

## CHAPTER-3

### Writing Back to the Centre: Localizing Praxis and Performance

This chapter engages with the issue of the marginal people's struggle for producing counter-narratives to the hegemonic forces of the centre, through localizing praxes and performances. I am borrowing the concept of "writing back" from Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back*, where these three Australian critics have discussed the colonized people's act of producing counter-narratives to the colonial centre. While referring to the subversive strategies of the postcolonial literatures, they say:

A characteristic of dominated literatures is an inevitable tendency towards subversion, and a study of the subversive strategies employed by post-colonial writers would reveal both the configuration of domination and the imaginative and the creative responses to this condition. Directly and indirectly, in Salman Rushdie's phrase, the 'Empire Writes Back' to the imperial 'centre', not only through nationalist assertion, proclaiming itself central and self-determining, but even more radically by questioning the issues of European and British metaphysics, challenging the world-view that can polarize centre and periphery in first place. (32)

Whereas Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin have used the concept of writing back in relation to postcolonial writers' strategies of self-assertion, I am using the concept in relation to the nation-state's centre and the regional peripheries. Moreover, I am not using the concept of writing back in a limited sense of countering the political and cultural centre of a nation; I am extending it to all forms of authoritative system within a society. Amit Chaudhuri, Arundhati Roy, Siddhartha Deb and Mamang Dai have shown such counter-narratives in their novels and have found the local as a powerful means of resisting various hegemonic suppressions. The centre-periphery conflict appears in different dimensions in these novels: in Mamang Dai and Siddhartha Deb's novels it is the

peripheral status of the North-East which conditions the production of counter-narratives to the centre; in Arundhati Roy and Amit Chaudhuri's novels the resistance to the established system or order of things appears in the form of cultural and linguistic experiment, the consciousness that local cultures can never be appropriated by any forms of monoculture. The necessity to "write" against the centre or to create a narrative of resistance emerges in a very peculiar situation in case of the North-East. The North-East remains in the periphery of the Indian nation-state; it receives little systemic attention from the centre. It remains a space which is illegible in the nation's psychological map. Sanjib Baruah says: "Deaths, injuries, and humiliations resulting from 'insurgencies' and 'counter-insurgency operations', as well as the hidden hurt that citizens quietly endure have become a part of the texture of everyday life in the region" (3). The "hidden hurt" that Baruah has mentioned here is the centre's treatment of the region from the time of Independence. After the country's decolonization the people from the North-East continued to remain an "other" in the plane of the newly formed Indian nation-state. They remained outsiders in the political and cultural landscape of the mainland during the time of Independence and it is the present political reality of the region. Prasenjit Biswas and Chandan Suklabaidya comment on the peripheral status of the North-Eastern people: "As decolonized subjects, they now share the vision of 'India' as Europe's Other and 'Europe' as India's Other, while they position themselves as the Other of both, with respect to their otherness from both 'Europe' and 'India'" (53). This situation is more applicable to the tribal people from the region, who always resist the centre's politics of appropriation. The cultural distinctiveness of the tribals has created a gap between the hills and the plains, the tribals and the non-tribals. Biswas and Suklabaidya see the voice of the North-East as unheard by the nation-state's centre. They say:

The Cartesian-instrumental idea of development that derives its objective value from reducing the 'observed subject' into a separable, quantifiable and disjointed means for attaining certain rational ends cannot really take into account the non-measurable, invisible and subjective aspects historically and culturally embedded multitudes of North-East India, specified by their sense of place and belonging. They further give rise to praxis of holistic notion, of human-nature relationship that is irreducible in its wisdom which remains as an unheard voice in a modern

and postmodern nation space of India. Colonial and post-colonial nation-states have simply bypassed these stateless societies from the processes of cultural and political recognition, although they have been made a part of the constitutional and institutional framework of India. (20)

Biswas and Suklabaidya point out that the sense of inhabiting a distinct space has continued to haunt both the tribal people of the region and the centre's perception of them. Such phenomena ultimately condition the impossibility of bridging the gap between the marginal status of the North-Eastern tribal states and the mainland. The tribal people's constant fear of their ethnic identity being contaminated by outside forces ultimately led to the necessity of redefining themselves and their cultural heritage through various local praxes and performances. It is worth-mentioning that certain terms used for defining the tribal people of the region originated from the derogatory perception of them by the people from the plains and the mainland. In Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* it has been stated that the origin of the word "Abor" (another word to refer to the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh) lies in the negative perception of the people from the plains of Assam: "The word conveyed something that meant both 'barbarous' and 'independent' in Assamese" (26). So it becomes evident that even the people from the plains in the North-East perceive the tribal people of the hill states negatively; it is a reality which has made the need for producing a counter-narrative more urgent. On the other hand, in Arundhati Roy's novel it is the binary between the "small" and the "big" forces of the society which conditions the resistant narratives. The twins in the novel twist the English language to counter the authoritative system of both family and society. They and their mother Ammu stand for the possibility of transgression and resistance. The established order of things, both in the domestic and the social dimension, have been challenged by the twins and Ammu. In Amit Chaudhuri's novels the local culture of Bengal is valorized. Chaudhuri is also aware that culture is a dynamic phenomenon through which the life-philosophy of a community can be perceived. For him the local world can be conceptualized through the language and culture performed in the local space.

Before analyzing the novels of the four writers under discussion in the light of their resistance to any authoritative suppression, it is important to see how many thinkers have engaged with the issue from diverse perspectives. Russell A. Potter focuses on the issue of the hegemonic culture in the United States and presents hip-hop as a powerful mode of resistance to such forces. While talking about bourgeois American culture, he says that history is repressed in such cultural backdrop. Potter says:

Much of suburban America presents a landscape singularly devoid of history; everything is new or at least remodeled. The educational process does little to foreground historical consciousness; for the most part, the past is presented as an arbitrary series of dates and events, with little evident relevance to the present. Even and especially when it comes to contemporary events, suburbia retains a thick buffer of reference . . . (464)

Potter points out this lack of interest in history as a part of bourgeois American culture. He talks about the experience of the African-Americans in this context, and finds the history of the African-American cultures to be the most astonishing and empowering account of resistance. He traces in the history of the African-American cultures certain strategies which form and sustain a culture against the dominant or hegemonic culture. He says that the African-American cultures have mobilized some “cultures of the *found*, the *revalued*, the *used*”, through a network of localized sites and nomadic incursions (458). Potter traces the strategies of remaking and revaluation in hip-hop and says that it uses the African-American tradition of signifying. He comments that it becomes a performance where passive reception is not possible. The hip-hop audiences do not merely listen, it is not merely a form of music; hip-hop is a cultural recycling centre, a social heterolect, a field of contest and a form of psychological warfare (458). Potter also refers to the importance of history in the act of resistance to the hegemonic American culture, says that history is a potential form of resistance. The past is usually represented as an arbitrary series of dates and events and a process of de-historicization follows. In such contexts hip-hop may serve as a vehicle for telling the repressed histories of the African-American culture. Potter says: “In the face of this homogenized, safely-sealed

version of history, hip-hop brings back the musical past that many white and middle-class listeners have conventionally forgotten” (465).

Tim Prentki engages with the same issues highlighted by Potter in the context of the African-American cultures. Prentki particularly discusses the neo-colonial process which operates under the label of globalization and tries to erase cultural diversities and creates in turn a globalized monoculture. Prentki tries to define cultural invasion as a significant mode of colonial discourse, which is even more powerful than military invasion. He says that often cultural resistance culminates in “a new found confidence in indigenous knowledge-system; from the over-determinations of the trans-national corporations to the self-determination of the local community” (164). Prentki emphasizes the need to maintain a dynamic cultural life in a constant process of dialogue and to revive the lost histories of local communities. He says: “If there is to be life after McDonald’s, it is to be sought among those indigenous cultures, which develop the means of survival without losing all contact with their histories, myths and former identities” (164). Although Prentki discusses the hybridization and negotiation of cultures by combining local elements of performance culture with the elements of globalized practices, he also expresses suspicion regarding the damage of the marginal culture by external cultures. His chief focus is on globalization’s creation of a monoculture, yet some of the issues raised by him in relation to resistant cultures can be applied to all marginal culture under hegemonic suppression.

Amit Chaudhuri, Arundhati Roy, Siddhartha Deb and Mamang Dai – all of them have created a local world in their novels through various aesthetic or narrative means. If some have deployed language as a mode of localizing performance, some have chosen local myths and cultures as a trope for resisting hegemonic forces. In this context Toni Morrison’s comment on the function of the artist can be cited. She says: “an artist could be genuinely representative *of* the tribe and *in* it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it” (302). As Potter has focused on the African-American cultures and hip-hop as a resisting mode of cultural practice, Morrison discusses the political nature of art and literature and the basic features of the African-American literature or Black art. Morrison, while discussing how an individual becomes

a part of the community, refers to an interesting rite found in the Black churches. Sometimes in the Black churches people shout out of grief in order to offer a personal statement. It is done out of trust for the community and within the context of the community. The shouter performs some rite that is extremely subjective and the other people performing as the community protect that person. For Morrison it is an example of a public and a private expression going on at the same time. Apart from mentioning this interesting rite found in the Black churches which serves as a medium of assimilating the individual to the community, Morrison also comments on the genre of the novel as a medium to accomplish certain very strong functions. A novel should have something so that it can enlighten, can open the door and point the way. The Black art has both oral and print literature. The stories, as a consequence, can be read in silence and one can hear them as well. In Black art, Morrison states, the primary importance is given to the effective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience. She says: “To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken – to have the reader *feel* the narrator without identifying that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book – is what’s important” (304). She says that there should be the presence of a chorus, addressing the community or the reader at large, community on the action as it goes ahead. As a whole, in the African-American writing, the basic features are the presence of an oral quality, the participation of the reader and the presence of the chorus. Morrison also talks about the presence of an ancestor, an elder – some timeless people – whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective. The ancestors or the timeless people also provide certain kinds of wisdom. In Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam*, the character of Hoxo and the shaman can be identified as such ancestors or timeless people. The chapter titled “songs of the rhapsodist” focuses on the small histories, myths and memories of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh. The narrator, who witnesses the community’s collective memory being enacted in various myths and cultural performances, comments: “myth and memory would be reborn in the song of the ponung dancers” (50). The ponung dancers are led by the shaman and the rhapsodist. The narrator and her friend are the audience who watch the dance of the ponung dancers and listen to the narrative of the rhapsodist. The ponung dancers arrive at the crucial point in the narration of their history where they “travel the road”, which metaphorically signifies the collective journey of the community, their cultural legacy

found in the form of myths and rituals being handed over to the next generations, and a process of cultural continuation. The narrator defines the shaman as “a shadow man leaping up larger than life”, and as a guardian of the stories and rhapsodies of time and destiny (55). He remembers the myths of the community and restores them to life. The act of remembering the stories of the past and performing them before the audience is a kind of praxis which preserves the local culture, myths and memories and ties the individual to the community and to the roots. Morrison’s reference to the shouter in a Black church as someone who involves the entire community of Black people in some kind of collective performance can appropriately be applied to the roles of Hoxo and the shaman in Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam*. The Adi community undertakes a collective journey of telling and retelling the community’s stories and legends, and it enables them to preserve these tales in their collective memory. Morrison’s identification of the Black shouter with the African people’s sense of solidarity, Potter’s reference to hip-hop in the context of African-American cultures, Prentki’s emphasis on the cultural strategies for resisting globalized monoculture – all are applicable to Dai’s representation of the tribal people’s struggle for retaining their ethnic culture and identity. The chapter titled “songs of the rhapsodist” talks about the rhapsodist and his followers: “Softly, softly, they must follow this terrible journey” (51). It is a terrible journey because it involves the service of preserving the community’s ethnic identity and culture. The rhapsodist or the shaman guards the stories and the rhapsodies of time and destiny, with the collective support of the community. Dai in this novel draws an equivalence between travelling the road and the act of guarding memory, because the Adi community preserves its myths and memories through a continuous process of memorizing and retelling them, which can be termed as a localizing praxis for sticking to the roots. The shaman sings of “the beginning of the world; of the sword of five metals that ignited the bonfire of the villages. He has sung of the story of his brother, the one who killed a man and became a martyr; the story of the hawk woman who defied a community to live in a house by the river” (55). These are the stories which keep the community’s life-world alive, and fight back the outside forces which try to contaminate the tribal people’s unique history and cultural resources. In tribal cultures the spoken word serves as a strong medium of transmitting its wisdom to the next generations. The ideals and virtues of the community are transmitted through chanted words, as shown in the performance of the rhapsodist in Dai’s novel. Moreover, the wise people like Hoxo in the novel also function as the

carrier of the community's histories and knowledges which are handed over to the next generation through an oral tradition. The chapter titled "the case of the travelling vessel" in *The Legends of Pensam* talks about a mysterious vessel which is owned by the Lotang family of the Migu clan. This fabulous vessel is called a "danki". The vessel becomes an object of pride and admiration for the family that owns it, because it is something they have inherited from their forefathers, although the origin of the vessel is not known to anybody of the entire clan. The story of the vessel is as thrilling as its inheritance: the eldest son of the family finds that the vessel is always filled with moist leaves and twigs which indicate that it travels in the hills, even in the areas far away from the village. When the vessel is with the Lotang family the entire Migu clan becomes prosperous, and the danki comes "to be cherished as an auspicious gift from the gods" (63). The vessel stands as a symbol of good fortune for the clan and one day. Once the vessel splits into two pieces as a consequence of an earthquake and disappears after some days. Consequently the Migu clan's fortune starts to decline. After the disappearance of the vessel the clan decides to perform a ritual, which includes the collection of a hive of wild ants from the tallest tree of the forest. For the Migu clan the tree is a symbol of strength and the ants symbolize fertility and birth of many sons (63). The story of the vessel ends with the statement made by the old headman of a village that such are "the histories recorded by our shamans and rhapsodists" (65). It can be said that the fabulous vessel which the Migu clan inherited and lost with the passage of time can be a metaphor of a community's precious legacies. So when the clan lost it they felt that it was urgent to perform a ritual associated with fertility and prosperity. The local cultural practices thus involve the collective effort of the community to preserve their legacies, which guard the fortune of the entire community. The loss of the vessel was a kind of lesson for the Migu clan that it is necessary to perform certain rituals from time to time to drive away misfortunes. I want to quote here the definition of "ethnic group" given by Richard Schermerhorn. Schermerhorn says:

Each society in the modern world contains subsections or sub systems more or less distinct from the rest of the population. The most fitting generic term to designate this fraction of the whole is 'ethnic group'. An ethnic group is defined here as a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common



ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. (17)

The Adi community as represented in Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is an ethnic group which strives to restore its common ancestry and the memories of its shared historical past, because the identity and "peoplehood" of the community is dependent on the preservation of these ancestry and memories. Schermerhorn also defines "dominant group". He says:

Dominant group signifies that collectivity within a society which has preeminent authority to function both as guardians and sustainers of the controlling value system, and as prime allocator of rewards in the society. It may be a group of greater or lesser extensity, i.e., a restricted elite, incumbents of a government apparatus, an ethnic group, a temporary or permanent coalition of interest groups, or a majority. (17)

In the context of Dai's novel the "dominant group" does not function through any majority group or government apparatus, but exists in the form of external influences which may contaminate the local culture of the Adi community. The tribal people in Dai's novel are afraid of outsiders and they are in a constant anxiety of retaining their ethnic purity and cultural legacy.

The character of Nenem in *The Legends of Pensam* becomes a metaphor of the community's spirit. She refuses to leave her roots, her community and her tribal land while rejecting the idea of going to a foreign land with her lover David. She marries a man from her own community and remains devoted to her roots. It is said that together they "would raise a family, guard their land and live among their people observing the ancient customs of their clan" (120). The section titled "scent of the orange blossom" in the novel presents a performance, in the beginning of which an old man announces that it is all about preserving their roots, because already the past is being cast away by many young people (114). It can be mentioned here that "Khampti", another tribe from Arunachal Pradesh, etymologically means sticking to the roots. The tribal people of the

region regard themselves as different from the people of the outer world and perceive the outsiders with suspicion. The narrator, who is from the tribal land and community but does not stay there, feels that even after the absence of hundred years, she would recognize the land again, even if no record survives. The chapter “songs of the rhapsodist” presents the history of a British political officer named Noel Williamson. It is said that this man came to the territory in 1911 on a mission to explore the course of the river Siang. An Adi man killed Williamson and the reason was ambiguous, some explanations being communication gap, a possible invasion and the consequent destruction of the tribal community’s village, and the story that the victim insulted a local tribal man. But the most plausible among these explanations was the story of a scandal: “a story of seduction and romance between a local woman and another white man following the course of the river” (48). It is stated that perhaps it was the memory of that event, which continued to haunt the region, and caused the murder of Noel Williamson. The narrator says that everything is conjecture, yet the possibility cannot be denied that perhaps the community’s memory of a past assault caused their suspicion and hatred towards another outsider. The tribal people’s constant fear of outside invasion and contamination results in violence and aggression towards such forces. The murder of Noel Williamson is the outcome of such psychological phenomena. During the colonial period the British and other outsiders failed to deal sensitively with the psychology of the tribal people in the North-East, and in the periods following the country’s decolonization continued to see the same reception from the centre. The result is the tribal people’s resistance to all forms of intrusion and policies of appropriation from the centre. Dai’s latest novel *The Black Hill* represents the same psychological response of the tribal people to outside intervention. In the context of the desire to preserve the roots, the resistant narratives of a community may unfold in terms of local cultural practices, and sometimes there may be more violent forms of resistance. *The Black Hill* deals with the story of a French missionary named Nicolas Crick who comes to the tribal territory and never goes back to his own country; the novel’s narrative mentions it as the year 1848: “a young French Jesuit priest would soon set out on a journey from an island shore, and never return” (12). The arrival of the priest in the region is seen with suspicion and the consequence is his murder; the exact reason behind the murder, however remains ambiguous like that of Noel Williamson. It is stated that the local people observed that the white men were travelling far and wide in their territory, and they were aided by

people from rival clans and from the plains. The narrative presents Crick's murder in the region as the consequence of many complex political and psychological factors; it becomes clear that the fear of outsiders was the most powerful one working behind the murder: the people of Mebo – a tribal village – said that the outsiders “may conquer the world but they will never take our land” (25). In *The Black Hill* the desire to stick to the roots and to obliterate external elements manifests in violence; in *The Legends of Pensam* this desire mostly culminates in the form of community rituals, performances of local myths and memories. Nevertheless, *The Black Hill* too presents the local cultural praxes and performances. The Mishimi man Kajinsha tells his wife Gimur – an Abor woman – the legend of a couple who was childless. A daughter is born after many rites are performed, but in the fight of man and spirits, the girl is claimed by the spirit of a bird. The girl consoles her parents by promising that every day she will spread her red garment on a rock to prove her presence around them. The promise is followed, but one day the couple finds that the rock is bare. Kajinsha gives a conclusion to this sad story: “So we disappear. Who remembers?” (66). This story of disappearance of the daughter resembles the story of disappearance of the fabulous vessel in *The Legends of Pensam*. It is signified that an inheritance may get lost with the passage of time, and it demands a constant ritual of memorization and redefinition. Nago – an Abor woman – is shown as remembering some layered memories of the past: “Nago would suddenly start chanting and recount past events and sometimes, looking at someone's face, she would pounce on an ailment that the person was suffering from, or tell of some hidden sorrow so vividly that her words had the nature of prediction and her insight the power of a visionary” (170). The village miri performs rituals to remove such spells. But Gimur remembers that there was another woman named Auli who, in her lucid moments too could “see” things that no one could interpret. Such powers possessed by some special people may signify the power of reviving specific memories which help in retelling the past. Nago's sudden insights and powers are rooted in her past, which signifies that the inheritance of the past bears hidden powers. The Adi community's performances of memorizing the past in *The Legends of Pensam* also symbolize the same.

In the author's note to *The Legends of Pensam* it has been mentioned that the Adis in Arunachal Pradesh practise an animalistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and the natural world. The myths narrated in the novel depict stories where man

and nature co-exist. Hoxo, the teller of myths and histories of the community is supposed to fall from the sky. To show that there is an intimate relationship between Hoxo and the world of nature, it is said: “The colour green always soothed him. It was the colour of escape and solitude” (8). The stories of the community create an ethnic life-world and are “fixed in their collective memory” (9). The novel also depicts certain rituals of the community which preserve their cultural identity and serve as a localizing praxis showing their difference from the outer world. There is a description in the novel how Hoxo conducts the serpent ritual to negotiate with the spirits for calling them to restore a sick child to health. The narrator comments on Hoxo: “He seemed to live in a timeless zone and from a great distance . . .” (24). The lives of the Adis are centred on some age-old beliefs and the community believes that in order to maintain order and peace in their world, it is essential to follow certain rites. A woman named Pinyar says: “My boy is being haunted by an evil spirit because we failed to observe certain rites in the past” (33). The rites being performed, stories being told through myths, song and performance of dances – all are part of a localizing praxis and performance for the community. In *The Black Hill* too Lendem tells Gimur that the miri “would perform rituals for her, so that she did not lose her soul in the land of sorrow” (168). The people like Hoxo and Nenem serve as metaphor of the community’s inner spirit, its desire to stick to the roots. Hoxo is represented as the teller of tales, as the storehouse of the community’s myths and memories. On the other hand, about Nenem it is said that she is more than an individual and is rather an embodiment of the community’s world-view: “Nenem, appropriately, was a gift from the mythical land among the stars that was the dwelling place of a beautiful bride, also known as the celestial aunt, who came down to bless the civilization of men with wisdom and grace” (125). The role of Hoxo and Nenem can be identified with Morrison’s idea of an ancestor or an elder of a community. Similarly Morrison’s reference to the rite performed by a shouter in the Black church which connects him to the community can be applied to the Adi community’s rites and local performances which transform an individual from a more spectator or a passive participant to an active performer or listener. As the hip-hop performance of the African-Americans becomes a powerful means of cultural resistance, the Adi community’s performance of their rites, their oral narrative of histories and local myths become a strong medium of framing an exclusive site for maintaining the cultural legacy. Michel de Certeau has emphasized on the power of popular cultures and ordinary languages. He focuses on how popular

culture, folk-tales or stories do serious services by subverting the established order of a society. He calls the carrier of popular cultures “the rural believers”, who stick to certain superstitions to create their own discourse of resistance (17). The popular culture intervenes into the existing order of things, and becomes “a dark rock that resists all assimilation” (18). Certeau’s discussion of the practices of everyday life, of popular culture and language extends to the field of folk-tales. He comments: “The formality of everyday practices is indicated in these tales, which frequently reserve the relationships of power and, like the stories of miracles, ensure the victory of the unfortunate in a fabulous, utopian space. This space protects the weapons of the weak against the reality of the established order” (23). In Certeau’s interpretation folk-tale becomes a powerful social and cultural medium. He is of the opinion that recorded or official historiography operates the strategies of instituted powers, whereas the fabulous stories or folk-tales offer some tactics of counter-narrative or resistance to their audience. From this perspective Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam*, where the myths and the popular tales of the community serve as significant element of the narrative, creates a subversive narrative of the hegemonic forces – which may be the nationalistic concept of monoculture or other authoritative forces. Certeau says that the stylistic effects of the folk-tales devices and figures, alliterations, inversions and plays on words serve as the tropes for resistance to the established order. He calls the folk-tales the living museums of resistant tactics. As a whole, the folk-tales, myths or popular culture can be termed as practice of an ordinary art form, the effect of which is large on the minds of the people. Certeau discusses how the ordinary man or “everyman” turns into a teller of significant tales. He says: “Rather than being merely represented in it, the ordinary man acts out the text itself, in and by the text, and in addition he makes plausible the universal character of the particular place in which the mad discourse of a knowing wisdom is pronounced” (2). Certeau’s definition of the ordinary man as the teller of tales extends into the distinction between the Expert and the Philosopher, although both have similar functions: “the task of mediating between society and a body of knowledge” (6). The Expert blots out the Philosopher – the specialist of the universal. The Expert becomes an “interpreter” and a “translator”, speaks as an ordinary man. It can be said that Certeau’s definition of popular culture as a powerful medium, folk-tales as a mode of resistance, and the ordinary man’s ability to become an “Expert” to tell the tales of the community can be applied to the narrative strategies of *The Legends of Pensam*. The narrative of this novel is woven around the

folk-tales, small histories and myths of the community. In the novel the folk-tales, histories, myths and other traditional rites and performances of the Adi community serve as a mode of signification, which is infinitely replete with cultural richness. In *The Legends of Pensam* the unique mode of signification emerging through the narration of folk-tales, histories and myths of the tribal community creates a local world. The cultural heritage of the Adi community – performed repeatedly through oral narratives, songs and dances – emerges as a living, dynamic system of communication.

While discussing the “locality” of culture, Bhabha says that nation is a product of cultural signification where it is often represented as homogeneous. In “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation” Bhabha discusses how the intervention of the performative in the cultural discourse of the nation serves as a counter-narrative to the nation and national culture. He says: “The National subjects split in the ethnographic perspective of culture’s contemporary and provides both a theoretical position and a narrative authority for marginal voices or minority discourse” (301). Bhabha uses the term “cultural difference” and says that cultural difference must not be understood as the free play of polarities and pluralities in the homogeneous empty time of the national community. He defines it as form of intervention, a strategy of minority discourse, which erases the harmonious totalities of hegemonic culture. Cultural difference leads to the possibility of cultural contestation, the ability to shift the ground of knowledges. Bhabha comments: “The analytic of cultural difference attempts to engage with the ‘anterior’ space of the sign that structures the symbolic language of alternative, antagonistic cultural practices” (313). The reality of cultural diversity hinders the people situated in the different corners of the nation from imagining that they form a fraternity, or they are the part of a larger whole. It challenges the imagined institution of national culture and the idea of monoculture. Bhabha’s notion of cultural difference as an intervening element helps to understand the narrative strategy of Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam*, the desire to return to the roots enacted by Deb and Chaudhuri’s characters in some of their novels, and the linguistic performance in Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. All these writers show a departure from the easy acceptance of nationalistic and hegemonic imposition of monoculture or any other master narratives which do not allow the free play of artistic imagination. Like Bhabha, Ernest Gellner also considers the issue of cultural diversity as significant. He emphasizes that nationalism has created a

monoculture or a hegemonic culture which tries to erase ethnic distinctions and local cultural diversities. The folk-cultures of the ethnic groups often get marginalized and erased by the imposition of the nationalistic high culture. Gellner says:

Nationalism is, essentially the general imposition of a high culture on society, whose previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases the totality of the population. It means that generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy supervised idiom, codified for the requirement of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication. It is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually substitutable atomized individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind, in place of a previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves. (307)

Gellner's focus is on how nationalistic monoculture may destroy local cultures or the supposed low cultures of marginal and ethnic groups within a nation. However, the destruction of local cultures can be repaired or fought back through various practices like community festivals and rituals. The ethnic myths and symbols work as powerful resistant elements which may create counter-culture in a localized space. Mamang Dai, Siddhartha Deb, Amit Chaudhuri and Arundhati Roy have created a minority discourse and a space for local knowledge in their novels.

Recently the issue of localism has become a very significant area of research, as it is relevant to the contemporary world. Many writers have come to discuss the local in the context of the global, have addressed the issues related to the destruction of local cultures by the cultural invasion of the West. Arjun Appadurai also focuses on the crucial issue of global cultural flows and contemplates on the place of locality in the context of global cultural flows. He wonders whether anthropology retains any special rhetorical privilege in a world where locality seems to have lost its ontological moorings, and whether the mutually constitutive relationship between anthropology and locality may survive in a dramatically delocalized world (210). Appadurai views locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than spatial. Locality, in his opinion, is a phenomenological quality which expresses itself in certain kinds of agency, sociality and

reproducibility. Appadurai comments that even in the most intimate, spatially confined, geographically isolated situations, locality must be maintained carefully against various kinds of odds. In many societies the boundaries become zones of danger which need special ritual maintenance. He says that locality is an inherently fragile social achievement. He considers the rituals and rites of a community as complex social techniques for the production of locality. The ethnographic records of a community can be rewritten and reread, through which locality can be produced. Appadurai's idea of locality and its production through the performance of traditional and ethnic rituals and rites can be particularly applied to the Adi community's repetitive process of enacting and reliving their local past through various oral narratives and cultural performances. Appadurai has used the phrase "local knowledge" to mean the reproduction of locality in the condition of anxiety, entropy and social flux etc. (210). Local knowledge, he says, is about producing local subjects and neighbourhoods where such subjects can be recognized and organized. The local neighbourhoods where local subjects are recognized are the ethnic life-worlds, which create anxieties for the nation states as they contest the techniques or ideologies of nationhood. Appadurai has used the term "neighbourhood" to refer to the actually existing social forms in which locality as a dimension or value is realized. Among the four writers under discussion, the aesthetic position of Mamang Dai and Siddhartha Deb have to be seen differently as they are from the North-Eastern part of India, writing about the marginality and the unique political situation of the region. Appadurai's "local neighbourhood" and local knowledge have been produced by the Adi community in *The Legends of Pensam* through the folk-tales, myths and performances of local rites and rituals. Prasenjit Biswas and Chandan Suklabaidya have discussed the issue of reconceptualizing the ethnic life-world of the tribal people in the North-East through a particular focus on the tribal people's desire to keep their identity intact in the face of the centre's politics of appropriation and assimilation, and their narratives of resistance. They have commented that the voice of the North-East remains unheard in the nation's centre. The tribal people of the region have received the status of scheduled tribe in the constitution, but their ethnic identity is hardly respected in the mainland. On the contrary, the centre's politics of appropriation and homogenization creates a haunting sense of insecurity, and as a result a tendency towards redefinition of the native-self follows. Biswas and Suklabaidya say: "the question of tribal, ethnic and national identity, with all its attendant political, economic and cultural claims, has remained an unresolved



paradox for the mainstream developmental model, adopted throughout the country” (20). The native voice of the North-East has always struggled against the alien process and politics of appropriation. The consequence is a re-description of the tribal identity through various means, like local praxes and performances. In the process of reclaiming their cultural past in the face of nationalist cultural politics, the tribal people of the North-East resist the process of appropriation and homogenization of their culture by the dominant culture of the centre.

In Deb’s novels the counter-narratives to the centre are found not in the cultural dimension, but through the representation of subjects or characters who serve as protectors of their cultural roots. In Deb’s *Surface*, Malik is the leader of an organization named Prosperity Project – an alternative community in Manipur. If we follow Appadurai’s theory, it can be said that Prosperity Project creates a local neighbourhood where local knowledges are organized and recognized. Far away from the centre, this organization tries to reform and repair the damages done to the local people of the region. Malik’s wife told Amrit – the narrator as well as the journalist – that Malik was rooted to the region in a way that no one can be to any place. He never missed the big cities and remained loyal to the roots. The woman named Leela, whose mysterious photograph causes Amrit’s visit to the region, becomes a part of the project aimed at developing the region. Leela is initially attracted to the unfamiliar and the strange and she goes to Delhi to see the world beyond her known and familiar circle. She fails in her attempt to assimilate herself in the outer world and comes back to the roots. She comes back to Manipur and joins Prosperity Project. Malik’s Prosperity Project thus serves as a local neighbourhood or space where Leela appears as a local subject, who is ready to preserve and perform the local knowledge. Amrit, in a conversation, comments that Malik “has a history here . . . a history of his own people, his own culture, while you and I are just strangers passing through” (150). Malik’s dreams and performances become futile at the end; the only gesture active in the region for preserving local knowledge comes to hopelessness when he is abducted and killed by the insurgents. However, throughout the narrative he serves as a powerful symbol of local knowledge preserved, as an agent of local history, culture and identity. Leela, who is always fascinated by the unreal and the external, at last finds peace in being a part of Malik’s Prosperity Project,

although temporarily: “Leela got her things, excited and happy to be going to the project site at last” (210).

Like Nenem in *The Legends of Pensam*, Dr. Dam in Deb’s *The Point of Return* represents the desire to stick to the roots. In his search for a homeland in the North-East, he searches for his long lost ancestral land – Sylhet. For Dr. Dam’s son Babu, the old family house in Silchar and the image of the grandfather serve as the reminder of the roots. In the novel the act of memorizing the ancestral land and the old home, the small histories connected to them becomes a performative signifier of preserving the roots. The grandfather’s constant act of memorizing his old home left behind in East Pakistan is more than a natural psychological response to a geopolitical shift: “It showed that the landscape of his past would forever be permanent and unchanging, not something that was historical and therefore open to perpetual revision but a place beyond the vagaries of time” (35). Dr. Dam carries this memory of homeland as a legacy and tries to find a permanent home in the North-East, in a gesture of retracing and reconstructing the roots – the foundation. There is a long description in the novel how Dr. Dam’s desperate attempt to locate a home comes out in the form of buying lands in different places of the region. Dr. Dam tells Babu the stories from the past, which are apparently incoherent and trivial, which are in fact scraps of memories recollected and preserved to relive the past. As a child Babu finds them uninteresting, but later realizes that those were nothing but some performances for reliving the past: “perhaps he was thinking about the past, about the village life that had come up so suddenly in his stories, and maybe he was overwhelmed by the memories . . .” (142).

In the context of the production of local knowledges in local neighbourhoods, Walter D. Mignolo’s study of subaltern knowledges and border thinking can be mentioned. He discusses knowledges and thinking, which are from the zones of “people without history” (3). He says that his idea of “border thinking” is modeled on the idea of “African gnosis” which was introduced by Valentine Y. Mudimbe in his study of the invention of Africa (10). Mudimbe employed the term “gnosis” in the subtitle of his book *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Mignolo refers to Mudimbe’s introduction of the term “gnosis” to suggest a wide range of knowledge wiped out by philosophy and epistemology. Mudimbe noted that “gnosis”

etymologically is related to “gnosko” which in ancient Greek means “to know”. Although Mignolo identifies “gnosis” and border thinking as a product of colonial difference and as a discourse of resistance, a kind of knowledge conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system, it can be applied to the practice of local knowledges in the margins. Mignolo also refers to Michel Foucault’s inaugural lecture in the College of France in 1976, in which Foucault introduced the concept of reviving subjugated knowledges (Mignolo 19). He quotes the distinction made by Foucault in his lecture, between academic and disciplinary knowledge and non-academic and popular knowledge. Mignolo says that the body of local popular knowledges questions the foundation of academic and disciplinary knowledges. While pointing out local history’s gradual attainment of prominence, he says:

Today, a world history or a universal history is an impossible task. Or perhaps both are possible but hardly credible. Universal histories in the past five hundred years have been embedded in global designs. Today, local histories are coming to the forefront and, by the same token, revealing the local histories from which global designs emerge in their universal drive. (21)

Mignolo’s notion of local histories as more reliable mode of history compared to world history or universal history points out the possibility of resisting the dominant discourses of the society. In Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* border thinking, or gnosis, or the revolutionary impulses of subjugated knowledges emerge in the form of folk-tales, small histories and myths being communicated and retold by the Adi community. In Deb’s *Surface* and *The Point of Return* they find expression in one’s desire to return to the roots, to relive the past, and to restore the local identity.

Although the writers under discussion are engaged with the counter narrative to hegemonic monoculture, with the praxes and performances through which the local can be revived, their novels can also be seen in the context of minority discourse. Minority discourse is a product of the conflict between the voices from the margins and dominant culture. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd have discussed the issue of minority discourse as a resistant impulse in the face of the hegemonic suppression of minority

voices by colonial discourse as well as Western humanism. They have referred to an African man called Alexander Crummell to substantiate their discussion of how minority people sometimes internalize and support the politics of a superior culture. JanMohamed and Lloyd state that Crummell represents an acceptance of Euro-American hegemony, as after learning Greek he is ready to dismiss all African languages as “the speech of rude barbarians” (5). They comment that some people are forever consigned to play the role of the ontological, political, economic, and cultural other of the hegemonic, dominant culture. Hegemonic pressures force one to reject one’s own language and culture as barbarian, as in the case of Crummell. JanMohamed and Lloyd have basically addressed the conflict between the hegemonic discourse of Western humanism and the cultural other which may be the third-world or ethnic minority groups. In the nation’s peripheries too such conflicts are frequent as the marginal voices are hardly accepted as valid. They highlight the fact that the West does not conceive a native-American or an African, who have been marginalized by Euro-American hegemony, to have anything relevant to say. JanMohamed and Lloyd have referred to the condition of the 18<sup>th</sup> century South Carolina where the desire to acquire literacy by Black Americans was considered as a criminal offence and native education was repressed in a systematic way by the colonizers. Even when one was allowed to learn the master’s language certain limits were observed so that it could serve the interest of the colonizers. Thus the language and the cultures of the minority groups are always suppressed by hegemonic politics of the dominant cultures. JanMohamed and Lloyd maintain that the identity of the “minoritized peoples” is affected by the destructive and hegemonic politics of the dominant cultures and minority discourse emerges as a challenging force to counter such damages (7). The dominant cultures create an impression that the minority cultures are underdeveloped, imperfect, inauthentic or perverse. In this context JanMohamed and Lloyd have mentioned the Tolowa oral narratives and the struggle of the Tolowa tribe to get the United States government’s legal recognition. They comment: “For many minorities, culture is not a mere superstructure, all too often, in an ironic twist of a Sartrean phenomenology the physical survival of minority groups depends on the recognition of its culture as viable” (9). They focus on the possibilities of alternative practices for challenging hegemonic forces of dominant cultures and of redefinition of institutions in different or alternatives images. They emphasize that in minority discourse the abstract philosophical question of essence and ethics are transformed into questions of practice, which means that resistant

narratives are always concrete and dynamic in nature. The novels of Dai, Deb, Roy and Chaudhuri represent such dynamic and concrete forms of counter-narrative to the hegemony of the authoritative forces. Alternative practices are evident in their novels, although in different modes. In Roy's *The God of Small Things* the twins' reshaping of language becomes a performance that challenges the institutional and the authoritative. Bishnupriya Ghosh has rightly observed that the extremely innovative language used by the twins in Roy's novel cannot be fully comprehended outside of their local context. Roy in this novel has reshaped the language to suit her unique way of narrating the stories of the peripheral identities. It becomes a form of alternative practice for resisting the institutional forms of signification in the novel. Ghosh says that Roy deals with a small ethnicity created by the twins in the novel. The twins produce their own version of the national languages and of the colonial imposition of standard or officially accepted English. A major part of the narrative in *The God of Small Things* represents the children's consciousness which is expressed through an extremely innovative language. Ghosh comments that Roy's novel "is a tale told in the vocabulary of small things, the children" (113). She even finds the extensive use of capital letters in Roy's novel, when the narrative focus is on the children's innovative use of language, as an expression of children's small consciousness exploring a larger world. In the children's use of English Ghosh finds a rhythm of Malayalam language. She comments: "The combination words of phrases that deviate from hyphenated standard English word capture the polysyllabic verbal structure of Malayalam, and not simply the odd language of children. Here the children's innovative English represents a specific bilingual community" (113). The language deployed by the young narrators – Rahel and Estha – in *The God of Small Things* can be considered as a local praxis which challenges the standard and the institutional use of language. Baby Kochamma fines the children for speaking Malayalam and the children go farther in their linguistic experiments by recreating the English language, mixing it with Malayalam words and rhythm. The combination of English with untranslated Malayalam creates a language which is not standard English, but a vernacular, a local version of English. The children find the logical, institutional and standard use of language as restricting and limited and take resort to linguistic experiments. They even read texts backward which the elders find irrational. Ghosh considers such performances as a means of bringing the small things into notice, and the twins' act of deconstructing the correct English by reducing it to nonsense as a space of

free-play of their imagination. She in her discussion on Roy's novel comes to the conclusion that "Roy's linguistic experiments demand locale-specific knowledge for fully understanding the text" (119). Ghosh says that it is not only in the children's use of language where experiment is visible; in the novel Roy extensively uses untranslated Malayalam words with locally accented English words. In her discussion on Roy's novel Ghosh has used the phrase "performative localism" which appropriately reflects Roy's artistic purpose; it is an invitation, according to Ghosh, "to readers to be borne across to local cultural worlds in different ways" (119). I think that Roy's mixing of Malayalam with locally accented English reflects the contemporary Indian English novelists' unselfconscious use of language. They are no longer bothered about using a standard version of the colonially imposed, elite language. This narrative strategy ultimately gets reflected through some chosen characters in their novels. In Roy's novel the twins serve the purpose of rejecting the accepted and official mode of language use. Baby Kochamma stands for the authoritative voice which tries to suppress the voice of the marginal. She eavesdrops on the twins' private conversations and fines them whenever she catches them speaking in Malayalam. She makes them write lines, which she terms as "impositions" that they will always speak in English (36). It reflects the constant surveillance of the dominant ideology on the behaviour of the inferior, the peripheral and the powerless of the society.

There are many critics who have addressed the representation of linguistic performance in Roy's novel and have defined it as a deliberate aesthetic mode. Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas, for instance, has found in Roy's novel two types of linguistic performance. Baneth-Nouailhetas says that Baby Kochamma, Comrade Pillai and Chacko stand for the hegemonic and institutional language use, whereas the children's innovative use of language stands for a performance which challenges the official and the standard use of language. The children's language in the novel has undermined the accepted mode of language use or the official order of language. Baneth-Nouailhetas even allegorizes the children's act of reversing the words as a universal desire for the reversibility of action. Another critic Anna Clarke has highlighted the second chapter of the novel "Pappachi's Moth", where the narrative focuses on Pappachi's frustration over the fact that the moth discovered by him was not named after him. For Clarke the moth is a metaphor of dynamism and the act of trying to transform it

“into a lifeless, classified, named object of study” is to kill its dynamism (133). Clarke associates it with the destruction of the shifting and mobile meaning of words by Pappachi and other elders in the novel. She makes a distinction between the mummified, inert, authoritative word and the living, dialogic word. In *The God of Small Things* the language of the children stands for the dynamic and living word which challenges the authoritative use of language. Julie Mullaney has talked about an indigenous Indian-English which serves as a tool for the twins to renegotiate their space in the world. Mullaney says that Roy’s twins use the language in a way which reminds one of the strategies of challenge delineated in Bill Ashcroft’s *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, where the colonizers’ language is used to counter their ideologies. Whereas most of the critics of Roy focus on the use of language as a performative tool in her novel for challenging the dominant and the authoritative, Alex Tickell has highlighted the performance of Kathakali dance as a mode of local oral-storytelling cultures, as an instance of cultural commercialism. Tickell defines the Kathakali performance in the novel as a representation of the cultural politics of “exoticizing” the local culture of Kerala; he says that the performance of Kathakali in Roy’s novel does not simply show nostalgia for a lost tradition. Tickell says: “Having examined the significance of the *kathakali* performance in *The God of Small Things*, we must not assume that Roy’s embedded presentation of the ‘Great Stories’ is wholly positive or that it represents a simple nostalgia for the cultural coherence of oral storytelling” (163). Tickell even says that the Kathakali performers in the novel have an ironic correspondence with their author. He talks about the uneasy political possibilities of a postcolonial writer like Roy to return to indigenous cultural traditions in their primitive form. Tickell has interpreted Roy’s representation of Kathakali performance in its transformed, commercialized form as the author’s own affiliation with a cultural politics of exoticizing the local culture of Kerala. I think that rather than taking part in a cultural politics which exoticizes the old storytelling tradition of Kerala, Roy wants to show how capitalist politics enters into the site of local cultural performances. The Kathakali performer in *The God of Small Things* tells “Great Stories” which are “as familiar as the house you live in” (229). The performance gives him his identity: it is “the vessel into which he pours himself. It gives him shape” (231). In spite of the fact that the performer has entered the world of commerce, he sustains himself through it. The chapter titled “Kochu Thomban” in the novel depicts the Kathakali performer’s

plight in the face of rising consumerism. The performer cannot escape his role; he must remain a part of the tradition. However, in the Kathakali performer's "abject defeat lies his supreme triumph" (231). His performance has undergone transformations due to the arrival of commerce in the cultural space. It reveals how the powerful forces contaminate and distort local traditions. Yet the performer sticks to his role-play. He shows how ordinary man continues a legacy in the face of hegemonic cultural interference. The Kathakali performer is a symbol of an undying spirit that continues a legacy in spite of the reality that the performer cannot stop the commercialization of the once-pristine performance. From this perspective the Kathakali performer can also be defined as a "small" entity in Roy's novel who tries to retain his position in the world of the "big" forces. Roy's *The God of Small Things* represents a discourse from the periphery, and creates a space for the voices which are usually suppressed. The twins' innovative use of language stands as a resistant force challenging the authoritative, hegemonic use of language. The standard use of English is a symbol of following the colonially-imposed language, whereas the twins' use of twisted English is a practice, an alternatives mode of linguistic performance. In Roy's novel it is not merely the linguistic performances of the twins which resist authoritative forces; the apparently insignificant life-world of Ammu and her children also signifies a narrative of resistance. Both Ammu and her children defy the established institutions and laws: they go against the rules made by the highly stratified society of Ayemenem. Ammu and the children's relationship with Velutha is symbolic of their rejection of social laws and institutions. They reject the rules constructed by the social mainstream and create a bond with someone who lives in the periphery of the social system. Their world is full of "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits" (3). They transgress those boundaries and limits: Ammu and the twins cross into the forbidden territories, by breaking love-laws and challenging prohibitions. Their transgression and resistance to the authoritative norms culminate in the acts of rule-breaking.

Anna Froula defines Ammu and her children as "subversive liminars" and transgressors who are unable to cope with the mainstream. Froula comments that in Roy's novel, the mother and the twins "embody the interloping sites of cultural impurity" (39). In fact in this "cultural impurity" lies their resistance to dominant culture. They disrupt the orderly functioning of the established social system through their



relationships and priorities. Ammu and her children refuse to immerse in the authoritative system and pose a threat for the patriarchal hegemony of Kerala. They live on the society's margin and challenge the dominant system which tries to appropriate them. Ghosh's definition of "performative localism" in the twins' use language, Baneth-Nouailhetas's emphasis on the universal desire for reversing the officially accepted mode of behavioural pattern, Clarke's reference to the preference for the dynamic side of language use, Mullaney's analysis of the modes of countering the ideologies of the hegemonic society – all hint at the narrative of resistance in *The God of Small Things*. In Roy's novel it is not only the linguistic performance which signifies a dynamic process of creating counter-narratives, the entire behavioural pattern of the twins and their mother stands for a narrative of resistance. If Roy's novel is about the opposition between the small and the big, the peripheral and the authoritative, the powerless and the powerful, language emerges as a very strong medium of resistant discourse for the small, peripheral and the powerless to counter the hegemony of the big forces. Whereas the officially accepted or standard mode of speaking and writing English and Malayalam language in the novel stands for the "big" and the powerful, the reversal of the standard use of language stands for the potential within the "small" to resist the authoritative. The children in the novel involve themselves in word-play, and twist both English and Malayalam languages in such a way that they become almost incomprehensible. The children are the peripheral voices in the novel, who in order to establish their identity and voice have to transcend the limiting rules of language use. In the process of resisting the authoritative existence of the elders in the Ayemenem family the children have produced their own idiom of rebellion and peripheral discourse. Language is a powerful site of resistance to hegemony; it is a site where the credibility of the dominant voices can be questioned and peripheral voices can be constructively produced. The voices of the children in Roy's novel represent the suppressed voices of all who belong to the society's margin – Ammu, whose voice is suppressed in the patriarchal world of Ayemenem, Velutha, whose voice is unheard in the caste-oriented society of Kerala. Ammu and Velutha challenge the hegemonic forces of the patriarchal, stratified society of Ayemenem through their union in the History House. Their sexual union is a metaphor of protest against the entire social norms: the History House which is a witness to many stories of law-breaking, witnesses their love-making as a symbolic act of resistance and renewal. If language is a powerful site for the twins to establish their

voice, the History House too offers a space to those who want to transgress the confining laws of the social-system. Perhaps the history of resistance to authority or the established order of things started in the History House with the Englishman who loved a local boy and committed suicide for being separated from his lover. The children saw the house as a world of mystery and magic, for Ammu and Velutha it stood as a space of escape, protest and self-affirmation. In Roy's novel the performance of writing back to the centre emerges not through cultural practices or rituals of preserving the ethnic roots, but through the act of establishing the peripheral and unheard voices, and through the act of transgressing the authoritative system. The peripheral voices refuse to immerse in the world of received ideas and established order of things, and they innovate their own modes of protest and self-affirmation. Hazel Johnson, while discussing the local forms of resistance, offers some useful insights which can be applied to Roy's novel as well. Johnson says that the local forms of resistance are associated with the concept of the weapons of the weak which "suggests that in practice people will resist or try to change conditions of powerlessness. Such resistance is often about everyday survival, although it may be to prevent the desecration of valued customs and beliefs (or to change them), or to counter specific acts of abuse and physical violence" (161). Although Johnson defines the "weapons of the weak" in the context of the rights of the poor and their socio-political resistance, it can be applied to the peripheral identities' acts of resistance in Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Ammu and her children in the novel try to change their condition of powerlessness, refuse to follow the valued customs of the society through various modes of resistance. They emerge as the worst transgressors in the eyes of those who represent the dominant system.

Like Mamang Dai, Siddhartha Deb and Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri also supports a world-view and an aesthetic principle which incorporate the local and transcend the national. In his Introduction to *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture* Chaudhuri has celebrated Rabindranath Tagore's ideology of self-division and his suspicion of the idea of a fixed centre. He says that the nationalistic ideology is based on the idea of a fixed centre, which must be rejected in favour of clearing a space for the local and the regional. Chaudhuri in this Introduction says that his creative exploration as a writer has been aimed at tracing a trajectory of the Indian "real" and the Indian "everyday", and recuperating a genealogy of Indian reality and the

mundane (14). As Appardurai has commented on the production of local knowledges in local neighbourhoods as an essential mode of countering the national and the transnational, Chaudhuri's novels also create local subjects in local spaces. In *A Strange and Sublime Address* the narrator comments that in Bengal the lazy Sunday evenings can be spent in several ways: one can, for instance, listen to the popular plays in the radio. These radio plays produce the familiar master narratives in local terms, performs the supposedly standard form of a text in a different way. The narrator comments: "The heroine's voice would quiver like note on the violin; the star crossed lovers would frequently cry 'Never!' and 'Forever!'; the murderer would murder accompanied by drums and cymbals; the funny man would mispronounce words and fall in love with the heroine. It was like Shakespeare, and yet was not like Shakespeare" (16). As the twins mix Malayalam words and accent in their use of English in *The God of Small Things*, in Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* too English is given a local colour: "Sometimes Chhaya would come in and say excitedly; 'They're showing a seenema in the field!' 'Seenema! What seenema?' Mamima would ask" (16). The characters in this novel, particularly the women and the children speak English words with a Bengali pronunciation. In Chaudhuri's novel the colonially imposed language – a symbol of aristocracy and power – has been reshaped in a way where the speakers are least anxious about its standard mode of speaking. The characters like Sandeep's aunt and the maid servant use the English words as the words of their own vernacular.

In *A Strange and Sublime Address* a Sikh man's way of speaking Bengali shows how it is possible to produce different and local versions of a language, or to subvert what is considered as institutional. The narrator says:

The Sikh spoke a courteous Bengali to the women, made still more courteous and comically elaborate by the fact that it was spoken in a broad Hindustani accent and according to the rules of Hindustani grammar. This gave the gentle, rounded sounds of the Bengali Language a masculine openheartedness; it even made the language smell of onions and chappatis. (44)

The lyrical sound of Bengali language has been transformed by the Sikh into a language with a masculine overtone. It is a linguistic praxis where someone initiates an alien language and makes it his own.

Abhi's English lesson in *A Strange and Sublime Address* is another instance of the authoritative and the standard being deconstructed, to create a local version of a language. It is humourously stated that when the boy's English lessons began, "the voice became stentorian and English sentences and word exploded like little bombs in the air" (95). Like the twins in Roy's *The God of Small Things* Abhi in Chaudhuri's novel embarks on producing a local version of English tinted with Bengali pronunciation. Although in Chaudhuri's novel language does not emerge as a site of power-play and resistance, the local version of an otherwise elite language shows a natural tendency for linguistic localization. Abhi's English lesson is an example of the tendency to reshape and localize the colonially imposed, superior language:

- Whut ees thee name of thee boy?
- Thee name of thee boy ees John.
- Whut deed John habhfor deenar?
- John had meelk and bredfor deenar.
- Why deed John habh meelk and bredfor deenar? (95)

The way English is spoken in a Malayalam accent in Roy's novel, the Bengali accent interferes into English in Chaudhuri's novel to show how language becomes a dynamic site for producing the local and rejecting the institutional. In Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* everything is represented through the consciousness of Sandeep, who comes to Bengal to spend his holidays, and observes the local culture, language and practices of Bengal minutely. He observes the word "sandesh" written in stylish Bengali letters outside the paper box that contains sweets:

The letters, curving, undulating, never still, curving into a kinetic life, of their own, reminded him of Calcutta, of buying and selling, of people in the

pavements, of office-goers in the mornings, and homecomings in the evenings, of children reading books, of arguments and dissensions in the tea shops, of an unexpected richness in myriad rooms, all festivities of colour and light. He wanted to return to the city where all things curved and arched and danced like those letters; it exhausted him to lie in this room with these other still figures. He longed to come back to life. (111)

For Sandeep these letters are like the dynamic life of Bengal itself; these letters recreate a local world for a cultural outsider like Sandeep. He looks at the Bengali letters of a novel by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. In spite of the fact that he cannot read and write Bengali, Sandeep feels the power of the letters: he “saw the letters as characters” and feels that the “letters were intimate, quirky, ancient, graceful, comic, just as he imagined the people of Bengal to be” (75).

In *A Strange and Sublime Address* the women’s act of decorating themselves also becomes a part of local cultural practice, which resonates with the Bengali artisan’s act of offering finishing touches to the idols before the festival. The woman’s performance of self-decoration is a parallel practice of worshipping the idol of the goddess; “the immemorial tradition of applying Kaajal and Kumkum, and other ancient cosmetics like sandalwood paste and mehndi, belonged more to the world of intricate, systematic ritual than to the world of fashion” (58). Chhotomama in the novel serves as a cultural agency and he performs the task of transferring local knowledges to those for whom such knowledge is important to understand the local culture, language and practices of Bengal. Sandeep wants to know the meaning of the word “godhuli” and Chhotomama’s explanation of the word carries them to a local world created by the villagers in Bengal: “The word *go* means ‘cow’, and the word *dhuli* means ‘dust’. In the villages, evening’s the time the cowherds bring the cattle home. The herd returns, raising clouds of dust from the road. *Godhuli* is that hour of cow dust. So it means ‘dusk’ or ‘evening’” (51). This explanation of a small Bengali word shows how local knowledge is transferred to an outsider, how language becomes a product of everyday practices in a local space.

A writer who is politically conscious is always focused on the representation of his society, its world-view, ideologies and visions. The four writers under discussion represent in their novels the practices and experiences of ordinary man in the context of the local and the peripheral. These practices and experiences produce a locality which transcends the hegemony of national culture, and the suppression of any kind of authoritative system. Culture defines a particular way of life which expresses the values and traditions of a community in a particular geographical space. Mamang Dai, Siddhartha Deb, Arundhati Roy and Amit Chaudhuri – all of them deal with culture in the local space. They represent an alternative mode of cultural and linguistic practices for challenging the oppressive structures of the society.

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