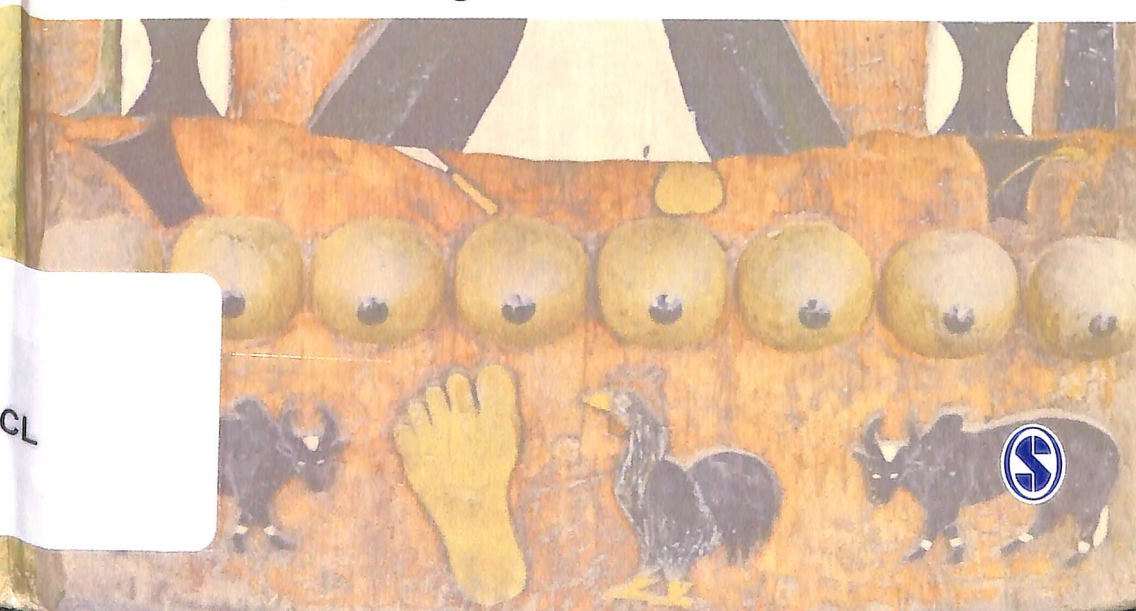


SAGE STUDIES ON INDIA'S NORTH EAST

EMERGING LITERATURES FROM NORTHEAST INDIA

The Dynamics of Culture,
Society and Identity

Edited by Margaret Ch. Zama



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Emerging Literatures from Northeast India

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Society and Identity



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MARGARET CH. ZAMA

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Above all else, sincere acknowledgement and thanks go to the contributors of this volume for their cooperation and patience throughout. Mention should be made here of the fact that this volume is not on the proceedings of the seminar per se, nor have all papers presented at the time of the seminar been included. This volume contains only the revised papers received, as well as those invited from scholars who chaired the sessions.

Last but certainly not the least, I express my grateful thanks to my family, for their patience and understanding.

Margaret Ch. Zama

Introduction

Margaret Ch. Zama



The use of the word ‘emerging’ in the title of this volume needs to be defined, for while recent and contemporary works/writings occupy space in most of the essays, so do works of earlier decades. So ‘emerging’ does not necessarily denote only the new but also refers to the fact that though more new writings in English and the vernacular are indeed being generated from the region, so also is the emergence of previous and existing works in the form of translations, thereby making such works accessible for the first time to the rest of the world. All of this is to a great extent, facilitated by the interest generated of late for a growing discourse on the region, particularly from the academia. Space is being created and recognition fast increasing for this growing vibrant writing, much of it now being written in English due to the high levels of literacy in the region.

Earlier versions of most chapters in this volume were presented at the National Seminar on ‘The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India’, organized by the Department of English, Mizoram University, over four years back in March 2009, which is the genesis of this volume (though not a volume on its proceedings per se). The seminar brought together scholars of literature, language, folkloristic studies, social sciences and the media, to discuss and interact on various issues of emerging trends witnessed in the growing literary discourse that have emanated from the Northeast region. The thrust then at that point in time still remains valid and unchanged today which is, that emerging literatures 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 context 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 endeavour to preserve their cultural and ethnic identities. This is not to be mistaken simply as blind nostalgia for a way of life long lost, but must be received as voices of individual authors from societies caught in the cross current of their political and historical inheritances, personal tragedies and cultural ambivalence, voices that are involved in developing and contributing to a much larger literary consciousness that needs to be recognized and interrogated.

The cultural geography and its diversity; the problematics of ethnicity and identity in the context of politics of culture and identity; the emerging literatures that have been generated after the textualization of tribal societies mostly in the wake of Christianity while mapping the transition from oral to the written—these are but some of the vital and engrossing areas touched upon in the content of this volume, and which need not be repeated here. What may however be strongly reiterated is the fact that the changing times and its accompanying dynamics have necessitated the various communities of this region to seek new ways to negotiate, translate and expose their world views. The role and the impact of emerging literatures of the Northeast region in this regard is now being recognized more and more in academia, providing a growing corpus of both primary and secondary resources which is now actively contributing to a literary discourse that is in the process of staking its claim not only in mainstream discourse but beyond. This may be perceived as a tall claim by some, made by one who is seen engaged in privileging and promoting regional revivalism. Not so really, as time will tell.

The chapters in this volume have been loosely arranged into three parts to reflect their commonalities and differences. The sequencing of the contents has been based, firstly, on a general overview of emerging literatures from the Northeast region with their historical and cultural mappings, as well as some literary and theoretical structures already in place, which project a potential for establishing new paradigms within the growing creative output and accompanying literary discourse. Secondly, the specifics or those already in place, or in the process of being put in place by writers of the region, and thirdly, paradigms outside of the Northeast to provide a wider scope and perception of similar writings.

Part I of the volume: Building Literary Paradigms for Northeast Discourse contains five broad-ranging articles spanning the theoretical

and historical that explore the given core themes from very dissimilar perspectives:

Kailash C. Baral in his submission 'Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India' which is a revised version of his keynote address given at the seminar, points out that "literary marginality, against the grain, contests and problematises some of the universalistic assumptions of literature while factoring in and often valorizing unique ethnic and cultural experience that needs to be examined outside the Marg-Desi divide", in his reference to emerging writers and their works, from the region. These writers are, according to him, individualistic in their approach and narrative styles, but collectively represent the ethos of the region in terms of their shared history and political destiny, and therefore aspire towards a vision beyond narrow ethnic mappings. The chapter also points out that the absence of authentic histories of most communities of the Northeast has compelled many of its creative writers to take on the role of cultural historians in order to provide alternative histories as it were. The advent of Christianity in the nineteenth century and the subsequent conversion of many tribes of the region resulted in cultural loss which today has generated attempts at recovery, again, by many of the emerging writers. New narratives that may be classed under the genre of *place novels*, have also begun to make their mark with writers like Dhruva Hazarika and Siddhartha Deb to name a few. A new growing confidence is thus detected in the choice of themes and subject matter as well, which seeks to make inroads beyond identity and ethnic issues.

One major aspect of any culture possessing the written word as it were is the history of its acquiring it, for this history invariably impacts the culture of the community. In this connection, Tilottoma Misra gives an insightful study of the coming of the print culture into the region in her submission 'Speaking, Writing and Coming of the Print Culture in Northeast India'. The equation of oral culture with non-literate/primitive communities and the written word with modernity and progress was a Western colonial construct, more so because it was associated with power. This aspect contributed to the growing awareness "that possessing the art of writing is in many ways more empowering than oral communication" and the evidence of this, according to Tilottoma Misra, is seen in the construction of a set of myths by different oral communities of the region, about the loss of the technique of writing at some point in their remote past. The colonial efforts to integrate the

different languages of Assam by making Bengali the print language, for better governance, provoked stiff resistance, but there were also evidences of prominent dialects within many tribal communities that were privileged by the Christian missionaries such as the Ao-Naga language and the Lusei dialect *Duhlian* of the Zo tribes, which received priority and were promoted as print language. The writer notes that such efforts in order to help integrate a region are “characteristic strategies of all modern empire-builders, and the story did not come to an end in northeast India with the end of colonialism”. The writer further shows how recent research on the effect of colonialism on the vernacular languages has shown the creation of ‘laboratory languages’ that were meant to facilitate the development of print capitalism during the colonial times. It is indeed interesting to note how the print culture can play powerful key roles in the sociopolitical and economic dynamics of a community or any nation for that matter. It may be added that it is also worth our while to not forget the primacy of oral speech or orality, which was to be later followed by literacy (writing) and, then only, by the print culture.

Manjeet Baruah in his chapter ‘An Emerging Genre of “Political” Literature in India’s Frontier’ makes it a point to emphasize the historicity of the region by stating that the idea of a Northeast frontier was a colonial construct since prior to the nineteenth century, this region never did exist as part of any political state system. So according to him, in order to understand the core history of the difficult relationship between India and its Northeast frontier, one has to return to the colonial period, and in an attempt to interrogate the relationship of Assamese literature to the larger movements in the area, the chapter points out that one can see an emerging genre of ‘political’ literature based precisely on the issue of frontier and of how such a literature is “different from those in the past that also focused on the frontier”. The writer takes as examples works from Assamese literature of the past two decades wherein is detected a growing concern with the political problem of being a frontier people. It is interesting to note that the poetry of Megan Kachari and prose/fiction of Anurag Mahanta’s *Aaulingar Zui* (An Harvest of Ash, 2007), both members of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a secessionist/militant group, are taken as case in point and placed alongside Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s Assamese classic *Iaruingam* (People’s Rule, 1960), to highlight the fact that the two novels of the same genre, spread across the span of close to 50 years, clearly reflect the changing political

considerations of people inhabiting the frontier. In examining the works of other writers of the earlier generation writing in contemporary times and on the same issues of military violence, militancy and Indian nation state, as those of the present generation of writers, the chapter takes note of the many differences in treatment of violence, stating that “the difference would be in the paradigm within which the violence is placed. The paradigms are also ideological constructs that gives meaning to the respective treatments of violence.”

Parag M. Sarma in his chapter ‘Towards an Appreciative Paradigm for Literatures of the Northeast’, advocates the ethno-critical approach that will acknowledge differences rather than opposition, enabling a fresh appraisal of the literatures of the region that will interrogate the ‘us and them’, and in the process, “dissolve borders and boundaries from absolute categories to shifting spaces where cultures negotiate and deal with each other”. An important question posed in the chapter is about the role of literature in an ethnic milieu as diverse as that of the Northeast and goes on to state that what is needed is “an oral derived appreciative paradigm that while acknowledging that the written form is radically different from the oral, nonetheless gives cognizance to the oral antecedents of a culture, and how the creative vision and world is shaped by it”. This idea of the ‘oral derived’ would allow the examination of traditional features alongside post-traditional evolution brought about by transition to written cultures. In the long run, it is true that a proper appreciation of the literature of the region is possible only with a proper understanding of the ethnic fabric and the interethnic relationships coexisting in the region.

D. Venkat Rao provides a scholarly study in his chapter ‘Sign Forces of Culture: Reflections on Mnemopraxial Responsibility’ of what he calls “the verbal and visual sign forces” of cultural singularities to be found in the diverse idioms of communities from the region, and wherein lies the traits of their heterotextual pasts, despite subjection to erasure of identities by outside forces. The questions posed in this chapter bear witness to the confessional style of the writer who, as one not belonging to the region, is seeking ways of relating to a context which to him, is unfamiliar. The chapter attempts to address the cultural, intellectual, experiential gap between the Northeast and the rest of the country, i.e., mainland India, and since academics is our common linking thread, the chapter takes on the burden of how one like him is to deal with other asymmetries between the regions. The theoretical concepts of several terms used by the writer and which

have become part of common academic language, contribute further to a deeper understanding of the discourse that the chapter initiates. Another aspect witnessed in the chapter is the distinct attempt to move away from anthropologization of cultures earlier popularized by anthropologists, like Geertz, to contemporary critical developments in literary and cultural studies. Hence a critical footnote on 'Anthropology in the East' is also provided. Despite the paucity of material in English on the Northeast, particularly with reference to its literary output and which the writer must have surely found to be a sore point while writing the chapter, it is to be noted that this has not deterred him from making a rich contribution to the present volume. He further goes on to suggest that research in humanities in universities must take up the task of evolving new teaching modules and programmes, both in theory and practice "that are sensitive to our distinct but disjunctive heritages—mnemocultural and mnemotechnical or a-conceptual and conceptual inheritances" and that such a work can be conceived under what he terms Critical Humanities. Such a practice would indeed contribute towards mainstreaming studies presently viewed today as belonging to the periphery.

Part II of the volume: Specifics of Literary Paradigms of the Northeast contains seven chapters that dwell on selected texts of writers and oral traditions of the region, which provide a broad spectrum to the growing literary corpus on studies of the Northeast.

My chapter on 'Locating Trauma in Mizo Literature: The Beloved Bullet' explores possibilities of ways of reading history other than the model of straightforward experience and reference, and touches on concepts of collective trauma, cultural trauma and the politics of mourning wherein many experiences of the tragic aftermath of the region's violent history can be placed. The selected novella of Dokhuma depicts, amongst other aspects of the Mizo National Front (MNF) underground movement and uprising of 1966, the trauma of dislocation/relocation generated by the controversial enforced village groupings. The chapter makes mention of the fact that while other Northeastern states like Assam, Nagaland and Manipur have not only been immediately vocal, but also productive in their literary output of depicting the resistance, trauma and suffering of their people, Mizoram has been more reticent till of late, though it did give vent to collective trauma and suffering at the time of their dark history, through several song compositions. A telling note touched upon is of how such writers "who write of human sufferings, particularly of sufferings that are part of their own history,

tread the thin line between fiction and non-fiction, and run the risk of projecting a one-sided approach”.

The chapter on ‘Selected Oral Poetry of Northeast India and the Ecological Space’ from Sarangadhar Baral depicts the ethnic variety of the folksongs of several tribal groups of the Northeast while projecting the universal appeal inherent in them, despite their distinct geo-cultural localities. The ecological space is not only to do with nature but also centred in ‘an unselfing’ or emptying of the human ego long practiced by many other cultures such as the Native Americans, Latin Americans, Australian Aborigines as well as Taoists, Zen Buddhists and others. The chapter laments that the city-centric modernist consciousness had long “discredited the whole ethos of nineteenth century romantic thought, which in our crisis-ridden environments necessitates our rethinking its discrete sympathies and kindly effects”. Yet we also learn from our ethnic lyrics that our environment shapes and forms our experience, and that it is this that helps in recovering native whole strengths.

Desmond L. Kharmawphlang in ‘The *Phawar* in Context: The Politics of Tradition and Continuity’ writes about a unique Khasi oral tradition which, because of its very flexibility and “wonderful play of imagination, exaggeration, hyperbole and metaphorical representations” is not only a tradition, but an artistic performative production that is, today, appropriated and applied to validate various aspects of Khasi culture. Since the *phawar* is indeed considered a tradition unique to the Khasis, attempts to identify and locate some other similar folk tradition of India for comparison could prove to be a difficult job. The chapter writer is a renowned folklorist who strongly stakes this claim about the *phawar*, that it is “the one singular folklore genre which completely identifies the Khasi community”. Samplings of the *phawar* in the chapter is taken from wide-ranging contexts that span the traditional as well as the contemporary, from the age old Khasi tradition of archery shooting, to politics, to verbal duelling between the sexes, to even those expressing admiration for the football hero Baichung. This changing role of the *phawar* denotes its flexibility and versatility in mediating “between society and the by-products that culture as a socially derived phenomenon sets off”.

The proliferation of modern Manipuri short stories is aptly termed as ‘cascade’ in the chapter by Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh entitled ‘Some Petite, Some Powerful: The Cascade of Manipuri Short Stories’ which traces the history of the development of Manipuri fiction from

ancient times. Like all other cultures, the oral tradition of story-telling predominated at first until the advent of their script sometime in the eighth century AD which saw the emergence of a new form of story-telling through the written text. The writer terms the rich cascade of Manipuri short stories “a movement of some sort” and points out that it was post-Second World War, which saw the emergence of this genre with renewed vigour, which today provide “valuable insights into the lives of the people and prevailing conditions in Manipur for analysing Manipuri society at large”.

The undermining of old ways through education and modernization, effected particularly by the entry of Christianity, is an experience shared by many tribal cultures of the Northeast. Temsurenla's submission on the Ao-Naga experience is seen in 'Culture Makes People What They Are As Much As People Make Culture: Religion As a Factor of Cultural Change among the Ao Nagas'. One detects a telling point in the chapter which is the delegation of the Ao language to second place after English in church services, conventions and conferences in their own homeland, where songs are sung in English rather than in Ao and “it is often considered old fashioned to be seen singing an Ao song by the present Ao generation. There is an assimilation of other languages into the Ao language leading to a loss of the ‘Ao-ness’.” The ambiguity of lamentation for cultural loss brought about by a new religion, while willingly embracing it at the same time, finds echo in many writings of other tribal communities of the Northeast, so too the efforts at recovery without compromising the new faith.

Rakhee Kalita Moral in 'Beyond Borders and Between the Hills: Voices and Visions from Karbi Anglong or, Whose Hills Are These Anyway?' echoes similar sentiments and views expressed in Parag M. Sarma's chapter. She writes of the strong need to factor in new voices “that aim at alleviating current hostilities and envision a mood of collaboration rather than confrontation in the troubled northeast India”. She projects Rongbong Terang's Assamese novella *Jaak Heruwa Pokhi* (Birds Breaking Rank) as a case in point that focuses on culturally displaced communities within the nation. The politics of exclusion among the various ethnic groups of the Karbi Anglong district of Assam revives questions of migration and shifting identities which generate a climate of violence in the region. The ongoing formation of a distinct literature of the Karbis appears to be the result of the increasing preoccupation with the search for identity by a historically ancient community of Assam, and this separate emerging literature has its first

Karbi novel in the Karbi language, dating as recent as 2004. It is called *Kanthop Tang Angne* (Bitter Hatred) by Lunse Timung. It is only after reading this short but powerful chapter that one appreciates what one first thought to be a rather cumbersome title. For indeed, anyone living in close proximity with the violence of the Northeast has learnt to look beyond the man-made borders and between the many hills, only to ask sadly, if not cynically, whose hills are these anyway?

In his submission 'An Assessment of Northeastern Sensibility in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Mamang Dai's *River Poems*', Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal questions the veracity and spontaneity of the sensibility depicted by Desai in her work as compared to what he considers the genuine depiction of sensibility in Mamang Dai, the argument being that it is not possible for a writer like Desai who is from a totally different background and culture to empathize with the location and people. Such a stance taken is no doubt vulnerable and open to contestation, but the point of literary discourse is to allow space to views other than our own. In this connection, there is also the related consideration of writers indulging in creative writing per se, and those who do so, but with the added burden of being the spokesperson for a community as well, sometimes out of choice, but sometimes out of a necessity.

Monalisa Changkija, a well-known poet and journalist from Nagaland as well as editor of the widely read *Nagaland Page*, provides a searing testimony of the 'Northeast Outside the Newspaper Pages'. Since the role of a journalist leaves no room for imaginative free play and the factoring in of the subjectivity of an insider, her chapter liberally highlights some of her very poignant, and at times, satirical and bitter portrayals of personal experiences through the medium of her poetry. The writer, by profession a journalist, makes no attempt to wear the garb of an academic nor does she make pretence of critiquing her own poems here as her thoughts are focused elsewhere—on a freewheeling, philosophical rambling of what life to her is like in the Northeast. She is forthright in admitting that "newspaper pages are the medium, not the message and no newspaper can adequately convey the message of the Northeast". This volume of academic leaning is enriched immensely by the inclusion of this chapter which in itself, is reflective of the various genres of writing presently emerging from the region, and it is also representative of voices other than the ones already touched upon by the other writers.

Part III of the volume: Caste-Tribe Paradigm Beyond the Northeast has two chapters which provide a sampling of the discourse that

is emanating out of similar contexts in other parts of what one may term as 'mainland India'. As the subtitle denotes, these two chapters have deliberately been included and placed in isolation as it were, in Part III, and it will be noticed that direct references to the Northeast in the chapters are absent for the intention of the chapter writers is not to provide a comparative study. Their chapters were invited to represent other dimensions to the theme of the dynamics of culture, society and politics in writings about the marginalized in other parts of India other than the Northeast region.

Hemendra Singh Chandalia in his submission entitled 'Culture As a Site of Struggle: A Study of the Oral Literature of the Bhils of Rajasthan' makes an interesting point when he writes that though culture defines its character by its identity with religion, it is not so with the Bhils who follow different religions, but share a common culture. He observes: "Their faith, as other things in life, has also been a part of the process of interaction, assimilation and reflection. Their literature is a rich repository of their cultural practices and tells a lot about their life style." He also notes that the literature of the Bhils is available mostly in verse form which is part and parcel of their oral tradition, and that "the oral often expresses counter hegemonic tendencies subverting the asymmetric social norms" of the written and formal discourse which is dominated by power and hierarchy.

Joseph Bara's scholarly chapter 'Alien Construct and Tribal Contestation in Colonial Chhotanagpur: The Medium of Christianity' is an eye-opener in many ways for it sets the record straight as it were, from and for, the other side. The essay gives a convincing case study of the Mundas and Uraons of Chhotanagpur, examining how the term 'tribe' was shaped under British colonialism, and how tribes of India responded to the conceptual cultural imposition. A crucial point made is about the appropriation of Christianity by the tribals for the protection of their distinct tribal identity, contrary to the belief that the impact of Christianity subdued or deactivated them. The tribal leaders employed the new religion "not only to assert for immediate tribal rights, but also used it at a higher pedestal to contest the imposed concept of 'tribe' and construct a new one".

It is hoped that all the chapters compiled in this volume are appreciated for their valuable insights, and will provide food for thought to scholars and researchers interested in the area of cultural and literary studies of Northeast India.

PART I

**Building
Literary
Paradigms
for Northeast
Discourse**

1

Articulating Marginality

Emerging Literatures from Northeast India*

Kailash C. Baral



Is marginality a feature of literature, and if so, in what way(s)? Does it underline the author's location, his/her identity and sociocultural background? Does it connote a political conundrum identifying the relationship between the centre and its periphery? Or is it about other differentiated markers such as ethnic or linguistic identities and the politics about them? Too many questions, too few answers; nonetheless the questions cross our minds leading to an understanding that literary marginality is not a single thing. We understand that literature aspires towards universality in representing the human condition; in its coming to *being* it responds to the *here and now* of our existence, and in its *becoming* it nourishes a transcendental aspiration, an aspiration beyond existence. The emerging literatures from Northeast are variously critiqued as ethnic writing, lacking in history and tradition, and often subjected to the virulent diatribe that it lacks in aesthetic virtuosity. These critical opinions are at best paternalistic and at worst, smack of ignorance in understanding the societies and cultures of the Northeast. Contemporary writings from Northeast either in English or vernaculars aspire towards a vision beyond the narrow ethnic groove and represent a shared history. In these writings, the cultural memory is reprocessed in that the intensity of feeling overflows the labour of technique and craft. The evolution of this literature as a domain has

* Keynote Address at the National Seminar on 'Dynamics of Culture, Society and Literature: Emerging Literatures from North East' organized by IIAS, Shimla, and Department of English, Mizoram University, on 10–11 March 2009.

its freshness as well as rootedness in age old traditions and therefore could be situated outside the Marg–Desi dichotomy.

The Marg–Desi divide of course draws a distinction between ‘Great Traditions’ and the ‘Little Traditions’ in literary articulation, but could be extended to the diverse ways of its conceptualization. The modern scholars suggest that very often both constructs overlap and sometimes a local tradition could be pan-Indian whereas a classical tradition might not, as in the case of dance forms and classical music. If, at a preliminary level, the Classical or Marg refers to stable, elite and immemorial traditions, the Desi implies traditions that are local, ephemeral and lacking in historical depth. This divide is further discussed under such labels as: national *versus* local, cosmopolitan *versus* vernacular, elite *versus* popular and so on. Any analysis based on this division is of historical interest, whereas a local tradition could be reimagined as pan-Indian and some contemporary practices could be considered as classical or part of the great tradition. Further elaboration on this divide would also mean that a vernacular literature that has gone through the process of sanskritization and followed its literary genres is closer to the classical tradition, whereas the literary tradition that has grown indigenously may not be part of that tradition. Such an implication could be valid in the context of the emerging literatures from Northeast India. Though Assamese and Manipuri literatures have gone through some processes of sanskritization (though not fully immersed into it), they also have a body of literature that has been outside this tradition. It is therefore pertinent to say that literary writings from Northeast have a plural significance; sometimes genre forms have been adopted from the Indian classical tradition and sometimes these forms have grown outside of it, mostly drawn from the English literary tradition. Tilottoma Misra is emphatic in driving home this point, saying that “[s]ignificantly, for mainland India, the region known as the ‘North-East’ has never had the privilege of being at the centre of epistemic enunciation ... the imagination of the ‘mainland’ has even today not overgrown those constructs of the mysterious ‘other’”.¹ In this context, what is important is the way a writer from the Northeast perceives his/her position vis-à-vis the mainland. Temsula Ao, an important creative voice from the region, puts across the point tellingly, that their ‘otherness’ has helped them to overcome their isolation once their feelings and thoughts are textualized, inscribed in written form in forging similarities of world views with other cultures; yet the uniqueness of

their cultural differences has not disappeared.² In spite of this assertion, marginality defines the essence of that 'otherness'. Marginality becomes a defining trope that signifies this literature's location as well as its reception by mainstream critics. It is for this reason that it becomes pertinent to consider the socio-historical-cultural conditions within which a writer from Northeast lives and writes while bringing into his/her writing the unique personal-cultural experience and sensibility. However, literary marginality, against the grain, contests and problematizes some of the universalistic assumptions of literature while factoring in and often valorizing the unique ethnic and cultural experience that needs to be critically evaluated.

Emerging out of the colonial–ethnographic representation and seeking consolidation of ethnic and cultural identities in postcolonial times, the writers from Northeast India in their works describe themselves and their cultures, express their views and ideas, feelings and emotions, thereby signifying their cultural and ethnic particularity. Although individualistic in approach and narrative style, the emerging writers also collectively represent what could be called the ethos of the region that underscores their shared history and political destiny. Even if the very nomenclature 'Northeast' is subject to contestation, we can talk about it as a given in geopolitical terms. In the cartographic imaginary, Northeast means many things to many people—those who live in it, those who know and write about it, and those who read about it. This land mass has existed for centuries through its legends, myths, stories, poetry, songs, dances, arts and crafts as well as through its conflicting history and moribund politics. This territory is ancient and modern, mythic and contemporary. Temsula Ao (2007), in the epigraph to her work *Songs from the Other Life*, writes:

To All
Who can still
Sense the earth
Touch the wind
Talk to the rain
And embrace the sun
In every rainbow

(Songs from the Other Life).³

Her words bear the indelible mark of the people and the terra firma they live on that can best be described in the words of natural elements. It is not a dedication to humanity in general, but to the people

with whom she shares every bit of her existence. Similarly, Kynpham Nongkynrih ruminates:

This land is old, too old
and withered for life to be easy.

(The Ancient Rocks of Cherra)⁴

Esther Syiem also echoes similar sentiments:

Mylliem of my ancestors,
Need I affiliate to you all over again?
As in your men and in your women
I find an answering call
in the aroma of smoked earth in them
and the unbeaten slant of a life
that writes itself back into my present.

(Mylliem)⁵

In these lines, the poets mix memory with myth in signifying the land, its smell; the wind that blows over it and the rain that beats its hills and forests. The land of the ancestors becomes a place of longing and belonging.

The people who call this territory their home define the uniqueness and diversity of their cultures, customs and social practices through their oral and written literatures. Northeast in many ways is a land of paradoxes. In the congeries of its complexities and contradictions, Northeast is not only a territory of diverse people and cultures but also an idea constantly evolving in its making. If the past has a rootedness in harmony among communities and cultures, the present is a reality of profound disaffection. The violence that stalks this land is part of everyday life that adds to the fragility of the human condition. In spite of all this, life goes on. What is edifying in the face of it all is the call for the humane aspect of life. It is true that creative writers seek a different world in their writing. However, the reality around them doesn't disappear but only gets transformed in that the creative stirrings within them seek words to be articulated, either in vernacular or in English, in trying to hold together and give meaning to fragmentation and disintegration, transforming the real into an imaginary realm. Needless to say, all genres of creative writing collect the raw material from life's fount, be it poetry, short story or a fictional work come to life in the unfolding of the world of words, in order to give meaning to

life while connecting the individual to the community, to the world. Although contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences are part of creative writing to hold together, the home and the world becomes the most redeeming feature of literature.

Instead of attempting a survey of the works from different states of Northeast, it would be useful to discuss major thematic strands that characterize the writings from the region. A few years ago, I edited a collection of short stories in translation for the Sahitya Akademi and what impressed me was the diversity of themes that “characterize different aspects of life such as innocence, violence, humour, corruption, romantic love and the supernatural. The variety of representations in spite of gaps and a sense of incompleteness conjure up creative ideas about the land and its people.”⁶ Some of these themes are still relevant when we critically discuss the formation of Northeast literature.

In the context of emerging literatures from Northeast, two interconnected factors are important: colonial legacy in the form of ethnographies and the ethnocentric imaginary that is the driving force behind contemporary writing. These two factors intersect colonial identity, construction and resistances to it. Further, significant in this context is that the past is an integral part of the present where the oral informs the written in that the creative writers redefine ethnic-cultural identities in reprocessing cultural memory. The creative energy that moves contemporary writing attempts to rewrite the history of communities. Ao offers the best example of this reinvented cultural identity:

STONE-PEOPLE

The worshippers
Of unknown, unseen
Spirits
Of trees and forests,
Of stones and rivers,
Believers of souls
And its varied forms,
Its sojourn here and passage across the water
Into the hereafter.

STONE-PEOPLE,

Savage and sage
Who sprang out of LUNGTEROK,
Was the birth adult when the stone broke?
Or are the Stone-People yet to come of age?

(Stone-People from Lungterok)⁷

Origin myths and belief systems continue to dominate even fictional works. Adi creation myths, ritual journeys and shamans in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* come alive taking us to a world that once was. Not sticking to a single narrative mode, opening up her text to plural voices and narrative forms, Dai conveys the complexity of the painful process of change in Arunachal Pradesh. A disillusioned young man, Larik, gives voice to his frustration in the context of development of his region: "This one terrible road is all that they have managed for us in fifty years! And what does it bring us? Outsiders. Thieves. Disease."⁸ The same sentiment is expressed by Robin Ngangom and Kynpham Nongkynrih, editors of the volume *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, that there is "the uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds" and of the parallel existence of "the folk and the westernized, virgin forests and car-choked streets"⁹ in the Northeast. The stone-people certainly have come of age to express themselves in words. We know that a creative writer is sensitive to the changes while fashioning his/her work that intersects history, memory and identity. Desmond Kharmawphlang sings of the past and connects it to the present:

Long ago, the men went beyond the
Surma
to trade, to bring home women
to nurture their seed.

Later came the British
With gifts of bullets, blood-money
And religion.
A steady conquest to the sound of
Guns began.

Quite suddenly, the British left.
There was peace, the sweet
Smell of wet leaves again.

(The Conquest)¹⁰

In the absence of authentic histories of most communities in North-east, the creative writers have taken it upon themselves to be cultural historians. Their work provides us the resource for writing alternative histories. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* reconstructs a bit of history. Her account of the first encounter with the British in 1911 is well documented in which a British political officer and a number of sepoys and coolies were killed by Adis in the village of Komsing. Following the

encounter, the British launched the punitive expedition in 1912. These incidents from history are recounted along with the changes that have swept Arunachal Pradesh in recent years. These historical events are woven into a narrative that also includes personal stories of love and loss. The British are alluded to in many ways in the creative writings from Northeast. But the most enduring feature of British colonization in this region is the spread of Christianity that finds mention quite often.

Christianity, a powerful force, has deeply touched the lives of many communities in the Northeast. The advent of Christianity in the region is an important historical event, for the missionaries have been instrumental in giving the hill tribes their script as well as educating them. What emerged from this historical phase is a cultural dynamics that has engaged the creative writers in a quest to know who they are and in what way their culture is predicated. The influence of Christianity is viewed with some ambivalence by some poets, but its contribution to the shaping of the ethnic and cultural imaginary cannot be underestimated. If Christian values are valorized in many writings, the spread of the religion itself is questioned, for the followers of this religion have paid a price too. Ao writes:

Then came a tribe of strangers
Into our primal territories
Armed with only a Book and
Promises of a land called Heaven.

Declaring that our Trees and Mountains
Rocks and Rivers were no Gods
And that our songs and stories
Nothing but tedious primitive nonsense.

We listened in confusion
To the new stories and too soon
Allowed our knowledge of other days
To be trivialized into taboo.

(Blood of Other Days)¹¹

Various forces have corrupted the so-called innocence that has been a feature of the people in the region. The hills never remained the same after the British left. Even Christian piety, honesty and charity could not withstand the disabling effects of corruption at all levels. Desmond Kharmawphlang in 'A Happy Journey for Mr. Ta En'¹² narrates about the official corruption and how it eats into the very fabric

of the society. The lure of easy money in violence-ridden lands with a seize mentality has promoted drug addiction as well as the spread of AIDS. This has come out forcefully in Yumlembam Ibomcha's story 'A Fragmentary End'.¹³ In another story, Vanneihluanga, a writer from Mizoram, talks of corruption, political power and the death of a child.¹⁴ All these themes are very well captured in Ao's stories of loss and indignity in the volume *These Hills Called Home*.

Across the genre, in the emerging literatures from Northeast, there is a seeking for bonding in the shared experience of pain and loss. The common man in Northeast is painfully caught in the mayhem of violence produced by unending militancy, inter-ethnic feuds and the oppressive measures of the state. While Kynpham Nongkynrih writes about the impossible dream of an indigenous tribe,

To dream the impossible dream,
to fight the unbeatable foe,
to bear with unbearable sorrow,
to run where the brave dare not go...

(Play of the Absurd)¹⁵

echoing the motto of a hill tribe of one million fearful of extinction rising in insurrection against a nation of one billion, Robin Singh writes about the pain of that insurrection:

First came the scream of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a news paper: six short dead, twenty-five
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church
As the days crumbled, and the victors
And their victims grew in number,
I hardened inside my thickening hide,
until I lost my tenuous humanity.

(Native Land)¹⁶

If Robin Singh's lines give a graphic picture of the mayhem, Saratchandra Thiyam alludes to the myth of Orpheus and Pluto, and wonders what would happen had those guns been in the hands of Orpheus:

Except for lifeless bodies lying around unconcerned.
The tens of thousands of bullets emerging

From the strumming by one index finger
Heap layer upon layer on Charon's boat the dead.
If these guns were entrusted to Orpheus's hand
Will the innocent ones journey to Pluto's side?

(Gun)¹⁷

Troubled by mindless violence, the sensitive hearts of these poets express their pain and anguish in articulating what happens around them. Keisham Priyokumar attempts to figure out the sorrow of innocent people who are yet to make any sense of inter-group feuds. His story 'One Night' powerfully depicts the Kuki-Naga conflict that generates suspicion and anger between two good friends belonging to two warring communities. Although they regain their humanity in their shared pain and understanding, the psychological scar of losing one's near and dear ones remains. Temsula Ao takes on all sides in telling the stories about the so-called victors and victims. Conflicts of all kinds throw up heroes and villains, creating new community lores and legends, jokes and stories. Most of her stories in the collection *These Hills Called Home* deal with the Naga insurgency and its consequences. Stories such as 'The Jungle Major', 'The Curfew Man' and 'An Old Man Remembers' tellingly throw light on different aspects of the conflict and how ordinary people have dealt with extraordinary situations. 'The Last Song' is a gory tale of Apenyo, the young singer who was raped and killed along with her mother by a young army captain and his men in an orgy of violence. The story 'Shadow' matches 'The Last Song' in its gory detail in which Hoito, an underground commander on his way to China, kills Imli, the innocent young recruit, the son of the second in command of the underground army because he hates him being forced on the group. Ao makes a point that acts that are unethical and inhuman would always invite retributive justice. Both Hoito and the army captain became insane. While Hoito met a terrible end, the army captain is still paying for his crime languishing in a mental hospital somewhere. To her, if the Indian army in most cases used raw force and was ruthless, the underground outfit was not free from atrocities on its own people either. In spite of the discipline, the members of the underground are also vulnerable to human weaknesses such as jealousy, hatred and greed. On both sides we have manipulators as well as dreamers; in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims. Bimal Singha's story 'Basan's Grandmother'¹⁸ from Tripura tells about the bonding between a non-tribal grandmother and a tribal

child who finally meet their death with a single spear piercing through the two of them. He asks: "What is the colour of the blood of the two that smeared their bodies? Is it different? What is the identity of the victims once they are dead?" We cannot of course rationalize the import of the story in a situation where even the life of its author was cruelly snatched away by the same hand that took the lives of Basan and his grandmother. The human cost of such conflicts is enormous as it leaves behind survivors scarred both in mind and soul. As violence breeds violence, there is hardly any relief from violence that has become a way of life in Northeast.

New narratives have emerged from Northeast that may be called place novels to capture the cultural experiences of people such as Dhruba Hazarika's *A Bowstring Winter* and Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return*. Besides the ethnocentric imaginary and the politics of identity, themes such as nationhood, migration, exile and gender also prominently figure in some of the writings from Northeast. As we move ahead, looking forward to a future, one needs to pause and reflect on what the future is going to be like. Considering the trauma and the tragedy of the present, I don't find a better way of visualizing the future than reposing my faith in the words of Temsula Ao:

The inheritors of such a history have a tremendous responsibility to sift through the collective experience and make sense of the impact by the struggle on their lives. 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.¹⁹

She calls upon the emerging writers to rewrite and re-embrace this vision in weaving it into the fabric of life and writing.

Her thoughts could anchor us in hope and guide us to the future. A grandmother holding the hand of her granddaughter in the poem 'Soul Bird'²⁰ says after seeing the soul of the child's mother among the stars: "It is over/Come, let us go home now." Ibomcha echoes the sentiment in welcoming the young son not to return to the sky, but to return to this earth, to home:

Boy
You are a star this moment
And for tomorrow
The early morning sun.
This storm will last only awhile,
Come riding the storm.

Tomorrow's dawn
Is waiting for you
Do not go back.

(Star)²¹

The riders of the storm one day will certainly make it home; another sunrise will welcome the little girl and the boy to a new life, a new world. Together they will write the song of hope, the song for a better tomorrow.

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