



**“BUT HIS MOST POTENT WEAPON IS HIS TONGUE”: KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH’S EXPLORATION OF THE SPOKEN WORD AND POWER IN *KA DORBAR U LAIPHEW JINGTHAW* IN *THE DISTASTE OF THE EARTH***

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*ABSTRACT.* This paper analyses Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s *The Distaste of the Earth* (2024), with particular attention to the representation of anthropomorphic speech in animals, to argue that animal speech in the text serves as a narrative strategy to critique and redefine the anthropomorphic boundaries between human and non-human beings. The analysis focuses on *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw*, “the council of diverse creatures” (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 256), to illustrate how Nongkynrih employs animal voices to challenge and subvert the hierarchical authority and linguistic dominance associated with human reason and rationality. Overall, this paper underscores the significance of storytelling in shaping and negotiating cultural values, power structures, constructions of identity, and through which ethical awareness of interconnected ecological relationships is cultivated.

*Keywords:* Spoken Word, Nongkynrih, The Distaste of the Earth, Storytelling, Anthropomorphism, Animal Speech.

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**“PERO SU ARMA MÁS POTENTE ES SU LENGUA”: LA EXPLORACIÓN DE LA PALABRA HABLADA Y EL PODER EN *KA DORBAR U LAIPHWEW JINGTHAWEN THE DISTASTE OF THE EARTH* DE KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH**

*RESUMEN.* Este artículo analiza *The Distaste of the Earth* (2024), de Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, prestando especial atención a la representación del habla antropomórfica en los animales, con el propósito de argumentar que el habla animal en el texto sirve como estrategia narrativa para criticar y redefinir los límites antropomórficos entre seres humanos y no humanos. El análisis se centra en *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw*, “el consejo de criaturas diversas” (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 256), para ilustrar cómo Nongkynrih emplea las voces de los animales para desafiar y subvertir la autoridad jerárquica y el dominio lingüístico asociados con la razón y la racionalidad humanas. En suma, este artículo subraya la importancia de la narración en la configuración y la negociación de valores culturales, estructuras de poder y construcciones de identidad, y a través de la cual se cultiva la conciencia ética de las relaciones ecológicas interconectadas.

Palabras clave: Palabra hablada, Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth*, Narración, Antropomorfismo, Lenguaje animal.

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**1. INTRODUCTION: RETELLING THE LEGEND OF MANIK RAITONG IN *THE DISTASTE OF THE EARTH***

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is a distinguished writer and academic from the Khasi community of Meghalaya and is currently Professor of English Literature at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. He has authored and edited numerous volumes of poetry, short stories and essays, written in both Khasi and English. Nongkynrih has contributed significantly to the preservation and re-imagining of Khasi oral traditions, notably through works like *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (2007), a retelling of Khasi folk stories; *Manik: A Play in Five Acts* (2011), based on the legend of Manik Raitong; and *The Legend of U Thlen: A Graphic Novel* (2013), among others. His novels, *Funeral Nights* (2021) and *The Distaste of the Earth* (2024), reflect the Khasi worldview, its cultural and ecological sensibilities, and critically engage with the transformations and dislocations brought about by modernity. Across his diverse body of work, Nongkynrih has demonstrated a sustained commitment to bringing Khasi narratives, ethics, and aesthetics into dialogue with contemporary literary forms.

Nongkynrih’s *The Distaste of the Earth* (2024) retells the Khasi legend of Manik Raitong. Manik becomes an orphan at a young age after he loses his family and entire clan to an epidemic. He falls in love with Lieng Makaw, the daughter of the *Lyngksor* (prime minister), but is rejected by her mother as he is viewed as an omen of death. Manik withdraws from society, living as a recluse in sackcloth and ashes, mourning the death of his kin and the loss of his love. At night, he divests himself

of his rags, dresses in finery and plays haunting tunes on his *sharati* (flute). Lieng Makaw is soon married to the *Syiem* (king) and becomes the *Mabadei* (queen-consort). After the *Syiem* leaves for other provinces for a prolonged period, the lonely Lieng Makaw becomes enchanted by the tunes that Manik plays on his *sharati* and reconnects with him. They begin a relationship and she eventually bears his child. When the affair is exposed, Manik's tragic fate is sealed, thus enshrining him as “Manik the Wretched” (Nongkynrih, “U Manik Raitong” 144), the archetypal lover of longing and loss. As Manik leaps into the fire that is his death sentence, Lieng Makaw jumps into the funeral pyre to join him (129-54). The legend of Manik Raitong, with its enduring themes of desire, loss, tragic love, and fate, and its emotionally compelling tone, has ensured its place in Khasi storytelling traditions, with contemporary writers such as Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih revisiting the tale. Because its themes remain resonant, it lends itself to re-articulation in modern literary forms as a means of sustaining and re-imagining Khasi cultural memory across temporal contexts.

Nonkynrih writes in the author's note of *The Distaste of the Earth* that he has compressed the love story of Manik and Lieng in his novel to “a mere skeletal outline that would hardly fill two pages” (ix). Instead, he “creates an ancient fictional world of kings and queens, princes and princesses, warriors and plunderers” (ix), in which the story of love plays just one part. He imaginatively expands the tale of the epidemic that wipes out Manik's family and his Maitang clan. The devious machinations of the *Syiem* (king) and the *Dorbar* (traditional council or assembly) to rob Manik of his inheritance, Manik's residence in the forest of Lawbah, and the episode of *Ka Dorbar U LaipheW Jingthaw* or “the council of diverse creatures” (256) are Nongkynrih's own additions to the legend of Manik Raitong. His additions add further depth to the legend, facilitating the novel to grapple with the themes of corruption, greed, oppression, justice, revenge, retribution, and peace. Nongkynrih thus creates a world where the evils of humans and the forces of nature intertwine to weave an epic tale of love, loss, struggle, resilience, and moral reckoning.

Nonkynrih dedicates a seventy-five-page section in *The Distaste of the Earth* to *Ka Dorbar U LaipheW Jingthaw*, forming “a substantial section where [Manik], in a dreamlike state, listened to animals relating their own tales of woe at the hands of man” (ix). At this juncture in the novel, Manik and his sister Maïa have tragically lost their family and their clan. Instead of safeguarding the siblings' rightful inheritance of the land and property of the Maitang clan, the human *Dorbar* seizes their inheritance and exiles them to a corner of the clan's territory. Maïa then passes away from an illness, leaving Manik all alone in the world. His life under threat, Manik leaves the little hut and escapes to the forest of Lawbah, where the events of *Ka Dorbar U LaipheW Jingthaw* unfold.

The animals, birds, and insects of Lawbah gather at the *Ka Dorbar U LaipheW Jingthaw* to converse with the new human resident of the jungle. Here, Manik narrates his tragic tale of loss, betrayal, and suffering. The diverse creatures, in turn, then narrate their own experiences of betrayal and exploitation inflicted by humans. They recount and retell *khanatang* (Khasi creation myths or sanctified stories) and

folk tales, interrogating how these narratives have constructed a worldview with humans at the centre and how they have functioned to legitimise human superiority and authenticate animal stereotypes. The interaction at *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* harkens to a time even more ancient than Nongkynrih's fictional world of kings and queens. The myths, legends, and tales situated in this ancient period often begin with the words *sbisien mynba dang lung ka pyrthei* (when the earth was still in its infancy). In Nongkynrih's English retellings, this primaevial age is evoked through the words "when man and beasts and stones and trees spoke as one" (*Around the Hearth* viii). This temporal framing suggests that the ethical dilemmas of human-ecological relations are enduring concerns in the Khasi cultural memory. This frames contemporary cross-species and ecological conflicts within the Indigenous Khasi tradition, thus situating Nongkynrih's novel within the continuum of Khasi cosmology.

## 2. SITUATING *KA AĪOM KSIAR* OR THE GOLDEN AGE: THE MYTHIC CONTINUUM OF SPEECH AND RELATIONAL BEING

Michelle Scalise Sugiyama, in "Distant Time: A Possible Typological Literary Universal", identifies a recurring motif across oral narratives of forager, forager-horticulturalist, and forager-herder societies: a belief in a primordial or "distant time" where the world was fundamentally different from the present (n.p.). Richard K. Nelson first introduced the term "Distant Time" as a translation of the Koyukon word *Kk'adonts'idnee*. He explains:

As the Koyukon reckon it, all things human and natural go back to a time called *Kk'adonts'idnee*, which is so remote that no one can explain or understand how long ago it really was. But however ancient this time may be, its events are recounted accurately and in great detail through a prodigious number of stories. *Kk'adonts'idnee* (literally, "in Distant Time it is said") is the Koyukon word for these stories. (16)

Other anthropologists and ethnographers have identified similar epochs: Federica de Laguna calls it "Myth Time" (39, 76, 290, 293); Elizabeth and Melville Jacobs use the term "myth" (ix); Deon Liebenberg refers to it as "mythic" age (167). A similar vision of primordial time is found in Khasi cosmology. As Soso Tham explains,

"[l]ong, long ago before anyone can remember, there was a Time we now call the Ancient Past. She holds and protects all the days that once were young but have now grown old, that once were new, but now have aged. No one has ever seen her, but we all know her. Khasis call her *Myndai* or *Ki Sngi Barim*—the days that make up Time long gone. (19)

The conception of *Myndai* or *Ki Sngi Barim* functions as the Khasi equivalent of Distant Time and evokes an ancestral past that is both mythic and living, a sacred archive of memory connecting the present to the ancestral past.

Scalise Sugiyama elaborates that in Distant Time, the boundary between humans and other life forms was fluid, explaining that this idea is expressed in slightly different ways across cultures, such as "animals were like people" (Erdoes and Ortiz 12) or "animals were people and people were animals" (Reichard 14). Carobeth Laird and George Laird describe Distant Time as the time "When the Animals Were People" (147). The Bella Coola, for example, believed that long ago, "man was able to understand the speech and actions of the birds, the mammals, and the fish" (McIlwraith 385). Thus, another common Distant Time belief was that animals and humans could communicate with one another. Within the continuum of *Ki Sngi Barim*, the Khasis situate *Ka Sotti Juk* (Age of Purity) or *Ka Aiom Ksiar* (Golden Age), which is described as a period of harmony and union between the creator U Blei and all beings (Kharhmar n.p.). In his English works, Nongkynrih refers to this period as the Golden Age when "man and beast lived together in happiness, communicating through the same language" (*Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham* 140) and when "man and beasts, stones and trees could speak as one" (*The Distaste of the Earth* 261). It was a time marked by open communication between heavenly beings, spirits, animals, plants, humans, and non-living nature. Nongkynrih's section on *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* corresponds to an invocation of *Ka Aiom Ksiar*, recovering this lost continuum of speech and communication that has become fragmented in the modern world.

The belief in fluid communication and kinship among all forms of life persists in Khasi lore through figures like the *Kbla Puli*, who are tigermen or weretigers in Khasi belief and are sometimes referred to as *san saram*, meaning five claws, distinguishing them from the *saw saram* or the four-clawed ones, the real jungle-dwelling tigers (Kharmawphlang, "In Search of Tigermen" 161). The Khasis believe that the ability to transform into *Kbal Puli* is a power that only a few possess today. The *Kbla Puli* thus embody the residual memory of *Ka Aiom Ksiar*, encoding the ancient Khasi worldview in which the boundaries between beings were porous and interdependent, not hierarchical.

The transition from this fluid communication and the belief that "animals were people and people were animals" (Reichard 14) to the categorical division of 'human-animal' and 'culture-nature' represents an epistemic rupture, as Nongkynrih's novel represents. This shift, as Nongkynrih illustrates through the tales of *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw*, signals the emergence of anthropocentric worldviews in which humans assume centrality and reflects the transition from relational ontologies grounded in shared sentience and reciprocity to systems of hierarchical epistemologies that privilege human modes of knowing and being. In *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw*, Nongkynrih symbolically revisits the lost continuum of communication, suggesting that the moral and ecological imbalances of contemporary times stem from humankind's estrangement from this primordial relational ontology.

The tension inherent in representations of speaking animals is that they are presented in terms of a uniquely human trait, namely, human language. Speech then becomes a mirror that reflects how humans conceptualise animals. Thomas Wolfe,

in *The Kingdom of Speech*, declares, “[s]peech is not one of man’s several unique attributes—speech is the attribute of all attributes! Speech is 95 percent plus of what lifts man above animal!” (n.p.). For Wolfe, language functions as a marker of human superiority and is a faculty that compensates for physical weakness. He writes, “[i]n hand-to-paw, hand-to-claw, or hand-to-incisor combat, any animal his size would have him for lunch. Yet man owns or controls them all, every animal that exists, thanks to his superpower: speech” (n.p.). Speech here is equated with mastery and symbolises the human capacity to define and dominate other beings. Jeremy B. Lefkowitz explains this belief in Greco-Roman philosophy: “animals are ‘irrational’ (*aloga*) and ‘dumb’; humans, though ‘naked’ when compared to the physical gifts of the other creatures, have been given ‘reason’ (*logos*) to compensate for their relative weakness” (4-5). Within the Cartesian humanist framework, speech, reason, culture, and consciousness are uniquely human capacities, and the ‘animal’ is constructed as the oppositional ‘other’, a being without language, reason or moral consciousness. This distinction places the human at the centre of meaning, and establishes a moral and linguistic hierarchy that justifies domination.

Jacques Derrida in “The Animal That Therefore I Am”, deconstructs this tradition by interrogating and challenging the historical exclusion of animals from the category of the ‘subject’ and the denial of their perceptions, thoughts and suffering within human-centric frameworks. He critiques the notion that only humans are capable of self-representation or autobiographical expression, observing that humans have reserved the role of the “autobiographical animal” (416-417). He argues against the humanist assumption of a privileged, rational humanity and redefines animality as the “life of the living” (417). By decentring the human, Derrida forces a recognition of the human’s own animality, as the thinking subject who “says ‘I’ or apprehends or poses him or herself as an ‘I is a living animal” (417). His reconfiguration of animality decentres the human as the privileged centre of meaning and seeks an ethical reconsideration of life beyond anthropocentric hierarchies.

This challenge of human exceptionalism resonates with the cosmological vision embedded in Nongkynrih’s retelling of Khasi lore, where the boundaries and communication between humans and other beings are fluid. This decentring is dramatised in *The Distaste of the Earth* at the forest of Lawbah when Moina, the mynah, speaks to Manik. Startled, Manik asks, “[w]ho taught you my language?”, assuming that Moina is speaking the human tongue. Moina replies, “I did not speak the human tongue. It is you who speak my language ... Not [only] the tongue of birds; the tongue of all creatures” (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 254). Her response exposes the myth of animals losing the “Spoken Word” as a human fabrication. In fact, it is humans who have lost the ability to communicate with the diverse creatures who can still communicate in the original language gifted by Mei Hukum (Mother Decree).

In Khasi mythology, *Ka Ktien u Briew* (The Word of Man) was shared by all creatures as “the only means of interaction between man and all fellow creatures” (Nongkynrih, *Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham* 140). Nongkynrih uses the term

“Spoken Word” instead, thereby displacing it as an exclusive human quality while simultaneously underscoring its communicative gravity. In “The Mythic Beginnings of Shad Suk Mynsiem”, Nongkynrih retells a *kbanatang* in which Mei Hukum withdrew the Spoken Word from the disobedient animals, granting its privilege solely to humans (“The Mythic Beginnings of Shad Suk Mynsiem” n.p.). By reworking this *kbanatang*, Nongkynrih reverses its logic, presenting language not as a marker of human privilege and cognitive superiority, but as a site of loss and alienation. He frames language as both a marker of consciousness and a mechanism of exclusion through which humans have alienated themselves from the relational ontology in which other beings still participate. By asserting that the animals can speak, Nongkynrih symbolically restores agency to the silenced and reclaims storytelling as a shared practice between species. In doing so, his narrative participates in a broader post-humanist critique of anthropocentrism, expressing how the silencing of other species is tied to the loss of relational modes of knowing and being that once bound humans to nature.

### 3. CHALLENGING ANTHROPOCENTRIC STORYTELLING: RECLAIMING ANIMAL AGENCY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN *KA DORBAR U LAIPHEW JINGTHAW*

Building upon this reorientation of voice and power, *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* expands the critique of language and speech into the realm of storytelling. Nongkynrih employs a nested narrative in which the animals serve as intradiegetic narrators who share stories and engage in dialogue. While the animals in Nongkynrih’s narrative are still undoubtedly anthropomorphised, as their voices must be translated into human-readable forms, they nonetheless disrupt human-centric assumptions about agency. Naama Harel notes that although non-human narrators are “pronouncedly anthropomorphised”, they can still “raise significant questions about nonhuman existence and its relationship with human existence” (49). Thus, she argues that “anthropomorphic representation should not necessarily lead to anthropocentric interpretation, which excludes the nonhuman protagonists” (49). Nongkynrih’s text affirms this, as his animal narrators offer access to perspectives that would otherwise be inaccessible, and in the process, expand the field of narrative empathy to extend beyond the protagonist of the main narrative, Manik. As Karla Armbruster notes, such storytelling invites the reader to simultaneously “identify with the nonhuman animal as a fellow living being and remind[s] him or her of the inevitable differences between humans and other species” (24). Thus, *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* becomes a polyphonic space where the animal characters are no longer passive objects under the human gaze, but autonomous subjects who narrate their own histories.

Lefkowitz remarks that the central conceit of the animal fable lies in the idea that there was a time when animals could speak as men do (10), thus casting speech as a characteristic of logic that animals have lost as they descended into bestiality. Nongkynrih overturns this by tracing the animals’ voices to *Ka Aiom Ksiar*, thus grounding their speech in sacred authority rather than human logic. This move

legitimises animal speech and also differentiates it from the fallible language of humans. In legitimising the narrative voices of the animals within a sacred and mythic framework, Nongkynrih simultaneously stresses the fictionality of his narrative and insists on reliability, thereby creating a paradox that itself reconfigures storytelling as a site of epistemic resistance.

Furthermore, Nongkynrih exposes the instability of a ‘truthful’ narrative, reminding us that stories are discursively constructed and mediated. The ambiguity surrounding the episode of *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingtbaw*, on whether it unfolds in the material world or within Manik’s consciousness as a consequence of his trauma and isolation in the forest, deepens the magical realist tension between the psychological and the mythical. If the council of diverse creatures is indeed a dream born out of Manik’s “hazy and nightmarish state of desolate grief and frustrated rage” (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 254), its very unreliability intensifies the testimonies of the animal characters. Their suffering, which normally remains outside human perception or is silenced or not recognised, finds powerful articulation through the suspension of realist boundaries. The result is a form of speech that is so charged with ethical urgency that it breaks the structural constraints of discourse, transforming trauma and silenced pain into a visionary act of storytelling.

### 3.1. *Subverting Animal Symbolism: Stereotypes and Counter-narratives*

At the *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingtbaw*, the animals and birds expose how humans have mobilised the centrality of speech to construct foundational narratives that justify their domination of nature. They expose how storytelling creates hierarchies by reducing animals to allegorical figures for human morality. The fable as a genre tends to project “human instincts and responses onto animal protagonists with little concern for naturalism or genuine animal behaviour” (Lefkowitz 1). Such symbolic use of animals as moral or allegorical figures for abstract human qualities reduces them to narrative templates and effaces their lived experiences.

The critique of animal stereotypes is developed in Myrsiang, the fox’s contestation of a folktale that portrays the fox as deceitful and the tiger as foolish. In this tale, the fox tricks the tiger with the promise of a meal of a cow and traps him in a small cave. The tiger eventually dies in the cave, and the fox feasts on his entrails. The fox then beguiles the tiger’s widow and marries her, claiming that it had been her late husband’s wish (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 274-84). The story relies on the symbolism that the tiger represents greed, and the fox represents cunning. Regarding the anthropomorphism of animals in fables, Morten Nøjgaard states that animals are endowed with impossible qualities, such as talking, to express that they are to be taken allegorically, establishing that the only possibility of giving the fable meaning is through its interpretation (63). The tiger’s greed and the fox’s deceit merely mirror human vices, yet because the power of interpretation is a human monopoly, human narratives utilise stereotypes to portray the animal world as one that is ruled by appetite and self-interest. The re-interpretation of the

tale by Myrsiang reveals the ideological nature of this convention, as such tales mask human projections hidden behind the veneer of allegory.

Khla, the tiger, who is the moderator of the council, recounts a tale in which his ancestor attacks a goat owned by humans but is caught in a trap in a shed (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 268-74). The tiger warns a passing herdsman not to lead his livestock towards the shed. The herdsman heeds his warning but abandons him in the trap. The tiger pleads with the herdsman to save him, swearing on his mother's name not to harm him. Moved by the tiger's words, the herdsman frees him from the trap, only for the tiger to turn on him. The herdsman then demands that they go to a judge to determine "who has betrayed the word of truth, the pledge of honour" (270). The banyan tree, the birds, and the boulder side with the tiger, asserting that it is man who tends to assault and destroy other beings. The herdsman rejects their verdicts, and their voices are rendered meaningless unless validated by human judgment. The herdsman finally asks for the arbitration of the fox, who sides with him and not with the tiger.

Khla questions the truth of this narrative, arguing that humans are the most treacherous creatures:

Trees, stones and birds can only recount his destructive weakness. They all agree that man is a threat to all life on earth and that only with his death would they be saved from as complicit: How many times have we been shot with arrows and ensnared in traps like the one in your story? Countless. But that doesn't stop man from telling stories maligning our names. (274)

The contradiction in the portrayal of the fox as a deceitful trickster in one story and as a wise judge in another further highlights the instability of the truth in human narratives, demonstrating how storytelling can be a manipulative tool to serve human interests. Myrsiang observes, "[i]n the story, both of us come out as horrible villains. You are murderous and stupid; I'm wily and treacherous, if not as murderous" (284). Through these interrogations, the narrators expose how humans construct stories that fix animals into immutable stereotypes, such as embodiments of greed, cunning, or savagery, and deny them any complexity or change. Nongkynrih transforms storytelling into a site for epistemic resistance, *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* becomes a counter-discursive space where human truth is unmasked as self-serving fiction.

The animals at *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* resist the representational framework of animal stereotypes that are inscribed in human narratives. Instead, they reclaim their individuality and complexity, resisting the reduction of their characters to moral caricatures. The act of reclamation resonates with Derrida's deconstruction of the homogenising category of 'animal'. He argues, "[t]here is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit...[but] 'living creatures' whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity" (415). Nongkynrih's pluralisation of animal voices, each distinct, thus dismantles the anthropocentric category of the

‘animal’. The narrators claim interpretive authority, turning the interpretive gaze back on humanity and exposing how the same stories used to affirm human virtue, in fact, mirror humanity’s destructive tendencies.

Khla’s and Myrsiang’s narratives expose the instability and partiality of human accounts, revealing that human storytelling is not neutral but a tool for asserting dominance and controlling the definition of truth. In questioning the validity of human narratives and in taking away the power to decode animal behaviour and interpret the moral of the narratives, *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* functions to disrupt the set-up boundaries and distinctions between humans and other creatures. The diverse creatures want to be recognised as animals, and not as anthropomorphic animals. Storytelling, thereby, is transformed into a counter-discursive act of redefinition and resistance.

### 3.2. “But man’s word is dung”: *The Deceptive Human Tongue*

The discussions at *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* further expose how human speech functions as an instrument of deceit. The members discuss a *khanatang* where Meingi, the sun, departed to *Krem Lamet Krem Latang*, the cave of the sanctified leaf, after she and her brother Ñi Nai are insulted at the dance festival organised by humans to celebrate the fall of Diengïei, the monstrous tree that had enveloped the world in darkness (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 288-95). Her departure plunged the world into darkness for the second time. Humankind convened a session of the council of diverse creatures to choose who would bring Meingi back. The elephant was chosen as he “personified brute strength and reflected man’s pride in his own knowledge and shortsightedness in believing that the sun, who signified heavenly light, could be intimidated by a show of force” (Nongkynrih, “The Purple Crest” 10). The elephant refused to make the dangerous journey, and humans punished him to become a beast of burden. The hornbill, who symbolises pride, volunteered, but Meingi refused to return with him when he misinterpreted her hospitality as interest and began to court her lasciviously. The rooster was then summoned and promised that he would be dressed brilliantly like a worthy ambassador, and that he would forever occupy a place of honour in all human rituals. The rooster successfully travelled to Meingi’s retreat to request her return. Meingi, who was impressed by his humility and eloquent words, returned to grace the earth (8-15).

At *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* in the forest of Lawbah, Hati, the elephant, Kohkarang, the hornbill, and Rynkuh, the rooster, re-interpret this tale to uncover the human narrative’s deceitful intentions. Hati asks, “[w]hy did man not run his own errands? Why should he punish anyone for not doing something that even he did not dare to? ... he is not only a despicable coward but a wily trickster as well” (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 290). He unmasks the story’s underlying intention to mask human cowardice while projecting deceit onto the animal world. Kohkarang dismantles the tale’s supposed veracity, calling it a “made-up account” (292), revealing that his ancestor never reached the cave. Delirious from a burning

fever, he lost his bearings and returned home (291). Humans concoct the story of the hornbill, recasting his vulnerability into a tale of lust, and Kohkarang laments his species' name has been slandered for all time (293). Rynkuh reveals that his ancestor was deceived through the promise of honour and sacrificed as the one “accountable for all the injustices and transgressions of man and his fellow creatures” (294). Rynkuh reveals the twist in the tale: as his ancestor could not overcome the limitations of his physical stature, he was sacrificed at the altar and travelled in spirit. He was, in all reality, a victim of human manipulations, a scapegoat who takes on the responsibility of all the evils and wrongs of the world. Through their testimonies, the narrators expose the mechanisms of their misinterpretation and reveal that the moral order enshrined in human narratives is not natural but has been constructed through language and power.

Khla narrates another tale in which the dog was tricked into exile through human deception, leading him to betray the other animals and pledge his loyalty to humans (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 285-286). The dog once mistook packets of *tung rymbai* (fermented bean paste) for his favourite delicacy of human dung. Believing that the other animals would also enjoy this treat, he brought it to sell at the animal market called *Ka ĩew Luri Lura*. The packets were assumed to have been left there by some traders on their way to their own market as they were too burdensome to carry (Nongkynrih, “Luri Lura” 28). Khla reveals that the packets of the paste had actually been placed in his path by humans, so that he might disgrace himself at the market. After the outraged animals exile the dog, he seeks refuge with humankind, who promise him food, shelter, protection, and friendship. In return, the dog helps them during hunts and avenges himself on the other animals. Khla's examination of the tale highlights that humans, not animals, are marked by their predatory instincts, as even when their survival is not at stake, they resort to trickery to cement their superiority.

Similarly, Blang, the wild goat, narrates how humans deceived the goats who turned to them for protection (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 296-301). The goats were led to believe that their members who were taken away were given to relatives who would take care of them, blissfully unaware that they were being domesticated by their “greatest benefactor” to be bought, sold, and slaughtered (300). Another member of the council, Kyrtong, the wild ox, exposes how humans used divine sanction to exploit his kind for labour, “milk, skin, bones, fat and meat” (305), by telling the ox that God had commanded the ox to serve humans faithfully (304-5). Blang declares that “man's word is dung” (301), capturing the collapse of faith in the integrity of human speech.

Lenpula, the python's retelling of the myth of U Thlen, deepens the critique of the deceptive nature of human words. He says that part of the myth is “a lie propagated by men about [his] kind” (260). In Khasi mythology, Thlen was an evil creature who fed on human flesh and could change his shape and size at will, preferring the form of a giant python (Nongkynrih, “The Man-Eating Serpent” 65). He was eventually killed by Suitnoh, who was a kind of *URyngkew-U-Basa* or patron god of villages. Afterwards, Suitnoh instructed the people to consume all of Thlen's

flesh in a single day, warning that if any piece remained, his evil would persist. An old woman secretly saved a piece of flesh, which later transformed into a serpent and offered her wealth in exchange for refuge. Tempted by riches, she agreed. Thlen brought prosperity to her household but soon demanded human victims. To appease him, she began hiring killers called *nongshobnob* to supply Khasi blood, and thus the practice of keeping Thlen for wealth spread as a dark custom in parts of Ri Khasi, or the land of the Khasis (64-72).

Lempula laments how the implicit belief in the story of U Thlen has demonised his kind and contributed to their oppression, and how human moral projections have cast species as embodiments of evil: “Whoever is not like man is portrayed as evil to be feared, avoided and destroyed on sight. ... he treats us as disposable enemies” (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 263). His retelling inverts this mythic narrative to reveal how humans project their own avarice, deceit, and appetite for domination onto other species, thus absolving themselves of their own violence. His tale recalls the violence that humans have perpetrated on the goats and the ox, whom they slaughter and consume for meat. Lempula’s indictment echoes Blang’s cry, “[i]s there a monster, a demon more horrible than man?” (301).

### 3.3. *The Spoken Word as Weapon of Dominance: Inverting Myth and Human Authority*

The challenge to the hegemony of human storytelling is further developed by Lempula’s account of how humans have employed their stories to legitimise their superiority over other creatures. He recalls a tale in which Thlen revolted against the authority of the *Hynñiew Trep*, the human caretakers of the earth (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 261-63). In the *khanatang*, the creator U Blei had sent seven of the sixteen clans living in heaven “to descend to earth to till the land, to populate the wilderness, to rule and govern and above all, to be the conscientious caretakers of all life and all creations” (Nongkynrih, “The Mythic Beginnings of Shad Suk Mynsiem” n.p.). These seven clans came to be known as the *Hynñiew Trep*, the ancestors of the seven sub-tribes of the Khasi people. U Blei made a Covenant with *Hynñiew Trep*, giving them *Lai Hukum* (Three Commandments), which included *ka tip briew tip Blei* (the knowledge of man, the knowledge of God), *ka tip kur tip kha* (the knowledge of one’s maternal and paternal relations), and *ka kamai ia ka bok* (the earning of virtue) (Nongkynrih, “The Mythic Beginnings of Shad Suk Mynsiem” n.p ; “The Seven Clans” 5).

At a session of *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw*, U Thlen, the representative of the spiritual realm, declared that he would cease to live by the Covenant, proclaiming “my sustenance is humankind; my earning is pelf” (Nongkynrih, “The Mythic Beginnings of Shad Suk Mynsiem” n.p.). The other creatures revolted in succession, and chaos overthrew virtue. Mei Hukum intervened and decreed that all creatures should receive a fair share of God’s blessing. The animals received the inferior share of “great strength but little ingenuity” because they did not wait until the stipulated day after nine days and nine nights to receive their blessings, while

humans received the superior portion of "great ingenuity but only a little strength" (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 262). Mei Hukum also took away the Spoken Word from animals, thus ending their verbal communication with humankind forever. Mei Hukum also gifted humans with "*ka tiar ka sumar*, the weapon, the protection", or the bow and the arrow as weapons to protect themselves from the animals (262). Humans, now endowed with both intellect and armament, secured domination over the rest of creation.

In Nongkynrih's retelling of this *kbanatang*, Mei Hukum's distribution of blessings reflects a bias that privileges humans with intellect and language, while relegating animals to permanent voicelessness and subordination. Such mythic narratives, within and beyond the Khasi context, function as aetiological devices to naturalise the domination of animals by humans and to legitimise the anthropomorphic hierarchical ordering of creation. The animals, however, expose this deception and point out that humans use their stories to malign, defame, trick, and turn animals against each other. Through irony and inversion, Nongkynrih exposes the human Spoken Word as a tool of domination. Axel Goodbody observes that representing animal lives is fraught with tension since "language and culture inevitably project a world understood according to our scale, interests and desires" (257). He positions irony as a means of making readers aware of the "discriminatory othering of animals" (257). Nongkynrih deploys the central irony of how animals only become perceptible as sentient beings when they speak the human tongue. Yet, this act of speaking exposes a moral order that others them. This ironic inversion of the voiceless speaking and the voiced listening also serves to emphasise the arbitrary boundaries set by humankind in defining intelligence and moral worth. Through the interwoven tales of *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw*, Nongkynrih dismantles the human monopoly over storytelling and exposes how the human Spoken Word, once deemed sacred, has become an instrument of domination. The animals' testimonies invert the hierarchy of the speaker, revealing that human speech, or the "most potent weapon", rests on silencing other forms of life (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 312).

The exchanges at *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* reveal humans have themselves set up the markers of difference and separation between themselves and other creatures. By asserting that animals have always been able to speak, rather than granting them the gift of human speech, Nongkynrih subverts the familiar trope of talking animals in fables and other narratives. The loss of communication, therefore, lies with humans who refuse to listen because of their arrogance. This approach dismantles the traditional hierarchy between humans and animals, the linguistic dominance of human speech, and, by extension, human reason and rationality is overturned. In the process of undermining the linguistic and moral superiority of humans, Nongkynrih questions the legitimacy of human storytelling, exposing how it perpetuates human-centric hierarchical structures and domination over nature, and offers an alternative epistemology of reciprocity, shared values, and communication.

### 3.4. *The Ethics of Speech: Power and Corruption in the Human Dorbar*

The scepticism toward human storytelling and narratives thus reveals a deeper tension between the power of words and their potential for manipulation. The matter of deceptive narratives is further complicated by the significance that spoken words hold in native oral traditions. Spoken words are the foundation of the oral traditions of native people, usually expressed in their legends, myths, folk tales, songs, chants, sayings, and other such traditions. These oral traditions preserve the history, wisdom, and knowledge of the community and reflect their customs, beliefs, hierarchies, and other aspects of their culture. A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff writes that central to the belief of ancient tribal societies is that the spoken word was powerful and revered, as it “enables native people to achieve harmony with the physical and spiritual universe: to bring rain, enrich the harvest, provide good hunting, heal physical and mental sickness, or ward off evils” (7). Desmond L. Kharmawphlang says of the Khasi belief in the spoken word: “The Khasis believe that once a word has been uttered and not retracted, it cannot be treated lightly; it becomes a force” (“The Golden Vine” 104). This reverence for the spoken word in Khasi traditions stands in stark contrast to the instability of truth in human narratives in *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw*. This contrast highlights how human storytelling can shift to serve human agendas when divorced from the cultural preservation and spiritual significance of oral traditions.

Nongkynrih dramatises this corruption through the human *Dorbar* at the village of Paham Lum, where speech is strategically wielded as a tool of control and manipulation. The *Dorbar* comprises the *Syiem*, the *myntis* (ministers) and the elders who represent the executive council of the village. The *Dorbar* is convened primarily to discuss what will happen with the ample landholdings of Manik’s Maitang clan in the Risoh valley. The *Syiem* and the *Lyngdob* (chief priest) justify their plan to seize the Maitang clan’s possessions, appealing to the *Dorbar*’s authority while silencing dissenting voices.

The *Lyngskor* (prime minister), who opposes this plan, remains silent as a neutral member to safeguard his position in the *Dorbar*. As Graham Furniss asserts, “the power of the word as spoken and therefore as agent of representation and communication” functions within the particular contexts of power and authority (18). The *Syiem*’s silence becomes a performance of dominance, while his *Lyngdob* (chief priest) acts as his orator and speaks for him. Throughout the session, the *Lyngdob* turns to him for his permission and awaits his nods of approval. The *Syiem* exerts control over the *myntis* even with his silence because his agents have already bribed them with promises of land and positions of power. The *myntis* here are reminiscent of the dog and the goats, who were lured into domestication after hearing promises of shelter and protection. The *Syiem*, too, is comparable to the deceitful trickster fox, as he is described as “foxy”, with “shifty eyes, a pointed nose and a small mouth” (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 211). The *Syiem* plans on taking over Manik’s entire inheritance, thus committing “daylight robbery, a deed of piety [which] shimmer(s) in the clothes of magnanimity” (220), echoing the tales where deceit triumphs over the truth.

Korbar, the headman of Paham Lum, defiantly opposes the *Dorbar*'s plans. The *Lyngdoh* insinuates that Korbar's challenge of the *Dorbar* is an attempt to disguise his own desire to attain the Maitang clan's wealth (218), thus proving true the accusation at *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* that humans malign and defame those they are jealous of or who are their enemies. Korbar valiantly fights for justice, and in the process also fights for the sanctity of the *Dorbar*. He directly accuses the *Dorbar* of planning theft and murder, and when the angered *myntis* protest, declares, “[t]hat is the only kind of talk that should be spoken! It is called the truth! The king and the council of the king should represent the truth” (213). His defiant outburst restores the moral weight of the spoken word. The *Lyngskor* also reminds the *Dorbar* that they must proceed with righteousness: “Ours is *ka dorbar Blei*, a God-given council, so we must rule and govern with truth and virtue” (217). Therefore, Korbar's only defence against the accusation of the *Lyngdoh* is that he speaks the truth.

Fabian Lyngdoh explains the working of the *Dorbar* and its intrinsic connection with the truth and spoken words:

When a person speaks in a *Dorbar*, he establishes his argument of truth called ‘ka siang nia’, which means to lay down his reason or principle. The opposing member would in retaliation establish his alternative argument of truth which is called ‘ka said nia’, which means to wash away or remove the validity of the argument that the first speaker had established. If ‘ka siang nia’ of the first speaker cannot be invalidated by ‘ka said nia’ of the opposing speaker, then the argument of the first speaker stands as a resolution or ‘ka jubanlak’ of the covenant arrived at in the *Dorbar*. (n.p.)

In the debate at the *Dorbar*, Korbar invokes the Khasi ideal of spoken words as truth, while the *Lyngdoh*'s rhetoric appeals to greed and ambition and distorts the *Dorbar*'s principle of truth. He persuades the *Dorbar* by enumerating the abounding wealth of the Risoh valley, “fertile farmlands, extensive orchards and woodlands”, to motivate the greed of the members of the *Dorbar* and then declares that the two surviving members of the clan “don't need it. *They don't need it!*” (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 214). He delivers a presentation structured to paint perpetrators of a crime as benevolent leaders, thus orally presenting a sequence of meanings that give credence to his plan. The proceedings of the human *Dorbar* thus stand at a complete contrast with *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw*, which is guided by the motto of justice, “*ia kaba dei yn ia bat, ia kaba lait yn ia bref*, we shall keep and hold what is right; reject and dismiss what is wrong” (256).

By juxtaposing *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* with its human counterpart, Nongkynrih exposes the erosion of morality from human speech. The Spoken Word, once sacred, now conceals violence. The human *Dorbar* thus becomes a mirror to expose how the most potent weapon, the tongue, no longer sanctifies truth but desecrates it. Simtyngwieng, the black-backed forktail, had issued this warning to the *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw*: “Never, never underestimate the tongue of man. He fights us with all the weapons at his command: arrows, swords, spears and

snares. But his most potent weapon is his tongue” (312). Through Simtyngwieng’s words, Nongkynrih crystallises his central critique that the human tongue, once revered as sacred, has become corrupted with greed and the desire for domination.

### 3.5. *Decentring the Human: Posthuman Becoming*

When Manik first played his *sharati* to call upon the animals, birds, and insects of the forest of Lawbah, they did not respond to his “mad wrathful tune” (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 254). Moina advises him to pour his sorrow, not his anger, into the tune. Manik’s “notes of sorrow” captivate the creatures of the forest, who then come to where Manik is playing his *sharati* and convene for *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* (255). Moina tells the assembly that they were able to respond to Manik’s call because the inhabitants of the forest and Manik are united by “a common thread in (our) suffering and a common cause in (our) oppression” (255). Experientiality is thus a key narrative feature of the text. Nongkynrih presents the animals as feeling, reasoning, and critical subjects whose experiences allow them to empathise with the human Manik. Their tales tap into Manik’s familiarity with betrayal, abuse, exploitation, and the maligning of his character, and echo his distrust of other humans. Manik’s own tale is an allegory of the greed and deviousness of humans, the weaponisation of the tongue, and the devastating consequences of human greed and the exploitation of nature. At a more significant level, granting animals subjective states as well as cognitive and emotional lives akin to humans serves as a foundation to enable the empathetic relationship with Manik, which will extend into an invitation for Manik to become an inhabitant of the forest.

The final story at *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* is narrated by Langwarty, the yellow-footed green pigeon, who narrates how Kyntiap Mon, a human, transformed into a pigeon and became Langwarty’s ancestress (313-20). Kyntiap Mon was abused by her mother and stepfather, who planned to work her to death and acquire her property. Unable to tolerate her miserable life, she transformed herself into a bird by sticking green bird feathers into her flesh. Kyntiap Mon metamorphoses into the green pigeon, declaring, “from now on, the soles of my feet will never touch the ground again, contaminated as it is by human cruelty” (319). By tracing her lineage to a woman who became a bird, Langwarty’s narrative of metamorphosis collapses the distinction between human and animal, foregrounding a cosmology in which transformation is not aberration but continuity, and also suggesting that the human is not a category apart but part of an ontology of relationality.

The narrative of Kyntiap Mon’s transformation inaugurates a thematic movement from suffering and alienation within human society toward liberation through a redefined relationship with the more-than-human world. This movement finds resonance in Manik’s story when Khla tells Manik that his relief can come from transforming into an animal, “maybe not physically, but certainly in all other circumstances” (321), and that he can find happiness in his arboreal existence. Manik ultimately renounces his desire for revenge, taking Moina’s advice to “unyoke” himself from thinking “like man” (324), becoming “disconnected from the sources

of wretchedness, a fluffy down in the wind of fortune" (322), choosing instead to "be a real creature of the forest: *Im rwing*, *bam rwing*, *dih rwing* — live for the present, eat on the spot, drink on the spot" (323). Nongkynrih's narrative enacts a postmodern deconstructionist decentring of the human agent, which involves dissolving the anthropocentric boundaries that define identity and agency. Through Manik's emancipatory movement into becoming a creature of the forest, Nongkynrih dramatises the erasure of hierarchical distinctions between humans and animals. As Donna Haraway observes, existence is relational and already entangled, writing: "To be one is always to become with many. ...those who are to be in the world are constituted in intra- and interaction. The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject-and-object-shaping dance of encounters" (42). Manik's detachment from human society is therefore not an escapist ploy or a negation of being, but a reconfiguration of subjectivity into a relational ontology. Manik's relocation to the forest signifies not just a spatial but also a cultural and ontological displacement. In withdrawing from human society, Manik distances himself from the logocentric and anthropocentric orders that privilege human rationality and dominance. The forest, in turn, becomes a space where agency, value, and meaning are reconstituted through non-human relationalities, unsettling the hierarchies of human-centred epistemologies.

The tale of Kyntiap Mon's transformation into the green pigeon also suggests that justice, which is denied by human structures, may be realised in spaces where natural order prevails. Manik, after he becomes a resident of the sacred forest of Lawbah, receives justice as divine forces of nature punish those who had wronged him, with the *Syiem* crushed by a falling branch (Nongkynrih, *The Distaste of the Earth* 333), and the daughters of the *Lyngdob* drown in a flash flood (334). Both tragic incidents occurred in the forests of the Risoh valley. At the human *Dorbar*, the *Lyngdob* had ordered that the prohibited forests of Risoh would be opened for use by the villagers, violating the Maitang clan's centuries-old tradition of protecting the forests (215). Villagers were forbidden from trespassing on the protected forests, and woodcutting, hunting, fishing, and bird-catching were prohibited (258). The sacred groves, a misnomer, as they are actually sacred forests, have been protected by the Khasi and Jaintia people and are sacred sites which are consecrated by spirits who punish offenders who defile the forest. Harming any plant or animal is forbidden, and such acts risk supernatural retribution. The villagers thus interpret the deaths of the *Syiem* and the *Lyngdob*'s daughters as vengeance enacted by the guardian deities of the clan. The restoration of moral equilibrium occurs through natural, rather than human, agency. Manik's transformation into a creature of the forest thus encapsulates a posthuman ethics in which all forms of life are entangled in a shared ecology of justice.

Nongkynrih resists reading Manik's residence in the forest and the return to nature as an escapist response or renunciation of human connection and society. Moina's advice to Manik, "[y]ou will be happy here [in the forest] with us ... you will be at peace. But if you ever go back, remember that it is possible to be warm and well-fed and to enjoy all the good things without falling prey to a senseless,

acquisitive frenzy” (324), offers a moral counterpoint to human greed. Nongkynrih’s ecocritical perspective thus challenges anthropocentric perspectives by suggesting the re-assessment of human structures and their ethical reorientation through co-existence. In this context, the central theme of the construction of reality through storytelling in *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* becomes inseparable from the larger ecological and ethical project of dismantling human exceptionalism.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: RE-IMAGINING LANGUAGE, POWER

Frederike Middelhoff writes that

[t]here is no such thing as knowing animal minds and feelings, nor is there any chance to evade anthropomorphising animals if they are made narrating (or even writing) subjects of their lives. Animal consciousness and feelings in linguistic terms are always subject to an epistemological anthropocentrism. (7)

Nongkynrih acknowledges this limitation but attempts to move beyond an ontological anthropocentrism which privileges humans over animals for religious, moral, or biological reasons. His narrative opens up a space to imagine a more-than-human perception, which acknowledges the inherent agency and value of all beings and thus invites the reader to consider what it might be like to observe and assess the world from beyond the human perspective. Nongkynrih’s use of anthropomorphism is not to merely endow animals with speech, but to symbolically restore agency to those rendered voiceless within cultural and linguistic systems of power. He transforms the act of storytelling from a human-centred hierarchical exercise of power into a dialogic, reciprocal, multi-voiced space. In doing so, he transforms the *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* into a counter-discourse to human *logos*, where there occurs a shift from domination to reciprocity.

Ultimately, *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* is not simply a tale about speaking animals; it is a profound exploration of power, justice, and the constructed nature of truth. Nongkynrih dismantles the linguistic superiority of humans and reclaims narratives as a shared ecological practice, and his exploration of storytelling becomes a meditation on the politics of voice and the ethics of representation. If, as Derrida argues, language has historically served to include only human voices within the domain of meaning, Nongkynrih’s reimagining of speech and narrative restores multiplicity to the act of expression itself. In foregrounding these competing voices, Nongkynrih not only critiques the anthropocentric limits of *logos* but also reconfigures narrative into a dialogic, plural space.

Furthermore, the rejection of imposed narratives aligns with decolonial resistance to narratives that have been used to define and marginalise indigenous and native peoples. This mirrors real-world dynamics where marginalised groups have their voices ignored or co-opted by dominant cultures. In doing so, Nongkynrih exposes the limits of speech as a marker of identity and agency, as speech alone cannot secure recognition when it is dismissed or invalidated by dominant discourses.

Nongkynrih's re-imagining of speech also becomes a decolonial gesture that unsettles colonial ways of knowing and speaking, reclaiming storytelling as an ethical and political act of epistemic disobedience. The reclamation of narrative authority by the animals at *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* thus becomes emblematic of a broader struggle to restore silenced voices and to reassert an ethical relationship between language, power, and representation. *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw* thus becomes not merely a narrative of animals speaking back to power, but a vision of how indigenous epistemologies and ecologies contest colonial epistemic domination.

Nongkynrih also foregrounds the overall transformative role of storytelling in shaping and contesting values, power structures, identity, and the cultural perceptions of nature. His work thus participates in a broader decolonial movement to delink from imposed hierarchies of meaning and to recover indigenous modes of communication, perception, and ethical engagement. The decolonial imagination here restores the vitality of oral storytelling not only as cultural preservation, but as an act of resistance, as a way of reasserting sovereignty over meaning and reclaiming the relational ethics embedded in indigenous worldviews.

His work also reveals the tension between the power of language to preserve a community's culture and its potential to legitimise hierarchies and exclusion. This duality underscores storytelling's ambivalent capacity to both sustain cultural identity as well as perpetuate forms of control. Through figures like the members of the human *Dorbar*, Nongkynrih exposes how humans manipulate language to construct self-serving truths and reveals the dangers of speech detached from responsibility. Yet, the novel also simultaneously celebrates how indigenous oral traditions uphold the sacred and ethical function of speech in maintaining cultural identity and preserving and transmitting collective wisdom. This contrast underscores the wisdom behind the Khasi belief in the power of spoken words and the responsibility that comes with speech. By foregrounding spoken words as both sacred and potentially manipulative, the text interrogates the moral responsibility that accompanies speech.

Through the convergence of anthropomorphism and decolonial critique, Nongkynrih interrogates the epistemic hierarchies embedded within dominant linguistic and narrative forms. His reconfiguration of speech operates as a decolonial intervention that contests colonial modes of knowing and representation, which privilege human, Western, and rationalist paradigms. His re-imagining of speech acts as an ethical intervention that dismantles hierarchies of expression and reclaims storytelling as an act of cultural survival. *Ka Dorbar U Laiphew Jingthaw*, therefore, functions as both a literary and philosophical project that calls for a re-evaluation of the moral foundations of language and its ability to sustain or subvert structures of power. In conclusion, Nongkynrih's *The Distaste of the Earth* re-asserts the indigenous oral imagination as an epistemically and ethically transformative force. It advances a decolonial vision of storytelling that challenges dominant legacies of representation while restoring narrative as a relational, ecological, and ethical practice.

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