

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

12th Year of Open Access

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. XII, Issue-2 (April 2021)

Editor-In-Chief : Dr. Vishwanath Bite
Managing Editor : Dr. Madhuri Bite



www.the-criterion.com



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

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

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

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

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

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



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Women's Literary Space in North East Literature in English: An Overview

Dr Doyir Ete
Assistant Professor
Dept of English
Rajiv Gandhi University
Arunachal Pradesh.

Article History: Submitted-27/03/2021, Revised-24/04/2021, Accepted-25/04/2021, Published-05/05/2021.

Abstract:

There is lot of scope to map the evolution of Women's Writing in North East literature (NEL) in English along with negotiating common tropes of gender, patriarchy, and domesticity. Women writers have created a space of their own along with contributing to North East Literature in general. Women's Writing also depicts women in a conflict zone and how their lives are affected in complex ways. They also face the experience of negotiating modernity and dismantling traditional patriarchy at the same time. Tribal Feminism as a critical framework helps to interrogate their writings. Tribal Feminism can be understood from within the area of Feminism, but it also has its own unique sensibilities. A vision of tribal feminism is that the experiences of women from the region are no longer treated secondary to the other experiences from the region. It has become critical at this juncture that in the discourse of North East Writing in English women's experience also need to be privileged as a story of the region's consciousness.

Keywords: North East Literature, Tribal Feminism, Women's Writing, Modernity.

North East region of India is a conglomeration of eight states Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Sikkim. The region has seen tremendous geo-political changes due to the intervention of nation-state politics after Independence and subsequent merging of the region into the union of India. The region was always culturally, socially, linguistically, and even to some extent religiously distinct from the mainland and so the process of integration into India was a complex one. Postcolonial concerns of identity, race, ethnicity, and history is at the center of North East Literature along with gender and women's issues. North East Literature is at a turning point as it is dismantling representative images of the region and its literature and at the same time engaging with multitudes of concerns. At such a time

women writers and their contributions are all the more critical and to borrow Elaine Showalter's phrase there is a desire for 'a literature of their own' amongst the women writers from the region. North East boasts of a number of women writers writing in English like Indira Goswami, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Rita Chaudhury, Janice Pariate, Margaret Zama, Anjum Hasan, Monalisa Chankija, Mitra Phukan, Tillotama Mishra, Rashmy Narzary and Yishe Doma to name just a few. By placing women and women's experience at the center of their narrative voice these authors focus on the different experiences of women in different contexts and changing social scenarios. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) stressed on the need for 'space' and 'freedom' for women to create works of art and this is true even of women in North East who have always jostled for space in the literature not only of the region but also of the country. Today, North East Writing is enriched by the rich contributions of many women writers from the region.

Categorizing literature based on gender tends to subscribe to the very stereotypes that we aim at deconstructing, but the objective of this paper is to highlight and foreground women's writing not as different but as a part North East Writing. It is also true that women many a times react to situations differently than their male counterparts which offer a different perspective to various experiences. It is the literary manifestations of such experiential outcomes which is unique to the women of the North East region that is mostly explored in the books by women writers. 'Home' as a construct is problematic in the context of the North East region. In women's writing this construct undergoes further complexities when seen from the lenses of gender, women's issues, and feminism. In a postcolonial world where identity-politics is more inscribed, the region is also witness to the internal strife and conflicts which add to the complexities in defining 'home' and 'homeland. Tillotama Mishra observes "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" (xiii, 2011). Margaret Ch. Zama also echoes similar thoughts " ...emerging literature from the Northeast region, having undergone historical and political trauma of untold suffering and marginalization, registers various voices that need to be heard and understood in the contest of India's multicultural mosaic. 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 endeavor to preserve their cultural

and ethnic identities” (xi, 2013). It is within this body of literature that the women writers from the eight states are also actively contributing in creating a literary discourse of their own.

An interesting area for investigation in the works of women writers is tribal feminism. How women in the North East experience not just traditional problems of women under patriarchy but also negotiate the history of political intervention of the state as well as violence due to insurgency and counterinsurgency. There are many women’s movements in the North East which has its genesis precisely because of the devastating effects of such conflicts in the region. Traditionally, women have been active participants in social, cultural, and political arena. Patriarchal institutions and their limiting norms exist at many levels, but women are relatively more empowered and free agents in many spheres. Movements like Meira Paibi Numit (Women Torchbearers) in Manipur was launched in 1980s against the AFSPA and brutal rape of women during counter insurgency and other such violence. The Naga Mother’s Association actively protested violence and gave the slogan “Shed no more Blood”. An icon against AFSPA is Irom Sharmila widely known as the Iron lady. She has herself penned a thousand words long poem titled “Birth” about her journey and struggle. Tribal feminism responded to a whole plethora of situations from within the patriarchal norms of the community as well as the interventions of dominant hegemonies in different forms and shapes. One can try to understand these experiences from the framework of feminism, but it would also suffice to generate a vision of tribal feminism where the experiences of women are no longer secondary to the other experiences from the region or from that of the mainstream.

In the stories from the North East and about the North East, the women’s experiences also need to be privileged as a story of the region’s consciousness. Dr Rita Chowdhury’s *Chinatown days* (2017) or *Makum* narrates the story of the estranged community of the Assamese-Chinese of Makum during the 1962 Indo-China war and their dislocation and subsequent forced exodus to China. The central love story of Mei Lin a young Chinese girl and Pulak Baruah an Assamese boy also demonstrates women’s suffering during political strife and war. Such, histories that are a defining experience of North East find no mention anywhere in the domain of dominant national discourse. Temsula Ao in *These Hills Called Home* (2005) dwells on the internal conflicts between the underground separatists and the Indian government. The angst of simple Naga folks living under fear of both underground and the Indian army forms the

background of many of her stories. The feminist perspectives of women's experience under war are an undercurrent in many of the short stories in the book. Nagaland of Ao's stories is depicted in its both traditional forms and as a modern state. The desire for self-rule among the Nagas is very well described in the novel *Yaruingam*(1960) by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, but Ao has touched upon these concerns in her stories in different ways. Ao writes "Our racial wisdom has always extolled the virtue of human beings living at peace with themselves and in harmony with nature and with our neighbours. It is only when the Nagas re-embrace and re-write this vision into the fabric of their lives in spite of the compulsions of a fast changing world, can we say that the memories of the turbulent years have served us well" (xi, 2006). In her stories she interrogates the problematics of Naga identity focusing on the internecine conflicts and wars in which it is the common man, women and children who are most affected. Her stories also have for its background the cultural fabric of Nagaland, drawing from the collective memory of her tribe, their myths, legends, and oral lore. Her stories display a unique ethnic struggle between a Naga identity and a Christian religious influence. Women in her stories are doubly victimized under the military and Naga movements for self-rule. How violence has shaped the social fabric of family affecting particularly women and children is a central concern for many women writers. Popular novelist from Assam, Mitra Phukan dwells on the infringement of political and public conflicts in the lives of common people as she attempts to understand these from a women's perspective. *The Collector's Wife* (2005) is the most telling of her works with the title itself conveying a women's perception of things and a women centric experience. The novel presents the conflicting emotional and ideological struggles of Rukmini with the ULFA and Students Movement of Assam as a background. The choices she makes, and the fate that is destined for her is symbolical of the situation of the society that the novel mirrors. With the death of the two men in her life she carries the future in her womb, but the unborn child will be fatherless. The child will have to navigate its own journey in the world. Like Bhattacharya's *Yaruingam*, Rukmini's child is a child of adversity. Another novelist from Assam, Srutimala Duara's *Travelling with Dreams* (2001) also deals with terrorism, but in it she has peeled the many layers of terrorism, the root cause of the common people joining the militancy, and the suffering of families caused by their own kind. In the character of Jibon, she has represented the anguish of many such young men and their loss of faith in authoritarian institutions. Very sensitively she has portrayed the anxieties of common citizens who face migrant issues and

poverty which are not solved even today. Her other novel *Ashes in the Sea* (2019) has Smriti as the titular character and her journey from Assam to South India spans the journey of her mind. The story is a poignant description of not only her sense of nostalgia for a lost homeland, but there is also the sense of loss of pristine Assam of the earlier days. Naga author Easterine Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) is a historical fiction based on the Naga-British conflict in Khonoma. In political discourse where there is absence of any historical documentation of such encounters with the British, historical fictions based on the oral narratives play an incredibly significant role in articulating such histories. The question of Naga nationalism is a common trope in writings from Nagaland. It influences the characters voices as well as forms the background of many stories. The postcolonial concerns of identity, history and different forms of resistance and defiance are present in these stories. *Mari* (2011) by Kire is a beautiful love story in the backdrop of the Kohima War of Second World War. The novel depicts the trauma of a family under siege due to war as well as the personal loss and recovery of Mari the protagonist. *A Respectable Woman* (2019) narrates the lives of two generations of Angami women as they negotiate tradition, modernity, individuality and identity in a post war Kohima city. Even here, Kire has traced two generations of Naga women through key periods in history, thus tracing the growth of Naga women along with the growth of Nagaland as a state. The ideas of nation, nationality and identity are critically engaged in many of Kire's novels. Kire also presents the stark reality in which the Government, the underground and Christian missionaries functioned - both the good and the bad aspects. Also, the younger generation woman who question patriarchy and are independent is reminiscent of strong Naga women like the author. The most recognized writer from Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai has evoked the home of her ancestors in her novels and poems. She has depicted the negotiation of the tribal way of life with modern ways. To understand what is home today, her characters must negotiate different events of globalization and modernization. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*(2006) contains many wonderful stories of the tribal women and their little lives. For eg. Nenem and David Ferguson's love story which defied tribal norms at many different levels also depicts Nenem's adventurous spirit. Nenem must choose between love and land ultimately choosing land. Dai questions why could she not have both? In the story of 'Pinyar the widow' traditional customs bound a woman to her fate as she finds very less space to maneuver and change the material circumstances of her life. It is true that women have a comparatively better position in tribal communities from the North

East compared to her counterparts in traditional societies in many other parts of the country. For instance, there are fewer taboos and restrictions on women in tribal societies of the region. There are no dictates to use a veil or a purdah, no restrictions on going out without a companion and dowry is not practiced. This in no way means that women in a tribal society enjoy equal right as men. She is bound by traditional and patriarchal rules and is restricted by traditional rules. Dai problematizes the status of tribal women in her portrayal of women like Pinyar who are isolated from their village because of reasons beyond their control. She also interrogates the questions of home, identity, location and dislocation which define the relationships between land, people and country. Women writers use their own experience as a starting point of discussion and whether autobiographical, fictional or non-fictional it does not matter because these are all contemporary stories that make up the experience in the North East region.

Women's writing in North East literature also questions the established conventions of traditional societies and ways in which women negotiate private and public spaces that are empowering. Easterine Kire's, *Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) is a fine example. The novel presents the life of Naga women under a patriarchal Naga society. Kire delves deep into the institutionalized forms of oppression to present matriarchy as insidiously working which is equally repressive. These women also have to face the brunt of violence, alcoholism, and modernity that threatens to alter the traditional society. Her women characters are strong willed and feisty in nature. It is true that the struggles of women differ from context to context and society to society, but they also share experiences that are universal. Temsula Ao depicts women in conflict and how their lives are affected in complex ways. A woman in conflict is a constant trope in her narratives. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) locates women's body as site of resistance as they are caught between different warring factions subjected to inhuman brutalities like rape and murder. Ao narrates how in the name of suppressing militancy, state machineries targeted Naga women as a reprisal towards the Naga men who had picked up arms. At the same time, she is equally critical of the Naga underground too, who kill their own in the name of freedom. 'The Last Song' is a powerful rendition of this song of a woman's pain and tragedy. Not only has she sung to convey the message of resistance she sings it while violence is being committed on her very body. Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988) presents a male dominated society through which Giribaala has to struggle subjugation and victimization. Her keen eye for the socio-cultural aspects of the

Amranga Satra gives her readers a peek into this traditional society. She has brought to light the plight of widows, the effects of opium and illiteracy and how it affected the characters in the story. Goswami's struggle to bring progressive change in society is also seen in her work *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2005). The novel calls for the abolition of animal sacrifice in the famous Kamakhya Temple in Kamrup, Guahati. MitraPhukan's novel *A Monsoon of Music* is a socio-cultural depiction of the backwater of a town called Tamulbari. This is a traditional village, and the story revolves around Nomita as she is caught between a traditional society and a sophisticated world of music and shows. The novel also shows Phukan's knowledge of music, musical instruments, and its nuances. The novel also portrays women and men whose depiction showcases the range of Phukan's eye for human characters. Bringing a fresh wisp to writings from the region, Janice Pariate's *Boats on Land* (2012) and *Nine Chambered-Heart* (2017) offers the readers novel ideas with stories having women as central characters. In *Nine Chambered Heart* the protagonist is a lady whose character is revealed through eight different men who had been in love with her. What stands out is that though she is the central character around which the story revolves, she by virtue of being absent is also the voiceless one. Her silence is also exacerbated by being a female thus she represents all those women whose voices have been suppressed for years. Pariate is also one of the few writers from the North East who has also sensitively portrayed lesbian characters and the teenage hood of her characters. Feminist theorist Judith Butler has stated how feminism will be more inclusive when it encompasses within its purview not just feminine experience but also LGBT's and Queers. These authors have foregrounded the female experience in a huge way but to say that they write only from a women's voice would be limiting because many of these author's also articulate male voice and experience. What is also noticeable in many writings of women writers is that the feminine experience is not exclusive to women rather it is also explored by other genders in different ways. It is incredibly multilayered. It must be pointed out that each writer has an individual trajectory completely different from one another yet sharing a commonality of women's experience.

Women writers have also been engrossed with the question of history and cultural memory. The challenges inherent in the underrepresentation of states of North East and its history remains a major concern for authors like Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Rita Chaudhury and many more writers. Many states in the North East have a rich oral history which has been the

well spring of its culture and tradition. The oral culture is also the source of many stories from the region. Due to the privileging of logocentrism, oral literature was disregarded as primitive and inauthentic. This brand of philosophy left little space for voices from non-scribal society. The appearance of fiction, poetry and short stories based on the oral narratives was also a reaction against such dismissal of oral culture. Oral tradition reflects everyday lives, customs, and traditions. It explores human's coexistence with the environment. Writers have touched upon these issues on an aesthetic as well as critical level. *Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai is one of the best examples of translation of the oral narratives of the Adi community into the written word. The book takes us into lives of men and women who have lived for centuries in proximity with nature. She also shows how the closely held belief systems and practices guide them as they negotiate modernity and globalization. Dai's collection *River Poems* eloquently voices the irreplaceable position of stories and memories that form an integral part of oral tradition.

Ecofeminist perspective is another important angle through which writings of women writer from North East can be studied and understood. Looking at nature from a feminist perspective includes approaches of both ecology and feminism. Drawing on the insights of both ecological criticism and feminist ideas the stories draw a parallel between the oppression towards nature and women. Such writings call for the preservation of a way of life in which nature and humans co-exist along with recognition of this sustainability as the best way forward for planet Earth. North East is a hotspot for various flora and fauna and the region has seen tremendous alterations in its ecology as a result of modern interventions in the form of dams, roads and industries. The impact of these on the nature and biodiversity has been a cause for concern in many societies. Particularly for states with tribal population the change has been considerable affecting the very fabric of cultural and social life. Such concerns are reflected in the writings from the region in major ways. Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Esther Syiem, Monalisa Changkija, Easterine Iralu, Anjum Hasan and many others the ecological consciousness is deeply embedded in their poetry. Temsula Ao's *A Laburnam for my Head* and *These Hills Called Home*, Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill*, Srutimala Duara's *Ashes in the Seas* are some novels which present the landscape as an integral part of the narrative. In such stories it is not only the gendered spaces they foreground, the authors also present spaces of the forests, fields, rivers, and gardens as enriching and defining spaces. Thus, in Dai's poetry and novels tribal men and women are recurrently seen along riverbanks and in forests from whence they derive their

sustenance both physical and psychological. Similarly, Ao's laburnum is symbolic of an intense desire encapsulated in the female character's simple yet complex life. The senses aroused by the flower are pleasant yet unsettling like the hidden secrets in the mind of the characters.

In conclusion one observes that it is impossible to find a common point from which to start constructing a framework of women writers in North East Literature. Whichever point we discuss there will always be variations because each point is presented in ways that are interpreted according to the individual understanding and choices of the authors. The location from which the author is writing is just a reference point otherwise the women writers from the region has their individual signatures and idiosyncrasies in their writing as well as subject matter. Also, not necessarily the women writers write only about women's issues because like men can write about women, women can also write about men's issues apart from any other issues under the sun. The subtleties in the experiences differing from men are just a matter of experience rather than abilities or efficiency. The uses of language in different ways by women writers and male writers have been a matter of theoretical debate. For instance, Helen Cixous's *écriture feminine* or *feminine writing* can be undertaken in the study of women writers but it can also be understood that such theorization of women's language based on her sexuality is an approach that will be limiting when reading and discussing works of women writers from the North East because of various reasons. Western worldview is constructed on a physical and material basis with focus on scientific understanding of nature whereas aboriginal worldview is more holistic and inclusive. Thus, a more appropriate approach to read native literature would be to read their writings free of any constructive disruptions.

Works Cited:

Ao, Temsula. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2006

---. *Laburnam For My Head*, Penguin India, 2009

Chaudhury, Rita. *Chinatown Days*. Macmillan, 2017, Print.

Dai, Mamang *River Poems*, Writers Workshop Kolkata, 2004

---. *The Legends of Pensam*, Penguin India, 2006

---. *The Black Hill*, Aleph Book Publishing, 2014

Das, Nigamananda. Ed. *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. New Delhi: Adhayayan Publishers and Distributors, 2011.

Duara, Shrutimala. *Travelling with Dreams*, Spectrum Publications, 2001

---. *Ashes in the Sea*, B R Publishing Corporation, 2003

Goswami, Indira. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Rupa and Co, 1986, 2004.

---. *The Man from Chinnamasta*, Katha Books, 2006.

Kire, Easterine. *Sky is my Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, Speaking Tiger Publishing Pvt Limited, 2018

---. *Mari*, HarperCollins, 2010

---. *A Respectable Woman*, 2019

---. *Terrible Matriarchy*, 2007

Mishra, Tilotama. Ed. *Introduction to The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Pariate, Janice. *Boats on Land*, Random House India, 2012.

---. *The Nine Chambered Heart*, The Borough Press, 2018.

Phukan, Mitra. *The Collector's Wife*, Zubaan Books, 2005

---. *A Monsoon of Music*, Zubaan Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2011.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own : British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton, N.J. :Princeton University Press, 1999.

Zama, Ch. Margaret(ed). *Emerging Literatures From NorthEast India*, Sage Publications India, 2013.