



Subverting the Norm: Northeast Indian literatures

Nida Ahmed

Literature, Department of English, English Graduation From Hindu College, Delhi University, Ambedkar University, Delhi, India

Abstract

The novels that are to be talked about in this paper further are texts by writers who chose to write about Northeast Indian Literature. 'The Legend of Pensam' and 'A Terrible Matriarchy' are the texts that will take into consideration in this paper. It will reflect how Dai makes a conscious effort to eradicate the stereotypes like backwardness, underdeveloped, primitive, and uncivilized associated to Northeast by the mainland and how Kire explores a world replete with tradition mores.

Keywords: northeast, culture, marginal, human rights, subverting, identity

Introduction

Marginality has been strangling Northeast India of access to basic human rights and resources in social sphere of life. Identifying the position of Northeast tribes with the Hindi speaking mainland India suggests that these frontiers have been demarcated from India's center, quite literally. According to Tilottoma Misra, "Significantly for the mainland India, the region known as the 'North-East' has never had the privilege of being at the center of epistemic enunciation. The imagination of the mainland has even today not overgrown those constructs of the mysterious Other. Marginality further characterizes this Otherness in ethnic, socio-cultural, political and linguistic frameworks, leaving the marginalized devoid of a "whole" identity. Their 'invisibility' has been naturalized since the colonial transfer of power and there is a severe need to re-engage with pre-conceived notions about politics and history in Northeast India. In order to assimilate themselves with their Indian brethren, Northeast Indian writers take refuge in literature to articulate their sensibilities and transcend the narrow groove of ethnicity. Literature not only provides a definite space for representation but also nourishes the aspirations of the marginalized to exist and belong somewhere in relation to the mainland. They surmount this metaphoric exile by fabricating and textualizing their thoughts, valorizing their yet untold personal experiences, identifying with other cultures and yet retaining the uniqueness of their own culture, and consolidating their ethnic and cultural identities. This quest for cultural identity is not removed from self-questioning. Self-questioning is thus motivated by reflecting on one's own culture and reaffirming its solidarity. Also, the catechization of cultural identity goes alongside with the literary identity of these writers. Mikhail Bakhtin argues:

Literature is an inseparable part of the totality of culture and cannot be studied outside the total cultural context. It cannot be severed from the rest of culture and related directly (by-passing culture) to socio-economic or other factors.

These factors include culture as a whole and only through it and in conjunction with it do they affect literature. The literary process is a part of the cultural process and cannot be torn away from it.

The literature of Northeast Indian writers effectively proves this claim. Furthermore, in some ways, these writings can be read as being analogous to Bill Ashcroft's theory in *The Empire Writes Back* in the sense that they seek to "decolonize" themselves from the mainland (outsiders) which perceives the region as just being a hotbed of violence and assumes sovereignty over them. By using proverbs, oral folktales, and religious prayers, Northeast writers re-present themselves in a new light by challenging the dominant discourse and subverting it efficiently.

There is no one perspective about Northeast India: it differs on certain levels. The three suggested categories on the basis of cartographic imaginary are: those who live in the region, those who know and write about it, and those who have read about it. The region is an amalgamation of legends, myths, folktales, storytelling, dances, singing, weaving, agriculture, hunting, arts and crafts on the one hand and bloodshed, brutal violence, turbulent history, underground militants against Indian State and moribund politics on the other hand. The writers call for a more humanistic project by re-constructing the "norm" of violence with creative stirrings and establishing a "whole" by conjugating the fragmented identities, which would further bolster interaction of individuals with their community and that of communities with the mainland. The evolution of their literature as a domain has its freshness as well as rootedness in age-old traditions, shared history, and cultural memory. The intensity of their feelings comes out clearly with the dexterity in the technique and craft of Northeast Indian literature. Esther Syiem meticulously echoes a wistful longing for the past by invoking nature's beauty through sensuous imageries in her poem *Mylliem*:

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.

The longing and belonging for the glories of ancestors in the

past is transmitted effectively by Mamang Dai in *The Legends Of Pensam*. The novel asserts the richness, uniqueness, and diversity of Adi culture and traditions by giving her narrative structure a distinct color of oral storytelling mode. Dai makes a conscious effort to eradicate the stereotypes like backwardness, underdeveloped, primitive, and uncivilized associated to Northeast by the mainland. Instead of illustrating the troubled political climate in Arunachal Pradesh, she delineates her narrative towards the unexplored and understated flora, fauna, folktales, and myths and belief systems that have been characterizing the lives of Adi community since generations. According to Pratilipi magazine (2010), "It is tragic that the long-running unrest, violence and terrorism in the North-East have remained a mere digression in the mainstream of the Indian nation-state ... "North-East" is not a geographical, political unit, but a place of many languages and cultures." True to this argument, the five books in Dai's novel encapsulate the everyday ways of living of these people, a perfect blend of harmony, affinity, and kinship. They are disjointed and present themselves as being an allegory for the oral legacy of the Northeast region. The "inbetweenness" or Pensam of their lives is beautifully conveyed by the tug between tradition and modernity, and a healthy compromise between the two. The evolution of the village marks the advancement they are inherently capable of even when agony has embedded itself in their collective psyche. On one hand, they sustain traditional practices of hunting and agriculture and on the other hand, the narrator's generation educates itself and brings socio-cultural and economic reforms. It is significant that the narrator chooses to return to the village and finds it necessary to document the vast tradition. A close affinity established between the two generations signals the amelioration and development of the tribes in every facet of life.

Furthermore, Mamang Dai gives elaborate description of the influences of shamans, spirits, unnatural events and superstitions that govern the lives of Adis. Whenever an unpleasant incident takes place, the villagers consider it an act of spirits and rush to the shaman for him to perform necessary rites and rituals that were not performed earlier, and now would make things right. The malign influence of the spirits is capable of inducing every possible unfavorable occurrence in the village-men get unnaturally killed in hunting expeditions, children suffer strange illnesses, houses are suddenly burnt to ashes, and men kill their families unconsciously. Furthermore, Dai characterizes the belief system in such eloquent phrases that the readers cannot resist being captivated. One such example is: "In these small clearings in the middle of the forest, people have premonitions. Women dream dreams. Babies are born who grow up unnaturally fast, like deer or lion cubs...Old women still braid threads of vine and pray for safe passage." Apart from belief in the world of spirits and shamans, just like other indigenous tribes, the village holds great reverence and faith in nature and homeland. Life becomes onerous due to the extremities of climate and heavy rains. Dai says, "It rains during the day, it rains all night. It can rain non-stop for sixty-two days at a time. Not a peep of sunshine. Not a breath of wind. Every summer the tangled undergrowth clinging to the hills is swept away by the downpour, causing landslides that cut off all communication and links." Combating these obstacles, the villagers do not fail to bind their belief in nature. Dai asserts this in her

preface by saying, "When you look at the land you forget your aches and pains." Temsula Ao also documents this sensitivity to nature in the epigraph of *Songs from the Other Life* (2007):

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

The romanticism of her words recognizes that the terra firma of Northeast Indian natives can be best depicted through the imageries from the natural world. Dai also characterizes the love of tribes for their homeland. Even though the narrator moves out of the village to educate herself, she chooses to return to the village since an incomprehensible force seems to act upon her. The dramatic love story of Nenem and David shares a similar phenomenon marking its presence. The rebellious girl breaks away from the clutches of tradition to establish her relationship with a British officer, an outsider, by meeting him publicly but refuses to leave the hills and settle in an alien land. Dai says, "This was her land. She had chosen it over love. She did not ask herself if she was happy." Later she collapses to death when the ravaging floods forced the villagers to move out of the village. Her firm decision to sacrifice love for homeland and death proves that Adis treat their land with supreme veneration. Further, the villagers hold animistic faith and have profound knowledge about environment. They become aware when their lives are affected due to the influence of certain malign spirits which may present themselves in the form of trees or animals. The cutting down of trees and vegetation is seen as a threat to their culture and tradition. Similar beliefs of various indigenous tribes are seen in other parts of Northeast India too. Easterine Kire in her novel, *When the River Sleeps* (2014), portrays the Angami tribe's belief in the forest and river spirits. The human world remains conjoined with the worlds of nature and spirits in the consciousness of Nagas which brings out their animistic belief. No distinction is made between animate and inanimate worlds and spirits reside in everyday objects. Kire elucidates this by describing the vigor of the river against Villie

The river was almost human as it pushed him down and under, down and under, and the water rushed at him as though it would strangle him.

Further, Villie successfully tackles the river and establishes the greatness of his spirit:

I claim the wealth of the river because mine is the greater spirit.
To him who has the greater spirit belongs the stone!

The Legends of Pensam in the same line brings out the beliefs of the indigenous people in the living spirit of nature. The narrative technique employed by Dai has been lauded by many critics. In an interview with *The Hindu*, Dai says about her oral storytelling like structure, "Ours is an oral tradition you know, I was trying to meet people and collect

and record these oral narratives. You know, the small histories which were getting lost and when you talk to people even small things can trigger these memories off.” Dai thus conveys the cultural ethos of Adi tribe by presenting various accounts from the past with the help of invoking memories. The narrator brings along her filmmaker friends and seeks to preserve these stories by documenting them. The tradition of the rich oral narratives makes the community’s culture vibrant and Dai’s effort in recording these stories for future generations is worthwhile. Dai’s novel proves that North-East literature is definitely not limited to the projection of violence and bloodbath, and instead is successful in re-presenting many under-represented themes central to the lives of the Adi community in Arunachal Pradesh.

Emerging from a prosperous past and a discordant present, Easterine Kire’s *A Terrible Matriachy* is another book from Northeast region which refashions space and identity notions by molding the micro into the macro. The novel is set in Kohima, Nagaland where Kire explores a world replete with tradition mores. The narrator familiarizes the readers with the personal history of Dilieno, a little girl of four and juxtaposes it with the passage of Naga lives to make sense out of everything. Initially, the novel seems nothing more than a bildungsroman but very soon, the readers realize that it envelops a whole series of issues like the significance of adhering to the traditions of one’s community, the larger Indo-Naga army conflict that pervades homes and collective memories of a people, the inheritance of loss, the passage of time, space, and mortality. Kire is lauded by critics for the ambiguity with which she portrays Lieno’s sufferings under the shelter of her paternal grandmother and yet lacks even the slightest tinge of hostility in her story. Lieno belongs to a society which is so steeped in the customary laws that it believes girls need not be educated, loved, or adored, should fetch water from the well first thing in the early morning and do not deserve even a good piece of meat with gravy. The life of a girl child ends up trying to be a good Naga wife. This seems like a critique of patriarchy on an upper level, and sure it is. However, the fact that Kire posits grandmother as a victim of circumstances and even the possibility of her being good at heart and capable of adapting to change makes this novel as being a repository of Naga culture and tradition.

Furthermore, Kire does not palpably devote much space to Indo-Naga conflicts. Critics consider that by not accounting this issue in length and only including it in undertones, Kire seeks to bring out cultural and tradition mores bounteously. Instead of building her novel around the pervading socio-political scenario, Kire chooses to embrace general customs, folklores, spirits, beliefs, and social values of Naga community that have been handed down over generations and are, in a sense, the principle medium through which the Nagas express their most intense emotions and fears. The extensive funerals in the novel solidify the intricate facets of Naga culture where age-old traditions and new Christianity interweave to form an alliance. Towards the end, the world of spirits interacts with the human world which resonates the idea perpetuated by Dai’s novel. The absence of belligerence reflects the author’s sensibility towards the rich community life that has survived the thrusts of repression and alienation. Kire asserts in an interview that “it is a stereotyped expectation that Naga writers are capable only

of producing politically charged writing or exotic folk literature” and celebrates the psychological healing of Northeast Indian literature by claiming thus:

It is like the dark side of the moon
For it is there
But so little known.

Thus the use of traditional folklores and practices instead of dwelling into ravages and ruptures becomes a political tool since it reminds people that their culture can surmount the alien culture and strengthen their cultural greatness by defeating any threat posed from the outside. The writers become custodians of the cultural greatness in their regions. Another writer from the Northeast, Temsula Ao represents oral folklores that encompass the cosmology of their survival and links them with nature. Her collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) presents to its readers everyday lives and various aspects of Naga culture amidst the haunting experiences of violence inflicted by the Indian State. Her short story *The Jungle Major* depicts how villagers cultivate a small field on the outskirts of the village and grow some vegetables in kitchen gardens. Their barns remain full with grains and friends share drinks in the evening to recount stories from the past. *The Last Song* reveals the religious fervor of the villagers who visit the church every Sunday, choirs sing songs, and people contribute happily for the new church building. It depicts how Naga women thread the loom and weave colorful shawls, skirts, and lungis. Special feasts are organized where pigs are fed with food to fatten up. Further, the practice of burying the dead is elaborately talked about by Ao. The tradition of storytelling marks its presence again in the form of grandmother’s tales who introduces the children with their past cultural identities and supernatural elements like the song of Apenyo. Since there exists no recorded or written history, the oral tradition maintains the harmonious social fabric. In the story, *The Night*, Ao describes the meeting and meeting place of the Nagas, the practice of maternal uncle accompanying the girl to the meeting, the lines of propriety and impropriety, the importance of having a father’s name, and being called a “non-person” if that does not happen. Furthermore, *The Pot Maker* represents the practice of making pots and prestige attached to it. The realms of kitchen place, “the home and the hearth” are efficiently implored by Ao which again establishes the distinctive color of culture and tradition. The stories seek to look beyond the terrors of insurgency by compellingly portraying the everyday lives of Nagas that often remain untold, unexplored, and unacknowledged. Literatures from Northeast India are variously critiqued for being “too ethnic”, lacking any historical roots, and aesthetic virtuosity. However, being an outsider that forms the third category in the cartographic imaginary, these critical opinions seem nothing but assiduously ignorant and oblivious in attempting to recognize the societies and cultures of the Northeast. Though authentic histories do not exist for them, these writers take up the enterprise to produce cultural histories and serve as cultural historians. In the process, they produce alternative histories and bring new ideas against old prejudices. It seems politically convenient to fixate the existence of Northeast India as being a locus of social unrest, to recognize the diversity only to repress it as well as homogenizing it in the process and perpetuating

savage stereotypes instead of endorsing their ethnic diversity, celebrating the tourism potential, and lauding the literary achievements. This leads to dehistoricizing of the Northeast region. Shoojit Sircar's movie *The Film Pink* (2016) addresses this violence and discrimination faced by Northeast Indians till date by "doubly-marginalizing" his character Andrea Tariang who is perceived as being a prostitute for belonging to the Northeast region. Cut off from the mainland at length, the region has become an exotic place where external myth making is normalized. To promote a more sympathetic viewpoint, Easterine Kire urges thus, "Stop defining the Northeast by the conflicts going on there. Let media focus on ordinary people and their lives. Let exoticisation of the Northeast stop." The writings thus propose a distinct cultural identity to achieve self-esteem, well-being and "whole" personal identities. This emerging new generation not only resists the commonplace assumptions by constructing their roots through literature in bondage but also demands a rightful share in the progressive nationalism and national building process as Indian citizens. The baggage of being backward tribals is done away with. And that is a fresh beginning.

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