



Research Paper

## A Critical Appraisal of Fiction in English by Women Writers from India's North-East

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**ABSTRACT:** It is without a doubt that writings in English emerging from the North-East region of India encapsulate a complexity that is a result of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual cultures of its people and the issues that are unique to the region's ruptured history. For this reason(s), writers from the North-East explore a kaleidoscope of thematic concerns in their fiction. The literature produced by women from this region also encompass all of these thematic concerns, however, their fiction also carries the burden of alternative textual readings as they are written from a place of subjective existence. A notable phenomenon is that many contemporary writers from the region are female and the prolific flow of English fiction from the North-East comes from women writers, and such a development cannot be overlooked because it appears to foretell that women's fiction from the region straddles a critical stage in India's literary history. It is with this conviction that the paper deems it important to estimate the contribution of women writers from the North-East to literature by giving a critical appraisal of their fiction (looking at the socio-cultural context(s) that they write from) and make an attempt to examine the niche that they occupy in the broader canvas of Indian writings in English.

**KEYWORDS:** North-East, Women's Writing, Writings in English, Fiction.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Writings from the region embody layers of complexities as the North-East is an amalgamation of multiethnic and multilingual cultures within a space that tangibly isolated from the rest of India. Their short stories, poetry and prose in that sense perform as social activists by talking about pertinent issues that are unique to the region. Writers from the North-East give a voice to silenced experiences that otherwise would not be heard.

The literature produced by women from the North-East also carries these same concerns. It is true that gender colours the writings of women irrespective of the community, tribe, race, country or place that it originates from and this holds true for the fiction of women writers from the region. Since women writers from the North-East are at the forefront of literature that is streaming out from the region, it is crucial to critically appraise their writings. The aim of the paper is to investigate this growing tribe of women writers with the aforementioned intention.

If one is to analyse the fiction of women writers, it is important to contextualise the socio-cultural-historical environment that they occupy.

### II. THE SOCIO-CULTURAL-HISTORICAL SITUATION OF WOMEN IN THE NORTH-EAST:

The history of the North-Eastern region of India is one of marginalization and silenced narratives. History has a tendency to be biased in documenting the narratives of the powerful and ignoring the minority. This adage is potently true in the case of the North-East. In the chronicles of the first anthropologists and administrators in the region, there is an inclination to homogenize its people and cultures as one. Indian historians are guilty of the same. Even today, the region is seen and represented as residing on the margins. And in doing so, the entire region and its people become divorced from the larger picture that make up the history of India becoming the "marginalized" and the women the "double marginalized"<sup>1</sup> (Ashcroft et al. 249-50).

The history of women from the region is difficult to trace because as in all patriarchal societies, the woman is only seen, heard and discussed in relation to the man. The linear representation of the region's history with its selective subjects denies the woman any representation except in relation to the man (Yano and Pande 67).

There has been a perpetuation of a notion from an outsider's viewpoint that women in the region enjoy a higher status, quality of life, and mobility when compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country. This may be true on a superficial level as there is an absence of rigid caste system, dowry and the Purdah system but there is a lack of awareness that women in the region are oppressed by binding customary and traditional practices (Buongpui 73). Monica Banerjee in "Conflicts and Constructive Work" writes that the "visible equality in gender" especially in the public sphere is something that is often highlighted in context to the North-East when talking about the status of women, but she also states that:

There is some myth and romanticism surrounding the issue of liberated cultures and options of choices available to women from diverse tribes or plains (non-tribal) societies. Scholars and practitioners from the region now argue that in the name of preserving traditional customs and tribal identities, very often, individual and gender choices get foreclosed. (219-20)

Also, with the region's multiple ethnicities and religions, the practices of discrimination vary depending on the community, tribe, faith and ethnic background that a woman comes from.

In tribal societies of the North-East, tribal and clan identity is fiercely guarded and it comes before individual identity. Customary and traditional practices are strictly observed and preserved at all costs and as such since these practices are patriarchal in its motivations; it affects the welfare and undermines the status of women in tribal societies.

A glance at the oral traditions, folktales and sayings of the many tribes displays some of the negative connotations that are attached to the woman. She is associated with social taboos and with fables that serve as warnings for the wayward, and she is often portrayed as a damsel in distress. Qualities like meekness, docility, and submissiveness are glorified and idealized. Concerning taboos for instance, men are forbidden during certain occasions or during auspicious events to have contact with women as it is believed to bring bad luck and misfortune. For example, in some certain Naga tribes,<sup>2</sup> men are forbidden to cohabit with the women before, during and after a raid (Jacobs et al. 131); the Zemei Naga men are forbidden to touch the meat of an animal killed by a woman as it is considered to be below the dignity of a man (Zehol 302); among the Angami Nagas, *Genna* (taboos or prohibitions set aside for religious rituals and ceremonies) was strictly observed and during the purification festival called *Sekrenyi*, on the day of the *Genna*, women were restricted to go to the village well to fetch water as they were considered unclean unlike the men folk (Yano and Pande 76). The traditional attitude of discrimination towards women is also reflected in the sayings and in the references to women. For instance, a traditional Mizo<sup>3</sup> saying goes: "Wives and bamboo fences must be changed when they grow old" (qtd. in "Contested Fields", Krishna 176) and women in Garo<sup>4</sup> society are ridiculed with the saying that: "Just as a goat without teeth, so a woman lacks brain" (qtd. in "Gender Relations", Boungpui 74).

The discrimination and stereotypes that affect women in tribal societies also reflects the historical role that women had to assume when men engaged in warfare and had to take up the responsibility of giving protection to the village, women were left to concentrate in the welfare of the family, the responsibility of working and harvesting the fields. This left women out of most decisions regarding community interests and religious roles which continue till today.

Another important aspect of tribal societies is that customary laws are considered as an intrinsic part of their identity and culture.<sup>5</sup> Carrying out and practicing customary laws act as powerful tools that continue to define the roles of men and women, and it influences the economic and social status of women (Buongpui 77-78). Observance of customary law means that women have no equal rights to property. Lal Dena in "Status of Mizo Women" writes that a Mizo woman is deprived of inheritance rights and share in the property of her father unlike the male child (145). In "Benevolent Subordination," Temsula Ao notes that in Naga society "All landed property belonged to the male. If a man has only daughters, on his death his property reverts to his male siblings and their sons (128). In Sikkim the situation is no different with ethnic women having no right to landed property (Krishna 178).

In contrast to the patriarchal societies that has been mentioned so far, much ado is made about the matrilineal system of the Khasis.<sup>6</sup> The Khasi matrilineal culture practices a customary law that allows the youngest daughter to inherit the property of her parents, both ancestral and acquired. However, the administration and control of the inherited is executed by the husbands, sons or mother's brother(s) (Krishna 178; Syiem 136; Mukhim 291). Customary laws also restrict the participation of women in the decision-making process in relation to community and traditional institutions of governance.

Ao observes that women are excluded from "institutions of power ... by cultural traditions because most customary laws are constituted and interpreted by men alone because a woman's opinion is not considered to be valuable enough in decision-making"(131). Since public spaces are highly gendered, the area of

administration and politics is considered to be a man's space and participation of women is restricted and even considered to be beyond her intellectual capacity.

In non-hill tribe communities especially in Assam and Manipur, where the ethnic majority are followers of Hinduism, women in these communities are subjected to the same debilitating practices and customs that their counterparts face in the rest of the country.

In Assam, the culture is a synthesis of social practices and customs of diverse communities and tribes (Hazarika 18). In the Vedic period in Assam, women enjoyed privileges equal to men in education and religious ceremonies especially by upper caste Hindu women but by the medieval period, as a feudal and casteist system was adopted, rituals and patriarchal practices become more stringent. A look into oral/folk literature also shows that moral qualities of women were discussed at length and those qualities such as meekness and docility enjoyed social respect in society (Hazarika 23-29). The advent of education under the British and Baptist missionaries allowed Assamese women to make progressive steps but the education of women also triggered certain debates among the emerging intelligentsia of the time. Some prominent men questioned the propriety of women's empowerment through education fearing it would lead them to neglecting their wifely duties (Hazarika 37).

In Manipur, *Meitei*<sup>7</sup> women occupy a paradoxical social status. On one hand, they do occupy equal participation in the social and economic sphere as the men because *Meitei* women have always maintained a tradition of rebellion against oppression by organizing themselves into groups that protest against injustices. But the bitter reality is that such rebellions are given the impetus by the presence of many social evils visible in society today. For example, the *Nupi-Lan* which is literally translated as 'women's war' were politicized agitations initiated by women in the state to display themselves as "figures of resistance", but looking into the domestic space, *Meitei* women are still subjected to patriarchal oppression. Domestic violence and abuse is quite common (Devi 84). Also in Manipur, the situation is highly militarized like other places in the region and this has created a backdrop where the presence of the Indian army has become a highly contentious issue with the women suffering the direct effects of occupation, retaliations by insurgents and a politically unstable environment.

In any conflict or combat-zone, it goes without saying that women and children become the most vulnerable. The unrest and violence is an everyday part of life for the local populations in the North-East, and women in such situations are more vulnerable than men "with greater restrictions placed on them, their mobility, their access to health, education, livelihood, employment, even leisure" (Gill 9). Many women especially mothers in the region have taken the initiative in organizing associations and groups that try to negotiate peace between the insurgents and the state governments, and they have achieved to a certain degree to maintain the cessation of conflicts overturning into outright wars but the underlying reality is that as proactive as they are in peace building processes, women's groups still function under the dominant power structure that are set up by men – in other words, they do not have the final say (Goswami 121).

Another important aspect is the influence of Christianity and its impacts on the traditional way of life. It was with the arrival of Major Francis Jenkins, the British commissioner for the Assam province in 1832 that the American Baptist missionaries first set up camp in 1836 introducing formal education and their faith in the region. Their mission work swiftly spread into the hill tribe communities and at the turn of the twentieth century, many communities in the region had accepted Christianity as their religion.

Women undoubtedly benefited from the education provided by the missionaries. Women could finally aspire to move beyond the drudgery of household chores and fieldwork and could contribute more to social and economic matters. Although women benefited from western education, it also reinforced the system of patriarchy. Christianity taught women to be obedient and dutiful mothers and daughters. Also women's participation in church was still limited since she could not be ordained into ministry or perform priestly duties (Yano and Pande 87).

Taking all these factors into account, the status of women in the North-East on the outside may seem to enjoy greater mobility and freedom, but the reality is that since most communities are structured on patriarchal lines, women are still controlled by agencies of patriarchy.

The North-Eastern woman is not immune to the psychological effects of trauma and violence caused by decades of unrest; she is vulnerable and subjected to sexual exploitation, abuse, and oppression. Although by categorizing women from the region as 'North-Eastern women' there is the danger of generalizing them and making ineffectual their individual experiences, the fact is that they have the common experience of being women from a certain region of the country i.e., the North-East and this is reflected in their fiction.

### **III. A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF WOMEN'S WRITING IN THE NORTH-EAST:**

The tradition of women's writing in English is fairly new with most writings by women taking off only after the advent of the British rule in the region and with the introduction of formal education. However, it is important to mention that there are prolific fiction writing, dramas, poems, folktales written by women in the

regional tongues. For instance, Manipur has a rich culture of theatre (Brara 335). Female artists of the *Shumang Leela*, which are local theatre groups, perform on themes that are relevant in showing the problems that women encounter. Plays and performances with themes on domestic violence, corruption, polygamy, and army atrocities are taken up. These female artists brought attention to women issues and revolted against societal notions imposed on them through the medium (343).

Another example would be the role of journals and periodicals in Assam that encouraged women to publish poems, general articles and stories, and thus creating the confidence in them to venture into the public sphere and voice out against the various modes of oppressive forces in their lives. They wrote on matters pertaining to “education, freedom and equality of the sexes” (Hazarika 85). Journals like *Ghar Jeuti* in Assam fronted by women focused on the promotion of women’s writing thus developing a literary ambience in the state (88).

An eminent literary figure that deserves an honourable mention when discussing the literary scene in the region is the fiction of Indira Goswami, a regional language writer whose works were able to transcend regional barriers. Her life’s experiences dramatically influenced the direction of her fiction in which she made bold feminist statements through the creation of her woman characters.

In most of her novels, the reader encounters women who are victims of social oppression, whose desires do not have any social sanction and consumed by the fire of unfulfilled desire, they are finally driven to self-destruction. Goswami is undoubtedly one of the rare Indian women writers who dared to portray a woman’s sexual needs as a natural right. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is an example of Goswami’s questioning of the repression of female sexuality. She creates women characters that are bold and in doing this charted into new territories in Assamese literature and even in Indian literature (Swami). Through her fiction, she also severely criticized Hindu customs and rituals which she felt was outdated and had simply become tools for oppressing women, and was also critical of the stifling patriarchal system that Hindu women and widows in particular were subjected to.

The contemporary women writers writing in English from the region are a group of first-generation writers who come from better economic backgrounds that has allowed them to have solid educations that translates into points of view that are more cosmopolitan. This and the ability to reach out to a bigger reading audience are primary reasons in their choice to write in English. There is a shared commonality in this even though the region is highly heterogeneous and creates a bond beyond political boundaries.

The rise of English fiction from the region, novels and short stories, has proliferated – the contributions of women writers are immense. Women writers from Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh have produced fiction prodigiously in the last decade. Mizoram has just entered into this world with a few publications, whereas in Sikkim, Yishey Doma is a recent entry into the arena of English fiction. Women writing fiction in English from Manipur and Tripura have yet to surface on the map although translations of works written by women have been going on for some time.

From Nagaland, Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire are two prominent writers from the state. Their works have brought much attention to the region in general and in particular Nagaland. Both of these writers are recipients of national awards and have been recognised for their contributions to literature. Some of Ao’s short fiction works are: *These Hills called Home* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head Stories* (2010). Kire’s novels include *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), and her novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) won her the Hindu Literary Prize in 2015.

From Meghalaya, Anjum Hasan and Daisy Hasan, who are sisters, have published novels that reveal ‘outsider’s’ perspective as they do not ethnically originate from the state. They have written on themes about xenophobia in the region, the existential angst of the youth and the treatment of North-Easterners in mainland India. Daisy Hasan has written *The To-Let House* (2010) and Anjum Hasan debuted with *Lunatic in My Head* (2007) followed by *Neti Neti* (2009), her short-story collection *Difficult Pleasures* (2012), and *The Cosmopolitans* (2015). Another writer with ties to the state is Belinder Dhanoa whose works include *Waiting for Winter: A Novel* (1991) and *Echoes in the Well* (2014). There is also Bijoya Sawian’s *Shadow Men* (2010) which against the backdrop of communal violence in Shillong explores the issues that crop up in the matriarchal Khasi society. Her most recent publication has been a collection of short stories called *A Family Secret and Other Stories* (2014).

Two prominent literary figures in English fiction writing from Assam are Mitra Phukan and Jahnvi Barua. Phukan has written *Terrorist Camp Adventure* (2003), *The Collector’s Wife* (2005), and *A Monsoon of Music* (2011). Barua wrote the critically acclaimed short stories collection *Next Door Stories* (2008) and the novel *Rebirth* (2010). The backdrops of these works are the insurgency movements in the state of Assam and ecological richness that the state boasts of.

Another writer in English from the region is Mamang Dai who is from Arunachal Pradesh, she is a former civil servant and recipient of the Padma Shri for her contribution to literature and education. She brought to the attention of the world the rich oral traditions and folklore of the Adis (one of the tribes of the state) of

Arunachal with the publication of her collection of short stories *The Legends of Pensam* (2006). This was followed by *Stupid Cupid* (2009) and *The Black Hill* (2014). From Mizoram, Malsawmi Jacob is a first-generation English writer whose novel *Zorami* (2014) deals with the insurgency movement that had affected the state in the 1960s.

There are a few mentionable young women writers who are also contributing to the literary scene of the North-East. A notable name is Janice Pariat whose debut book *Boats on Land: A Collection of Short Stories* (2012) won the Sahitya Akademi for the Young Writer Award in English language. *Boats on Lands* touches upon a myriad of themes that interweaves myth and reality to present difficult truths, political unrest, nostalgia, questions of identity and belonging, love and relationships, angst, sexual yearnings, mysticism, and beautiful descriptions of the landscape of Assam. Pariat is also the author of *Seahorse: A Novel* (2014). Other young women authors and their works of fiction are Avinuo Kire's *The Power to Forgive and Other Stories* (2015) and Suzanne Sangi's *Facebook Phantom* (2013) and *Jo's Journal* (2014).

The fictions of these contemporary women writers bring to life a historical account of life in their societies. They reflect the demarcated traditional roles for men and women; offers their perspectives on kinships and friendships; offers insight into ancient tribal customs; familial ties; and the conflict that has become endemic to the region. The niche that women occupy in the region is brought to life through their narratives – their sorrows, aspirations, struggles and life experiences are exposed and brought to the knowledge of the outside world. Their writings contribute to the greater arena of Indian English Literature in general and women's writing in India in particular by offering a unique perspective of female experience from a region often shrouded in mystery.

The recent phenomenon of an overflow of women writers emerging from the North-East has garnered greater visibility for the women of the region and by becoming active participants in the literary culture with the rest of India is reminiscent of the proto-feminist stages in women's history. By the simple act of writing their experiences, women writers of the region have acquired the power to have a voice and thereby creating opportunities to speak out against the frequently silenced space of oppression that women inhabit in a man's world (Waldron 5).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In India's North-East women writers have emerged as a literary force to be reckoned with. These women writers are addressing through their narratives the issues that are pertinent to the region and offer glimpses into the lives of women in the region. While a literary tradition in English may be in its infancy and a distinct tradition of women's writings is still developing, it is without a doubt that the narratives of women from the region can significantly contribute to the enrichment of the great literary tradition of Indian writings in English.

#### NOTES

1. Here I use 'double marginalization' at par with 'double colonization' (the notion that as formerly colonized societies that were doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies) elucidated by Bill Ashcroft in *Post Colonial Studies Reader*.
2. Ethnic tribes descended from the Mongolian racial group. Naga tribes are indigenous to Nagaland state but also are present in different states that comprise the North-East region. There are more than 40 plus distinct Naga tribes, see Jamir.
3. The ethnic inhabitants of the state of Mizoram.
4. One of the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya.
5. Customary law can be defined as, "an established system of immemorial rules which evolved from the way of life and natural wants of the people, the general context of which was a common knowledge, coupled with precedents applying to special cases, which were retained in the memories of the chiefs and his counsellors, their sons and their son's son, until forgotten, or until they become part of the immemorial rules," (qtd. in *Gender Relations*, Buongpui 77) see Bekker 11.
6. In Meghalaya, all three major tribes, the Khasis, Jaintia and Garo practice the matrilineal system.
7. *Meitei* is an endonym given to an ethnic person of the state of Manipur. *Meiteis* are the major ethnic group of Manipur.

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