

# Voices From The Periphery: Indian English Writing From The Northeast

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*Abstract: The term North East India tends to homogenize a vastly heterogeneous region and is collectively applied to the eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura and Sikkim. Writings in English which have emerged from the region in recent times is significant for these are not just voices from the margin but they also tend to negotiate the centre-periphery relationship. These writings not just seek to deconstruct stereotypical views of the Northeast, but they also represent the very ethos of the region. Writers in English from the region have had to face diverse obstacles but with the spirit in which they have met the challenges indicates an increase in the repertoire of the literature produced in the region and also it is hoped that these writers would bring about some influence on the English literature from the country.*

*Keywords: Northeast, centre, margin, North East English writing, identity, ethnicity.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term Northeast which is collectively applied to the eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura and Sikkim is too sweeping a term and tends to homogenize the entire region significantly overlooking the geographical, cultural, social and political differences. However, the fact is that this terminology is used for political convenience; it is purely an outsiders point of view and the region continues to remain one of the most stereotyped parts of India. Be it literary, social, political or economic affairs, the imagination of “mainland” has been that of the mysterious other. Hence, K.C Baral comments that it is in this context it becomes very important how a writer from the Northeast perceives his/her position. The term “marginality” gains significance in this context. Writings from the Northeast are not just representative literary pieces but they become voices from the margin. These writers from the Northeast don’t just express their views, ideas, feelings, emotions and ethnic particularity, but collectively, they reproduce the ethos of a region.

Tilottama Misra, in her editorial note in *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India, Fiction* mentions:

“An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with ‘other’ cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the seven north-eastern states. Each small community or linguistic group has responded through its oral or written communication to the majoritarian cultures from either mainland India or from outside the borders of the country, in its own distinctive manner.”

The literature of the Northeast marks the negotiation of the margin with the centre thereby testifying the process of reconstruction of the notions of identity, nationality, homeland, insiders and outsiders.

Writing in English from this region which though of recent origin has been variously contested. Author Mitra Phukan in her article “Writing in English in India’s Northeast; Relevance, Importance and Place” says that English obviously came into this region with the British colonizers but it was not the British administration which was solely responsible for planting the seeds of this language in this region. The responsibility mostly falls upon Christian Missionaries. These

Missionaries set up various schools and colleges in different parts of the region. Most of the contemporary writers in English from this region have had their education in these Christian Missionary run English medium schools. English being their first language these writers find it convenient to express themselves in English rather than their mother tongue. These writers, though belonging to different parts of the region, had gone to English medium schools, were trained to write in a certain way, had read similar books in their formative years in schools and colleges. These are various factors which have threaded these writers inspite of having individual culture, identity, ethnicity of their own.

Contemporary writings from the Northeast are not just limited to the grove of ethnic representations but they go beyond the ethnic and reprocess the cultural memory of a shared history. In most of the writings it is a double dimension: freshness of thought and theme on one hand and rootedness in age old tradition on the other. As far as the literature of the Northeast is concerned, it has a plural significance. While some genre writings have been adopted from the Indian tradition, others are a result of the Western tradition. According to K.C Baral in his keynote address at the National Seminar On "Dynamics of Culture, Society and Literature: Emerging literatures from North East" organised by IAS, Shimla and Department of English, Mizoram University on 10-11 March 2009:

"the emerging literatures from the Northeast are variously critiqued as ethnic writing, lacking in history and tradition and often subjected to the virulent diatribe that lacks in aesthetic virtuosity. These critical opinions are at best paternalistic and at worst, smack of ignorance in understanding the societies and cultures of the Northeast."

It is to be noted that every poet or writer from this region has their own distinct individuality and vision and each shapes the English language to serve their own use. For example, Arunachal Pradesh has a rich oral tradition of its own. For most part written literature there had been either Assamese or Hindi in the last century. The Assamese language in its various oral and written forms has also served as the lingua franca amongst many of the hill states in the neighbouring states of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. But these oral forms have remained as pidgin languages and hence are termed as non languages even by speakers who use them. We find writers like Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorje Thongchi making use of Assamese language in their works. At present, however, the new generation has accepted the prime position of English with English being made the official language in most of the hill states. The old story telling tradition, which is common to all the oral cultures of indigenous people have been creatively integrated in the works of the writers of the present generation who belong to such tribes but have chosen to write in English. These writers by moving from the oral to the written had attempted to give a permanence to the fluid narrations of oral literature. For writers like Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh, it was indeed a radical step when she chose to write in English. Another reason which facilitates English writers from this region is the wide global readership which they enjoy when they write in a language that has an international reach.

## A. OBJECT OF STUDY

The paper aims to study selected fictions of contemporary writers from the Northeastern region of India and also attempts to situate these writings from the periphery as a "sub genre" of Indian English writings post independence.

## B. ANALYSIS

Set in troubled times, works of Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika, Aruni Kashyap raise questions about insurgency, homeland and the Assam Movement; not to forget the dark era of "secret killings", the fear lingering in the minds of the common man. The Assam Movement forms the backdrop of Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife*. Rukmini, the District Collector's wife who is the protagonist in the novel ponders over the question of death. Kidnappings, extortion, killings become the order of the day and even the Superintendent of the police is not spared. While Rukmini sets out on a journey towards self discovery, she unravels various questions of identity as well. These questions of identity not just concern the individual but the community also. Phukan through Rukmini points out at the students who played a major role during the Assam Movement. As Rukmini observes the students gathered for the agitation, she notices that the girls who used to dress in salwar kameez to college are clad in mekhela sador to assert their Axomiya identity. She looks at the bright, young faces of boys and girls and notices their facial features which is a mosaic of the Mongoloid, the Austric, the Aryans and the Dravidians:

"...the almond eyes, the golden skins of the Mongoloid, the curly hair of the Austric, the dark complexions of the Dravids, the fine features and fair colourings of the Aryans, were all present in the crowd of young faces before her. And they wanted to rid the land of foreigners!" (Phukan,91)

Here lies the irony of the entire Movement.

It was during the Assam Movement that the secessionist group of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was formed. In due course of time this group started asserting its power and placed demands for the sovereignty of the state. The Indian Army has been the principal actor in attempts made by the centre to curb insurgent activities in the Northeast. The real problem with power being bestowed on the Indian Army is that in the course of their counter insurgency operations against the militant groups of the NorthEast, there have been many examples of transgression into the civilian domain. This has created a "kill as you like" environment in the region which has been further legitimised by acts such as the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958). Brikodar's sister Mamoni in Aruni Kashyap's *The House With a Thousand Stories* becomes a victim of the dark desires of the Indian Army: the army which was deployed in the region to quell militancy. During Pablo's visit to Brikodar's house, she behaves like a lunatic after a group of twelve Indian Soldiers cross question the protagonist. The explanation that is available to Pablo through Mridul for Mamoni's behaviour is that she had been raped by four military men when she had gone to wash clothes in the Pokoriya river. The bride (Moina pehi) in the same text attempts suicide when it is rumoured that her would be brother

in law is a member of the ULFA. It is not whether she supports the cause of the ULFA or not but the very fact that after being associated with such a family, she would be victimised by the Indian army. The rumour conjures images of atrocities by the Indian army in her mind:

“If she would be raped during combing operations by army men, whom she feared more than death, more than the taste of phenyl. The signs of which she had seen in the bodies of the women in the village. One of them was, of course, Brikoder’s sister Mamoni who had screamed and fainted, leaving behind a yellow trail, when she heard the sounds of boots marching. When she saw jeeps, when she saw khaki dresses, when she heard the men in uniform speaking in Hindi.” (Kashyap, 191)

Everyone in the village hoped that one day there would be no ULFA, SULFA, Bodo or Karbi rebels but they were certain that that day would come after lots of death: killings of families, rapes during secret killing missions.

Insurgent activities, counter insurgency operations, secret killings, victimisation of the innocent also gain prominence in Dhruva Hazarika’s novel *Sons of Brahma*. The protagonist of the novel Jongom Hanse is sandwiched between ULFA on one hand and counter insurgency operators on the other.

The writings of Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire (Iralu), and Monalisa Changkija which are rooted in the struggle of Naga separatist battle raise poignant issues of a separate homeland and identity. The anxiety of otherness depicted in their works duplicate the anxiety of otherness that the periphery experiences from the centre. Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone* is fraught with the various issues related to the Naga freedom struggle. The Nagas’ quest for a separate ‘identity’ and the resultant subjugation of the rebellion by the Indian Army led to various atrocities, which resulted in the suffering of the common people. The North Eastern region of India is a multi cultural and multi ethnic mosaic. Post independence this region has acquired the notoriety of being a “disturbed” area because of various inter ethnic struggles for self determination. The dominant theme of the short stories in Ao’s collection *These Hills Called Home, Stories from a War Zone* is that of violence perpetrated by various militant outfits as well as by the armed forces in their counter insurgency operations. According to Tillottama Misra, violence features as a recurrent theme in writings from the Northeast because the story of violence seems to a never ending one and yet people have not learnt to live with it as they are expected to do by the centres of power. In Ao’s narrative, the young, old, rebels, housewife, everyone is touched by violence. Her book is fraught with stories related to various issues of Naga freedom struggle. Soaba is one of the powerful stories which brings to the fore how the state exerts its ‘right’ to inflict violence or disciplinary measures on the Naga people through the predicament of the protagonist, Soaba. The literal meaning of the word is ‘idiot’ and the story depicts how the protagonist gradually cloths himself with the new identity made available by the state to him. The Curfew Man is another significant narrative in the collection which describes the plight of simple villagers sandwiched between the Naga rebels on one hand and the Indian Army on the other. The Northeast has been constructed as the mysterious other by the Indian imagination.

According to the stereotyped Indian imagination, the Northeast is an “untamed” land of homogeneous entity. Udipanna Goswami, in her book *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam*, comments:

“For the Indian state, the people of Northeast seem to have remained at the either end of the spectrum stretching between the noble savage and the naked brute. The exorcised, enigmatic noble savage can be tamed, but the naked brute understands only the language of violence. It is for this reason that the first response of the state towards any disturbance in the periphery has been the use of violence and coercion, the most disturbing manifestation of which has been the prolonged militarisation in the Northeast.” (Goswami 130-131)

The Indian Army in course of its various counter insurgency operations is often found to transgress the rights of the civilians. In Ao’s story *The Last Song*, we get a ghastly picture of atrocities committed by the Indian Army in the name of curbing insurgency. The narrative is of a young girl who sings so well that at a very tender age she becomes a member of the Church choir. At a moment in the story when she refuses to be subjugated to the Army, she is raped and her song crushed forever. Not satisfied with raping both the mother and the daughter, the captain of the army ordered his soldiers to shoot those people who had gone to pick up the dead bodies of the mother and the daughter and then burnt down the church with his own hands with many people inside its privacy.

“The cries of the wounded and the dying inside the church proved that even the house of God could not provide them security and save from the bullets of the crazed soldiers”(Ao, 29)

Closely associated with the anxiety of otherness, is the insider-outsider dichotomy which has been widely explored in the novels of Meghalaya born writer Anjum Hasan. She basically deals with the dilemma of being both insiders and outsiders and the experiences that the non Khasis underwent during the conflicts and demands for statehood. The novel *Lunatic in My Head* is also preoccupied with the dichotomy of the insider and the outsider. Hasan’s characters who are people born and brought up in Shillong but are non Khasis have to pay prices for being dkharis. In the novel, among Aman’s group of friends, Ribor is a Khasi and hence it is Ribor who often saves him and his friends whenever other Khasi boys try to bully them. during one of his walks in the town, when a car approaches Aman, he feels insecure because Ribor is not with him and he can very well recognize the driver of the car to be a Khasi fellow. But then he is relieved when the person halts the car asking for a match in order to smoke his cigarette and does not bully him. He says that not all Khasis are bad, there are some good ones as well. The incident involving Aman and Ribor along with the channawalla Sarak Singh where the channawalla is bullied by a group of Khasi boys because he is an outsider reflects the troubled times in Shillong.

Ibomcha, Firdaus’s boyfriend is from Manipur. He has plans to take her to Manipur after their marriage but Firdaus does not want to leave Shillong. during his visits to Imphal, he often asked Firdaus to accompany him but she always declined saying that she was not prepared at the moment. To

her it is Shillong that she had known throughout her life. At times inspite of living in Shillong, she had longed to be there. Back in college when she hears about her colleague Nivedita's husband's extra marital affair with a Khasi lady, she sought pleasure at the fact not of deteriorating relation between the husband and the wife but at the thought that Mr Nivedita (Firdaus's coinage to refer to Nivedita's husband) had chosen a Khasi lady. Unfortunately, the Khasi lady died as a result of the affair and Mr and Mrs Nivedita had to leave Shillong and move off to Calcutta. In her letter to Flossie Sharma, Nivedita is nostalgic about Shillong and complains about the hot and humid weather of Calcutta; she wishes they had never left Shillong. after reading the letter Flossie Sharma remarks:

"Thank God we are not compelled to go to awful places like Calcutta. We keep complaining about Shillong but think of all the good things in this place." (Hasan, 344)

Homi Bhabha in his essay "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the margins of the Modern Nation" reveals nationalist representations as highly unstable and fragile. According to Bhabha, on one hand while nationalism is a pedagogic discourse as it claims a fixed origin for the nation and asserts a sense of continuous history, on the other hand nationalist discourses are simultaneously performative and must be continuously rehearsed by the people in order to maintain a sense of comradeship. It is this sense of the performative that enables all those placed on the margins to intervene in the signifying process and challenge the dominant representations with narratives of their own. These counter narratives represent different experiences, histories and representations and challenge the formation of a homogeneous nation. It is the performances of these people on the margins which creates a friction between the major signifying process and the narratives of the marginalized. This is what we find in the case of the Khasi-non Khasi or the Indian state conflict. The Khasis think that inspite of being a majority in population in the region covered by present day Meghalaya, after the British had left India, a neo colonialism has set in where the trade in the area is dominated by the Marwaris, administration is dominated by the Bengalis and the Assamese, education by the Christian missionaries and the original inhabitants, that is the Khasis have been relegated to the background and hence they rose against the Indian state demanding for the formation of a separate state. Franz Fanon in his essay, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" mentions about the rise of neo colonialism, a situation where after the period of colonialism is over, some natives who are educated in the ways and manners of the colonizers start taking their place and dominate the natives thereby leading to conflict between the two factions in due course of time. Hasan in both the novels by highlighting the plight of the non Khasis and the sense of belonging that these people too nurture having lived in Shillong for two or three generations and how they think of Shillong as their homeland and inspite of getting the opportunity to go back to the place of their origin would not do so because Shillong to them is their context; has tried to bring about some sort of reconciliation between the two factions.

Conflict also forms an important arena of Guwahati born Bangalore based writer Jahnvi Barua. Barua's debut novel *Rebirth* which was longlisted for the Booker Prize deals with

not just the external conflict but more importantly the inner metaphorical conflicts of the female protagonist. Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth* portrays the character of Kaberi, a Guwahati born woman who after her marriage with Ranjit (Ron) moves off to Bangalore. Although the busy life of a city like Bangalore would give one an impression of a city where people hardly have time to reflect about their own selves, we find Jahnvi Barua sketching the entire novel as thought motives of her protagonist Kaberi. The narrative technique that Barua adopts here is keeping in view her main motive of rendering the story as well as the inner thoughts of the protagonist. Written in first person, the actions in the novel are unraveled through the thought processes of Kaberi. Adopting the technique of interior monologue, it is Kaberi's memories of her past and thoughts about the present that she narrates to her unborn child that we get to know what is happening.

## II. CONCLUSION

Although writings in English from this region has undergone criticism from vernacular modes of literature, however, it is to be noted that with international publication houses publishing these works, space is being created and recognition is fast increasing for this vibrant writing in English. The Northeastern region of India has undergone historical and political trauma of untold suffering and marginalization. The writings in English from this region are infact various voices which need to be understood in the mosaic of Indian culture as a whole. Margaret Zama, in her work *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India* thus comments,

"They usher in a different brand of literary repertoire in ways that depict their various communities, their unique linguistic registers, and the worldview that they project in an endeavour to preserve their cultural and ethnic identities. This is not to be mistaken simply as blind nostalgia for a way of life long lost, but must be received as voices of individual authors from societies caught in the cross current of their political and historical inheritances, personal tragedies and cultural ambivalence, voices that are involved in developing and contributing to a much larger literary consciousness that needs to be recognized and interrogated."

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