



Decolonial Re-existence through Animist Realism: Water Spirits and Shamanic Mantras in Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land*

Sampda Swaraj

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India

• <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6034-8925>

Binod Mishra

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India

• <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2364-6405>

Abstract

Colonialism's deleterious impact on Indigenous epistemologies has engendered an exigent concern in the project of decoloniality, calling for a re-existence of marginalized cosmovisions. To accomplish this, an epistemic delinking from the paradigm of Eurocentric discourses is imperative in the interest of a comprehensive appreciation and recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems. In this vein, the present study employs the literary trope of animist realism to analyze two short stories from the anthology *Boats on Land* by the Khasi author, Janice Pariat. Her creative writing explores the animist philosophy of the Khasi community who dwell in the humid tropical State of Meghalaya, India. Through an attentive reading of the animist belief in water spirits and shamanic mantra rituals, this paper critiques colonial narratives of Khasi animist worldviews as "satanic", "supernatural", or psycho-pathological aberrations. The paper presents Khasi animist wisdom as a sophisticated and equitable principle of mutual coexistence and respectful relationality between human and more-than-human realms, replete with spiritual, ecological, and cosmological overtones. Indigenous animist epistemologies are indispensable as sustainable alternatives to the knowledge structures of colonial modernity. The present study contributes to the envisioning of a coexistence of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems in the spirit of mutual recognition and constructive engagement within an evolving epistemological landscape in the ongoing decolonial enterprise.

Keywords: Khasi, decolonial, Indigenous epistemology, more-than-human, mutual coexistence, animist realism, creative writing, Meghalaya India

...the rule[s] [of creative writing] stemmed from a remnant of colonial infrastructure dismissive of non-Western modes of storytelling.

— Janice Pariat, *Decolonising Creative Writing*

Introduction: Khasi Oral Tales and Literary Imperialism

Janice Pariat (b. 1953), a Meghalayan Khasi littérateur, astutely perceives the literary imperialism perpetuated by Western textocentrism and its concurrent disregard for oral storytelling traditions. The culmination of Pariat's awareness is a culturally conscious and decolonial approach to creative writing where she incorporates Indigenous oral storytelling traditions in a genre of animist realism. A testament to this is her debut anthology *Boats on Land* (2012), which weaves a literary tapestry of folk customs, oral stories, and myths of the Indigenous Khasi community from Meghalaya, a tropical state located in the far Northeast¹ of India.

Our article focuses on two tales from this anthology, *Dream of the Golden Mahseer* and *A Waterfall of Horses*, which are quintessential examples of the author's decolonial literary acumen. In addition, they also set the stage for an epistemological decoloniality of the Indigenous Khasi animist cosmology. *Dream of the Golden Mahseer*, set in the modern hill station city of Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, offers insightful perspectives on the intricacies of Khasi folklore of *puri* or water spirits, and the effects that colonization and Christianization have had on these beliefs. The story follows the disappearance of a Khasi colonial war veteran, Mama Kyn, attributed to his possession by *puri*, and the resulting commotion of faith and disbelief, fear and wonder, among the characters of the narrative. The second story, *A Waterfall of Horses*, set in the Meghalayan village of Pomerang in the 1850s, portrays Khasi animist traditions in their Indigenous state. Amid the looming shadows of colonialism, the story chronicles a confrontation between British settlers and the Indigenous inhabitants. It showcases the indomitable faith of the local residents in Khasi shamanic rituals, and the invigorating power of mantras as they employ them to orchestrate a mystical retribution for the heinous slaying of their kinsman by a colonial soldier.

The Khasi are a prominent ethnic community of Meghalaya, with members also living in Assam. Descendants of the Austroasiatic Mon-Khmer, they first immigrated to the plains of Assam via Myanmar, Southeast Asia, and Western China, before eventually occupying their present abode (Bareh, 1964, pp. 16-17, 35-36) in the tropical hills of Meghalaya – which is considered the wettest place on earth. They are matriarchal and matrilineal. The Khasi community has traditionally prized itself on its rich animist philosophy, which embraces an ethos of equitable agency of humans and more-than-

¹ The term 'Northeast India', throughout this paper, is used strictly in a geo-spatial sense, and does not, in any way, indicate a homogenization of identities of the ethnically diverse demography of the member states.

human entities and advocates for respectful and relational coexistence between these realms. However, Khasi animist wisdom has been seriously undermined by colonial and neocolonial ambitions. Colonialist distortions demonized Khasi animist rites and rituals as malevolent, supernatural, and indicators of native psychopathological afflictions; while imperialist Christian proselytizers' attempts at cultural assimilation brought reformist dispensations. G. N. Devy has aptly observed that the effects of colonization on Indigenous knowledges and belief systems are the most damaging and far-reaching: "If there is anything more seriously devastated than the land, land resources, forests, rivers and hills of the indigenous, it is, probably, the belief-systems of these communities" (2021, p. 5). Accompanying these earlier encroachments is the neocolonial modernization of the Khasi community, which is further undermining Khasi culture. These politico-cultural encounters have engendered various forms of resistance, negotiations, and appropriations of traditional Khasi cultural icons. Consequently, it becomes necessary to engage in epistemological decoloniality of the Indigenous Khasi animist worldviews.

However, the enterprise of decolonizing Khasi animist epistemologies confronts another daunting challenge in reconciling Indigenous animist knowledges with current Western posthumanist and new materialist scholarship, including the notions of Agential Realism and Vital Materialism. Karen Barad's (2007) agential realist theory, which s/he terms "ethico-onto-epistem-ology — an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being" (p. 185), posits that human existence is inextricably intertwined with the material world and is an emergent function of intra-active, entangled, and interrelated agencies of human and more-than-human entities, including the quantum physical. Jane Bennett's (2010) concept of Vital Materialism acknowledges the non-anthropocentric quality of agency inherent to all physical and material entities, which she refers to as "thing-power" (p. 4), analogously emphasizing the active and powerful role of more-than-human agents in influencing human phenomena. Both these theories resonate with Indigenous Khasi animist worldviews, as delineated in the select short stories examined in this article. However, despite the shared interests and similar foundations between the animist and new materialist-posthumanist strains of thought, a paucity of inter-theoretic conversation persists primarily due to two factors: Western scholars' entrenched and largely unrecognised Eurocentric colonialist presumptions of intellectual superiority; and the post-colonial apprehensions of Indigenous thinkers of being subjected to neocolonial epistemological plunder — where their knowledge is extracted (like resources) for the wealth of Western scholarship. Although there have been interventions to decolonize posthumanism and new materialism by bringing these theories into conversation with non-western knowledges, including Indigenous animisms (for instance the recent collection on Tropical Materialisms by Benitez & Lundberg, 2022), there is much work still to be done. This paper is a step towards this pursuit as our textual analysis demonstrates that Khasi animist wisdom complements and enhances Vital Materialist

and Agential Realist ideas by virtue of their performative and ethical ramifications of agent ontologies. While the Western posthumanist and new materialist investigation of non-human agency falls into an abstract and objective epistemic relationality between human and non-human, Khasi animist culture prioritizes lively onto-ethical participant relations with non-human agents. Furthermore, the relational ethics of Khasi animist discourse align with Chao and Enari's (2021) framing of "beyond-human imagination" as "a practice of humility – a recognition that other beings, too, have rich and meaningful lifeworlds". And this:

...demands the cultivation of an intellectual and ethical openness to the possibility of other-than-human sentience, will, and desire, and a repositioning of the "human" as one within a broad spectrum of matter and life in both deep and present time. (Chao & Enari, 2021, p. 38)

In the present study, we bring together our academic knowledge and experiences as learners and teachers of Khasi literary arts towards a practice in epistemic decoloniality of Indigenous Khasi animist cosmology through a careful engagement with two short stories from Pariat's collection *Boats on Land*. We hope that such a reading can help reinvigorate Khasi animist culture with renewed relevance in critical academic discourse – including bringing it into conversation with posthumanism and new materialism.

We begin the following analysis by emphasizing the pivotal role played by literary actants, both creative and critical, in the praxis of decoloniality of Indigenous communities. Next, we formulate the Indigenous literary trope of animist realism as a potent decolonial theoretical framework for our analysis of the select short stories *Dream of the Golden Mahseer* and *A Waterfall of Horses*. In the remainder of the article, which presents a (con)textual critical analysis of the two stories, our discussion seeks to overturn the colonialist misconstruing of Khasi animist belief in water spirits and shamanic rituals as primitive, supernatural, magico-religious phenomena of pre-literate, archaic and unsophisticated minds. Further, we explore the significance of Khasi shamanic mantras and their relationship with Vedic spiritual epistemology. By examining the interplay of different epistemological frameworks, we seek to understand how knowledge is formed and shared across religious traditions. Through a close textual inquiry, we intend to learn with/from these beliefs as culturally performative phenomena of respectful and relational engagement with the world and its human and more-than-human elements towards an egalitarian and harmonious coexistence. In our critical exploration of the tales, this ideology emerges as the cornerstone of Indigenous Khasi animist principles.

Decoloniality² of Indigenous Epistemologies via Literary Actants

The concept of decoloniality alludes to an ongoing contestation – political, epistemic, and existential – against the colonial enterprise, which assumes a mutating attribute to perpetuate a permanent and continuous matrix of power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000). Contemporary exercise of decolonial politics centres not just on an anti-colonial resistance against Western (neo)colonial hegemony; it expands to include Adolfo Alban's idea of the “re-existence” of (alter)native and otherwise marginalized knowledges and ontological orientations:

Re-existence as the mechanisms that communities create and develop to invent daily life and power, in this way confronting the hegemonic project that, since colonization until our present day, has inferiorized, silenced, and negatively made visible existence... (Alban, 2013, as cited in Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 95)

One of the significant *modus operandi* of this project of decoloniality is through an epistemic “*un paradigma otro*”,³ “an other way of thinking” (Escobar, 2007, p. 190), to create a space for Indigenous epistemologies. Epistemic violence, which comprises the reductionist colonial paraphernalia employed by Western academia (which has spread around the world), authorizes the West with the privilege of producing scholarly and rational knowledge; and simultaneously eliminates, distorts and destroys other knowledge frameworks and worldviews, thereby naturalising unequal socio-political power relations (Shiva, 1993; Spivak, 1988).

This socio-political reality, which is interwoven into any literary creation, means literary studies is potentially an effective platform through which to dismantle the hegemony of Western epistemic macro-narratives – if literary studies itself follows decolonial practices and is inclusive of other literatures and oralities. Literary corpora from Indigenous communities embody the geo-political and body-political location of the

² Here it is pertinent to clarify our approach to the terms – ‘decolonization’, ‘decoloniality’, ‘anti-colonial’, ‘postcolonial’, and ‘post-colonial’. Our usage of ‘decolonization’ pertains to dismantling colonialism's political and economic structures, often achieved through a formalized process to gain political independence. We employ ‘decoloniality’ as a broader concept, encompassing a more comprehensive approach that seeks to confront and transform the power relations and epistemic foundations of colonialism, including its extant cultural and epistemological legacies. While ‘anti-coloniality’ is a political stance focused on activist resistance against colonialism and the hegemonic colonialist Eurocentric paradigms, our understanding of the decolonial vista, alternatively, interlaces anti-colonial resistance with the constructive tools of pro-positive construction, re-existence and recognition of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies towards their coexistence with decentred Western socio-political and epistemic modes (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The term postcolonial (without a dash), refers to the cultural and intellectual movement which emerged after the withdrawal of the colonials, which critically examines the enduring effects of colonialism and its power structures through literary and artistic productions. We use the term post-colonial (with a dash) to refer to societies after the withdrawal of colonials.

³ The phrase is used by Escobar (2007) to commend the efforts of researchers from Latin America for envisioning and exploring the possibility for the production and dissemination of non-Eurocentric Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies.

enunciating subject to acknowledge and delineate the sensibilities, truths, histories, and overall world-sensing of these marginalized geo-political sites of knowledges, which arise predominantly from the post-colonial tropics (Grosfoguel, 2011; Mignolo, 2011). Indigenous literary oeuvres aim at achieving the twin targets of the project of decoloniality: resistance against the epistemic violence that (mis)represents, others, and silences the culture and history of colonized subjects; and a re-existence of their orature, arts, epistemes and worldviews against colonial erasure. Nonetheless, one cannot choose to remain oblivious to the exclusionary convention of Western academia that sustains the perpetration of epistemic violence in the academic and literary realm by assuming a disinclined disposition towards the promotion of scholarly research or pedagogical activity on the Indigenous "epistemologies of the South" (Santos, 2016, p.18); or, more precisely, the Indigenous epistemologies of peoples of the tropics.

The trajectory to decolonize literary academia demands a two-pronged approach – taking into account both creative and critical realms. Decoloniality at the creative front calls for a burgeoning literary aesthetic by Indigenous artists engaged in presenting, and (re)storying micro-narratives from their communities independent of the hegemonic Western universals. The critical/scholarly decolonial trajectory encompasses a diversification of academic curriculums towards greater inclusivity of such literatures, and also a paradigmatic shift in literary criticism and pedagogical approaches.

An informed and accountable critical engagement with this Indigenous literary cum epistemic corpus would redefine the colonial power relations between the knower and the knowledge-producer,⁴ provided one is mindful of "the hubris of the zero point"⁵ and allows oneself to facilitate an "epistemic delinking" from Western knowledges and the "colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo, 2011, pp. xxxiii, 13, 129). Mignolo (2011) propounds that "the task of decolonial thinking and the enactment of the decolonial option in the twenty-first century starts from epistemic delinking: from acts of epistemic disobedience" (p. 139). Extrapolating his argument, it becomes evident that epistemic delinking includes not only the creation of Indigenous literature, but opens up a parallel route to examine and acknowledge alternative decolonial visions of life and modes of knowledge. Decolonial strategies of literary criticism and pedagogy need to explore

⁴ In the context of decoloniality, the "knower" refers to the marginalized individuals or communities with subjective experiences and perspectives that challenge dominant knowledge systems. They possess valuable insights and alternative epistemologies. The "knowledge producer" refers to the institutions and structures that generate and legitimize knowledge. Historically rooted in Western traditions, they have often dismissed or suppressed non-Western knowledge systems.

⁵ Mignolo (2011) coins this phrase to refer to Western ego-politics of knowledge via which it acquires and perpetuates an epistemological hegemony over all other alternative knowledge systems. He calls for an epistemic delinking from Western epistemologies, which would subvert the supremacy and domination of Eurocentric modes of knowing.

and appreciate Indigenous literary creations and knowledges from Indigenized perspectives through a cognizance of vernacular epistemologies.

Thus, the literary stage of decoloniality involves twin actors – the Indigenous literary artists and the responsible literary critics cum scholars of Indigenous literatures – working alongside each other. Their collective efforts to present, understand and celebrate Indigenous presences and their ways of existing, knowing and relating with the world, creates a praxis of decoloniality by manoeuvring a re-existence of Indigenous epistemologies and cultures.

This endeavour also necessitates that scholars acknowledge their positionality within such pursuits. As co-authors of this paper belonging to non-Indigenous ethnicities, our initiatives are directed at decolonizing our own positions through engagements with Northeast Indian Indigenous cultures and literatures, specifically with Khasi animist culture. For the first author, Sampda Swaraj, a female scholar from the ex-colonial Indian subcontinent, my appreciation for the intellectual sophistication and cultural refinement inherent in Khasi animist epistemologies has been enriched by literary and anthropological texts as well as my personal interactions with Khasi Indigenous research scholars. As a non-Indigenous researcher my academic pursuit aims at decolonizing the Indigenous Khasi animist culture against its sabotage by colonialist epistemic violence and the neocolonial forces of modernization of the Khasi community. The second author, Binod Mishra, from the standpoint of a non-Indigenous pedagogue involved in the scholarship of Northeast Indian Indigenous literary arts and education, brings to this research paper his understanding of the decolonial practises which are prerequisites for the inclusion of Indigenous stories into pluralistic multicultural pedagogical spaces. His insights entail approaching Indigenous texts with requisite contextual knowledge about ethnic culture and aesthetics to unravel the subtleties of Indigenous literatures that distinguish them from the Eurocentric canonical texts. Central to his understanding is the necessity to confront the colonial practices of “limited, and perhaps distorted and unbalanced, curriculum about Indigenous histories, cultures, and identities” (Stelmach et al., 2017, as cited in Hanson, 2020, p. 208).

Theorizing *Animist Realism* as a Literary Trope for a Decolonial Shift

The Nigerian author, academic and cultural critic Harry Garuba (1993) coined the term animist realism⁶ to describe the predominant literary technique of Indigenous authors. It accords "a physical, often animate material aspect to what others may consider an

⁶ Garuba coined the term 'animist realism' in his article "Ben Okri: Animist Realism and the Famished Genre" (1993) to discuss the predominant feature of Okri's writings. In his later article, "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society" (2003), he elaborates upon his conceptualization of animist realism, locating it as a prominent characteristic in the works of Indigenous authors from Africa, India and Latin America – Chinua Achebe, Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, Nivi Osundare, to point out a few.

abstract idea" to construct a narrative representation of Indigenous animist worldviews in their creative writings (Garuba, 1993, as cited in Garuba, 2003, p. 274). He emphasizes differentiating animist realism from the critical literary device of magic realism, the former being an independent, non-Eurocentric and, therefore, a more appropriate concept to understand and engage with Indigenous literatures. We can ideate his neologism as a decolonial step towards crafting a new Indigenous literary critical framework, informed by and attuned to, the epistemologies of peoples from across the tropics for the analysis of an Indigenous literary oeuvre that exemplifies a representational mode of animist consciousness.

Before we set forth animist realism as a critical trope for Indigenous decoloniality, let us briefly trace the transformative trajectory of the discourse of animism. Tylor (1871) introduced the concept of animism into anthropological discourse to describe a primitive stage in the evolution of religion. The colonialist rhetoric associated with this older usage of the term portrayed animist communities as primitive, unsophisticated, and childlike in their inability to distinguish between the animate and inanimate. They were deemed subordinate to Western sciences and society which were considered enlightened, knowledgeable, rational, and cultured. The revival of animist discourse as "new animism" by later anthropological theorists (Hallowell, 1960; Harvey, 2006, 2013; Ingold, 2000) divested it of its colonialist polemic to understand it in terms of "a respectful (careful and constructive)" reciprocal and relational engagement of humans with other forms of personhood (animate as well as inanimate) (Harvey, 2006, p. xxiv). New animism challenges the dichotomous tenets of coloniality/modernity⁷ which epitomize colonialist anthropocentric culture as the superlative. It instead proffers a contemplation of diverse (corrective) alternatives to Western capitalist modernity in the form of Indigenous ways of living and respectfully associating with the world, the planet, and the cosmos.

Garuba (2003) describes magic realism as a subspecies of the broader dimension of animist realism. He contends that magic realism, which is primarily concerned with magical and surreal expressions in literature, is too limited a concept in its scope to accommodate and describe the literary compositions underwritten by an animistic conception. The defining and foremost characteristic of animist realism is not a pervasion of the narrative with fantastical encounters and magical episodes, rather, animist realist literature is identified by a portrayal of the animate nature of the world that foregrounds the relational and respectful coexistence of humans with the more-than-human co-inhabitants in a pluralized egalitarian social cosmos. He contemplates a decoloniality of the Indigenous cultural repertoire through animist realism as a three-tiered phenomenon. Firstly, a long-term reiteration of Indigenous animist themes in literature would sediment themselves as the animist unconscious within the

⁷ See Mignolo (2011), he explains that coloniality is constitutive of modernity and vice versa.

community. Following this, the animistic mode of thought is likely to be reproduced in the community's social, political, and economic materialities. This shall result in a re-traditionalization⁸ of the Indigenous communities, which ultimately would culminate in a "re-enchantment of the world". Re-enchantment is understood as the construction of Indigenous alternative modernities, which dismantle the hierarchical authority of Western sciences while incorporating elements of Indigenous cultures within the fissures of Western modernity (2003, pp. 263-267, 284).

Garuba discusses the decolonial potential of the animist realist genre in the context of African post-colonial Indigenous literatures. We widen this purview in our article to include Indian post-colonial Indigenous literatures, given their congruous objective of decolonial re-existence of Indigenous communities who were/are impacted by colonialist and assimilationist nation-states' subjugation. It is crucial to remark that while our discussion draws on Indigenous philosophies and practices, we recognize the heterogeneity, complexity and multiplicity of Indigenous modes of existence and cognition, shaped by the diversity of perspectives, experiences and contexts of Indigenous peoples. Hence although our understandings draw from this broader Indigenous literature, our research remains with Khasi animism and the work of Khasi author Pariat.

Pariat (2012) iterates Garuba's notion of re-traditionalization and re-enchantment through Indigenous animist literatures when she speaks about the composition of her anthology *Boats on Land*, which articulates elements of Indigenous Khasi animist customs and beliefs within the socio-political backdrop of British colonization and Indian post-independence modernity:

Our landscape was marked by folktales – why's the mountain shaped in a certain way, why the cock crows in the morning ... With *Boats on Land*, I've taken these folk stories and interwoven them with the Shillong, Assam and Cherrapunji⁹ of today... (Narayan, 2012)¹⁰

Reconfiguring *Puri*: Animist Belief as (E)co-Relational Coexistence

Dream of the Golden Mahseer is a post-colonial short story set in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, which revolves around the mysterious disappearance of a Khasi war veteran attributed to water spirits (*puri* in Khasi language). The events unfold through the eyes of a witness whose reflective and retrospective narration offers valuable

⁸ Garuba (2003) cites reference to Patrick Chabal's (2009) idea of re-traditionalization of Africa. He describes it as a bilateral encounter of Indigenous traditions with Western modernity – an integration of European scientific modernity and political machinery into the traditional cultural matrix and a concomitant recuperation of traditional cultural beliefs to be assimilated in the Western modernist ethos.

⁹ Cherrapunji, formerly known as Sohra, is a town in East Khasi Hills. It is the traditional capital of the Khasi tribal kingdom.

¹⁰ Cited from an interview of Janice Pariat with Manjula Narayan, the National book editor at *The Hindustan Times*.

insights into the dichotomy between traditional faith and modern scepticism regarding Khasi animist belief in *puri*. The narrative, furthermore, highlights the aftermath of war through the psychosocial trauma of two war veterans – the brothers, Mama Heh and Mama Kyn. As we delve deeper into the story, it presents opportunities for various research perspectives.

Faith versus Fear: The Colonial Erasure

Possession by *puri*, is a prominent feature of Khasi animist society. It is characterised by eccentric behaviour of the possessed, such as frequenting waterbodies at odd hours, incoherent speech, and a state of delirium and physiological weakness. After days of disappearance, when Mama Kyn is found in a frazzled state near the Wah Dieng Doh waterfall, the old housemaid Mena connects this occurrence with a *puri*'s possession of him. She provides a detailed account of the ambiguous and conflicted disposition of *puri*:

She must have followed him home from the river. Once that happens, he'll always be under her spell.... They're beautiful creatures, these *puri*. People say they have waist-long hair and skin the colour of moonlight.... The *mischievous* ones are alright, they don't do much harm.... But the *malicious* ones, they're very *dangerous*.... They lead men to dangerous places, to cliffs and waterfalls, to whirlpools and deep lakes...and will do anything to lure them into the water. (Pariat, 2012, pp. 74-75) [emphasis added]

Before its confluence with Christianity, the Khasi religion perceived human encounters with *puri* as a blurred-reality phenomenon that represents a liminal ontology of coexistence between humans and the other-than-human (Nature/spirit). Colonial missionaries engaged in acts of epistemic violence by demonising and stigmatising Khasi Indigenous beliefs in possession by *puri* and spirit veneration as "vernacular Satan" (Lyngdoh, 2018, p. 94).

The Seng Khasi¹¹ ontology characterizes *puri* with two distinct temperaments: *thongthei*, the malevolent and hostile water spirit which causes tragic consequences such as mental and physical afflictions or death; and, *ñiangriang*, a benevolent spirit guardian which bestows upon humans the gifts of fertility, good health and safety. However, a Christianized interpretation portrays these water spirits as solely malignant and demonic. This discursive shift is articulated using a negatively charged rhetorical term, *ksuid*,¹² in place of the more neutral term, *puri*. Unlike fundamentalist

¹¹ 'Seng Khasis' refer to the non-Christian Khasis who adhere to their traditional Indigenous faith and customs. They have experienced marginalization in terms of their social position and population size within the community.

¹² *Ksuid* is a generic term in Khasi language used to refer to non-human entities that possess hostile and harmful attributes.

Presbyterian converts, the Catholic Khasi converts acculturated certain vernacular beliefs within their Christian tenets (Lyngdoh, 2018), albeit, always in negative contrast with the supreme authority of their Christian God. This accounts for the biased perspective of the old housemaid Mena, a Catholic Khasi, in her description of Mama Kyn's disappearance. Although she gives credence to the Indigenous Khasi belief in *puri*, she characterizes it using exclusively negative markers – "malicious", "mischievous", and "dangerous". While the precolonial Khasi culture believed that an encounter with *puri* could evoke various emotions, including positive ones such as love or beatitude, the Christian colonizers' demonization of *puri* as malevolent (*ksuid*) led to the attribution of fear as the only affective response to them. This fear had two sources: the portrayal of the other-than-human realm as demonic; and the ostracization of vernacular believers by the Christian community. The story reflects this fear through verbal expressions, particularly in conversations about *puri* possession, marked by a whispering tone: "'Lah kem puri,' I heard people whisper around me..." (Pariat, 2012, p. 73).

The narrative features a dichotomy of belief and disbelief among Khasi pertaining to the animist tradition of *puri*. On the one hand, we witness an unwavering faith in the belief of *puri* espoused by characters like Mena and the narrator, Aaron, who privileges cultural beliefs over a rational explanation for Mama Kyn's disappearance: "The rational explanation for his disappearance was that he suffered diabetic hallucinations and walked off a cliff or into a forest, never to return. But I think that's ridiculous" (Pariat, 2012, p. 63). On the other hand, the ideological faction comprising the modernized characters - Uncle Gordon, Aaron's mother, and his ten-year-old nephew – manifest a derisive scepticism to such customs: "...only old people believe in all that", "This is all nonsense" (Pariat, 2012, pp. 74, 75, 77).

These subtleties of the narrative highlight that the twin epiphenomena of colonization – Christianization and modernization of the Khasis – have eroded their Indigenous animist culture by portraying the other-than-human as demonic and fearsome, or implausible and unconvincing. There is a need to address the prevailing misconceptions of the Khasi animist culture and knowledge, steering these perceptions away from the unsettling supernatural and fantastical, and back towards the relational ontology of respectful and interactive cohabitation between humans and other-than-humans. Such an understanding embodies the hallmark of Khasi animist epistemology, which offers a logical and viable Indigenous alternative to Westernized modernity.

In the light of a decolonial revision, we can perceive *ngat puri* (possession by *puri*) in Khasi ontology as a "communicative event" (Lyngdoh, 2018, p. 82) which exemplifies a reciprocal interrelationship between humans and the other-than-human realm (the waterbody and its inhabitants), and their mutual influence on each other's existence.

Revamping Khasi Nymphs: The Fecundity Envoy

Decolonial revision also requires moving away from colonial dualistic thinking. In this regard, we acknowledge the dangers of reductionism when assuming a binary between Western and non-Western epistemologies (Carrier, 1995). We note the multiplicity inherent in Western thinking, as well as the heterogeneity of Indigenous epistemologies. Furthermore, Western scientific paradigms and Indigenous epistemologies are not inherently incompatible; instead, they can be adapted and integrated within each other's contexts. However, such a relation requires openness and understanding. As such, colonial and neocolonial epistemologies remain closed to these possibilities.

In line with this understanding lies Abram's (2013) critique of Western scientific civilizations' inadequate comprehension of Indigenous epistemologies concerning Nature "spirits". They perceive them as "disembodied, supernatural entities, immaterial phantasms conjured by a naïve and primitive imagination" (pp. 127-128). Conditioned by a deterministic and objective conceptualization of nature, the colonizers failed to fathom Khasi animist culture's elaborate affiliation with the water. The Khasi religious cosmology reverses water as a feminine deity, *Ñiaring*.¹³ A philosophy of harmonious relationality and mutual coexistence informs this belief: "Ñiaring made the promise that she would cleanse and purify [the human world] from illnesses that might be caused by beings whom she contains and nurtures. In return, mankind agreed not to be cruel or violate her" (Lyngdoh, 2018, p. 88). The feminine deification of water as *Ñiaring* signifies that Khasi animism bestows immense reverence upon water as the vital life-sustaining force of creation and a purveyor of fertility and fecundity. The motif of the interconnection between water, fertility, and female spirits in Khasi animism is in congruity with the community's matrilineal social organisation tracing back to a female water spirit named lawbei Tynrai.¹⁴ It has been noted that communities who "revere water as a creative force tend to make their water spirits female because they consider water as the source of life and the mother of all things" (Andrews, 2000, cited in Andaya, 2016, p. 245).

In the story, the old housemaid Mena portrays *puri* with "waist-long hair and skin the colour of moonlight" (Pariat, 2012, p. 74), emphasizing their feminine traits.¹⁵ Her belief that *puris* lure men underwater and form a union with them highlights their desire for procreation and human association, reinforcing the connection between water and fertility. Viewed in this context, we may interpret the Khasi animist belief system

¹³ The secret name of Water diety in Indigenous Khasi cosmology.

¹⁴ Ancestral progenitress of the Khasi clan. The term "Khasi," which translates to "born of the revered mother," is a testimony to the clan's matrilineal tradition, with etymological roots in words "Kha" and "Si," meaning "born of" and "ancient mother," respectively.

¹⁵ It is to be noted that water spirits in Khasi animism are not exclusively feminine; in some Khasi communities, they are also believed to have male gender.

surrounding *puri* as a means of venerating and acknowledging water's life-sustaining, procreative, and fertile attribute towards flourishing the community's welfare. Additionally, Uncle Gordon's facetious remark on Mama Kyn's conjugal status: "'No [he is not married]. The only love in his life is kha bah.' A type of local fish" (Pariat, 2012, p. 65) effectively symbolizes a parallel between *kha bah* and a cherished spouse in Mama Kyn's experience. On a profound note, it reinforces the feminine principle of water while also highlighting the love, companionship, and comfort offered to the human psyche by its harmonious association with other species.

This stimulates a fresh interpretation of the narrative, whereby we discern Mama Kyn's ostensible enchantment by *puri* as his attempt to coexist with the world of more-than-human entities, particularly *Ñiaring* (water/river), to alleviate his war-induced psychological trauma.

Ñiaring and its Inhabitants: Khasi Spiritual Tranquilizers

The story's initial exposition, "The elder brother was taken by drink. The younger one by fairies" (Pariat, 2012, p. 63), juxtaposes the similar and unfortunate fates of two brothers who served as British colonial troops in separate wars. The brothers in the story exhibit divergent physiological and sociological symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)¹⁶ induced by their experiences in combat. Mama Heh displays "hyperarousal symptoms", including sleep disturbances, explosive behaviour, and aggression, while Mama Kyn manifests "social avoidance symptoms" (Lindley, 2000, pp. 52-53), withdrawing into isolation and solitude.

Mama Kyn, who often left for his fishing trips to Um lam at dawn, was hardly ever around...[he] didn't talk much.... Unlike Mama Heh, who was usually tipsy and voluble, his younger brother cleaned his fishing equipment in silence, rarely taking his eyes off the reel or the fine tangle of angling bait. (Pariat, 2012, pp. 67, 69)

The divergence in their PTSD symptom expressions underscores the contrast in their responses and coping strategies: one through alcoholism, and the other seeking solace in solitary fishing as a means of communion with nature and non-human life forms.

In the plot of the story, the disappearance of Mama Kyn occurs following his unprecedented narration of the distressing flashback of a shelling during the African War. We may interpret that his recollection triggers the "re-experiencing of phenomenon"¹⁷ (Lindley, 2000, p. 52), exacerbating his trauma. Consequently, he

¹⁶ PTSD, categorized as an anxiety disorder, produces a range of symptoms in individuals who have experienced a traumatic event. It frequently affects war veterans who have endured the psychological tolls of war.

¹⁷ 'Re-experiencing of phenomema', which encompasses a re-living of the phenomena linked to the traumatic event – such as thoughts, images, and dreams, is one among the three symptom clusters of PTSD.

begins to disappear for longer-than-usual periods and eventually vanishes forever to find sanctuary in nature (waterbodies), his only source of comfort and tranquillity. Correspondingly, his posture by the waterbody and his psychomotor retardation: "his arms drawn around his bent knees, his eyes staring into nothingness.... Mama Kyn was lying on the ground, facing the stream, too weak to move" (Pariat, 2012, pp. 73, 75), suggests his psychological distress and worsened trauma. His recollection of the war shelling depicts his doubly traumatised psyche: "We...had faced three days of non-stop shelling. It was August, hot, dry, sand everywhere – in our food, our eyes, our socks, it even coated us like a second skin. So much sand" (Pariat, 2012, p. 70). The psychological trauma of the battleground is coupled with the biological affliction of his parched and exhausted body in a scorching terrain. It subtly explicates the rationale behind his search for solace in the aqueous realms with their inhabitants to alleviate his war-trauma anguish.

Within the narrative, fishing emerges as a symbolic metaphor that underlines nature's potential to provide spiritual solace and therapeutic benefits to humans. Scholars view fly fishing as a "nature-based spirituality" that extends beyond mere fish-catching, offering spiritual companionship, transcendence, solace, and solitude to the human spirit (McGuane, 1999, as cited in Snyder, 2007, p. 914). Mama Kyn, a PTSD sufferer withdrawn from social contact, devotes himself to fishing because, as a "keen fisherman" (Pariat, 2012, p. 65), fishing provides him opportunities for communal contact with fish, enabling him to connect with the natural world. The palpable intimacy Mama Kyn has forged with his fluvial companions is evident in his poetic and picturesque description of fishing experiences:

"Lai Lad, he said, was unpredictable...while Subansiri was complacently calm...Ranikor was the wild child, difficult to navigate and tame, yet her waters were home to the golden mahseer, rare as drops of solid sunshine...I am catching Golden Mahseer. They're all around me, flying through the air, leaping into water. I reach out, one after another...they lie in my hand like pieces of the sun." (Pariat, 2012, pp. 70, 76)

The narrative serves as a critique of the possessive materialism of the colonial West, which spawns belligerent war that seeks to subjugate humanity as well as nature. The Indigenous Khasi lifestyle of peace, communal harmony, and solidarity, as portrayed in the story, sharply contrasts with the militaristic colonial ethos exemplified by Mama Kyn's poignant recollection of the battleground and Mama Heh's war-traumatized psyche. Mama Heh's plea to his peace-loving community: "May you all never know war" (Pariat, 2012, p. 66), serves as a reminder of how colonial conflicts disrupted the serenity and composure of the colonized people, both individually and communally. In the spirit of an Indigenous denunciation of the colonial culture of possessing and

exploiting nature's resources, we interpret Mama Kyn's possession by *puri* (spirits of water) as a metaphor for the subversion of the colonialist anthropocentric view that human beings have dominion over nature. The spirits of nature are said to be incensed by the disturbances caused by human intervention in the ecosystem (Aisher, 2007, p. 479). This animist realist narrative affirms the values of Khasi animist culture, which emphasize the agency of the other-than-human (water, in this case) and its capacity for retributive justice upon human lives. It brings into the picture the ethos of humility and reciprocity as the ethics of agency and relational ontology of human and beyond-human. The above exposition also accentuates the ways in which Indigenous epistemologies of more-than-human agency can inform Western posthumanist and new materialist theories in certain aspects. The Western approaches too often remain restricted by the conventional representational dualism of 'the spectator (researcher)/ the observed (researched)', producing abstract notions of more-than-human agency. In a deeper way, Indigenous Khasi philosophies explore the ethical and reciprocal co-constitutive relations of entangled human/more-than-human agents.

However, this depth of Khasi understanding, is itself under threat from colonial modernity. The concluding section of the story highlights a difficult relationship between Khasi Indigeneity and Khasi modernity. In the wake of the economic development of this community, which Garuba (2003) understands as a project of the renovation and redeployment of colonial modernity (Prakash, 1990, as cited in Garuba, 2003, p. 281), the narrator is disconcerted by the digital natives' incredulity of their traditional knowledge and customs: "What does it take, I think, to have faith in things beyond the ordinary? Age? Childlike wonder? Is it right to cling so fiercely to the world" (Pariat, 2012, p. 78). He assuages his anxiety with the dawning conviction:

I notice how the air fills with cicadas, the trees cast their trembling shadows on the water, the reeds bow in steady reverence. I realise that no one is truly ever gone. All voices are heard in a river's murmuring. (Pariat, 2012, p. 78)

The narrator's perceptive observation suggests that we can reconcile the contraposition between animist Indigeneity and incredulous modernity not through a reductive binary negation but through a complex process of accommodation and negotiation. The current array of Indigenous experiences rejects an "absolutist indigenism" and the dichotomy of exclusivist self/other categorizations of Indigenous and Western cultures. Instead, we need to recognize the "articulated sites of indigeneity" as a diverse, heterogenous, and contested set of cultural and political positions that embrace the hybridity, syncretism, and selective reconfiguration of Indigenous traditions through their entanglements with global forces. This, in turn, can overcome the rigid confrontations between Indigenous beliefs and Westernized modernity, forging "big enough worlds" of cultural coexistence where histories and

cultures intersect, allowing Indigenous cultures to flourish, interconnect, and engage with others while preserving their distinctiveness, sovereignty, and autonomy (Clifford, 2001, pp. 472, 482). Contextual to our narrative analysis, this entails the conscious cultivation of a renewed awareness that enables us to reconceptualize the Indigenous Khasi epistemology of Nature's "spirits" not as intangible and ethereal entities but rather as efficacious and invisible "myriad energies that move in the invisible depths of the sensuous" which manifest as means of expressing humility and fostering renewed solidarity with the more-than-human terrain (Abram, 2013, pp. 127-128).

The tale, *Dream of the Golden Mahseer*, has led us to consider the intricacies of the Indigenous Khasi belief system's fragmentation due to the vicissitudes of Christianization and modernization – the socio-cultural repercussions of British colonization. It is now essential to understand the community's pre-colonial animist belief framework through the lens of decolonial epistemology.

Decolonial Performance: Khasi Shamanism

Through the following narrative analysis, we endeavour a decolonial illumination of the precolonial Khasi animist belief system. This system demonstrates a cosmo-relational ontology that emphasises the universality of soul (*rngiew*) and reciprocal relations between humans and the more-than-human world.

A *Waterfall of Horses*, the prelude tale of Pariat's *Boats on Land*, embodies a decolonial performance by illuminating precolonial Khasi animist knowledges and practises and their significant role in perpetrating anti-colonial rebellion against the settlers. Through the spatiotemporal backdrop of British colonial settlement in the small village of Pomerang in Meghalaya, the narrative presents the ruthless and exploitative demeanour of the colonial soldiers towards the Indigenous Khasi population. Amid the unrest that ensues after the murder of a local farmer, Jymmang, by a company soldier, the village unites to avenge the injustice. Outmatched by the superior colonial weaponry, Nong Kñia, the old shaman of the community, assumes the responsibility of avenging the dead clansman through the esoteric "power of ktien – the word" (Pariat, 2012, p. 12). The intricate subtleties of the narrative suggest the potency of the Khasi shamanistic knowledge of mantra as an instrument for the epistemological decoloniality of the community.

Reciprocal Relationality: The Rngiew Perspective

Lyngdoh (2016) employs the term shaman¹⁸ to denote the "specialists" within the Khasi community who are "believed to be endowed with healing powers, soul flight

¹⁸ The term "shaman" originates from the Tungus people of Siberia, where the shamans are believed to possess special abilities or powers, such as the ability to communicate with spirits, to perform healing rituals, and to enter into a trance state in order to journey into the spirit world.

ability, and intrinsic connection with ancestors" (p. 52). Consonant with Lyngdoh's perspective, we recognize Nong Kñia as a Khasi shaman in the narrative, characterized by analogous powers as elucidated in the account: "He is the bearer of the word. The one who performs our rituals and communicates with the gods" (Pariat, 2012, p. 12). The precolonial Khasi vernacular tradition recognizes shamans as ritual performers and healers who mediate between human and the more-than-human (including spirits, ancestors, and the animate and inanimate world) by undertaking journeys through alternate realities. We can understand the concept of shamanism in Khasi ontology through two key ideas: *rngiew* and *ramia*.

The Indigenous Khasi community espouses an animistic worldview that regards the human realm as inseparable from the other-than-human. Every entity, living or non-living, is imbued with a soul or *rngiew*, which animates them beyond their corporeal embodiment or "*Ka Met*". Moreover, in human beings, the *rngiew* and the "*Ka Met*" are complemented by a third defining element, "*Ka Mynsiem*", denoting one's ethical constitution that defines the person's moral character (Kharmawphlang, 2001, p. 161). Shamans are specially gifted individuals whose *rngiew* empowers them to apprehend, interconnect, and intercede with the *rngiew* of other-than-human beings. They establish this communion through an altered state of consciousness, which enables them to venture into an alternate reality. Their metamorphosed consciousness is achieved in *ramia*, a trance-like state of dreaming, illusion, or hallucination, which permits and enables the *rngiew* of the shamans to forge interconnections with the otherworldly inhabitants. Notably, in the pre-Christianized Khasi vernacular, the shaman's role is not that of a human-centric intermediary; instead, s/he is responsible for establishing mutually beneficial, equitable and reciprocal relations between the human and more-than-human worlds. Khasi shamanism acknowledges the sentience and intentionality of the other-than-human world, expressing gratitude and reverence through propitiations and considerate conduct for its provision of nourishment and sustenance. Therefore, we can more aptly characterize Khasi shamanism as (sham)animistic.

The story's shamanic allusions and episodes radiate an underlying etiquette, reciprocity, and relationality between humans and more-than-human realms. The narrator's mother illuminates Nong Kñia's healing power as a Khasi shaman:

He could heal a person by uttering a mantra. Once, I remember I cut my hand while splitting bamboo...and he held it, and spoke into it, and the bleeding stopped. People would come to him if they had fish bones stuck in their throat – he'd chant the words and rub their neck with oil and ash, and the bone would be gone. (Pariat, 2012, p. 13)

Illness, in Khasi shamanistic belief, materializes from poor etiquette and imbalanced relations between humans and other-than-humans. Vávrová's (2022) insight into

shamanic healing as a spiritual act of creative and dialogic interaction between human and non-human forces resonates strongly with Khasi shamanism: "it is a form of *poiesis* (Lundberg, 2008, as cited in Vávrová, 2022, p. 71) and involves the practice of healing through a detailed and embodied engagement with intertwining relations of the material and spiritual" (p. 71). Khasi shamans recite mantras, which characterize harmonious relationality between humans and non-humans, to restore the relational equilibrium and heal the afflicted. They, thus, emphasize the interconnectedness of humans and more-than-humans as a means of achieving holistic well-being.

In a riveting portrayal of shamanic justice, Jymmang's murder unites the clan members, ancestral spirits, and animals in a collective pursuit of vengeance, again exemplifying their symbiotic interrelationship. The community instils an ominous fear in the colonial troops, ultimately attaining their revenge as the soldiers depart the village, compelled by dread and apprehension after bearing witness to the unnerving spectacle of their horses hurtling over a waterfall as if bewitched:

Soon, the horses grew impossible to control or contain – they reared and neighed, baring their teeth, knocking over their masters, trampling on bodies fallen to the floor. A fierce madness overtook them, their eyes turned white and wild, and, full of great and invisible terror...they made straight for the waterfall, and leaped, soaring over the emptiness and falling into the mist. (Pariat, 2012, pp. 15-16)

The colonial troops' baffled and frenzied response to the shamanic ritual in the narrative is symbolic of the broader European colonisers' inability to comprehend the sophisticated co-existential and co-relational dimensions of Khasi shamanistic practices. Their attempts at cultural translation were constrained by their ideological frameworks of the Christian theological binaries of natural/supernatural and the Enlightenment dichotomies of nature/culture.

Through his shamanic ritual mantras, Nong Kñia's *rngiew* establishes a relational communion with the *rngiew* of the horses and the *syrngi*¹⁹ of the slain kinsman. He invokes the *rngiew* of the horses to request of them a sacramental sacrifice to avenge the murder of their human companion. Sacrifice is always part of a reciprocal relation. The failure to perform a respectful propitiation for the sacrificed horses may be the causative factor behind the desolation of Pomerang, as this resulted in a breach of reciprocity in shamanistic interrelationship with the other-than-human kin. "Pomerang is an abandoned village now with barely any recognisable markers of its past. Only a few stones stand atop a barren hill, a cluster of tea bushes grow wild..." (Pariat, 2012, p. 19). The incident highlights the agency of the more-than-human world, capable of

¹⁹ *Syrngi* is the *rngiew* of the deceased ancestor, that is believed to be vital and powerful in Khasi animist culture.

imposing consequences on humans for violating the ethical code of reciprocity and humility in inter-species and inter-elemental relationality.

Ka Ktien: Significance of the Spoken Word in Khasi

Furthering the argument from a decolonial perspective, we now explore the salience of the spoken word, termed *ka ktien* or *ktien*, in Khasi shamanic culture. The subsequent discussion will also highlight the pressing need for epistemological decoloniality of *ka ktien* heritage in response to the reductionist tendencies of colonial-imposed Khasi literacy.

In the prologue to the story *A Waterfall of Horses*, Pariat accentuates the crucial significance accorded to *ktien* in the Khasi cultural milieu:

How do I explain the word? Ka ktien.... We, who had no letters with which to etch our history, have married our words to music, to mantras, that we repeat until lines grow old and wither and fade away. (2012, p. 3)

Lyngdoh (2016) apprises that the importance of *ktien* in Khasi culture is rooted in its pre-literate religious ontology. The Indigenous Khasi religion upholds the vernacular belief that communication with the other-than-human world – including the Supreme Being²⁰ – is conducted through a covenant ritual. This ritual involves a verbal argument conducted with profound reverence and strict adherence to the divine laws prescribed by the Supreme Being through an oral covenant called *jutang*²¹ in Khasi.

Nong Kñia's iterative assertions pertaining to the potency of Khasi incantation legacy: "...we can fight them with words...we have one weapon, poor as it may seem, the power of *ktien* – the word.... We won't strike the men.... There are other ways to render them powerless" (Pariat, 2012, pp. 11-12), signifies its twinned approach. Firstly, within the narrative, it takes the form of a shamanic ritual mantra that eventuates anti-colonial resistance against colonial troops. Secondly, in the Khasi community, it catalyses epistemological decolonial re-existence of Khasi animist knowledges and customs.

The narrative foregrounds Indigenous Khasi epistemology of mantras, performed during shamanic rituals to establish communicability and relationality with the more-than-human word. It transpires as a step towards cognitive justice by debunking the modern rationalist Western academic discourse that distorts the understanding of

²⁰ Prior to its convergence with Christianity, the Indigenous Khasi religion embraced a belief in the Supreme Being, *U Blei*, and established connections with the divine through traditional rituals and ceremonies.

²¹ *Jutang* refers to an oral covenant in Indigenous Khasi communities, that comprises laws laid down by their ancestors and orally conveyed by God at the time of creation. It forms a covenant for communication of humans with the Supreme Being and the more-than-human realm.

mantras by mislabelling them as "spells" or instances of "magical" language. This rhetoric tends to marginalize and overlook Indigenous epistemologies as illegitimate, non-scholarly, and at odds with religious and rational discourses (Burchett, 2008, p. 837).

In our effort to perform a decolonial praxis in which to explore mantra as an erudite and sophisticated epistemology – one that is practiced by many Indigenous peoples of the tropics – we reference the exposition of Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya (2003), an eminent Indian philosopher of scientific spirituality, to illuminate the subject. He describes mantra as an energy-based spiritual tool which linguistically "implies a specific structure of sonic patterns – coded in syllables and vowels" that makes it a powerful carrier of the cosmic energy of sound. The particular arrangement of syllables and their associated phonemes in the mantras contain activators of the cosmic energy of "śabda"²² and "nāda"²³, which manifest as powerful sonic energy upon the recitation of mantras (Acharya, 2003, p. 3). Further, Shakta spirituality, an Indian philosophy, propounds that energy (called Shakti in Sanskrit) serves as a mediating link between matter and consciousness, transcending the separation between human and non-human vital forces (Chakraborty & Mukhopadhyay, 2022, pp. 60-61). It thus implies that mantras performed during Khasi shamanic rituals allow the *rngiew* of the shaman to form connections with the other-than-human world by releasing sonic and cosmic energies through their rhythmic enunciation. Such an understanding allows for the epistemological decoloniality of Khasi shamanic mantras by delinking mantric practice from reductionist colonial thinking and recognising their intricate epistemological frameworks of interconnectedness. Furthermore, this understanding also rejects the "ocularcentrism" of Western epistemological approaches and acknowledges alternative Indigenous sensory (aural and vocal) modes to engage with the spiritual being of the more-than-human world (Howes, 2003; Pandya, 1990; Aluli-Meyer, 2001, as cited in Chao & Enari, 2021, p. 40).

Pariat (2012) contends that the colonizers' imposition of a literary script for Khasi languages constituted yet another transgression against the Khasi endemic culture and its reverence for oral tradition. Ostensibly a benevolent gesture, it was, in reality, a colonial manoeuvre aimed at religious conversion and essentialization of the Khasi. Additionally, the insufficiency of a written script to capture the subtleties of Khasi oral heritage accelerated the colonial erasure of oral traditions. The prologue to the story serves as a reminder of the pre-eminence of sound and utterance attached to *ktien*, which is beyond its scripting:

Say it. Out loud. Ka ktien.... For I mean not what's bound by paper. Once printed, the word is feeble and carries little power. It wrestles with ink

²² Acharya describes *śabda* as the eternal element of cosmic sound.

²³ According to Acharya, *nāda* is the rhythmic flow of eternal musical sound.

and typography and margins, struggling to be what it was originally. Spoken. Unwritten, unrecorded. (Pariat, 2012, p. 3)

The paper-and-ink language is ineffectual in transcribing the unfathomable power of *ktien*, manifested not from its linguistic structure or etymological meaning but from the confluence of vibrant sonic energy and lively agency. In the story, the narrator's mother aptly conveys the essence of *ktien* as an omniscient power that transcends beyond a disembodied and abstract arrangement of alphabets:

I explained to her that we have no need for these things – books, and letters, and writing – and that everything we know about the world is in the sound of our words, *ki ktien*. It has the power to do good. (Pariat, 2012, p. 12)

The *ktien* is an assemblage that emerges through intra-action. It necessitates experiential engagements through relational encounters – that of humans with cosmic energy and earthly beings – rather than reproduction through a reductionist linguistic representation.

The disproportionate emphasis placed on language and literacy within the Western colonial epistemological frameworks leads to a neglect of Indigenous animist auricular cultures and materialities. Therefore, a decolonial re-existence of Indigenous Khasi epistemologies necessitates a revival of *ktien* – the fountainhead of a Khasi verbal vernacular heritage of songs, stories, and rituals, that transmit Indigenous memory, wisdom, and philosophy configuring human existence in relation with the more-than-human.

Culmination and Beyond: Navigating Non-Colonial Coexistence

Through a critical analysis of these two stories, we discover that Indigenous cultures are subjected to an imposed paradoxical position. Indigenous scholars are expected to transcribe their cultural beliefs in an unadulterated manner, however, when they do so, they barely find a place in the neocolonial Western academic space; alternately, if they align/adjust the representation of their beliefs and culture in order to find academic representation and recognition, they fall prey to colonial modernist ideals of binaries and hegemony which disjuncts them from the cornerstone of their Indigenous philosophies. In this double bind, Indigenous knowledges are too often restricted to finding acknowledgement within the sphere of Indigenous communal transmission. This paradoxical state makes Indigenous intellectuals vulnerable to accusations of inauthenticity and incapacity to express genuine Indigenous perspectives. Mitigating this dichotomy necessitates a nuanced approach that involves delinking with the hegemony of Western epistemologies to acknowledge the Indigenous knowledge systems through innovative and contemporary modes of interpretation, expression,

and transmission. Our article contributes to this agenda by engaging with Indigenous Khasi literary works, in the form of the two stories, to explore the intricacies of Khasi animist epistemologies as they encounter the convergence and amalgamation of colonial Christianity, and neocolonial modernity. We set forth a praxis of epistemological decoloniality of Khasi animist ontologies by reinterpreting them beyond colonial (mis)interpretations of being superstitious and non-scholarly, to unveil their characteristic hallmarks that promulgate a philosophy of relational and reciprocal interrelatedness between the human and more-than-human.

Mignolo and Walsh (2018) caution that decoloniality is an unfinished project, while coloniality is “in a constant process of rearrangement and production” (p. 66). This observation foretells the subsequent crucial step of decoloniality: cultivating and fostering a decolonial integration and coexistence of Indigenous and Western knowledge paradigms in an evolving epistemological landscape. The imminent obligation towards this task is to summon a decolonial emancipation of knowledge from the “imperialist-capitalist logic” of disciplinarity (Chao & Enari, 2021, p. 44). The political and (neo)colonial biases of academic disciplinarity have often subjugated Indigenous animist epistemologies to a subordinate position vis-à-vis Western paradigms of posthumanism and new materialism – such as Vital Materialism and Agential Realism – despite the fact that the pioneering discoveries of these theories regarding the post-anthropocentric agency of polyphonic earth and its creatures are frequently pre-existent in tropical Indigenous ontologies, including Khasi animism. It thus becomes imperative to facilitate inter-theoretical interactions and mutual acknowledgement between these distinct epistemologies, sharing akin interests and foundations, as they complement and enrich each other’s perspectives.

To illustrate, our discussion in this article points out how Indigenous Khasi animist perspectives of more-than-human agency enhance beyond-human agent ontologies of Vital Materialism and Agential Realism. Khasi animism introduces a performative paradigm that emphasizes an inter-species and inter-elemental relational ethic of inclusivity, participation, kinship, and humility, that moves beyond (or moves deeper into) the textocentric and representational epistemic conceptualizations of the new materialist-posthumanist articulations of more-than-human agency. Consequently, Indigenous animism creates a space for contemplation and theorization not merely about the more-than-human world, but – more importantly – with it.

Thus, the next challenge of epistemological decolonization lies in a diligent and relentless effort to achieve mutual recognition, constructive engagement, and unfettered exchange between these divergent genealogies of thought while eschewing the perils of reductionism or juxtaposition. This quest holds the promise of engendering a paradigmatic shift towards a non-colonial epistemological vista of careful cross-cultural hybridization of knowledge.

References

- Abram, D. (2013). The invisibles: Toward a phenomenology of the spirits. In G. Harvey (Ed.), *The handbook of contemporary animism* (pp. 124-133). Routledge.
- Acharya, P. S. S. (2003). *Eternity of sound and the science of mantras: Sabda Brahm: mantra vijnana*. (R. Joshi, Trans.). Yugantar Chetna Press.
- Andaya, B. W. (2016). Rivers, oceans, and spirits: Water cosmologies, gender, and religious change in Southeast Asia. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 4, 239-263. <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2016.2>
- Barad, K. M. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12101zq>
- Bareh, H. (1964). *The history and culture of the Khasi people*. [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Gauhati
- Benitez, C. J. R., & Lundberg, A. (2022). Tropical Materialisms: Toward Decolonial Poetics, Practices and Possibilities. *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, 21(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.21.2.2022.3929>
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391623>
- Burchett, P. (2008). The 'magical' language of mantra. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 76(4), 807-843. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfn089>
- Carrier, J. (1995). *Occidentalism: Images of the West*. Oxford University Press.
- Chakraborty, S., & Mukhopadhyay, A. (2022). Spiritual materialism/ material spiritualism: Shakta tantric approaches to matter. *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, 21(2), 43-64. <https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.21.2.2022.3897>
- Chao, S., & Enari, D. (2021). Decolonising climate change: A call for beyond-human imaginaries and knowledge generation. *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, 20(2), 32–54. <https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.20.2.2021.3796>
- Clifford, J. (2001). Indigenous articulations. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 13(2), 467-507. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2001.0046>
- Devy, G. N. (Ed.). (2021). *Environment and belief systems*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367814274>
- Escobar, A. (2007). Worlds and knowledges otherwise: The Latin American modernity/coloniality research program. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 179-210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162506>
- Garuba, H. (1993, March 13). Ben Okri: Animist realism and the famished genre. *The Guardian*, p. 23.
- Garuba, H. (2003). Explorations in animist materialism: Notes on reading/writing African literature, culture, and society. *Public Culture*, 15(2), 261-285. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-2-261>
- Grosfoguel, R. (2011). Decolonizing post-colonial studies and paradigms of political-economy: Transmodernity, decolonial thinking, and global coloniality. *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(1), 1-38. <https://doi.org/10.5070/T411000004>
- Hallowell, A. I. (1960). Ojibwa ontology, behavior, and world view. In S. Diamond (Ed.), *Culture in history: Essays in honor of Paul Radin* (pp. 19-52). Columbia University Press. Reprinted in G. Harvey (Ed.) (2002), *Readings in Indigenous religions* (pp. 18-49). Continuum.
- Hanson, A. J. (2020). Teaching Indigenous literatures for decolonization: Challenging learning, learning to challenge. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 66(2), 207-222.
- Harvey, G. (2006). *Animism: Respecting the living world*. Columbia University Press.

- Harvey, G. (Ed.). (2013). *The handbook of contemporary animism*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315728964>
- Ingold, T. (2000). *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling, and skill*. Routledge.
- Kharmawphlang, D. (2000/2001). In search of Tigermen: The were-tiger tradition of the Khasis. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 27/28(4/1), 160-176.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23005708>
- Lindley, S. E., Carlson, E., & Sheikh, J. (2000). Psychotic symptoms in posttraumatic stress disorder. *CNS Spectrums*, 5(9), 51-57. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1092852900021659>
- Lyngdoh, M. (2016). *Transformation, tradition, and lived realities: Vernacular belief worlds of the Khasis of Northeastern India*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Tartu]. University of Tartu Press.
- Lyngdoh, M. (2018). Water spirit possession among the Khasis: Representation of fear through narratives. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, 49(3-4), 81-102.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2011). *The darker side of western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394501>
- Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371779>
- Narayan, M. (2012, October 6). Review: Boats on land. *The Hindustan Times*.
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/review-boats-on-land/story-allPGI2mBwg6QCOP11tP5L.html>
- Pariat, J. (2012). *Boats on land: A collection of short stories*. Penguin Random House India.
- Pariat, J. (2021, July 4). *Decolonising creative writing: It's about not conforming to techniques of the western canon*. Scroll.in.
<https://scroll.in/article/999215/decolonising-creative-writing-its-about-not-conforming-to-techniques-of-the-western-canon>
- Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1(3), 533-580. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005>
- Santos, B. de S. (2016). Epistemologies of the South and the future. *From the European South*, 1, 17-29.
- Shiva, V. (1993). *Monocultures of the mind: Perspectives on biodiversity and biotechnology*. Zed Books.
- Snyder, S. (2007). New streams of religion: Fly-fishing as a lived religion of nature. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 75(4), 896-922.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40005968>
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.
- Tylor, E. B. (1871/1977). *Primitive Culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, language, art, and custom* (vol. 1). John Murray.
- Vávrová, D. (2022). Graun Em Pulap Long Pipia: Rubbish, sorcery, and spiritual healing, Papua New Guinea. *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, 21(2), 65–76. <https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.21.2.2022.3884>

Acknowledgements

We extend our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable insights and constructive feedback which significantly contributed to refining and strengthening the argumentation of this paper. We also express our acknowledgements for the copyeditor's efforts in enhancing the overall quality of this paper by ensuring its clarity and coherence.

Sampda Swaraj is a full-time PhD Scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee. Her research interests encompass Indian Indigenous literature, New Animist philosophy, Critical Posthumanism and Environmental Humanities. She has presented papers at several international seminars and conferences. Currently, her research is centred on Indigenous animist realist literature from the Northeastern states of India. As a member of a non-Indigenous ethnic background, she deeply values and embraces a commitment to decolonial praxis in her research. Her passion lies in the realms of cultural and literary studies that actively challenge and subvert (neo)colonial divisions to recognize the intricate ecological relationality between humans and the more-than-human world.

Binod Mishra is a Professor of English at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee. His extensive scholarly contributions to critical literature are well-known, with several published papers in journals of national and international renown. His critical scholarship is complemented by his poetic flair, earning him numerous prestigious awards, including the Citation of the Brightest Honour by the International Sufi Centre, Bangalore, 2020. Belonging to a non-Indigenous ethnic background, his scholarly pursuits revolve around creating and nurturing decolonial paradigms of pluralistic and inclusive academic spaces. His endeavours have garnered recognition, being listed among the top 25 Indian English Poets for their contribution to fostering communal harmony and cosmic humanism. This accolade further underscores his dedication to literary creativity that promotes social harmony and empathy.