Mizo society is its way of speech act, a performative to claim a sort of inclusion in the mainstream Indian discourse and configure a process of ethical appropriation for its culture and its roots. To this intent, many Mizo scholars have mediated the literary scene in the country with their comparative ethos mobilizing the Mizos from the margin to the center. Laltuangliana Khiangte’s anthologized poems in *Mizo Folk Songs and Folk Tales* is the case study in this article foregrounding the Mizo people’s collective imaginary trying to defend themselves from the collectivizing myths of ignorance, savagery and alienation also as “interrupting the myth” (Nancy 56) is the need of the hour. The collection of poems in the book has poems belonging to different sub-genres like religious, love, nature, existential, etc. with each poem exhibiting a subtext of Mizo socio-cultural discourse. Even if it is a religious poem invoking God, the running strain underneath is that of Mizo life-stream’s well being and its protection from the external weakening influences and violent discourses of segregation and isolation. When it comes to nature poetry, the description of the inimitable beauties of Mizo landscape and its serenity as against the belligerent colonial ideology espousing a new codification for the otherwise irreducible particularity of its ethnicity into a collective and universal pedagogy seems to be the leitmotif creating a narrative of affect. Similarly, the philosophical and existential poems try to write new mininarratives as against the metarealities whose contingent and provisional natures match the contemporary teleologies and subject formations. In the poem “Precious Words of God” by Rev. Liangkhaia translated by Laltuangliana Khiangte, the poet summons God to be with him as he crosses the desolate land of the ruthless world:

Just to pass the bare desert here,

Let thine words, alone be our guide  
 Would this be the shining cloud  
 That the Israelites followed  
 To lead us once again,  
 Its light has been shining on.  
 In the vast whirling-sea of this world,  
 We're living in doubt all day,  
 Thy words lead us like star of peace,

That will show us the heavenly path (Liangkhaia Trans. Khiangte , "Precious Words of God" 17)

Herein, the strength is sought to traverse the resistive efforts of the external world and the colonial mindset of the political economy trying to subsume the fringe narratives under the unifying endeavors and larger construction of a homogenous national identity. The poet seeks a clearance of doubts in the minds and hearts of the fellow Mizos aiming to make the readers listen to their untold hardships and struggles while combating several duplicities of dominant discourses in the idea of India.

The recourse to theological and scriptural contents hints at the deep seated religious fervor emanating from a radical cultural belonging motivating the readers towards a "rhetorical listening" (Hesford qtd. Nayar 252) which demands the readers hear voices such as the poet's as well as the other Mizos and the irreducible solidarity of the Mizo space. In another poem with similar temper named "I Dare Not Lay My Armour By" the Mizo persona admits being circled by the foes threatening to subsume his essentialism which the Mizo narrative is striving to keep intact and free of any discursive construction and interruption. The Mizo subject takes to arms in order to shield any discursive merger, a sacrifice, an important rite of passage in the political annals of the sovereign nation. The poet alludes to the legend of Jesus Christ's place of Crucifixion Calvary to map his own location which required redemption and for which he is ready to offer his own blood as well as can bleed his antagonists who try to contravene his land's autonomy.

In Calvary's redemptive flow,  
 I too can conquer every foe;  
 And set free, a new life to win,  
 Those souls who are now enslaved by sin.  
 The light will break and darkness flee,  
 Then my Redeemer I shall see;  
 And I shall lay my armour down,  
 Clothe Thou me, Lord, in a spotless gown.  
 (Thanguta trans. Lloyd "I Dare Not Lay My Armour By", 24)

The Mizo persona is not ready to be cowed down by the external elements, doesn't look like dropping his guard until intervened by his Maker and wishes to be one with his Lord. Such a passionate resolve to crusade against the exclusionary xenophobic streaks underscores a fear of the epistemic violence which challenges the existence of the subalterns. The need to take to arms insinuates a deeper anxiety which arises from the dialectics of the local and the glocal wherein the latter seems to be a political

variable gnawing at the integrated structuring of the tribal narrative with its perverted logics and cold calculations. In another poem, the blood of Jesus is shown to be inspiring every man who seeks to transcend the human forged chains of bondage and ruthless machinations to corrupt the idyllic and the pristine. The recurrent references to blood are a part of the Mizo tribal ideology to identify the schema in the colonial pattern and be braced to shed own as well as the enemy's blood if required. In "He Gave His Life", the supreme sacrifice by Jesus is located within the larger paradigm of Mizo cultural identity's strife at sustaining itself and which needs to be protected from the sinister negotiations of the postmodern totalizing narratives disrespectful to the micronarratives like theirs:

"His precious blood was given,  
He conquered death and hell,  
The great salvation found in Him  
Each human tongue should tell.  
My soul, turn to the Cross,  
Look on that holy hill,  
Be clothed in living faith and love;

Let praise thy spirit fill. (Rokunga trans. Lalthankima "He Gave His Life", 28)

The poet demands that the Jesus' sacrifice be told about by every tongue which clearly indicates the Mizo tenacity to embody the Jesus narrative in order to contest the anti-cultural elements propagating the capitalist designs of alienating and dismantling their superstructures in the name of globalization and other grand narratives of political economies.

The motive behind such a fervent discourse is to make the readers experience the anxiety and the fear in the minds of the tribals of being obliterated from the nation's memory as it moves towards the authoritarian nation-state signifier. The text here then, to adopt Shoshana Felman's description of testimonial narrative, be treated as a "point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life" (Felman 2). Hence, the Mizo text becomes a powerful channel to pass on its concerns to the reading groups to forge an ethical imagination while reconciling and relating to the Mizo tribe's otherness what has been referred to as "emphatic unsettlement" by Dominick LaCapra (LaCapra 699). What LaCapra intends to say is that one may not identify with the sufferer but can register and reflect upon, for oneself as well as others, the trauma and the unsettlement (699). Likewise, even in the religious poetry of the Mizo Tribes the debate is implicit whether they possess the right to sustain their socio-cultural monolithicism which stands problematized in the larger narratives of national homogeneity and the state sponsored virtues of economic credit.

Their contentment with their life style and sociological narratives is clear in their nature poetry wherein the raging geopolitics of the state stands contested through the encomiums lavished by the poets upon their natural vistas, the landscape. Hence, the development of ethnoscape in the psyche, comprising the natural resources, stands successful in transcending the human and fiscal resources factorization of the (post)modernity induced state politics. An excerpt:

In our pleasant highland clad with green forest,  
 Where crystal, clear dew gather and flows;  
 Sweet song-birds and cicadas unite,  
 And sing all day long their glad tribute,  
 Old leaves fall to nourish young shoots in spring.  
 Dreamy haze spreads awakening old memories  
 Every bough breaks forth with blossoms  
 And resounds with song of winged songsters.  
 Mizoram, land of sweet sounds and clean air  
 Perfumed with scents of *herse*, *khiang* and *ngiau*  
 We roam the old friends in pensive memory

And chance upon a lovelorn Dove's soft coo (Vankhama trans. Sangliana "The Land of Sweet Sounds, 36)

The poet poses a perfect escapade for the representative Mizo subject who is in awe of his land and wishes an eternal union with its bounties. He refuses to be part of the regime of biopolitics and biopower which has the capacity to reduce man into just a resource and an immaterial labor whose only function is production for the postmodern raging consumerism. As Paolo Virno indicates, the defining tendencies of culture in these times are "performativity" and "virtuosity" and for the first time in history, the human faculties of cognition and communication have become "the primary productive resources of capitalism" (Virno 99). It is an era of immaterial labor, of "labor that produces immaterial products, such as information, knowledge, ideas, images, relationships and affects" (Hardt and Negri 65) The clarion call for return to nature is hence, a ploy to imagine (for local consumption) a virgin landscape of the homeland whose holiness stands negotiated and compromised in the capitalist economy's ground leveling grand imperatives. In another poem "Our Fair Mizo Hill" by Rokunga translated by Lalthankima, the apostrophizing of Mizo land and hills and the depiction of extraordinary courage of the Mizo people and legendary heroes displayed against the foes, human and abstract downbeat factors like ignorance and illiteracy, coinciding with the contemporary clash with the 'emergent intellectual discourse' of the postcoloniality and its complex semantics.

Fair mizo hills, thou art like the fairest dream-land,  
 O'er thy hills and dales reigneth abiding peace,  
 Here flowers bloom, the sweet scent of joy blows in breeze,  
 'Tis of thee we sing, land of beauty; our Mizo land....  
 Here in day of yore we dwelt in fear of spirits,  
 Here we passed the dark ages in fear of foes,  
 With the night gone, now the dawn of freedom greets thee  
 Joy and peace are entwined in thy hills and dales.  
 With harps and strings resounding with one voice  
 Sweet and loud would we sing of our cherished land;  
 Let our voices go resounding from shore to shore,

Sing ye, 'tis of the land before all lands to cheer and praise. (Rokunga trans. Lalthankima "Our Fair Mizo Hill", 38)

Here too the recourse to untainted Mizo beauty suggests an ingrained love for the motherland whose identity and existence stand problematized in the cracked national discourse. The Mizos' reconstruction of the Mizo culture and sceneries is reclamation of the glorious past and the literature here, the poems and songs, is a window to a radical rethinking of the ontological reconstruction s of their identity.

In the poem "Spirit of Night", the poet rakes up a nuanced reading of night which is a representative pictogram of the Mizo struggle for identity. Night is darkness and for the tribals and the marginal identities in India the life stream is a dark world where the different structures of power and language organize and regulate social, cultural and linguistic acts.

What makes the night so hungry-  
 Hungry for all unwanted things of light!  
 Light becomes dim at night. May be-  
 Be in a certain corner, in a corner so special, yet unmarked  
 Unmarked spot of the day, ah!  
 Ah! Where night's agent starts groping -  
 Groping in the dark  
 What makes the night so angry,  
 Angry night! To do and to react -  
 Reaction which is so bitter,  
 Bitter for someone to receive the gift!  
 Gift of the night, to a particular prey,  
 Prey of the unforeseen, suppressed temper!  
 Temper of the most common type. (Khangte "Spirit of Night", 68)

Here night is shown to be hungry and angry, two signifiers which hint at a semiotics of discontentment and utter defeat of a social and cultural order. For the human beings, predominantly the Mizos here, hunger for respect and equity and anger due to the blatant denial of either of the two. It is a cognizant reality which feeds the entire pedagogy of Indian dialectics and its failure to be all inclusive posturing an integrative operation. Hence, the Mizo narrative, through its newly recognized faith in literature and cultural superstructures, furthers itself as an agentic subjectivity which had an ontology and temporality of its own and which needs to be resituated and realigned in the contemporary moment when its integrity, legitimacy and harmony with the past is interrogated. And it is through the same agency finding identitarian act that the Mizo narrative inaugurates a discourse through language, the speech act which is the originating source of the subjectivity constituting the ontology of the Mizo subject for, as Rajesh Babu Sharma writes,

"The term 'Language' here includes all canonical narratives - religious, cultural, historical, literary, juridical, philosophical and many others - that are the sources of all knowledge/ signification in the social and cultural space. Language creates and interprets the future possibilities of all narratives as well. Language creates and interprets the knowledge systems. Language creates the principles of hermeneutics - it validates one kind of knowledge and invalidates the other." (Sharma 72)

The Mizo optimism in finding their agency and resignifying their subjectivity is manifest in the poem "To the Day" wherein the Mizo subject is hopeful of a new day which shall recodify their dialectics in future making them successful political subjects having the potential to transcend the essentialist notions of identity evolving from a pre-existent ontology. The poet Lalitluangliana Khiangte writes:

Now here's the day!  
 A time when everything is clear,  
 'Cause things are there as they should  
 Light being an instrument of the day  
 Each day brings new hope,  
 Hope for a better living,  
 Life on earth is but based on dreams,  
 Day-dreaming is what one can't avoid consciously  
 Or unconsciously, one is dreaming for one's betterment ...  
 Oh! Heart, heart!  
 Ah! My soul knows  
 The future triumph of Virtue over vice in the end,  
 But we are now like this, seeing like this....  
 We are here as we are, in front of the stage,  
 Staring clearly at the wonderful events of the day,  
 For our own eyes can see in the light ("To the Day" Khiangte, 71-72)

The poet sees a light which is his core sanguinity envisaging a better future for his lot through the identitarian acts and performatives through literature and other allied endeavors of political overtures.

To conclude, literature for the Mizo academia and intelligentsia serves twin purposes of aesthetic catharsis as well as political ruse to seek a remedy from the pathology of isolation and homogenizing politics of the state and other counter-narratives. Mizo tribal literature stands up against the ritualized political and social practices which intertwine with institutional powers to create dominant ideologies that ultimately legitimize and naturalize certain identities and delegitimize, exclude and marginalize others. Dislocation from the habitats and reterritorialization to inimical locations which don't necessarily promote the autochthonous narratives and don't effect cultural and social increments has been the stock Mizo and other tribes' discourse keeping the postcolonial debates in India in business. Inscribed in such a socio-political palimpsest, Mizo literature and especially the poetry forges a narrative of affect, attempts to find agency and effects a performative in their identitarian acts (overtly political as well as culturally apolitical) to seek a social, cultural, juridical validity through a resignification of their subjectivities. A radicalized revision of the ontological reconstructions of the Mizo identity reformulates a representative politics which tries to combat, interrupt and subvert the mythologies of cultural exoticism and primitivism. The cultural genealogies of the Mizo narrative take the center stage in the depictions of literature and scramble towards a cosmopolitanism which is the new reality<sup>1</sup>. The poems of the Mizo tribes reflect a cultural promiscuity of the past and the present wherein even the signifier 'tribal' is repotentiated with new political energies, it is not historical but a history in the making. State's apathy and certain vested interests

may prevent such narratives from transcending the periphery but perhaps may not hold for long since the tribal subjectivities as Mizos are determined to counter the narratives with subtext of hegemonies and make themselves count in the national imagination through their identitarian politics bent upon resignifying the very codes which repressed them.

### References

Ulrich Beck makes a distinction between “normative” or “philosophical” cosmopolitanism (which has long been circulating in discourse) and “everyday” or “banal” or “mundane” cosmopolitanism. The latter refers to the “actual cosmopolitanism of reality” which can be seen, for instance, “at the level of cultural consumption and media representations” (131)

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