

A Critical Appraisal of the Fiction of North-East Indian Women Writers

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Abstract

Unquestionably the English-language literature of India's North-East area exhibits a complexity due to the region's multi-ethnic and multi-lingual population and its unique history and issues. For this reason, works from the North and Northeast include a wide range of subject matter (s). The fiction written by women in this area carries a lot of potential meanings because it is based on their subjective experiences. Women make up a sizable portion of today's writing community in the North East, and they also produce the lion's share of the region's English fiction. That this seems to show that women's fiction from the area spans a watershed in India's literary history is something that cannot be overlooked. In light of this firm belief, the study sets out to evaluate the North-Eastern women's literary contribution by critiquing their fiction (in light of the socio-cultural milieu(s) from which they write) and trying to locate their place within the greater context of English-language Indian literature.

Keywords: Northeast writers, women's literary contribution, English language literature, marginality, stereotyped-life etc.,

The word "Northeast," commonly used to refer to the eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Sikkim, is excessively broad and tends to homogenise the entire region while ignoring its substantial geographical, cultural, social, and political distinctions. This language, however, is used solely for political expediency, represents the perspective of those from outside the region, and the area continues to be one of the most stereotypically portrayed in India. The enigmatic stranger has long captured the interest of "mainland," whether in literature, social issues, political debates, or economic matters. That's why it is crucial, according to K.C. Baral, that a writer from the Northeast understands his or her place in the world. In this setting, the word "marginality" takes on new meaning. The literature of the Northeast is more than just a cross-section of the country; it also includes voices from the periphery. Collectively, these writers from the Northeast reproduce the ethos of an area through their expression of its people's thoughts, feelings, emotions, and ethnic particularities.

The literature of the Northeast is a witness to the rebuilding of ideas like "identity," "country," "home," "insiders," and "outsiders," as well as the negotiation between the edge and the centre.

Writing in English from this hotly contested territory, the origins of which are quite recent. According to Mitra Phukan's paper "Writing in English in India's Northeast; Relevance, Importance, and Place," while the British colonisers were certainly responsible for bringing the English language to the region, they were not the only ones responsible for establishing the language there. Christian Missionaries are mostly responsible for this. The missionaries spread education throughout the region by founding a number of institutions of higher learning. These Christian Missionary managed English medium schools have educated the vast majority of the modern writers writing in English from this region. As their native languages, these authors find it easier to write in English than in their native tongue.

Though they originated in diverse sections of the region, these authors shared a same background: they were all educated at English-medium institutions, where they learned to write a certain way and read the same kind of works. Despite having their own distinct cultures, identities, and ethnicities, these writers have been connected by a number of shared experiences. Contemporary works from the Northeast go beyond simple ethnic depictions to reprocess the shared cultural memory of the region. Most writings feature two distinct qualities: a modern take on a timeless topic or idea, and a firm grounding in the past. Literature from the Northeast has multiple meanings for the region. Certain types of literature have been imported from the Indian canon while others have emerged from the Western canon.

The complicated writings of the North-East are a result of the region's multilingualism and the fact that it is geographically isolated from the rest of India. Therefore, their poetry, prose, and short stories operate as social activists since they focus on issues that are relevant in their local communities. Authors from the North and Northeast give a voice to perspectives that might otherwise be silenced. Similarly, these concerns are echoed in the works of North Eastern women writers. The fiction created by women from the region reflects the region's cultural norms and values, just as it does the works of women from any other group, tribe, race, country, or territory. It is crucial to provide critical analysis of the works of North Eastern women writers because they are at the front of the region's literary output. The goal of this research is to learn more about this dynamic community of women authors.

The sociological and historical contexts of women authors must be taken into account while analysing their literature. When it comes to expressing themselves, people in India's north-

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eastern region have always been silenced. A common pattern in historical writing is to highlight the experiences of the dominant group while ignoring the voices of the marginalised group.

Ashcroft (1995) writes that this adage rings especially true in the North Atlantic region. There is a propensity to generalise about the region's people and culture in the recollections of the area's early anthropologists and administrators. The same sin is also committed by Indian historians. The area is still categorised as a backwater until now. As a result, it is easy to forget that India as a whole has a history of being "marginalised," and that women in particular have been "double marginalised" (249) They further comment that patriarchal societies make it challenging to understand a region's past because women are rarely the focus of attention or conversation apart from their male counterparts. The region's history is presented chronologically, but only in relation to men, which excludes women (67).

It has been assumed, from the outside looking in, that the status, quality of life, and mobility of women in this region are superior to those in the rest of the country. Although this may appear to be the case at first glance due to the lack of a strict caste structure, dowry, or Purdah system, the subjugation of women in the region is widely unknown (Hasan 2007). Many people in the region, both academics and professionals, believe that personal freedoms and gender identities are limited for the sake of preserving ancient customs and distinct tribal identities. (219-20)

In addition, discriminatory practises differ depending on a woman's community, tribe, religion, and ethnic background because of the region's numerous nationalities and religions. In the societies of the North and Northeast, tribal affiliations are highly valued and protected over personal ones. Even though their patriarchal goals undermine women's welfare and status, rituals and traditions are cherished and respected at all costs in tribal societies.

Skimming the oral histories, folktales, and proverbs of the various tribes reveals some of the negative connotations connected with women. She is frequently portrayed as a helpless damsel, and she is linked to cultural taboos and cautionary stories. Those who exhibit traits of mildness, obedience, and submission are held in high esteem. When it comes to social mores, it is considered extremely unlucky for a man to touch a woman on certain holidays or during special celebrations. Some Naga groups forbid men from sleeping with women before, during, or after a raid (Zama 2013); Zemei Naga men are forbidden from eating meat killed by a woman because doing so is beneath the dignity of a man, and the Genna (religious taboos or prohibitions) were strictly observed by the Angami Nagas, especially during the Sek

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purification festival (Pukhan 2005). Proverbs and other references to women reflect a prejudiced culture that dates back centuries. The Mizo have an adage that goes something like,

"Wives and bamboo fences must be replaced when they age" (Pukhan 2005. A common slur against women in Garo culture is the idiom, "As a goat without teeth lacks intelligence, so does a lady"(Goswami 2014).

Women in tribal societies face discrimination and misconceptions because of the historical role they played when males went to war and the men of the village were tasked with protecting the community while the women stayed home to care for the family and gather crops. It is still the case that women aren't included in most decision-making processes involving community priorities and religious duties. A fundamental aspect of tribal society is the high regard in which customary law is held. Putting into practise and enforcing customary standards are powerful instruments that continue to define the roles of men and women, and they have an effect on women's economic and social standing (Goswami 2014). Women do not have equal rights to property under customary law. To paraphrase Lal Dena's "Status of Mizo Women," unlike male children, Mizo women do not have the right to inherit their father's property or receive an inheritance (145). To paraphrase what Temsula Ao says in *Benevolent Subordination*, all land belongs to the man" in Naga civilization. Upon a man's death, his inheritance will go to his male siblings and their sons if he has no sons (128). Like the rest of the world, ethnic women in Sikkim do not have legal rights to own land (Ao 2006).

In contrast to the patriarchal societies we've seen so far, the matrilineal organisation of the Khasis is a hot topic of debate. In the matrilineal Khasi society, the youngest daughter is legally entitled to inherit her family's inherited and ancestral property. The inheritance is managed and controlled by spouses, children, or the mother's brothers (Ao 2006). Women are likewise barred under customary law from holding leadership positions in their communities or in traditional governing structures. Women, according to Ao, are barred from "institutions of power, by cultural traditions since the vast majority of customary laws are formed and interpreted by men alone because a woman's viewpoint is not recognised as being sufficiently valuable in decision-making" (131). Because of the pervasive sexism in public spaces, administration and politics are generally seen as the purview of men, whereas women's involvement in these fields is discouraged and sometimes even seen as intellectually deficient.

Women of India's non-hill tribe communities, especially in the states of Assam and Manipur, where Hinduism is the prevalent religion, face the same harmful practises and customs as their counterparts throughout the country. Assam's culture is a synthesis of the norms and practises of many different groups and ethnicities (Misra 2011). Assamese women of higher castes in the Hindu faith had the same access to education and religious rites as men did throughout the Vedic period. However, during the mediaeval period, when a feudal and casteist framework was formed, rituals and patriarchal traditions tightened. Moral qualities of women, like as meekness and docility, were discussed at length in oral/folk literature and were rewarded with esteem (Misra 2011). Women in Assam were able to break barriers thanks to the work of British and Baptist missionaries, but this shift in social norms was not without controversy among the period's emerging intellectuals. Some well-known males have questioned the wisdom of educating women in the hopes that it will prevent them from shirking their domestic duties (Misra 2011).

For women of the Meitei in Manipur, their social standing is ambiguous. On the one hand, these women have always kept a tradition of rebelling against oppression through the formation of protesting groups, which gives them the same opportunities as men in the social and economic arenas. But the harsh reality is that such uprisings are fed by the widespread nature of several social issues in modern society. Although Meitei women continue to experience patriarchal tyranny in the home, political agitations like the Nupi-Lan (literally "women's war") were conducted by women in the state to portray themselves as "figures of resistance." Abuse and violence within the home are all too common (Devi 84). The situation in Manipur is heavily militarised like the rest of the region, and this has led to a setting in which the presence of the Indian army has become a very divisive subject, with women bearing the brunt of occupation, reprisal by rebels, and an unstable political atmosphere.

Women and children are always the most defenceless in times of crisis or conflict. Women are more vulnerable than men in times of unrest and violence because they face greater limitations on their freedom of movement, access to healthcare, education, work, and even leisure activities (Gill 9). In an effort to avoid conflicts from growing into all-out battles, many women, particularly mothers, in the region have organised associations and groups that try to mediate peace between the insurgents and the state governments. However, despite their initiative in peace-making processes, women's groups are still mostly subservient to a male-dominated political system (Goswami 121).

Another important issue is the impact of Christianity on the conventional way of living. With the arrival of British commissioner for the province of Assam Major Francis Jenkins in 1832, American Baptist missionaries set up their first camp in the area in 1836, bringing with them the institution of formal education as well as their own religious views. Through missionary work among the hill tribes, the vast majority of the region's population converted to Christianity at the turn of the twentieth century. The efforts of the missionaries to educate women were unquestionably beneficial. It is possible that women today may make an effort to advance beyond traditional roles in the home and the workplace. Western education helped women, but it also reinforced patriarchal norms. Christian teachings emphasised the need of female obedience in the home. Women's roles in the church were limited, as they were forbidden from serving as priests or being ordained (Hazarika 2014).

Taking these factors into account, it could seem like women in the North-East have more freedom and independence than they actually do. However, because most communities are established along patriarchal lines, women are still regulated by patriarchal institutions. Because of the cumulative effects of decades of violence and trauma, women in the North and Northeast are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, abuse, and subjugation. In their writing, women from the North East reflect on the shared experience of being women from a specific portion of the country. However, labelling them as "Northern-Eastern women" runs the risk of generalising and minimising their unique experiences.

The majority of works written in English by women did not appear until after the arrival of British control in the region and the introduction of formal education. Of equal importance, however, is the fact that women have written extensively in regional languages, including a wealth of literature, theatre, poetry, and folktales. One example is the vibrant theatre scene in Manipur (Hazarika 2014). The Shumang Leela, a group of local female artists, stage plays about timely topics that address the challenges women face in their daily lives. Plays and performances often deal with heavy subjects including domestic violence, corruption, polygamy, and military crimes. These women artists defied societal preconceptions of what it meant to be a woman and used their platforms to advocate for gender equality (343).

Another example is the role of magazines and periodicals in Assam, which provided women the confidence to enter the public sphere and speak out against the many oppressive forces in their lives by publishing poems, general articles, and short stories. They discussed "liberal

education," "individual rights," and "gender parity" in their writings (Misra 85). The literary climate in Assam was encouraged by women-run magazines like Ghar Jeuti (88).

Indira Goswami, a writer in a regional language whose works have gained international attention, is a significant figure in the region's literary history and should be taken into account while evaluating the literary landscape of the area. Her personal experiences had a significant impact on the direction of her writing, which included feminist commentary in the form of forceful characterizations of independent women. Most of her writings include female protagonists who are oppressed by others, whose desires aren't acceptable in society, and who are ultimately consumed by the blaze of unsatisfied lust. Without a doubt, Goswami is one of the very few Indian women writers who dared to portray a woman's sexual desires as an inherent right. Goswami's investigation of the repression of female sexuality is exemplified by *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. She breaks ground in Assamese and even Indian writing with her strong female protagonists (Swami). She railed against the outdated and oppressive Hindu practises and rituals that, in her view, had become nothing more than tools for oppressing women, as well as the patriarchal system to which Hindu women and widows in particular were subjected.

The current crop of women who write in English from the region are all first-generation immigrants from more privileged backgrounds who, as a result, have access to excellent educational opportunities that have allowed them to develop more global perspectives. These are two of the main motivating factors for them to publish in English rather than their native language. Despite the region's extreme diversity, its inhabitants share at least one trait that is not limited by national lines. English novels and short stories have flourished in the region, with significant contributions from women writers. Women writers in the north-eastern states of Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh have published a wealth of literature in the past decade. While Mizoram has only just produced a few of pieces, Sikkim has recently welcomed a newcomer to the area of English fiction in the form of Yishey Doma. Despite the fact that translations of fiction written by women from Manipur and Tripura into English have been happening for some time, neither state's female authors have yet to have a significant impact on the genre.

Two well-known authors hailing from Nagaland are Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire. As a result of their efforts, Nagaland and the surrounding area have received a great deal of media coverage. These two writers have won prestigious awards for their works at the national level.

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Two of Ao's collections of short stories are *These Hills Called Home* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head Stories* (2010). In addition to *When the River Sleeps*, which was awarded the Hindu Literary Prize in 2015, Kire is the author of the novels *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), and *When the River Sleeps* (2014).

Sisters Anjum and Daisy Hasan wrote novels set in Meghalaya from a "outsider's perspective" because they are not from the state's original ethnic group. They have discussed the treatment of North Easterners in India as well as issues of xenophobia in the region and existential angst among the young. Anjum Hasan's first book was 2007's *Lunatic in My Mind*, then came 2009's *Neti Neti*, 2012's *Difficult Pleasures*, and 2015's *The Cosmopolitans*. Written by Daisy Hasan, *The To-Let House* (2010). (2015). *Waiting for Winter: A Novel* (1991) and *Echoes in the Well* (1995) are works by Belinder Dhanoa, a writer having ties to the state (2014). And against the backdrop of communal violence in Shillong, Bijoya Sawian's *Shadow Men* (2010) explores the difficulties faced by the matriarchal Khasi society. Her latest work is the short story collection *A Family Secret and Other Stories* (2014).

Two prominent Assamese writers of English fiction are Mitra Phukan and Jahnvi Barua. Author Phukan has produced such works as *Terrorist Camp Adventure* (2003), *The Collector's Wife* (2005), and *A Monsoon of Music* (2011). Barua's short story collections, *Next Door Stories* (2008) and *Rebirth* (2008). The biological variety of the state of Assam and the insurgency movements there serve as backdrops throughout these works. Another English writer from Arunachal Pradesh is Mamang Dai, a former civil servant who was honoured with the Padma Shri for her work in the fields of literature and education. Her short story collection, *The Legends of Pensam*, popularised the rich oral traditions and folklore of the Adis (one of the state's tribes), bringing Arunachal to the attention of readers worldwide (2006). Then we got *Stupid Cupid* (2009) and *The Black Hill* (2009). Novelist Malsawmi Jacob, a first-generation English speaker and native of Mizoram, centres on the insurgency movement of the 1960s (2014).

A small but notable group of young women from the North and Northeast are making their mark on the literary scene. Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land: A Collection of Short Stories* (2012) won the Sahitya Akademi Young Writer Award in English. Myth and reality collide in *Boats on Lands* to reveal difficult realities: political unrest; nostalgia; identity and belonging; love and relationships; worry; sexual yearnings; mysticism; and, of course, the breathtaking natural beauty of Assam. In addition, Pariat has written *Seahorse*, a novel (2014). Other works by

young women authors include those by Avinuo Kire (*The Power to Forgive and Other Stories*, 2015), Suzanne Sangi (*Facebook Phantom*, 2013), and Jo (a Journal, 2016).

The fiction of these contemporary women writers vividly recreates a bygone era of existence in their societies. They shed light on the region's long-standing customs and conflicts, the traditional roles of men and women, and the people's views on blood ties and friendships. In telling their stories, these ladies give voice to the unique position that women hold in the region, exposing their struggles, hopes, and obstacles for the benefit of others. Their works enrich the canon of Indian English literature and Indian women's writing by presenting a fresh perspective on the female experience in a region that is often shrouded in mystery.

Women in the North-East have risen to prominence thanks to the recent inflow of writers from the region, and their involvement in India's literary culture is reminiscent of proto-feminist phases in the history of women. Women writers of the region have been given a voice by writing about their lives, giving them a platform from which to protest the subjugation of women in a patriarchal society (Waldron 5). Women writers in India's north-east are making waves in the literary world. These writers give insight into the lives of women in the region while also addressing issues of critical importance there. The narratives of women from the region can undoubtedly complement the great literary tradition of Indian writings in English, even if a literary tradition in English may be in its infancy and a distinct tradition of women's writings is still forming.

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