

# INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM NORTHEAST INDIA – A STUDY ON SELECT WOMAN WRITERS AND THEIR WORKS

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## **Abstract:**

Northeast Indian Literature refers to both the literature in the languages of Northeast India and the body of work of the writers writing in English from this region. The writers from India's northeast have been grappling with numerous socio-political issues which have inspired them and provided some unique materials for their literary works. However, they have been able to strike a fine balance between a violent past of militarism, militancy, and innumerable predicaments, and comparatively a peaceful society of the present time in which the people started dreaming of a tranquil, safer and progressive life. These visionary writers, through their poetic creations, tried to bring reformation in their respective trouble torn society by creating awareness among the masses for whom, violence including bloodshed have been common occurrences for a long period of time.

**Key words:** Militarism, militancy, predicament, tranquil, reformation, multiplicity, insurgency

## **Introduction:**

The northeast part of India has always been typecast as the periphery whereas the mainland India has been universally acknowledged as the centre. Hence, the writers from geo-politically isolated region have not been given due representation by Indian mainstream writers. Although, English writing in the northeast India does not have a long history, the writers from this region, by dint of their relentless effort, have been able to carve a niche in the realm of Indian English literature. Mamang Dai (Arunachal Pradesh), Indira Goswami, Mitra Phukan, Aruni Kashyap (Assam), Anjum Hasan, Esther Siyem, Patricia Mukhim, Indari Siyem Warjri (Meghalaya), Mona Zote, Margaret Chalthantluangi Zama, Margaret Lalmuanpuli Pachuau (Mizoram), Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Monalisa Chankija, Nini Lungalung (Nagaland), Sudha M Rai (Sikkim), Jogamaya Chakma, Sefali Debbarma (Tripura) are some of the representative writers from India's northeast. These writers have dealt with some core postcolonial issues like identity crisis, search for roots, self assertion among the ethnic groups, ecology of this region etc.

## **Objective of The Study:**

Some of the recurrent themes of northeast literature and especially of poetry are – incredible natural beauty, multiplicity of culture, ethnic community, insurgency, terrorism, political factionalism, the sense of alienation, and the indifference, neglect, and racism that the people from northeast encounter in various parts of mainland India. Besides these issues, the ecology of the region and the degradation of the eco system seem to be a vital part of the writings of the northeast women writers. This paper is an attempt to examine the above mentioned aspects in select works of some of these women writers from Northeast India.

## **Hypothesis:**

A study of the works of the women writers of northeast show that they are predominated by their love for the land, nature, myth, narrative, tribal folklore, and especially their love for humanity. Their works highlight the issues related to the underprivileged class of the society including women. Besides, the women writers from northeast show a strong ecological awareness. This paper attempts to verify and validate the presence of all these aspects in the writings of these women writers.

## **Methodology:**

In this paper, a text-based reading methodology is mainly used. The primary sources are the various poems, prose including novels and short stories. Besides, books and journals research and other research articles written on these writers have been used as secondary sources.

## Analysis:

One of the most striking features of northeast English literature is the dominance woman writers. Almost all the states of this region have produced some quality writers who have successfully projected before the world some of the vital socio-political issues concerning northeast. Mamang Dai, a journalist and former civil servant based in Itanagar, has written extensively about the culture and history of Arunachal Pradesh. With a rural sensibility, Dai makes nature a medium through which she tries to search her identity and ancestral root. She laments over the loss of traditional values and destruction of nature. Her poems resonate with eco-feministic attitude in the sense that she talks about relationship between man and nature. Her poems landscape the past and the present with recurrent images embedded in nature. Her famous short story collection *The Legends of Pensam* is a beautiful combination of myth and history of the Adi tribe of Siang valley. It is a novel with a serious ecological concern. Here, history, myth, tradition, memory, and fiction are harmoniously blended together. The writer shows the clash between tradition and modernity. Besides, Dai tries to highlight nature-women relationship and significant resemblances between the two. Talking about the rich cultural and ecological heritage of Adi community to which she belongs, the writer remarks, “Like the majority of tribes inhabiting the central belt of Arunachal, the Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world.” (Dai 2006:1). Similarly, her animism is reflected in the poem *Green in the time of flood*. Her poems resonate with the eco-feminist trends of contemporary times. Her poems investigate the primitive customs and beliefs of her people. Thus, Mamang Dai’s literary works apprise the readers of the legends, myths, and oral tradition of Adi tribe living in the foothills of Himalaya. In her poem *The Sorrow of Women*, Mamang Dai talks about the marginalized women voice which is muted by the patriarchal society.

Temsula Ao, a renowned female writer, belongs to Ao tribe of Nagaland. Like her contemporaries, she has also described the pain and pleasures of the people of Nagaland. Her poems combine both traditional elements and revolutionary ideals. Most famous of her works include *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs From Here and There* (2003), *Songs From the Other Life* (2007). Her other works include *Henry James*, *Quest for an Ideal Heroine*, *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition*, and *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a war zone*. The short story collection *These Hills Called Home* is a collection of ten short stories which depicts man’s struggle for survival in the war zones. Another noteworthy book of short stories by Ao is *Laburnum for my Head* which is a collection of eight stories describing the lives of people in the trouble-torn Nagaland. These stories delineate the complex relationship between power, resistance and violence. The thrust areas of Temsula Ao’s writings are – human relationship, religion, nature, death, and other social issues like gender discrimination. She very delicately incorporates the plights of Naga women by emphasizing that man-woman relationship should be based on mutual understanding and cooperation. Through her writings, she appeals to the orthodox Naga society to treat women at par with men with honour and dignity. At the same time she exhorts the women of her land to assert for their rightful position in the society.

Another distinguished woman writer from northeast India, Easterine Kire has to her credit several fictions, short fictions, and three collections of poetry. Her famous novels – *A Naga Village Remembered*, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *Bitter Wormwood*, *Mari*, *When The River Sleeps*, and *Life on Hold* reflect the voice of the subalterns who find it very hard to establish their identity in the society. The search for identity, freedom, justice, and spirituality is clearly evident in the novels and short stories of Kire. She shows that passivity and ignorance on the part of the subalterns including woman subalterns about their legitimate rights are some of the basic factors responsible for their perennial plight. It is worth mentioning here that Easterine Kire has raised the issue of the subalterns from various perspectives. In her writings, she has highlighted the prevalence of subalternity in all walks of life including familial, social and political spheres. In her *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the novelist has accentuated different issues related to women subalterns in Naga society. However, contrary to the traditional belief that women are oppressed and exploited only by men, Easterine has shown that not only patriarchy but matriarchy is also plays a pivotal role to execute gender discrimination which leads to women’s subaltern position in the society. Besides dealing with the issue of subalternity, Kire has exhibited various socio-cultural beliefs, superstitions, and myths related to traditional Naga society.

Monalisa Chankija is another writer from Nagaland who writes mostly on contemporary social issues. In her writings, she deals with some recurrent themes like violence, gender distinction, and ecological degradation in the state of Nagaland. Her poems such as *Now Be Dead*, *Child of Cain*, *Stop*

*this Nightmare*, and *Shoot* delineate the political turmoil in her homeland. The poem *Nature Reflection* shows her concern over the destruction of the pristine nature by human beings. Her collection of essays *Cogitating for a Better Deal* incorporates various issues ranging from social conflicts, outdated customary practices, gender biasness to the Naga Movement for independent Naga state.

Nini Lungalung is another distinguished Naga writer who is known for her reflective and philosophical writings. She is a serious writer who deals with the social issues like gender discrimination, conflict, human relationship, loss of flora and fauna, and insurgency problem in Nagaland. Her poems like *Chapel, I will Be, Bird, The Maiden and the Glass Tyrant* echo her introspective nature. Similarly, poems like *Going Home*, and *Home Sweet Home* glorifies the natural beauty and bounty of Nagaland.

Mitra Phukan is a prominent Assamese writer writing in English. Her novel *A Collector's Wife*, besides being a touching story about the protagonist Rukmini, her loneliness, and feeling of identity loss, also delineates the atmosphere of terror, violence and insurgency in Assam. Moreover, the novel deals with ecological issues by highlighting the landscape of Assam with rivers, mountains and forests. In the novel, Phukan expresses her displeasure for exploitation and gradual destruction of flora and fauna of Arunachal as a result of modernization and technological advancement.

Sudha M Rai, a renowned poet from Sikkim, highlights the contemporary social problems such as insurgency and counter-insurgency actions by the government, and its adverse impact on the life of common people of home land and the northeast in general. In her poem *The Night I was Raped*, the agony of a girl who has been raped is equated with the destruction of nature. Here she writes:

This huge stomach,  
This pain,  
In the pollution-filled milieu,  
To repeat the same story,  
Is growing in my womb,  
This foetus again. (Rai 2009:239)

The socio-political turmoil and violence, ecological degradation and their impacts on the life of common people are some of the core issues which are highlighted by Jogamaya Chakma, a representative poet from Tripura. Her poem *The War Dress* reflects the overall situation of northeast during the time of the poet. She writes:

There's no peace, it's said, in the forest too  
In tree after tree, in creeper after creeper  
In root after root  
There are diseases,

Of sabotage and pangs of uprooting (Chakma 2009: 74)

Here, the poet has portrayed a clear picture of the contemporary society in Tripura. The violence of all forms such as conflicts, killings of people emanating from socio-political chaos, and degradation of ecology by man just for material benefit have become obvious themes for writers like Jogamaya Chakma.

### Conclusion:

It is observed that the women writers writing in English from India's northeast very deftly presents the problems which have severe impact on the lives of the people of northeast India. They have been able to show to the world how northeast is one of the most vibrant region both culturally and ecologically. Their writings reflect the natural beauty, peculiar diversity in terms of language, tradition, and custom of the indigenous people. Thus, the northeast English literature, and especially, the literature produced by women writers, have become the voice of this isolated region. All these factors have made the works of northeast English writers, especially that of the women writers, a unique genre which is distinctly different from the literature produced by mainland Indian writers.

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