



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

## **Violence as a Dominant Theme Extending Beyond Borders: A Study of Selected English Short-Stories from Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura**

**Pramathesh Deka**

Asst. Professor,  
Department of English,  
G.K.B. College, Tamulichiga,  
Jorhat, Assam

### **Abstract:**

The north-eastern states of India have gone through an intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiations/encounters with the 'other', 'majoritarian' cultures from either 'mainland India' or from beyond the Indian border, says Tilottoma Misra. The sense of cultural anxiety, urgency for identity recovery, choosing between paths of armed resistance and peaceful dialogue, and consequent violence (perpetrated both by insurgent and counter-insurgent side) become dominant theme of literature of these states.

The paper will endeavour to study the theme / treatment of violence which extends beyond the borders of the North-East Indian states and thematically unite the entire region by diffusing state borders in fiction written in the region. The study will concentrate on select short stories, written in English or their English translations, by writers from North-East India, particularly from Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura.

**Keywords: North-East India, violence, subaltern, insurgency, hegemony.**

Violence has been a recurring motif in Literature. It is emblematic of a disorder and chaos which jeopardizes thought processes and militates against happenings, which in turn is reflected in literature and art. Violence can deeply affect sensibilities, disturb the psyche and embed a deep seated urge to communicate and share whether in literature, films or paintings. Much of the discussion today in the literature of North East India focuses on violence as a thematic interest. The north-eastern states of India have gone through an intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiations/encounters with the 'other', 'majoritarian' cultures from either 'mainland India' or from beyond the Indian border, says Tilottoma Misra. The people of the North-East India have gone through a long history of negligence in their demand for economic and infrastructural development, denial of representation in the great Indian civilisational discourse, betrayal in terms of political equality, marginalization of the local people by the continuing migration of people from outside.

Tilottoma Misra in her introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* writes that it is not a coincidence that the dominant theme of the fiction writing of the region and those included in this collection happens to be that of violence perpetrated by various militant outfits as well as by the armed forces in their counter-insurgency operations. "Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be a never-

ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt 'live with it', as they are expected to do the distant centres of power"(xix). Writers across the states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura are deeply concerned about the brutalization of their societies by the daily experience of human rights violations and the maiming of the psyche of a whole people by the trauma caused by violence. In Northeast India there amalgamates diverse ethnic and religious groups having different beliefs and customs. However, the land has been plagued by problems like unchecked militancy, insurgency, ethnic riots and killings etc. These rapidly suffusing violence has disrupted and paralyzed normal life. Violence has been a way of life. This is what Temsula Ao writes about in her volume of short stories "These Hills called Home: Stories from a War Zone", the kind of violence which is historically and politically located. (Ao x)

The paper will study the short stories, both written in and translated into English, as published in the book *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*, compiled and edited by Tilottoma Misra. It will concentrate on the short stories written by writers belonging to Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura to study the treatment of violence and terror particularly connected to insurgency, retaliatory operations by the armed forces and communal enmity.

### **Stories from Assam**

In the story 'Munni's Legs' by Atulananda Goswami, we see how a bomb blast on the railway track changes the entire otherwise peaceful environment into a tense one. An innocent girl of three years of age has to lose her life in the blast leaving a psychological shock to the retired person, the speaker of the story. The entire cabin of the train was infected by the mirth and sweet behavior of the little girl who was ready to share her piece of banana to her co-passengers. She rightly said that she did not want grow up - to see the hatred and violence of the adult world. The story presents how Munni's mother, in her blood draped cloths, frantically searched for Munni's legs carrying the lifeless body of the child in her bosom. She forgets to search for the whereabouts of her husband and her son. The speaker, in his depilated condition lying on the gass amidst mutilated bodies, is the only person she can complain "somebody has stolen Munni's legs". "Munni's legs were cut off just below her knees. It was difficult to make out how badly the mother was injured. Her entire dress soaked in blood, she ran about with Munni's lifeless body clutched to her bosom, searching for the man who had stolen her daughter's legs"(82). There is total annihilation of humanity and sympathy.

'The Slaughter', by Imran Hussain presents how a young lad, son of a retired school teacher, who could not kill a pigeon for meat, is transformed into a cold-blooded murderer. The father takes all the trouble in his bad health and unfavorable climate condition to get the pair of pigeons killed so that he can serve a good meal to his son returning home, presumably from his university hostel, and his companions. The reader is made dumbstruck to witness the brutality and violence met on the half-witted idiot Benga by the security personnel because his inability to speak Hindi and reply to their queries. The story presents that a public murderer does not have to carry a rough and virile personality, that he can be a soft voiced Sonti who touches his father's feet for blessings and behaves very obediently to his parents. As such, it makes difficult for general people to differentiate between a cold-blooded murderer and hard core terrorists from general public which turns the situation more tensed.

‘Haflong Hills’ by Kallol Choudhury presents the sense of terror lurking behind otherwise serene and beautiful landscape of Haflong. It presents the subdued anxiety that every person, especially employees hailing from outside Karbi Anglong, live their daily life with. All employees are forced to submit twenty percent of their salary every month at particular places. The underground leaders and the extremist are presented to be resolute and cruel and there is always a sense of anticipated doom lurking everywhere. People there have to live under constant atmosphere of terror, compromise and sacrifice. But at the same time, the top leader is shown to abide by Netaji’s ideals and trying not to harm the country.

‘The Treasure Trove’ by Sekhar Das presents the pangs and hardship when a young engineer, the sole earner of a modest family, is kidnapped by an unknown insurgent group for no stated reason and his corpse is discovered heaped in the garbage. It presents how any peace loving and amiable person can become prey to terrorism and how people in the north-eastern region live under complete insecurity and uncertainty about their and their loved one’s life. “AK-47 is but a Russian gun! Russia is also an ally, a friendly nation. But why did my brother die of bullets from an ally’s gun? The corps was discovered after eight days, eight kilometers away from the hill station near the railway line, where the tunnel ends and poles start appearing”(151). Though the story is set in North-East India, particularly in Assam by hinting at the regional office of the firm the deceased worked for to be Guwahati, the story treats terrorism as a universal concern extending beyond geographical boundaries.

“‘They’ means *they*. ‘They’ are present in the nooks and corners of the globe, with different names, with different identities. They, who can take the lives of the powerful people in authority as well as of the wage labourers at the bottom. They had cut the throat of a cabinet minister of the South a few days back. One evening last December, they had hijacked a plane full of passengers, shunting them from one country to another in order to get their demands fulfilled. Didn’t they want to blow up Ms Kumaratunge a few days back? They are everywhere – in different geographical locales. Only their races are different.”(152)

The story presents that the layman has understood all the motives behind terrorism and learned the tactics of living under violence and terror. People have started to take terrorism and failure of government agencies to curb it as granted. People have known for sure that they have to live amidst terrorism and violence and there is now way out:

“I have a knowledge of many things. I know both poetry and the chemical formula of an atom bomb...Why only me, many people know these things. Why Talibans are Talibans; to which world does Osama Bin Laden belong? Who or what is behind the Ranbir Sena and the Sunlight Sena? We all know whose blood is shed in the soil of Jehanabad, Palamu and Nalbari. We know. We understand everything.”(153)

The story sums up the atmosphere of the entire north-eastern region in which terror and violence lurks behind the lush greenery and beautiful landscape. It opines that the natural scenery contains nothing but terror hidden inside it :

“The thick forests of the mountain range have become the seat of destructive weapons. Human language, human passions have died here long back. Only the venomous smell of the gunpowder prevails here; and the language of the bomb. No one listens to the little narratives of harmony, travel and togetherness”. (162)

## Stories from Manipur

'In Nightmare' by Yumlembam Ibomcha, we see details of intense violence and violation of human rights of a peasant accused of having underground connections at the hands of security personnel. It is not proved which organization he has connection with or whether he has any connection at all. The man is brutally tortured, hit with the butt of the gun, kicked with heavy boots, his tongue being cut forcibly using a knife and buried alive in front of his little daughter. The little child pleads the uniformed personnel to leave her father lest he will die, but the personnel are shown to derive unknown animal pleasure out of the torture. The man, Chaoba is made to mimic the cry of a dog and cat kneeling down while security personnel rode his back one after another till he lies flat on ground. Security personnel, "each of the men was as big as the hills" and dressed in black uniforms seem to encroach upon the entire landscape, "shouting thunderously", open firing with booming noise. However, the story presents the little child having only a nightmare. But the fact that her father was actually being abducted by security forces from their residence and there were no whereabouts of him for a long time hints that no one can deny the predicament of her father. "A child was accidentally shot dead in the gunfight on the road; an old woman was hit by a bullet while she was staying inside her house" (176). No one can ascertain the safety of their loved ones who are missing for long time.

In Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh's story 'The Mauled Cub' we find the condition of the womenfolk living under the shadows of violence, terror, insecurity, betrayal and human rights violation. Tombi, the young girl, is raped twice within the span of one single day by the two opposing parties - once by the leader of insurgent group belonging to her own community who took stealthy shelter at theirs, and then gang raped by three army personnel partaking search operation after there is an explosion in the locality. Women have been shown to live under utter personal sacrifice when Tombi is shown to hide her bruise and pangs of being raped from her mother lest this "disturbing news put her mother in a state of delirium" who has already suffered a lot after her husband's death and son's abduction by security forces. People in Manipur are shown to live in terror amidst both the warring parties. They cannot refuse shelter to insurgent groups, cannot inform the police and their neighbours about it. If reported to police, they are harassed by police itself to have connections with insurgents. Army personnel can abduct a student of class X living with his family when a bomb blasts nearby without giving any reason and that youth does not return home even in next five years as has been the case with Tombi's elder brother.

## Stories from Nagaland

'The Curfew Man' by Temsula Ao presents the predicament of people living under constant anxiety under the shadow of violence from both the insurgents and security personnel. Everything is presented to have plunged into a state of hostility between two warring armies; the one overground labeling the other as rebels fighting against the state and the other, operating from their underground hideouts and calling the Indian army illegal occupiers of sovereign Naga territories. "Caught between the two, it was the innocent villagers and those living in small townships who had to bear the brunt..."(229) Curfew is declared to keep situation under control. There are incidents when people carrying the sick to

hospital or in search of doctors were stopped and subjected to humiliating searches causing even fatal delays. "There were several incidents where civilians were shot dead by the patrol parties after curfew and their deaths reported as those of underground rebels killed in 'encounters' with the army"(230). Human rights and privacy of the people are violated as government informers monitored the movements and conversations of families whose relatives are doubted to have joined underground groups. Public servants like doctors, teachers and lawyers are also monitored and often questioned. Government agencies also forced 'bad elements' of the towns to work so by either paying them handsomely or by threatening them to reopen old criminal cases. So people are being forced to work under cover by choice or by compulsion. It is reported how underground agents take forceful shelter at private residences and when discovered, the owner of the house is arrested and beaten up so badly that he dies out of injury.

Temsula Ao's another story titled 'Sonny' presents how people in Nagaland live in uncertainty and mutual unreliability amidst rebels, supporters of rebels, police informers, double-crossed agents and security personnel. It shows how the cravings for power and position inside an insurgent faction lead toward cold blooded and brutal murder of a rebel leader with high ideals. There is a sense of subdued anxiety and mutual betrayal in the midst of which no person can live a peaceful life. There are "inequalities and injustices of the repressive 'occupation' forces" which rural people wanted to eliminate. Army personnel were said to be "alien rulers who came and overturned their ancient way of life" (244). It presents the army violating human rights when

"...government forces blazed through the land like a wild fire, turning villages into burnt-out heaps and people into creatures herded into concentration-camp-like grouping zones. Families were separated, women were raped and killed and the men were forced to see the humiliations before they were either maimed for life or simply killed"(244).

### **Stories form Tripura**

'Nanda Teli' by Haribhusan Pal presents how the simple, happy and carefree life of the rural Tripura has been turned off late into tensed existence under the shadows of terrorism and insurgency. And amiable petty businessman, Nanda Teli, is shot dead by unidentified gunman on his way home from his shop in the market unleashing a trail of tension, fear and terror in the entire locality. Even before the murder, people lived in intensely terrorized state. "The market, nowadays, closes before dusk. As evening wears on, it is deathly silence all around...whether there is urgency or not, everyone wants to return home in day light." (268) There is an atmosphere of terror and violence in the behavior met out to rural people by Bindu Riyang's elder son. Bindu Riyang's elder son brings 'different people' to their residence every now and then and his younger son spies on people and their conversations. And the result is the headline in the newspapers:

"Extremists Attack Totabari, One Killed...It is suspected that Nanda Kumar fell into the trap laid by the murderers, when he was coming out from the market. His bullet-ridden body lay at the scene of incident in a pool of blood." (268)

Biman Choudhury's 'The Riot' presents the terror stricken rural Dhaka in the grasp of communal riot and violence. There are reports of carnage of "8 Hindus and 6 Muslims" following the incident of "a Hindu boy from this locality was chopped into pieces over that

iron bridge” and thrown to the canal water when he was going to call a doctor for a patient. Hindu miscreants wait to prey upon “lungi-clad souls” emerging out of the railway station making innocent passengers victims of unidentified murderers. There was an atmosphere of anxiety and violence where no one’s safety in guaranteed.

Although all the stories studied above have violence as their theme, they vary in their treatment as well as attitude. The stories written in Manipur seem to present violence in most heinous manner, although the cause of terrorism and the consequent violence is not stated clearly. They seem to present neither the cause nor suggest any solution to the problem. Similarly, the stories from Assam too seem not to takd about the cause of the problems of insurgency and violence in the state. The feeling of betrayal and that of ‘illegal’ inclusion of Assam into British India after the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826 as the root cause of insurgency, as felt by the insurgent groups in Assam (Misra, U 66), is never hinted at in the stories. Nor do they seem to suggest any way out of this mess. There seem to be mysteries behind insurgency and violence. Nobody can say beforehand what can happen the next moment. On the other hand, ‘The Curfew Man’ by Temsula Ao of Nagaland presents the cause and concern of the insurgency problem in the state. It presents that Indian nation state’s forceful attempt to integrate the present day Nagaland into the Indian political territory hampering their ethnic structure and the Naga people’s retaliation to such attempts to be the cause of the problem. It talks about how both the Naga insurgents and Indian army blame each other of violating each other’s rules. Similarly, the story titled ‘Nanda Teli’ by Haribhusan Pal from Tripura presents that the cause of insurgency in the state is the unending migration of Bangla speaking population into the state which is turning the native Kokborok into a minority community in their own homeland.

So, it is evident that violence has been a dominant theme in the short stories written in and translated into English in the states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura. The entire region has been infested with the problem of terrorism and counter-terrorism which get reflected in literature produced in the land. The common people find themselves jeopardized in the midst of the surroundings which they cannot change or alter. The sensitive writers of the region depict their perceptions of the traumatic experience of a people living in the midst of terror and fear and yet cherishing hopes, as Tilottoma Misra hopes, that human values will triumph some day and a new dawn of peace would emerge out of this trial by fire.

**Works Cited:**

- Ao, Temsula. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. New Delhi: Zubaan Books. 2006. Print.
- Misra, Tilottoma. ed. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings From North-East India*. New Delhi: Oxford. 2011. Print.
- Misra, Udayan. *Periphery Strikes Back*. Shimla: IAS. 2000. Print