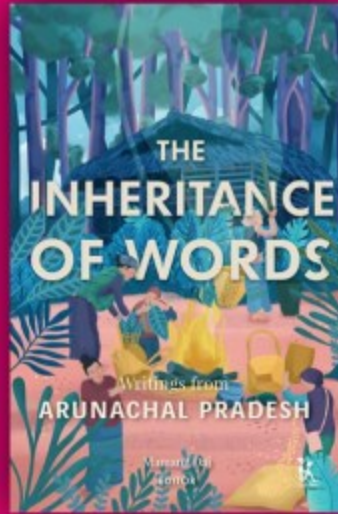


A Preliminary Reading of Some Poems from ‘The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh’ (2021)

By Dr. Basil N. Darlong Diengdoh



The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh

Women’s writing in English from Arunachal Pradesh is tentatively but tantalizingly poised, ready to emerge as a mainstay of literary and artistic pursuits. Coming from a land steeped in diversity but also new realities, a cohesive literary identity is hard to peg down without efforts that culminate in collections such as *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh* (2021). From the legacy started by figures such as Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, to Tagang Taki, Rinchin Norbu Moiba, Samuru Lunchang and Kensam Kenglam, then Jumsi Siram and Yumlam Tana, to name but a few, the prolificacy of the current generation, including Mamang Dai who has edited this recently published compilation, has met with great appreciation and preliminary critical reception. This collection is stated to be the “first of its kind” from this once “frontier state” (“The Inheritance of Words” n.p.). This is a collection of writings that crossover from orality to the literary, from tribal and non-tribal mother tongues to translation, melding memory, experience, imagination and introspection in the form of poems and stories, each inflected by notions of tribe, place, and living in a dynamic world and in a dynamic culture.

It is complex lifeworlds that the poets featured in *The Inheritance of Words* inhabit, not confined either to the geographical idea of Arunachal Pradesh as a land of unmatched beauty from tropical woods to its Himalayan expanse, nor the geopolitical idea of a frontier state, a borderland that needs to be interventionally managed, with a colonial legacy that some may well argue, has not ended. The fact remains, the poets of this collection are writing in English (some in translation), capturing for a wider audience the literary moment through which Arunachal Pradesh may now be put into

perspective. This comes at a time when “the lot of the Indian poet in English isn’t particularly enviable” (Subramaniam 34) and is often viewed less than favourably in a publishing and reading world attuned to media-generated literary buzz, driven by the novel that are commercially viable.

This article focuses on the poetical parts of the compilation even as generic conventions are not the primary concern here. What emerges in the readings below is the myriad ways of interrogating, negotiating and representing aspects of life in Arunachal Pradesh (as well as the experiences beyond the trappings of border and identity). The idea of a womanhood shaped by but also resisting tradition—such as we see in the poem “My Ane’s Tribal Love Affair” by Ngurang Reena—highlights the residues of all these concerns and more in “an unfamiliar time when traditional/ faith entwined with western ideas” (lines 29-30).^{*} Similarly, other poems from *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, as this article examines, provide a deeper understanding of what it means to represent women’s experiences while countenancing subjective realities that are not easily labeled. In point of fact, the readings explored here are also subjective, culminating from the aim to contend with and trace a political and social aspect to contemporary poetry from Arunachal Pradesh. The “inheritance” of a politics of language, from Asamiya in the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency, to the imposition of Hindi, to the turn to English, not necessarily in that order, to the “originary moment of... translation” (Asaduddin 4) of the diverse tribal languages, all contribute to the present literary landscape, itself inflected by class, ethnicity and gender.

The readings conducted here are, it is important to underscore, preliminary, temporal and marked by a deep uncertainty that cannot fully capture the variousness of verse, of word, of style, of theme, of subtext, context and background. Reading poetry in tandem with each other and the close reading of a single poem signal two different forms of engagement, even as they are not mutually exclusive nor the spectral extremes of a literary binary. The poetical form lends itself to such an engagement beyond simplistic meaning and there are a number of poems in the collection, compositions in translation as well as in English, covering a wide range of literary concourses, which are briefly and reductively mentioned here. Samy Moyong’s “A Man I Know” and “I AM” explore the travails of relationships and the disambiguation of contemporary sexual politics at a deeply personal level. Ayinam Ering explores change as analogies to time and growth through personification in “I Am a Tree”. Her “Offspring” sheds light on gender politics in her tribe. Rinchin Choden’s piece states simply in its title—“Tradition: An Illusion of Continuance”—and traces in “The Jigsaw Puzzle” of identity-politics an often invoked but significantly exhausted notion of “outsiders” (line 8). Ponung Ering Angu interrogates nostalgia in “Dying Lights”. Gyati T. M. Ampu’s “The Wooden House” may be read as distinguishing between the titular structure and the meaning of “home” (line 12). Ngurang Reena’s “My Ane’s Tribal Love Affair” weaves a complex tale with an elegiac undercurrent, juxtaposing autobiography with traditional practice and spirituality with the meaning of what it means to be born and live as a woman in such a society.

Likewise, Kolpi Dai’s “Which Part of Me” ponders upon the idea of becoming as springing from within rather than the reductive assumptions and stereotypes that are thrust upon individuals. “Scribbled Pages” expands upon the idea of writing itself in an uneasy yet inevitable contestation with the disappearing orality of Arunachal Pradesh. Rebom Belo’s “The Room and I” (translated by Gedak Angu) echoes the reaffirming as well as veiling qualities of ‘a room of one’s own’. Memory and a poignant nostalgia emerge prominently in “Those Idle Days” by Jamuna Bini (translated by Yater Nyokir) and “The Darkest 5 Days” by Tolum Chumchum, respectively. Similarly, Chasoom Bosai’s “Evocation” connects memory and writing as an act of adoration (line 23). Nomi Maga Gumro’s “Feels Like Something is Lacking” (translated by Tage Moni) undertakes to express the

transitoriness of both memory and experience. Karry Paddu's poetic photo essay "I Am Property" lays bare the confusion traced in the insistence of tradition in its material manifestations and presupposes a fixedness of the idea of the tribal woman, culminating in her alienation from both the idea of herself and her relationship with the land. Doirangsi Kri's "Little Life" and "Pseudo Life" explore the shades of maternal care and living in a fast changing world. Omili Borang's "The Sun" serves to shed light on the changes within where the sun, an often invoked symbol of the state, is a specular presence that can shed light on dark things. Tunung Tabing's "Waves of Irony" develops the theme of contrast and contradiction as an inevitable aspect of living and writing. And finally, Subi Taba's "Lost Souls" revisits the complications of human relationships.

A common refrain in the poetry is the uneasy, perhaps even uncertain, relation between the present and the past—with this uncertainty now emerging in personal relationships, in families, even in the practice of age-old traditions immersed in the natural and supernatural worlds. This modicum of self-doubt is seen in many of the poems, grounding them in authorial uncertainty and narratorial fluidity. Samy Moyong's poet-narrator, for instance, declares, "I might be wrong with all my words/ never been good at reading people" ("A Man I Know" lines 33–34). The poems re-enact rather than mimic this anxiety. There remains a "tension between the given and the acquired" that "informs all the pieces" (Mukherjee, "The Inheritance of Words" n.p.). Part of this tension also arises from negotiating this poetic space itself, as agential, as transformative, even chaotic, given that many of the writers are not writing as part of a poetic tradition, but tentatively creating it, even if the collective is never announced, rather, difference is. Note, for example, the following passage from Kolpi Dai—

Somebody told me the love in paper is wrong.
The stories in paper are wrong.
Because I only know to speak in paper
I shut my mouth and let them whisper. ("Scribbled Pages", lines 1–4)

Nevertheless, the women poets may also be read as responding to the well-worn "image... as silenced, dependent, and marginal" (Mukherjee, "21st Century Indian Women Poets" n.p.).

There is a reflection on the shifting landscapes, both external and within, that have been wrought by time, resulting in changing lifeworlds that these poets aim to reflect upon and express. Jamuna Bini, for example, knows that "[t]oday/ these hearths are broken./ Folks no more live together" ("Those Idle Days", lines 54–56), but the fractious dichotomy between inheriting an identity and living one remains. Tradition has been carried forward, for instance, through uncodified practices, but not the fragile balance with nature that once sustained such lifeworlds. It is not surprising that this relationship between humankind and nature is often expressed as a memory in the poems. "Evocation", for example, presents an inevitably nostalgic and "...beautiful memory/ Of a place, of an echo/ The sublime world, the enchanted valley!" (Bosai, lines 1–3) that is perhaps figured now only in one's memory. Further, the insistence on traditional values have further concretised some of those aspects that are disempowering and alienating. Karry Paddu writes,

I fear a tribe who will be angry with me if I defy
them.
I fear alienation,
I fear being an outcast,
I fear losing my faith if I dare question.
Moreover, even if I question,
Who will answer? ("I Am Property" lines 3–9)

Elsewhere, in the midst of fear, the irony of existence is played out wherein the "rainbow of

happiness” as well as “a cloud of sadness”...

...both the pages belong
To that open, endless book
Of unending questions
Whose answers lie nowhere. (Tabing, “Waves of Irony” lines 27–30)

Similarly, addressing her mother in “My Ane’s Tribal Love Affair”, the poet disclaims: “We are two different women of two different/ times,/ In your old tradition and my evolution, an/ antithesis” (Reena, lines 139–142). The push and pull of the world is keenly felt and expressed in “Which Part of Me” when it is stated “I don’t know which part of me is real/... ” (Dai, line 1) “...[t]he little girl afraid to confront,/ Or the strong headed girl embarking out” (lines 8–9). The reduction of womanhood to biology is boldly challenged, for example, in Tolum Chumchum’s “The Darkest 5 Days” where the poet-narrator “must wake before the sun for the rosy laundry/ ‘For woman you have become’ said my mother” (lines 5–6). The capacity for writing to normalise non-normative experiences, desires and aspirations is witnessed in such poetry. In “The Room and I”, the poet-narrator depicts a paradoxical space, at once supplying as well as supplanting meaning. It is a place of “debate”, happiness and sadness, of aspiration and fright in equal measure. If the room signifies that “my life/ [is] scattered and all shattered” (Belo, lines 5–6), it also affords the exploration of desire and intimacy, while simultaneously hiding it—

Return wearied by work.
A friend awaits with wide open arms.
I embrace it then embark to heaven.
The room and I. (lines 25–28)

The significance of the room, a space one can call one’s own, also signals that the contemporary moment has not always yielded the necessary freedom for women in the Northeast, now negotiating, on the one hand, traditions still entrenched with a discriminatory mindset, while on the other, a hegemonizing modernity that erodes any sense of individuality while conforming to a growing consumerist culture that has turned an indifferent eye to the environment. This is an untenable situation, as Doirangsi Kri writes—“Transgressed are the ideals of simple living” (“Pseudo Life” line 9)—and calls for a carefully considered vision of the future which considers not just the narrow affiliations of tribe and land, but of the collective humanity that resides precariously in a world threatened by environmental annihilation because “[w]e owe a future world” (“Pseudo Life” line 22). Further, the sense of difference, alienation, superficiality and disdain toward this shift marks the present moment more acutely when

...[a]ll is gained online from internet’s cost
Epics, legends and myths are no more
pursued
On Facebook, WhatsApp and Insta all are
glued... (line 17–21)

It is interesting to ask where new communities might emerge but in the imagination, taking after Benedict Anderson’s conception, at least of a literary belonging, if not a national one. While the question of what active role a literary text may play in shaping one’s group identity is difficult to cohesively address in any one paper, the nature of its role in shaping perceptions of identity and belonging cannot be set aside easily. Thus, the poems that find voice through *The Inheritance of Words* present a means of acknowledging the complex difference, the evolving landscape of

identity, the fraught notion of home and belonging and the current crises of agency confronting the women of Arunachal Pradesh. The honesty with which the poem “My Ane’s Tribal Love Affair” captures this dilemma, cannot be understated—

...stench of my clan,
my tribe,
Headgear, men’s traditional cloth, machette.
Treachery and dishonesty are all I can sense... (Reena, lines 153–155)

...Yet I will carry folklore, magic, the spirits of
Nyapin with me.
I will revere my prayers and my traditions.
I am carrying my tribe on my back... (Reena, lines 161–164)

The crucial interrogation is whether or not tradition can accommodate new realities, new imagined communities spurred by a growing need for one’s own sense of agency, place, and worth in this world. For instance, can a tribe accommodate non-normative desires and aspirations? What of that which already exists—will it be acknowledged in ways that are not alienating or disempowering? What continues to be normalised under the aegis of traditional customs and practices often escapes interrogation in its problematic constructs of women, and is even accorded legal sanction in some parts of the Northeast, as can be witnessed in its tribal councils and its village politics, bereft of representation from women. There might be a basis for arguing that folklore itself is rife with the possibilities of egalitarian readings, but the lack of political agency despite growing literacy, education and awareness remains a pressing concern for the women of Arunachal Pradesh even as women empowerment and inclusion in political processes has long been pursued, campaigned for, contested upon, and celebrated.

Momentarily, if one were to glibly superimpose a political slant here, it could be said that the poems themselves are egalitarian because they shun identitarianism, naming no tribe in particular, eschewing the topical concerns of the ideas of the Northeast. And yet, this is not enough of a reading, and certainly falls short of the expression of personal demons, agonies, anxieties, frustrations and anger that simmers below the discontent, the self-doubt, and the sadness. The poems, the imaginative collective that they represent, therefore, don’t detract from reality as much as reflect it in deeper ways. As Nomi Maga Gumro poignantly captures from the very first lines, “Every time feels like something is lacking./ Every time feels like something is extinguished” (“Feels Like Something is Lacking” lines 1–2). In a similarly distressing vein, Karry Paddu asks, “How can I compare myself to women/ who are allowed to speak their minds?/ My traditions are different, my customs are/ different” (“I Am Property” lines 7–10), but there is a compelling reason why this is so: “fear”. Omili Borang’s “The Sun” calls for reflection and change from within to confront the forces without—“They tell me it is dark/ The way our future/ leads” (lines 14–16), and that the “sun within” must thrive. The implication is clear—the “land of the dawn-lit mountains” (“Arunachal Tourism” n.p.) does not bring a light and warmth enjoyed by all.

At the same time, the poetry contained in *The Inheritance of Words* while enabling a literary exploration of these inherently political and social questions that may easily be read as conveying a sense of lack, of need, of entrapment in almost carceral traditions. However, this would be a misreading at best, and worse, an underestimation, of the true sense contained in the plurality of voices: that these poems propose an imagined community of sorts that can forward the crucial sense of a threshold being tested, of limitations being breached, and in doing so, creating new spaces of

expression and bringing together a collective strength to uniquely individual problems. Even so, there is a deep sense of belonging to one's people that remains undiminished, even if the relation is imperfect and complicated. As Ngurang Reena shares,

I will revere my prayers and my traditions.
I am carrying my tribe on my back,
knowing that we will always be one in this
today, tomorrow, and in death. ("My Ane's Tribal Love Affair" lines 163–166)

Similarly, Karry Paddu says,

I am a proud tribal woman, I respect my
traditions.
I respect them for they make my tribe
unique
I respect them because they make me who
I am. ("I Am Property" lines 3–8)

Whether the literary imaginary can transcend—even transgress—the borders between tribes, between the men and women of these various groups of people, between fathers and daughters, between lovers, remains a crucial aspect of what it means to look to the future without discarding the past. For now, these readings are trapped in the ether of literary work and critical reception that feels, for all its bluster about the literary imaginary, all too real, especially when confronted with the narrow politics of identity. Can poetics and aesthetics test the political real? As poetical meaning continues to lend an openness to questioning the role of identity in anchoring as well as fostering personal growth and acceptance, this possibility is enticingly well-ensconced in the act of writing, and reading, poetry. Whether this signals a collision or conformity is what generates the critical interest in these current times.

**Citations of the lines from the poems are relative to the ebook.*

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. Verso, 2006.
- Angu, Ponung Ering. "Dying Lights." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.
- Asaduddin, M. "Introduction: Canon Formation and Literatures from India's Northeast: Some Reflections." *Literatures from Northeast India Beyond the Centre-Periphery Debate*, edited by K. M. Baharul Islam, Routledge, 2022.
- Belo, Rebom. "The Room and I." Translated by Gedak Angu, *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.
- Bini, Jamuna. "Those Idle Days." Translated by Yater Nyokir, *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.
- Borang, Omili. "The Sun." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.
- Bosai, Chasoom. "Evocation." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.
- Choden, Rinchin. "Tradition: An Illusion of Continuance." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.
- Chumchum, Tolum. "The Darkest 5 Days." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.
- Dai, Kolpi. "Scribbled Pages." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.
- - - "Which Part of Me." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.

Ering, Ayinam. "Offspring." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.

Gumro, Nomi Maga. "Feels Like Something is Lacking." Translated by Tage Moni, *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.

Kri, Doirangsi. "Little Life." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.

Moyong, Samy. "A Man I Know." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.

- - -. "I AM." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.

Mukherjee, Anusua. *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, Edited by Mamang Dai." *The Hindu*, 3 Apr. 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/the-inheritance-of-words-writings-from-arunachal-pradesh-review-fading-voices/article34222382.ece>.

Mukherjee, Monami. "21st Century Indian Women Poets: An Introduction." Owlcation, 3 Oct. 2017, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/21st-Century-indian-women-poets>.

Paddu, Karry. "I Am Property: A Photo Essay." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.

Reena, Ngurang. "My Ane's Tribal Love Affair." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021, eBook.

Subramaniam, Arundhati. "Introduction: Beyond the Hashtag: Exploring Contemporary Indian Poetry in English." *Indian Literature*, vol. 61, no. 1 (297), 2017, pp. 33–39. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26791073>. Accessed 9 Jun. 2022.

Taba, Subi. "Lost Souls." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.

Tabing, Tunung. "Waves of Irony." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.

The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021, eBook.

"The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh – Zubaan." Zubaan – Feminist Independent Publishing, <https://zubaanbooks.com/shop/the-inheritance-of-words-writings-from-arunachal-pradesh/>. Accessed 2 June 2022.

Thungon, Leki. "Doused Flames." *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*, edited by Mamang Dai, Zubaan, 2021.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. Oxford UP, 2015.

Dr. Basil N. Darlong Diengdoh is a young critic, writer and an Assistant Professor of the Department of English, Dibrugarh University.