



A THEMATIC ANALYSIS ON INDIAN WOMEN WRITING IN ENGLISH FROM NORTHEAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The literature from Northeast India can be read as an archive of history, art, society, culture, and politics. It provides a perspective from the within as it is written by individuals, who hail from this region. The women writers in English from the different Northeastern states, whose works are the primary focus both public and personal purview of the state they belong to and in doing so, they have captured the essence of the multi-lingual and multi-cultural existence of the region as a whole. Their engagement with the personal, political, cultural, and social aspects of human existence in their works presents an insightful overview of the region in which they are the representatives of their own narrative rather than depending on an external narrative.

Key words: northeast literature, female, multilingual, external narrative, culture etc

The two major subjects for the writers from Northeast India are— one, the oral culture in forms of folktales, rituals, etc. and two, the socio-political climate of the region in terms of insurgency, conflict, etc. Orature has always been a rich and the primary source of the representation of the beliefs and way of life of various indigenous tribes of this region. It used to be a source of

entertainment, medicine, art, and so on before these societies transitioned to a culture with a script. Therefore, for an insight into the traditional belief system, knowledge, and structure of society of most of the Northeastern tribes, the writings in English have become an important source in the present times, especially when the oral culture is fading gradually.

The socio-political factors which have led to the present understanding of the map of Northeast India are also integral to understanding the region by tracing its history of formation, from the pre-Colonial to Colonial to post-Colonial development. Therefore, the writers from the Northeast in an attempt to represent the history of the region have heavily involved their works with various socio-political processes, for instance, the arrival of the British, the transition of oral societies, the incorporation of the Northeast region into the Indian union, the reorganization of the states, etc. Most of the indigenous languages did not have a script and the concept of the “written” is as recent as the entry of the Christian missionaries in the region in the 1800s. Therefore, the act of the Northeastern writers employing the oral culture and the socio-political processes of the region in their works can be perceived from the lens of responsibility, to represent and preserve the history and culture in their own words through their writings.

It is also important to note that the communities which had their script before the arrival of Christian missionaries, that is, the Manipuris and the Assamese, had a written record of their society, culture, and history, which serves as an immediate source in the present times for writers and researchers alike. However, it is also an undeniable fact that writing in English or translating the Manipuri and Assamese works in English have gained prominence in the region for a few reasons—first, due to the arrival of the British, second, due to the introduction of English education and third, due to the influence of the English language in the post-Colonial era, globally.

The translated works of Rita Chowdhury, an Assamese writer, and M.K.Binodini Devi, a Manipuri writer are prime examples in this regard, for instance, Chowdhury’s Assamese novel, titled *Makam* and Devi's Manipuri memoir, titled *Churachand Maharajgi Imung*. Choudhury's *Makam*, which is set around the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and follows the lives of the Chinese Indian of Assam who were forced to leave India due to the tension between the two countries, is a historical fiction translated into English as *the Chinatown Days*. Devi's *Churachand Maharajgi Imung*, which gives an insider's insight into the royal family of Manipur and their court life, romances, childhood, etc. is translated into English, titled *The Maharaja's Household*.

The growth of the writings, originally in English began in the post-2000 period. There are a few writers, who wrote in English prior to the year 2000, they are—Arup Kumar Datta, Temsula Ao, Indrani Goswami, and Srutimala Duara. But, the growth of English writings began only after the year 2000 as many new Northeast Indian writers in English entered the literary scene in the region, with over fifty literary works published by both men and women writers in less than twenty years. The

twenty-first-century literary world of Northeast India is undoubtedly dominated by works of women writers in English and in representing the same shared socio-political and cultural space with male writers, their works, also, provide an in-depth analysis of the position and lived experience of women within that space. Their writings are a testament of how different women perceive their own culture and society according to the times they live in and their experience.

The common feature, which binds most of these writers is the representation of women, who either question the norms of the society or are individuals, who live and abide by the norms of the society and yet, are strong and resilient examples of womanhood. In either case, they are not voiceless as their thoughts and feelings are expressed in their texts. Therefore, in most of the works of women writers in English from Northeast, women characters play an important role irrespective of their precolonial, colonial, or postcolonial settings and in this attempt, the worldview of women who live in the same society as men, offers a valuable representation of the society itself.

How a woman writer interprets her society and culture is different than how a man does. Nevertheless, it is integral in the exploration of the structure of the society, the role of women in that society and also, their contribution as members of the society, and most evidently, the analysis of the society they live in and the culture, they follow. In addressing the issues which women face in the patriarchal societies of Northeast, these women writers have taken the forefront through their works, whether it is through apparent representation like in Nini Lungalung's, Monalisa Changkija's poetry, where women are expected to confine themselves to domestic roles or a subtle mention like in the works of Mamang Dai or Easterine Kire, where women are not part of the decision making process. It is also evident through the representation of sayings, myths, and legends of a respective tribe, for instance, Esther Syiem exposes the inequality between men and women which exists in a matrilineal Khasi society through the interpretation of old Khasi tales and sayings in her poetry.

However, the writings in English by women from the Northeast are not categorically related to only women's issues and their representation. It is a body of work, which acts as a guide and provides an understanding of the region, be it political, social, cultural, historical, or about art. If Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* is key work in Northeastern writings to understand the socio-political development of the present state of Meghalaya from as early as the 1800s to the present times and learn about the Khasi culture, then Easterine Kire's portrayal of the present Nagaland in her works appear in different periods, with *Sky is My Father*, which chronicles the time during the Colonial period and *Bitter Wormwood*, which is set in the post-Independence times, dealing with Naga demand for sovereignty. Also, Mamang Dai's works like *The Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill* chronicles the present times as well as the history of the region of present Arunachal Pradesh.

The cultural life of the various indigenous tribes of the region also finds an important place in the works of the women writers. The portrayal of the traditional beliefs and practices of the Adi

tribe of Arunachal Pradesh features heavily in Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, in Kire's *When the River Sleeps* too one learns about the various rituals of the Naga tribe, in Pariat's *Boats on Land*, the constant communication between the world of spirits and humans are emphasised, and so on.

The depiction of oral knowledge in terms of art, music, folktales, performances, legends, and myths of different tribes also forms a great basis for these texts. In Yishey Doma's *The Legends of Pensam*, the author draws the reader into the worldview of the Lepcha tribe from the present Sikkim, where she begins with the beginning, that is, the creation genesis to the introduction of livelihood in the form of agriculture to close-knit community-based society to the taboos and rituals, which have a certain basis in the Lepcha folktales, legends, and myths.

The political tension, which shook the region in the decades after India's Independence has found a critical space in the works of many women writers from Northeast India. Mona Zote's poetry depicts through various imagery the everyday stagnant life in Mizoram during the Mizo struggle for separation from the state of erstwhile Assam, and in its aftermath. Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami* is also set in a similar period, focusing on the brutal treatment of the para-military forces towards the local population of Mizoram.

Uddipana Goswami's *No Ghosts in the City* covers the various issues in different parts of Assam, for example, the migrant Bangladeshi-Assamese relations, the demand for separate statehood for the hill district of N.C Hills, the insurgency in Bodo areas, etc. Regina Marendi's portrayal of the political tension in Assam is related to the tension related to the nonindigenous and indigenous question in Assam. Anjum Hasan's depiction of Meghalaya in *Lunatic in my Head* is in regard to the insider-outsider debate during the statehood process of Meghalaya around 1987. Temsula Ao's *These Hills called Home* is a collection of short stories, which talks about Nagaland as a warzone between the Indian Army and the Underground Naga militants.

The transitioning social lives of the people of the region are also of particular interest in the works of these women writers. There is no denying that the political tension affects the social life, for instance, in Pariat's *Boats on Land*, there are stories which talk about the changing social relations between the 'outsiders' (non-indigenous residents) and the locals in Meghalaya, which affects life in schools, in the neighbourhood, in business, etc. However, the major subject concerning the capture of a changing social landscape is the conversion of most of the Northeastern tribes to Christianity. It finds mention mainly in the works of Kire, Pariat, and Ao which shows how the centre of the social and cultural life shifts from the traditional belief system to the Church. There is also a lament for the transition which is visible in their works and at the same time, the awe for the fading oral world and an attempt to carry forward the oral in the written world. Another important aspect in this regard is the change in social life due to the rapid urbanisation, represented in the works of Srutimala Duara, Jhanavi Baruah, and Indrani Raimedhi.

The shift from writing about the region to the kind of writing, where the region is not the focus has also gained new prominence when it comes to women writing in English from the Northeast. In this regard, Pariat's portrayal of human relationship in the contemporary times in *Seahorse* and *Nine Chambered Hearts*, Dai's depiction of the contrast between a metropolitan life in Delhi and the life back in the lap of her home state, Arunachal Pradesh in *Stupid Cupid*, Anjum Hasan's portrayal of cosmopolitan life in Bangalore in most of her works, or the personal tale of sexual abuse survivor in N. Jamir's *The Reluctant Daughter* are a few examples, where the women writers from Northeast have attempted to explore new subjects, where the region does not appear vitally.

In writing about the time, they do not belong to and also about the time they belong to, these women writers have not only explored the various ways of expression like poetry, novels, life writing, etc. but have centred their works on the different range of themes and issues. In short, English writing and the emergence of women writers writing in English is quite recent but in less than twenty years, their works have captured different centuries and decades of changes the region has undergone and have addressed the different issues concerning the Communities living in the region.

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