

Voices Through Water: Esther Syiem's Memoir in Water: Speaks the Wah Umkhrah as an Epistolary Novel

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Abstract:

This paper aims to textually explore the evocative convergence of memory, landscape, and cultural identity in Esther Syiem's debut novel in English, *Memoir in Water: Speaks the Wah Umkhrah*. It analyses Syiem's novel as an unconventional epistolary novel whereby the river takes the role of both addressee and speaker, functioning as a vital interlocutor between the self and ancestral past. The river, imbued with memory and symbolic resonance, functions both as a natural presence and as a living archive of Khasi cosmology and worldviews, and collective consciousness. Drawing upon Pierre Nora's theory of "sites of memory", this paper highlights the river as a symbolic and mnemonic site that holds the remnants of a fading cultural memory. Nora's theory asserts that when environments or traditions lose their lived immediacy, they become sites of memory: intentionally preserved and reanimated through narrative. The river emerges as a site which preserves indigenous worldviews in the face of cultural dislocation. The epistolary mode allows for cultural reclamation through literary nostalgia, with Syiem's evocative language invoking myths, rituals and landscapes that are gradually receding under the pressures of modernity and cultural amnesia. Syiem reanimates an indigenous worldview where the natural world is integral to identity and memory. The river listens, remembers, and responds. This act of writing becomes a mode of remembrance, preserving intangible heritage through a form shaped by Khasi oral traditions. The nostalgia that permeates the novel is a strategic return, a way of preserving cultural fragments and reasserting indigenous continuity.

Keywords: Epistolary novel, nostalgia, oral tradition, indigenous memory, cultural reclamation.

INTRODUCTION

Esther Syiem is a bilingual Khasi writer, academic and critic. Her publications include three volumes of poetry: *Oral Scriptings* (2005, 2nd edition 2010), *Of Follies and Frailties of Wit and Wisdom* (2010), and *Many Sides of Many Stories* (2017). She has a novel which was published in 2017 to her credit, entitled *Memoir in Water: Speaks the Wah Umkhrah*. Her other works include *Ka Nam* (a play), *The Oral Discourse in Khasi Folk Narrative* (2018), and *Ka Jingiamreh Kob ki Wah/The Race of the Rivers* (a retelling of a Khasi folktale). The majority of her writings delve into a deep-seated reverence of indigenous aesthetics. This paper aims to textually analyse her debut novel mentioned above as an epistolary novel. It employs the epistolary form not merely as a stylistic device but as a narration of culture, identity, and memory from the perspective of an ageing river, the Umkhrah River. The Wah Umkhrah's narrations can be read as an attempt to re-connect the past with the present by re-positing

Khasi oral traditions.

Memoir in Water: Speaks the Wah Umkhrah is the debut novel of Esther Syiem. This story traverses different timelines with folk narratives interspersed throughout the text, highlighting the transformation of Shillong from its past to the present and the drastic decline in the sacredness and purity of the Umkhrah River. It laments the cultural shift brought by rapid urbanisation and development. Through different characters in the novel, the dissociation of cultural values from indigeneity is hinted at. For instance, the helpers who migrated to the city and have fallen into the city ways in terms of mannerisms and lifestyle conduct; Sanbor and his friend who had fallen prey to modern ways of living and *kyiad*. Side by side, we have Kyrmen and the Umtang fairy's love story, which can be read as another retelling of a Khasi folktale. The stories iterate the close ties between nature, humans and non-human entities.

The term 'epistolary' originates from the Latin word 'epistola', meaning 'letter'. Historically, the word 'epistle' referred to a written letter, often formal in tone. An epistolary novel is a literary form in which the narrative is presented through a sequence of letters. In its conventional form, this genre relies primarily on correspondence between characters to convey the plot. The epistolary form in literature functions as a device to reveal interiority, engage in dialogue or bear witness across time and space. Syiem's novel adapts this form into a fluid exchange not with a human correspondent but with the river itself. This showcases a deep symbolic connection with nature in Khasi culture.

The novel sets forward with a prologue where Syiem presents an urgency to safeguard the land, nature and cultural lore. She urges that the stories of the land have to be told. And adds that "they're not always what you'd want to hear, not what you'd expect to hear but what you have to hear" (x). Through the voice of the Umkhrah River, Syiem unveils the personal memoir of what Umkhrah has witnessed till the present day. She paints a realistic picture of Shillong with Umkhrah at its heart, watching the ever-changing environment and its people. The river reminisces about the times "when there was not even a single plastic bag waiting to strangle life; strewn all over my body and choking the free flow of my whole being" (Syiem 27). The Umkhrah river speaking is symbolic of all rivers which have existed with man since the beginning of civilisation. Presently in Meghalaya, two rivers, namely the Umkhrah (to the north) and the Umshyrpi (to the south), flow through Shillong, both joined by innumerable tributaries and drains on their way till they merge in the west to form the Roro River, which finally flows into the Umiam Lake. The rivers helped in the production of electricity in the State of Meghalaya and especially in the city of Shillong.

Syiem adapts the story into a fluid exchange, criticism and reflection with the river itself and not with a human correspondent. The usage of 'I'/first person narration adds to the epistolary mode of writing, where the writer pours out individual firsthand experiences, also reflecting a personal memoir. The absence of formal addressees or replies does not hinder the epistolary structure; rather, it enriches by allowing the river to echo with layered meanings, shaped by both silence and sound. It starts off with the tragic story of Khrawbok. The Umkhrah River witnessed the tragic demise of Khrawbok drowning in its watering caverns. Through Khrawbok's story, Syiem iterates the intricacies of married life and life consumed by *kyiad* (local home-brewed alcohol). The Umkhrah River is adamant to share the stories it has witnessed, with passion and empathy. Right from the first story itself, there is a strong sense of emphasis, a story meant to be told. "So I begin a story that I have to tell, a story that won't let go of me until I've told you all. Even when the heavens no longer seem angry, even in the dry coldness of winter when I become a shrunken rivulet, I've never been free of what happened that night" (Syiem 2). The urgency in the tone of narration hints at an appeal to comprehend the nature of human relations within

the confines of married life.

Then, the narration moves on to a pristine past of yonder years, when nature was an integral part of people's lives. The position of the simile of ka'tiew lalyngngi pepshad or the "flower that missed the dance" is symbolic as it bridges the past with the present. In the past, young women used to frequent the river to scrub their heels in the clear water. The Umkhrah River reminisces about those days when life was simpler, and water was clean and fresh.

Folk narratives are replete with stories which revere rivers as life itself. Most of the ancient civilisations were also founded near water sources like rivers, basically for fresh water consumption and agriculture. For instance, Egyptian Civilisation (centred on the Nile River in Africa), Mesopotamian Civilisation (founded between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers), Indus Valley Civilisation (flourished along the Indus River in the Indian subcontinent), and Chinese Civilisation (founded along the Yellow River in China). Later, these civilisations developed into significant urban spaces. In the past, rivers were used as road connectivity as well, which belies a very colonial perspective. With human intervention and subsequent urbanisation, the sanctity and reverence paid to rivers gets reduced. Arupjyoti Saikia's *The Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra* offers a multidisciplinary exploration of the Brahmaputra River, situating it as a central agent in the ecological, geological, and socio-political history of Assam. Drawing on archival research and environmental history, the book critically examines the river's evolving role in shaping human and natural landscapes across time. Rajendra Kshetrimayum's "Cry of a Dying River" speaks of the pain of the Nambul River in Imphal. The poem reflects the tragic irony of how the Nambul River, once cherished as a symbol of beauty and pride, is now suffocated by human neglect and exploitation. It contrasts the river's glorious past with its present decay, exposing societal hypocrisy and environmental apathy. The Umkhrah River also laments its present polluted condition.

Syiem posits oral lore in the novel to reiterate the significance of it in contemporary times as well. In northeast region of India, many of the tribal communities including the Khasis practice oral tradition. 'Writing' came with the colonisers and the legacy continued in post-colonial times as well. Therefore, she puts that,

History in many of these hill areas, therefore, is conjoined with familiar dislocation and a hoary sense of a lost past. And as oral history goes, stories and narratives, ballads and chants, folklore and tradition, belief systems and traditional healing practices, the co-existence of the physical and the spiritual world prevail and pervade even within the linearity and structure of a formal literary history. The notion of writing a Literary History must then be viewed from a perspective that has to take into account the proximity and pervasiveness of the oral within the written (Writing Literary History, 1).

Also, the love story of Krymen Skhem and the water puri connects traditional lore with contemporary worldviews. It is an allusion from a Khasi folktale. The story in the novel can be read as another fictionalised rendition of "Ren and the River Nymph" from Khasi lore.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih has beautifully documented this story in his book *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*, published in 2007. This Khasi legend narrates the story of a simple yet handsome fisherman from the village of Nongjri, located to the east of Sohra or Cherrapunjee. He was the sole breadwinner for a family of two, which consists of him and his mother. One fine day, he came to know that he was successful in his fishing expeditions due to the blessings of a river nymph. "She was a puriblei, a divine fairy, for the elders had told him that evil could not show so lovely a face" (Nongkynrih 59). And she attested that: "Yes, it was I who wooed you with fish by the dozens every day, just as your friends said, although they had spoken in jest" (60). Thereafter, they enjoyed their clandestine meetings and finally

decided to get married. However, since Ren could not leave his mother alone, they came to the consensus that she would abandon her river abode and live with Ren and his mother, but on one condition: “the hut must be spotlessly clean, for we cannot live in filth; the broom with which you sweep that dirt must nowhere be in sight” (61). So, when the appointed day came for the daughter-in-law to visit Ren’s house, his mother absentmindedly kept the broom in its usual place in the corner behind the door. The river nymph fainted after this episode. Later, after regaining consciousness, she fled back to her watery home. The broom, thereafter, is considered as a symbol of a broken promise. Then, Ren became distraught, and his mother selflessly told him to follow his heart and told him that it was “not their custom for a son to bring his wife to his mother’s home” (63). In the denouement, Ren finally left his mother to join his puribei in the enchanted watery depths of the river. “From the story, the Khasis learnt the secret of driving away spirits with the broom- a ritual which is practiced even today” (63). The oral story ends in this manner. In Syiem’s rendition, the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law are portrayed as two women who could not understand each other. Umkhras asserts that “land and water are two different elements and the two women were simply stuck in their elements” (Syiem 57). Later, when the grandchildren arrived as two brilliantly-colored butterflies to meet their grandmother, they were accidentally murdered by their grandmother, who was appalled and grief-stricken thereafter. This rendition can be read as a metaphor of the fading oral lore. This highlights the position of oral lore in contemporary times.

Pertaining to Kyrmen’s sad story, Daiarisa Rumnong succinctly puts in her article “When Nature Remembers: A Study of Memoir in Water: Speaks the Wah Umkhras”, this event is a metaphor for the strained relationship between man and the environment, which most times ends with man destroying the delicate vulnerability of nature. It is only when nature is seen as an equal to man, that the convergence of identity, myth, memory, culture will bring about a sustaining relationship (7).

Epistolary form of writing also accommodates non-linearity, which is another key characteristic of both oral tradition and indigenous temporality. Unlike Western narrative conventions that prioritise chronological progression, Syiem’s epistolary fragments move between past and present, memory and myth, personal and communal history. This fluidity mimics the nature of water itself. The stories in the novel are an assortment of social realities and mythical tales.

The role of ‘memory’ is paramount in oral tradition. Pierre Nora, in his project *Les Lieux de Memoire* (Sites of Memory), explores the notion that memory is not a direct, organic connection to the past but is instead constructed and shaped by society, culture, and politics. Nora’s theory centres on the distinction between history and memory. While history is viewed as an objective, scholarly pursuit that seeks to reconstruct the past based on evidence, memory is a more subjective, emotional, and collective process that binds people to a shared past. He argues that in modern societies, traditional forms of memory have weakened due to the rise of written history, the dominance of institutionalised education, and the proliferation of mass media. As a result, “sites of memory” have emerged, like places, symbols, and narratives that serve as anchors for collective memory and preserve a connection to the past. Nora identifies these “sites of memory” in various forms, including monuments, historical documents, places, traditions, and even events or personalities that hold cultural significance. These sites serve as constructs, chosen and shaped by societies to help remember specific moments of their history. This idea of “memory as construction” invites critical reflection on how the past is remembered and the ways in which history is continually rewritten by different people.

In *Memoir in Water: Speaks the Wah Umkhras*, Syiem presents a narrative deeply connected to the

Khasi community's past, their culture, and their struggles. Syiem uses the Umkhrah River as a central motif in the novel, as a "site of memory" that embodies collective identity and historical continuity. The river is both a literal and symbolic site where the community remembers its roots, experiences, and the myths that shape its worldview. By engaging with the river, the protagonist, like the community, comes to terms with the past, confronting historical events, tribal customs, and generational changes. This aligns with Nora's concept of memory as a collective construct shaped by cultural symbols that both preserve and transmit past experiences. Its waters are imbued with myth, ritual and ancestral presence, becoming a site where memory is not only stored but also reactivated. The river, in this sense, is not passive but is a dynamic participant in cultural survival. Syiem's narrative reclaims this presence, reminding readers that cultural continuity lies not only in books and monuments but in the natural world itself.

Thus, Syiem critiques the pressures of modernity and the encroachment of dominant epistemologies that threaten to erase indigenous worldviews. The nostalgia in her work does not aim to reconstruct an idealised past but rather to restore a sense of cultural continuity and rootedness in the present. The river, therefore, functions not as an object of longing but as a conduit for memory and reclamation. The intimate reading of the landscape highlights the notion that land itself is a bearer of culture. In a world where written records were historically minimal or imposed by colonial powers, the natural world served as both page and archive. By invoking the river as a textual surface, Syiem reclaims the landscape as a legitimate and powerful medium of cultural transmission.

The performative aspect of storytelling is also retained through the rhythm and cadence of her prose. The structure of the novel also resembles a series of chants or invocations, echoing oral performances. This aesthetic choice reaffirms the connection between form and content, suggesting that the river's flow is not just metaphorical but sonic and narrative. As Syiem asserts in one of her interviews by Jobeth Ann Warjri, memory has played an important role in her life. She writes:

I suppose my first collection of poems was an attempt to bridge the past; I found that these memories were, to my surprise, meaningful and that they had a significantly contemporary relevance. It was my first attempt and I was still feeling my way around but realizing more and more that so much had to be retold, reinvented, re-made, updated and understood. I was not looking to write about the daffodil, as I told Professor Temsula Ao in one of my innumerable conversations with her. I was looking to the bamboo and the scuttling rodents who were generating stories of other worlds and other modes of being. Writers, therefore, shift their writings from human to non-human, and the subject of Anthropocene gains centre stage. The focus on urban ecology and the need to reform contemporary standards of living is depicted in Syiem's novel.

Esther Syiem, in her book *Oral Discourse in Khasi Folk Narratives*, posits the dynamic nature of the oral, which she terms the "oral resistant". The "oral resistant" refers to the inimical nature of orality striving and thriving across generations. Through the lens of the Umkhrah river, Khasi folk traditions are invoked, and the close ties between nature and humanity are also iterated. The novel is narrated in the form of letters from the ageing river. The Umkhrah River asserts that it is an old river.

I reminisce like an old river, but why shouldn't I? Do you hear me? Will you help me age gracefully for I can still see those days when our young ones would run down the hilly slopes to wash their produce in my waters before selling them at Iewduh Market: cabbages dipped in the flow of a watery life speeding past, radish washed clean, herbs perfumed by the moist fountains of my breath; untainted, reviving, I washed the mud off everything. I was your river. I supported life. I washed all your dirt clean. All I

wanted to do was flow with the tide and hurry off or slowly pick my way through sun drenched shallows (Syiem 17).

There is a hint of cultural amnesia. The Umkhra River took a didactic approach as well. Through this letter, there is an inclination to a pristine rustic past where people in Shillong revere and depend on the river for daily sustenance. Followed by lamentations on how corrupted and vile the contemporary scenario has become. It writes that dead bodies are trussed up and dumped without ceremony; newborn babies are discarded on the banks of the river; mutilations galore and queer things always happen at night. The Umkhrah further adds with a weary heart that the nights are no longer as restful as they used to be (Syiem 17).

Through the voice of the old Umkhrah, there is a convergence of memory, landscape and cultural identity. It is also an unconventional epistolary novel in the sense that there is no linearity of plotline and the correspondent is a non-human entity. This marks a special connection between land and water as well. It can also be read as a metaphor to re-connect with nature and indigenous ways of living in contemporary times. The river, imbued with memory and symbolic resonance, functions both as a natural presence and as a living archive of Khasi cosmology and worldviews and collective consciousness. The river emerges as a site which preserves indigenous worldviews in the face of cultural dislocation. The epistolary mode allows for cultural reclamation through literary nostalgia, with Syiem's evocative language invoking myths, rituals and landscapes that are gradually receding under the pressures of modernity and cultural amnesia. Syiem reanimates an indigenous worldview where the natural world is integral to identity and memory. The river listens, remembers, and responds. This act of writing becomes a mode of remembrance, preserving intangible heritage through a form shaped by Khasi oral traditions. The nostalgia that permeates the novel is a strategic return, a way of preserving cultural fragments and reasserting indigenous continuity.

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