

Gender and Identity:
Reading Select English Fictional Texts by Women
Writers from Northeast India

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by

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

‘Gender and Identity: Reading Select English Fictional Texts by Women Writers from Northeast India’ submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Dr. Nandini Saha, Professor, Department of English, Jadavpur University. And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

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Introduction

“They [the Indian army] had their weapons, we [protesting Manipuri women] only had our body... Together the mothers gave a war cry,”

---Soibom Momon Leima, a member of Meira Paibi.

Women haven’t had an easy relationship with nationalism. Even when they have suffered abuse at the hands of colonialists and racists, they have often been treated as symbols than as active participants by nationalist movements organized to end colonialism and racism.

--- Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, 42.

Rejecting and resisting “the dominant nationalist historiography that insists on totalizing standpoint of a seamless nationalism,”¹ subaltern and feminist historiographers like Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, Lata Mani and others have laid bare the inherent fault lines within Indian nationalism. They have shown how the idea of Indian nation was imagined into existence by privileging the standpoint of the Hindu upper caste and upper class male, positioning it as mainstream, and invisibilizing the voices of the small religious and caste communities, tribal sections, working class people and women. The discourse on nationalism in India now centers on the rise of aggressive Hindutva nationalism and the erosion of the modern secularist notion of India. It discusses how the impulse towards a pure Hindu national identity is instilling fear into the minority communities and curtailing women’s rights. Controlling women’s sexuality and subjectivity in the name of protecting them from Muslim men has now become legalized.² But subaltern historiography reveals that Indian nationalism was always and already majoritarian and patriarchal. It has only been amplified and distorted in the recent times.

Partha Chatterjee, for example, in his seminal *Nation and its Fragments* has demonstrated that Indian nationalism was shaped by the Hindu intelligentsia in opposition to the British colonialist in the inner domain of national tradition and culture in the nineteenth century. As

¹ Pandey, “In Defence of the Fragment,” 559.

²Uttar Pradesh cabinet has cleared a law against ‘Love Jihad’ or an alleged campaign by Muslim men to convert Hindu girls under the pretext of love. The law infantilizes Hindu women by assuming that they can be lured into relationship by Muslim men.

women are associated with the private space, they were constituted as the uncontaminated and passive purveyors of national culture. The concept of modern nation was inscribed and re-inscribed on the bodies of Indian women without giving them any agency. Abanindranath Tagore's painting *Bharat Mata* later concretized this patriarchal imagining of India. The 1905 painting depicting a Hindu goddess clad in saffron *saree* became synonymous with Indian territorial space and culture. The representation of India as mother of brave sons who will protect her honour, deny women their role as active citizens. Imagination of modern nation as ancient Hindu goddess also marginalizes other cultural communities and forces them to conform to the mainstream culture.

This homogenous and hegemonic Hindu Brahmanical idea of India was challenged by separatist nationalism in the states of Kashmir and Punjab. But the first and the most under studied challenge came from the tribal communities of the Northeastern region of India right after India's political independence. Their strong community consciousness and the fear of being subsumed into the hegemonic mainstream culture propelled them to raise their voice and arms against the Indian nation-state. Prominent Assamese scholars Sanjoy Hazarika and Sanjib Baruah have written extensively about the history of the region, its coming into being as the Northeast Other of post-colonial India and its resistive sub-nationalisms. But their woman-as-victim paradigm creates a lacuna in the history. This thesis aims to show how women's creative writings from the Northeastern region fill this lacuna by presenting women's points of view.

The resistive and assertive Northeast sub-nationalism that emerged in the form of Naga, Mizo, and Manipuri independence movements followed the similar route of the patriarchal Indian nationalism. It is not surprising since, as Cynthia Enloe points out, nationalisms have "typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope."³ Northeast nationalism was constituted and imagined in opposition to the Indian nation-state, like the way Indian nationalism was constituted against the British. The father of Naga nationalism A. Z. Phizo, for example, claimed superiority of the Naga race as Naga men do not practice sati, dowry like the Indian men. To him therefore both Indian and Naga subjects were only male. Women activists, academics, journalists and writers challenge both the masculine

³ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases. Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 44.

Indian nationalism and Northeast sub-nationalisms. These women have always carved a space for themselves to enrich and problematize the category of Indian nation as a homogeneous collective and the category of Northeast as its homogenous Other.

Northeastern region of India casually stereotyped as the Northeast is a conglomeration of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim⁴ that share 4500 km international border with five different countries and connected physically to the rest of the country only through a thin strip of land, known as Siliguri corridor or the chicken's neck. The term and category 'Northeast' homogenizes and reifies the mindboggling diversity of the region and the people. When used from above like by the British Empire or the Indian State and in some cases ethno nationalist elites, it implies homogenization and a desire to control. The root of the Northeast as a different epistemic category is, in fact, found within the political strategies of British colonial administration.⁵ The Northeast region came under British rule in 1826 after the Treaty of Yandabo between the British and the Burmese. The British helped the Ahoms of Assam in the battle against the Burmese. By 1891 the whole of Northeast region was under British rule. The British Empire then established tea plantations in the Brahmaputra valley. And the infertile hilly areas of the present day Nagaland, Arunachal, Mizoram inhabited by the 'savage' tribes were separated from the plantation area through the Inner Line Regulation. The hill areas beyond the Inner Line were not administered by the British but were ruled through an indirect system by local chiefs of the tribes. After the transfer of power, colonial Assam (present day Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland) and the princely states of Tripura and Manipur became part of the Union of India. The Indian State not only inherited the land but also the colonial construct of the Northeast as India's Other.

Much like Edward Said in *Orientalism*, Papori Bora citing the example of British administrator and historian Edward Gait's founding book *A History of Assam*⁶ analyses how colonial discourse constructed the Northeast as a different, pure Mongolian Other of India and the inhabitants as immigrants from China and South East Asia. Gait writes:

⁴ Sikkim was made a member of Northeast Council only in 2002. But it does not share the same history or geographical border with the seven states. It was for administration purpose that the state was added

⁵ See, Bora, *Nation and its Margin*, 10.

⁶ Colonial Assam refers to present day Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya.

In Assam on the other hand, although in the plains large sections of the population, like that of Bengal, are of mixed origin, there are also numerous tribes who are almost pure Mongolians, and the examination of their affinities, in respect of physique, language, religion and social customs, with other branches of the same family forms one of the most interesting line of enquiry open to Ethnologists.⁷

The colonial policies of differentiation and exclusion was inherited and maintained by the nationalist leaders. Gandhi in Hind Swaraj called the North-eastern tribals *junglees*. And here is an example that illustrates how Nehru saw the Northeast as ‘petty’. Nehru in the *Discovery of India* writes:

...The oft-repeated story of India having hundred or more languages is a fiction of the mind of the philologist and the census commissioner who notes down every variation in dialect and every *petty hill tongue* on the Assam-Bengal frontier with Burma as a separate language, although sometimes it is spoken by a few thousand persons. Most of these so-called hundreds of languages are confined to this eastern frontier of India and to the eastern border tracts of Burma. According to the method adopted by census commissioners, Europe has hundreds of languages and Germany was, I think, listed as having about sixty.⁸ [Emphasis added]

Here Nehru trivializes the languages spoken by the tribal communities from the Northeast by calling them petty. The language spoken by the Northeast people belong to the Sino-Tibetan and Astro-Asiatic family which is different from the Dravidian and Aryan language groups. His devaluation of the tribal languages exhibits that in his idea of India, the Northeastern region is irrelevant. Ambedkar did not see the region as petty but saw them as different who are not part of Indian ethos as they do not belong to the Hindu-Muslim culture of the heartland India.

The tribal people in areas other than Assam are more or less Hinduised, more or less assimilated with the civilization and culture of the majority of the people in whose midst they live. With regard to the tribals in Assam that is not the case. Their roots are still in their own civilization and their own culture. They have not adopted, mainly or in a large

⁷Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1926) vii, quoted in, Bora, “The Nation and its Margins,” 32.

⁸Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*. Delhi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 169, quoted in Bora, “The Nation and its Margin,” 137.

part, either the modes or the manners of the Hindus who surround them. Their laws of inheritance, their laws of marriage, customs and so on are quite different from that of the Hindus. I think this is the main distinction which influenced us to have a different sort of scheme for Assam.⁹

The Northeast, therefore, is a style of thought that is based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Northeast and the rest of India. This constructed binary is responsible for the unequal development, separatist struggle in the region against the Indian nation-state and the state's undemocratic measure to crush it.

The Nagas of the undivided Assam launched independence movement under the leadership of Phizo post the political independence of India. Phizo declared Naga independence on 14 August 1947. The armed conflict under his leadership reached its peak in the 1950s and 60s. Amidst the conflict Nagaland was born as a state in 1963. The Mizo leadership was also unwilling to join the Indian State. Therefore the Mizo National Front under Pu Laldenga launched similar armed secessionist movement in 1966. After twenty years of conflict, a peace accord was signed and Mizoram attained statehood. Manipur was a princely state during the colonial period. Since the transfer of power its merger with India has been a contentious issue. Manipuri people see this merger as a forceful occupation by the Indian nation-state. Many rebel groups have therefore launched independence movement against the nation-state to restore its pre-colonial status and seek sovereignty. Like Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur, Assam has also seen secessionist movements. In Assam, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was founded in 1979 with an aim to establish an independent nation-state of Assam through armed struggle.

These movements or insurgencies were crushed with military power and undemocratic laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958, that renders the people as non-citizens bereft of all rights. This undemocratic and unconstitutional Act was passed on September 11, 1958, by the Parliament of India. The Act is against Article 21 (the right to life) and Article 22 (protection against arbitrary arrest and detention) of the Indian Constitution as it empowers the Indian security forces to arrest anyone without a warrant, to search any place that

⁹Savyasaachi, *Tribal Forest-Dwellers and Self-Rule: The Constituent Assembly Debates on the Fifth and Sixth Schedules* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1998), 121-123, quoted in Bora, "The Nation and its Margin," 140.

supposedly harbors suspicious elements, and to fire or to use force even to the point of causing death against any person or assembly of persons who are deemed to have broken the law in the area proclaimed as “disturbed”. The armed forces are also provided legal immunity for any act of extra-judicial killing in these “disturbed” areas. All the seven Northeast states are subjected to this draconian undemocratic AFSPA. The most audacious and resolute voice to counter these repressive and oppressive measures came from the women of the Northeast region.

To this day, the most powerful and dramatic image of Northeast India is perhaps that of twelve Manipuri women performing a naked protest against the Indian security forces at Kangla Fort, the head quarter of the counter-insurgency paramilitary battalion in Manipur. In 2004, a young Meitei woman Thangjam Manorama Devi of Manipur was arrested from her home by some soldiers of the battalion under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958. She was accused of being a member of the People’s Liberation Army of Manipur, a separatist armed revolutionary group. Next day her sexually brutalised, mutilated, bullet ridden body was found a few kilometres from her home in Bamon Kampu village in Imphal East district.¹⁰ To oppose the brutal rape and custodial killing of Manorama twelve middle aged women (known as *Ima* or mother) from Meira Paibi group or torch bearing women marched to Kangla Fort. They stripped naked and raised a banner that read ‘Indian Army Rape Us. Indian Army Take Our Flesh’. The naked mothers challenging the army to rape them, to take their flesh inverted the idea of ‘honourable’ women in need of male protection and vulnerable women in need of state protection. The images produced in the media brought to the fore the split between the Indian State and the Northeast. Their radical form of protest, the words on the banner and the bare bodies of those ‘respectable’ women invited a polyphonic discourse on feminism, human rights, and nation-state’s relation to its fragments.

The image of emaciated Irom Chanu Sharmila with nasogastric tube attached to her nose is another equally powerful and reproduced image of the Northeast. From 5 November 2000 to 9 August 2016 neither a morsel of food nor a sip of water passed through her mouth. Her fast unto death was in response to the killing of innocent women, men and children by the Assam Rifles in

¹⁰Esha Roy, “Manorama rape and murder: 10 years on, family’s hope for justice fades,” *The Indian Express*, July 2014. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/manorama-rape-and-murder-10-years-on-familys-hope-for-justice-fades/>.

the Malcom massacre. On November 1st a bomb was planted by the insurgents at Assam rifles army camp. Enraged by this audacious act, the Assam rifles gunned down unarmed civilians standing at a bus stand in Malcom village near Imphal. Among the dead were a 62-year-old woman and an 18-year-old boy (who had been the recipient of a national bravery award). The shattering images of their inert bodies published in newspapers propelled Irom to act against this state sponsored violence. She decided to exercise the autonomy of her body and went on a fast-unto-death to challenge the state. Her demand from the state was annulment of the AFSPA. Her demand however was met with indifference by the state. She was forced fed and put under confinement. She was treated as a criminal and housed in the jail ward of Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital in Imphal, Manipur. In the face of state apathy, on 9th August 2016, she ended her fast.

In both these cases, it is women who emerge as the active agents challenging the larger nation-state and its authority. They assume the role of representing the community, living in a 'zone of exception,' bereft of basic democratic rights.¹¹ They try to rattle the consciousness of the people. Their message to the Indian nation-state and its apathetic citizen seems to be, as concentration camp survivor and writer Jean Améry once said to the young Germans: "You don't want to listen? Listen anyhow. You don't want to know where your indifference can again lead you and me at any time? I'll tell you."¹² And yet the leaders of the nation-state and the male rebel leaders of their own communities do not seek their advice while deciding the fate of the people. The peace treaties are signed surreptitiously between the two without consulting the women's groups. The members of Meira Paibi do not have power when it comes to institutional politics. Like the male politicians, they cannot take part in any decision-making process or discuss the issues of peace and security with the nation-state. Painting a grim picture of Meitei society to which these thirteen brave women belong, Vijayalakshmi Brara writes: "...Manipur has always had a patrilineal system of descent...the women's collectives are expected to remain in the background, ready to strike the moment the situation demands, and then retreat gracefully when

¹¹Vajpeyi argues that within the boundaries of democratic nation-state of India AFSPA creates a zone of exception, a non-India that is governed by undemocratic rules. See, AnanyaVajpeyi, "Resenting the Indian State: For a New Political Practice in the Northeast," in *Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India*, ed. SanjibBaruah (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹²Améry, *At the Mind's Limit*, 96, quoted in Vajpeyi, "Resenting the Indian State," 27.

the results present themselves. This patriarchal modern 'democratic' political discourse permeates all our ideologies -- be they revolutionary or otherwise."¹³

Like Manipur, other North-eastern states do not allow women to participate in any decision-making process. They are seen only as cultural symbols of the community and grieving mothers of the fallen sons, not as active citizens. Therefore Naga Chief Minister, Neiphiu Rio once said, "Our beautiful darlings are good for politics but not so good in politics."¹⁴ The documented history of the Northeast is replete only with images where male leaders like Prafulla Mahanta of the Assam's AAGSP, Pu Laldenga of Mizoram's MNF, Angami Zapu Phizo of the Nagaland's NNC can be seen delivering speeches, and signing accords with the Government of India. The political history is conspicuously silent about the contribution of the women's groups like the Naga Mother's Association, Manipur's Meira Paibi, Mizoram's Mizo Hmeichhe Tangrual and others. The most violent manifestation of this misogynist exclusivist politics was witnessed in 2017 when Naga tribal groups conducted violent protests against the reservation of women in electoral politics in order to protect their customs and tradition.¹⁵ Even in Meghalaya where the dominant tribal communities practice matrilineal system of descent, the decision-making power rests only with the men.

In this masculinised, militarized Northeast society where the decision-making powers rest exclusively with the men, women have to surreptitiously grab the available resources to claim power and agency. In the two above mentioned cases Manipuri women used the agency of their own bodies, the same female bodies which are a site of patriarchal oppression, to perform their protest politics. In the first instance the *Imas* used their bodies by refusing to cover it and in the second Irom Sharmila used her body by refusing to eat or drink for sixteen long years. The *Imas* also used the patriarchal trope of motherhood as a political tool to negotiate space in the public discourse. "They had their weapons, we only had our body... Together the mothers gave a war

¹³Vijayalakshmi N.Brara, "Performance: The Gendered Space in Manipur," in *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*, ed. Preeti Gill (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010), 284.

¹⁴ Bora, "Nation and its Margin," 282.

¹⁵In the constitutional northeast has special provision of sixth schedule under which they can have separate tribal customs and rules. In other parts of India, village and district level institutions have thirty percent seats reserved for women under the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution. The 73rd amendment has not been extended to Sixth Schedule areas (tribal majority areas) of the Northeast on the grounds that it is against tradition.

cry,”¹⁶ recalls one of the political mothers of Kangla protest, Soibom Momon Leima in an interview. A more recent example of feminine protest that can be compared to the protests by Irom Sharmila and the mothers of Meira Paibi, is the Muslim women’s indefinite sit-in at Shaheen Bagh in India’s capital Delhi. Indian Muslim women like the Northeast women are the doubly marginalized sections of the society because of their religious and gendered identity. But through their peaceful protest against the discriminatory and communal Citizenship Amendment Act they managed to register their dissent.

Woman’s body possesses unsettling force. It can make the normative structure not work anymore, the structure of normalcy, patriarchy, and authoritarianism. The marked, othered, disrobed, and dissenting bodies of the Meira Paibi Manipuri women who are racially different from the mainland Indian, the emaciated body of young Irom with nasogastric pipe, the *Burqa* clad, *hijab* wearing bodies of the Shaheen Bagh women pose a threat to the powerful state and reverses the idea of masculine definition of female body and femininity as passive, acquiescent, and pleasurable. They assert Helene Cixous’s concept of feminine which can be read as something that continues to escape all boundaries that cannot be pinned down, controlled or even conceptualized.

The praxis of the protest politics of the women from the North-eastern states against the oppressive Indian State and the undemocratic AFSPA is distinct from the masculine institutional politics premised upon aggressive confrontation. The aggressive masculine politics of both the repressive Indian nation-state and rebel Northeast groups is based on the ideology of absolute difference, hierarchical binary, pure identity premised on ethnicity and racial identity. Therefore the Government of India wants to dominate the racially different ‘mongoloid’ Others, the Northeast. And the Northeast male ethnic leaders want to exterminate the contaminating Others like the Sikhs living in small ghettos in Manipur or Bangladeshi Muslims living on the margins in Assam. The Bodos want an exclusive Bodoland. The Khasis of Meghalaya desire a pure Khasi land by exterminating the non-tribals.

¹⁶Sabarish Suresh, “13 years after Mothers of Manipur protested naked against Indian Army, where is justice?” *dailyo*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/mothers-of-manipur-naked-protest-thangjam-manorama-indian-army-afspa-meira-paibi/story/1/18391.html>.

Women's politics or the alternative non-violent protest politics of the marginalised sections on the other hand refuses to see the Other as an absolute and inferior being. It resists classification, and ghettoization. Irom Sharmila says in an interview: "...women are not powerless but our political system is very masculine, and this needs to change. Allowing women to enter politics is a way forward. I believe that if more women enter politics, there will be a feminization of politics." What she means by feminization of politics can be gleaned from her next statement. She says:

I am a Meitei but I want to be seen as human. I do not like being defined in narrow identities of community, religion, and tradition. I want to be identified as a human who wants freedom for her state. There are too many walls that divide people, limiting them to their own identities. That cannot lead to harmony and peace in society. We need to live together with mutual respect.¹⁷

Contrast this with the ideology and aim of People's Liberation Army of Manipur that is fighting for an independent socialist state of Manipur. Yet, it wants independence only for the Meiteis and excludes Naga, Kuki and other tribal communities who are also inhabitants of the state. A feminized politics does not seek power over others. The praxis and goal of this politics rests on inter-subjective exchange among the marginalised. It is not divisive or violent. It is resistive, subversive. And this subversive politics is the hallmark of the writings by Northeast Indian women writers.

Protest is a craft.¹⁸ And the craft of writing as a site of potential change and a means to achieve freedom from silencing provide an alternative space or a feminine space which can work to subvert oppressive power. Writing is the somewhere else which is not obliged to reproduce the flawed, oppressive, and discriminatory system. Therefore, Northeast Indian women use writing as a means to challenge the phallic authority. But before delving into the women's writing let me mention another resistive 'feminine' craft that the Northeast women perform to 'offend' the

¹⁷Panchali Ray," Resisting AFSPA, Fighting the Nation: An interview with Irom Sharmila Chanu," in *Women Speak Nation Gender, Culture, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2019), 188.

¹⁸Journalist Aakar Patel compares protest with craft in the context of black lives matter movement. The protest erupted after the death of an unarmed black man in the hands of white policemen in a white supremacist society of America. He writes in this tweet that India needs similar protests by the Dalits, women, Muslim to challenge the discriminatory system. Because of this tweet his account was temporarily suspended by Twitter India. Aakar Patel's Twitter page, accessed 14 June, 2020, https://twitter.com/Aakar_Patel.

majoritarian ‘mainland’: the apparently insignificant craft of cooking fermented food, *akhuni* that is an integral part of the Northeast culture and history. Naga feminist writer Dolly Kikon in her study on *akhuni* says how Indo-Naga conflict gave rise to articulate young men who dominate the discourses on Naga politics, identity, nationalism, and conflict. During her fieldwork she observed that the men vociferously talk about Naga identity politics but when it comes to discussing *akhuni* they show lack of excitement deeming it unimportant. The women, on the other hand, speak passionately about it and its intricate process.¹⁹ Preparation of *akhuni* is not allowed in the Indian metros as the non-Naga people find the smell offensive. In 2007 the Delhi police produced a handbook cautioning Northeast migrants to refrain from cooking fermented food. *Akhuni* therefore is a site of feminine expression that challenges the mainstream hegemony over Indian food culture. The ingenious protest by the Manipuri women and preparation of fermented food by the Naga women in the metros are alternative methods to register one’s protest, to assert one’s difference. Northeast Indian Writing in English plays the similar alternative subversive role in resisting the hegemonic powers of patriarchy and majoritarianism.

The domain of creative writing in English in the Northeast is dominated by women. While the Northeast men are busy asserting their masculine self through aggressive ethno-national politics, the women made their way into the domain of creativity and imagination to fly to the unexplored spaces. A cursory glance at the Northeast writing space validates this point. One of the first Northeast Indian English novels was written by Naga woman writer Easterine Kire in 2003. In fact the whole intellectual thought shaping scene in Nagaland, as a *Times of India* article²⁰ points out, is dominated by only women writers, publishers and journalists. Naga women writer Temsula Ao and Arunachali writer Mamang Dai have become literary celebrities. The first Mizo novel *Zorami: A Redemption Song* in English was written by Malsawmi Jacob in 2015. A major Mizo poet is Mona Zote. Shillong novels are penned by women writers like Anjum Hasan, Daisy Hasan, Bijoya Sawian, and Janice Pariat. One of the first English novels on Assam was written by a woman novelist Mitra Phukan.

¹⁹Dolly Kikon, “Fermenting Modernity: Putting Akhuni on the Nation’s Table in India,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38 no.2 (2015) 320-335, DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2015.1031936.

²⁰See, Yudhajit Shankar Das, ‘Why women dominate the entire intellectual spectrum in Nagaland,’ *Times of India*, Sep 18, 2019.

The main dilemma of this thesis was whether to use the umbrella term ‘Northeast’ to refer to the writings by women writers of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland and position them under a category. As mentioned earlier this term and category is a colonial construct. Duncan McDuie-Ra calls the creation of Northeast as a category by the British and Indian administrators, hegemonic. But in his essay “Solidarity, Visibility and Vulnerability: ‘Northeast’ as a Racial Category in India” he explains how the term Northeast in some context when re-imagined by the Northeast migrants can be an affirmation of solidarity for them. While defending the use of the term he makes a crucial point. He says “... there are few alternative categories or terms that can capture the shared geographic marginality, experience of state violence, and ‘fragmented sovereignty’... without favouring a particular ethnic group or favouring tribal over non-tribal, hill over valley, federal state over autonomous district and vice-versa.”²¹

One of the most glaring and recent examples of this pan-Northeast solidarity and affirmation was the protest against Nido Taniam’s killing in Delhi. In 2014 when a young boy Nido from Arunachal Pradesh fell prey to racist attack in a metropolitan city, the Northeast migrant community erupted with a sense of shared experience of discrimination. According to an *Indian Express* report Nido was called ‘chinki’ by a shopkeeper, a racist slur used against the people from the Northeast and he also made derogatory comments about his clothes and the colour of his hair. Nido responded angrily to this verbal racist attack. He banged his fist on the counter shattering the glass. And a fight broke out between Nido and the locals. Both parties were detained and then released. On the way back the locals cornered Nido and beat him up. The next day he was pronounced dead from ‘water in his lungs’. In 2020, when the world battling a pandemic which is believed to have originated in a Chinese wet market, some xenophobic heartland Indians are venting their anger against the Northeast migrants. The heartland people are targeting the Northeast migrants living in their cities by identifying them with the Chinese corona virus. They are being spat at, harassed publicly, and being evicted from their rental home.

²¹McDuie-Ra, “Solidarity, Visibility and Vulnerability,” 30.

Showing solidarity with the fellow Northeastern people who have been subjected to such racial attack, many northeast migrants have left cities like Kolkata.²²

In another context Northeast as a category and the collective presence of Northeast people can be used as resistance— in the field of Indian Writing in English which is essentially dominated by city-bred urban elites who can control the cultural capital. It is essentially because of this that I use ‘Northeast’ as a category in the thesis. The domination of this coterie showcases violence of another kind, violence of exclusion. “The Lounge Guide to India in 50 Books”²³ published by *Mint* on the occasion of 73rd Independence Day of India is the most recent example of this exclusion. The list that mentions fifty must read books by Indian and Indian origin authors does not mention a single book on the Northeast or written by any Northeast writer. The list leaves us questioning whose India it is guiding the readers to.

This India is represented by mainly Delhi based or expatriate elitist authors. Recall, for example, the literary scene post Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* a booker winning novel that destabilizes the concept of nation-state but reifies hierarchical gender relation.²⁴ A crop of authors identified with Delhi’s elite St. Stephens College (then a men’s college) emerged under the patronage of publisher Ravi Dayal who himself was a former alumnus of St. Stephens. Shama Futehally, a non Stephanian woman writer, in the foreword to her novel *Tara Lane* affirms this discriminatory paradigm of Indian Writing in English where she thanks supportive friends who ‘have told me firmly that you can write a novel without having been to St Stephen’s College. Therefore any merit and all faults are to be laid at their door.’ While *Tara Lane* has become a relic of the past, Amitav Ghosh’s (the most famous Stephanite novelist) genius is valorised unquestioningly. This canon centralizes city-bred mainly caste Hindu elite male point of view as standard and subject others to this exclusivist standard. Another award winning Stephanian author Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English August* exemplifies this othering when a city-

²²For a detailed analysis of these despicable acts of bigotry See, Shivangi Kaushik, “We are not Corona, Northeast Students Make Posters against Racial Abuse,” *Livewire*, March 27, 2020, <https://livewire.thewire.in/rights/we-are-not-corona-northeast-students-make-posters-against-racial-abuse>.

²³Anindita Ghosh, “The Lounge guide to India in 50 books,” August 15, 2020, *Mint*, <https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/the-guide-to-india-in-50-books-11597389813634.html>.

²⁴ Rushdie’s novel presents women characters only as sexual objects. For a feminist critique of his novel, see Amy Aroopala, “Postnational Feminism in the Postmodern Novels of Transnational Women Writers,” (PhD. thesis, University of Houston, 2016), 73—169.

bred Augustya reduces a tribal woman Pari to a sexual object. *The Mint*, that further solidifies this exclusivist canon, includes books by Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Upamanyu Chatterjee. Sadly these exclusivist practices remind us of J Hillis Miller's phallogocentric assertion "I believe in the established canon of English and American literature and in the validity of the concept of privileged texts. I think it is more important to read Spenser, Shakespeare, or Milton than to read Borges in translation, or even, to say the truth, to read Virginia Woolf."²⁵

The genre of Northeast writing in English does not conform to the literary standard of the Indian English Writing. It does not offer grand Indian novels like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* or Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, instead relates small stories of sub-nationalisms of people who look 'different', practice different religion, and have 'unpronounceable' names. It writes about the rivers, lakes, forests and hills inhabited by these people, and about their myths and folklore. North East Writers' Forum (NEWF) established in 1997 by a small motley group of Northeast English writers is responsible for establishing this subversive Northeast writing as a literary category which is at once affirmative and resistive. Then Tilottoma Misra's two volume Oxford anthology reinstated this genre. This anthology *Oxford Anthology of Writings from Northeast* edited by Misra carefully brings together essays, poems, short stories written originally in English as well as in translation by writers from Northeast India. While creating a genre Misra in the introduction to the anthology points out the cultural exclusion of the Northeast when she says: "Significantly, 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 outgrown these construct of the mysterious 'other'."²⁶ Later a Sage publication edited by Mizo University Professor Margaret Zama contributed to the consolidation of the literary genre. In that anthology of essays Kailash C. Baral observes a similar positional marginality of Northeast literature in the dominant literary discourse. He points out the cultural ignorance and arrogance of mainland India when he writes "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

²⁵Miller, J. Hillis. "The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time," *ADE Bulletin* 62 (1979): 10-18, quoted in Susan Hardy Aiken "Women and Question of Canonicity" *College English* 48, No. 3 (Mar., 1986), 288-301.

²⁶Tilottoma Misra, *Oxford Anthology of Writings from Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), xvi.

critical opinions are at best paternalistic and at worst, smack of ignorance in understanding the societies and cultures of the Northeast.”²⁷

Prasanta Das’s “Anthology-Making, the Nation, and the Shillong Poets,”²⁸ makes similar observation in the field of poetry writing. He writes how the politically explosive poems questioning the sanctity of the Indian State by Manipuri poet Robin Ngangom are ignored by the anthology makers of the so-called mainland India. Das points out that, anthologies are often constructed on the same principles and perceptions as those that govern the nation. He cites the example of *60 Indian Poets* edited by noted poet Jeet Thayill and published by the most prominent publishing house, Penguin India. The exclusion of Northeast poetry in this anthology, he argues, is analogous to Delhi’s neglect of the Northeast. The Shillong-based poets include Temsula Ao, Robin S Ngangom, Desmond L Kharmawplang, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Ananya S Guha, Almond D Syiem, Indari Syiem Warjri, Esther Syiem, and Donboklang Rynthathiang. Das however bemoans the neglect of mainly three male poets, Robin Ngangom, Kharmawplang and Nongkynrih. He asserts that these three poets are the best known and the most successful in terms of the content they produce. In doing so, he trivializes the poetic expression of the women poets like Temsula Ao, the most prominent poet from Nagaland, Esther Syiem whose poems are instrumental in transcribing the resistive potentials of the Khasi oral culture. Das here fails to appreciate the feminine poetics and politics in his celebration of the masculine.

Das’s glorification of male Shillong poets brings us to the main contention of this study: gender difference and the category of the Northeast women. This study brings to the fore that even when the category is used by the Northeasterners themselves the homogeneity poses problems. This received narrative about the homogenous Northeast pitted against the homogenous heartland therefore invisibilizes many small narratives like that of the indigenous women, the uprooted migrant women and men from other parts of India and neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Nepal living as outsiders in the Northeast,.

²⁷ Kailash C. Baral, “Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India,” in *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India*, ed. Margaret Zama (New Delhi: Sage, 2013), 3.

²⁸ Prasanta Das, “Anthology-Making, the Nation, and the Shillong Poets,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 42 (October 2008): 19-21.

Gender as a question that can trouble the category of Northeast writing and Northeast people as a homogenous identity was first brought to my notice by Duncan McDuie-Ra's *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail*. His book on the experience of the Northeast migrants living in Delhi describes how racism defines their experience in the capital city. Both men and women face racism in some form or other. We have already seen how a boy from Arunachal and a girl from Manipur were targeted in Delhi. A chapter in the book titled 'Provincial Men and Worldly Women' however nuances this experience. He argues that in spite of the discrimination faced by both men and women, it is women who flourish in the cities while the men struggle. In the process of migration the traditional normative masculinity that is conceptualized as strong, aggressive and protective is ruptured, whereas migration to different cities liberates Northeast women from the yokes of traditional patriarchy. It weakens the men as it impedes them from enforcing the rules and regulation practiced back home but liberates the women.

Indian-American diasporic women writers like Bharati Mukherjee have argued along similar lines. She says that expatriate Indian men and women relate differently to Indian nationalism. According to Mukherjee, because of their strong attachment to the nations of their origin, migrant Indian men have locked their hearts against the mainstream culture of the adoptive country. Migrant Indian women, on the other hand, who are "no longer having to do what mothers-in-law tyrannically forced them to" do not idealize their nation of origin and delight in "change."²⁹ From Mukherjee and Duncan's writings on migrant experience, it can be concluded that women's relation to their cultural identity is different. Nationhood, community, identities are male constructs, rigged in their favour. Hence no country, community share its resources equally with the women.

I intend to focus on Northeastern women writers to explore this different approach to identity, sense of community, nationality and sub-nationality.³⁰ Most Northeast Indian women

²⁹Debjani Banerjee, *Nationalists and Feminist Identities: Moments of Confrontation and Complicity in Post-Colonial Fiction and Films*, Diss. SUNY at Stonybrook, August 1995, 203, Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 1995.

³⁰ It is not to say that perceiving women as a category is not reductive and therefore fallacious. The intention is to problematize the category of northeast women writers as category by showing the different viewpoints even with their writings. But the categorization is based partly on the belief in the women's shared experience of marginalization under patriarchy and McDuie-Ra's observation on worldly women which set them apart from provincial men.

writers are migrants. Assamese writer Mitra Phukan has lived all over the world, Mizo writer Malsawmi Jacob and Shillong born writer Anjum Hasan are now based in Bangalore. Their varied experiences help them problematize the binaries. Physical migration however is not necessary for such fluidity. Temsula Ao and Nini Lungalang's writings prove that. All these women writers revel in change. At the same time these writers do not shy away from inscribing their roots. They inscribe the indigenous Meitei, Khasi, Naga, Mizo and Adi³¹ myths, folklore, songs and hymns. They write about their relationship with the hills, forests and rivers of their native lands. They also voice the concerns of the Northeast when the situation demands. For instance, Janice Pariat who otherwise hates to be ghettoised as a Northeast writer shows solidarity towards her fellow Northeasterners when the situation demands. She speaks passionately against the killing of Nido or the apathy of government towards the Assamese protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act. This duality is a salient feature of Northeast women writers.

In order to analyse this tension and duality I use the lens of 'feminist post-nation theory'. Post-nationalism, as Nivedita Menon describes, is characterized by sub-nationalism and transnational solidarity. Nation is imagined as a bounded terrain inhabited by a homogenous collective who are interpellated to celebrate the symbols of nationalism like the national anthem, national flag, a victory in war or in international cricket. Nation dreams of shedding the 'sub-ness'³² Indian nationalism as mentioned at the very onset is constituted as a homogenous collective of Hindu upper caste and middle class men where Northeasterners are primitive, 'chinkies' (and in 2020, Corona virus). Northeast women are the foreign, amoral, sexualized Other. Ashish Nandy points out how mainland men view Northeast women as sexually available non-beings:

Trying to break the stereotype by becoming different is of no use . . . Most people in Delhi know nothing about Northeast culture. The only stereotype they have is that they are outsiders. Any foreign women to them is fair game, and according to them the

³¹ The Meitei people are an ethnic group native to Manipur. The Khasi people are an indigenous ethnic group of Meghalaya. And the Adi people are from Arunachal Pradesh.

³² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

[Northeastern] women are foreigners lacking morality, used to sex and therefore a little more can't hurt.³³

Even Indian feminism position middle class and high caste Hindu woman as its subject. Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana point this out in “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender.”³⁴ In this acrimonious environment where women with ‘unpronounceable’ names, epicanthal eye folds are seen as the Other, the assertion of their identity in the form of sub-nationalism is empowering and subversive.

Sub-nationalism challenges narrow definitions of the nation state. Northeast is home to eighty five armed insurgent groups according to South Asia Terrorism Portal. They demand some form of sovereignty. Northeast sub-nationalisms demand the majority to see the minority as the equal other. The naked protest by the Meitei women for example is also an instance of Meitei sub-nationalism. Papori Bora says: “By refusing the paternalistic protection of the state, they speak to it as an equal and thereby claim equality for the minors of the nation. By attempting to resignify what it means to be a Northeastern subject, the command can be read as calling for a dismantling of the colonial and nationalist legacies, which constitute the Northeast as a minor.”³⁵ Also recall what Irom Sharmila said. She refused to deny her Meitei identity. Naga writer Easterine Kire’s novel on Naga insurgency similarly asserts Naga nationalism. The novel celebrates and romanticizes the unfurling of the Naga flag during the Naga movement. Northeast women writers also assert their sub-nationalism when they write about the rapes committed by the Indian army in their states.

But the Northeast cultural and political sub-nationalisms are masculine in nature. Sub-nationalism is controlled by male ethnic elites who suppress women’s freedom of expression. Sub-nationalism emerges when a community feels cultural threat from the larger nation-state. In the case of Assamese, Naga, Meitei, Mizo and Khasi nationalism the cultural purity is affirmed

³³Bora, “The Nation and its Margin,” 221.

³⁴ See, Susie Tharu, and Tejaswini Niranjana, “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender.” In *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed, Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996) 233--260.

³⁵Papori Bora, “Between the Human, the Citizen and the Tribal,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12 (200)3-4, 341-360, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2010.513100.

and imposed on the women. A pressing demand for the rejection of feminist concerns and reification of nationalism is made on them. This masculine narrative of sub-nationalism and cultural chauvinism also disenfranchise, for example, other minority groups. Assamese nationalism, for example, as Sanjoy Hazarika points out “has always ranged itself against the outsider”³⁶

Therefore women writers work to destabilize not only the edifice of the hegemonic Indianness but also the sentiment of Northeast sub-nationalism by showing trans-national solidarity with the marginalized Other of the heartland India as well as from Nepal and Bangladesh. Their response to the exclusion of the Other in the male dominated narrative of the ethno-nationalism, their empathy towards them illustrates their difference. Their feminine writing give voice to the *vais* (Mizo term for the outsider), the *dkhars* (outsider in Khasi language), *mayangs* (outsider in Manipur), Nepali and Bangladeshi migrants, the Sikhs in Manipur, Biharis working as labourers, and tribals from Orissa, Madhya Pradesh working in the tea plantation in Assam almost like indentured labours. Their writings disclose and dismantle all identities by establishing an alterity, by showing the vulnerability of the marginalized communities in the Northeast and of the Northeast people in the mainland India. They dismember all pure identities.

Their writing is similar to Cixous’s *écriture féminine* as it creates an alternative feminine space that is different from the aggressive masculinist politics. Pitted against two patriarchies (racist mainland Indian and indigenous) Northeast women’s lived experience is similar to the predicament and challenges of African-American women who have to resist both racist white patriarchy and black patriarchy. This connection has been explored in multiple studies. Here among other things I will attempt a reading of Northeast women’s writing through Cixous’s lens of *écriture féminine* or feminine writing. Cixous’s permanently transitional status as an Algerian, Jewish and French woman which is similar to the hyphenated identity of Northeast Indian women, her idea of writing and language that refuses to fit into the fixed categories of identity, gender, ethnicity, and work to destabilize hierarchical binaries encourages this reading. More importantly, what inspires this appropriation is the fact that this new insurgent practice of writing is always conceived by peripheral yet subversive subjects as a political tool to challenge all

³⁶Hazarika, *Rites of Passage*, 26-27.

forms of oppression. Writing subjects like Jewish woman in anti-Semitic world, Dalit woman in caste based Brahmanical society, homosexuals in heterosexist culture or Northeast women writers in a racially prejudiced Indian society have privileged connection to this writing. Northeastern women writers are doubly marked and marginalised as Northeasterner and woman. Yet, they challenge this marginalization. Northeastern women writers therefore are closer to *écriture féminine*. The description of the indefinable insurgent *écriture féminine* can be found in her famous essay 'The Laugh of Medusa' where she says:

It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded--which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always exceed the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, *by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate*.³⁷[Emphasis added]

To displace the western phallogocentric philosophy, Cixous invents the idea of *écriture féminine* that revises writing and the patriarchal definition of femininity. It is a way to explore new possibilities in writing. It conceptualizes writing as an alternate space which is not obliged to reproduce the unjust oppositional hierarchical binaries of master/ slave, man/woman, and self/Other. The writing by Northeastern women is a response to the conflict between the Indian self//Northeast Other and in some cases, Northeast self/migrant Others. They therefore use their writing as a way to express their anger towards all forms of violence and hierarchy and anticipate a space that is not obliged to reproduce this hierarchy.

Cixous's feminine writing mainly focuses on female body. The writings of Northeast Indian women similarly foreground female body, its *pleasures and pains*. The bodies of the protesting women of Meira Paibi and Irom Sharmila were seen as just symbols of suffering Manipur but when they return as flesh and blood women demanding their rights they were silenced. Therefore when Irom Sharmila decided to call off her hunger strike and marry her partner she received criticism from her own community. Panchali Ray writes "Her [Irom Sharmila's] body, frozen as the symbol of Manipur's resistance to the Indian state, with its re-

³⁷Cixous, "The Laugh," 253.

turn to the flesh and blood, challenged the phallogocentric social order governed by patriarchal and communitarian norms.”³⁸ The writings by the Northeastern women return this body to the women by inscribing it. Assamese writer Mitra Phukan, Naga writer Temsula Ao, Mizo writer Malsawmi Jacob write about the pleasures and pains of women’s bodies in their writing so that they can emerge out of their frozen, symbolic status.

Cixous’s *écriture féminine* asserts female body, feminine articulation, motherhood, emotional excess in short the sides which are not privileged in the hierarchical binary as a conscious artifice and political strategy to undo the traditional hierarchies. Cixous’s feminine writing subject is not wary of excess, emotion and pathos. In India, writer activist Arundhati Roy’s writings on nation, nationalism, capitalism and war can be read as an example of such writing that shows the way to re-claim the feminine excess, emotion and pathos. And her bitter dialogue with eminent historian Ram Guha can be seen as a duel between authoritative phallogocentrism and insurgent feminine writing. After the nuclear test conducted by the Indian State in 2002, Roy wrote emotionally about the impact of this form of violent and aggressive nationalism on common women, men and even animals. She continues to write passionately about various issues like the Narmada Bachao Andolan, Citizenship Amendment Act and so on. Eminent historian Ram Guha calls Roy self-absorbed. He finds her writing style hyperbolic, emotional, and excessive. He tells Anita Nair in an interview how he ‘detests’ Roy’s writing style and finds male writer and activists George Orwell in comparison sharper and measured. Guha tries to impose and dictate the norms of writing. Performing the role of a gatekeeper he wants to bar Roy’s entry into the world of writing. He wants to hear the language that speaks in the masculine. He seeks to impede the flow of feminine writing, play, emotion, and excess and shows his inability to accept the possibility of any other discourse. It is pertinent to write about Guha and his phallogocentric historicism because he has written the biography of Verrier Elwin who is known to be an authorial voice on Gond tribe of Madhya Pradesh and the Northeast. Elwin’s advice was sought by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to deal with the imbroglio called the Northeast. Guha’s book on Elwin positions him as the owner of the tribal knowledge. Roy says she would be more interested in the life of Elwin’s wife who was a Gond tribal woman whom Elwin exploited for his knowledge production.

³⁸ Ray, *Women Speak Nation*, 12.

Much like Arundhati Roy who is keen to be the voice of the marginalized through her passionate writing, the Northeast women writers write about the disenfranchised. They do not write the great Northeast novel about the leaders of ethnic revolution. They write about ordinary Northeast women and about their raped, infertile, pregnant and dissenting bodies. They write about the migrants and their loneliness. Roy, however, takes the position of an unmarked subject in her non-fiction writings. She writes as a universal subject taking on the authority and capitalism. Roy as a Delhi based Savarna writer can afford to be unmarked. The Northeast writers, on the other hand, are deeply marked by their race and ethnicity making them fragmented.

Their hyphenated identity and Otherness as Northeast-Indian woman enables a writing that can pose a threat to the dichotomy of sameness and Otherness. It disrupts self/Other binary. Self in their writing is always and already plural and fragmented where a proud Khasi man(the most dominated subject position in Meghalaya) turns out be a son of an illegal immigrant from Nepal (the most detested other in Meghalaya), where violent and hostile Delhi eventually becomes home to an Arunachali woman, where a Mizo woman who has been raped by a non-Mizo Indian soldier during Mizo independence war resembles a common mainland Indian woman, where an Assamese woman can see the anti-migrant Assam movement both from the perspective of an outsider and the agitators protesting against it. A Naga woman can trick the Indian soldiers to protect her Naga men and at the same time call to question the phallocracy of the same Naga men. It is not to say that these writings do not reaffirm the opposition of India and Northeast, men and women. Easterine Kire's oeuvre is especially marked by the masculine desire for categorization and classification. Her writings emerge as a defender of Naga patriarchal nationalism that solidifies the opposition between Naga and non-Naga, and Naga men and women. In this dissertation I intend to approach all the aspects as there is not one voice that speaks for the Northeast. It is a collection of different voices, opinions, and writings that make Northeast writing truly heterogeneous.

Chapterization of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Each chapter represents a different North-eastern state—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland. The first

chapter, titled “Arunachal Pradesh in the Writings of Mamang Dai: Myth, Legends, and Small Histories” discusses three fictional texts by Mamang Dai, *Legends of Pensam*, *Stupid Cupid* and *The Black Hills*. Her writings serve to demystify and de-exoticize Arunachal as a hidden land. Her first novella *Legends of Pensam* shows that the people from Arunachal are not exotic beings frozen in pre-modern, a-historical time. They are real people caught in-between past and present, tradition and modernity. The second novel *Stupid Cupid* demonstrates the experience of the Northeast migrants in Delhi. The racism, Othering and violence that they experience have been depicted here. The third novel presents a little known historical episode of Arunachal’s Mishmi tribe. In doing she fills a lacuna in the in the writing of Arunachal’s history.

The second chapter- “A Feminine Approach to Assamese Sub-Nationalism: Writings by Mitra Phukan, Uddipana Goswami and Jahnavi Barua” discusses Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife*, Uddipana Goswami’s ‘Colours,’ ‘Andolan,’ and ‘Sin and Retribution,’ and Jahnavi Barua’s *Rebirth* and ‘Patriot’. Assam is the most dominant state among the eight North-eastern states. Non-Assamese people from the Northeast rightly complain that Assam eats up the lion’s share of the Northeast Indian pie.³⁹ Assam witnessed a six years long Agitation (1979-1984) against the outsiders. The texts discussed in this chapter are written against the backdrop of this six years long Assam movement. They represent different approaches to the Agitation. Mitra Phukan’s novel foregrounds a woman’s body, her infertility, sexual pleasure, and the pleasure of childbearing out of wedlock. Assam is metaphorically presented through her journey from infertility to childbirth. ‘Patriot’ discusses two important facets of Assam Agitation—the anti-migrant sentiment and militancy. And Uddipana’s stories show the causes and consequences of the Agitation.

The third chapter, “Stories from Manipur: Asserting Indigenous Identity,” discusses Linthoi Chanu’s *Wari: a collection of short stories from Manipur*. The stories in this book deal with Meitei folk beliefs, religious myths and superstitions. The pre-Hindu Meitei religious myths and rituals define Meitei identity and they also serve as a discourse of resistance and protest. This discourse is a protest against ‘Hinduisation’ and ‘Indianisation’.

³⁹ Golan Naulak, October 16, 2020. Twitter . his comment was in response to was Majha House organized a session titled “Change Makers: The Power women of Northeast India” with powerful women like MitraPhukan, RakheeKalita, Tora Agarwal, Patricia Mukhim. Apart from Mukhim , an eminent journalist from Mehalaya, the other women were from Assam.

The fourth chapter, “Writing the *Dkhars*, the Non-selves and their Non-belongingness: English Fiction from Meghalaya,” discusses how the women writers from the state of Meghalaya show empathy towards the Other in the context of Shillong. The capital of Meghalaya, Shillong is the most cosmopolitan towns of Northeast region. But it is also the place of bitter local Khasi tribal and non-tribal outsiders (*dkhars*) conflict. Atrocities against the non-tribal by the dominant Khasi tribe and the lack of justice are a common phenomenon. Local Journalist Patricia Mukhim is the most prominent voice to raise her voice in favour of the outsiders. She has faced backlash because of her stand. This empathy towards the Other is reflected in the women’s writing as well.

The fifth chapter is titled “*Zorami*: Rewriting Mizoram’s Troubled History through a Feminine Lens” discusses Malsawmi Jacob’s *Zorami* which is written against the backdrop of Mizo movement that culminated in the birth of the state. History of Mizo insurgency centres on the leader Pu Laldenga. But here the writer centralizes a woman’s emotional journey towards healing. The eponymous heroine represents Mizo’s violent past and its journey towards peace and reconciliation.

The sixth and final chapter is “Delineating Conflict: Naga Women’s Writing in English.” I have chosen three short stories by Temsula Ao and one short story by Nini Lungalang that foregrounds women’s agency during Indo-Naga conflict. I also discuss three novels by Easterine Kire. *A Naga Village Remembered* is the first Naga novel in English. *The Bitter Wormwood* is the first novel on Naga insurgency. And the last *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a coming of age novel. Kire’s literary contribution is unparalleled but I argue that her writing reinstate Naga patriarchy.

I exclude Sikkim and Tripura since to my knowledge women writers of these two states are yet to publish original English literature in English.⁴⁰ There are many women scholars from Sikkim and Tripura who are producing academic writing in English. But to my knowledge fiction has not been produced yet.

Arunachal Pradesh in the Writings of Mamang Dai: Myths, Legends, and ‘Small Histories’

We dwell in the mountains and do not know
what the world hears about us.
Foragers for a destiny,
all the days of our lives
we stare at the outline of the hills,
lifting our eyes to the invincible sky.

---Mamang Dai, ‘Remembrance.’⁴¹

This chapter discusses the writing of Mamang Dai who hails from Arunachal Pradesh. Mamang Dai is the most renowned Arunachali writer in English.⁴² Other notable literary figures from Arunachal are Yeshe Dorje Thongchi and Lummer Dai, but they are the stalwarts of Assamese literature. Sahitya Akademi award winning author Thongchi is State Chief Information Commissioner for the Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh. His chief literary works are *Sonam* (1982), *Mauna Outh Mukhar Hriday* (Silent Lips, Murmuring Heart) (2005). His novels mainly deal with the cultural life of Monpa tribe of Arunachal. Lummer Dai who is a distant relative of Mamang Dai wrote *Pahorer Xile Xile* (In the Midst of Rocks of Hill) in 1961 when he was only a student. Later he published four more novels *Prithibir Hanhi* (The Smile of the Earth) (1963), *Mon Aru Mon* (Heart to Heart) (1968), *Kainar Mullya* (Bride Price) (1982) and *Upur Mahal* (Higher Level) (2003). The novels of Lummer Dai present a realistic description of the life of Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The Assamese language was the lingua franca and the medium of instruction in NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency) till 1982. Therefore Yeshe Dorje Thongchi and Lummer Dai received their education in Assamese. With the change of political scenario NEFA became the independent state of Arunachal Pradesh and adopted English as their new lingua franca. Because of this language barrier Thongchi and Lummer Dai’s works are now perishing without their readers. Even the readers of Arunachal are not well versed with their writing.⁴³

⁴¹ Dai, *River Poems*, 17.

⁴² Male Arunachali Poet Yumlam Tana also writes in English. He is from Nyishi tribe and explores the world of Nyishis. But he is less prolific than Dai. He has written two books of poetry *The Man and the Tiger* and *The Wind also Sings*.

⁴³ See, Tilottoma Misra, “Crossing Linguistic Boundaries: Two Arunachali Writers in Search of Readers,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 36 (Sep. 8 - 14, 2007): 3653-366.

Mamang Dai's writings on the contrary have been assimilated into the literary canon. Her most famous work *The Legend of Pensam* (2006) and her second fictional work *Stupid Cupid* (2009) were published by Penguin, India. Her latest novel *The Black Hill* (2014) has been published by Aleph book. It was released in Goa literary festival with much pomp and grandeur. She is hailed as a literary celebrity from Northeast India along with Naga writers Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire. Mamang was the first woman IAS officer from Arunachal but she famously renounced the lucrative job to become a writer. Now she has to her credit three collection of poems: *River Poems* (2004), *The Balm of Time* (2008) and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014)), one novella (*Stupid Cupid*), one novel (*The Black Hill*), a few children's books on folktale: *The Sky Queen* (2003), *One upon a Moontime* (2003), *Hambreelmai's Loom* (2014), and a work of fiction (*The Legend of Pensam*) that defies any generic definition.⁴⁴ She has received Padma Shri in 2011 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2014 for *The Black Hill*.

Arunachal Pradesh, her homeland, is the chief source of her literary inspiration, or in Tilottoma Misra's words, it forms the material basis for the composition of her writing.⁴⁵ Arunachal, one of the largest and sparsely populated states of India, is a land of unexplored forests, unnamed mountain peaks and innumerable valleys. It is one of the greenest states of India and a biodiversity hotspot. This sparsely populated state is nestled between ancient land of Tibet in the north, Myanmar in the west and Assam in its south. Politically it has traversed a long journey from being known as NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency) to Arunachal Pradesh. NEFA was created in 1954. On 20th January 1972 it became union territory and was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh meaning the land of dawn lit mountains. And in 1987 Arunachal evolved as an independent state. It is home to as many as twenty six major tribes and hundred sub-tribes like the Adis, Akas, Mishmi, Mishing, Apatani, Niyashi, Monpa and so on. It has also become home to Tibetan Chakma, Hajong refugees and Muslim refugees from neighbouring Bangladesh. All these communities have their own distinct culture, belief systems and languages which are mutually unintelligible. They also practice diverse religions. Much of the indigenous Tani

⁴⁴*Pensam* defies any literary classification because of its structure. It weaves different amorphous stories from the past and present. The only connecting tool is the nameless narrator who is a cosmopolitan Arunachali trying to reveal her homeland to the outside world much like the author.

⁴⁵Tilottoma Misra, "Crossing Linguistic Boundaries: Two Arunachali Writers in Search of Readers," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 36 (Sep. 8 - 14, 2007): 3653.

population (thirty percent population according to 2011 census) practice indigenous religion mostly the institutionalized Donyi-Polo. In north and north-west part of Tawang, West Kmeng and Changlang people follow Tibetan Buddhism (11.76 percent according to 2011 census). Hegemonic religion of the Northeast is Christianity. It is the dominant religion in the tribal states of Nagaland (87.93 percent), Meghalaya (74.59 percent), and Mizoram (87.16 percent). Arunachal is still connected to its indigenous belief system and they have also institutionalized it as a proper religion known as Donyi-Polo meaning the Sun and Moon. It makes Arunachal a land of mindboggling cultural diversity and contradictions where in one corner carnivalesque, animistic and shamanic religion like Donyi-Polo is practiced by the Tani group of people with song, dance, mystical chants, and gory animal sacrifice. And in another corner Buddhist monks practice their religion with somber rituals and where even hurting a blood sucking fly is forbidden.⁴⁶

Travelers, explorers, and documenters generally use epithets such as a ‘hidden land’, ‘forgotten frontier’, and ‘unexplored paradise’ to define this land of mindboggling contradictions. Ursula Graham Bower named her book on Apatanis and Dafla tribes of Arunachal Pradesh *The Hidden Land* which was published in 1913. Mamang Dai’s coffee table book on the oral history and myths of Arunachal coincidentally have the same title. It is titled *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*. British writer Antonia Bolingbroke Kent’s travel book based on her bike journey across Arunachal has this illustrative title—*Land of the Dawn-lit Mountains: A Journey across Arunachal Pradesh- India’s Forgotten Frontier*.

Though these titles perpetuate the idea of Arunachal as an exotic and remote land but it cannot be denied that the region is literally absent from mainstream political, cultural, literary, academic discourse. Kent observes “... in a world that has largely been mapped, clicked, blogged about, uploaded and tramped across, it seemed unbelievable that such a place still exists. Arunachal it was. ...With the exception of the late Mark Shand whose 2002 book, *River Dog*, told of his journey down the Brahmaputra, almost nothing has been written about Arunachal since the 1940s.”⁴⁷ This obscure remote region comes to news when Indo-China border issue comes to the foreground. As we know a 550 mile long contentious McMohan line separates

⁴⁶ See Antonia Bolingbroke-Kent, *The Land of Dawn-lit Mountains*, 228. Here she recounts how she was admonished by Dorje, a former lama for swatting a dum dum fly away.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 12.

Arunachal Pradesh and China. It was drawn by Sir Henry McMahon, the foreign secretary of British India in 1914. The McMahon was rejected by the Chinese delegation at that year's Simla Conference. They walked out claiming that Tibet and a significant chunk of Assam belonged to them. The border issue to this date remains a bone of contention between them. The tension exacerbated in 1959 when India decided to give political asylum to Dalai Lama. It instigated the 1962 Sino-Indian war. In October 1962 Mao Zedong's People's Liberation Army launched a surprise attack across McMahon line occupying parts of NEFA and a major part of Assam. Later China declared victory and retreated. Heavy army presence in the border areas of Tawang is a palpable reminder of the past war and present tension. Siang River, a tributary of Brahmaputra and a connecting link between Tibet and Assam is also a major bone of contention of India-China conflict. The river which is the identity shaper for the people of Arunachal has become a symbol of water war between India and China. British explorer Antonia Kent in the *Land of Dawn-lit Mountains* says, "The China issue has shaped the region since 1962 and is the prism through which the Indian government and people view this far-flung frontier state."⁴⁸

The reason behind this myopic vision is not the impregnable mountainous terrain alone. The official policies of successive governments contributed to this neglect. The exclusionary policy including the inner line permit of the British which was inherited by the post-colonial administrators led to the isolation of Arunachal. In 1826 when Assam came under the aegis of the British they established tea plantations on the fertile land of Assam and ignored the infertile and impenetrable hilly region of the 'savage' tribes in Arunachal. When they made inroads into the hills it was only to protect the tea gardens from the tribal raids. They introduced Eastern Frontier Regulations in 1873 to restrict the entry of the outsiders and protect the natives. Because of this policy Arunachal remained isolated from the rest of British India. And therefore the region remained untouched by the modern wave of western civilizing mission and Christian conversion. Mamang Dai writes, "Arunachal is one of the last frontiers where ancient religion is practiced."⁴⁹

After political independence of India in 1947 the pressing problem regarding Arunachal was whether to continue with the British policy of isolation or to adopt the policy of

⁴⁸Ibid., 10.

⁴⁹Mamang Dai, "Myth of Tranquility', South Asian Terrorism Portal, <https://satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume5/Fault5-5mdhai.htm>.

detribalization and assimilation. The then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was in two minds about it. In the foreword to *A Philosophy for NEFA* penned by Verrier Elwin he presents his idealized, patronizing opinion about the Arunachali people and writes about the corrupting influence of modern civilization and the mainstream caste ridden Hindu society on the pre-modern animistic tribal people of Arunachal. He writes: “*I am not at all sure which is the better way of living, the tribal or our own. In some respects I am quite certain theirs is better.*”⁵⁰

On the other hand Elwin who was well versed with the tribal way of life in Arunachal conceded the ill effects of under development in the region. He states that the tribes in the region live in unhealthy condition where child mortality rates are high, people die of disease. The practice of superstitious rituals, child kidnapping, inter clan rivalry only aggravate the dire living conditions. He believed that lop sided growth policy would only instigate the youth to take up arms against the authority and Arunachal will become another Nagaland. He therefore concludes in *NEFA* that in slow and steady manner development project need to be introduced to the people of NEFA. “It (Nehruvian tribal policy) would bring the best things of the modern world to the tribes, but in such a way that those will not destroy the traditional way of life, but will activate and develop all that is good in it.”⁵¹

So, the people of NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) remained caught in-between these two diametrically different policies of isolation and assimilation. They have now become hybrid subjects living in an in-between space of tradition and modernity or like Bhabha’s mimic-man, a distorted replica of ‘mainland’ India. Documentary movies show how the older generation mourns the loss of their old culture and appropriation of the ‘Indian’ ways. The most fascinating one is of an old Apatani woman whose sad eyes mourns the vanishing culture of tattoos and nose plugs.⁵² Mamang Dai’s first fictional work *The Legend of Pensam* meaning the legends of an in-between place demonstrates the impact of this governmental dilemma. She describes how a hill tribe community incarcerated in a hinterland copes with the influx of modernism. She also explores how the older generation mourns the loss of the old ways and the new generation pines for the modern lifestyle of urban India.

⁵⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru, foreword to *The Philosophy for NEFA*, by Verrier Elwin, (New Delhi: Vishal Kaushik, 1957).

⁵¹ Elwin, *The Philosophy for NEFA*, 9.

⁵² “The changing face of beauty in Northeast India,” YouTube video, posted by National Geographic, November 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-8EC1sHZmQ>.

The exclusionary policy of the successive governments has also broadened the racial divide between the Arunachalis and the mainland citizens. Therefore when the Arunachali people step out of their cocoon they face racial discrimination. Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid* based in 21st century Delhi elucidates the difference and acrimony that still exists between the mainland and the hill tribes of Arunachal. Verrier Elwin's *A Philosophy for NEFA* which talks about the lofty philosophy of slow assimilation of hill tribes was published in 1957. But even after sixty years the duality of isolation and integration still continues.

The tyranny of distance has created an exotic image of Arunachal in the minds of people living outside the state. Arunachal to them is a landmass of myth, legends and superstition. Antonia Bolingbroke-Kent's *Land of the Dawn-lit Mountains* introduces the author's destination in these words: "Remote, mountainous and forbidding, here shamans still fly through the night, hidden valleys conceal portals in other worlds, yetis leave footprints in the snow, spirits and demons abound, and the gods are appeased by the blood of sacrificed beasts."⁵³ This description also appears at the back cover blurb as promotional tool. And the mainstream publishers expect writers from the region to represent this exotic, remote otherness and sell a generic image of mythic land to the mainland readership without the rough edges and specific characteristics. Mamang Dai in her keynote address delivered at a Publishing Next conference says: "...another query I always get is about myth and legends. Sometimes I feel as if people expect me to walk around with a big cloud over my head and the mountains on my shoulders"⁵⁴

Mamang Dai in the same conference narrates a humorous anecdote to highlight the ignorance of mainland India. She tells how she was rattled by a curious fellow passenger from Nainital while returning from her hometown to Delhi. After collecting information about Arunachal, the curious co-traveler asked her whether her people relish tiger meat. She was furious back then but in retrospect she thinks she had lost an opportunity to open up her homeland to that mainland citizen. This is exactly what she intends to do through her writing—disseminate knowledge about her land and enlighten her readers. She in her writing records momentous historical events of the past. The assassination of missionary Kirk by Mishmee tribal

⁵³ Kent, *The Land of Dawn-lit Mountains*, 5.

⁵⁴ "Keynote Address by Mamang Dai (Publishing Next 2015)," You Tube video, posted by Publishing Next, September 21, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGSP6eqH6S0>

leader, The Abor expedition conducted by the British in 1911 and the building of Stilwell road during World War II and their disruptive effect on the Adi life find expression in *The Legend of Pensam*. She represents the myths and superstitions of the Adis, inscribes it as a land of myths and legends. And at the same time de-exoticizes it. She shows that the people are not trapped in any pre-modern time capsule. They do not desire to be museum specimens. She instead presents their relation with the changing times. In doing so, she exposes the denigrating and idealizing caricature of Arunachal and Arunachali people. Mamang Dai's writing aims to change the discourse and the essentialist categorization of Arunachal as remote by foregrounding an insider's view of the land.

Despite her efforts to de-exoticize Arunachal Pradesh Dai has been attacked by her critics for taking neo-romantic and apolitical stance in her writings. Prasanta Das, for instance, in his polemical essay on the Northeast poets and the literary canon criticizes Mamang Dai's poems for its romanticized depiction of Northeast landscape. "She has a way with words but her tendency to exoticize Arunachal Pradesh makes it seem to exist in a mythic time warp."⁵⁵ He continues "Mamang Dai ... do not address political issues directly in the way that Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Kynphamdo."⁵⁶ Esther Daimari writes "Mamang Dai's writings are neo-romantic in nature and she often projects Northeast as an exotic land, different from the rest of India."⁵⁷

A closer reading of her writings refutes these charges. It reveals how her literary work explores the dark realities hidden beneath the veneer of romanticized description. Her poems in *River Poems* for example describe the dichotomy of myth and reality because Arunachal is a land of myth, legends and orality where people believe in fantastical tales. At the same time it is a land of ordinary people grappling with the issues of underdevelopment, ensuing of modernity, violence, patriarchy, drug abuse and deforestation. They have the same aspiration and emotion as any other non-Arunachali. In her poems, Dai presents this duality and contrast. In 'Birthplace' she writes: "We are the children of the rain /Of the cloud woman/Brother to the stone and bat/ In our cradle of bamboo and vine/In our long houses we slept."⁵⁸ And in 'Remembrance' she

⁵⁵ Das, "Waiting to be taken onboard," 3.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Esther Daimari, "Images of Women in Mamang Dai's Fiction," *New Academia* II, no. IV (Oct. 2013): 1.

⁵⁸ Dai, *The River Poems*, 79.

describes the presence of gun-toting bands of militants mostly from National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang faction) popularly known as NSCN (K) in Arunachal villages: "That weapons are multiplying in the forest./The jungle is a big eater /Hiding terror in the carnivorous green."⁵⁹ In "An Obscure Place" with anguish Dai pens the adverse effect of development, deforestation and destruction of flora and fauna: "As smoke cloud chases the ants: / See! They have slain the wildcat / And buried the hornbill in her maternal sleep."⁶⁰

In this chapter I will discuss three of her fictional works *The Legend of Pensam*, *Stupid Cupid* and *The Black Hills* that like her poems, work towards de-exoticizing and de-homogenizing Arunachal Pradesh and present it as a dynamic terrain with complex history. And Dai does this mainly through her female characters. Women in the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh do not enjoy equal status, much like the caste ridden societies in other parts of the country. Women in rural Arunachal, as activist and social worker Jarjum Ete points out, are treated as beasts of burden.⁶¹ Ete raises her voice against patriarchy, the questions of child marriage, women not having equal inheritance, property and decision making rights and polygamy prevalent among Nyiashi, Aka and Idu-Mishmi tribes. Mamang Dai in her fictions also foregrounds the voices of the women folk, their struggle against patriarchy in Arunachal and racism in Delhi, their love for their homeland, its myths, legends and natural beauty, and their aspirations. By doing so, she gives a human face to Arunachal and puts an end to the abstract idea of Arunachal as exotic, remote and opaque.

The Legends of Pensam: In-betweenness

In the chapter 'The Golden Chance' from *The Legend of Pensam* (2006) the narrator who belongs to Adi tribe receives a phone call from her big city friend Mona. In an excited tone she tells the narrator that a documentary film maker wants to make a film on the Adis, about her mother's native village Duyang and other villages. Mona asks her to make the itinerary for the film crew since she is a local resident. The narrator however is apprehensive about the project because looking at her own people appearing in front of a movie camera and chanting their oral

⁵⁹Ibid., 17.

⁶⁰ Dai, *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, 18.

⁶¹Nandini Chakravarty, "Arunachal Pradesh: Role of Women as an Instrument of Social Movement," in *Social Movements in North-East India*, ed. Mahendra Narain Karna (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1998), 58.

stories for an alien audience would be an awkward experience for her. She fears that film makers from the big cities would not be able to represent an authentic picture of the people, living in remote villages secluded for ages. But later she realizes that the Adi stories will be lost if it is not recorded and preserving it in the form of a documentary film is indeed a golden opportunity. She thinks, “It was important to record our stories. The old rhapsodists were a dying breed, and when they were gone, who would remember? What happens to the people and the places we forget? Where do they go?”⁶²

This small incident in *The Legends of Pensam* (henceforth *Pensam*) which appears almost at the end of the text can be construed as the main authorial intention. In *Pensam* Dai’s intention is to record and preserve Adi cultural life and communicate it to the rest of the world. A critic rightly observes “It is an insider’s attempt to go back to her roots and retrieve the cultural ethos of a community so that they are not lost in the onslaught of modernization and globalization. ... Mamang Dai’s *Legends of Pensam* recalls a way of life, a way of being, and a worldview which formed the very core of Adi identity and which is now threatened by the onslaught of modernity.”⁶³ The critics however miss the outsider’s gaze for whom the Adi world is opened up. The novella tries to destabilize the insider/outsider, big city and a remote northeast village binary. While maintaining the difference between the Adi world and the world outside, it shows traces of similarity.

At the very onset the nameless narrator arrives in her homeland Arunachal in a dilapidated helicopter with her big city friends Mona and her French husband Jules. Mona is the proprietor of a glossy magazine, *Diary of the World* that carries ‘unusual true-life stories’.⁶⁴ The Adi narrator takes Mona and Jules to the house of exotic locals who have unusual true life stories to tell, arranges *ponung*⁶⁵ dance programme for them and transports its readers into the mythical world of the Adis. The metatextual elements like its cover design depicting five Adi people in their traditional attire sitting against the backdrop of lush bamboo grove and the chapters ‘A

⁶² Dai, *The Legends of Pensam*, 176.

⁶³ Harajit Goswami, “Postcolonialism and the Retrieval of the Past: A Critical Study of Mamang Dai’s *Legends of Pensam*,” *IJELLH* 4, no. 11(2016):467.

⁶⁴ Dai, *Pensam*, 17-18.

⁶⁵ Ponung dance is performed to preserve folktale, history, and oral literature of the Adis. Ponung reflects the simple tribal life and the concept of their origin, the Sun, the Moon and the creation of the universe. Adiponung serves as sources and reservoir of Arunachal history.

Diary of the World', 'Songs of the Rhapsodist' and 'Daughters of the Village' exude a sense of mystery and present Arunachal as an exotic mythical world.

Pensam begins in a style of mythopoeia. Dai uses poetic language to create a romantic image of the Adis living amidst pristine nature. In the prologue Dai looks back into the past when the Adi world was a cradle of glittering spirits and mythical stories about stars. She also mourns the loss of this romantic image as the old people who are the custodians of the Adi oral tradition are perishing. And along with them the old tradition is also fading away.

Back then, the village heaved with life, and I expected a great welling up of revelations, a web of magic through which we would step lightly like glittering spirits crowned with speech and thought. The years stretched before us like a singing forest; we were always poised to spread wings and float through the cool bamboo.... 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. Infant mortality is high. Old women still braid threads of vine and pray for safe passage.⁶⁶

Mamang Dai's descriptions of the Adi world bears uncanny resemblance to the words of Bolingbroke-Kent where she describes Arunachal Pradesh as an exotic land of flying lamas. Dai presents an exotic image of her land much like Kent. Adi men and women of older generation are portrayed as the children of nature whose births and deaths are shrouded in mystery. Hoxo, one of the main characters of the text is described as a boy who magically fell from the sky. His mother-in-law Nenem is named 'river woman' by the author. In 'River Woman,' which is a story between a tribal girl Nenem and a British official David, Dai dabbles with nature/culture binary. Nenem is sent by her father to a missionary school because he wanted her to learn to read and write and be famous. But Nenem born and brought up amidst nature begins to feel incarcerated and claustrophobic within the cold confines of the missionary school. She feels that her soul would shrink if she is transplanted from her roots. She falls sick in the school which compels her father to take her back home. She prefers a simple village life like selling oranges with her friends. She lives a tempestuous life amidst nature. She falls in love with a British officer. But she refuses to leave with him and be transplanted. Later she marries an Adi man named Jebu. At the end of the tale she mysteriously passes away beside a river.

⁶⁶ Dai, *Pensam*, 4.

In oral culture, the role of rhapsodists, story tellers and folk performers are significant as they guard the memory of the community. In *Pensam* Mamang Dai herself acts as a raconteur and a rhapsodist to narrate the folktales, myths and small histories of her people. She recounts animistic belief in the evil spirits that cast spell on hunters and make them murderous. In the ‘Strange Case of Kalan, the Hunter’ she narrates the myth of Birbik, a mythical serpent with horns. In this story Hoxo’s father sees Birbik and he is then accidentally killed. In the story of ‘Pinyar, the Widow’ Pinyar’s son kills his infant daughter with a machete under the spell of an evil spirit.

Pensam narrates these fantastic tales of mysterious births, deaths and spirits. And yet it is not a simple collection of folktales, myths and legends recounted to reinstate the exotic image of Arunachal. It represents several contesting facets of Adi life and as the title suggests *Pensam* lies in between several dichotomies. *Pensam* in Adi means in-between. And *The Legend of Pensam* dwells in between the real and the imaginary, myth and reality, nature and culture, between a make-belief world inhabited by spirits and a realistic world of bulldozer, microphone and television sets. It narrates the tale of two contrasting worlds. On the one hand it transports its readers into the a-historic unrecorded oral world of the Adis and on the other hand it talks about the parallel modern world of colonialism, capitalism and the world wars. *Pensam* also exhibits two diametrically different attitudes of the Adis—the older generation who is rooted within the nature and the frustrated current generation who are influenced by the fashionable wave of globalization. Tilottoma Misra describes *Pensam* in these words:

Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is written in lyrical prose and evokes the memories of an entire community of people. It represents the predicament of the sensitive young minds in contemporary Arunachal Pradesh, who too are at crossroads and find it difficult to cope with the inevitable break with the enchantment of the past and to re-model their lives according to the demand of the changing times. In her powerfully lyrical style, in verse as well as prose, Mamang Dai depicts the experience of the new generation inhabiting what she calls the ‘in-between’ places of the mind.⁶⁷

Along with the surreal folk beliefs and myths Mamang Dai here revisits the ‘small histories’ of Adi people. As it is known unlike the grand history of mainland India, the histories

⁶⁷Misra, *The Oxford Anthology of Writing from North-East India*, xviii.

of Northeastern tribes are under recorded. Therefore the author terms it as ‘Small Histories’. In *Pensam* she recounts two historical episodes. She mentions the Stilwell road construction episode and the murder of Noel Williamson in two chapters titled ‘Small Histories Recalled in the Season of Rain’ and ‘Travel the Road.’

Construction of the Stilwell road began during World War II under the directions of American General Stilwell. The road was intended to be the main supply route to China. More than 3000 African-American soldiers and 6000 local workers were employed for the building project. Hoxo’s father Latur and Hoxo’s friend Rakut’s father were among the locals who were employed as construction workers to undertake the dangerous project. They were away from home for three long years and when they returned they were armed with new knowledge of cargo trucks, bulldozer and of English alphabets ‘A, B, C’.

They were gone for three years. When they returned, Rakut’s father was wearing hunting boots and a camouflage outfit. The first thing he did on entering village was to salute and smiling broadly, shout ‘A! B! C!’⁶⁸

The murder of Noel Williamson and British punitive expedition against the Abors are one of the most significant historical episodes of the Adis. The Adis formerly known as Abor killed Dr. Gregorson, a tea garden doctor and Noel Williamson, Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya in March 1911. Williamson was murdered at Komsing along with forty four soldiers belonging to the party. The whole episode shook the entire hierarchy of British administration from the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur to the Secretary of State of India and the British Parliament. A punitive expedition was ordered by Lord Crewe, the Secretary of State for India in his telegram dated 24th July 1911. Major General H. Bower led the expedition which rocked the Abor hills and opened the ‘terra incognita’ to them.⁶⁹

Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, Angus Hamilton in his 1912 account of the expedition describes the Abors and the success of the expedition in these words “Very independent and quarrelsome, they [Abors] had come to regard themselves as therulers of this

⁶⁸ Dai, *Pensam*, 39-40.

⁶⁹Srinibas Panda, “Abor Rebellion 1911-12, A Post Mortem of the Murder of Noel Williamson,” in *Proceedings of Northeast India History Association*, ed. JayantaBhusanBhattarcjee (Shillong, Singhania Press, 1990), 420-429.

far-distant corner of India...the success of the expedition has been a sad blow to their self-esteem.... While the Abors speak with the deliberation of atypical savage people, their manners and customs no less reveal their primitive state....An animal that has died a natural death is as acceptable to them as the best butcher's meat, while the flesh of the tiger is reckoned particularly good."⁷⁰

One of the theories behind the murder and massacre of Williamson, Gregorson and the soldiers and coolies proposed by Hamilton was "that the more savage Abors were jealous of the intrusion of the white man, and took the drastic step of slaughtering Mr. Williamson and his party merely to indicate their displeasure at his persistent advance into their country."⁷¹ Another recorded statement by a village head suggests a communication gap (the Abors/Adis mistook the white envelopes with red and black border as a sign of threat) which Hamilton brushes aside as foolish story.

Immediately after the murder of Williamson "a mission from the Government of India to avenge the murder of a British officer in the wilds of Asia"⁷² was undertaken. The mighty punitive force consisting of 3,000 Ghurkha, Sikh and Assamese troops and 3,500 Naga coolies with the arsenal of hand grenades, light infantry, Maxim machine guns and elephant drawn Howitzer overpowered the Abors.

In *The Legends of Pensam* Mamang Dai re-enacts the history of expedition through the *Ponung* dancers and subtly asserts the Adi version of the history.

They had laughed in the face of the poor villager and said that he was a wild beast eaten up with disease who would never receive the attention or the sympathy of the white officer. Why should anybody insult a man who was not looking for sympathy? Why should anybody look at a man with disgust when he was a man of the land and the other was a visitor trying to conquer the villages with lies and bags of gifts? Why should anybody who had spat on a man's face live? It was only a matter of time before the *migluns* [white men] learned that all men were not afraid of gun and loud voices.⁷³

⁷⁰ Angus Hamilton, *In Abor Jungles*, 19.

⁷¹ Hamilton, *In Abor Jungles*, 53.

⁷² Ibid., 77.

⁷³ Dai, *Pensam*, 51.

Along with the past, Dai here mentions the present predicament of the Arunachalis and their struggle with the changing times. In the foreword to Verrier Elwin's *A Philosophy for NEFA* (Arunachal Pradesh) the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote:

I am not at all sure which is the better way of living, the tribal or our own. In some respects I am quite certain theirs is better. Therefore, it is grossly presumptuous on our part to approach them with an air of superiority, to tell them how to behave or what to do and what not to do. There is no point in trying to make of them a second-rate copy of ourselves.... I hope there will be no attempt made to impose other ways of life on them in a hurry. Let the changes come gradually and be worked out by the tribals themselves.⁷⁴

Nehru probably could not anticipate the aspirations of the tribal people to become like the 'superior' non-tribals. And the concluding chapter of *Pensam* poetically captures this aspiration that is slowly transforming the remote region of Arunachal. Dai narrates with a hint of regret and sadness the effect of urbanization and globalization on the peripheral Adi people. The chapter 'On Stage' opens with a scene in which we see a group of villagers whose gaze is transfixed on a television screen. This scene depicts their awe and envy towards the happy wealthy life of the plains people appearing on TV. The television set itself and the distant world of the plains on the screen open a new vista for the Adi villagers cut off from the mainland. A character in *Pensam* Mimum sighs and says "How lovely they are! In another life perhaps we will be happy like them!" Mimum again says with a ring of jealousy "How clever they are! Really they have everything. They are too much"⁷⁵

Another sign of change depicted in the chapter 'On Stage' is the introduction of microphone and the awkwardness of Minga X, an old folk singer. A veteran folk performer while performing on stage finds the microphone, a cold metal pitted with holes and attached to many cables and wires, strange, alien and devoid of any charm and feeling with which he used to perform before the introduction of microphone. In telling words Dai expresses the signs of change in Adi villages. She writes:

⁷⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru, foreword to *The Philosophy for NEFA*, by Verrier Elwin.

⁷⁵ Dai, *Pensam*, 180.

The texture and speed of change was visible in strange ways all across the land. A visitor coming to the town for the first time would still see the green hills, the green bamboo and the green river flowing in all directions, but now there were young men on motorcycles roaring across the stones while young picnickers wearing fake fur and woolen caps waved at passers-by. In the run up to the volleyball tourney this year, I heard that the Motum village team had been disqualified because one of their players tried to play holding a bottle of beer in one hand.⁷⁶

Here Mamang Dai presents television, microphone, motorcycle, fake fur and beer bottle as symbols of materialism which are creeping into the serene scene of Siang valley. These materialistic things represent and evoke multiple attitudes. On one hand some romantic idealistic people like Ming X rue the infiltration of change and on the other for some people these changes are symbols of their aspirations.

In the last section Mamang Dai also highlights the growing restlessness of the Adis who feel incarcerated within the small town ennui. Sirsiri, a middle aged woman foregrounds the frustration of the small town people. Their desire to explore the outside world is represented in these words “Hai, you have been travelling? How lucky! I am the only one rotting here!”⁷⁷ The angst and ennui of Adi women who want to venture out of their home and experience big city adventure is represented through Sirsiri.

Oh! What a place! Cursed, ill-chosen, disturbed! A little clearing in the forest full of stones and rain! When everywhere, cities were rising overnight like columns of light into the sky! Sirsiri was bitter and bored and nothing consoled her.⁷⁸

Through the bitterness and boredom of Sirsiri, Mamang Dai here puts forward some important questions. Through the microcosmic world of Sirsiri she addresses the lack of development in the Northeast in general and Arunachal in particular. The step-motherly attitude of the central government towards the Northeastern part of the country is a well known fact. The lack of infrastructure, deployment of armed forces and most importantly development disparity testify to that.

⁷⁶Ibid., 188.

⁷⁷Ibid., 166.

⁷⁸ Ibid.,168.

Antonia Bolingbroke-Kent's observation of Arunachal is strikingly similar to the image presented by Mamang Dai. Travel writer Antonia's real journey on motorbike and fiction writer Mamang Dai's literary journey of the state take a similar route. Both these writers begin with a picture of mythical, surreal world and slowly unfurl the problems of underdevelopment, poverty, and a striking difference from the mainland India. In an Idu-Mishmi house Antonia witnesses gory animal sacrifices and enthralling shamanic chants. In the same house amidst these primitive tribal rituals she sees how the people enjoy reality shows on TV. And it is difficult for her to connect these two diametrically different worlds. The Idu-Mishmi people glued to *India's Got Talent* remind us of the Mimams of Mamang Dai.

On one of these occasions a group of people were sitting by the fire watching an episode of India's Got Talent on television. It seemed impossible to believe that the heavily made-up wannabes on a stage in Delhi 1,600 miles away belonged to the same century as these dao wielding tribesmen of the Mishmi Hills, let alone swore allegiance to the same flag. Another time, the news was on and Modi was standing on a podium waving to an adoring crowd.⁷⁹

Dai's *Pensam* also dabbles with the issue of angst against the mainland Indian and the government of India among the Arunchali youths.

The village was fighting a grim battle. A stubborn pride wrapped around the young men like a dark cloak that kept them screened from the rest of the world. They did not welcome strangers. They did not want to join hands with the government. We are not seekers of fortune, they said. We are not seekers of words. We are not seekers of a new identity. Leave us alone.⁸⁰

Togla's son Larik's response to the road building project of the Indian government is a telling example of the angst of the Arunachal youth against Indian government. He says: "If they cannot tidy up there what guarantee do we have that they will give us anything good here, especially when they don't know or bother to find out who we are and how we live!"⁸¹ A clear division between us and them and there and here is evident in his rant. The road building project not only

⁷⁹ Kent, *Land of Dawn-lit Mountains*, 128.

⁸⁰ Dai, *Pensam*, 158.

⁸¹ Ibid., 156.

highlights their displeasure against the Indian authority but it also foregrounds their prejudice towards the common migrant worker from the mainland. The dark silhouette of the labourers' bamboo shacks against the mountain wall is a sign of threat to them. Therefore whenever any incident of crime takes place in the hills they are quick to point fingers at the migrant workers. Dai writes in *Pensam*, "... the road and the things that came with it seemed to be strangling them and threatening to steal their identity like a thief creeping into their villages and fields."⁸² Dai, in her poem 'Us' also refers to the changes and chaos that migration has brought in: "Migration, settlement, /the breeze of hometowns, moonrise. /Time has changed the language of our days./Before-then-after-now."⁸³ In Dai's second novel *Stupid Cupid* we see how in Delhi, Arunachali migrants are victimized because of their otherness. The equation of Self and Other changes in Arunachal and it is evident that the acrimony between the Indian 'mainland' and the Northeast is not confined within the big city of Delhi.

Stupid Cupid: Northeast Migrants in Delhi

Stupid Cupid (2009), Mamang Dai's second novel is the most obscure work of the author probably because of the frivolous air of its title. The nomenclature of the novel prepares the readers for a light hearted chick lit romance. Mamang Dai herself asserts this in an interview where she says "The second novel *Stupid Cupid* was meant to be a short, snappy take on life in the city –about romance, tenderness, desire, and starting over."⁸⁴ This one line description about her second novel succinctly sums up the story line, theme and style of the novel. This novel indeed is based in the city of Delhi and is centered on a woman's quest for desire, love and tenderness. It also depicts how the resolute female protagonist starts afresh. The story begins with a light hearted snappy narrative style of chick lit novel to depict city women's journey.

Originally coined by Pen/Nelson Algren Award-winning writer Cris Mazza who edited the short-story anthology *Chick- Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, the term 'chick lit' "today refers to frothy, sassy, *Sex in the City*-style tales of young, attractive, upwardly mobile, mostly white women looking for love, career and success."⁸⁵ Inaugurated by Helen Fielding's *Bridgette Jones*

⁸²Ibid., 157.

⁸³ Dai, *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, 26.

⁸⁴ Mamang Dai, interview by Ananya Guha, *red leaf poetry.com*.

⁸⁵ Amanda Maria Morrison, "Chicanas and "Chick Lit": Contested Latinidad in the Novels of Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43, no. 2, (2010): 311.

Diary (1996) Chick lit novel generally traces the journey of heterosexual white women in their pursuit of love, romance, sex and success in career in a humorous tone and evokes glamour and beauty via characters' consumption of luxury goods. This genre explores the journey of new post-feminist women who are not submissive, coy or coquettish like the women of traditional patriarchal narratives. At the same time, they are not rebellious feminists. Mazza writes the 'chick lit' postfeminist stories are "simultaneously courageous and playful; frank and wry; honest, intelligent, sophisticated, libidinous, unapologetic and overwhelmingly emancipated."⁸⁶ Post-feminist female characters of the 'chick lit' are liberated from the grim anger of the feminists. They are liberated to admit that they are part of the problem instead of just a victim of it.

Dai's *Stupid Cupid* contains some of these elements of a chick lit. It is woven around the first person narrator Adna an independent young woman who lives in Delhi. She runs a hotel named Four Seasons which is like a love nest for adulterous lovers. Adna is a typical post-feminist chick lit heroine who has idealist romantic aspirations, yet aware of the problem of the androcentric patriarchy.

In school we used to say, 'I'll never wear lipstick!' we'd be fierce and free. Yet when we put on our first bras and read our first romance novels we all imagined love that would sweep us off our feet. Ah. Breathless! And we were from staid middle class families, this image naturally modified itself into a married condition with the handsome husband as breadwinner and good, sweet, capable me doing all the rest. The idea was a fixation, and whatever else we might have dreamt about, one thing is certain: despite all our independent ways, we all grew up dreaming we would be lucky in love.⁸⁷

The novella explores Adna and her friends' quest for love and romance. The novel begins with the easy breezy frivolous tone of a chick lit romance. We see Adna and her female friends Amin, a rich homemaker and Julie Malhotra, a model and choreographer unapologetically discussing romance, money, marriage, adultery and sex at a posh restaurant.

A good marriage is something. But what about when you are scouting around? Love is not just about heats and arrows. Love is business. You have to work at it and find your

⁸⁶Mazza, *Chick- Lit*, 18.

⁸⁷ Dai, *Stupid, Cupid*, 10-11.

options, and the business of love and loving is expensive, you know!... if you have money you can buy time and have good lovemaking that makes you feel good, too....and even with a solid marriage you can still scout around, why not? It's a bit of extra spice here and there. After all, we are not lumps of wood! We're flesh and blood and desire!⁸⁸

As the novella progresses the content takes a somber turn thanks to the complexity of Delhi/Northeast relation. The principle theme of love, desire and tenderness is governed by that relation. And that makes this novel not an easily forgettable and frivolous chick-lit fiction. Elements like mainland India/Northeast conflict, migrant experience in big a city and references to tribal customs are integral to the novella. It depicts the lives of northeast tribal women who migrate from the Northeastern part of the country to the capital of Delhi for a better way of life. The omniscient narrator and protagonist Adna is a tribal woman from Arunachal Pradesh. The novel also portrays a community of Northeast migrants that include Adna's cousin Jia and Yoyo, his friend Moran, his sister Rita, Mesochenla or Green from Dimapur, and Mareb, a guest at Four Seasons. Adna describes them in detail to foreground big city/small town and Delhi/Northeast dichotomy.

Oyon or Yoyo distantly related to Adna is a twenty year old football star from Itanagar. Adna took him to Delhi to guard Four Seasons. Adna's cousin Jia came to Delhi to pursue journalism. She arrived in Delhi by train with a sack of rice and an assortment of home-made preparation. Jia was a typical stolid, intractable, tribal woman in Arunachal village. In Delhi, however, her tribal features and attire of bright sarong make her an anomaly. The latest visitor from the Northeast is Jia's older brother Dulen. He was a hardened villager who had shot a rogue elephant. But in a big city of glossy buildings he seems confined and vulnerable.

Adna, Mareb, Yoyo, Jia, Mesochenla all of them live in close proximity among their own people like a community. They cook their big Northeastern meal of pungent smoked pork. Whenever Mesochenla spots anyone with slant eyes she comments "There is no one like our own people."⁸⁹ It seems that they are like a secluded island in the Indian megacity. And when they interact with mainland people it is only in secrecy. In Four Seasons, a shadowy place of

⁸⁸ Ibid.,11.

⁸⁹Ibid., 68.

promiscuity, Mareb and her lover Rohit meets. Adna and her Delhi based unnamed married friend too do not acknowledge their relationship in public.

The constant juxtaposition between Delhi and Northeast towns like Itanagar, Dimapur and the difference between Northeast tribal women and men from the Indian mainland are the central focus of the novel. Delhi is presented as a place of adventure and independence for the small town women confined within the quiet, uneventful small town life. The big city dream of the Northeasterners is replicated in these words: “There was a glittering vista—the adventure of moving out from the hills into the unknown heat of big city.”⁹⁰ Adna’s hometown Itanagar to her is a quiet, dimly lit place of oppressive patriarchal norms, dominating elders, whereas Delhi is a glittering city of opulence, opportunity and most importantly freedom. Adna lives alone, frequents restaurants, bars, and shops, she smokes, and indulges in sex with her married boyfriend. In short, she enjoys amoral life style of modern day youth without any restriction. She likes living like a stranger in a city of heat and dust away from home,

...this anonymity was the very thing I liked. After the watchful expectations of a small town, being a total stranger among strangers was a relief and a pleasure...Even in the height of summer I liked the heavy evenings filled with diesel fumes and smoke, and the heat burning our faces the moment we stepped out into the street where the big, dusty trees in full bloom survived the heat and gave shelter to parakeets and squirrels. Coming out of restaurants we would stand under the trees and puff at our cigarettes. It was all very different from where I came.⁹¹

Adna who is carrying on a non-normative affair with a Delhi based married man sees her hometown as a conservative place ruled by pre-modern patriarchal customs where men can keep several wives and women are not even allowed to participate in decision making process. She says, “In our parts men kept several wives. It was a practice sanctioned by custom.”⁹² Veeranki Maheswara Rao, in her study *Tribal Women of Arunachal Pradesh* observes the marginalized position of women in decision making process. She writes, “... decisions related to major issues are taken by husbands ... Men dominated in making decisions on number of children to bear, arranging children’s marriage, taking/giving loans, sale/purchase of animals, settlement of

⁹⁰Ibid., 18.

⁹¹Ibid., 15.

⁹²Ibid., 32.

disputes, social visits, and to some extent voting.”⁹³ Nandini Chakravarty similarly writes: “Women-folk are subjected to the social drudgeries of family life and are deprived of inheritance, property rights and free and equal participation in public life.”⁹⁴ In cities like Delhi these oppressed women get the opportunity to live their life on their terms.

But their relationship with the big cities is not unproblematic. Small town girls like Adna, Mareb and Jia with ambitions and dreams see Delhi as a city of opportunity and independence. Delhi however reacts with hostility to the influx of migrants from Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura who land up in universities, training institutes, shared flats, and hostels focused on study, career, and opportunity. It is racism that defines Delhi’s response to the Northeast migrants. One small ‘skirmish’ that takes place with Jia and her friend T.D. metonymically represents the racism. Jia and T.D. (who are tribal people from Arunachal with Tibeto-Burman features) find themselves caught up in a squabble with a woman at a taxi stand. The woman angrily tells Jiato go back to her country thereby questioning Indian citizenship of an Indian. She says, “Hey you! Jao! Jao! Go back to your own- Desh.”⁹⁵

The Northeast women face dual discrimination of racism and sexism in mainland cities. Duncan McDuie Ra says in *Northeast Migrant in Delhi* that Northeast women migrants in Delhi occupy the sexualized public spaces like restaurants, spas, hotels, call centres. They are in demand as waitresses, hostesses, and sales representatives because of their different exotic features, accented English and pale skin. But they are not welcome into the home space of the ‘first citizens’ of India. In ‘Nation and its Women’ Partha Chatterjee says how Indian men construct the definition of modern Indian woman. Indian woman is a modest, homely Hindu woman who dexterously manages home as wife and mother.⁹⁶ Westernized Northeast tribal woman do not feature in the definition. They are the sexualized other and signify deviation from the norm. Chatterjee mentions over sexualized portrayal of Anglo-Indian women who are represented as immoral, available and ideal gratifier for Indian men. Booker winning novel *The White Tiger* written from the point of view of a man from heartland India shows similar desire in

⁹³Veeranki Maheswara Rao, *Tribal Women of Arunachal Pradesh*(New Delhi: Mittal Publications. 2003), 128, quoted in Esther Daimari, ‘Images of Women in Mamang Dai’s Fiction,’ *New Academia* II no. IV(Oct. 2013), 2.

⁹⁴Nandini Chakravarty, "Arunachal Pradesh: Role of Women as an Instrument of Social Movement," in *Social Movements in North-East India*, ed. MahendraNarain Karna (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company,1998), 54.

⁹⁵ Dai, *Stupid Cupid*, 52.

⁹⁶ See, Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 131-32.

heartland men to enjoy light skinned foreign women who do not conform to the idea of Indian women. In a brothel the protagonist chooses light skinned Nepali women over the traditional types in sari. He says “A blinding flash of light: a blue door opened, and four light-skinned Nepali women, in gorgeous red petticoats, looked out. “Them!” I shouted. “Them! Them! Them!”⁹⁷ Also recall Sahitya Academy winning novel *English, August* where we see city bred elite protagonist Augustya’s uncouth sexual desire for tribal woman Pari in the village of Madna. The Northeast tribal women too are over sexualized ‘other’ for the mainstream Indian men.

Esther Daimari rightly observes that for Adna’s male friend and Mareb’s lover Rohit they are mere digression from their regular life. Rohit encourages Mareb to continue having a clandestine affair with him though she is a married woman with a daughter. Adna’s non-committal married boyfriend who unabashedly sleeps and eats with Adna is petrified at the insinuation that his wife too can have an affair outside her marriage. Adna a die-hard romantic who pines for love and marriage and wants to live a normative life with him cannot even disclose his name to her friends. Her boyfriend a typical Delhi man is only interested in the differentness and exoticness of Adna. He always asks her questions about her customs and beliefs as Adna says “He was a Delhi man, and he had hardly met anyone from my region before.”⁹⁸ Later he goes to Canada without informing her. Therefore Adna reflects that back home in remote Arunachal men keep several wives but even in Delhi, a supposedly modern city the patriarchal rule dominates.

The image of Delhi as a city of glamour, love, opulence, sex, and independence collapses completely at the end when Adna’s friend Amine is brutally stabbed to death by a burglar. Delhi like Anjum Hasan’s Bangalore in *Neti, Neti* becomes a place of violence and rage. And dejected Adna comes back to her home in Itanagar only to go back to Delhi, to her Four Seasons to start afresh. The novella thus shows a complex relation between the Northeast and mainland Indian cities, Northeast women and mainland men, and the struggle of the Northeast migrants. But ultimately it is about the triumph of the spirit of Northeast women who carry in their heart the image of the dimly lit northeast town but are determined to struggle in big cities. As Adna says even though she likes the heavy evenings of Delhi filled with smoke and fume but “sometimes

⁹⁷ Arvind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, 34.

⁹⁸ Dai, *Stupid Cupid*, 53.

the barking of dogs at night was louder than the roar of traffic, as if they were trying to compete with the sounds of the city to remind me of home. And then I knew that my heart would always be locked in those dim, rain-wet hills.”⁹⁹

The Black Hill: Exhuming an Unwritten Story

In *The Legend of Pensam* Mamang Dai narrates the ‘small histories’ of the Adi people. She in that novel writes about the impact of Stilwell road building project and Abor expedition of 1912 on the Adis. In her third novel *The Black Hill* (2014) the underrepresented small histories of the hill tribes of Arunachal mentioned in *The Legend of Pensam* finds a fuller expression. Here she excavates a buried past of Arunachal Pradesh. *The Black Hill* is an ambitious project that weaves history with fiction. Here Mamang Dai aims to record the assassination of French Jesuit priests and members of Foreign Mission Society of Paris Nicolas Krick and Bourry under mysterious circumstances by members of Mishmee tribe. The sketchy facts of the incidents can be found in few written documents recorded by historian and priests of the Paris Foreign Mission society.

The facts regarding the death of missionaries are as follows: Nicolas Krick and Augustin Bourry were murdered on 1 September 1854 by members of the Mishmee tribe. The motive for the crime was not clearly established. There are several versions. The guides who accompanied Nicolas Krick and Augustin Bourry said that a tribal chief, Kaisha or Kajinsha (in official versions the spelling of his name varies), killed them when they were in their hut. Once the incident of assassination became known, the British decided to conduct an investigation and launch a punitive expedition against Chief Kaisha. During this, they recovered the personal belongings of Nicolas Krick and Augustin Bourry (including his flute). Kaisha was sentenced to death, but thanks to the intervention of Louis Bernard, his sentence was commuted to lifetime seclusion. From the interrogations that were conducted, it was concluded that Nicolas Krick was sick and in his hut when he was killed, and his body was later thrown into the river, not far from the crime scene. However the arrest of Chief Kaisha did not reveal the probable reasons for his act. Robbery, revenge, and hostility to Christianity are three of the reasons that are mentioned as probable. When they heard the news of the death of the two missionaries in January 1855, the

⁹⁹Ibid., 15.

directors of the Foreign Missions of Paris asked the bishop of Calcutta to do everything to ensure that the British government did not retaliate against the natives and did not intervene.

The fact that personal objects of the two priests were found in 1854 in Tibet, prompted Adrien Launay, priest and historian of the Foreign Missions of Paris, to think that the assassination of the two priests could be sponsored by the Tibetan authorities. Between 1852 and 1854, the tension between English and Tibetans was at its peak and they considered Nicolas Krick and Augustin Bourry as English. This thesis is partially questioned by Laurent Deshayes, in his book *Tibet (1846 – 1952): les missionnaires de l'impossible*, because the tribal chief Kaisha never mentioned Tibetans during the interrogations.¹⁰⁰

Mamang Dai in the acknowledgement section of *The Black Hills* mentions her indebtedness to these facts recorded in history books and anthropological texts that helped her create an authentic picture of the nineteenth century Mishmee Hills. She says how she delved into the books like Francois Fauconnet-Buzelin's *Mission unto Martyrdom* and Krick's account of *An Expedition among the Abors in 1953* for information and inspiration. But these books and the fixed words etched on them represent only one side of the tale. *The Black Hill* takes a departure from these unauthenticated facts present in the public domain. She instead intends to put forth the story of the Mishmee people who were indicted by the British. Through her literary imagination she wants to fill the lacunae in the history and paint a picture of the lived experiences of the people. Therefore she writes in the prologue to the book:

I have books in front of me. They tell me things about this land, and a priest who walked across these hills carrying a cross and a sextant. They tell me what he saw and thought, but these are words fixed on yellowed paper. There is another story from an unwritten past hidden beyond the mountain wall.¹⁰¹

Mamang Dai here presents a binary of written documents and unwritten oral history. She privileges the unwritten oral history of common folks that are told as folk stories by

¹⁰⁰See for example, Aiyadurai, Ambika, and Claire Seungeun Lee, "Living on the Sino-Indian Border: The Story of the Mishmis in Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India" *Asian Ethnology* 76, no. 2 (2017): 375-76, accessed December 8, 2018, doi:10.2307/90017668. Angus Hamilton, *In Abor Jungle*. In *Abor Jungle* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1912)

¹⁰¹ Dai, *The Black Hills*, ix.

grandmothers over the facts written by the chroniclers. The importance of memory and guarding the memory of a people and their past in the form of storytelling serve as a recurrent refrain in the novel. At the end of the novel the Mishmee chief Kajinsha who is wrongly arrested by the British for the murder reiterates Dai's refrain when he tells his wife Gimur: "Tell them about us. ... Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories."¹⁰²

The binary relation of unwritten oral history and the written historiography is hegemonic as the written letters belong to the colonizers and the orality is the identity of the tribal culture. The hierarchical binary of 'fixed words on yellowed paper' and 'another story from an unwritten past' prepares the readers for a history from below. But she does not provide a counter narrative that contrasts with the master narrative. She instead weaves a melodramatic love story around the sketchy detail.

She essentially wanted to write a story of love. So, two love stories run parallel in the novel: Abor girl Gilmur and Mishmee man Kajinsha's intertribal love and Krick's love for humanity and his God. But instead of love story what emerges out of the text is the fractured reality of Arunachal Pradesh. Upon closer inspection inter tribal rivalry and enmity, the reality of patriarchal polygamous society and cultural colonialism come to the foreground. On the occasion of the unveiling of her novel in Goa she humbly confesses that she is not scholarly enough to probe into the hierarchical relation between the colonizer and the colonized.¹⁰³ And that is reflected in her treatment of the priest and his mission. The political aspect of the Christian missionary project is overlooked. The story of religious love of Krick is not innocuous. The hetero-normative love story between Gimur and Kajinsha is also problematic as Kajinsha is an uncaring and polygamist husband. Religious mission and polygamous marriage can never be innocuous or apolitical. Dai does not take into account the disparity in power between the West and non-West while describing Krick's mission to Tibet and the unmistakably hierarchical relation between Kajinsha and Gimur.

¹⁰²Ibid., 288.

¹⁰³ "Exclusive Book Launch The Black Hill by Mamang Dai," YouTube Video, posted by icgoa, December 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8MIKHF33UY>.

At the very start, the novel focuses on the anti-colonial stance of the hill tribes, their resistance against the British imperialist mission and the response towards the western civilizing mission. In the beginning the readers are introduced to the resistive attitude of the Mishmee tribe and Abor tribe. After the treaty of Yandabo which took place in 1826 Assam came under the control of the British and they started penetrating deeper into the remote hilly regions. Kajinsha's father, a Mishmee village head, was against the encroachment of the British unlike his fellow Mishmee people. He joined hands with Khampti warriors to stop colonial invasion. In that he was fatally injured. Kajinsha inherited his father's independent zeal. When the story begins we see him pursuing the *migluns* (the British). Gimur shares Kajinsha's dislike of the strangers. For Gimur the British are the gun wielding power which crushes anything that comes its way.

In her mind the British were fearsome race of people who had appeared suddenly from nowhere. They travelled up and down the country trying to enter other people's land without any respect for anyone. They possessed firearms and punished anyone who tried to stop them. When they reached a place they ordered everyone to obey them. Someone should teach them a lesson she thought.¹⁰⁴

After initial resistance to the *miglun* (the British) a new sense of curiosity dawns among the locals. A desire to know the unknown creeps in. Gimur's friend Landem talks about cultural confluence. He says,

We can sing new songs. Our miri, padari and his cross, the miglun gods, there is no contest here. All gods are equally powerful. And if there is a contest among gods then let it be their contest.¹⁰⁵

The Black Hills does not delve deep into the politics of French Missionary Krick's journey to Tibet, the cultural and religious imperialism of the white men. Krick was a priest, a man of god, not a soldier carrying a gun. He is set against the gun wielding British soldiers who the Abors and Mishmees see as enemies. Krick is positioned as different from the British who in Mamang's words "brought war and captivity... Yet here he [Krick] was, a white foreigner who only carried his cross, a medicine box and possessions more modest than their own."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Dai, *The Black Hills*, 18.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 193.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 175.

Fathers Krick and Bourry continue to be the figures of sacrifice to the people of Arunachal. More than a century later Diocese of Miao in Arunachal is vigorously championing the cause of father Krick and Bourry's sainthood. It has established the first Christian hospital after the name of the priests. The hospital is called Krick and Bourry Memorial Hospital. It says that they were responsible for sowing the seeds of Catholicism in Arunachal. The official website of Miao Diocese says "Arunachal had the first encounter with Christianity with the coming of the French Missionaries Krick and Bourry who were martyred in Somme Village in Lohit District in 1854."¹⁰⁷

But the history of Societe des Missions Etrangeres de Paris or Paris Foreign Mission Society to which Krick belonged was mired in controversies. It was founded in the seventeenth century with the objective of evangelization of the non-Christian countries. Members of the society were mostly active in China and India. It is interesting to note that the establishment of Foreign Mission Society coincided with the foundation of French East India Company. The Mission was the vehicle of European expansion. And the missionaries were the prime agents of an intrusive cultural imperialism. In 1993, Edward Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism* argued that cultural links have been of much greater importance than 'direct domination and physical force' both in establishing territorial empires and in perpetuating forms of neo-colonialism.¹⁰⁸

Father Krick represents white supremacy and a form of cultural and religious colonialism. While standing amidst the wilderness of Mishmee hills, where there is no sign of any established religion, he reflects "if I could speak to them from my heart, I would convince them of the words of the savior, the blessed eternal. How wonderful, how glorious that would be."¹⁰⁹ He and Christian missionaries like him¹¹⁰ were able to convince some natives about the

¹⁰⁷ Miao Diocese, <http://www.miaodiocese.com/history/>.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 131, quoted in, Andrew Porter, 'Cultural imperialism' and protestant missionary enterprise, 1780–1914, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 25, no3 (1997): 368, DOI: 10.1080/03086539708583005

¹⁰⁹ Dai, *The Black Hills*, 141,

¹¹⁰ The missionaries penetrated into the region in 1913 to eradicate an epidemic. In 1914 a school was opened in one of the plains villages to educate the Adis from nearby hill areas. The Adi villages of nearby plains areas also accommodated the missionary Mrs. L. W. B. Jackman and family, who lived with them for a considerably long period.

superiority of Christianity and its positive effects on the tribal people of Arunachal. As Elwin puts it:

A number of people, themselves Christian by faith, believe that the best solution of the religious question in NEFA is to admit Indian missionaries and to encourage a general Christianization of the tribes. If the form of Christianity introduced was of a liberal kind and truly national in spirit, this would, they argue, bring many spiritual benefits to the people, and would save the educated from an irreligious and materialistic outlook. Since many of the hill people in the autonomous district of Assam State are already Christian, the tribesmen of NEFA could then be united with them in one Frontier State, in which there would be a natural religious unity and no place for communal dissension. In any case, the educated will not retain their old religion.¹¹¹

Elwin rejected the covert deep-rooted belief in the superiority of Christianity.

... a careful study of tribal religion, both in NEFA and elsewhere, does not suggest that it is noticeably inferior to its competitors. It has its drawbacks, it is underdeveloped, there are many problems to which it has no answer. But as a working way of life it brings consolation to its adherents and give them hope and courage.¹¹²

Despite the political motive behind the Mission to which Kirk belonged and his belittling of the indigenous belief-system, Father Krick is portrayed as a symbol of love in *The Black Hill*. And he is not the only white missionary who has been depicted as a picture of love. The novel mentions American missionaries as well without any political connotations. Gimur's aunt Moi's most cherished past involves her memory of a white memsahib and a spelling book and a pencil she had given her. Moi then pass these gifts to Gimur. It is interesting to note that in an oral tribal society where elders pass on oral stories to the new generation Moi chooses to give letters to her niece. And these written letters become symbol of light and change to Gimur. Note her ecstatic reaction to these written letters: "the letters looked like strange tattoos. She felt such pleasure trying to guess the meaning of these symbols, almost as if she was performing magic"¹¹³. "In this small superstitious village she (Moi) had been a beacon of light for Gimur. Had she not given her

¹¹¹ Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA*, 79.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Dai, *The Black Hill*, 28.

a book and a pencil?”¹¹⁴ Sometimes she “took out the book Moi had given her and stared at the letters as if they would suddenly begin speaking to her.”¹¹⁵ Her thoughts would then gravitate towards Father Krick as he is also a symbol of light to her.

In the prologue Mamang Dai privileges tribal orality over the written. The text however reverses the position by privileging the written as the signifier of progress, modernity and change. In Mamang Dai’s writings it is women who always act as agents of change whereas men are more traditionalist and resistive to change. Women want to transcend the oppressive norms of society and their suffocating milieu. Recall the example of Nenem, a tribal girl who indulges in sexual relation with a British officer, Sirsiri and her desire to venture out of her insipid small town life in *The Legend of Pensam*. In *Pensam*, Arsi also wants freedom from the drudgeries of family life, back breaking toil. And Adna and Mareb in *Stupid, Cupid* who want to begin afresh in an alien city of Delhi. In this novel Gimur is a transgressor as she chooses to live with a man of another tribe. Their inter-tribal love is not the only sign of female rebellion. Moi and Gimur’s attraction towards the book and pencil also demonstrates that it is women who want to embrace change. Gimur, like her 21st century Northeast counterparts Adna and Mareb, finds the life in remote villages, the superstitions, fear of the unknown, the outsiders and the gossiping nature of the people, suffocating.

Through Gimur the author articulates the message of oneness. The villagers see the priest as an outsider. They call him the *uyu* or ghost. But to her he is just another man whose heart, thoughts and needs are just like hers. Gimur is equated with Krick. He has made a long arduous journey from his home in France to Tibet for his love in God and humanity. Gimur like Krick has traversed treacherous terrain for the love of Kajinsha. She is described by the French Priest as Bellona, the Roman goddess of war. Gimur is a female warrior who had crossed rivers and mountains carrying a bright banner of love for the man called Kajinsha. The love story between Kajinsha and Gimur however is equally, if not more problematic, than the religious love of Krick.

The practice of polygamy is prevalent among the Arunachali tribes. Women of Arunachal are still fighting against the traditional practice of polygamy. Gimur is Kajinsha’s second wife

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 190

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 193.

and she has to vie for her husband's attention whereas her husband unabashedly indulges in sex with a young girl named Chhomu. Note Gimur's insecurity in her marriage: "It was a thought that had been eating into her ever since the birth of Siengbow and the death of her other son. She was still a stranger here and she knew the only way to seal her marital status with Kajinsha was to bear his child again---a healthy child, a boy. In such matters society was implacable."¹¹⁶ This reminds us of Jarjum Ete's interview where she criticizes patriarchal, patrilineal and polygamous Arunachal society and says "if a couple does not have a son the man has the prerogative to marry another woman so that he can have a son who can carry on the family lineage."¹¹⁷

Kajinsha's invalid first wife too leads a disenfranchised life as she has no say in her husband's second marriage. In *Pensam*, Dai criticizes the system of polygamy through the marginal character of Dumi. Her husband decides to remarry when "it is almost time to die."¹¹⁸ In this novel the narrative glosses over this gender discrimination. We also see no sorority bonding between Gimur and Kajinsha's first wife, the two victims of polygamy. There is only bitter rivalry and jealousy from Gimur's side. In fact the first wife's relatives are portrayed as villains. Her uncle Marpa is portrayed as the main villain of the novel. He is a materialistic, power hungry man who has been described as a man with no shame or conscience. Marpa belongs to a different tribe. He is a Tibetan Buddhist with written script. He shows Kajinsha some paper and taunts him: "These are texts that are thousands of years old, written and passed down from generation to generation but it will not interest you because you do not know what religion is, what a script is."¹¹⁹

Kajinsha on the other hand who is polygamous and unfaithful is projected as the hero of the novel who dies a stoic death at the end. Gimur's journey back home after knowing about her husband's infidelity comes as a fleeting hope. She along with her infant son and disabled stepson covers the mountainous terrain to start a life independent of her philandering husband. But she returns to Kajinsha to see him in the Dibrugarh jail in Assam at the end of the novel. Lamet, a Miju Mishmi chief robs priest Krick en route Tibet, kills him and then he frames Kajinsha.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 128.

¹¹⁷JarjumEte, interview by C. S. Lakshmi, in *The Peripheral Centre*, ed. Preeti Gill (New Delhi, Zubaan, 2010), 429. JarjumEte is the chairperson of the Arunachal Pradesh State Commission for Women. She belongs to Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

¹¹⁸ Dai, *Pensam*, 77.

¹¹⁹ Dai, *The Black Hills*, 229.

Gimur surreptitiously goes to meet Kajinsha in the prison. She bravely fights a sepoy in the jail but fails to liberate him. The British soldiers and sepoys decide to punish Kajinsha for his wife's audacious act. They beat him to death. Kajinsha accepts his death stoically thinking about the sky, the mountains and the happy childhood days with his father and Gimur. "He heard the men grunting and panting. They were prodding him on and hitting him, but he did not care. He was outside, under the open sky."¹²⁰ The news of his death reaches Gimur and the novel ends with the affirmation of their love. Gimur thinks: "I am earth and Kajinsha is the sky and we have looked at each other and will look at each other like this for a million years."¹²¹

Even though the novel has faced criticism for reducing the life of the hill tribes of Arunachal into a melodrama of love, lust and jealousy, but it cannot be denied that it does offer some insight into the psyche of the people of the nineteenth century. And most importantly, it unearths a forgotten chapter of Arunachali history, keeping a woman's fortitude at the centre.

Conclusion

Arunachal Pradesh celebrated its 35th statehood day on 20 February, 2021. On the day *The Arunachal Pradesh Times* published a list of challenges that the state faces.¹²² The state faces the problem of unemployment, poor health infrastructure, high school dropout rate, lack of governmental support for business start-ups among others. These challenges that the editorial underlines in many ways are similar to the problems the citizens in the mainland India face. And yet they think that Arunachal Pradesh is a surreal place shrouded in mystery where lamas fly and people 'relish tiger meat.' Ignorance and misconception about Arunachal still holds sway. The region is almost missing from the mainland Indian mindscape. For instance, in a 2017 press conference held in Mumbai, Matin Rey Tangu, a child actor from Arunachal who appeared in a big budget Hindi movie was mistaken for a Chinese actor. A journalist asked him whether it was his first time in India. A confused Matin cheekily answered "I live in India. How will I come to India?"¹²³ In the Indian mainland people from Arunachal have to face racism on

¹²⁰Ibid., 285.

¹²¹Ibid., 289.

¹²²Editorial, "Challenges before Arunachal," *The Arunachal Times*, February 20, 2021, <https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2021/02/20/challenges-before-arunachal/>.

¹²³SabikaRazvi, "Why So Racist? When 'Tubelight' Child Actor Shut Down a Journalist," *The Quint*, 21 Jun 2017, 12:24, <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/tubelight-matin-rey-tangu-on-racist-remark>.

everyday basis. Mamang Dai has taken upon herself the task of opening up her home to the world outside, voicing the experiences of racism and undoing the cultural hegemony through her writing. It must be reiterated that it is through a woman's writing and her adventurous women characters like Adna, Mareb, Nenem and Gimur that the lived experience of the Arunachali people are reaching a wider readership.

A Feminine Approach to Assamese Sub-Nationalism: Writings by Mitra Phukan, Uddipana Goswami and Jahnabi Barua

“All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous”¹²⁴

If Nellie was the name of a woman
She would be running down the grey road
In a red and green sari
If Nellie was the name of a woman
Her red and green sari
Would be spattered in blood
If Nellie was the name of a woman
She could not cry out
Because you cut off her tongue
If Nellie was the name of a woman
You would still have her blood
On your hands

---UddipanaGoswami, ‘If Nellie was the Name of a Woman’¹²⁵

Among the Assamese writers, Indira Goswami (1942-2011) enjoys the most significant position in the canon of Indian Writing in English.¹²⁶ The English translated version of her Assamese novels like *Chinnamastar Manuhtu/The Man from Chinnamasta* (2005)¹²⁷, *Tej Aru Dhulire Dhushorito Prishtha/Pages Stained with Blood* (2001)¹²⁸, *Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah/Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (1986) (translated by Goswami herself in 2004),¹²⁹ are part of university syllabi and subjects of academic discussion. Sahitya Akademi (1983) and Jnanpith award (2001) recipient Goswami is also a prominent figure in popular culture. Her *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* was adapted into a Hindi television serial, Kamrup ki Kahani for DD National in the 1990s and was also made into an award winning film *Adajya* in 1996. She

¹²⁴Anne McClintock, “Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family,” *Feminist Review* no. 44, (Summer 1993): 61.

¹²⁵UddipanaGoswami, “If Nellie was the name of a woman,” *Northeast Review*, March 2013, <https://northeastreview.wordpress.com/2013/02/28/if-nellie/>. During anti outsider Assam agitation thousands of Bengali speaking Muslims mostly women and children were butchered by the locals in Assam’s Nellie. The massacre was an offshoot of identity based movement spearheaded by the bourgeoisie.

¹²⁶Goswami’s precursor Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya (1924-1997), who received Jnanpith award in 1979, is a prominent name in Bhasha literature. But due to limited availability of the English translation of his novel, he has not been integrated into the canon of Anglophone literature. Indira Goswami’s popularity on the other hand can be attributed to her position as Delhi based writer. She was professor at Delhi University.

¹²⁷Set in pre-independence Assam, this novel is a scathing attack on the practice of animal sacrifice in Kamakhya temple.

¹²⁸This novel is based in Delhi and is about 1984 anti Sikh riots.

¹²⁹It revolves around a young Brahmin widow named Giribala in pre-independence Assam.

is considered to be a bridge between Assam and the mainland. Rajib Mehrotra, in fact, describes her as ‘Assam’s window to India and India’s window to Assam’.¹³⁰ This study, however, makes a shift from the translated literature of Indira Goswami and concentrates on a new crop of 21st century writers who are emerging as new literary emissaries from Assam. They are more assured in English and not apologetic for writing in a foreign tongue. These writers seek to represent the modern urban Assamese, their community consciousness and the aggressive identity politics associated with it, and most importantly they attempt to inscribe Assam’s differentness from mainland India by highlighting the binary between hegemonic Indian macro-nationalism and resisting Assamese micro-nationalism.¹³¹ Chief among them are Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika, Aruni Kashyap, Jahnvi Barua and Uddipana Goswami.

These writers appear after the six years long anti-immigrant ‘sons of the soil’ Asom Andolan or Assam Agitation (1979-1985). The movement spearheaded by All Assam Students Union (AASU) and ad hoc political party All Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was launched to expel Indians of the other states who were perceived to be in control of Assam’s economy. Later it took a more communal turn when the student leaders identified the Muslim migrants from Bangladesh as their chief target.¹³² The Agitation is described as a people’s movement against Indian government’s apathy in the face of influx of Bangladeshi migrants and its alleged policy to admit and enfranchise them for electoral gain. The agenda of the movement’s leaders was to propel the government to disenfranchise and deport the ‘illegal aliens.’¹³³ This Agitation driven by the ideology of an exclusive Assamese identity against the ‘Others’ not only changed the political reality of the region but also brought a paradigm shift into the literary landscape of Assam and no writing could remain unfazed by the movement, its ideology, and the violence. The ideology of Assamese sub-nationalism laced with latent and sometimes manifest hatred towards the non-Assamese migrant from other Indian states, Nepal and Bangladesh determine the contour of Assamese writing in English. Novels in English emerging from this region like Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife* (2005), Jahnvi Barua’s *Rebirth*, Aruni Kashyap’s *The House with Thousand Stories* (2013), Dhruva Hazarika’s *Sons of*

¹³⁰“In Conversation - Dr. Indira Goswami,” by Rajib Mehrotra March 3, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ExzTad5Pbs&t=813s.

¹³¹ It must be noted that not all writers promote this binary vociferously.

¹³² See Ajaz Ashraf, ‘Fact Check: Are Illegal Bangladeshi Migrants Responsible for Increase in Assam’s Muslim Population’, *Scroll.in*, January 16, 2018.

¹³³ This morally inappropriate derogatory term ‘illegal aliens’ has been used by Sanjib Baruah in his *India against Itself*.

Brahma (2014), Uddipana Goswami's *No Ghosts in this City* (2014) all give voice to this ethno-political tension.

The focus of the chapter is Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife* (2005). I will also discuss Uddipana Goswami's short stories 'Colours,' 'Andolan' and 'Sin and Retribution' from *No Ghosts in this City*, Jahnabi Barua's novel *Rebirth* and a short story 'Patriot' from her short story collection *Next Door* (2008). Uddipana Goswami's short stories 'Colours,' 'Andolan' and 'Sin and Retribution' delve deep into the Agitation, its roots and consequences. Barua's *Rebirth*, which sees the aggressive Assamese sub-nationalism through the lens of the feminine, demonstrates how women are the main victims of violence. And finally, I have chosen 'Patriot' from her short story collection as it brings to light two aspects of Assamese sub-nationalism—militancy and anti-migrant prejudice.

The choice of Phukan's novel is particularly significant. It was one of the first Assamese novels in English which has Assam Agitation as its setting, and also because of the scathing criticism it has received for 'belittling' the Agitation and betraying her own community. It has been criticized for trivializing the movement by portraying it from an outsider's point of view. Reviewer Suresh Kohli in Sahitya Akademi's bimonthly journal *Indian Literature*, Prashnta Das, Professor at Tezpur University, Assam, in his essay on Northeast writing in English and Namrata Rathore Mahanta in the chapter on Northeast women writers in English in an anthology, criticizes the author for taking an unauthentic non-northeast mainland gaze. Namrata, for example, says that the writer adopts "an outsider's condescending attitude towards the political movement in Assam."¹³⁴ The outsider for them is a spatial term meaning outside the Northeast. But the term is important for another reason. Women are constructed as feminine 'other' (corporeal, lack, passive, irrational and so on) in relation to the man who is the masculine 'self' (cerebral, active, aggressive, rational etc). And they are kept 'outside' the public political realm of authorship and agency because of this constructed femininity/otherness. I will, therefore, use the same criticism of 'outsider's attitude' as a starting point to construct a feminist reading of the novel. I argue that the novel's outsider's point of view is more metaphoric than spatial. The novel tries to re-appropriate femininity from the patriarchal construct and endow it with new meaning. The outsider, thus, becomes a metaphor for subversive potential of the feminine. By

¹³⁴Namrata Rathore Mahanta, "Women Novelists in English from the Northeast: A Contemporary Perspective," in *The Indian English Novel of the New Millennium*, ed. K. Prabhat Singh (New Castle: Cambridge Scholar, 2013), 110.

privileging the elite world of an English speaking wife of a bureaucrat, her private mental and corporeal space, her quest for an alternate identity beyond the confines of patriarchy, her ability to carve out a space based on sorority bonding with fellow women and matrilineality—the novel supersedes the provincial, chauvinistic, and androcentric nationalist premise of the Movement. The female protagonist Rukmini is preoccupied with her personal battle with patriarchy and when it comes to the Agitation she takes a nonchalant approach. She refuses to demonize either the student activists or the authority. But at the end of the novel the Agitation changes the course of her life. But before delving into the literary representation of Assam Agitation it is imperative to understand the premise.

In 1978, after the sudden death of Member of Parliament Hiralal Patwari, a bye-election to the Lok Sabha in the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency was announced. In the process of holding the bye-election, it was discovered that the number of voters in this constituency had grown dramatically. Local newspapers like *Dainik Axom* played a major role in fanning the fear psychosis by highlighting the issue with exaggerated data and statistics. Soon after, the AASU demanded that the election be postponed and the names of the foreign nationals be detected and deleted from the electoral rolls. In June 1979, a twelve-hour general strike was observed by them. This marked the beginning of the six-year-long anti-foreigners movement in Assam. It gained mass support from the people of Assam especially from the young students who enthusiastically participated in demonstrations and processions. They observed Mass dharnas (strike), picketing, satyagraha (disobedience), mass signature campaigns, black-outs, and economic blockade. In the year 1979, a militant group ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) was also founded at the symbolic palace of Rang Ghar with an aim to free Assam from the ‘colonial’ power of India and to form an independent Assam ‘Swadhin Assom’. In the 1980s Indira Gandhi led central government became oppressive towards the protest. The armed forces were unleashed, in Baruah’s words, to challenge the power capability of the agitation leaders and in Amalendu Guha’s theory, to protect the rights of the minorities. Killings, counter-killings, black out, curfew, abduction, bomb blasts became daily norm in the state.

While the ULFA led separatist insurgency began to flourish, the AASU led agitation was truncated on August 15, 1985 when Assam accord was signed by the leaders of AASU, AAGSP and the government of India in the presence of the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The Accord promised to resolve the foreigners question in the land of Assam by identifying, categorizing and

expelling them. Clause 5.8 of the Accord says “Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigners.” This Accord is used and cited even in the 21st century to dehumanize the linguistic minority. The dangerous ramification of NRC (the promised practical step) is the glaring example of that.

But apart from the radical leftist viewpoints, like that of eminent historian Amalendu Guha (and to a certain extent Sanjoy Hazarika who calls the ethos of Assam movement ‘patriotism of a jingoistic quality’¹³⁵) the knowledge produced about the upsurge including the writings of Gail Omvedt, Sanjib Baruah, Udaayon Misra, Tilottama Misra show sympathy towards the idealism of the ethnic self-determination. They call it people’s spontaneous reaction against the threat of being swept away by alien cultures. They all trace the roots of the problem and anti-migrant sentiment among the Assamese into the colonial era, the irresponsible British policy of encouraging migration to Assam and post-colonial India’s inability to deal with the issue. By identifying the migrants as threat to the cultural, economical wellbeing of the autochthonous Assamese, they consciously and unconsciously try to provide rationale for the xenophobic anti-migrant mindset that the Assamese harbours, and their demand for a Swadhin Asom or homeland. They also project the ULFA (before their degeneration into a terrorist group without any ideology) as committed idealist, as a symbol of resistance to Indian hegemony. This discourse, according to Guha, fails to recognize that the idea of Assamese identity upon which the movement was based is not an original or a benign idea. Assam has always been a multi ethnic, multilingual region. It is home to ethnic Assamese, Bengali speaking Hindus and Muslims, non-autochthonous tribal groups transported from central India and multiple autochthonous tribal communities like the Bodos, Karbis, Kacharis, Mishings, Dimasas, Rabhas and others who are the original natives of Assam. Some of the tribal communities like the Bodos and Mishings even have their own language and culture.¹³⁶ Hence autochthony is a slippery notion in Assam. The concept of exclusivist language based Assamese identity, therefore, had to be imagined and invented. This project began to take shape from the 1850s under the aegis of the upper caste Assamese speaking middle class intelligentsia and it grew into

¹³⁵Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage*, 65.

¹³⁶ For a detailed analysis of the tribal question in Assam See for example Monirul Hussain. "Tribal Question in Assam." *Economic and Political Weekly* 27, no. 20/21 (1992): 1047-050. Accessed May 31, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4397885>.

a 'dangerous', aggressive concept on the issue of language, land and job. Cultural and political organizations like Assam Chatra Sanmilan, Assamiya Samrakshini Sabha, The Assam Association, and Assam Sahitya Sabha played significant roles in raising community consciousness among the Assamese speaking locals. Tantaram Phukan's 1927 speech at Assam Sahitya Sabha (a prestigious literary organization) conference, where he is inciting his Assamese brothers to unite in the name of ethnic assertion and fight against the contaminating culture, is telling:

We, Asamiyas, are a distinct nationality (jati) amongst Indians. Though our language is Sanskrit-based, it is a distinct language. *A rising nationality shows signs of life by way of extending domination over others.* Alas! It is otherwise (with us), we are incapable of self-defence today! We are not only dependent, but even a dependent neighbour is trying to swallow us, taking advantage of our helplessness. Brother Asamiya! Recollect your past glory to have an understanding of the present situation.¹³⁷ (Emphasis original)

The term 'predatory' can be used here to define this invented Assamese sub-national identity. Predatory has been defined by Arjun Appadurai as those identities whose social construction and mobilization requires the extinction of 'other' communities perceived as threat to the very existence of some group, defined as 'we.' In Assam the 'we' are the Assamese speaking autochthonous who construct themselves as threatened majority and position three minority categories of non-Assamese communities as threat to their existence - Bengali Hindu, Bengali Muslims and the tribal from the heartland and Nepal whose extinction is imperative for the cultural and economic survival of the 'we' collective.

The English educated Bengali Hindus migrated and joined the workforce in Assam in the nineteenth century because the British administrators were not interested in building education infrastructure for the locals. They instead encouraged the Bengalis to join the colonial bureaucracy and become the new face of colonialism. And as they began to compete with the native for jobs and emerge as a new middle class in Assam, the rage against the prosperity of the Bengali speaking Hindu intensified. The difference was exacerbated when the British government tried to impose Bengali as the official language. The community conscious enlightened section of Assamese society became more vocal against the expansionism of

¹³⁷ Quoted in, Amalendu Guha, 'Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-80' *Economic and Political Weekly* 15, No. 41/43, Special Number (Oct., 1980), 1703.

Bengali language. The simmering rage on the issue of language and job culminated into ethnic cleansing of Bengali Hindus from Assam valley known as ‘Bongal Kheda’ (oust the Bengalis) pogroms. In the 1940s, 50s and 60s job seeking Assamese looted and burnt the clubs, schools and houses of the Bengalis with impunity.

Another minority community against which the Assamese identity is framed is the tea plantation labourers known as the *baganiya*. In the nineteenth century, poor tribal people from Nepal and Eastern and central India, were transplanted in Assam as bonded labour or coolies to work in tea plantations by the British because the local peasants did not find wage labour attractive.¹³⁸ Between 1872 and 1880 about 26,300 “coolies” arrived and in 1892 almost 40,000 were reported to have migrated to the estates.¹³⁹ The tea industry of Assam flourished based on the labour of those displaced migrant coolies recruited on indentured contracts. Assam today is the largest tea manufacturer in India but the tea workers continue to be among the most oppressed and exploited section of the Assam society. Uprooted from their homes and treated as pariah in Assam, the tea workers demonstrate the pain of displacement and longing for native land in these words *"Our ancestors migrated to these lands from the Orissa-Jharkhand region of present India. We would like to go back and see the villages where we came from."*¹⁴⁰

Finally, it is the Bengali speaking Muslims who were the main threat to the ‘we’ identity during Assam agitation. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the British colonial state encouraged large numbers of Bengali Muslim peasants from the over-populated districts of eastern Bengal, where land had reached the limits of cultivation, to migrate and till the uncultivated stretches of the Brahmaputra Valley. In the dominant and popular discourse they are described as ‘land hungry’ populace. Udayon Misra for example says that soon after their rehabilitation they began to encroach upon land cultivated by the

¹³⁸ For a detailed discussion on labour discourse of Assam tea plantation See Jayeeta Sharma, 'Lazy' Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam Tea Industry, *Modern Asian Studies* 43, No. 6 (Nov, 2009), 1287-1324.

¹³⁹ Nel Vandekerckhove, “We are Sons of This Soil”, *Critical Asian Studies* 41 no.4, 2009: 532, DOI: 10.1080/14672710903328013.

¹⁴⁰ Richu Sani I Chemmalakuzhy, “How Assam’s Tea Gardens Flourished On The ‘Abuse And Torture’ Of Their Labourers,” *Youth Ki Awaz*, 2016. <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2016/05/slavery-in-assam-tea-gardens-india/>

indigenes.¹⁴¹ Later large scale undocumented immigration took place especially during partition in 1947 and in 1971 when Bangladesh was fighting a gory battle of independence from Pakistan. These Bengali Muslims are addressed by the derogatory term ‘Miya’ and the six years long agitation was mostly about the miyas versus the Axamiyas that is Muslim migrants versus the autochthonous Assamese.

They were the chief target of violence during the Assam movement. Nellie massacre that took place in 1983 was the most significant example of that as 16000 Bengali Muslims mainly women and children were massacred by the local Assamese community. The master narrative maintains a stoic silence towards this quasi genocidal killing of the Bengali speaking Muslims at Nellie. Mitra Phukan corroborates it when she says how Nellie was silenced. And by calling them land grabbing illegal aliens they tacitly support the ideology behind the massacre. Japanese scholar Makiko Kimura is the only one to study the incident and give an objective and comprehensive analysis on the subject. She records the gruesome incident in these words:

... the incident started in the morning (timing given varied from 5am to 10am). At first, the attackers started burning houses, and then the immigrants noticed that their villages were gheraoed from every side. After burning all the houses, the perpetrators started killing the inhabitants by using guns, bombs and daos (axes traditionally used by tribes).¹⁴²

In his prophetic article written before the Nellie massacre Amalendu Guha said that the Assam movement was ‘national in form, chauvinist and undemocratic in content and proto-fascist in its methods.’¹⁴³ Guha calls the movement undemocratic because it was controlled by the Assamese middle class for their own survival. The toiling class was used by them only as brainwashed foot soldiers. The massacre, after all, was perpetrated by poor Assamese and local Tiwa tribals, not the middle class ideologues who inflamed their anti-migrant sentiment. But being a Marxist historian Guha failed to see the exclusion and abuse of another category, the women of Assam.

A feminist critique of the movement reveals that the Assamese ‘we’ collective was exclusively a male territory. Ironically it is believed that this students’ movement which was designed and led by ethnic Assamese *men* was gender equal, that young women and men of

¹⁴¹Udayon Misra, “Why Many in Assam See the National Register of Citizens as a Lifeline,” *The Wire*, 24 August, 2018.

¹⁴²Makiko Kimura, ‘Memories of the Massacre.’ *Asian Ethnicity* 4, Number 2, June (2003): 230.

¹⁴³Amalendu Guha, ‘Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-80’, 1699.

Assam participated in their agitation on *equal* footing. Even by taking a cursory look at the leadership, one can understand the masculinist control over the movement. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta was the president of AASU from 1979 to 1985. Later he became the chief minister of the state. The second in hierarchy was general secretary Bhriku Kumar Phukan. Mainstream AASU and AAGSP's radicalised underground version ULFA was founded and led by Paresh Baruah, Pradip Gogoi and Anup Chetia. By positing ethnic Assamese at the center these leaders created several binaries and used women participants only to bolster their cause. Parvin Sultana's polemical writings show how women members of AASU, AAGSP as well as ULFA were kept out of the decision making process and debarred from articulating issues that concern women by the male leadership. She says that 'This movement did not give platform to women to question patriarchal issues....despite their presence in Assam Movement in a large number none of them could make it to the decision making echelons of either AGP or AASU.'¹⁴⁴... '[W]omen were encouraged to participate just for logistics' sake. The upper echelon of AASU and AGP leadership was an exclusively male domain. And they tended to be hostile to separate articulation of women's issues. They found it *divisive*.'¹⁴⁵

In spite of this male bias, women in large numbers participated in the movement flaunting their cultural symbols, the traditional *mekhla sador*.¹⁴⁶ But what happened to the dissenters who refused to be part of the cultural festival of ethnic assertion? When the women refused to participate in the movement of identity assertion their freedom of choice was muzzled. Control over female sexuality and muzzling of their choice to remain outside the so-called festival of ethnic assertion is demonstrated in Roshmi Goswami's writings. In an essay she cites the case of Roshmi Bora, a fifteen year old girl who was killed by ULFA members in Nagaon district of Assam. Roshmi, in Roshmi Goswami's words, was attractive, vivacious and highly accomplished girl. Extrovert and spunky, she dared to turn down the sexual advances of a local militant. She had been warned against giving stage performances in 'Indian Clothes'. But she refused to bow down to their diktat. She had been vocal about the imposition of such restrictions on her or on any women and raised questions about why there should be different rules of conduct for men and women. After one of her dancing performances an Army major visited her

¹⁴⁴Parvin Sultana, "Tracing Masculinity: From Assam Movement to ULFA," *The Chronicle* 1 no. 1, (Dec, 2013) 20-25

¹⁴⁵Ibid.25.

¹⁴⁶ Traditional Assamese dress.

home to congratulate her. This infuriated the local militants. Subsequently she was kidnapped and killed.¹⁴⁷

Anne McClintock contends that nationalism is constituted as a gendered discourse. Men identify themselves with national whole, whereas devoid of any agency, women are associated only with the body politic of nation. Women's bodies and sexuality are like national boundary that needs to be controlled and patrolled to avoid foreign invasion. They serve as a symbolic bearer of national margin and its difference from other nationalities. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias thus identify five ways in which women are implicated in nationalism: as biological reproducers of the members of national collectivities, as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups (through restrictions on sexual or marital relations), as active transmitters and producers of the national culture, as symbolic signifiers of national difference, and as active participants in national struggles.¹⁴⁸ When they decide to break away from these traditional gendered roles they are deemed as antinational. Roshmi Bora refused to be a transmitter of Assamese culture and a symbolic signifier of the difference between Assamese and Indian culture. She had to sacrifice her life for her defiance.

Assam Agitation in Literature

The writers discussed in this chapter belong to the Hindu Assamese affluent class since tribal communities and Muslims are underprivileged, oppressed and exploited. Most of them do not have access to English education. Assamese middle class is the same section that led the Assam Agitation. The literary community of Assam like the aforementioned Assam Sahitya Sabha played a significant role in the movement. A major chunk of Assamese writing therefore reflects a strong sense of Assamese identity. One of the most promising literary voices from Assam Aruni Kashyap for instance prefers to call himself an Assamese writer rather than an Indian writer.

Aruni Kashyap's writing in English bears a searing anger towards the Indian mainland. He refuses to be included under the generic umbrella term of Indian Writing in English and

¹⁴⁷Roshmi Goswami, "Shifting Sands: Negotiations, Compromises and Rights in Situations of Armed Conflict," in *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*, ed. Preeti Gill (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013),

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in, Anne McClintock, 1993.

intends to forge a new literary identity that is distinct from mainstream Indian literature and exclusively Assamese. He describes his writing in these words:

We have something different to say than the current crop of Indian English writers. It is interesting that many challenges to narrow approaches to the idea of India are coming from marginalized sections: the poorest of the poor in central India, Dalits, narratives from Kashmir and the northeast.

Listening to, and reading, stories from these marginal spaces will provide solutions to many problems about contemporary India. The sooner mainstream India realizes that, the better. As for me, I am more comfortable calling myself an 'Assamese writer'.¹⁴⁹

Kashyap's words come from a deep sense of marginalization. In his non-fictional writings he cites several anecdotal accounts from his student life in Delhi to demonstrate Indian mainland's ignorance about his home town Guwahati. In a talk tellingly titled 'Peripheral Imagination: Writing the Invisible India' he says how he was jeered at by his mainland classmates. "On the first night in my hostel, one of my batch mates majoring in history asked me where I was from. When I replied, he said, "O yes, isn't Assam in Arunachal, somewhere near China? There's some terrorist activity in Assam, no?" He thought it was funny to not know about Assam, Guwahati and the Northeast. But it offended me."¹⁵⁰ In the second anecdote he documents mainland's projection of the Northeast as the terrain of the savage other. "The second incident happened in 2005 when we had gone to a hill station in Himachal Pradesh on a trip from my college in Delhi. Our bus had suddenly stopped in the middle of the night on a lonely road that had forests on both sides. Many cracked jokes about "wild tribals" attacking us; everyone laughed. But the laughter had reached a new decibel when a friend of mine had said, "Don't worry, no tribals would kill you, we aren't in the Northeast. We are safe." I didn't find that statement funny. I couldn't participate in the laughter."¹⁵¹ Aruni writes how his fellow students' query about Assam and the reports of violence on non-Assamese in the region made him feel as if he was (and other Assamese) "the target of disgust, suspicion and complaint..."¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹Aruni Kashyap, "People want me to write good things about Assam," *TNN*, May 17, 2015.

¹⁵⁰Aruni Kashyap, "Peripheral Imagination: Writing the Invisible India," May 18, 2012. Asian American/Asian Research Institute, The City University of New York. <https://aaari.info/12-05-18kashyap/>

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵²Aruni Kashyap, 'People like me generally get called supporters of terrorism', *Tehelka*, Feb 03, 2007.

He says that incidents like these propelled him to question his identity as an Indian. And he became aware of his contradictory twofold identity as an Assamese-Indian. Therefore when he penned down his first novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* he used his pen as a cudgel to criticize Indian State's brutal repression of any form of dissent in the time of extrajudicial killings in Assam. The narrator of the novel, Pablo is an English speaking city-bred boy, who visits his ancestral village Mayong to attend the wedding of his aunt Moina. In this new world he comes face to face with the violence that Assamese men and women living in the hinterland experience on a daily basis. Through horrific images of twisted human bodies hanging from the electric pole he reminds his readers of Indian Army's vulgar display of power. The narrative shows how the Indian Army torture, kill and sexually assault the family members of the ULFA militants and ULFA sympathizers to crush the secessionist movement. The fear of the army is so intense in the village that Pablo's aunty Moina commits suicide just before her wedding to avoid being tortured and raped by the soldiers. She kills herself when a rumour about her future husband's brother being an active member of the ULFA comes to the surface.

Aruni, in this novel, also expresses his anger towards the governments of India and Assam for funding the vicious cycle of violence through Pablo. Pablo says how the Government of Assam has sparked off the fratricidal conflict between the ULFAs and the SULFAs (surrendered ULFA members) to rule Assam. He tells his cousin Mridul and his friends Binod and Brikodar:

I'm almost certain *they* started the killings. *They* sparked off this fratricidal conflict. There is not much difference between the colonial British and our own government, which is no more than an agent of the Delhi government. Their policy is to divide and rule."¹⁵³[Emphasis original]

As Pablo vents his anger against the governments, the soldiers of the Indian Army walk in crushing the laburnum flowers. Then they start intimidating Mridul and their friends in Hindi, a language that none of them could speak. Note how Aruni here presents the binaries between oppressive Delhi and colonized Assam as well as the Hindi language and the Assamese

¹⁵³Kashyap, *The House with a Thousand Stories*, 109.

language. His oeuvre including this novel, poems and non-fiction highlights this othering of Assamese people by the so-called mainland.¹⁵⁴

As an Assamese writer, Mitra Phukan is expected to further this idea of Assam, Assamese culture and literature as a marginal, peripheral space, which is constantly at threat - a perpetual victim of the hegemony of the Indian mainland. But she chooses to change the perception. When asked about the marginal position of Assamese literature by a mainland journalist she says: “No I don’t think it is marginalised. The total population of Assam is only about two and a half crores. Of these, a significant percentage speak different languages, such as Bodo, Bengali, Tiwa, Karbi, etc. Given this, the position of Assamese literature is very good.”¹⁵⁵ Unlike Kashyap, Mitra Phukan always emphasizes that the construction of the ‘Other’ is not a one-way process. She argues that separatist ideology brainwash the Assamese specially the impressionable youth into developing a warped idea of identity. They are taught to identify the Indian nation-state as the Other, which stalls the state’s progress. She says “Their [children of the conflict] primary emotions are those of hatred for what they perceived to the ‘Other’, or what they have been taught is the ‘Other’. Often, the other is India, the nation. This has very serious repercussion on aspects of the unity of the country, indeed, on nationhood itself.”¹⁵⁶ This contrasting viewpoint of Phukan goes against the dominant narrative of the Assamese Agitation that only criticizes the fault-line within the nation building process of Indian nation-state for the protracted violent politics in Assam. Her debut novel is reflective of her deviant viewpoint.

Author, translator, columnist and trained vocalist Mitra Phukan has written three children’s books: *Mamoni’s Adventures* (1986), *Chumki Posts a Letter* (1989) and *The Biratpur Adventure* (1994), two novels: *The Collector’s Wife* (2005) and *A Monsoon of Music*¹⁵⁷ (2011). She has also translated Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s *Blossoms in the Graveyard* into English. I will here focus on *The Collector’s Wife* which is one of the first generation English novels from

¹⁵⁴See, Aruni Kashyap, “How to talk about Indian racism,” *The Hindu*, May 19, 2016, and “The Unsafe Augusts of Assam,” *Open Magazine*, August 2013.

¹⁵⁵Mitra Phukan, ‘I love Interacting with People’, interview by K.K. Gopalakrishnan, *The Hindu*, November 06, 2010.

¹⁵⁶Mitra Phukan, “Who Killed Mother Teresa? Children of the conflict,” in *Peripheral Centre: Voices from India’s Northeast*, 287.

¹⁵⁷*Monsoon of Music* takes its readers into the world of Hindustani classical music and tells the story of four musicians.

Assam. The question of Assamese identity and the problem of migration continue to be the most important issues to the Assamese. Therefore when Phukan penned her first novel she chose Assam Agitation based on these two issues as her subject matter. But she here sees Assam Agitation from the perspective of its apolitical female protagonist Rukmini Bezboruah. Rukmini is the wife of Siddharth Bezboruah, a dutiful district collector of an imagined insurgency ridden town of Parbatpuri in Assam. As the title suggests she is known in her social circle by the derivative identity of a wife of an important government official. But she is also a part-time English lecturer at a local college that gives her an identity of her own however frail it may be. She goes to college from her spacious bungalow perched atop a hillock in her husband's official chauffeur driven car. That enables her to experience the students' rage against the migrants from a safe distance. She is positioned strategically in such a way that she can show the reality of the agitation from two contrasting points of view. Being the Collector's wife she knows the official side of the movement and being a part-time lecturer she is also involved with the students' politics. This strategic positioning of her protagonist allows the writer to destabilize the binary between the agitators and the administrator. In Phukan's words, she tried to make Rukmini as layered as possible.¹⁵⁸ She does not represent a monolithic version of the Agitation.

Rukmini is a convent educated woman, uncomfortable in Assamese language. Her parents live faraway in Trinidad. Her essential spirit therefore is not provincial. She can see the agitation from a non-insider's point of view. It is essentially because of this that the novel has been criticised by the reviewers and academics for presenting a facile picture of a complex situation in Assam. Prasanta Das in his scathing criticism of *The Collector's Wife* mentions Phukan's deracination; he criticizes her for taking an easy route and resorting to a readymade discourse of violence to cater to the expectation of the mainland reader. Das writes:

The existence of this discourse means that the writer from the Northeast has easy access to a readymade mode of representation and perhaps even a readymade audience. However, writing from the outside – “the Northeast” is an outsider's term – has its limitations. Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*, which caters to the readerly expectations of its intended pan-Indian audience by adopting a title that goes against local practice (District Collectors in Assam are known as Deputy Commissioners), illustrates

¹⁵⁸Mitra Phukan, interview by Nabish Alam, Jan 16, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIIRqXcjJE>.

some of the shortcomings of this kind of writing... Phukan trivializes the Assam movement, which her novel claims to depict, by her reliance on an essentialist discourse.¹⁵⁹

Pitting her against Mamang Dai's authentic portrayal of Arunachal Pradesh in *The Legends of Pensam* he contends that Phukan's narration of Assam reinforces northeast stereotype. Echoing Prasanta Das almost word to word Namrata Rathore Mahanta says:

Mitra Phukan's novel, *The Collector's Wife* (2005), attempts to depict the Assam movement but is foregrounded in its reliance on the Northeast stereotype. This causes the writer to play into the matrix of the dominant discourse and adopt an outsider's condescending attitude towards the political movement in Assam. Rukmini, the protagonist of the novel, is the wife of a District Collector. She is also a part-time lecturer in a local college. However, she lives a serene, comfortable and ordered life as a bureaucrat's wife. When she faces disorder and change in the form of student activism, she adopts a condescending and indulgent attitude towards the students whom she perceives as being temporarily overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of youth.¹⁶⁰

Prasanta Das and Namrata Rathore here make a clear distinction between the Northeast and the outside that is the mainland India, between local and global. While eulogising Mamang Dai for writing as an insider, they bemoan Mitra Phukan's deracination as if by writing for the wider readership outside Assam she is breaking the tradition of community solidarity and surrendering to the colonising power of the mainstream Indian readership. Therefore to them it is not an acceptable text by a Northeast writer. Just like Roshmi Bora who was killed for wearing 'Indian' clothes during her dance performances Mitra Phukan is chastised for writing for the Indian readership.

During the Agitation Assam was divided into two distinct categories of 'us' and 'them' and the ruler and the ruled. The 'us' is the common Assamese speaking men and women, the student leaders fighting a war against the authority ostensibly through non-violent Gandhian means and the militants who are fighting the same war but with guns, even they are referred to as our boys. And the 'them' are the migrants and the Indian nation-state metonymically

¹⁵⁹Prasanta Das, "Indian English Writing from the Northeast,"

¹⁶⁰Mahanta, 'Women Novelists in English from the Northeast: A Contemporary Perspective', 2013.

represented by the bureaucrats like Rukmini's husband and the non-Assamese security personnel deployed to maintain normalcy in the region. The writers are expected to write from the position of 'us'. So when Mitra Phukan is perceived to be writing for 'them' she is branded as a non-Assamese.

This chapter proposes that *The Collector's Wife* subverts these binaries, Assamese/non-Assamese, Northeast/mainland, and us/them. Mitra Phukan does not interpret the Assam movement from the mainland's point of view that tends to paint a homogenous simplistic picture of the Northeast, nor does it reproduce the homogenous view of the 'we' collective. Instead she writes it from a 'feminine' point of view. What makes *The Collector's Wife* unconventional is its constant shift of stance, displacement of reader's expectation, and the rejection of any fixed identity. In her representation of the Assam agitation: and its various aspects like the security personnel, administrators, student leaders, and local media she always presents the other side of the story as well.

When it comes to representing the security men the dominant narrative unequivocally berates them. In Aruni's *The House with a Thousand Stories* the presence of army men is depicted through fear and anxiety. Through the helpless character of a village woman, the male narrator Pablo showcases the fear of the army. When an army patrol enters into village, terrified Mamoni, who was raped by four military men when she had gone to wash clothes in the Pokoria River, breaks into hysteria. "Mamoni had come out of the house, sat on the veranda and had started to scream, she wouldn't stop, she kept screaming like a lunatic until she fainted. I saw the white of her eyes; the irises of her eyes had disappeared. She was still sitting. I saw the pale yellow trail of urine sliding down from the veranda on to the courtyard."¹⁶¹

Sanjib Baruah in his scholarly writing highlights the inconvenience that he as an Assamese experience in the hands of the state machinery. Note for example in the following quote where Baruah writes:

By January 1983 it was reported that the capital city of Gauhati and the towns of the Brahmaputra Valley were "virtually armed camps." In view of the "presumed unreliability" of the state police forces, paramilitary forces were brought in from the center and from other states. On the streets of the capital city, according to an Economic

¹⁶¹ Kashyap, *The House with a Thousand Stories*, 112.

and Political Weekly editorial, there was "a premium in not being an Assamese," because ethnic Assamese young men were likely to be arrested and beaten up.¹⁶²

But breaking away from the discourse of CRPF bashing, Mitra Phukan's Rukmini shows empathy towards the non-local security men who come far away from their home just to do their job. While going to a tea-garden with her friend Manoj in a car she was stopped by the men in khaki for search operation.

Just doing my duty, sir," he said in the same impersonal voice. Already, his eyes were looking beyond them, scanning the roads for signs of an approaching vehicle. Rukmini suddenly felt a rush of empathy for him. He must be frightened too, she thought, this young man with the dark skin, skin that marked him out as a non-local immediately, and eyes that were pieces of coal. He must have nightmares, too. What if the next car which was ordered to halt was different? The window would be rolled down slowly, and instead of seeing a man out with a woman, he would find himself looking down the barrel of another AK-47. Not their own. But Theirs. And then...¹⁶³

Rukmini however does not fail to point out how the unarmed student protestors have to face the bone shattering blows of the baton and sexual assault by lathi-wielding security men. It is because of her polysemous narrative, that in spite of the criticism, the readers can sympathise with the characters of security men.

In her portrayal of the local newspaper too she breaks the conspiracy of silence. She exposes the manipulative local media and their role in projecting the ULFA members as Robin Hood like figures and fanning the war hysteria against the Sate and the migrants. In the novel the militants abduct Manoj Mahanta and his friend Pronob Bishaya, a tea garden owner. But Premananda Kalita's paper, the *Parbatpuri Tribune* shows reluctance to see the kidnappers as terrorist and the kidnapped as victims.

Kalita carefully avoided, as always, the use of the word 'victim' when he referred to those who had been abducted by ultras or terrorists. He knew, as did most other editors and proprietors of Parbatpuri's journals, that, in terms of circulation figures, it paid to

¹⁶²Sanjib Baruah, Immigration, Ethnic Conflict, and Political Turmoil--Assam, 1979-1985, *Asian Survey* 26, No. 11 (Nov., 1986), 1198.

¹⁶³Phukan, *Wife*, 126.

glorify the kidnappers and their exploits. As long as the kidnapped were wealthy, readers felt that the abductions and extortions were the work of Robin Hood-type heroes.¹⁶⁴

Earlier in the novel Kalita is painted as an influential media personality harbouring and propagating strong anti-migrant ideology. *The Collector's Wife* also presents a counter discourse through the character of journalist Mukul Madhav. His objective reportage on the same incident of kidnapping and his description of the kidnapped men as victims, illustrate that there is no one uniform picture of local media.

The protagonist of the novel is the District Collector's wife. Her husband Siddhartha Bezbaruah belongs to the ruling class which immediately position him as an antagonist, the Other. He is also a callous husband who is indifferent to his wife's needs. Later it is found out that he is having a clandestine affair with Rukmini's colleague Priyam. Yet he is not an unproblematized antagonist of the novel. His helplessness in the face of violence and flood, his commitment to his people, His sincere effort to rescue Manoj Mahanta, the father of his wife's unborn child from the clutches of the militants, and finally his death during that operation creates a humane picture of Siddhartha.

Rukmini is a college lecturer and her students Bibek and Bondona represent the students' voices in other words they are the walking talking points of view of the student union in the novel. She has a maternal attitude towards the agitating students. Time and again she highlights the non-violent character of their movement and their idealism. Like Udayon Misra or Sanjib Baruah, Phukan presents some rationale for their agenda to oust the foreign settlers. She gives them a podium to express their fear and anger towards the foreign settlers. When Rukmini asks the injured students recuperating in the hospital whether their parents approve of what they do, they reply with resolute determination. Bibek says

My parents are farmers. Small farmers, who live in a village about 50 kilometres from here. They know what's happening. Our village is surrounded by foreign settlers. They have cut down the forests which once sustained us, have built their huts all around. They know that it's the hunger for land that has brought them here. My parents understand that hunger for land. That is why they are afraid that, twenty, thirty years from now, we will be left without any because the local people are not fighters. They know how to plant and

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 284.

sow and reap and harvest, how to dance at the advent of spring, and weep at the deaths of their loved ones. But they are not a fighting race. *That is why I am fighting for them in a non-violent way, as Gandhi taught my grandfather to do.* My parents know that my studies are being affected. I was a rank holder in the Matriculation exam, but this year I probably won't be able to clear the examination. It's a question of survival.¹⁶⁵ (Emphasis added)

As a shadow of her male counterpart, Bondona echoes the same sentiment with steady gaze

Yes, it's the same with me. My father is the priest in our village. Landless, depended on the goodwill of the people for whom he performs pujas. I am a Brahmin.... we have no reservations for poor Brahmin girls, no quotas in college seats for children of priests, no matter how poor they may be. My mother knows what I am doing...But she supports what I do. So does my father.¹⁶⁶

In this scene Rukmini appears rather gullible as she listens to her caste privileged young students as a mesmerized silenced observer. Her silence and awe suggest that, the fear and hatred of 'the small numbers' harboured by Bibek and Bondona, is a justifiable cause. Amalendu Guha in his scathing criticism of the Agitation exposes the loopholes within the so-called 'just' demands of the poor peasants of Assamese ethnicity. He argues that peasants' discontent and their desire for increased autonomy was exploited by the gentry and was given a chauvinist twist. Ignorant, conservative and backward peasants were misguided by the rural gentry. Instead of uniting the impoverished toiling masses of all communities, linguistic and religious, in a common anti-feudal, anti-monopoly struggle, the movement divided them on the basis of communalism and divisive slogans. Mitra Phukan argues along similar lines in her essay "Who killed Mother Teresa? Children of the Conflict", she there says how the political opportunists in the hinterlands use underdevelopment as a tool to fuel disharmony along region, class, caste, and indoctrinate the impressionable youth to think in terms of narrow parameters of caste, community, ethnicity and religion. In the novel Rukmini does not produce a historically conscious argument instead she is mesmerised and in awe of her young students' determination. But her characterization by default put her on the other side of the discourse. As mentioned earlier, Rukmini traverses the streets of Parbatpuri in her husband's official car with her armed

¹⁶⁵Phukan, *The Collector's wife*, 181.

¹⁶⁶Ibid, 181.

body guard. So while the student protestors march on streets with their anti-migrant and anti-government slogans she passes by them in her car with her security pointing his gun at them.

Unlike the dominant discourse of Sanjib Baruh, Udayon Misra and others which maintains a patronizing tone towards the Movement, Mitra Phukan's Rukmini does not shy away from deconstructing the sons of the soil movement for a golden homeland. Rukmini points out the aporias like the delusion of the young students and their misplaced priorities. She says: "... the students' union certainly seemed to think that getting rid of the illegal immigrants would suddenly usher in a kind of utopia. ... Perhaps the cause of the students whom they were supposed to represent would have been better served if they had insisted, instead, on a change in syllabi, in having better infrastructure in their educational institutions."¹⁶⁷

Phukan enlists the violence perpetrated by the insurgent groups, war hysteria churned by the local media, and most importantly she calls to question the basic premise of the movement that is ethnic assertion. As mentioned in the first section of the chapter, Assam is a multiethnic society where ethnic identity is fluid and malleable. There is no official definition of 'Axamiya.' When Rukmini looks at the multiracial innocent faces of her students she feels the irony of the situation.

As she looked at the eager, bright young faces of the boys and girls, she couldn't help noticing the facial features and contours before her. The almond eyes, the golden skins of the mongoloid, the curly hair of the Austric, the dark complexions of the Dravids, the fine features and fair colouring of the Aryans, were all present in the crowd of young faces before her. And they wanted to rid the land of foreigners!¹⁶⁸

Rukmini dismantles the edifice of the Assam Agitation by laying bare the sheer travesty of their demand of separating the 'other' from the 'self'. She can see that the self is always already supplemented by the other. In fact there is no self. She deconstructs the fixed, stable, and self-evident idea of ethnic Assamese identity that some authors see as given and as perpetually threatened.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 89.

¹⁶⁸ Mitra Phukan, *The Collectors Wife* (New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 2005), 91.

The masculine narrative that is concerned with the subjects of Assam Movement reduces the bodies of the Assamese women into a passive site of oppression. Aruni's portrayal of the army, for example, foregrounds the brutal power of the State. His narrative renders women like Mamoni and Pablo's aunt Moina into powerless victims. His novel reproduces the Freudian image of woman as hysteric, thereby reinforcing rational man/hysteric woman dichotomy. *The Collector's Wife* in contrast carves out an alternate subversive private space by foregrounding the body of woman and pleasure. The elements of Assam movement are peripheral to the main concern of the novel. Rukmin's childless state even after a decade long marriage is the focal point of her life. Rukmini does not believe that her identity is not dependent on her ability to contribute a brood of children to a waiting world, but she develops a sense of insecurity because of societal pressure. To emphasize this point, the novel begins at a wedding party where Rukmini is humiliated by some women of Parbatpuri for her barrenness. Three women 'with blazing circles of vermilion' pasted on their foreheads (custodian of patriarchy) bemoan the glorious days when even the shadow of a barren woman was considered ominous.

This foregrounding of female body has come under attack by reviewers of the novel. Suresh Kohli in his review complains that the novel suffers not only from painting a facile picture of the political movement but also from woman centricity or in his words 'gender obsession.' He further complains that in Phukan's writing male characters are only marginal players to the female protagonist. According to him she does not delve deep into the psyche of either of the husband and the male friend instead dwell on the subjects of feminine psyche and pregnancy. He writes:

The story has been told from a woman's perspective, that of Rukmini Bezboruah—her loneliness, her fears, apprehensions, anxieties, relationships, actions and interactions, and remains so till the very end. Nothing wrong, no harm done. But that leaves some gasping holes, notably the two men who revolve round her, her wronginghusband, and the wronged lover, though not necessarily in that order. No insight has been provided into their actions, as well as reactions, whether personal and social. But then that's not very uncommon in even some of the finest novels written by women authors who, however, infuse some uncanny feminine insights into their narratives that make them different.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹Kohli, review of *The Collector's Wife*, *Indian Literature* Vol. 49, No. 5 (229) (September-October 2005) 214-216.

His view of Phukan's writing and of women's writing in general, mirrors patriarchal and phallogocentric literary norms that undervalue women's texts. This reviewer is like the priest of Cixous's 'The Laugh of the Medusa' who trembles to see women's 'sexts,' that is woman writing as woman, foregrounding her body. The literary canon is dominated by fiction written by male authors that foreground only their masculine perspective. The most canonized bildungsromans written by men that are appreciated for reflecting universal existential crisis, essentially project only the male worldview. Women are only peripheral characters there. Critics and reviewers accept this as the literary norm. They fail to see that masculine experience too is gendered and not representative of universal experience. Literary criticism and writing therefore needed a rupture, a new model to examine women's writing.¹⁷⁰ Mitra Phukan does the same in her novel. She shows her 'sext' by her conceptualization of Assam as Rukmini's womb.

It is a common phallogocentric ploy to identify woman's body as a passive piece of land (the homeland) that needs to be protected by her sons (son of the soil). In this dominant discourse the mother's body is placed outside the active political realm, whereas the sons take the central position. In the case of Assam agitation as well this ploy was used. Phukan uses the same strategy of identifying mother's body as homeland and turns it on its head by creating a mother-daughter genealogy. Phukan in her novel uses Rukmini's infertile body as the metaphor for barrenness of Assam during the agitation. And the message of hope is presented through her unborn child which she imagines as a female one.

One can argue that Jahnabi Barua's *Rebirth* is an example of a disruptive feminine text as it is narrated as a monologue of a pregnant woman to her unborn child. The womb of Kaberi is foregrounded but the disruptive quality is missing. Kaberi is married to Ron who leaves her for another woman (this woman Laksmi is portrayed as a bad woman whereas the wronged wife, Kaberi is the good woman) and makes a selfish re-entry after learning about her pregnancy. At the end of the novel Kaberi decides to leave her selfish abusive husband and return to Assam. She decides to begin her life anew with her dead friend's husband Bidyut. Her return to the security of heterosexual matrix and her physical return to her homeland Assam from Bangalore reinforces the man/woman, Assam/mainland, good woman/bad woman opposition.

¹⁷⁰See, Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' 885. She says the concept of *écriture féminine* is one such model invites woman writers to reclaim and free her body from the patriarchal construct and rewrite it through her text. Its message is: "Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them sexts!"

Rukmini, on the other hand, seeks the non-normative and does not return to the security of normative life. Her child is conceived through an ‘illegitimate’ union outside the patriarchal morality that imposes the responsibility of chastity solely on women. The child is not even the product of a traditional sentimental heterosexual union. To seek the taste of adventure amidst the ennui of her life, Rukmini agrees to visit a tea garden with a near-stranger Manoj Mahanta. They share a room in a guest-house; spend a passion filled evening together. She experiences fleeting moments of ecstasy “Her thoughts were drowned in a sea of sensations. It was a long time since she had felt anything like this... Parts of her body that she had almost forgotten had existed, came alive...Dizzying sensations whirled around her mind.”¹⁷¹ After this she returns to asexual non-intrusive friendship with Manoj.

The unborn child is a product of this non-normative union. Her rearing too will be an unconventional one. The novel’s ending suggests, since both Siddhartha and Manoj are killed by the militants, that Rukmini will raise her child on her own without depending on either the biological or the foster father of the unborn child. Even before the death of Siddhartha and Manoj, she had decided to take up a job of a writer outside Parbatpuri.

If in Rukmini’s case it is her unborn daughter who represent a brighter future for Assam, in the case of Nandini Deuru her pastry shop in an insurgency ridden town symbolizes a hope. The peripheral character of Nandini Deuri is introduced to the readers through the eyes of Rukmini who sees her as the dutiful wife of the SP of Parbatpuri. She very efficiently looks after the needs of her husband and three children. And the more modern Rukmini detest the idea of turning into a toiling woman like Nandini. Rukmini’s error of judgement comes to light after the brutal murder of the SP. Along with Rukmini, the beguiled readers get to see another facet of Nandini’s character who wants to forge a new identity for herself. The widowed Nandini is not a melodramatic picture of sorrow when her husband is shot down by MOFEH militants on their wedding anniversary. She plans to open her own pastry shop. After establishing her own cake shop she tells Rukmini: “I’m thankful that the bakery is slowly, but definitely, beginning to erase my other identity.”¹⁷²

¹⁷¹Phukan, *The Collector’s Wife*, 141.

¹⁷²Ibid., 302.

She with pride and relish lists the delicacies to be sold in her shop—butter biscuits, small jam tarts made with real short crust pastry, rich fruit cake, and chocolate gateaux. This culinary connotation is significant. Women are tutored and brought up as custodian of traditional food culture. Exquisite western pastry shop run by a widow in an impoverished town riddled with the politics of ethnic identity is in a way a total subversion of accepted reality. Through the seemingly trivial and delicate sensory perception of pastry Nandini Deuri produces a strong picture of femininity. She has always been an efficient cook and feeder. When her well fed husband is killed she decides to break away from traditional image of woman as home cook confined to her husband's kitchen and venture into the field of entrepreneurship.

The elite class women of Assam like Rukmini and Nandini are total outsiders in the provincial Assam since they don't take part in the protests, picketing, and satyagrahas. They just observe it from the comfort of their luxurious life. See for example, Rita Chowdhury's *Ei Somoy, Sei Somoy* which creates a binary of good woman and bad woman. Champion of the cause of nationalism Aditi Chowdhury is the good woman. Nibha and Sukanya's mother who prioritise their sexuality over idealism and nationalism are the bad women. By constructing a community of these 'outsider' elite women who prioritise their own happiness and stand victorious in the face of tragedy *The Collector's Wife* is successful in presenting an alternate reality and viewpoint of the Assam Agitation.

*

While Phukan foregrounds the voice of the privileged class, Uddipana Goswami (writer of the poetry collection *We Called the River Red: Poetry from a Violent Homeland, Green Tin Trunk* and short story collection *No Ghosts in this City*) criticizes the apathy and cultural arrogance of the Assamese urban middle class and their reluctance to engage with the problems that the marginalized face. In her short story 'Colours' through the life choices of a young doctor she questions a limited life of constricting values and a self-centred universe. The city bred unnamed doctor who is also the first person narrator of the story is repulsed by the hypocritical middle class values and lack of courage of his middle class parents. Therefore he decides to leave the city of Guwahati and settle in Kalguri village to work as a doctor in the tea estate. He spends time with the tea labourers there (the non-autochthonous tribals transported to work in the

tea estate), enjoys local beer or *haria* with them, participate in their evenings of *jhumur* dance. He takes their affection for granted and fails to know them as people. When riot breaks out between the Bodos and tea plantation workers, he recoils back into his privileged life, the life he detested.

He was partially responsible for endangering the lives of the workers and murder of one of the tea plantation workers Dambaru. In order to satiate his love for literature the doctor would send Dambaru to village headmaster Nazaray's house in a Bodo village. As a result Dambaru and the headmaster's daughter Deepti fell in love. Nazaray was a Bodo whereas Dambaru was not ingenious to Assam. His grandparents were transported from 'mainland' India as bonded labourers. Because of this socially unacceptable relation Dambaru was killed by the Bodo people. After the murder ethnic clashes broke out. Deepti also meets a tragic end. She was repeatedly raped by some armed men during the clashes and became a militant to vent her anger. The doctor on the other hand returns to Guwahati to the comfort of his middle class life and decides to marry a girl his parents had chosen for him. Both Rukmini of *The Collector's Wife* and the young male doctor of 'Colours' belong to the privileged section who refuse to engage with the poor, but Rukmini as a woman has her personal battle to fight against patriarchal society and its value systems. Hence they cannot be seen through the same lens.

In her short story 'Andolan' (Agitation) Goswami subverts Assamese ethnic assertion and reveals the chauvinism. The narrator of the story, an upper caste ethnic Assamese college lecturer married to a famous professor, revisits her past before the inception of the Assam Movement. Through her personal childhood memory Goswami demonstrates how Assamese ethnic pride was always and already contaminated with the hatred for the 'Other'. The narrator's hometown Barbari, a cosmopolitan multicultural town serves as a microcosm of multi-ethnic Assam which is hierarchically divided. At the top of the echelon are the caste Hindu Assamese who own the land, and the Bengali Hindu with white collar jobs. The autochthonous tribals, non-autochthonous tribals or the *Baganiyas* and the Muslims remain at the bottom of the hierarchy. The narrator recalls how her mother would discriminate against them and treat them as untouchables.

When Aminulmama came home, he knew that he could not come inside and sit in our drawing room. ... There was a different cup and saucer kept for him, but at least he did

not have to wash them himself before leaving. Others like Abdul *chacha*, who was the president of the cooperative market, but much less powerful than Aminul*mama*, would have to. As would all the Bodo, Nepali, Bihari and *baganiya* visitors to our house...¹⁷³

She also remembers an incident at school when her teacher Shashtri *saar* told her classmate Bhikhu a *baganiya* boy to vacate his seat for her even though she was late. When Bhikhu asked the teacher, “she is late, why punish me?”¹⁷⁴ he was insulted and punished. He was called a ‘coolie dog’ and made to stand against the wall. The narrator concedes that even though she felt bad for Bhikhu then, she would not allow him in her house if he suddenly shows up now. She covertly tells her readers that she inherited her mother’s detestation for the ‘Others’. This chauvinism of the middle class Assamese was at the heart of the Assam Agitation and cause of the ethnic tension and massacre of the marginalized.

In ‘Sin and Retribution’ Goswami shows the blood lust among the Assamese fighting for the cause of Assamese identity. Blinded by hate against the migrants they slaughter and loot them indiscriminately. And an earring with earlobe attached to it found in the pocket of an agitator becomes the symbol of that hate. The story is told from the point of view of an Assam Agitation protestor. The story is about one of his exploits. The narrator and his compatriots Pratap and Ramen slaughter Muslim migrants of Nayagram village and then to evade the CRP (Central Reserve Police) he takes refuge in the house of Sharma *saar* who was once his professor. The nervous professor unwillingly give him shelter for a night but when he finds out the murder weapon thick with dried blood he finds his voice and calls out his murderous ideology: “you dare come into my house with blood all over you. You dare teach my children your murderous ideology. Murderer!”¹⁷⁵

But the boys who kill are not the main antagonists in the story. The suave intellectuals like Dhaniram Saikia referred to as Saikia *saar* who brainwash the young boys and sow the seeds of hate is depicted as the main villain. The young boys are made to believe that killing the migrants is the only way to save their motherland and national identity. The narrator recalls the

¹⁷³Uddipana Goswami, “Andolan,” in *No Ghost in the City* (Zubaan: New Delhi, 2014), 101.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 108.

¹⁷⁵Goswami, ‘Sin and Retribution,’ 64.

speech of Saikia *saar* that inspired him to be a ruthless murderer. Saikia *saar* immaculately dressed in white *dhuti* and shirt told them at the headquarters:

Before long, we will no longer be Axamiya. We will all be Miya, all Muslims. Our names will have Ali or Begum attached to them, we will be speaking their filthy tongue. Our long suffering Axami ai, our dear land, will be swallowed whole by these land-hungry invaders, we will soon be part of Bangladesh. Is that what you want?¹⁷⁶

This story brings to mind Amalendu Guha and Kaustavmoni Borah's¹⁷⁷ articles on Assam Agitation that highlights the role of Assamese middle class in fuelling the fire of hate.

Uddipana Goswami's father, a Professor by profession was part of the Assam Agitation. She herself is not a critic of the six years long Agitation and she also feels strongly about the issue of migration. Unlike Phukan she sees the Indian mainland as a hegemonic force which is apathetic towards Assam's wellbeing. In an impassioned letter to her son she writes how the new Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 that grants citizenship to every non-Muslim illegal immigrant who came before 2014 from three neighbouring Muslim countries, will endanger the identity of the autochthonous Assamese.¹⁷⁸ But in her creative writing she takes a nuanced approach to the question of identity. She writes about the cultural imperialism of the mainland India. In her poem 'From Exile' she writes:

They ask me:
'You eat human flesh, don't you?'
Nowadays I do not protest
Quietly, I pay the price of being
What they are not.¹⁷⁹

She also reproaches the Assamese chauvinism, violence attached to the Agitation, the jingoistic rhetoric of the leaders and shows her empathy towards the migrants. Her poem

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 55.

¹⁷⁷See, Kaustavmoni Boruah, "'Foreigners' in Assam and Assamese Middle Class," *Social Scientist* 8, no. 11 (1980): 44-57, accessed May 30, 2021, doi:10.2307/3516752.

¹⁷⁸ As Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura are borderland states, the citizens of these states feel that they have to bear the burden of the Bangladeshi Hindu migrants if the law is implemented. And the old fear of being swamped away physically and culturally by the outsider is coming to the surface. So, in order to protect their indigenous identities their demand is to disenfranchise all migrants.

¹⁷⁹¹⁷⁹Uddipana Goswami, 'From Exile,' freedom special, *Pratilipi*, 13 / ISSUE 13 (2009) <http://pratilipi.in/2009/03/02/the-end-of-ennui-uddipana-goswami/3/>

‘if Nellie was the Name of a Woman,’ and stories like ‘Sin and Retribution,’ and ‘Andolan’ testify to that.

*

Jahnavi Barua who now lives in Bangalore had obtained her medical degree from Guwahati medical college; she has also studied creative writing from the United States. Her debut novel *Rebirth* (2010) tells the story of Kaberi who is a submissive Assamese woman married to an insensitive, abusive and unfaithful man. The focus of this novel is not the Assam Agitation, or the ethnic clashes and militancy which accompanied it. But it touches upon the topics of the Assam Agitation, the political violence generated by the various insurgent movements in Assam, and the tension between Assam and the mainland. Set in Assam and Bangalore it foregrounds the mainland India’s exoticization of Assam. Kaberi is displaced from her hometown Assam after her marriage. She is settled in Bangalore. At a party in Bangalore she faces unsavoury enquiries from an ‘ignorant’ and ‘arrogant’ woman from Bangalore. Radhika in a black backless halter dress asks Kaberi wearing her traditional *mekhla sador* about her ‘Assamese sari’. The novel here highlights Radhika’s ignorance about Assamese traditional attire. Radhika then asks her conspiratorially ‘I have always been fascinated by the North-East; it seems so dark and mysterious. Tell me, what is it like?’¹⁸⁰ Radhika wonders why Kaberi does not have ‘chinky eyes’. She tells Kaberi “...you don’t look Assamese, you know, chinki eyes and all that.”¹⁸¹ Kaberi explains that all Assamese do not look like that. Radhika then asks Kaberi about the insurgency: “What about the troubles now, you know, the insurgents and all that?”¹⁸² At this point Kaberi gets overwhelmed and she refuses to pursue the topic of insurgency. She finds it impossible to explain the cause of the Assam insurgency to a mainland citizen who has never faced marginalization. She thinks “... it is impossible to explain to an outsider how feelings of alienation have flared into a malignant blaze,”¹⁸³

In *Rebirth*, Barua dexterously weaves the political violence generated by the insurgent movements into the text. Barua here links two kinds of violence—domestic violence and political violence. Women are at the center of violence. Kaberi is a victim of domestic violence and her friend Joya is a victim of political violence. Kaberi’s husband is involved in an extra-

¹⁸⁰Barua, *Rebirth*, 129.

¹⁸¹Ibid.

¹⁸²Ibid.

¹⁸³Ibid., 129-130.

marital affair. When Kaberi confronts her husband, he slaps her. The company of her friend Sonia gives her comfort. Here Barua creates a woman-only safe place and highlights the sorority bonding between Kaberi and Sonia: “Sonia moves across and sits beside me. I bury my head on her shoulder. It is hard and bony like Joya’s but at this point it is the softest place in the world.”¹⁸⁴ Her mind then drifts towards the memory of her friend Joya who lost her life in a bomb blast. Kaberi narrates how her friend Joya became a victim of the political violence induced by the idea of ethnic homelands in Assam. She recounts how a bomb blast blew Joya’s body apart when she was going by bus to attend a health camp organized by her medical college. The camp was deep in an insurgent territory. Joya, in this novel, is a victim of mindless violence that ravages Assam but she is not presented as a helpless victim without any agency. Joya was going to the hilly territories controlled by the insurgents to provide health care to the terrorized common villagers. She was also a passionate supporter of the Assam Agitation.

Set in the post-agitation twenty-first century, *Rebirth* travels back in time to celebrate the cause of the Assam agitation.

Those had been the years of the Assam Agitation, when ordinary citizens led by young student leaders, still in college and school, had risen in peaceful protest against their own government. What provoked this unusual mass protest was the government’s treacherous policy of aiding the influx of illegal migrants from a neighbouring country so that they could vote for them.¹⁸⁵

Joya’s eighty-year-old grandmother and fourteen years old Kaberi take part in the protest march with the enthusiasm of a fervent nationalist. There Kaberi witnesses the savage power of the baton of a security man. It is evident that whenever she represents the relation between Assam and the Indian mainland or nation-state she adopts the familiar divisive narrative. She encodes how the ‘mainland’ construes Assam as the ‘Other’ and uses the cudgel of power to oppress it. In ‘Patriot’ however she shows bonhomie between a migrant from the mainland and an Assamese. Barua shows empathy towards the poor migrants living in Assam because they are subjected to marginalization, like the Assamese in the mainland.

¹⁸⁴Ibid., 137.

¹⁸⁵Ibid., 88.

Rebirth is narrated in the form of Kaberi's monologue addressed to her unborn child. Thus, it foregrounds the body and psyche of a woman. And through Kaberi's monologue Barua weaves into the text, the issues of domestic abuse, political violence and Assam Agitation. The novel is at once about the private world of a woman and the public-political arena of Assam.

*

'Patriot' is a short story which is part of *Next Door* a collection of short stories. I have selected this particular story for this study, because it interweaves the issues of militancy and anti-migrant sentiment among the Assamese people. The story is about Dhiren Majumdar, an ordinary middle class pragmatic man who worked obediently and slavishly as a government official and retired as an undersecretary in the Department of Education. He is proud of his son's success who is a Deputy Commissioner in Kamrup district. Like any common man he is scared of the gun wielding insurgent militants and like most Assamese he despises the migrants like Pyare Lal who is a dhobi.

His peaceful ordinary life takes a turn when a member of a banned insurgent group comes into his life. The boy barely out of his teens, takes shelter in the abandoned house that is part of his ancestral property, after being shot at. He discovers the boy after hearing eerie noise coming from the abandoned house and hides the information from everybody including his wife and house help. The bleeding and badly injured boy demands food and medicine from Dhiren and threatens him of dire consequences. Fearful Dhiren Majumdar smuggles food for him and tends to his wounds. He develops fondness for him. Later he finds out that Manoj chose the path of militancy driven by poverty and corruption in the state. Manoj applied for lower primary schoolteacher's post but the officials demanded one lakh rupees as bribe to appoint him. Driven by poverty his father decided to send his sister to Delhi to work as a maid. During that time men from ULFA visited his poverty stricken village to channelize their despair and anger against the corrupt system and to recruit young men.

...‘And then they came to the village.’ He said, pride strengthening his voice, ‘the men who told us that it was time to throw off the shackles of imprisonment. It was time to take back what had been ours--- the land, the jobs and our self-respect.’¹⁸⁶

In ‘Sin and Retribution’ Uddipana Goswami illustrates the blood lust of the militants and protestors of Assam Agitation. Here the eponymous hero of the story ‘Patriot’ is portrayed in positive light.

But I argue that ‘Patriot’ is not about the militants who want to drive out the outsiders and create a sovereign Assam, rather about ordinary Assamese people like Dhiren Majumdar and their compassion for all. The story begins with Dhiren Majumdar cursing Pyare Lal, a dhobi and an outsider in Assam. When Pyare Lal comes to Majumdar’s house to deliver the clothes he curses him in his mind. “Dhiren Majumdar glared balefully at his receding back. Cocky swine, he thought, bloody foreigner, he should go back where he came from.”¹⁸⁷ And it ends on a heart warming note as the outsider Pyare Lal decides to cut out a gate so that Majumdar does not trip and fall while picking up flower for his *puja* and Majumdar thanks him for his kindness.

Conclusion

Assam agitation cannot be seen in isolation. It did not appear suddenly in 1979 and did not end abruptly in 1985. It has a long history of chauvinism, and a sense of deprivation, misplaced fear of the minorities. And even after three decades, its vestiges haunt the already weak minority section. The National Register of Citizen (NRC), published in 2018 intensified the fear that the Muslim immigrants in Assam live with. The NRC was the product of the Assam accord. On July 30, 2018 its final draft was announced and four million names were left out of list. While the liberal minds were wary about the fate of those, the hyper nationalists were rejoicing this purification process. The whole mammoth exercise was undertaken to filter out the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants (Other) from the rightful Assamese citizens (self). In other words it was a scientific, sophisticated means to purge the self from the other, to build an imagined purified Assamese identity. The ‘Other’ of the Assamese ‘self’ now lives in a state of limbo. Given the vulnerability of the disenfranchised stateless minorities, there is a need for

¹⁸⁶Barua, *Next Door*, 131.

¹⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 112.

subversive/feminine texts like *The Collector's Wife*, 'Patriot', and 'Andolan' that question the dominance of the unified Assamese self and empathize with the 'Others.' I will conclude this chapter with a Miya poem¹⁸⁸ by Hafiz Ahmed to show the pall of fear under which they live.

Write
WriteDown
I am a Miya
My serial number in the NRC is 200543
I have two children
Another is coming
Next summer.
Will you hate him
As you hate me?¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸Miya poetry is a genre of poems written by the Bengal origin Muslim in Assam.

¹⁸⁹Shoaib Daniel, "I am Miya': Why poetry by Bengal-origin Muslims in their mother tongue is shaking up Assam," *Scroll.in*, July 14, 2019, <https://scroll.in/article/930416/i-am-miya-why-poetry-by-bengal-origin-muslims-in-their-mother-tongue-is-shaking-up-assam>.

Stories from Manipur: Asserting Indigenous Identity

When life comes to its end
My lifeless body
Please carry it
and place it on the peak of Father Koubru.¹⁹⁰

...

I'll spread the fragrance of peace
From Kanglei,¹⁹¹ my birthplace
In the ages to come
To every nook and corner of the world.

---Irom Sharmila, 'Fragrance of Peace'¹⁹²

The tiny state of Manipur which is a meeting point between South Asia and South East Asia is bound by Myanmar in the east, Nagaland in the north, Assam in the west and Mizoram in the south. Geographically the state is divided into the oval shaped valley at the centre and hill ranges that surround it. Manipur is a multi ethnic and multi religious state. The hilly region of the state is home to two main tribal groups the Kukis and the Nagas. The surrounding valley area is dominated by the Meiteis who comprises two third of the total population of the state. "Ethnologically and linguistically the Meiteis are Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid with Australoid, Aryan and Thai admixture (including some Negrito and Dravidian elements)."¹⁹³ The Hinduised Meiteis of Manipur however strongly believe that they are of western and Hindu descent. The state is also home to Meitei Muslims and other migrant groups. Their perspectives are marginalized in modern scholarship on Manipur, as Parratt observes.¹⁹⁴

The trajectory of Manipuri history has not been without conflicts and contestations. The people of Manipur witnessed three major seminal moments in the forms of Hinduisation in the 18th century, British invasion in the 19th century and forceful integration into the Union of India in the 20th century. Manipur was always an independent kingdom. The history of Manipuri

¹⁹⁰ A hill in Manipur, considered sacred by the Manipuri people and referred to as their ancestor.

¹⁹¹ Ancient name of Manipur.

¹⁹² Irom Sharmila, *Fragrance of peace*, trans. Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010).

¹⁹³ Naorem Naokhomba Singh, 'Religious Syncretism among the Meiteis of Manipur, India,' *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, 4, no.8 (2015):23.

¹⁹⁴ Parratt, *Wounded Land*, 5.

kingdom goes back to the first century of Christian era. The kingdom of Manipur was known by different names by the neighbouring regions.

In the first recorded treaty between East India Company and Jai Singh (King of Manipur) in 1762 the kingdom was recorded as 'Meeckley'¹². To the Shans the kingdom was known as 'Kase' and to the Burmese as 'Kathe', a corruption of the same word. The Ahoms called it 'Makeli' and the Cacharis 'Magli'; while the old Assamese name for it is 'Moglan'.¹⁹⁵

The present Sanskrit name Manipur was given in the 18th century after the adoption of Hinduism. In the later part of 17th century, a Bengali scholar and Brahmin priest named Shantidas Goshai from Shyllet (now in Bangladesh) visited the royal palace of Kangla and introduced the then king Meitingu Mayampa to Hinduism. The king accepted the new religion and changed his name to Raja Garib Niwas. The history of Hinduisation is one of coercion. The Meiteis had their own system of religion known as Sanamahism which had its own myths and legends, gods and goddesses, priests and priestesses, rituals and festivals. People proud of their traditional culture and religion were forcefully converted. To suppress Meitei religion, the Hindu Brahmins took some heinous actions in the period between 1758 and 1798. Ancient temples and deities were destroyed. Traditional priest and priestess were prosecuted. Rudimentary caste system associated with Hinduism, conservative food culture, notion of pollution, purity and impurity (Amang-Ashen in Meitei language) were introduced. Ancient scripts known as *Puyas* were burned at King Garib Niwas's order. During the period of Hinduisation, Hindu orthodoxy was so strict that lunatic, hill people (different ethnic groups of the surrounding hill ranges), Manipuri Muslims were treated as untouchables. Any contact with them could easily get ostracised or fined. And common people ended up being easy targets of being ostracised and fined.¹⁹⁶

In spite of these oppressive measures the roots of Sanamahism could not be uprooted. The roots of Sanamahi religion are still deeply entrenched in Meitei culture. Pre-Hindu festivals are still celebrated with traditional pomp and grandeur even by the Hindu Manipuris. Therefore it can be said that the Meitei civilisation was not Hinduized rather Hinduism was *meiteized* in

¹⁹⁵Naorem NaokhombaSingh, "Religious Syncretism among the Meiteis of Manipur, India," 22.

¹⁹⁶For a detailed description see, Naorem Naokhomba Singh, Meitei Religion: An Emic Perspective, *Spectrum* 6, no.1(2018): 75-76.

Manipur. Simon Lishram rightly points out that Manipur is now a conglomeration of two cultures indigenous Sanamahism and Vaishnavite Hinduism:

What intrigues me about Manipur is this: an ordinary resident of Imphal, a *Meitei* – a community which constituted the royalty of the Kingdom – is born into a family, becomes of age, is coupled in matrimony, experiences death and is remembered by his kin in the fashion common to Hinduism as practiced in mainland India. However, his or her daily prayers, routine rituals, and biddings in times of trouble are not of a Hindu character. It reflects back to a tradition which precedes the advent of Hinduism in the region.¹⁹⁷

Linthoi Chanu's stories to be discussed in the chapter bear witness to that. Stories like 'Near Immortal,' 'The Hound,' 'Hags of the Mountain' and 'The Scarlet Haophi' delineate how ancient pre-Hindu beliefs, traditions, rituals, legends and myths are still integral part of Manipuri life.

In 1891, Manipur witnessed another critical moment when it was colonised by the British after the Anglo- Manipuri war. After Manipur's defeat in the war, the British captured the Kangla fort from where the kings ruled and selected a young boy with no claim to the throne to be the king. The colonial officers ruled the kingdom for decades through the subservient kings. The period between the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 to the dissolution of British India in 1947 marks a very important and significant phase in the history of Manipur. During the British era Manipur witnessed two Nupi Lan (women's agitation), self-determination movements and two great World Wars. The women's wars or agitations are known as Nupi Lan. The first Nupi-Lan or women's agitation took place in 1904 against a repressive policy. The British consigned Manipuri men to forced labour to restore a burnt-down police shed. The women's struggle against this order lasted a week. The British successfully suppressed the uprising but had to recall the order. The second Nupi Lan took place in 1939 against a famine created by excessive export of rice right in the harvest season. The Meira Paibi women's movements against drug abuse, alcoholism and the AFSPA in the present times are inspired by the Nupi Lan. *Wari* does

¹⁹⁷Simon Laishram, "Dual Religious Identification of the Meities of Manipur: Miscegenation of Ancient Tradition and Hinduism" 3

not contain any story about the Nupi Lan but a story named ‘When in War’ recreates the Battle of Imphal that took place during the Second World War.

The third significant change in Manipur occurred when India gained its independence in 1947. Manipur at that time was recognised as an independent princely state. And it was the first to conduct a democratic election through full adult suffrage in the subcontinent. However, on 15 October, 1949 the princely state of Manipur was merged with the Union of India as a Chief Commissioner’s Province. The process of integration as L. M. Mangal observes was plain subjugation by India. He writes: “The take-over of Manipur on 15th October, 1949 was plain occupation and subjugation by India aimed at or having the effect of disallowing and preventing the popularly established Government of Manipur from exercising its sovereignty over its territory.”¹⁹⁸ Following this, there were several transitions in Manipur’s political construction. Eventually it became a full-fledged state on January 21, 1972 as a result of the North Eastern Areas (Regulation) Act, 1971. But the forceful integration which led to an uprising of the Meiteis demanding an independent state still continues. There are more than forty five active insurgent groups operating in Manipur today. Linthoi Chanu’s stories do not address the Indo-Manipur armed conflict. But a story ‘Amity in Queue’ about economic blockade mentions how common people are caught in the conflict between different state and non-state actors.

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Manipur is synonymous with Manipuri dance and theatre to the world outside. But the state also has a long history of written literature which goes back to more than one thousand years. Ancient sacred scriptures or *Puyas* were destroyed during the period of Hinduisation. But the Royal Chronicles written in archaic Meitei language are still kept in the Royal court. Manipuri literature including court chronicles, historical writings, short stories, novels, dramas and poems bear witness to the changing times. The old and medieval written literature was about the glorification of Manipuri kingdom, gods and goddesses and nature. The modern literature, on the contrary, gives voice to the conflict between the Indian State and Manipur.

¹⁹⁸ L. M. Mangal, “Annexation of Manipur as the 19th State of India: The Status of the Territory of Manipur in International Law since 1949,” *Beijing Law Review*, 11, (2020): 335, <https://doi.org/10.4236/blr.2020.111022>.

The old and the medieval Manipuri Literature spoke in general about themes such as glorification of nature, God, human nature, patriotism, soul's journey. After the conquest by the British in 1891, Manipuri Literature diversified. During the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a Renaissance with the burgeoning of Manipuri literature in all forms. Modernist and Postmodernist writers had undergone the ontological and phenomenological experiences and the soul-killing trauma of violence, conflict, abrogation of human rights, untimely deaths of the innocent and youth, suffering of the young widows, large-scale dehumanization, etc. have shaped their sensibilities and worldviews.¹⁹⁹

Some of the outstanding writers of Manipuri Bhasha literature are Khwairakpam Chaoba Singh (1895-1950), Hijam Anganghal Singh (1892-1943); and Arambam Dorendrajit Singh (1907-1944). Women writers are significant part of Manipuri literature. M.K. Binodini Devi, member of the royal family of Manipur, is the most significant woman writer of Bhasha literature. Publishing house Zubaan has recently released a book *Crafting the Word: Writings from Manipur* (2019) that brings together women's writings translated into English from Manipuri languages. It exhibits a rich history of women's writing in Manipuri language. Manipuri writing in English is a relatively recent phenomenon. The most famous writer who writes in English is poet Robin Ngangom. Manipuri author and activist Binalakshmi Nepram, known as 'the face and voice of the Northeast,' has published an English novel named *Meckley* in 2004. The book, unfortunately, is unavailable. This chapter, therefore, focuses on a relatively new book by a young writer. *Wari: A Collection of Manipuri Short Stories* a collection of short stories is written in English by Linthoi Chanu.²⁰⁰ Wari means story in Meitei. This collection of short stories has eight stories. Four stories deal with Meitei folk beliefs, religious myths and superstitions. Linthoi Chanu writes:

My love for stories of legends and myths about my culture did not stop at me just listening or reading about the wonders of it all. I wanted to share it with people I knew and people who loved reading as much as I do. I felt like it was my job to keep looking

¹⁹⁹Khongbantabam Naobi Devi, "The Ethos Of Manipur A Thematic Study Of Modern Manipuri Literature In Translation, University of Madras," (PhD thesis, University of Madras, 2017), 26, <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/243849>.

²⁰⁰Chanu was born on 15th August 1995. She grew up at Uripok Sorbon Thingel, Imphal. She completed her Master's Degree in English Literature from Pondicherry University. Writing has always been her passion. She has written a book named '*The Tales of Kanglei Throne*' for young adults.

for stories unheard of, stories that were unknown and stories that had long remained buried, never passed from the lips of the person who heard it last. I felt I needed to search, listen then pass it on just like it was passed on to me.²⁰¹

Folklore is regarded as “autobiographical ethnography, a people’s own description of themselves”²⁰² by Alan Dundes. Meitei folklore defines Meitei identity and it also serves as a discourse of resistance and protest. It is a protest against ‘hinduisation’ and ‘indianisation.’ In her stories Chanu weaves ancient folklore into the modern Manipuri life because she believes “even after great changes in our faith and beliefs over the years, nothing can replace the profound feeling of security and beliefs in ancestral deity worship.”²⁰³

Chanu’s first story ‘Near Immortal’ tells the story of an old woman with supernatural powers. It exposes society’s attitude towards old women and superstitions attached to it. The story is about an urban myth of *khoiduawa* which is a superstition related to old people and their supposed greed to be immortal. It is believed that older people who live longer than they are expected to, carry evil powers within them that are greedy for life and to satiate their greed they kill young healthy people with the help of black magic. Abok Tharo or grandmother Tharo is one such woman. She is seen as an evil witch. She is avoided by everybody, nobody talks to her. She is given meal by her great granddaughter-law as if it is meant for strays.

The writer here tries to evoke sympathy for the old woman with stooping back, messy silver hair, wrinkled arms and dry lips. At the same time, the story maintains a mysterious silence about the reality of the old woman and the evil power that lives within her. Tharo does not want to hurt anyone but she is also envious of youth. When a group of young men pass by her, she thinks: “if only she could stop her envy for youth, she thought. Youth was a mirage... it was a magic shop, always promising something but was it worth the sacrifices she had made and the pain she had inflicted herself with?”²⁰⁴ The next day a healthy fifty year old man dies after she casts a spell on him. One day her great grandson who is a doctor and lives in Bangalore comes to visit her. The doctor does not believe in the superstitions. But a few days later he

²⁰¹UT Desk, “Iwui Story: Linthoi Chanu’s eigi WARI,” *Ukhrul Times*, November 14, 2020, <https://ukhrultimes.com/iwui-story-linthoi-chanus-eigi-wari/>

²⁰²Alan Dundes, “Folklore as a Mirror of Culture,” *Elementary English* 46, no. 4 (1969): 471, accessed June 9, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41386525>.

²⁰³Chanu, *Wari*, 23.

²⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 8.

commits suicide. The ending leaves the curiosity about the evil spirit alive and does not debunk the myth.

If visibility in public spaces, financial independence, and entrepreneurship are the markers of higher status of women in society, then it can be said that women of Manipur enjoy relatively higher status in India. Women run market Ima Keithel²⁰⁵ (women's market), *Maibi* (priestess) culture, Nupi Lan or women's agitation against the British and the role of women's pressure group Meira Paibi are notable part of Manipur. Maibis are the most fascinating part of ancient Meitei religion. They are shaman priestesses who act as connect between the spiritual and living world. Women who get callings from deity and manifest this calling through incoherent speech, and trance are called Maibi. They are integral part of Meitei culture. But this story demonstrates that there is ambivalence in society's attitude towards women. On the one hand women are respected as Maibi, while on the other, some older women are castigated as witches.

The next story 'The Hound' is about *lam konbalai* or guardian deity which is an integral part of Meitei faith. Each house and clan has their own deity and they perform *Lai Haraoba* (appeasing of the spirit) to seek blessings and display their gratitude to the deity for protecting them.

'The Hound' tells the story of a college boy Pirel and a day in his life. The story is about his miserable life and how he was saved by a guardian deity in the form of a black hound. Pirel lives with his mother and sister. His father is an ill tempered alcoholic who comes home only to demand money and torture his mother. One day Pirel returns home from college and finds his mother crying. He learns that his father came home thundering for money. Distraught Pirel then goes to work at Ibotombi and Son's Garage where he works after his college hours. In the garage he gets humiliated by the garage owner. He swallows his hurt and goes back home. In the evening his father's gamble mates come to Pirel's house to ask for money. They take away

²⁰⁵ Ima keithel is the largest women run market in Asia. The stalls in the market are owned by middle aged and older women in their 40s, 50s, 60s and even in their 70s. These women are mainly sole earning member in the family who have lost their husbands in Indo- Manipur conflict or to drugs. One of the most unique features of this market is that the stalls are passed down from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law defying the patrilineal structure of inheritance. This market established in the 16th century was also epicentre of women's resistance movements.

Pirel's beloved ducks in lieu of money and beat up Pirel when he objects. Dejected Pirel goes to the Community Lake and decides to take his own life. The calm lake surface looks more inviting than his miserable life. When he is about to jump off he sees a stray black dog. The happy dog's affectionate woofing makes him change his mind. He decides to adopt the dog and returns home to his waiting mother. The dog follows him. But when he turns back the dog disappears.

A few days later on his way to college he sees lines of people in festival attire standing near the Community Lake and priest and priestess conducting *Lai Haraoba* rituals. The priestess then begins to bellow an oracle "...health and wealth for all of my devoted brood. I, as your divine guardian shall protect and watch you all just as a father follows around his toddler's first walk. It was me in the happy form of a hound..."²⁰⁶ The conclusion denote that the happy dog who followed Pirel home was indeed a guardian deity who brought him back to life from his self-destructive thoughts.

The next story 'Hags of the Mountain' is based on *Loudraobi*, a mythological creature from the legends of Manipur. The story reminds the readers of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. In that book the narrator who is an Adi woman from Arunachal Pradesh invites her big city friend Mona and her French husband to her native village. In the village they hear myths and legends of the Adi people. In this story a Manipuri girl named Darily Sapam invites her foreigner professor Dr. Roderic Ferdinand, a white man with pale hair and green eyes, to her village. Darily and her family try to entertain their first guest from the west with traditional stories and songs. Then Darily takes him to an adventurous journey to the village of Chingsu. In that remote village Dr Roderic hears a story about a mythical creature from the village chief. The creature Loudraobi, according to ancient beliefs, looks like a hag with heinous claws and slithering tongue. The hag hunts for male victims and lick their feet to enslave them forever. As a man of truth and science the professor refuses to believe in the story, but later he feels the presence of the mythical hag in the forest. "The legend from the night before exploded at the back of his head. His hair curled in a ridiculous fear. His heart throbbed and his fingertips turned ice cold. The hag could not be real!"²⁰⁷ The being however turns out to be man in camouflage jumpsuit. The story dexterously weaves the ancient legend of Loudraobi into a modern premise.

²⁰⁶Chanu, *Wari*, 22.

²⁰⁷Chanu, *Wari*, 47.

‘The Scarlet Haophi’ is also about ancient superstitions and beliefs of the Meiteis. In this story Chanu mentions ‘Laina Chenba’ or the spiriting away of children and people by wild spirits or guardian deities. In Manipur water bodies like ponds, lake, canals, rivers are believed to be the abode of ancient gods. In ancient times people lived with fear of causing the wrath of Gods in case they disturbed them. In this story an eight year girl is spirited away by a guardian deity living in a water body.

In this story an eight year old girl Ebehaibi’s parents buy a wild marshland with a huge sparkling pond at the centre. They decide to build their house on it ignoring the warnings of some old men who tell them that the pond is the dwelling place of their guardian deity. By building their house on it they disturb the spirit living in it and incur her wrath. To teach Ebehaibi’s parents a lesson, the guardian deity in the garb of a *haophi*²⁰⁸ seller come to the newly built house and gifts Ebehaibi a *haophi*. At night the *haophi* transforms into the twilight sky and Ebehaibi’s bed turns into an open field. She sees the *haophi* seller on the field. The adventurous girl happily goes with her on a magical and adventurous journey. They play with ancient dolls and still born babies who transform into crickets. Then the sky and the field again become her bed and *haophi*. As she returns from her magical journey she finds that two days have passed and her parents are frantically looking for her. The parents realize their mistake and dig up a small pond at the edge of courtyard and construct a shrine to honour the ancient guardian deity *Haoreima Ema Shampubi*.

These four stories about ancient Meitei beliefs and superstitions remind the readers of Janice Pariat’s stories in *Boats on Land* (2012). The stories like ‘A Waterfall Horses’, ‘Dream of the Golden Mahseer,’ ‘The Keeper of Souls,’ and ‘The Discovery of Flight,’ that blend the mimetic with the fantastic, transport her readers into the supernatural world of Khasi myths and folklore. Pariat’s stories subvert the authority of the written words introduced by the British and play a significant role in preserving the indigenous character of the Khasi oral culture and also sub-nationalism. Mizo writer Malsawmi Jacob, Naga writers Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire and Arunachali writer Mamang Dai also use indigenous folk elements in their writings to challenge the Hindu hegemony in Indian culture and to assert their indigenous identity. But while Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya went through a Christianization process, Manipur had to grapple

²⁰⁸ Traditional Manipuri winter shawl.

with the process of Hinduization. Chanu's stories, therefore, subvert the authority of the Hindu beliefs and rituals imposed on the Meiteis.

'The Hound' and 'The Scarlet Haophi' in this collection are of special significance since they are about the ancient pre-Hindu guardian deities and the rituals of *Lai Haraoba*. *Lai Haraoba* according to Saroj and John Parratt mirror the entire culture of Manipuri people. They write:

The *Lai Haraoba* which may be translated as 'the pleasing of Gods', is probably the greatest single key to Meitei history and culture. Despite two and half centuries of Hindu dominance, the *maibis* and *maibas*, largely through the rituals among which the *Lai Haraoba* stands supreme, have successfully preserved the essence of Meitei civilization and world view²⁰⁹.

The rituals of *Lai Haraoba* were not preserved in written form, but were passed down through oral tradition by the *maibis* (priest) and the *maibas* (priestess). Chanu's 'The Hound' plays a role in preserving the *Lai Haraoba* in the form of an English fiction.

The other four stories in *Wari* deal with themes such as drug abuse, economic blockade, the Battle of Imphal and the marginalised communities living on the *Phumdi* (floating isles) in Loktak Lake. 'Forbidden Passion', is a story about drug abuse in Manipur. Manipur is located near golden triangle which is the epicentre of international drug racket. Youth of Manipur therefore have easy access to drugs. The lack of employment, industrialization, urbanization and the growth of insurgency have intensified the problem of drug abuse in Manipur. During 1970-1980 drugs such as Morphine, Poldrom, Mandrake, Hypogen and so on were widely available and abused in Manipur. Heroin or No. 4 appeared in the early 80s which was widely available at cheap rates. *Scroll* reports that Manipur has the highest percentage of female injecting drug users (28.2%) among all Northeastern states.²¹⁰ While male drug abusers are accepted by their family, women face ostracism.

²⁰⁹ Saroj N. Arambam Parratt, and John Parratt, *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Ltd, 1997), xiv.

²¹⁰ Sarita Santoshini, "Great highs and astounding lows: The drug problem among Manipuri women", *Scroll.in*, Nov 17, 2016, <https://scroll.in/article/821617/great-highs-and-astounding-lows-the-drug-problem-among-manipuri-women>.

The story 'Forbidden Passion' is narrated by a lonely old woman who lost her parents, brother and family wealth to drugs. The woman's father was a wealthy politician. Her beloved brother Tamo was a smart kid who went to Pune to study medicine. As a child she led a comfortable life. One day her father was arrested for his links with the drug mafia. He was gunned down on the day he was arrested. Her mother then eloped with a policeman. Her brother returned after dropping out. Later she found out that her brother had become a drug addict. She tried to redeem him but seeing her brother's helplessness she started to inject the lethal "milky fluid into his beautiful vein."²¹¹ One day she found her brother's lifeless body in the balcony. He died of drug overdose. This tragic story reminds the readers of the 1980s when drug abuse was rampant in Manipur.

The next story 'Amity in Queue' is about two strangers Sakhi and Thabalei and their sorority bonding. They help each other in difficult times, share their stories and part ways. The difficult time the story talks about is the scarcity of fuel during blockades. One of the most poignant lines of the story is how the Manipuris have to live like slaves in a free country. They have to stand in a queue for hours for a basic commodity like petrol. Manipur is a landlocked state. The essential commodities are brought in by trucks through the National Highways. When blockade is imposed every essential commodity becomes scarce and expensive. Economic blockade is a regular affair in Manipur. Blockade is imposed by various groups such as United Naga Council, SHDC (Sadar Hills Demand Committee) and others for various reasons. Manipur witnessed fifty days of blockade in 2016 when the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) decided to impose a total blockade on all Manipur-bound vehicles, including passenger and goods carriers after an attack on the Nagas.

Sakhi and Thabalei meet during one such blockade while waiting for hours in a long line to fill up the gas tanks of their vehicles. Sakhi is a single mother. Her daughter is preparing for her board exams. Thabalei is a mother three children. Her husband is a driver and is stuck on a highway because of blockades. She had to leave behind her small children to collect fuel for her vehicle. They share their life stories, breakfast, hot meals, spend the difficult time talking to each other and laughing at their jokes. After hours of waiting in the queue their turn finally come. Sakhi fills her motor bike and moves forward to make room for Thabalei. But Thabalei is unable

²¹¹Chanu, *Wari*, 60.

to fill her vehicle as the fuel at the petrol pump finishes, and chaos breaks out at the pump as a result of this. Sakhi stops at the end of the road and looks back to get a final glimpse of her friend. But Thabalei vanishes into the chaotic crowd. This is a sad story about two women, and their day to day struggle written against the backdrop of macro political tension that plagues the common people.

‘When in War’ is a heart-warming story of a seventeen year old Manipuri boy Kunjabihari and his chance encounter with a Japanese soldier during the Battle of Imphal. The Battle of Imphal took place from March until July 1944 during the Second World War. The Imperial Japanese Army together with Indian National Army (INA) units launched operation U-Go to capture Imphal. And the quiet corner of British India turned into a massive battlefield. The experience of the innocent people caught between two warring sides finds no mention in the history. This story aims to give voice to their experience.

Kunjabihari, the protagonist of the story, is part of a team responsible for digging up holes to serve as bunkers during the Battle of Imphal. He is amused at the power of men to destroy each other. But he himself hates the idea of dying. One night while Kunjabihari was doing his business in the toilet a Japanese soldier stormed into the toilet. Flabbergasted Kunjabihari smacked his head with a bucket. He felt pity for the emaciated soldier and brought the unconscious soldier inside his room and brought him back to health with the help of his parents. The grateful soldier left behind a knife as a parting gift which Kunjabihari keeps as a souvenir. He also left behind the memory of Japanese folk song which he used to sing in his weak raspy voice.

nogashoriyeno
koshinshimashou
nowaeikoto
shorishimashou²¹²
[let’s do it, let’s do it]

The Battle of Imphal was the greatest defeat for the Japanese. The Japanese was the enemy of the Allied Powers but the story foregrounds the similarities between Manipuri people and the Japanese. “He would stare at the soldier and wonder why a man from the other side of

²¹²Chanu, *Wari*, 31.

the world looked so much like him. He was paler than him but his narrow eyes, small nose and dark shiny hair were similar.”²¹³

‘Floating Dream’ is the last story in the collection. It tells the story of kids living on floating bio mass or *phumdi* in the Loktak Lake and their broken dreams. Loktak Lake in Manipur is a major tourist attraction. Tourists visit the lake to see the wondrous beauty of the rich flora and fauna. But the marginalized locals living on the *phumdis*, their lived stories, and shattered dreams remain untold. This story is about those people. It revolves around three small children, Senyenbi, Phajabi and Sarif, who are eager to learn and impress their teacher but their teacher disappoints them. And a pair of weather beaten second hand tennis shoes become a symbol of their disappointment and shattered dreams.

Young Senyenbi picks up a pair of weather beaten tennis shoes from the second hand pile in the market place. She washes them, stitches the holes and is excited to wear them to the school. Like Senyenbi, her friends Phajabi and Sarif are also poor. Sarif’s father is abusive and alcoholic, whereas Senyenbi’s father has left her and her mother to live with another woman. The school and their beloved teacher Miss Likla are their only way to escape their harsh reality. So, the Kids in their faded t shirts, green skirts and second hand shoes wait for their beloved teacher. But their teacher betrays them. She does not appear. Dejected Senyenbi throws her shoes in the lake. And the shoes sink in the dark water just like her dreams. The story begins with Miss Likla sipping lemonade in her air conditioned room away from the heat and dust of the summer. The scene is presented to juxtapose the two worlds—the privileged world of Likla and the life of her pupils who live ninety kilometres away from her house. This sad story highlights the gap between the haves and have-nots in the most subtle and effective way. And most importantly it brings out the sad aspect about the Loktak Lake, the major tourist attraction in Manipur.

Conclusion

The most resistive face of Northeast India is perhaps represented by the Meitei women of Manipur. Irom Chanu Sharmila and the twelve mothers of Meira Paibi who fought against the

²¹³ Ibid., 31.

authoritative Indian nation-state, the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 and atrocities of the security forces (the Assam Rifles deployed there)—represent the fraught relations between India and Manipur. Irom Sharmila and the Meira Paibi women symbolise India's oppression and Manipur's resistance. The stories in Chanu's *Wari* are not overtly political or resistive like the naked protest by the political mothers of Thangjam Manorama or the satyagraha by Irom Sharmila Chanu. The stories do not address the conflict or the human rights violations, rapes and extrajudicial killings by the Indian Army. They instead present micro narratives of Manipuri people whose history and lived experience have not found enough attention. The writer here writes about the economic blockade, fuel crisis, drug abuse, and people living on the floating isles in Loktak Lake. She writes about the religious mythology and folk beliefs of the Meiteis that still determine their unique identity. By writing about the Meitei myth and folklore she resists Hinduization and Indianization and, and asserts her indigenous identity, thereby creating a space where the subaltern can speak.

War enriches the burgeoning Northeast writing in English. The book is an important addition to the canon of Indian Writing in English as it is one of the few Manipuri books in English available to the readers,²¹⁴ and also because every story in the book embodies the spirit of Manipur. The ancient Meitei scriptures (*Puya*) were destroyed by the Hindu missionaries in the 18th century. The burning of *Puya* assaulted the culture, religion and language of Manipur. By inscribing the indigenous Meitei religious beliefs and using Meitei words in her writing, Linthoi Chanu here reclaims the past and asserts her indigenous identity.

²¹⁴ Another book originally written in English Binalakhshmi Nepram's *Mecckely*, a historical fiction on Manipur is already out of print.

Writing the *Dkhars*, the Non-selves and their Non-belongingness: English Fiction from Meghalaya

We have
no Rama
no Sita
no Arjuna
ours, are
differently-named.

No wars were fought on grounds
in Kurukshetra and Lanka;
ours were in camouflage
up the stony tracks of the antelope
down impossible ravines and
through impassable jungles.

. . .

No one river too sacred
to purify impurities;
none of our gods
bear god-names like yours.

But if you should
twist your tongues around ours
as we learnt to twist ours around yours,
you'll get a taste of
webbed legends.

---Esther Syiem, 'To the Rest of India from another Indian'²¹⁵

This satirical and scathingly critical letter to 'mainland' India in a poetic form is written by Esther Syiem, author and Professor of English in North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya. She belongs to the Khasi tribe, the most dominating community in the state. In this poem she highlights the hegemony of the all pervasive myth of Ramayana and Mahabharata that denotes Hindu supremacy, superficial homogenization of the Indian nation and culture, and marginalization of the fragments. Syiem resists this narrow definition by putting forth a fragmentary point of view – the counter discourse of Khasi myth and legends. A major chunk of Esther Syiem's oeuvre is dedicated to Khasi orality. Her major writings including a collection of

²¹⁵ Esther Syiem, 'To the Rest of India from Another Indian', quoted in, TemsulaAo, *On Being a Naga* (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014), 135.

poems *Writing Orality* and an analysis of Khasi orality are a treasure trove of knowledge about Khasi oral culture as they enlighten the readers about the legends and its political connotation. She says that orality in the hills of Meghalaya is seen as the “identity-giver, identity-shaper and identity promoter that, whilst manifesting old identities also revamp them.”²¹⁶ But identity promotion or assertion whether in the name of Ram or Ri Hynniewtrep²¹⁷ can sometimes degenerate into aggressive chauvinism and xenophobia. We have witnessed and continue to see the insidious chilling effect of the Bhartiya Janta Party led Ram Janmabhoomi movement of the 1990s which led to Babri Masjid demolition and a slew of riots that ravaged India. We have also seen the case of Assam agitation (1979-1984) in which assertion of linguistic and cultural identity turned into a gory turf war in the form of the Nellie massacre. Both these identity based movements designed by the majority and targeted against ‘the small numbers’ (Muslims in general in the Ram Janmabhoomi case and Bengali speaking Muslim in the Assam agitation) laid bare the communal fault-line. And the ripple effect of that anti-outsiders Assam agitation was felt in the neighbouring Meghalaya in a major way in 1979 which continued till the 1990s.

The purpose here is not to negate or delegitimize Syiem’s angst and complaint by showing the cases of reverse racism perpetrated against the non-tribals by some Khasi men. Hindu hegemony is a fact. And it is also very true that the Khasis are a neglected community outside the Khasi hills. The instances of being othered in heartland India experienced by Khasi women and men are real and terrifying. An apparently small incident that took place in Delhi at a posh club is one of the recent examples of “northeast bigotry, chauvinism and ignorance.”²¹⁸ In 2017, a Khasi governess Tailin Lyngdoh was allegedly denied entry by The Delhi Golf Club as she was wearing traditional Khasi dress called *jainsem* which was assumed to be the outfit of the liminal non-elite.²¹⁹ The intention of this study is to highlight this kind of small stories of bigotry and othering as well as possibilities of friendship and alliances to subvert insider/outsider, self/other dichotomies. Therefore along with Syiem’s poem that addresses the tribal angst against

²¹⁶ Esther Syiem, *The Oral Discourse in Khasi Folk Narrative* (Guwahati: EBH Publishers, 2011),

²¹⁷ While Ram is a major Hindu God, the hero of epic Ramayana, Ri Hynniewtrep- the land of seven huts in Khasi language- is part of Khasi origin myth. The Khasis identify themselves as the children of the land of seven huts.

²¹⁸ Sweta Goswami and Rahul Karmakar, “Delhi Golf Club in row for ‘denying entry’ to woman in Khasi dress,” *The Hindustan Times*, Jun 27, 2017.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

the discrimination by the powerful nation-state, this chapter considers the othering of the non-tribals by the dominant Khasis in Meghalaya which emanates from aggressive identity assertion and fear of losing land and jobs to the migrants.

Meghalaya is dominated by three main tribal communities Khasi, Garo and Jaintia. But it is also home to migrants arriving from the rest of the country and neighbouring countries of Nepal and Bangladesh. In its inception there were more non-tribals than tribals in Shillong. According to 2011 census more than 14 percent of the population was non-tribal. But it is seen as an exclusive homeland of the Khasi, thanks to the sixth schedule of the constitution, that allows separate autonomous district council to protect its land, resources and culture from being swamped by larger non-tribal population.

Meghalaya was carved out of undivided Assam in 1972 and made into a separate state following a peaceful movement led by the All Party Hill Leaders Conference. The mist covered Shillong, which was the capital of undivided Assam, was made into the capital of Meghalaya. Since colonial times (1874 to be precise) Shillong had been the British outpost and the capital of Assam. Therefore many migrated there for better economic opportunities. The first Bengalis to make Shillong their home was a father-son duo Golam Haider and his son Kasimuddin Mollah who established the first departmental store at Police Bazaar. Thereafter many Bengalis from undivided Bengal were brought in as clerks by the British to join the administration. Nepalese were recruited in the British army and also as guards and peons to assist colonial administration. This motley of population did not remain static, they grew, which resulted in many hybrid identities. So, there are generations who were born and brought up there and had seen no other place and yet known as the outsiders. The pejorative term '*dkhar*' (pronounced as d-car) is used for these non-tribal outsiders. The '*dkhars*' suffer from anxiety of belongingness to their own homeland Shillong. Their anxiety deepens after every riotor whenever the call for the ethnic cleansing in the state grows. The anti-outsider ethnocentric movement in the state is led by the Khasi Students Union- a party of the Khasi tribal elites. Their ideology and action is driven by the "desire for an isomorphism between an essentialized notion of ethnic identity and the claims

overterritory.”²²⁰ The KSU’s slogan “*Mait Shaprang Khlorkari*” (Strive ahead sons of the soil) testify to that.

The first riot between the Khasis and the *dkhars* took place in October 1979, after a scuffle between some Hindu Bengalis and Khasis, during the immersion of the idol of Hindu goddess Kali. This resulted in mass exodus of the Bengalis. In the late 1980s Nepalese were the main target of the tribal ire but also anybody who looked non-north-eastern like the milk selling Biharis were also massacred. In 1986 after KSU’s clamour for the detention and deportation of the migrants, the state government deported over 10,000 Nepali speaking residents without bothering to check if they were indeed foreigners. From 1972 onwards new battle-lines are continuously being drawn and fresh groups of people are being defined as outsiders in Meghalaya. The state therefore is now replete with communal ghettos where the ‘outsiders’ like the Punjabis and Bengalis live.

Prominent authors who write about Meghalaya are Anjum Hasan, Daisy Hasan, Bijoya Sawian, and Janice Pariat. They highlight the experience of these marginalised hybrid identities, and by hybrid I do not mean only non-tribal migrant Shillongite²²¹ but also Khasi Shillongite whose identity as Northeast-Indian is equally fractured outside their hometown. They write about the Khasis who are treated as *dkhar*/the ‘other’ in the mainland and the *dkhars* who are treated as the ‘other’ in Shillong. And they write about a milieu which is multicultural and always in flux as a result of this plurality. The most prolific and well-known author who represents this terrain and its people is Anjum Hasan who herself was an outsider in Meghalaya but when she moved to Bangalore she remained a Shillongite. Her writing captures this hybrid nature of identity. Ever-changing characters and places are characteristics of her writing. Her first collection *Street on Hills* captures her life in Shillong. This chapter focuses on her two novels *Lunatic in My Head* (2007) and *Neti, Neti* (2009). Her sister Daisy Hasan’s *The To-Let House* addresses the same idea of non-essentialist identity. Their writing presents a subversion of stable recognizable identity. Her characters are individuals without roots, without fixed cultural and geographical base.

²²⁰Baishya, *Rewriting Nation-state*, 273

²²¹People of Shillong are referred to as Shillongite.

I will also discuss select stories from *Boats on Land* (2012) by Janice Pariat whose writing always destabilize the Khasi/*dkhar* binary. Breaking the rules of conventional realism she brings to her readers the concept of magic realism. Integrating social realism and the fantastic in '19/87' she tells the story of a Muslim tailor living in Meghalaya.

And finally I discuss *Shadow Men* (2010) by Bijoya Sawian, a Khasi author and translator who probes the most fascinating but paradoxical facet of Khasi society-its matrilineal structure. The Khasi men in her fiction are projected as self-pitying individuals because they are not patrilineal. Bijoya Sawian who bears a Bengali first name and Khasi surname because of her mixed parentage is deeply rooted in Khasi culture. One of her first works was a translation of Khasi myths. But interestingly the narrator of her first fiction is a Delhi based woman who rediscovers Shillong, the town of her childhood. She finds it to be transformed from a quaint town to a disturbed one. Her endeavour in the novel is to find the reasons. The men behind the riots and bomb-blast and murders are probed to look for the reasons and find solutions. And the crux of the problem is shown to be the Khasi matrilineal system of inheritance. This novella adds a different dimension to the gender discourse and anti-*dkhar* movement. Women are victims of power hierarchy but here Khasi men are presented as victims of tradition and customs. Positioning patrilineal social structure as a norm and matrilineality as an anomaly and regressive, it discusses how men in a small matrilineal community struggle to fulfil their patriarchal aspirations. They see themselves as worthless, since they are looked down upon by the non-tribal mainlanders because of their tribal identity. These self-pitying men are projected as the double victims of racial and gender discrimination. But how far this theory is true will be analysed in this chapter.

Lunatic in My Head: The Weight of Strangeness

The title of Anjum Hasan's first novel is appropriated from Pink Floyd's 'Brain Damage.' The title is significant on multiple levels. It alludes to Shillong's obsession with western music. The words 'lunatic in my head' points towards the disruptive non-linear stream-of-consciousness narrative technique of the novel. And most importantly the line 'lunatic in my head' brings out the mild eccentricity of the three sad *dkhar* protagonists of the novel: Firdaus, Aman and Sophie who are not happy with who they are or where they are. They want to be

someone else and be somewhere else. The eccentricity of these characters is induced by their complex relationship with Shillong – their anxiety of belonging to this beautiful town, their love for this Khasi dominated town that ironically see the non-Khasis like them as detestable strangers. At the same time there is their desire to escape from the small town claustrophobia.

This lunacy of the fictional characters becomes clear when we read it in conjunction with their creator Anjum Hasan's relationship with Shillong. In her essay 'Shillong, Cowboy Boots and Bob Dylan' she says how the self-content Dylan-obsessed local rock stars singing on stage once made her want to be someone else and be somewhere else. Therefore Anjum Hasan who is herself a *dkhar* born to eminent Professor Noorul Hasan of Northeast Hill University in Shillong left her hometown at the age of twenty six for the more cosmopolitan city of Bangalore. But her love for the hill town remained etched in her heart. And it continues to be a source of inspiration for her literary endeavour. Her first writing *Street on Hill*, her first two novels *Lunatic in My Head* and *Neti, Neti*, depict the complex milieu of the town. In an article titled 'Provincial Self-Fashioning in Fiction—Then and Now' Anjum Hasan writes, "When I set out to write my first novel a decade ago, what I wanted to explore was the small-town life, give narrative shape to my own youth spent in the town of Shillong, but also try and highlight somethings in general about the place: street life, local tongues, the extraordinary mix of people in the city, and the resulting interplay of love and violence."²²²

But it is not the spatial reality that is the main concern of the novel. This novel rather deals with her complex relation with Shillong. And three *dkhar* characters who are perennial outsiders represent this duality of love and hate. Firdaus Ansari a college lecturer, Aman Moondy an IAS aspirant and ardent lover of Pink Floyd, and eight year old Sophie Das. Through the interweaving stories of these three unhappy protagonists the novel explores the tension of tribal/non-tribal, Khasi/*dkhar* conflict, its effect on the non-tribal settlers, and the feeling of alienation felt by them. But it would be reductive to say that this novel deals only with the issue of *dkhar*'s anxiety of belongingness to Shillong. It is not a one-sided diatribe against the Khasi atrocities against the non-tribals. It rather problematizes the concept of identity, root, origin, and

²²² Anjum Hasan, "Provincial Self-Fashioning in Fiction—Then and Now," *American Book Review* 36, no. 6 (September/October 2015), 6.

home, and explores the nuanced question of non-belongingness not only to the adopted place, but also to the so-called homeland thereby shattering the concept of identity assertion.

The first protagonist with whom the novel opens is Firdaus Ansari who has her roots in Bihar but she was born in Shillong and had never lived anywhere else. And yet she is a *dkhar* to the Khasis. The second protagonist Aman Moondy's forefathers are from Uttar Pradesh. His grandfather used to own a sweet shop in Kolkata. They were looked down upon as uncultured 'U.P.-wallah' by the Bengalis. Aman's father left Kolkata as he was tired of being an outsider there. But even in Shillong the burden of being an outsider weigh them down. The third protagonist Sophie Das's father is Bengali and mother is from north of India. Therefore she is not fluent in Bengali and cannot call herself a true Bengali. All of them are outsiders in Shillong and at the same time they are outsiders in their own communities. They have no identity to rely on. They have no home to re-imagine.

The novel begins with Firdaus's perspective of Shillong as a heterogeneous cultural playing field and gives us a glimpse of the extraordinary mix of people in the town. On her way to college Firdaus observes people from multiple ethnic origins. She sees Sharon a quarter English, quarter Assamese, half Khasi beauty parlour owner; whistling college boys who are purely Khasi, restaurant employers who are Nepali migrants, a Goanese liquor shop owner, Bengalis with their *jholas* and a Sindhi. As she enters the staff room, we see the dividing lines between tribal and non-tribal identities. Firdaus Ansari's colleague Nivedita's husband is having an affair with a tribal woman and Nivedita's sympathetic colleagues Flossie Sharma and Konkona are critical about the unfaithful husband's lack of taste in women. Nivedita tells Firdaus when she advises her to ignore her husband:

"See, Miss. First of all, he is running around with some woman and dragging my name in the mud. Second, she is tribal, this woman who has totally ruined my life. I'm not saying it is better to be chasing non-tribal woman, but after all ... anyway, the point is that he's shameless."

Flossie nodded her head in commiseration.

"Yes, yes. It's pitiful indeed that the man has displayed so little taste."²²³

²²³Hasan, *Lunatic*, 11.

Firdaus, on the other hand, likes the idea of this affair as it subverts the invisible line dividing the indigenous tribal and the non-tribal settlers. She feels this way because she does not identify with her non-tribal colleague's strong sense of rootedness or share their cultural chauvinism that emanates from it.

Firdaus is a non-believing Muslim who lives with her religious grandfather. Her grandfather performs his prayers, visits the *maulvi*. He clings to his Muslim identity in a Christian dominated town. He remains confined within the closely knit Muslim community. Firdaus's boyfriend Ibomcha who hails from Manipur takes a bus every two months to visit his native land and his old mother. He speaks to the boys from Manipur in Meitei which is incomprehensible to Firdaus. She, on the other hand, belongs nowhere. Her roots are in Bihar but she was born and brought up in this Khasi town nestled in Northeast India. She does not consider herself Bihari since she was born in Shillong and had never stirred out of this place. In the eyes of Shillong she is a *dkhar*, an outsider who has her roots somewhere else. But in reality she has no roots.

I [Firdaus] should just write a letter telling him [Ibomcha] that nothing, not the smallest thing could possibly unite us. You, your homeland, your tribe, your love for your mother, your dozens of cousins, your schemes, your beliefs— I share nothing of this. I can't get onto a bus every second month and go home. There are no people I call my people. I don't speak a private language. How would you, always enfolded by this mist of connections, carrying it with you wherever you go, how would you understand this loneliness?²²⁴

Her boyfriend Ibomcha, well connected to his Manipuri roots, fails to understand Firdaus's loneliness, her solipsism. Firdaus therefore decides to break off with him over a lunch of greasy noodles but fails to communicate her decision. Their conversation in the restaurant touches upon the important questions of religious identity, belief-system and insider-outsider relation. Ibomcha questions Firdaus's Islamic identity since she eats pork. Firdaus tells him that she is a non-believer, an outcast, a *dkhar* within her own community. This feeling of non-belongingness connects the three characters of the novel. All three of them live like isolated islands encaged within their thoughts.

²²⁴Ibid., 167.

Middle aged Firdaus Ansari has now accepted her lot as a college lecturer in a Shillong college. She has made peace with her small town humdrum life comprising of her reluctant students, the unfathomable *The Old Man and the Sea* which she tries to teach them, an unfeasible M. Phil thesis on Jane Austen which she cannot seem to finish, her disciplined grandfather and self centred boyfriend. The novel begins with Firdaus reading the lines from *The Old Man and the Sea*, and ends unceremoniously with her teaching *The Old Man and the Sea* to her reluctant students to demonstrate the mundane nature of her life.

But twenty years ago before her parents' death she had a big city dream much like Anjum Hasan. Firdaus thought about going to Delhi and enrolling in a university. She wanted to venture out and experience the real world beyond the confines of suffocating small town existence.

All through her college she had imagined what it would be like to leave home, visit her parents in the summer vacations, describe to them her life in the big city, and already, even much before she and her parents had begun to plan for this move Firdaus had imagined herself (the Firdaus irrevocably changed by her exposure to the real world) disappointed by her parents' inability to grasp the immensity of the difference between the big city and the small town. She had never been to Delhi, but already then she saw clearly how her experience of it would swallow her life in Shillong, drown it, push it to the verge of meaninglessness, and how this irrelevance would be symbolized most starkly by her parents' incomprehension of what it meant to live in the metropolis.²²⁵

After her parents' tragic death in a train accident the idea of leaving Shillong, boarding a train was terrifying to Firdaus. The restless and repressed desire to leave Shillong and start afresh somewhere else however remained entrenched in her mind. That repressed wish in her restless mind manifests itself in the strange habit of constant hand washing. She itches to wash her hand. She fills her buckets, mugs, jugs so that she always has enough water to wash her hands. This eccentricity or lunacy is symbolic of her repressed depression.

The second protagonist and another sad character of the novel Aman Moondy also wants to flee his home town and feels becoming an IAS is his only ticket to the world outside, but fails to crack the exam. His encounter with the Khasi-*dkhar* binary is more violent than that of Firdaus's. Through him Hasan presents a Shillong that lives under the shadow of fear. Shillong

²²⁵Ibid.,107.

presented through Aman's *dkhar* eyes seems threatening, violent and hostile. The strangeness, sense of fear and alienation of the *dkhar* people in the hill town of the Khasis is reflected on the streets of Shillong. In an incident Aman Moondy goes for a night walk and is gripped by a sense of fear as he encounters a drunken man. Then he reflects, "Dkhars were afraid of tribals, tribals were afraid of dkhars."²²⁶

Aman's section begins with him and his Khasi friend Ribor deciding to take a stroll on a rain soaked afternoon. They pass through schools, Lake Dale, and graffiti in dripping red paint saying "We are Khasis by blood and Indian by accident." The message in the graffiti in dripping red colour clearly expresses the India-Northeast divide, and the anti-India stance of the Northeast in general and Meghalaya in particular which has eighty percent Khasi tribal population. Shillong streets on which Aman casually wanders becomes testimony to that conflict. Aman and Ribor then stop by the aloo-muri wallah (street food seller) Sarak Singh's stall. At this juncture the readers are introduced to the physical violent side of the Khasi-*dkhar* conflict. A bunch of rowdy Khasi boys harass and manhandle the poor non-tribal migrant Sarak Singh and asks Aman to go back to his home state when he intervenes. Aman's reflection on his *dkhar* status and his incapability to stand up for himself or migrants like Sarak Singh at this point is pivotal to the theme of the novel.

He found it particularly hard to defend himself against racist attacks because he was never sure who he was defending – an encroacher, a permanent guest of the hills-people, or someone who belonged here because he had never lived anywhere else? Which one of these? He didn't know.²²⁷

His anxiety of belongingness to Shillong makes him shed secret tears at night. And only solace or escape for him is his obsession with Pink Floyd. He writes letters to Pink Floyd member Roger Waters and innocently believes that Waters reads his letters and gets inspired by his poetry in spite of the obvious silence on his part. At the end of the novel, Aman's father comes to his rescue. He arranges Aman's escape from Shillong. He tells him to go to Delhi and stay with his cousin, and explore his options in that city of opportunities.

The third unhappy protagonist is eight years old Sophie Das. Like Di and Addy in *The To-let House*, little Sophie is also surrounded by a rancid normative adult world with its fights

²²⁶Ibid., 72.

²²⁷Ibid., 37.

and reconciliations. Sophie's father's jobless status and his desire for a son and disappointment at the birth of the second daughter are the bone of contention in the Das household. Sophie's mother constantly nags her husband and asks him to give tuition instead of waiting endlessly and fruitlessly for a respectable job at a university. One day the proud Dickens quoting Mr. Das slaps his wife in response to her 'uncultured' suggestion. Sophie runs away from this scene of violence. When she returns she is amazed to see that a scene of normalcy has been restored as if nothing had happened.

Apart from this wretched adult normalcy of her home little Sophie also has to wrestle with the anxiety of belongingness to Shillong like her adult counterparts Aman and Firdaus. Sophie's experience at a Khasi wedding party with which the aptly titled section 'Sadness' ends is the most impactful example of racial discrimination in the Khasi Hills because of the subtlety with which the episode is dealt with. Sophie accompanies her Khasi landlady Elsa Lyngdoh to attend a Khasi wedding. She in her plain frock feels unwelcome and alienated amidst the Khasi wedding guests in their silk *jainsem*. At the tea ceremony the serving girls ignore Sophie because of her non-tribal features. The foodless Sophie becomes a subject of joke for two Khasi girls. They giggle at her humiliation and take pleasure in the fact that a *dkhar* has been shown her place. Sophie feels "that the nicest thing, the nicest thing by far ... would be if she could somehow turn into one of them, somehow become Khasi."²²⁸ She therefore concocts an imaginary story about her parentage. According to her story she is the adopted daughter of Mr and Mrs. Das and her actual father is a Khasi gentleman Syiem.

Like the wedding party, Sophie's own home is also an abode of racial and cultural intolerance. But here the non-tribal *dkhars* are contemptuous of the tribals. Anjum Hasan often brings to the fore the sense of cultural superiority among the non-tribals and their contempt for the tribal way of life. We have already witnessed it in Firdaus's staffroom. In the section titled 'Anger' Sophie's mother rues about the lack of culture in Shillong and tells her husband:

We are not starving yet, but the point is, life can't go on like this. Why don't you apply for a job elsewhere, outside Shillong? Where is it written that we have to stay in

²²⁸Ibid., 99.

Shillong? There is nothing in this place anyway. No jobs, no culture. I have no one to talk to. And look at Sophie- she is picking up all sorts of tribal habits.²²⁹

She shows her displeasure at her daughter's spending time with the landlady Elsa Lyngdoh because "after all their culture is different". She goes on: "My worry is— what will happen to Sophie? She will lose her culture. As it is she knows nothing about anything. Ask her about the Mahabharata, why Diwali is celebrated, who Meera Bai was — nothing zero."²³⁰ It is pertinent here to go back to the opening quote of the chapter where Esther Syiem criticizes the hegemony of high culture of Hindi heartland, the pervasive presence of Ramayana and Mahabharata and the sense of contempt with which Khasi culture is looked at. Mrs. Das's worry about losing her culture in the tribal terrain of Shillong only corroborates Syiem's words.

In this adult world of hate and intolerance little Sophie finds solace in the imaginary world of the story books. She identifies with the fictional characters of the books. The imaginary world of her books is more real to her than the real world comprising her frustrated and fighting parents. According to her imagination her real home is on the other side of the hills. Her immersion into the imaginary world is the metaphor for her secret sadness. Sophie's section, in the novel, ends with little Sophie lying on the bed and reading her book, *Hit and Run Holiday*.

It is evident from the above discussion that this novel is not a monologic diatribe against Khasi racism. It is not about *dkhar* communities and racial discrimination that they face. It is about people and their shared sense of sadness. It is about fluid identities, its definition and positioning. Aman Moondy who is a Hindu male, therefore a dominant citizen in the heartland becomes an 'outsider' in the hinterland of Northeast Hills. And Aman's Khasi friend Ribor, who is a dominant subject in Meghalaya, becomes a subject of contempt in the mainland. The narrative of discrimination and insider-outsider relation changes when a Khasi steps out of their cocoon of Khasi hills and crosses the Meghalaya border. A Khasi youth like Ribor with his slanting eyes, his language which is spoken only by a few thousand people belonging to the Khasi community will become a stranger. His strangeness forces him to sheepishly crawl back to the streets of Shillong where he feels at home. Yet people like him intend to venture out of their cocoon and explore the cruel world outside which we will see in *Neti, Neti*, the sequel to this

²²⁹Ibid., 286.

²³⁰Ibid., 287.

novel. In *Neti, Neti* we will see little Sophie as a grown-up woman exploring the violent city of Bangalore.

Deconstructing Shillong-Bangalore Binary in *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*

Daily News and Analysis in its review of *Neti, Neti* (2009) describes the novel as a Bangalore novel. It says “One has heard of the Delhi novel and the Bombay novel, and finally, here’s a Bangalore novel.”²³¹ *Mint* in the review of this novel says “*Neti, Neti* can legitimately claim to be the definitive ‘new Bangalore’ novel ... an unflinching investigation of the immigrant narrative.” These lines from the review are included as a hypertextual element of the novel as they appear as the blurb of the novel. But the blurb fails to capture the pervasive presence of Shillong within the city of Bangalore. The novel which opens and ends in the cosmopolitan city of Bangalore presents Shillong as a constant leitmotif. Therefore calling *Neti, Neti* a Bangalore novel is only half truth. *Neti, Neti* can also be described as a Shillong novel. The novel offers a constant juxtaposition between the commercial, cosmopolitan city of Bangalore and the sleepy, music loving hill town of Shillong. And at the same time it also problematizes this binary between these two locations. Shillong which begins as a surreal place representing home, comfort and beauty degenerates into a real place of ugliness, violence and corruption, whereas the violent, cruel and ugly city of Bangalore becomes home to the protagonist.

Twenty four year old Sophie Das relocates from her hometown Shillong and settles in Bangalore for a better way of life. She builds a makeshift life for herself in the city comprising of a small flat where she lives as a tenant, a car obsessed boyfriend, a brain dead job as a subtitle transcriber. But her thoughts are replete with Shillong nostalgia. She creates an idealized image of Shillong – an isolated beautiful hill town untouched by the modern India’s rush for prosperity. This is evident from her imaginary conversation with Ribor (Aman’s friend from *Lunatic in My Head*). On her way to work in the busy streets of Bangalore she imagines Ribor, a music shop owner from Shillong. She whips up an imaginary conversation with Ribor for whom she harbours secret unrequited love. The make believe conversation opens thus:

He would ask her if she missed Shillong and instead of giving him the easy, ready answer, she’d tell him the truth, which is that what she really missed was Beauty. When people talked about hill towns, they imagined them as holiday destinations. They

²³¹Review excerpt on book cover, *Neti, Neti*, by Anjum Hasan.

imagined them as places that offered a brief respite from reality and were for that reason adorable. They imagined them as collection of views and things to do. But this was not what Sophie meant when she confided to herself and an imaginary Ribor about the thing she missed most. The white gushing of Elephant Falls or the green expanse of Umiam lake were nothing compared to waking up early on a winter morning because you were in love with someone who hadn't noticed, and watching through the frost on the windows two boys in jackets and mufflers kicking a ball around in the football field and an occasional taxi rolling out through the morning mist. . . .²³²

Here Sophie paints two contrasting pictures of Shillong. Shillong from the perspective of an outsider who sees it as a holiday destination, as a collage of Elephant Fall and Umiam Lake, and she paints a picture of insider's Shillong— a languid place of serenity and sadness. Bangalore, on the other hand, is described as a city that “possessed a great zest for ugliness” where “everyone just wanted to obscure the view, blot out the sky, erase the gaps. The city not just proliferated but kept reproducing itself. You never turned a corner and experienced an epiphany.”²³³ The lack of natural beauty and imagination of the city is reiterated few pages later when Sophie on her way “felt she could go on being driven through the streets all day and never arrive anywhere- only find more shops, more apartments, more streets more houses. No hill or sea or river or valley to put a natural stop to this mad proliferation.”²³⁴

In the first few pages Hasan builds a violent image of Bangalore in order to juxtapose it with the serenity of Shillong. Cruelty, violence and mad rush of capitalism are represented through some gory images. Constant reference to road rage, road accidents, a casual accidental death of a small child in a shopping mall, and finally the murder of a call centre employee Ruksana by her boyfriend Ringo Saar are symbolic of the prevalent violence of Bangalore. The death of a small boy in a shopping mall specially stands out because of the casualness with which it is narrated and also because of the usual apathetic reaction of the city to this incident. In the third chapter titled ‘The Fatness of These Pursy Times’, which succinctly captures the voluptuous affluence of the city and the restlessness claustrophobic feelings of Sophie in her host city, the incident takes place. Sophie visits the new mall—

²³² Hasan, *Neti, Neti*, 35.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid., 163.

“...clogged with Saturday night shoppers and in the atrium, on a tiny ramp a fashion show was in progress. Girls with jewellery glinting like mirrors, wearing richly embroidered saris of silk and georgette, walked up and down coyly and occasionally, sat on a chaise longue, considering each other wordlessly through eyelashes weighed down with mascara. Men photographed the models with their cell phones.”²³⁵

The new mall is a microcosm of the affluent and aspiring Bangalore in which everything including women are rendered into ‘things, things, things’ to lure burgeoning bourgeoisie. Sophie wanders along the labyrinthine alleys of the malls selling “shoes and sweaters, leather handbags, crystal ware, cookie tins, ballpoint pens and shiny cars, scents, posies, wicker bins ... brandy, coffee, long umbrellas, novels, kurtas, strong white mints ... shampoos, trousers, cheeses, flowers, sandals knives and ...”²³⁶ And then suddenly the tragedy befalls as a telling reminder of the cruelty, apathy repressed beneath the veneer of shimmering opulence. “A sudden scream rang through the air, echoing eerily in the vault and dying out slowly.”²³⁷ Then a pandemonium broke out and Sophie pushed people aside and saw a child sprawled face down on the Mercedes Benz kept as a centre piece in the mall.

Though Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* serves as a constant reference point in *Neti, Neti* but it is another French novel that is more pertinent. The description of shopping mall through the eyes of Sophie, a migrant in Bangalore, reminds the reader of Emile Zola’s fin de siècle novel *Au Bonheur de Dames* (1883) set in a luxurious departmental store. Zola, in *Au Bonheur de Dames*, presents a critique of capitalist culture of 19th century France. In *Dames* the twenty year old protagonist Denise arrives in Paris from her hometown and encounters shiny shops selling luxurious things. At the beginning of the novel the mall, a simulacra of Le Bon Marche, is a glimmering dome: “Une exposition de sois. De satins et develours y épanouissai.” (An exhibition of silks, satins and velvet blossoms.)

The mall reference appears again when Sophie’s cynical friend Shiva tells a sarcastic tale about a mall stampede on its opening day. He describes the new mall in his middleclass neighbourhood as a hideous UFO which has appeared overnight “decorated like a Christmas tree, lots of parking space, giant posters of chicks in the windows, great discounts.”²³⁸ The fatal but

²³⁵Ibid., 68.

²³⁶Ibid., 72.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸Ibid., 128.

ludicrous stampede occurs because the mall announced exchange offers on its opening day. Fortunately the narrator Shiva's mother managed to get away with just a bruise on her arm.

These violent images set in a mall remind of another French novel *Au Bonheur des Ogres* (1985) by Daniel Pennac. This *Serie noir* fiction also explores the connection between urban violence and the glossy consumer culture. Like *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *Au Bonheur des Ogres*, *Neti, Neti* uses city stores as a site and symbol to delineate moral and philosophical degeneration of urban capitalist society. It symbolizes the feverish pursuit of material things.

The latent violence and neurosis repressed beneath the surface of nouveau riche class of the city is represented through another peripheral episode. Sophie's colleague Swanthi's mother's madness and her eventual suicide are emblematic of the city's inability to come to terms with the sudden material growth. Swanthi's mother who was raised in abject poverty selling *ragi muddo* to truck drivers fails to deal with the sudden wealth. Her economic condition suddenly improves when her son gets a job in Dubai and her daughter in a BPO. She does not know what to do with the gold her son sends from Dubai and degenerates into madness and eventually commits suicide. Through these apocalyptic images of mall stampede, suicide, and accidental death Hasan offers a scathing critique of commercial modernity and consumer capitalism of Indian metropolis.

This violent city of road rage, traffic accidents, ugliness, capitalist oppressiveness lures a lot of economic migrants. People from all over the country migrate to Bangalore for a better way of life. The Silicon Valley of India has emerged as the chosen city of lifestyle migration in India. According to a study Bangalore gets 47.7 percent of highly educated migrant/s (graduates and post-graduates).²³⁹ "Boys from smaller towns in the state coming to study in engineering and medical colleges; girls from the Northeast coming to work as waitresses or run tiny beauty parlours; men and women from one or another big city moving here because Bangalore seemed to urgently need designer boutiques and five-star hotels and architectural firms and advertising companies ..." (163). Sophie too, a graduate, left her hometown and settled in Bangalore with the hope of a better future but it seems an 'idiotic hope' to her. And the final act of

²³⁹[ChittaranjanTembhekar](#), Bangalore gets lion's share of educated migrants, |TNN , Feb 5, 2013, 07.16 AM IS

disillusionment happens when her friend Ringo Saar murders his girlfriend Ruksana in a fit of rage. At this juncture Sophie leaves Bangalore.

The actual physical journey from Bangalore to Shillong takes place in Chapter eight aptly titled 'Flight'. Leaving behind "Bangalore its mile after mile of flat rooftop, colorless houses packed together in a way that suggested only unpleasant things – haphazard construction, claustrophobia, over-population."²⁴⁰ Sophie flies back home, a magical place nestled atop a mountain.

This commercial megacity of hopeful migrants, burgeoning shopping malls, call centers, BPOs is contrasted with the provincial, quiet and static life of Shillong frozen in the capsule of timelessness. This side of Shillong is represented by a few characters from Sophie's native life. Ribor, a CD shop owner, and uncle Rock, for instance, represent Shillong's penchant for music, its parochialism, stasis and also its resistance to change or to mingle with the rest of the nation. Ribor, a forty year old Khasi Shillonghite, is a Shillong incarnate to Sophie. Sophie equates him to a relic of Shillong, an ancient tribal settlement detached from the rest of the world. She considers "Ribor a lovely relic, ... perhaps of the faraway history of Shillong of which she knew only a little – the tiny tribal settlement, its people roaming the hills for millennia, carving little kingdoms ..." When she first imagines him in the busy streets of Bangalore he is like a little Shillong dwarfed by a Bangalore city. When Sophie tells Ribor about leaving the town his reaction clearly demonstrates his reluctance to explore the word beyond the mountains. Ribor who had never stepped out of Shillong says,

It's hard. Many people think it'll work out but they come right back. They're embarrassed for a few weeks – you ask them what happened and they say – I couldn't find a good place to stay, or it's too hot, or everyone out there thinks we are Chinese and tries to rip us off. And then, after a while they forget about it and it's as if they never went.²⁴¹

Uncle Rock, modelled on Shillong's Dylan, Mama Lou or Uncle Lou, symbolizes Shillong's obsession with counter culture icon Dylan. Dylan worshipping lead singer of an ever changing band Uncle Rock is invited to perform in a music competition in Bangalore. Amidst the cacophony of head banging metal music his amateurish Shillong blues gets lost. And he feels he does not fit here. On his way back he tells Sophie-

²⁴⁰ Hasan, *Neti, Neti*, 181.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

Something about the feel of the place- it's not right. I didn't get the right vibe. No one really has the time to have a conversation. And whether you're from Shillong or Assam or Nagaland ... the whole damn Northeast – it's all the same to them. They can't handle us – our strange names, our strange language, our strange accents. And if someone happens to actually sit down with you, buy you a drink, wants to listen to your stories, his damn phone will ring. After this happened a few times, I said to myself – Uncle Rock's not coming this way again."²⁴²

The image of Shillong as cocoon of comfort, sameness, timelessness, serenity, imagination and epiphany slowly disintegrates. As the story unfolds Sophie sees a Shillong that is riddled with scams and corruption. And most importantly Sophie realizes that Shillong is not a fairytale magical place frozen in time. It is changing and becoming more like Bangalore. Shillong too like Sophie wants to see what lies outside its mountainous borders. It too wants to participate in the feverish pursuit of material pleasure. Ribor who formerly is seen as a relic of Shillong is now eager to make a life in Bangalore.

Hasan deconstructs the idea of Shillong as a cultural epicentre. Shillong's obsession with the counter culture icon Bob Dylan also serves as a potent symbol of the place. It has been already mentioned that Bangalore to Sophie is a city devoid of imagination, beauty, art and literature. Therefore Hamlet sprouting Sophie's father, R. K. Narayan's *Swami and his Friends* which she won as an award in school, *Madam Bovary* which she borrowed from a local Shillong library are reminiscences of Shillong. Hasan here satirically replicates Shillong's fanaticism for Dylan. It is a known fact that the quiet town celebrates Dylan's birthday every year on the 24th of May. Dylan enthusiast Lou Majaw known as Shillong's Dylan organizes Dylan concert every year on the bard's birthday. And this piece of news found a mention even in New York Times.²⁴³ This love shows that Shillong is still stuck in the 1960s anti-establishment counter cultural movement.

The fictional Uncle Rock, a bona fide Dylan worshipper, organizes a concert where he claims Dylan himself will perform. But it turns to be a great scam. Ribor's brother Michael

²⁴² Hasan, *NetiNeti*, 183.

²⁴³ SominiSegupta, "Town in India Rocks (No Use to Wonder Why, Babe)" *The New York Times*, June 23, 2008.

dupes Uncle Rock by sending fake emails impersonating as Dylan. And the Dylan concert turns out to be a farcical event ending with angry mob attack.

Sophie's own family based in Shillong for over two decades also begins to show signs of decay and rupture. Sophie from her Bangalore perspective sees her family as an example of sameness. When she comes back to Shillong she sees clearly that a change is brewing under the surface of stasis. She is shocked to find that her father has decided to move to Shantiniketan and her mother to Varanasi leaving behind Sophie's illusory never-changing home. And as the final act of rupture Sophie's sixteen year old sister gets pregnant. Das family gets the foetus aborted. And a disillusioned Sophie along with her sister returns to her new home Bangalore, to her free spirited bunch of friends and car obsessed boyfriend.

The 'Other' within: Problematised Khasi/dkhar Binary in *The To-Let House*

The To-let House (2010), long listed for the Man Asia Literary Prize 2008, and short listed for The Hindu Best Fiction Award 2010 is the debut novel of Daisy Hasan. Daisy like her sister Anjum is an expatriate Shillonghite who looks back at her strife-torn hometown for literary inspiration and reconstructs the experience of the non-tribal migrants living in that troubled zone of exception.²⁴⁴ She holds a PhD from Swansea University, UK and is currently working at University of Leeds, UK. From the privileged vantage point of her diasporic position she recounts the story of the small hill town of her childhood marred by trauma of violence. Shillong therefore is an old town shrouded with childhood fantasies and mysteries. In the novel the town unravels itself as an old forgotten children's book whose "pages are stuck together from being closed so long."²⁴⁵

Like the author, the first person narrator of the novel, twenty seven year old Di is also an expatriate Shillonghite. Di left Shillong at the age of eighteen. After achieving her flight and freedom from the stifling existence in Shillong she returns to her 'highland home' which she describes in these words- "A ghost town existing within the hills that, in the dark, look no longer like hills, but a shroud for the town's secrets."²⁴⁶ Hasan in this novel aims to unearth the uneasy

²⁴⁴ I use the term 'zone of exception' because basic law of the country does not apply here. The non-tribals victimized by the tribal do not get justice.

²⁴⁵ Hasan, *The To-let House*,

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 221.

secrets of the past, the personal history of the characters and through them the collective memory of the people.

As discussed earlier the picturesque hill town and capital of Meghalaya which is referred to as the 'Scotland of the East' by the European settlers became the centre of political turmoil after achieving statehood in 1972. The dominant Khasi population led by militant outfits and student unions started unleashing violence against the non-tribal settlers in the name of economic deprivation and ethnic assertion. Shillong witnessed three violent riots in 1979, 1987 and 1992. Daisy Hasan uses her debut novel to problematize this idea of Shillong as a picturesque holiday destination and weaves newspaper reportage on violence and unrest that took place in 1979, 1987 and 1990s into a fictional narrative depicting the characters of Di, Kulay, Clemmie. The novel unfolds in strife torn Shillong in 1979 when anti-*dkhar* protest was at its peak. Through the incoherent monologue and memory of a *dkhar* child called Di she weaves a dystopian world of hate, violence, abuse and fear. She takes the reader into an abyss of darkness where putrid smell of burning tyres, and the stifling fear of the non-tribal settlers permeate the atmosphere. "Pungent smoke from smouldering rubber hits her (May's) whisky-smothered throat. The smell is emanating from the tyres the Union boys are burning in the field to protest against exploitation by the *dkhars*."²⁴⁷ And a Khasi mansion and its adjacent to-let house where Di, her sister Addy and their mother live as tenants becomes a microcosm of all that is wrong in Shillong.

Daisy Hasan here uses the fashionable postmodernist literary tropes like word play, neologism, apparently illogical dreams, and multiple disjointed narrative voices. In writerly fashion she aims to disrupt the logic of ethnic assertion, the ethnic cleansing movement of Meghalaya, to dismantle the Khasi/*dkhar* binary, and explore Khasi selfhood. The novel is divided into three sections. The first section 'Mansion' begins in 1979 when Shillong witnessed the first bloodbath. The Second section 'A Home and the World' takes a five year leap and depicts the gory time between 1984 and 1988. The short last section 'Truce' takes place in 1997. These three sections depict the trajectory of Di's life. Di was just nine years old when the novel opens. Her childish nonsensical monologue communicates a very gloomy world of the adults living in the Khasi mansion and her innocence and naiveté heightens the effect of the darkness.

²⁴⁷ Hasan, *House*, 41.

Her nameless mother referred to as Ma is an unwed mother of two. The father of her children refuses to marry her so, to teach him a lesson, she leaves his home and takes refuge in the to-let house. But she is perpetually immersed in his thoughts. She hopes that he will find her one day and beg her to marry him. ‘A peach coloured wedding sari with an apology of gold brocade and a splash of blue along the border,’ an inseparable part of her existence is the symbol of this self-defeating futile hope. Her landlady May, the owner of the mansion and the to-let house, is also a tormented soul. She is the daughter of a wealthy, corrupt and well-connected Christian Khasi bureaucrat and uncaring parent L. Hilarious. To spite her party hopping uncaring parents she marries a tailor named Governor. But her husband Governor turns out to be an alcoholic adulterer, a wife beater, and a paedophile. He indulges in sex with Redcoat, a maid of the mansion. He also makes nine years old Di the victim of his drunken lust. Perpetually disgruntled May degenerates into an alcoholic adulteress looking for love and comfort into the arms of men like Benjamin.

While the world of Ma, May and Governor expresses the stifling and depressing existence of the adults living in a dystopian town, May and Governor’s son Kulay symbolizes the anti-*dkhar* sentiment festering in the young Khasi boys. Kulay is one of the central characters in the novel. The novel opens with the description of Kulay. Through him Daisy interrogates the binary of Khasi/*dkhar* or self/other which is at the crux of the Khasi insurgency. She also deconstructs the binary by showing the presence of the other or the *dkhar* non-self within Kulay. Kulay identifies himself as a highborn authentic Khasi self and positions himself against the polluting outsiders. The novel begins with twelve year old Kulay who thinks himself as a blue blooded Khasi and hates the outsiders settled in his hometown. With disdain he looks at the multi-ethnic landscape of Shillong from his mansion and feels proud of his blue blooded Khasi identity. “He is neither a Momodome [the dome of the gurudwara] nor a Mohammedan, but a blue blooded, stone eyed Khasi. He knows he is different—cleaner and clearer than them, the outsider.”²⁴⁸ He dreams of a pure world of the authentic Khasis, “he wants to join the Union. He wants only white skin and red blood and pure shit.”²⁴⁹ He joins the union, perpetrates violence including shoving a stick into a pregnant *dkhar* woman in order to achieve his dream. In his reveries he envisions an idyllic Khasi kingdom of the pre-fall golden era when the golden ladder

²⁴⁸Ibid.,9.

²⁴⁹Ibid., 94.

connecting god and man was not snatched away.²⁵⁰ He wants to lead the Khasis into that “pre-fall golden” age by eliminating pollutant outsiders.

Kulay now sees it clearly in his reverie. The land— his land—lies blistered by cracks and deluges and imaginary red and blue lines that divide it into several desiccated pieces. His vision is of the sixteen huts from which his people are believed to have come. He hopes they can be raised to heaven on the branches of the golden oak vine again.

He does not hear the people cry that the golden bridge between heaven and earth is broken, for sin has covered the world and all they can be sure of is that this golden boy will, as other golden boys must, ‘like chimney sweepers come to dust.’²⁵¹

Through the character of Kulay and his school mates Martin, Terri and Revise, Daisy shows how the anti-outsider ideology was vitiating the minds of the young boys in Meghalaya during the insurgency. Twelve year old Kulay tells ten year old Addy to go away from his homeland on the occasion of his sister Clemmie’s birthday.

Why do you call us dkhar? Addy is brave and angry.

‘Because you are.’

‘We’re not. We’re Indian.’

‘Indians get out ...’²⁵²

To undermine this irrational hate that the young Khasi men harbour, Hasan foregrounds the existence of non-Khasi elements in Kulay. Hasan mentions his fondness for *dkhar* food cooked by Addy and Di’s mother. He likes the *dkhar* food *pakor*s but disdainfully calls it ‘fuckoras’. Later as a young man he becomes drawn towards his *dkhar* tenant Di. But he is perpetually fearful about his love for anything non-Khasi. At the end of the novel Daisy problematises Kulay’s identity affirmation by revealing his true identity. Kulay actually is the illegitimate child of Governor and an illegal Bangladeshi immigrant Redcoat. He is murdered by the union boys because of his half-breed identity at the young age of twenty.

²⁵⁰ The Khasis trace their origin through the myth of sixteen huts and they call themselves the children of seven huts or the u Hynniewtep. According to their creation myth, Ka Jingkieng Ksiar (meaning The Golden Ladder) at Sohpetbneng Peak was the ladder of life through which the progenitors of the Khasis could ascend and descend daily. This ladder forms a connecting link between man and God. As the term, "Sohpetbneng itself means, "the navel of heaven", it implies that this forms the centre through which the progenitors of the Khasis known as u Hynniewtep began their journey into this world. The myth of u Sohpetbneng also speaks about the snapping away of Ka Jingkieng Ksiar (golden ladder) which H O Mawne (1991) says has caused a chasm between god and man.

²⁵¹ Hasan. *House*, 120-21.

²⁵² Ibid, 75.

The ethnic cleansing movement or the son of the soil movement in Meghalaya was led by Khasi men. One of the leaders of the movement was Martin Narayan Majaw who was born in Kerala to a Kerala Namboodiri father and Khasi mother. Martin who lives in Guwahati ironically said, ““We don't like outsiders to stay here [Meghalaya]. We tell them, come here, appreciate the blue sky and the green hills, and then go away.”²⁵³ Modelled on him the fictional leader of Student's union in *The To-let House* Lambert Narendra Don mouths similar dialogue of intolerance in the novel: “The existence of our people is at stake ... fight now or be wiped out.”²⁵⁴ Narendra Don like Majaw is a much hated half-breed, son of an inter-ethnic marriage. He himself is a symbol of heterogeneous Shillong and the impossibility of achieving purity, but he dreams of imposing a false sense of homogeneity. Kulay's secret identity and final revelation unfurls and dismantles this dream of homogeneity and purity completely.

Kulay's real mother, the shadowy and spectral character of Redcoat further complicates the subjectivity of an authentic Khasi self. Governor's mistress and biological mother of Kulay is not only non-Khasi but also an illegal foreigner without any country. Daisy Hasan touches upon the issue of illegal Bangladeshi and Nepali migrants in Meghalaya and their phantom existence through the character of Redcoat. Shabbily and gaudily dressed Redcoat with melanin patches falling out of her face lives in the servant's quarter and runs a small kiosk near the mansion. Her non-Khasi features like the big red *bindi*, bigger nose ring, and large eyes repel Kulay. His disgust grows as he learns about his parentage. His disgust and anger are manifestation of his self-hatred. He hates himself because of his hybridity, he is unable to accept the non-Khasi blood in him so, Kulay throws her out of the mansion in a fit of rage. She takes refuge in a camp and then leaves Shillong in a truck full of hapless migrants. She returns to her impoverished country where electricity has not yet reached, where people spend their lives in unyielding fields.

In 1986 the issue of illegal migrants in Meghalaya became a burning issue. The KSU targeted 75,000 Nepalis living in the state for generations. The belongings of the Nepali labourer were looted and burnt down. The state government tried to clear a Nepali graveyard to make

²⁵³ SumitMitra, 'Assam, Meghalaya in the throes of widespread communal trouble,' *India Today*, February 11, 2014, issue date: December 15, 1979, updated: January 29, 2015 13:45 IST

²⁵⁴ Hasan, *The To-let House*, 116.

space to set up a refugee camp. Thousands had to live in a few camps in subhuman condition. Nepalis who left for their home country were rendered non-citizens as Nepal government refused to give them citizenship.²⁵⁵ But their condition is an unheard story in the media and academia. Daisy Hasan's *The to-let House* gives an interesting spin to the issue of illegal migrants. The Red-coated woman living at the periphery of a Khasi mansion leaves Shillong but she leaves behind the pound of her flesh in the form of Kulay giving the impression that it is impossible for the tribals to regain a pure land. The migrants are an intrinsic part of its being.

Meghalaya is also home to legal and illegal Bangladeshi migrants as it shares a highly porous 443 kilometre border with Bangladesh. Driven by politics, poverty and overpopulation the Bangladeshis cross over to the North-eastern states of India for a better way of life. In the wake of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, many Bengalis from Sylhet were allocated settlement area by the then government of Meghalaya headed by B.B. Lyngdoh. The legal migrants were settled in different parts of Shillong, in areas designated as revenue plots. They are considered to be the biggest threat by the local population. Most Bangladeshis are either prosecuted or pushed back to their country. The Nellie massacre that took place in Assam in 1983 is the most violent example of anti-Bangladeshi sentiment in the Northeast. Janice Pariat who has written a beautiful humane story of Khasi-*dkhar* relationship in her *Boats on Land* shares an excerpt from her private conversation with her Khasi family members to highlight the anti-Bangladeshi sentiment or the *dkhar* syndrome prevalent among the Khasis.

Conversation meanders around the recent news: a dozen manual labourers from Bangladesh, which shares a 443-kilometre border with Meghalaya to the south, have been caught without 'papers' in the East Jaintia Hills. The discussion is easygoing until I defend the Bangladeshis.

The room fills with mounting anger and almost everyone there contributes to a barrage of accusations, ranging from the simple—"they're here to take our land and resources"—to the more elaborate, that in a quest to Islamicise the world, a certain party in Saudi Arabia funds immigrants from Bangladesh to set up businesses in Shillong. I don't think, I say, that a person with little more than a shirt on his or her back emigrates with any grand political agenda in mind. They leave because they have nothing to stay for.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵Ramesh Menon, 'Nepalis in Meghalaya face tribal wrath amid official apathy', *India Today*, February 15, 1988.

²⁵⁶Pariat, "insider/outside", http://janicepariat.com/?page_id=4768/.

Both Janice Pariat and Disy Hasan show empathy towards the disenfranchised ‘other’. And Hasan creates female characters who are capable of accepting the otherness and difference unlike the masculine selves who are socialized into aiming for the monolithic phallic self. Kulay as an egoistic man wanted to achieve pure Khasi identity and wanted to lead his people to an exclusivist Khasi land. And what happens to his egoistic self is of utmost importance. “At one searing moment, he almost surrenders. He knows things about the union. He might trade these for a few minutes of relief, he feels like a rat, a mole screaming: ‘Not me. Not me. Not me, but Martin, Terri, and Revise from up the lane.’ I’m not a bus or a cat or a rat I’m a mole and I live in a hole.”²⁵⁷ These lines that appear as a blurb in the novel is useful in understanding the thematic crux of the writing: the rupture of the egoist self. He breaks in police custody he wants to reveal the secret information about the union to buy some relief and respite from physical torture. Daisy describes him as a rat in a hole.

Kulay perishes but Di manages to survive as a decentered subject who is capable of loving even a town that is hostile to her. Di leaves Shillong to experience the taste of uncertainty, adventure and freedom in the big city. She returns to Shillong after learning about her mother’s death. After returning she revisits the people and places of her childhood memories: an ageing May, her mansion, and Kulay’s grave. As she meanders through the town she is gripped by the deafening love for her hometown Shillong and reflects “I am arrested by my memories of the past and hear the immutable sound of my love for the town... I realise that it is love that has finally saved me. I understand, then, that there can be no escape from this deafening love.”²⁵⁸ Unlike Kulay she does not resist her impulse to love the ‘other.’ Her ability to love beyond the self brings to mind these lines: “For me, the other is the other to love. . . . To respect strangeness, a completely foreign other, for me, is absolutely vital, it is for me the supreme value”²⁵⁹

Janice Pariat’s *Boats on Land*: Magic amidst Turmoil, Riots and Curfews

Janice Pariat was born in Jorhat Assam and grew up in Shillong. Later she moved to Delhi to study English literature at the elite St. Stephens College and thereafter she went to London’s School of Oriental and African Studies to pursue her interest in art history. She has

²⁵⁷ Hasan, *To-let House*, 140.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 225.

²⁵⁹ Conley, *Writing the Feminine*, 144.

traversed many loci and according to her own admission she shares the most complicated relation with Delhi. In an essay written in 2014 she explains why she cannot call Delhi home.²⁶⁰ She was beaten up by a motley of Hindi speaking locals including a woman in blue salwar kameez at Lado Sarai. She, a young woman travelling with her male friend in her western attire, with North-eastern features and limited grasp over Hindi language was an outsider to the locals attacking her. She tells how till date Delhi to her symbolizes the tall lady in blue salwar who beat her up with sandals. Spurred by the killing of a young Arunachali boy Nido Taniam, she wrote this piece to relate her own experience and the daily humiliation and discrimination that people from the Northeast states face in the capital. And yet she is fiercely against reinstating any binary, or asserting her Khasi identity. She says: “Categories dehumanise. We might apply them to rocks and plants, but when we slot human beings into Hindu, Muslim, Dalit, Brahmin, Northeastern, South Indian, we crush the infinite complexities we are capable of harbouring.”²⁶¹ Therefore almost in rebellion she wrote her two fictional works *Seahorse* and *Nine Chambered Heart* about fluidity of identity.

For this study however I have chosen her first fiction, a collection of short stories that is located primarily in Shillong. I argue how through these stories she tries to undermine the logic of hierarchical categorization and power-relations between opposite categories of colonizer/colonized, written/orality, modern/primitive, insider/outsider and Indian mainland/Shillong. *Boats on Land* by Pariat is a collection of fifteen short stories. The collection which was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award presents multifarious stories set in different time zones from the 19th century to the contemporary times and they deal with different themes. But what binds these heterogeneous stories is the magical Khasi Hills against which they are set. Pariat uses an oft quoted line from Alejo Carpentier’s the prologue to *The Kingdom of the World* “I found the marvelous real with every step” as a prologue to her *Boats on Land*. Carpentier’s novel about the ruins of emperor Christoph in Haiti evoked in the author a sense of enigma. Carpentier termed this sense ‘the marvellous real.’ Pariat transposes the concept of ‘marvelous real’ from the ruins of Haiti to the context of Khasi landscape. The world of the

²⁶⁰Janice Pariat, “The Place I Cannot Call Home,” February 2, 2014. [Janicepariat.com.http://janicepariat.com/?p=1741](http://janicepariat.com/?p=1741)

²⁶¹Pariat, “Putting People in a Box,” February 9, 2014, <http://janicepariat.com/?p=1758>.

Khasis is infused with mystical folklore where belief in the supernatural, the fairies, and were-tigers coexists with the realities of the mundane life. Pariat integrates these marvellous elements with Khasi political history to defamiliarise the real, and the norm like the hegemony of the British civilizing mission, or the reality of anti-*dkhar* agitation, the anti-*dkhar* slogans, bullets, curfews and incursion of modernity. By so doing, she questions the validity of the real.

The collection opens with ‘A Waterfall of Horses.’ The unique title of the opening story captures the concept of magic realism. The story serves as a prelude to the collection and represents the sinister supernatural power of the Khasi chants and mantras and their ability to influence and control the nature. Pariat in the story demands from her readers a complete suspension of disbelief as it narrates a fantastical story about the magical power of spoken words. Here horses of the British soldiers hypnotised by the Khasi mantra rush to their death and jump off a cliff. Though the story is about supernatural beliefs, it is not set in some timeless twilight zone of the Khasi hills. It is set in the mid nineteenth century colonial era in an isolated nondescript Khasi village of Pomreng. The temporal setting not only gives a realistic tone but also imparts a political edge to the narrative. In the nineteenth century the British expansionist mission was making inroads into the Northeast of India. And by the mid nineteenth century it had established its economic bastions in the form of tea plantation and cultural hegemony in the form of missionary schools. The unnamed narrator of the story, a thirteen year old boy works as an errand at a tea estate. Through his innocent eyes we see a story of colonial exploitation and a supernatural war against it. The narrator’s mother is a maid for the wife of Father Jones, the manager of the tea plantation and he works as a help. There he meets British soldiers Pat, Trotter and gentle sahib Sam. While Sam is busy romancing a village belle the rest busy themselves with drinking local beer, bullying and whipping villagers and plantation workers.

The locals and the British soldiers existed companionably as long as they remained confined to their places. But the situation started to worsen when the soldiers began participating in village affairs. The breaking point between the soldiers and the villagers took place when Trotter tied a banana seller to his horse and dragged him for a day. The farmer could not survive the atrocity and died. The village council decided to avenge the death of one of their own. But they were aware of the superior power of the gun that the British soldiers carried. A suggestion

came from an old man. He said softly “we can fight with words.”²⁶² With the power of *ktien* (spoken words) they decided to wage a war against the modern weaponry with the power of spoken word or *kaktien*. The old man was the bearer of the word, the one who can perform rituals and communicate with the gods. Their war was also a symbolic cultural war between the written alphabet and khasi orality, *kaktien*.

The story is set in the 1850s and Khasi language was transcribed into Latin script by Thomas Jones in 1842. Jones also established missionary school to spread modern education. The child narrator’s mother who works as a maid for Jones’ wife tells how the memsahib wanted to teach her the alphabet. But she explains to the memsahib:

... The memsahib says she would like to teach me to read and write, with something called “alphabet” that her husband has invented for our language. I explained to her that we have no need for these things— books, and letters, and writing— and that everything we know about the world is in the sound of our words, *kaktien*. It has the power to do good...²⁶³

She explains to her son the power of the word to do good. She tells him how mantras could heal wound, stop bleeding and get a hungry traveller food. The story subverts the hegemony of the written word, authority of the reality, the truth, the norm, and the neat categorization that Pariat fiercely opposes and thus how the indigenous character of the oral Khasi culture and also sub-nationalism gets preserved.

The British first made its presence felt in the Khasi Hills in 1824 when they sealed a treaty with Jaintia Rajah Ram Singh. The British subsequently facilitated the entry of the missionaries. Rev. Thomas Jones I was the first Welsh Calvinistic missionary to come to the hills. He set up a school at Sohra village (Cherrapunji) and it was Jones who in Sohra village gave Khasi language its script in 1841. Thomas Jones is acknowledged as the father of Khasi alphabet. The earliest works to be translated by Thomas Jones were the *Kot Tikir* (Christian Catechism, 1841), *Ka Jingduwai* (The Lord’s Prayer, 1842), and *Ka Testament Bathymmai* (portions of the New Testament, 1843). But even in the 21st century orality continues to exist as a subversive tool along with the written culture in the Khasi Hills. Esther Syiem says: “They [Khasi orality] are not discarded relics of the past. They have withstood the trauma of change. Despite the incursion too, of a popular culture that has introduced new lifestyles and challenged

²⁶²Pariat, *Boats*, 11.

²⁶³ Ibid., 12.

existing values, the elements of Khasi culture have remained significantly unchanged at the deepest level.”²⁶⁴ Pariat shows in ‘The Discovery of Flight’ and ‘The Keeper of the Souls’ the presence of the surreal and the supernatural putting up a resistance against the globalised mercantile pragmatic modern world.

There are other stories that weave reality and supernatural together like ‘At Kut Madan’ and ‘Dream of Golden Mahseer’ that foreground the violence of World War. These stories de-normalise the presence that we accept as real. As Rosemary Jackson says: “...fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis on which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent.”²⁶⁵ Having established the importance of oral tradition in Khasi life, I will now move onto the next story that calls for the importance of the magic realism of the Khasi orality in the time of riots, clashes and curfews. For this study I have chosen ‘19/87’ that is set in the times of anti-*dkhar* agitation. The title of this story has double significance. It calls to mind the year 1987 in which a riot took place and the importance of number in traditional gambling based on archery. And she conflates the two to tell a story of a *dkhar* and his uncanny friendship with a Khasi.

1987 is one of the most significant years in the history of Shillong. In that year a major ethnic riot took place when Nepali coal mine workers were expelled from Meghalaya by agitating KSU resulting in clashes, killings, destruction of public property and an exodus of thousands of Nepalis from the state. ‘19/87’ is set against this backdrop of fear and violence. The protagonist Suleiman’s radio nonchalantly testify to that when in creaky sound it reports “... the shoot-out at Laban last week. There have been minor cases of unrest throughout the town, and encounters between KSU and CRPF continues. Bah Lyngdoh, the SP of police says security will be tight, specially with the KSU rally tomorrow.”²⁶⁶ But there were stories that were not reported in newspapers and radio. The alienation, humiliation that the *dkhars* experienced and the experience of the Khasi people who did not feel one with the cause of ‘chase the *dkhar* out’ movement. ‘19/87’ explores one of these small stories of Suleiman and Banri.

²⁶⁴Esther Syiem, *The Oral Discourse in Khasi Folk Narrative*, 29.

²⁶⁵Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1993), 4.

²⁶⁶Pariat, *Boats*, 112.

At the centre of '19/87' it has a thirty four year old Muslim tailor Suleiman. His father migrated from Hindi heartland of Lucknow to Shillong in 1955 when Suleiman was just two years old. His home of three decades suddenly became hostile to him when Meghalaya became an independent state. The indigenous tribal communities became aware about their rights in the newly born state and started seeing the migrants as the usurpers. In 1972 they targeted the Bengalis, in the 1980s the subject was the Nepalese. In order to suppress this unrest the government deployed CRPF which predictably intensified the tension. And curfews, blackouts, protest-march and stone pelting became the norm of the day. Khasi-outsider relation degenerated. The Khasi neighbours who used to share local gossips with Suleiman started avoiding him as if he had some fatal contagious disease. Stones were hurled at his home. He was constantly threatened with slogans like "Dkharliah, minh ha Shillong" (you bastard outsider, get out of Shillong). But Pariat here tries to circumnavigate the brutal and sensational aspect of the insurgency. She instead chooses to tell a non-dramatic but poetic story of Suleiman's life and how he snatches fleeting moments of happiness by flying kites, having lunch at a restaurant and by just staring at the starry sky.

The story therefore is woven around the rather nondescript solitary life of Suleiman who spends his days cooking simple meal of rice, smoking *beedi* under the starry night and surreptitiously thinking about his Khasi client Chritian's plump arms hesitantly. His days are occasionally punctuated with incidents of stone pelting and name calling. The story also ends non-dramatically with Suleiman smoking his *beedi* under the starry sky emptied of kites and wires, listening to the rustling of leaves and clanking of tin roofs and waiting for the next day to set in. In the midst of this nothingness something uncanny happens. A Khasi youth Banri comes to his tailoring shop to get his jacket mended.

Suleiman loves flying kites, a sport, and a passion he inherited from his late father. He is skilled at flying kites, at pulling the string and vanquishing his enemy kites. And Banri loves betting. He likes to try his luck at lottery. When he comes to Suleiman's tailoring shop, he comes to know about Suleiman's unique power to interpret dreams and work out winning numbers for gambling from it. Suleiman gives him winning numbers and he wins. That is how they bond over the lottery numbers. His magical power to decipher or calculate winning numbers from his dream is the source of their non-normative friendship.

Karongbiria or archery is the most significant sport among the Khasis (especially indigenous Khasi socio-religious cultural organization belonging to the Niam Khasi faith). A lottery system known as *teerjuwai* based on this ethnic sport is a unique feature of Shillong life. And traditionally the lottery numbers are calculated from dream interpretations. For example, a person dreaming a Khasi boy represents number 6 and girl represents number 5. If the persons dream them together, then both the numbers are taken for the lottery. This practice is prevalent in all parts of Meghalaya and the success of lottery is credited to dreams since the dream world or *ramia* among the Seng Khasi is of great importance.²⁶⁷ But despite being a Khasi Banri is unable to interpret numbers from his dream. His grandmother taught him but he failed to master the magical craft. Suleiman on the other hand despite being an outsider can do that. And thus the distinction of who is an ‘insider’ and who is the ‘outsider’ gets blurred. Banri is intrigued by this quality. Banri therefore comes to Suleiman’s place to share a drink and once he takes him to a Muslim restaurant to have a delicious meal.

Like Suleiman who is a *dkhar* among the Khasis, Banri is also a misfit because he does not believe that fighting or driving the outsiders out is the solution to the unemployment that the indigenous tribes face. On a tipsy evening Banri tells Suleiman: “People keep asking me why I don’t join KSU... that it’s cause for our tribe. They think...I see it in their eyes when they look at me...they think if I don’t then somehow I’m not a real Khasi.”²⁶⁸ Their friendship is centred on their shared sense of loneliness, non-belongingness and inability to escape that. Suleiman fears that he has to leave his hometown but has nowhere to go. And discontented with the protracted violence and small town inertia Banri wants to go somewhere else with Suleiman. But he is bound by responsibilities. The sad life of people like Suleiman and Banri impels the author to question the futility of agitation. And she invokes the sense of mystery and fantasy to challenge its veracity.

Shadow Men: Rationalizing anti-dkhar Violence and Problematizing Matriliney

Rolling hills shrouded in fog offer a perfect setting for mystery fiction. Bijoya Sawian takes advantage of this picturesque landscape of Meghalaya by setting her maiden thriller in the

²⁶⁷See, Deepshikha Carpenter, “Beliefs and Dreams: A Comparative Narrative between the Seng Khasi and the Dimasa Tribes,” in *Dimasa History Language and Culture*, ed. Monali Longmailai (Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2017).

²⁶⁸Pariat, *Boats*, 114.

sleepy town of Shillong. She effectively uses the beautiful hill town of Shillong with its misty mountain, rain soaked atmosphere as a setting for her mystery fiction. Sawian's maiden fictional work revolves around the mysterious death of a *dkhar*- a Bihari migrant worker employed by an affluent and influential Khasi family. And from the very onset a thick curtain of mist engulfs the scene to highlight the sense of mystery. The novella begins with these words- "Ghostlike, the mist floated up from the gorge below, encircling the gardener's cottage and the trees, sleeping languidly through the flowering shrub."²⁶⁹ The presence of Shillong however is not limited only to its natural beauty. The novella sinks deeper into the socio-political milieu of the town. *Shadow Men* is designed as a socio-political thriller. It is not confined within the structure of the whodunit fiction. This novella, ostensibly a murder mystery, unravels to its readers multiple interlaced problems of Meghalaya. It exposes the realities of ethnic violence, corruption in the political class, unemployment, Khasi-*Dkhar* binary, the friction between 'mainland' India and its Northeast fragment and most importantly the inherent contradictions within the traditional custom of Khasi matriliney.

In the novella two narratives run parallel. The narrative with which the novella opens involves three main characters, Raseel Singh, Kmie U Flin and Robert. Raseel the first person narrative voice is a Delhi based Sikh woman who has come to her friend Aila and her husband Aibor's home in Shillong post her parents' murder to recuperate from the mental trauma. Kmie U Flin is a middle aged matronly Khasi maid of the household. And Robert is a Khasi youth who works as a driver for Aila and her husband Aibor. The second narrative revolves around a few Khasi henchmen of a corrupt MLA of the opposition party, Bah Jus, who orchestrate murders and riots in the town. The henchmen named Ksan and Strong are disgruntled Khasi men. Through these two interlinked narratives Sawian unearths unpleasant issues plaguing the Khasi Hills.

The novella opens with Raseel witnessing mysterious happenings in the servants' cottage from her balcony. She sees three men going and coming out of the cottage surreptitiously and hears a gunshot. Later she discovers that one of the Bihari gardeners of the household Suresh has been murdered and another Bihari gardener Ravi has been charged with the murder. Actually Bah Jus's hired men have killed Suresh under his instruction since he wanted to manufacture the

²⁶⁹Sawian, *Shadow Men*, 1.

news of law and order problem under the regime of the present CM. And Aila's husband Aibor has helped him stage the crime in his house in order to get a lucrative contract.

As already mentioned *Shadow Men* does not strictly adhere to whodunit format. Who killed Suresh, whether he was killed at all, where Ravi went after the murder and who is impersonating as Ravi in jail are irrelevant questions here. Sawian instead intends to explore through this murder mystery the disgruntled voices of the Khasi men and their resistance to the traditional practice of matrilineal system of descent.

Bijoya Sawian born to a Khasi mother and a Bengali father and married to a Sindhi was brought up in Shillong in a Khasi matrilineal family set up. She has seen the Khasi Hills and its degeneration into chaos from close quarters. She has witnessed insurgency, ethnic violence, and unrest brewing beneath the serene veneer of a quant hill town. Therefore she says in an interview that writing about Shillong in her first fiction was a cathartic experience. She wanted to give voice to the repressed voice of the Khasi youth incarcerated within the claustrophobic milieu of the small hill town, to the ordinary Khasi men who are victims of corrupt political system, unemployment and an eroding matrilineal system. Syiem makes her authorial intention clear in *The Telegraph* review of *Shadow Men*: "The sadness I felt when I thought of all those young people out there, with few or no alternatives beyond these hills because of their circumstances, suddenly poured out in a huge torrent of words. I suppose it was a kind of catharsis for me".²⁷⁰ She wants to represent the bullies on the street who threaten the *dkhars* and extort money in the name of ethnic assertion. In this narrative the men who are mere peripheral figures in the works of Anjum Hasan and Janice Pariat like the nameless boys who bully Sarak Singh, Ribors's brother Michael, the bullies in '19/87' who are there to highlight the violent side of Shillong are given a voice. Here the anti-social elements like Strong, Ksan, Ribok who kill the *dkhars*, burn cars, torch government offices under the instruction of manipulative political leaders, have been allowed to present their side of the story. And their side of the argument is predicated only on the patriarchal ideology. Their story is nothing but a diatribe against the Khasi matrilineal system. They are patriarchal men stuck in a matrilineal system.

²⁷⁰ SudiptaBhattacharjee, "Cathartic twist to pastoral whodunit - Shillongite in novel debut after Oxford stint," *TelegraphIndia.in*, April 28th, 2010. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/north-east/cathartic-twist-to-pastoral-whodunit-shillongite-in-novel-debut-after-oxford-stint/cid/532686>.

As we know, the most distinguishing characteristic of the Khasi community that marks them out for special attention is their matrilineal system of descent. Khasi society is governed by the three major norms of matriliney. In Khasi community descent is traced through female line meaning the children are known by their mother's name. The youngest daughter or *Khadduh* inherit ancestral property. And they also follow the principle of matrilineal or uxorilocal system of residence. Therefore once married to the *khadduh* the husband has to move to the wife's house. This unique feature of their social system has garnered much attention from the anthropologists, researchers and journalists. Charles Lyall in his introduction to Major P. R. T. Gurdon's *The Khasi*, one of the earliest account of Khasi custom and belief, describes Khasi matrilineal system in these terms:

[Khasi] social organization presents one of the most perfect examples still surviving of matriarchal institutions, carried out with a logic and thoroughness which, to those accustomed to regard the status and authority of the father as the foundation of society, are exceedingly remarkable. Not only is the mother the head and source, and only bond of union, of the family... she is the only owner of real property, and through her alone is inheritance transmitted. In the veneration of ancestors, which is the foundation of the tribal piety, the primal ancestress [*Kalawbei*] and her brother are the only persons regarded. The flat memorial stones set up to perpetuate the memory of the dead are called after the woman who represents the clan [*maw kynthei*], and the standing stones ranged behind them are dedicated to the male kinsmen on the mother's side.²⁷¹

It is interesting to note that here Lyall describes Khasi society as matriarchal implying that women are socially, economically and politically dominant.²⁷² Even at the present time the Khasis are seen as female dominated society. Karolin Kluppel, a Berlin based photographer, who has won many prestigious awards in 2015 for her photograph collection on Khasi women in one of her interviews says: "In the Khasi culture women and girls have a special standing in the society and, of course, this exceptional role 'produces' a great self-confidence. I did not want to do a classical documentary on their culture, but tried to capture this outstanding role somehow. I decided to make a portrait series of the girls because I was so impressed by their self-assured

²⁷¹ Charles Lyall, introduction to *The Khasis* by P. R. T. Gurdon (London: Macmillan, 1914), xix.

²⁷² See, Tilput Nongbri, 'Khasi women and Matriliney: Transformation in Gender Relations' in *Gender, Technology and Development* (Sage: New Delhi, 2000), 360-390.

appearance and thought this must be how matriliney becomes visible.”²⁷³ Kluppel in her photo series “Mädchenland” or “Kingdom of Girls” visually captures this supposed self-confident visages and behaviours of Khasi girls. ‘Mädchenland’ showcases striking images of girls playing languidly amidst pristine backdrop of Mawlynnong, a remote village in Meghalaya. One image shows a girl playing with severed hooves. Another image captures a young girl wearing traditional dried fish necklace. Through these images of ‘empowered girls’ Kluppel aims to represent a unique feature of Khasi tribe, their matrilineal tradition. She in her photo series portrays the Khasi society as an embodiment of female empowerment. Kluppel presents Khasi community as a prehistoric utopian ‘herland’ where women rule. But like Lyall’s observation, Kluppel’s representation of Khasi matriliney is a simplified summarization of Khasi society which, in reality, is a much more complex terrain. Esther Syiem, an insider, for example, has this to say about this tradition: “... they (Khasi women) seem to rule the home. However, scratch the surface and it is apparent they are as often as not victims of male dominance.”²⁷⁴

Syiem here brings to the fore the inherent paradoxes within Khasi matriliney. Tilput Nongbri in her article too problematises the misleading notion of khasi matriarchy by elaborating on the phallogocentric ideology upon which khasi society is built. She says how Khasis reproduce the masculinist, essentialist universal binary of active, rational, public masculinity and passive, emotional, private femininity. Men are believed to be physically and intellectually superior to women. They are invested with judicial powers and are treated as protectors of women. The Khasi term *u rangbah*, meaning adult man, neatly captures the phallogocentrism of Khasi society. The term is made up of a combination of two words, *rang* which is an abbreviation of *shynrang* means man and *bah* which means bear or carry on the back. Combined together, the word *u rangbah* projects a Khasi man as a powerful being entrusted with high moral integrity and the physical and mental ability to shoulder the multiple responsibilities of society. Women on the other hand are conceptualized as men’s inferior other. They are seen to be physiologically and mentally weaker than men, in need of the man’s guidance and protection. As the ‘weaker sex,’ women are expected to submit themselves to the authority of their brother, mother’s brother, father and husband. Like in western culture, men in Khasi society employ the

²⁷³ Karolin Kruppel, email interview, quoted in Evelyn Nieves, ‘Girls Rule in an Indian Village,’ *The New York Times*, June 3, 2015.

²⁷⁴ Esther Syiem, ‘Khasi Matrilineal Society: The Paradoxes Within,’ in *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India’s Northeast*, ed. Preeti Gill (Zubaan: New Delhi, 2013), 135.

authority of language as a tool to exercise their power over women, legitimise the structure of gender hierarchy, unequal gender roles, and to prepare and maintain a firm ideological base to subjugate and control women. The gendered terms, phrases, traditional adages like *urangbah khadar bor and kakyntheishibor*²⁷⁵ or, an oft-quoted Khasi simile, *kakynthei, kakhynnah* analogically equating women with children, are perfect examples of that.

These linguistically construed gendered ideas are used to exclude women from the corridors of power. In Dorbar Shonng, which is a traditional decision making body, women are not allowed to participate. In legislative assembly there is no woman representative. Even their inheritance laws reflect male hegemony as the youngest daughter is only the custodian of the property. She is not the owner. Women have no authority over the property without the consent of the male members specially her maternal uncle. It is safe to say that the Khasis were always already a male supremacist society. Khasi women never enjoyed the absolute freedom that men enjoy in any patrilineal set up because matrilineal structure was invented by men. Khasi men in pre-modern times were mostly warriors. They had to stay away from home, their life was precarious. Therefore matrilineal arrangement was most suitable in that scenario. Women were chosen to be the custodian of race by the men to preserve their race. And with the changing times, and its accession to the Indian union the dormant nexus between patriarchy, ethnic identity and the state has now become even more prominent. The most telling example of this is the movement spearheaded by Khasi Students' Union (KSU) and the Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai (SRT) to replace matrilineal practice in favour of a patrilineal one.

Sawian neither celebrates the superficial relative power of women in Khasi matriliney like Kruppel. Nor does she question or critique the male supremacist ideology and misogyny blatantly. The main purpose of the novel is to project the erring men as the victim of the matrilineal system of descent and inheritance. They commit crime because they do not enjoy the same status that men in patrilineal-patriarchal society enjoy. In *Shadow Men*, The SRT men are touted as few intelligent men in the state who are raising a movement against the obsolete matrilineal system in favour of a more 'modern' and 'progressive' patrilineal structure.

The shadow men, or the eponymous characters of the novel, are the product of the same ideology of male supremacy upon which societies outside Khasi Hills are structured. The all

²⁷⁵which means, a man has 12 units of power/energy whereas a woman has only one unit.

pervasive ideology of masculine supremacy makes these men insecure about their masculinity in a matrilineal structure. The world is ruled by the dictum of the 'name of the father'. Wife takes her husband's name and children their father's. The role reversal or as Syiem puts it, the egalitarianism of the Khasis make their men uncomfortable. Therefore Sawian's *Shadow Men* takes patriliney as normative and natural. Robert says in self-pity- ". . . men here are in a terrible state. We are sad, we are desperate and all these terrible emotion stem from that. We own not a patch of land, not a penny, nothing. Even our children belong to their mothers."²⁷⁶

In patriliney the children belong to the father and women accept it as a norm. They do not use gender injustice as an excuse to commit crime, neither do they show any inclination towards committing crime but Robert here is trying to rationalize murders, rioting, ethnic violence perpetrated by Khasi men. According to his argument Khasi men feel worthless because of matrilineal line of descent and therefore indulge in violence to vent their frustration on the *dkhars*. Similar kind of argument is made by a Khasi man in a newspaper article in which he says: "Only mothers or mothers-in-law look after the children. Men are not even entitled to take part in family gatherings. The husband is up against a whole clan of people: his wife, his mother-in-law and his children. So all he can do is play the guitar, sing, take to drink and die young,"²⁷⁷

The henchman Strong's tirade against his mother-in-law who disrespects him because he does not have a government job is another specimen of male ego, and their lust to dominate the household.

That old hag had the guts to tell me to throw away some orange peels.

...

That bastard, Kem, my youngest sister-in-law's was the culprit. He was sitting on the steps, peeling orange after orange and throwing the peel around. He was sitting there eating oranges, spitting the seeds from his filthy mouth- couldn't care less, just like that and I am supposed to ...

²⁷⁶Sawian, *Shadow Men*, 34.

²⁷⁷Julien Bouissou, "Where women of India rule the roost and men demand gender equality," *The Guardians*, Tue 18 Jan 2011 13.59 GMT, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/18/india-khasi-women-politics-bouissou>.

Yes and you also know why I am subjected to such treatment. I am not the khadduh's husband, I am not a government officer like that bloody slop, I can't move my wife and kids out from the family home, so this is what I get. This is what I get.²⁷⁸

The corrupt political class takes advantage of this repressed masculinity, and unfulfilled patriarchal aspirations and employs them as assassins, rioters and goons. Strong says:

He thinks, plans, orders and ...

And we follow, right? Yet does this scum care? Will all this really bring the government to the task? Does this government care? Does Delhi care? Does anyone care? Or are we being used, just simply being used for the boss's gains? He is using us, Ksan. He is using these kids too. "Yes..." *yes and look at us now ... mere castrated bulls.*²⁷⁹ (Emphasis added)

Sawian's view is explained by Robert when he says how the *dkhars* are mere punching bags for the Khasi men who use them only to vent out their suppressed aggressive masculinity. Robert tells sympathetic Raseel – "Bengalis, Nepalis, Biharis and of course, wealthy Marwaris, Sindhis, Sikhs ... Garos. These are all punching bags. Out of sheer frustration we punch, we shoot, we ... kill. I feel so, I think this is the main cause of all this goddamned frustration and I think I am right. Every Khasi man feels so faltu, so completely and utterly helpless."²⁸⁰ The onus squarely falls on the matrilineal structure and corrupt political system not on the individual. They are exonerated because they are projected as mere victims of the system that is corrupt and gives inheritance rights to the daughters. Both Robert and Aibor knew about the staged murder. Aibor in fact helped the corrupt politician to get a plump contract. But Raseel sees them with sympathetic eyes and manages to humanize them. After the death of Robert and Aibor, Raseel remembers them as "wonderful men caught in circumstances beyond their control."²⁸¹ Ribok one of the three killers of Suresh too is humanized, glorified and romanticized. At the end of the story he strums his guitar and sings a morbid Bob Dylan song with which *Shadow Men* ends. "Everyone wants to know why he couldn't adjust/ Adjust to what- a dream that bust? /He was a clean cut kid/ But they made a killer out of him/ That's what they did."²⁸² (Emphasis added)

²⁷⁸Sawian, *The Shadow Men*, 56-57.

²⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 55.

²⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 39.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁸²*Ibid.*, 157.

According to the logic of *Shadow Men*, Nepali migrants are killed, Punjabis are ousted from their centuries old colony, or young boys like Kulay and Manic shove stick to a *dkhar* woman and revel in her death because of gender injustice that the Khasi men face. It would be befitting to end with a counter theory proposed by Esther Syiem in a poem. In this poem Syiem enumerates how Khasi women are true victims of phallogocentric logic. The men demand total control over women's body, their sexual choices, just the way they demand total control over the Khasi land. When a Khasi woman marries a non-Khasi she is considered un-patriotic whereas a child born to Khasi man and a non-Khasi woman is seen as a true Khasi. Therefore Syiem says:

For 'walking around' with dkhars from the alien plains
 They were not cross questioned, simply
 Stripped and paraded for their sexual preferences;
 Two hill women who chose to look for spouses
 From other than their own kind
 Watched over by honest, upright, local demi-god
 Who balanced race
 On a tiptoed of communal justice,
 Whose wrath they brought down.
 . . .
 I saw a blur of naked belly on naked moving legs
 Followed by a disciplined line
 Of the virtue minded subsidiary gods
 And a mesmerised rabble hard hit
 By the injustice of the women's choice.²⁸³

This murder mystery remains unresolved and so does the question of the motive behind the killings of the *dkhars*. Are they killed because the Khasis cannot turn overnight into a patrilineal society? But read in conjunction with Syiem and Nongbri's writings this theory seems flawed. This theory brings out one facet of insurgency but the reasons are a combination of patriarchy, the violent politics of identity assertion which continues till date and that is a mix of various reasons: fear of losing one's identity, land, jobs and lust for power and hatred of the others, the *dkhars*.

²⁸³Esther Syiem, "A Terrifying Glimpse from a Passing Taxi (mid 1960's)," *Indian Literature* 54, no. 3 (257) (2010): 42-43, accessed June 8, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2334945>.

Conclusion:

Shillong is a fascinating place with its misty hills, cosmopolitan characters, obsession with western music, matrilineal system and sporadic inter-ethnic violence. Apart from these fictions there are other fiction that are based in Shillong and deal with *dkhar* experience like Siddhartha Deb's *Point of Return*, Nilanjan Chaudhury's *Shillong Times* and Anuj Saikia's *Girl from Hills*. The fundamental difference between Anjum Hasan, Daisy Hasan and Pariat's writing and that of Chaudhury's and their inscription of *dkhar* experience is the question of belongingness, homeland and rootedness. Written from the point of view of the migrant north-easterner like Dam and Debu they have a safe place outside Shillong. They can reject parochial Shillong and find a safe place in Delhi or elsewhere in Indian mainland. In *Point of Return* Babu returns to Shillong But for the women characters in Anjum Hasan or the Muslim tailor in Pariat's '19/87' it is a constant negotiation. Hasan says, "...the rest of the country to them is a blur, they suffer from the vertigo of not knowing who they are."²⁸⁴

²⁸⁴Hasan, "Growing up with Mrs. P," 31.

Zorami: Rewriting Mizoram's Troubled History through a Feminine Lens

My tribe you dub "subaltern" –
We call ourselves highlanders –
Live on sharp rugged hills
Our voice buried many years
Is now beginning to rise.

---Malsawmi Jacob, 'Identity'²⁸⁵

"There's no such thing as a bygone as long as the effect last. We cannot separate '*the dancer from the dance*' as Yeats says," she thinks. To her, at this moment, the word 'Indian' stands for an olive green clad giant with an evil grin pasted on it. The image evokes a murderous rage in her. She grits her teeth. She feels giddy and nauseous."²⁸⁶

---Malsawmi Jacob, *Zorami*, 243.

Mizoram, though in the present enjoys political peace, had witnessed a war for secession from the Indian nation-state for two decades (1966 to 1986) when it was an autonomous hill district under the Assam administration. The Mizo Hills came under British rule in 1890-91 and the Mizos like other hill tribal communities in the Northeast were kept isolated from the 'mainland' by the colonialist policy of inner line regulation. The colonial, orientalist anthropology and historiography then established them as the exotic Other of the Indian 'mainland.'²⁸⁷ The British impressed upon the Mizos that they were never an integral part of the Indian 'mainland', its history and anti-colonial nationalism.²⁸⁸ The policy of isolation, the

²⁸⁵ Jacob, 'Identity,' quoted in Zualteii Poonte, "Identity and other poems - Malsawmi Jacob," *Mizo Writings in English*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.mizowritinginenglish.com/2017/08/identity-and-other-poems-malsawmi-jacob.html>.

²⁸⁶ Jacob, *Zorami*, 243.

²⁸⁷ See, N.E. Parry, *The Lakhers* (London: Macmillan, 1932). Also see, Lalrameng K. Gangte, "Ideology of Colonial Historiography and Mizo History Writing," *Historical Journal Mizoram Vol. XIX*, (September 2018): 21–23. The article mentions books like Sir Robert Reid's *The Lushai Hills* (1942), A. G. McCall's *Lushai Chrysalis* (1949) and Grace R. Lewis' *The Lushai Hills: The Story of the Lushai Pioneer Mission* (1970).

²⁸⁸ For a detailed discussion, see Sajal Nag, *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in North-East India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002), 17--22. In the book Nag discusses British policy of divide and rule. He argues that isolation of northeast hills including Naga hills or Mizo hills is not a unique phenomenon, the whole medieval world including India was divided into separate autonomous units. The colonial historiography reinforced the idea of exotic isolated northeast to 'civilize' and subjugate the terrain and this idea was later inherited by Indian historiographer post independence. The narrative that Mizo Hills did not participate in anti-colonial movement is also a false one. The British occupied Mizo Hills through suppressing the chiefs who put up a resistance. The process is enumerated in Joseph K. Lalfakzuala's writings. See, Joseph K. Lalfakzuala, "Encounter with the British: The Legacy of Autonomy in the Mizo Hills." *Social Change* 47, no. 4 (December 2017): 582--97, doi:[10.1177/0049085717730252](https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085717730252).

construed idea of their uniqueness, the legitimate fear of being suppressed and subsumed by an alien and hegemonic mainland Indian culture, and finally their exposure to the concept of European nationalism inspired the enlightened middle class male ethnic leaders of the region to formulate a new national identity for themselves before the political independence of British India. The first ethnic political organization of Mizoram, the Mizo Union, founded in 1946, wanted temporary merger with India as they were against traditional practice of chieftainship in the Mizo Hills. But their choice was not without conditions as they thought it was “subject to revision according to the future trend of events to the extent of seceding [from India] after ten years.”²⁸⁹ Its faction, a more radical and pro Myanmar party The United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) commonly known as *Zalen* emerged with a motive to join Burma on 5th July 1947. It demanded complete independence from India on the eve of the Indian Independence. The idea of separation harboured by the ethnic leaders found a new catalyst in 1958 when *mautam* (bamboo flowering) famine, a devastating natural phenomenon struck the Mizo Hills.

Mau is a kind of bamboo that flowers in every fifty years and then dies. Jungle rats devour the seeds of the flower and multiply in numbers. After exhausting the seed they start destroying the grains. This rare apocalyptic phenomenon took place in 1958 in Mizoram. Wide spread flowering and death of *Mau* bamboo was followed by plagues of jungle rodents that destroyed crops and infested houses, consuming stored foods.²⁹⁰ Therefore food shortage of famine proportion was faced by the Mizos. Many of them turned to the jungle to survive on roots and leaves. Anticipating the famine the Mizo people asked the Assam and Indian governments to take precautionary measures. But the government dismissed their fear and plea as an irrational tribal belief. Many died of starvation, malnutrition and cholera as a result of this apathy. The failure of the Assam and Indian governments to act promptly and with administrative adroitness in the time of crisis further exacerbated the already fraught relation between the Mizos and the

The author in the article discusses that the colonial policy of exclusion was designed to instil direct control over the tribes living in the Mizo hills.

²⁸⁹Memorandum Submitted to His Majesty’s Government’; Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change (1890–1947)* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1992), 138. Cited in Willem Van Schendel, “A War Within a War: Mizo rebels and the Bangladesh liberation struggle,” *Modern Asian Studies* 50, no.1 (October 2015): 13, DOI:10.1017/S0026749X15000104.

²⁹⁰For a detailed description of *mautam* famine see, Ken Aplin and James Lalsiamliana, “Chronicle and Impacts of the 2005-09 *Mautam* in Mizoram,” in *Rodent Outbreaks: Ecology and Impacts*, ed. Singleton Grant R, Steve R. Belmain et al (Philippines: IRRI, 2010), 13-49.

government. The ethnic leaders seized this opportunity to politicize the tragedy of famine *mautam* by reinforcing their ideology of secession from India. Ostensibly to communicate the hurt and anger of the starving Mizo populace to the apathetic government, they founded Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) but the real motive was to further the agenda of creating a separate and independent Christian Zo land or greater Mizoram.²⁹¹

The ethnic-nationalism of the MNFF leadership was based on their difference from the Indian ‘mainland’ which they refer to as the land of the *vai* (a word for the race of people known as ‘mainland Indians’, different from the mongoloid group to which the Mizos belong). And Christianity was one of the chief points of difference apart from racial and cultural difference. Christian missionaries converted the Mizo people to Christianity to ensure their loyalty to the empire. By 1950 ninety percent of the Mizo population were Christians. Christianity is the identity maker and shaper for the Mizo community. In order to fulfil the dream of creating an independent Christian Zo land, the MNFF shed their apolitical garb and dropped the word famine from their identity and transformed into a political party named Mizo National Front (MNF). They sought help from the Naga insurgent groups and gained strength after receiving training and arms from Pakistan, the ‘enemy’ country of India via the East Pakistan corridor. Under the leadership of Pu Laldenga, the newly emboldened MNF laid a secretive plan, codenamed ‘Operation Jericho,’ on 28th February, 1966. According to the plan they declared independence from the Indian union with a series of violent attacks on government installations-treasury, radio station and police station and army camps in the administrative centre of state.

Unlike the time of the famine of 1958, this time the government of India responded promptly. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi led Union Government reacted immediately and aggressively with air strikes, Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), curfews, forced labour, grouping of villages into larger units and other oppressive measures. On 2nd March, 1966 the government declared the Mizo hills a ‘disturbed area’ under the draconian AFSPA. On 5th March, 1966 army troops moved in to take control of the area and aerial strike was conducted. While the MNF leaders went underground in East Pakistan the common people of Mizo hills paid the price of being the ethnic ‘other’ to ‘mainland’ India. They were displaced from their

²⁹¹ In addition to present day Mizoram, the area of greater Mizoram includes the northern corner of Rakhine state and the northern Arakan/Rakhine Yoma (mountain range) in Myanmar, most of Chin state in Myanmar, the southern Cachar Hills of Assam state, the eastern Tripura Hills areas of Tripura state, and the Chittagong Hills tract in Bangladesh.

villages, grouped in new camps, put under constant surveillance, raped and tortured by the Indian army. This asymmetric war between the MNF's guerrilla warriors and the powerful Indian armed forces continued for twenty long years. Finally on 30th June 1986, a peace accord or memorandum of settlement was signed between the MNF and the government of India. Mizoram achieved statehood. Pu Laldenga, who had pushed the innocent peace loving Mizos into the vortex of violence, accepted the Indian union and became the first Chief Minister of the new state. Unlike Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur, Mizoram has not witnessed violence post this arrangement. The state, in fact, commemorates 30th June every year as the day of peace or *remmani*.

Returning to where we started the chapter, the disturbing thoughts of the eponymous heroine of the novel *Zorami*, which rewrites the traumatic history of the MNF movement or *rambuai*, suggests that the psychological wound of the past cannot be wiped away through political means. Signing a political peace accord can achieve political peace. It can bestow power on the leaders. But it cannot erase the wound inflicted upon common women and men by the state machinery. The unhealed wounds still simmer in their collective memories, and more so because during the disturbance there was complete censorship on expressing one's opinion, criticism, and dissent. Both the warring sides forcefully repressed the written word. When Journalist Robert Lalchuana wrote an opinion piece on the impossibility of achieving a united Zo land stretching across International borders, the MNF picked him up from his office and broke his legs.²⁹² The writers and journalists therefore practiced self imposed censorship. The only source of news and information was government sponsored and therefore biased, the All India Radio.²⁹³ This repression created a silence that was pregnant with pain, loss, frustration and anger. The people of Mizoram with their strong oral tradition of story-telling and song making tried to give expression to this silence in their songs and hymns. Women rebels singing patriotic Mizo folk songs in the prison houses of Tezpur, Nowgong and Aizawl is an example of that resistance. But oral history has no authorial status in institutions that rely heavily on the written documents. This paucity of written record on Mizo secessionist movement because of censorship

²⁹²Sanat K.Chakraborty, *Media in Conflict Situation – A Northeast India Perspective* (Shillong: Grassroots Options, 2000), 48. Cited in, Renee Lulam, "A Fractured Inheritance: Negotiating Intergenerational Memories of the Mizo Insurgency in India's North Eastern Borderlands," *Oral History Forum d'histoireorale* 37 (2017), 6.

²⁹³ The government run radio station was set up in 1966 when the militant activity was at its peak. It was an attempt to promote national integration. Ironically it was also the time when the people of Mizoram were being treated as non-citizens by the nation-state through undemocratic measures like AFSPA.

imposed by both the Indian government and the MNF is slowly becoming a thing of the past. We see a steady flow of academic writing on the events since the establishment of peace.

Scholarly discourse on Mizo insurgency, however, has many gaps and lacunae and the most grievous of all is that of gender blindness. The authoritative and otherwise incisive texts by C. Nunthara, Sajal Nag, Nandini Sundar and others tend to gloss over the gendered character of the history of the MNF movement. Their writings dwelling on the generalities and painting the Mizo community as a monolithic whole unwittingly render unrecognizable the subjectivity of Mizo women who experienced the period of disturbance or *buai* differently from their male counterpart. The Delhi based scholarship fails to recognize that the Mizo secessionist war was essentially a war between two patriarchies, much like white woman's feminism that refuses to see the black man as oppressor. In order to create a binary between the coercive Indian nation-state and the victimized Northeast fragment fighting a battle of self-determination, the historiography on Mizo insurgency ignores the hegemonic masculinist character of the Mizo insurgency. It only erases the experiences and efforts of women.

An essay by Hmingthanzuali and Rekha Pande brings to our notice this lacuna in the existing scholarship on Mizo insurgency by disclosing the excessive emphasis on the MNF and deafening silences on the agency of the women rebels, wives of the male ethnic leaders and women led organizations like the 'Mizo Hmeichhe Tangrual' (MHT). This group of a few middle class women was founded in 1946. Their aim was to raise women's issues and pressurize the Mizo Union, the first political organization of Mizoram, to incorporate women's concern in the union's political agenda. The effort and agency of MHT finds no mention in the political discourse on the MNF movement because the hyper-masculinist, aggressive ethno-nationalism of the MNF monopolizes the discourse on insurgency and ethno-nationalism. The essay by Hmingthanzuali and Pande mentions how like all insurgent groups and political institutions the MNF was also a male dominated phallogocentric party. Their ideology was underpinned by the images of *pasalthan*, the traditional Mizo male warriors and their masculine valour. Ethnic male heroes of the past such as Zampuimanga, Chawngbawla, Taitesena, Vanapa, Saizahawla, Khuangchera, Lalphunga and Lamaira were re-appropriated, remembered and glorified as the symbols of Mizo nationalism.²⁹⁴ Hmingthanzuali points out a troubling yet predictable aporia in

²⁹⁴ See, Hmingthanzuali and Rekha Pande, "Mizo Women and Agency: Reading Insurgency in the North-east India from a Gender Perspective" *Journal of History & Social Sciences* VII: (December 2017), 7.

this reconstruction of Mizo nationalism. She says how the MNF forgot to include the bravery of a female chieftain named Ropuilianiwho bravely fought against the British in 1895. Therefore when in 1963 the MNF leaders called for volunteers they did not include women. Despite that many politically conscious patriotic women joined as volunteers but they remained confined within the stereotyped domestic roles as care givers to men even within the structure of a liberating mission. Hmingthanzuali and Pande thus describe the insurgency in these words: “Insurgency in Mizo hill ... appears as a patriarchal war against the larger Nation State for the restoration of ethnic patriarchal order in the society.”²⁹⁵

Given this patriarchal nature of Mizo insurgency and the gender lacuna in the available writings on it, the role of emerging English literature²⁹⁶ from Mizoram in retrieving the agency of unheard female voices, and their stories becomes critical. The contribution of the most prolific and well-known Mizo poet and novelist Malsawmi Jacob in this regard is path-breaking. Novelist, poet, researcher and journalist Malsawmi Jacob was born in Mizoram but spent only a few years of her childhood there. Because of her father’s transferrable job in the Army, her family shifted base multiple times. She did her schooling in Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Manipur. She did her Masters in English in Shillong. Thereafter, she went to do her PG Diploma in teaching English in Hyderabad. Since then she has lived and worked in various cities across the country – the Aizawl College in Mizoram, SPARROW, an archive of Indian women’s history in Mumbai, Maharashtra, and St. Claret College, Bangalore, Karnataka. She now lives in Bangalore.

Jacob has done exemplary work in representing the Mizo ethos, exposing the violence perpetrated by the Indian nation-state against the Mizos, presenting it to the worldwide

²⁹⁵Ibid., 22.

²⁹⁶ Though Mizo writing in English is almost a non-existent niche, the Mizos has a long tradition of oral as well as written literature in Mizo languages. The first Mizo language novel *Hawilopari* was published in 1936. More than 100 novels were written during 1936-1996. *Lali* by L.Biakliana, *Kros bulah Chuan* and *Nunna Kawngthuam Puiah* by ZikpuiiPa (K.C. Lalvunga), *Thla Hleinga Zan* by James Dokhuma and *Zawlpala Thlan Tlang* by Khawlkungi are some of the fictional writings of that era. These are Christian and moralistic in tone. Some of the recent fictional works are- *Hmangaihzuai* by C. Laizawna, *Mittui Kara Hmangaihna* by Zothansangi-Pa, *Hlimni Kawl Eng Ve Tak Ang Maw?* by H.P. Lalremtluanga, *Khualzin Nula* by Lalhriata, *Ram Leh I Tan Chauh* and *Hmangaih Zoramthangi* by H. Lallungmuana. For a detailed discussion on Mizo literature See, Vannghaka, K.C, Influence of Christianity in Mizo Fictions (PhD Thesis, Mizoram University, 2009), <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/235339>.

readership and most importantly undoing the invisibilization of Mizo women. Jacob is best known for penning the first Mizo novel in English. Apart from her novel *Zorami* (2015) she has published seven books- a collection of poems (*Four Gardens and Other Poems*), a collection of short stories (*Blind Spots: Short Stories for Transformational Thinking*), two books of children's stories (*Amazing Adventures* and *Magic Mirror Stories*), and two nonfiction narratives (*A Pushkar Pandit's Tryst with God* and *The Messiah*).

One of Malsawmi's most noteworthy poems named 'Pi Hmuaki' that appeared in *Four Gardens and Other Poems* both literally and metaphorically unearths the buried truth of gender oppression in Mizo society, culture and orature. Hmuaki was the first Mizo songstress whose name can be traced back to the seventeenth century. The legend has it that she was buried alive under the instruction of the village chief and elders. She was an extremely popular and exceptionally prolific composer. Her prolificacy irked the village patriarchs. They were scared that she would leave no song left to be composed by the younger generation, so they decided to put an end to her creative flow. She was ruthlessly killed for venturing into the world of creativity which is still considered to be a male bastion. As prototypes of eco-feminism her songs were also known for deriding the aggressive notion of male heroism. In her songs Pi Hmuaki criticized the false idea of masculine valour represented by the traditional practice of warfare, head hunting, and killing of animals-- the values that were re-appropriated in the time of *buai* by the male ethnic leaders as symbols of ethnic patriotism. Malsawmi Jacob's poem 'Pi Hmuaki' is an ode to the first Mizo songstress and her courage, and insurgency. Here is an excerpt from Malsawmi Jacob's poem on the songstress:

The heroes loved their exploits
heads and loots won in raids
killing was the way to live
to attain the honoured place in *pialral*²⁹⁷
You derided their philosophy
wouldn't sing their eulogy
...
Their annoyance grew day by day,

²⁹⁷*Piarlal* is Mizo concept of heaven where 'heroes' who slay many enemies and animals have special space.

decided to silence you altogether
Shut you out from golden sunlight
wind and call of *chuk-chu-ri-kur*²⁹⁸.
Your gong still rings under the earth
Bong! Bong!
A disturbance in tyrants' ears.²⁹⁹

The purpose of reproducing this particular poem from her oeuvre is twofold. First, songstress Pi Hmuaki as a representative of rebellious feminist aesthetics serves as a literary foremother to Malsawmi Jacob. Her insurgent writing is an inspiration to woman authors like Malsawmi who aim to foreground the suppressed female voices. The subversive yet tragic image of poet Pi Hmuaki therefore is a recurring one in her oeuvre. In *Zorami* the protagonist ruefully remembers the tragic fate of the poet. In the chapter entitled 'A Birthday Party' she tells her friend Kimi "What a cruel fate her [Pi Hmuaki's] talent brought her!"³⁰⁰ The chapter ends with this emphatic line revealing the writer's empathy for her literary foremother: "Poor woman, poor poor women!"³⁰¹ It is noteworthy how her focus goes beyond the silencing of one woman poet to include the suppression of all women because in Malsawmi's imagination Pi Hmuaki's tragic fate is a metonym for the plight of all Mizo women.

Secondly, this short poem on the insurgent writings of Pi Hmuaki serves as a prelude to her novel *Zorami*. 'Pi Hmuaki' and *Zorami* are complementary to each other. In their dialogue with antiquity and history both the texts illustrate the feminist project of rereading and rewriting historical and mythical sources. By remembering the subversive songs of the buried songstress Malsawmi rewrites and fixes the lacuna in the Mizo oral history that oppressively buried the disruptive power of the feminine. And in *Zorami* while recollecting the memory of *rambuai*, she unearths the silenced, repressed, yet disruptive voice of the feminine.

Zorami: A Redemption Song, the first Mizo novel in English, was published in 2015. Malsawmi Jacob says in an interview: "By some strange twist of fate, this novel actually came to me in English. Perhaps because I wanted to tell this story to people outside our state; in a sense, I

²⁹⁸ Dove.

²⁹⁹ Malsawmi Jacob, 'Pi Hmuaki', in *Four Gardens and Other Poems* (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2017)

³⁰⁰ Jacob, *Zorami*, 79.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

wanted to make the Mizo voice heard across the country and the world.”³⁰² The Mizos however do not speak in one voice. There is an authorial voice (like that of the MNF leaders) that makes the most noise and there is the thwarted voice of marginalised individuals especially women. In order to inscribe this dissonance Malsawmi Jacob in this novel weaves together multiple genres and narrative devices. It is at once a historical and stream-of-consciousness novel that destabilizes the linearity of time. *Zorami* is a historic novel since it is a faithful rendition of the historic episodes of the Mizo insurgency that ravaged the hills for two decades from 1966 to 1986. Without altering the names of the political parties, leaders and places, she chronicles the events faithfully. From the rat induced *mautam*, the Jericho Operation, to Pu Laldenga’s rise to power— she gives her readers snippets of the history of Mizoram. She even goes back in nineteenth century to describe the advent of the missionaries and the process of proselytization. It is also history from below because the most important source of her literary inspiration is the testimonials or the ‘small histories’ of the Mizo people that she collected on her tape recorder in 2004. She feels “[H]istory is incomplete without an understanding of the inner stories of people.”³⁰³ Jacob visited Mizoram in 2004 to do research for her novel. During her visit she had met several people who were affected by the MNF movement or *rambuai* and recorded their painful experiences on tape. Their oral narratives make up the major part of her novel. But at the heart, the novel is a fictional story of a Mizo woman, Zorami, with which the novel begins and ends. Zorami’s voice in this novel represents the people’s experience of the *buai*, the inner story without which the history of *buai* is incomplete.

The opening quote of this chapter reflects the repressed angst and wounds of Zorami, a fifty-year-old Mizo woman who was raped at the tender age of thirteen by a soldier from the Indian army during the time of disturbance between the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Indian government. Standing on the brink of madness and embroiled in suicidal thoughts, Zorami depicts the psychological impact of gendered nationalism on women — both phallogocentric militarized Indian nationalism that exercises its power on the women through sexual violence, and hyper-masculine Mizo ethno nationalism that imposes silence on women in the name of community’s honour. Through her battered body and scarred psyche Malsawmi

³⁰²Ninglun Hanghal, “Impact of Insurgency on Mizo Women: Finding A Voice!” *Zo News*, Sep 1, 2017.

³⁰³Malsawmi Jacob, interview by Yogananda Rao, “Malsawmi Jacob and *Zorami*: The Novelist and the Novel,” *Zozem: Slices of Life and Pieces of Thought*, <https://zozem.blogspot.com/>.

Jacob portrays the troubled history of Mizoram variously known as *rambuai*, Mizo insurgency, MNF movement and Mizo independence struggle.

At this juncture it is imperative to emphasize the significance of the word *rambuai*. The period between 1966 and 1986 is termed differently from different perspectives. It is called insurgency by the Indian government and independence movement by the MNF. But to the common people of Mizoram it was just a disturbance or as they call it in Zo language, *buai*. So, *rambuai* means disturbance in land. This chapter consciously uses the term *rambuai* because Malsawmi Jacob in her novel aims to inscribe the common people's experience of the conflict.

To substantiate this point I would furnish an episode from the novel. The author in the novel records MNF leader Laldenga's inciting speeches at colleges to garner support for his mission. In the 1960s Laldenga was vociferously propagating the MNF doctrine of a unified Christian Zo land to enthuse the youth and channelize their energy into the path of an armed struggle. Here is a specimen of his inciting and divisive speech woven into the text.

...we, the Mizo people, can never be at home in India, the land of *vai* people. Our culture is different. Our customs and practices are different. Our religion is different. ... We are in great danger of being assimilated, consumed and annihilated. Our Mizo identity is in danger. If we continue to live as we do now, we may become lost tribes of Israel. If we do not liberate our land now, won't our descendants rise up in anger against us? ... Dear fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, let's rise up and fight! Let's fight for God and our country!³⁰⁴

Ralkapa, a marginal character in the novel, was in the gathering where Laldenga delivered this speech. Excited by this zealous and jingoistic patriotism he decides to join the MNF as he could hardly contain his excitement after the speech. His primary response was to drive out the non-Mizos from his land. Another young student Laldinpuii's imagination was set on fire as well. Both of them joined the MNF. Ralkapa later degenerated into a 'broken old man', a disfigured *kawktu*,³⁰⁵ an Indian army informer. The bright Laldinpuii lost her life in a counter insurgency operation. Laldinpuii wanted to be a doctor. She might have served her community

³⁰⁴ Jacob, *Zorami*, 68--69. See TantaramPhukan's chauvinistic speech mentioned in the Assam chapter to seek a parallel between Assam and Mizo chauvinism.

³⁰⁵ *Kawktu* in mizo language means the one who points finger. The word 'Kawktu' is used for government spies or informers.

better had she refrained from joining a self-destructive mission of restoring ethnic patriarchal order in the society.

Ralkapa's father Hrang's advice to his son, which he disdainfully ignores, is instrumental in understanding Malsawmi's position regarding the politics of the MNF led insurgency. Hrang tells Ralkapa: "Listen, if you really love Mizoram, study well and keep out of politics. You can work best for our people if you are educated."³⁰⁶ Therefore neither the father of Mizo patriotism Laldenga, nor the martyr Laldinpui is the protagonist of the novel. Zorami, an apolitical victim of the insurgency and counter-insurgency operation who rejected the politics of the MNF and chose the uplifting and liberating path of education to uplift her life and counter the suppressive forces of the India State is the embodiment of Mizoram to Malsawmi.

Institutional politics like that of mainstream political parties that rule any nation-state insists on fixed identity and Otherness. It relies on the boundedness of an identity and its territorial domination. For example, the mainstream Indian political parties believe in crystallization of a monolithic Indian identity and its territorial domination over the recalcitrant peripheries. Therefore with military power they try to subjugate the land and people of Kashmir, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. The institutional politics of the MNF was also premised upon pure Mizo identity and its domination over Mizo inhabited area. Mizo language fiction written about *rambuai* before *Zorami* like C. Laizawna's novel *Zalen Hma Chuan* (1986) and James Dokhuma's *Rinawmin* (1970) act as the mouthpiece for the MNF ideology. For instance, throughout the novel the hero of *Rinawmin*, Mizo army officer Major Rozuala speaks of the MNF motto: 'For God and for the Country.' But in *Zorami* Malsawmi makes a paradigm shift from this zealous jingoistic nationalism. She fights the same battle of Mizo sub-nationalism but not with the masculine weapon of war. She fights it by rewriting the painful history of the secessionist movement, by remembering and more importantly by reminding the aggressors about it. At the same time she creates a subject in the form of her heroine who is a non-chauvinistic and non-conformist Mizo woman with physical features that resemble non-Mizo *vai* Indian women. *Vai* is one of the value loaded term in Mizo lexicon. Its negative connotation has only been exacerbated after the *buai*. It not only connotes otherness, but also pain, and anger. Interestingly Malsawmi here re-appropriates this term. *Zorami* is associated with this otherness.

³⁰⁶Ibid., 72.

In doing so, Malsawmi's *Zorami* nuances the binary relation between the mainland Indians and the Mizos thereby creating possibilities for trans-border inter-subjective connection on micro levels between marginalized individuals.

Zorami's Lacerated Body and Wounded Psyche

Mizoram in Mizo language means land of the highlanders. Zoram is a short form of Mizoram. The word 'zoram' instead of Mizoram suggests endearment. Zorami's full name is Zorampari which means flower of Mizoram. This strategic naming of the heroine is significant. Malsawmi consciously chooses this name to symbolically represent war ravaged Mizoram's journey towards healing through Zorami's journey from being a boisterous young girl to a victim of sexual violence, from her inability to accept and appreciate her body to acceptance, healing and catharsis. In *The Collector's Wife* Mitra Phukan symbolically represents Assam through Rukmini's infertile and later pregnant body. In *Zorami*, Malsawmi takes a step forward by writing about a woman's body that is plain according to normative beauty yardstick, violated, frigid and barren, thereby creating a new form of female subjectivity. And the writing style that she employs to transcribe this subjectivity is the feminine language proposed by Woolf and Cixous.

Virginia Woolf in her 1923 review of Dorothy Richardson's novel, introduces her readers to the concept of a 'psychological sentence of the feminine gender', or the 'woman's sentence' that is "of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extremes, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes."³⁰⁷ Woolf says that Richardson consciously invents this sentence "in order that it may descend to the depths and investigate the crannies of Miriam Henderson's consciousness."³⁰⁸

Like Woolf, Cixous have privileged an expressive fluid, 'elastic' language that emanates from the repressed psyche and forbidden body of women. Cixous calls upon women to decolonize their body, which have been colonized and rendered without agency by patriarchal sentences and symbolic order, by showing it and writing it in a disruptive feminine language. Malsawmi does the same in this novel. Here she lays bare the battered body and the festering soul of a woman that are negated and trivialized in patriarchy, much like Temsula Ao in 'The Last

³⁰⁷Virginia Woolf, "Dorothy Richardson," in *Women and Writing*, ed. Michele Barrett (New York: HBJ, 1979), 191.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

Song'. She delves deep into Zorami's consciousness to expose the dark realities of the phallogocentric tenets of Indian nationalism, as well as Mizo patriarchy.

The novel begins with Zorami as an insecure fifty-year-old woman waiting for her husband Sanga to return from his official tour in Delhi. She is gripped with fear that her husband may not return to her— an aging, unattractive, introverted, emotionally stunted woman. She mumbles to herself and deliberately misquotes –rather rewrites- Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium' on the morning of her fiftieth birthday to reveal her insecurity to her readers. Like her creator, Zorami is also a lecturer of English. She employs her reading of the canonical texts to express her anxiety. The novel thus begins with these lines "An aged *woman* is a paltry thing, /A tattered coat upon a stick..."³⁰⁹ (Emphasis added).³¹⁰ The narrative then travels back and forth disrupting the linear narrative structure to shed light on the important moments of Zorami's life that led to her insecurity and emotional stagnation. As Zorami's meandering mind recollects her grandmother's stories, her mother's scolding, the fateful evening when she was raped by a soldier, and her wedding day, the readers piece together the story of a woman trapped in a sense of victimhood and waiting for redemption.

Zorami's 'emotional stagnation' is the result of double repressive patriarchies— hyper masculine violent Indian nationalism on the one side that uses rape as a weapon against the 'anti-national' racially 'other' woman. On the other hand the traditional Mizo patriarchy that exercises its male domination over women by naturalizing and disseminating the constructed idea of woman's inferiority to men. Male dominated Mizo community is patrilocal that is premised upon the subordination of women. Jacob says, "Mizo society is deeply patriarchal. Though women are highly visible in the work sphere – they do step out of their home to make a living – they are deliberately kept out of social and political decision making."³¹¹ Male domination in Mizo community like in all other societies is maintained through various institutions. The Mizo customary laws, chieftainship and local oral knowledge system ensure that woman's subalternity to man is maintained. The old popular sayings and adages belittling woman's intelligence like

³⁰⁹ Jacob, *Zorami*, 19.

³¹⁰ The original lines from 'Sailing to Byzantium' by Yeats are "An aged man is but a paltry thing, /A tattered coat upon a stick,...".

³¹¹ Ningul Hangal, "Meet Malsawmi Jacob – First Mizo Author to Write an English Language Novel," *thebetterindia.com*, June 12, 2016. <https://www.thebetterindia.com/57733/giving-words-voice-mizo-women/>.

‘woman’s wisdom does not reach beyond the village stream’, ‘A woman can be deceived seven times with the same trickery’; or sayings objectifying and dehumanizing woman ‘a wife and a broken fence are meant to be replaced,’ ‘women and crabs have no character,’ ‘It is better to leave a growling bitch and an upset woman unappeased and to leave them to their own devices till they are content’³¹² – serve as justification for the unequal gendered roles and rules. Josephine L. B. Zuali says that this knowledge system “has resulted in limiting the subjectivity of women and their potential for self-realization.”³¹³

In an intimate conversation Zorami and her friend and confidante Kimi jokingly vent out their frustration against Mizo patriarchy. They enumerate the various discriminatory tribal laws and old sayings. They say how according to the law if a man decides to divorce his wife, she has to go out with an empty hand. Nothing belongs to her, she cannot even take her children with her.³¹⁴ Zorami and Kimi’s friendship and their personal conversations on gender discrimination serve as a woman-only space, a location where Zorami can give vent to her angst. Since her childhood Zorami has faced suppression in the name of gender socialization. As a young girl she was trained into believing in her own inferiority and participate in her silencing. This tutoring of suppression was passed down from a mother to her daughter.

Zorami as a child was boisterous and expressive. She was not ashamed to sing in front of the whole school. Her mother however was worried that her daughter will grow into a tom boy. So she taught her to be ashamed, to be silent. “You sang before the whole class? You were not ashamed? Girls shouldn’t do such things or talk too much,”³¹⁵ her mother said. Thus Zorami learned to be ashamed, to keep quiet. So she did not tell anyone about the bully. Neither did she tell about the dirty man with the dirty touch.”³¹⁶ When she was bullied by a boy or molested by a man, as a child she did not complain to her parents, she remained silent about it, and when she was raped by a man from the Indian army the memory of rape became her dark secret, a snake or a *mautam* rat gnawing at her heart.

³¹² Josephine L. B. Zuali, “Representation of Women in Mizo Folktales: A Study of the Patriarchal Demarcation of Gendered Roles in Traditional Mizo Society,” *MZU Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies* 5, no.2 (December 2018), 113.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 111.

³¹⁴ Jacob, *Zorami*, 77.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

On a hot April day when strict curfew was in place in Mizoram, thirteen year old Zorami went to the spring to fetch water. She was last in the queue and darkness was creeping in. When her turn to fill the bowl finally came the place had become totally dark and deserted. Taking advantage of her helplessness a soldier of the Indian army covered her mouth and carried her into the bush to sexually assault her. She was brutalised and left to die. The incident lacerated her both mentally and physically. Malsawmi Jacob's impactful words describing the physical and psychological pain of the thirteen year old Zorami, act like an 'axe for the frozen sea'³¹⁷ within her complacent readers.

Broken? She was lacerated, ripped apart. A fiend in human body did it in revolting lust. When the thirteen year old did not come back from the *tuikhur*³¹⁸ where she had gone to fetch water, her worried mother took a couple of neighbours with her and went in search of her daughter. They found her unconscious, her dress torn and soaked with urine and blood, in the bushes. In the hospital, after she regained consciousness, a nurse stitched her up. Without anaesthesia. How she screamed! The needle pierced her again and again. Stinging pain upon pain. ... And the dirt, the dirt! How she wanted to wash herself clean, to be immersed in a flowing river! But there was no such river within reach. All she could get was a few mugs of water for a bath. She loathed her defiled body like a rotten carcass. In sleep, she dreamt of a brook running down a hill. She ran to it, hoping for a dip in its clear, clean water. But when she reached there, she saw only muddy, filthy water. ..Within a day, the buoyant, rather boisterous young girl had turned into a weepy, terrified wreck. ... As time passed, the wounds on her body healed, leaving scars. But her wounded psyche festered.³¹⁹

She began to loathe her body, her being as a woman. The brutal sexual assault however is not the only reason for her self-loathing. Rape is the most violent manifestation of patriarchy but it operates on several nuanced ideological levels. Her self-depreciation is a reflection of a systemic patriarchal socialization that teaches a woman to see herself as an inert body, a man's pleasure object, that limits a woman's worth to her physical beauty, chastity and ability to bear children. Zorami was always obsessed with her lack of physical beauty. She developed a sense of

³¹⁷ See, Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, Editors*, trans. Richad and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken, 1978), 16. He writes "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us."

³¹⁸ *Tuikhur* means a water point.

³¹⁹ Jacob, *Zorami*, 197.

inferiority as a child because according to Mizo beauty norm she is plain. She is short and dark. Because of her darkness she is derisively called a *vai*, a highly loaded word used to address non-mongoloid plains people from ‘mainland’ India. A shopkeeper of a candy store who offers Kimi a chocolate refuses to offer Zorami a chocolate because to him she is ugly: “The man stares at Zorami, laughs derisively and says, “She’s so ugly! She looks like a *vai*!”³²⁰ Sanga’s uncle too identifies her with ‘ugly’ *vai* people. “Special! She’s dark and her eyes are big, she looks like a *vai*.”³²¹ On her wedding day she overhears the guests calling her ugly. “The bride, she’s ugly,” someone whispers as she walks down the aisle on her father’s arm. She tries not to hear, not to think about it.”³²² But it remains etched in her memory.

Not only with plainness and ugliness her body is now also associated with damage, and impurity. After the incident of sexual assault her family moves to Shillong. After completing her Masters degree in English literature in Shillong, she returns to Mizoram to begin her life anew as a college lecturer. As she turns twenty four, a man named Sanga proposes marriage to her. She refuses. Her father however feels that a ‘damaged girl’ like her should be grateful that a man is accepting her ‘unchaste’ violated body. He says: “you should be only too happy he is willing to marry you, a damaged girl. He is too good for you.”³²³ She is reduced to a mere body by the men who call her ugly, by the soldier who rapes her and finally her father who sees her as damaged. When Sanga proposes marriage to her she tells him echoing her father’s damaged goods analogy: “I’m a ruined woman...not fit for you.”³²⁴ This self-doubt and self-deprecation of Zorami and other rape survivors in Mizoram can be summed up in the words of Cixous: “Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven’t got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove.”³²⁵

³²⁰Ibid, 25.

³²¹ Ibid, 57.

³²² Ibid, 244.

³²³ Ibid., 62.

³²⁴ Ibid., 63.

³²⁵Cixous, *Medusa*, 878.

This constructed belief system equating a woman to a lump of flesh takes the shape of unknown fear, torturing thoughts, and ‘invisible intruders’ as she grows old. Because of her ‘plainness’, ‘damaged body’, frigidity and childless status she is perpetually shrouded by the fear that her husband will leave her for a younger attractive woman. Her ghostly thoughts visit her and yell at her: “*crying is useless. And you are useless. The demon continues. O yes, expect for one thing, for use by men in a certain way. But for that, you know, you only have to be a lump of flesh. ... That’s the only kind of use you have, that’s your worth... And your husband has run away with a young woman because you failed him there.*”³²⁶ It pushes her to “*... Lay down and die* (Emphasis original).”³²⁷ She sinks into the abyss of depression and thoughts of suicide grapple her.

Zorami’s troubling inner voice yelling at her is not mere hallucination of a fictional insecure wife. It represents the plight of the Mizo women who were raped and tortured by the Indian army during the counter insurgency operation in the years between 1966 and 1986, but could not voice their trauma. The women till date have found no justice. Because of the AFSPA the army could do what they wished with impunity. And the oppressive Mizo patriarchy too denied the women their right to narrate their experiences of sexual violence. Therefore the memory of violence latent in the psyche of the Mizo women festers like a searing wound.

For the women in Mizoram the fear of rape by Indian soldiers was the ever present reality and threat during *rambuai*. The mass torture and rape specially the incident at Kolasib in 1966 was common knowledge throughout Mizoram. Rape and assault on pregnant women and making a spectacle out of it was used as a military strategy to weaken the spirit of the male community as women are seen as the property of men and men are perceived as the protector of ‘their’ women. At Kolasib, according to information collected through interviews, a number of women were raped in front of their male relatives, mostly husbands, who were forced to watch.³²⁸ Apart from the recorded history, a research work by Denise Adele Segor on *rambuai* which presents a collation of testimonials of Mizo women foregrounds the individual narratives of fear and trauma. Rekha Pande and Hmingthanzuali’s essay through the unpublished memoirs, oral

³²⁶Ibid., 245.

³²⁷Ibid.

³²⁸Sajal Nag, A Gigantic Panopticon: Counter-Insurgency and Modes of Disciplining and Punishment in Northeast India, *Policies and Practices* 46 (2012), 12.

interviews of women from different social classes such as volunteers, rural women, Government employees and wives of ethnic leaders, brings into focus the hitherto unacknowledged agency of women. Similarly Segor's dissertation foregrounds Mizo women's response to war and forced migration. In her dissertation a testimonial narrative depicts how a village woman named Romini escaped from being raped by a Sikh soldier by screaming. The broken and incoherent sentences of Romini as she narrates her encounter with the Indian soldier are illustrative of her fear and trauma.

The village men, in the house they hadn't dared to stay at all, our man who was the head of the family, over there Tamdil [lake] bank, he spent the night. . . like that we stayed . . . so then our dog pounced up with all its might, but *vai* language only, I heard . . . *e khaisipai* they have come I said . . . our locality at the edge, was our living place . . . entering in frequently, "sikh," one man, "Aa *pu kapu*" he was saying [i.e., he was calling out to the man of the house] . . . then I didn't dare to sleep . . . my youngest I carried on my back . . . coming frequently, the box he opened . . . then he would set out again . . . the last time, he pulled me forcefully . . . the baby I was carrying on my back even . . . so I screamed out hard . . . our next-door neighbor man came over . . . so like that he let go and out he ran . their married woman came out of the house . . . *e khai* Rovi our *pa* they have seized also, in our house will it be safe to stay, she said . . . my *puan*³²⁹ that time it fell off . . . to pick it up I didn't have time . . . my baby, carrying on my back, with that I ran out . . . my children to call out for I didn't remember . . . now, this one, between the time of childhood and puberty she was .. just before I got away out of sight. . . my mother she called out to me, should I be coming too, she said . . . yes really, just a moment, for you we will wait . . . Mama, if you carry one on your back then two can walk . . . my *puan* on the floor, you take hold of it while you are at it I said . . .³²⁹

To a male Mizo researcher, Lalthangliana however the rape of Mizo women is a loss of their honour and chastity and degeneration into immorality. He writes in his dissertation on the MNF insurgency: "As a result of turmoil in Mizoram during which women were freely raped and

³²⁹ Denise Adele Segor, "Tracing the Persistent Impulse of a Bedrock Nation to Survive Within the State of India: Mizo Women's Response to War and Forced Migration" (PhD thesis, Fielding Graduate University, 2006), 272. [ellipses original]

molested the chastity of women in Mizoram has declined to a considerable degree. The number of rape cases, the cases of adultery and the number of illicit love affairs had now increased.”³³⁰

In a society where rape is equated with the question of women’s morality, honour, chastity, and purity of body and character, it is impossible for rape survivors to narrate their experience without being judged and stigmatized. Zorami’s story mirrors this societal taboo and stigmatization. She is incapable of accepting and appreciating her body and experiencing pleasure even after thirty seven years of the incident. “She desires to melt, to flow in a gushing splashing rivulet”³³¹ but stays frozen. To her the act of sex is associated with violence and pain. Sexual act in patriarchy belongs to the male domain. Rape is the most concrete manifestation of that. But even in consensual heterosexual relationships women are expected to be a passive pleasure objects. Wives are expected to give in to their husbands’ ways. (Non acknowledgement of rape of a wife by her husband as a criminal offence under IPC testifies to that.) Zorami fails to be a pleasure object for her husband. She blames her own sexual frigidity, for her husband’s alleged attraction for his younger female colleague.

This whole culture of rape, sexual assault on Mizo women by the men from the Indian army and the reinforcement of repressive Mizo patriarchy was an offshoot of the conflict between two phallogocentric nationalisms: the separatist Mizo nationalism and Indian nationalism. The women of Mizoram were doubly victimized because of their race and gender. Jacob depicts this predicament through Zorami and she also narrates how their pain can be alleviated through spiritual experience.

Redemption through Spiritual Epiphany

This novel takes its readers on an emotional journey of Zorami as a victim of self-hate and ‘anti-love’ towards the process of her healing. At the end of the novel she emerges as a newly born woman resurrected from her destructive thoughts, her traumatic past by Jesus. In feminist philosopher, academic and theologian Mary Daly’s radical separatist paradigm the cure from self-hate for women is a women-only space. She suggests that women should physically and psychically remove themselves from patriarchal religion and all patriarchal institutions to

³³⁰Lalthangliana, “Mizo National Front Movement: A Sociological Study” (PhD thesis, Gauhati University, 1993).

³³¹Jacob, *Zorami*, 64.

heal themselves. She believed that women should not identify with Christian tradition that legitimises patriarchy by imagining God as father and both God and Christ as male. In her first two books *The Church and the Second Sex* and *Beyond God the Father* she describes the role of Church and Christianity in positioning women as inferior to men.

Ironically Malsawmi Jacob envisions catharsis for Zorami and other common Mizo women and men who suffered during the *buai* through religion, the patriarchal system that reinforces misogynist ideology. She here resorts to Mizo Christianity to achieve a sense of closure, and catharsis. Zorami is not like Daly's feminist. It is not her inner strength or her rebellious will to break away from the traditional fold that liberates her from her memory and brings redemption. In *The Collector's Wife* for example in a more dramatic subversive ending the male providers die and Nandini Deuri and Rukmini become liberated to forge an identity of their own without the support of the men. Here Malsawmi operates within the confines of Mizo culture and ethos that, as Joy Pachuau says, is defined by Mizo Christianity. Joy Pachuau in *Being Mizo* says that 'the Mizos are not "Mizos only", but Mizo Kristian or "Christian Mizos"'.³³²

Christianity made inroads into the Mizo Hills in the 19th century in the form of cultural colonialism. James Herbert Lorrain and Frederick W. Savidge of the Arthington Aborigines Mission entered Mizoram in 1894. They adopted the 'indigenous principle' of mission.³³³ They learnt the indigenous language then gave it a written form and started preaching about the Savior in their language. They also incorporated and recast the Mizo worldview, like the concept of supreme male god or *pathian* and heaven or *pialral* to suit the sensibilities of the Mizos. By indigenizing their mission they successfully converted the Mizos. Malsawmi mentions how the missionaries also used force to ruthlessly suppress the revival of all forms of traditional culture and beliefs and the resurgence of heathenism. They prohibited the consumption of local rice beer, participation in feasts and festivals. After many conflicts between the revivalist and the church, Mizo Christianity became a lived-in local religion, a melting pot where the traditional use of drum and poetic expression coexist with the decorum of the Church. Because of the flexibility, deft tactics and sometimes coercive method the growth of Christianity was

³³²Pachuau, *Being Mizo*, 138.

³³³This principle, as propounded by Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, promoted the establishment of a strong self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating indigenous church to propagate Christianity.

phenomenal in the Hills. In 1901 only twenty six Mizo people adopted Christianity and by 1951 ninety percent of the population were Christians.³³⁴

The presence of Christianity is overwhelming in this novel as well. The subtitle of the novel 'A Redemption Song' itself bears testimony to that as redemption is a Christian approach to salvation. The novel also opens in a church. In the prologue the readers see the newly married, young and submissive Zorami in traditional *puan*³³⁵ visiting church with her husband Sanga in his western grey suit on a Sunday morning. The preacher there reads from the Bible the Gospel according to Luke, chapter thirteen, verses ten to thirteen where a woman crippled by an evil spirit is healed of her sickness by Jesus. And the novel ends with the gospel of the resurrection of Lazarus. Zorami's resurrection has been likened with the resurrection of Lazarus.

At the end of the novel the recurrent disturbing dream about the incident of the rape visits Zorami. In her nightmare she sees a half dead girl lying beside a dried spring. She seems beyond redemption. "The young girl is lying hunched up among dry ferns. Bloodied, lifeless."³³⁶ Then as a ray of hope comes the Redeemer, who, "has borne our grief and carried our pains."³³⁷ He takes her to a spring to bring her back from the nether world. "The Man goes to her, picks her up gently. He carries her up a rugged, rocky path. He reaches a waterfall. ...The water runs down on her, completely drenching her. Colour comes to her deathly pale face. Life comes back to her limp body. ... She smiles broadly and swims back towards the Man."³³⁸ She is healed of her anger and destructive memory of the past like the woman in the gospel and Lazarus: "Something has happened. The weight that bent her over and held her down is gone. She is in the pool under waterfall, laughing and playing."³³⁹ And she is now ready to forgive, forget, love and be loved. As she wakes from the dream her husband returns from his office tour. Wrapped in his arms her heart sings of flowers and dove.

³³⁴ Amalendu Guha, "Great Nationalism, Little Nationalism and Problem of Integration: A Tentative View." *Economic and Political Weekly* 14, no. 7/8 (1979): 457. Accessed June 8, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/4367362.

³³⁵ Traditional Mizo dress.

³³⁶ Jacob, *Zorami*, 250.

³³⁷ Ibid., 249.

³³⁸ Ibid..

³³⁹ Ibid., 250.

The Mizo Christians believe in forgiveness and love for all. Denise Adele Segor points out that Mizo Christianity embodies “Mizo love values.”³⁴⁰ They believe that “God guides them through difficulties, and makes meaning of their suffering. As a result, many could forgive their enemies, although they can never forget.”³⁴¹ This ethos has been used by the author here to alleviate the pain of *buai*. In a Hindu majoritarian country like India where indigenous tribal Christians are treated as the inferior ‘other’, foregrounding of the healing aspect of the Mizo Christianity to counter the wound inflicted by the Hindu ‘mainland’ is a subversive act. But we must not ignore the fact that Mizo Christianity is deeply patriarchal. Both Christianity and traditional Mizo belief systems work in tandem to subjugate women. For example, when the missionaries began propagating Christianity, instead of reforming the misogynistic laws, they introduced puritanical Victorian morality in order to gain the confidence and support of the village patriarchs. “The language of the mission fused the elements of patriarchal chauvinism inherent in the Mizo socio-religious system, with that of the patriarchal biases in the Judeo-Christian traditions.”³⁴²

Another problematic aspect of Mizo Christianity is its hegemony over other religious communities. It suppresses stories of the minority. Reviewer of Joy Pachuau’s *Being Mizo*, Bérénice Guyot-Réchard writes that: “Christianity-as-Mizoness has become hegemonic in contemporary Mizoram. In the last few decades or so, a small proportion of people in Mizoram and the neighbouring Manipur district of Churachandpur have begun to identify as Jews, presenting themselves as one of the 12 ‘Lost Tribes’ of Israel, the *Bnei Menashe*.”³⁴³ Some have even emigrated (‘returned’) to Israel.”³⁴⁴

To repress the existence of any problem or difference, as Cixous says is characteristic of the masculine. She says “It is characteristic of the masculine to repress the existence of any problem, of any *difference*, never to think of differences”³⁴⁵ *Zorami*’s reliance on Christianity to

³⁴⁰ Segor, “Mizo Women’s Response to War and Forced Migration,” iii

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Anup Shekhar Chakroborty, “emergence of women from ‘Private’ to ‘Public’: A Narrative of Power Politics from Mizoram,” *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9 no.3 (2008): 30.

³⁴³ The *Bnei Menashe* are an [ethno-linguistic](#) group in Mizoram who claim descent from one of the [Lost Tribes of Israel](#) and have adopted the practice of [Judaism](#).

³⁴⁴ Bérénice Guyot-Réchard, review of *Being Mizo: identity and belonging in Northeast India*, by Joy L.K. Pachuau, *South Asian History and Culture*(2016):3.

³⁴⁵ Cixous, *Rethinking Differences*, 76.

mend the shattered soul of the Mizo people excludes the Mizo who do not believe in Christianity, who are atheist, agnostic, or identify as the *Bnei Menashe*. It represses the plurality of belief systems in Mizo culture. Realizing the limiting nature of religion Jacob, in an interview, insists on spirituality rather than religion. She says: “Spiritual epiphany is the key factor in my protagonist’s inner healing. I honestly could not find any other way to mend her shattered psyche. And for a people still hurting from the atrocities they suffered, a genuine spiritual experience is the need. Spiritual, not merely religious.”³⁴⁶ But the recurring image of Christ as the savior reifies the hegemony of Christianity.

As an unconventional and non-conformist heroine of a feminine text, Zorami is not depicted as a devout Christian who unquestioningly follows the dictum or believes the sermons. She does put up a resistance against the traditional Church rules and customs, and discriminatory church-laws made by the men for their own convenience. While reminiscing about her wedding day she criticizes the discriminatory sartorial rule of traditional church wedding. On her wedding day she wanted to wear a western gown but she was forced to wear the traditional *puanchei*³⁴⁷ because “a good church-law abiding bride was expected to wear the Mizo attire at her wedding.”³⁴⁸ The laws however did not apply to her bridegroom. She says “no question ever arose about the bridegroom and the best man turning out in a western suit and tie.”³⁴⁹ Zorami, at the beginning of the novel, also questions the concept of love and forgiveness for all enshrined in Christianity. Once she attends the Church on a Sunday afternoon where Preacher Rinzuala’s message of love was delivered:

God is love!”... ‘God so loved the world’. That means the whole world, all the people that live in it. Not only the Mizo people. Not only the white people. But everybody. ... he loves each of the CPRF men standing on duty with their guns. He even loves the army who are so hateful to us, who have hurt us in various ways. Jesus died to save them too.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶Jaydeep Sarangi. “In Conversation with Malsawmi Jacob”, *Writers in Conversation* 4. No.2 (2017). < http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/>.

³⁴⁷ A colourful traditional festive cloth for women.

³⁴⁸ Jacob, *Zorami*, 219.

³⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 220.

³⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 179.

But Zorami is unable to forget or forgive the *vai* army man who assaulted her. She finds no justice in forgiving her violator after all “to bear a grudge against what was done to her is a moral duty of every victim.”³⁵¹ She tells Kimi that it is impossible for her to forgive. Kimi is a devout Christian. Her father was murdered by Ralkapa and Subedar Singh but she harbors no malice against them as she believes in God’s justice. In Temsula Ao’s ‘The Last Song’ the captain who raped Apenyo degenerates into madness as a consequence of his deed but in *Zorami* there is no poetic justice. The healing through divine intervention or spiritual epiphany therefore seems incomplete. One is left with a nagging feeling that justice has not been served. But as Malsawmi Jacob explains she “could not find any other way to mend [Zorami’s] shattered psyche. And for a people still hurting from the atrocities they suffered, a genuine spiritual experience is the need.”³⁵²

Malsawmi Jacob’s penchant for spirituality is not new. She has written short stories for the Christian Magazines, such as *Family Foundation*, *Campus Link*, *Light of Life* and *Harvest Times for Your Family*. The stories published in these magazines were brought out as a short story collection, *Blind Spots: Short Stories for Transformational Thinking* (2018). One of the stories in this collection demonstrates how one can attain inner peace by completely surrendering to God. In ‘New Song’ from *Blind Spots*, an eighteen year old singer Melody loses her father. And her love for Jesus fills the aching void left by his absence. Her father was a devout Christian who wanted her to sing and live for God. But she ignored him while he was alive. Melody was a believer but “Christ was in one corner of her life instead of right at the centre.”³⁵³ But after his demise she changes. She starts to sing for God alone and that brings her inner joy. The same strategy is used in this novel as well. Zorami is a believer but does not believe in the Christian value of love and forgiveness for all. But she transforms into a happy and loving woman after Jesus comes to her dream to redeem her from her anger and sufferings.

I argue that in spite of its reliance on religiosity, the novel does not fall short of being radical. It foregrounds the scarred psyche of a woman and her body that is not conventionally attractive, violated and barren. It deconstructs the edifice of Indian nationalism represented by the army. She calls into question the man-made rules and regulation to suppress women, the

³⁵¹ Vajpeyi, ‘Resenting the Indian State,’ 27.

³⁵² Sarangi. “In Conversation with Malsawmi Jacob”, *Writers in Conversation* 4

³⁵³ Malsawmi Jacob, ‘New Song,’ in *Blind Spots* (Mumbai: GLS Publishing, 2018), 14—15.

established Mizo knowledge berating women. Thus she encourages and empowers the Mizo women to come forward and tell their subversive tales. And most importantly, the reliance on spirituality is only on the surface level, a cosmetic one. The ruptured body and mind of Zorami and Mizoram is set free through Malsawmi Jacob's writing, her words. The traumatic memory, the hurt of the *buai* is eased because it was put into words by Malsawmi Jacob. Here I will appropriate Woolf's words to show how Jacob has made the experience of *rambuai* real: "I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together."³⁵⁴

Vignettes Representing Difference

Though at the heart of the novel remains the emotional journey of Zorami, it makes a deviation from time to time to accommodate various personal histories of Mizo people. Through several unconnected and assorted vignettes Malsawmi Jacob gives voice to the horrors experienced by the people during *buai*. While air strike, grouping, rape and torture by the Indian army represent the oppressive character of Indian nationalism, the killing of the Mizo dissenters and non-Mizo migrants by the MNF, are representative of the alternate stories of xenophobic totalitarian sub-nationalism of the MNF. And all these amorphous facets that plagued Mizoram during the time of Mizo *rambuai* find closure and catharsis with the redemption of Zorami as she metonymically represents Mizoram in the novel.

The air strike stands apart among the multiple episodes narrated in the novel. After the MNF attack on government offices and military camps on 28th February, 1966, the very next day the Government of India instructed two fighter jets to drop bomb on its own people. The centre of Aizawl was targeted, the main bazaar area was destroyed, and people living in Aizawl were forced to flee their homes and take shelter in villages and forests. In the chaos many children got separated from their parents. Journalists record it as one of the most shameful episodes of Indian history. Malsawmi Jacob records this episode of history in the words of panic stricken women running helter-skelter.

"They are dropping bombs!"

Children cried, calling on their mothers.

³⁵⁴Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Jeanne Schullkind (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976), 85.

“What shall we do?”
 “Run! Run to the jungle!”
 “*Karei* Alas! It’s awful!”
 “All our things are lost!”
 “Where is my baby?”
 “What will we do with grandpa? He can barely walk.”
 “We have to carry him.”³⁵⁵

The air strike impacted the lives of the people belonging to all strata of society. Mary’s story illustrates that. Mary belonged to an affluent family. She studied at a school in Shillong. The strike took place while she was away in her hostel. On returning home to Aizawl she witnesses her charred home and broken father which leaves young Mary feeling shattered and numb. Her father had a flourishing press in Aizawl main town which was reduced to ashes after the bombing.

The main street wore a ravaged look. Burned buildings with black faces. Army men in uniform all over the place, rifles hanging from their shoulders. As she went past her father’s press, she turned to look. She saw the gaping space where the walls had been, and black twisted iron stumps on the floor. She did not cry, not a single tear dropped from her eyes. She felt numb and weighed down.³⁵⁶

Forced dislocation or regrouping of villages was another coercive method to crush the spirit of the Mizo people. Taking a leaf out of England’s anti guerrilla operation in Malaysia and America’s counter insurgency operation in Vietnam, Indian government resorted to the method of grouping of villages. Out of 764 villages 319 were grouped. The forceful regrouping was done ostensibly to protect the villages from the ongoing violence but it was a ploy to separate the insurgents from the community and monitor the movements of the villagers. The forceful grouping of villages displaced the people from their land and community. They were kept under constant surveillance. They could not socialize, or participate in community fest. Their identity was reduced to just roll calls. Regrouping in Mizo language is called *kmawkhawm* meaning driving villagers here and there. A former soldier in his memoir recounts how he was instructed to drive away the villagers from their homes with their belongings and then burn their

³⁵⁵ Jacob, *Zorami*, 100.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

houses.³⁵⁷In *Zorami* Malsawmi records the traumatic experience of the *khawkhawm* through a folk song. Though *Zorami* is the first novel in English, Mizoram boasts of long oral tradition

Of all our bad times, *khawkhawm* is the darkest;
All our *Zoram* has faded like worn out clothes;
Men, women and children, gathered from all hills
Go hungry and homeless like *riakmaw* bird.³⁵⁸

Brazen human rights violation by the army personnel especially targeting of women related to the MNF members was common as they had immunity under AFSPA. *Zorami* is not the only rape victim in the novel. *Zorami* records several other brutal rapes of Mizo women by the Indian army men. While *Zorami*'s rapist remains nameless and faceless, another repulsive character called Captain Kohli created by the writer to be the face of army brutality. *Zorami*'s rapist go unpunished but Captain Kohli who picks up female relatives of suspected underground rebels to satiate his lust is killed by the Mizo rebels.

While airstrike, regrouping, rape and torture by Indian army highlights the coercive, oppressive power of the Indian government and the Indian armed forces, a few incidents of violence against the non-Mizos from the plains and Mizo dissenters by the MNF army foregrounds the insular attitude of the MNF. The brutal murder of a science teacher George from Kerala in front of his students is an episode that is a telling example of MNF's blind hatred towards the non-Mizo Indian. The episode is narrated by a student who witnesses the killing. The young student shaken by the experience tells her mother how her teacher was stabbed again and again. The murder exposes the detrimental effects of killings and counter killings on the children and their education. The MNF not only killed the non-Mizos staying in Mizoram they also targeted the local dissenters. A local journalist who wrote against the MNF violence and impossibility of achieving their goal in an editorial was silenced in similar fashion.

These episodes reflect that Mizo identity is plagued by vestiges of xenophobia towards other communities from the plains. Malsawmi Jacob identifies this parochialism and chauvinism and advises a rearrangement of thought. Through the transformation of Rinzuala, a Christian extremist, she proposes the idea of tolerance.

³⁵⁷Nandini Sundar, "Interning Insurgent Populations: The Buried Histories of Indian Democracy," *Economic & Political Weekly* 46, no. 6(2011):47.

³⁵⁸Jacob, *Zorami*, 116.

Rinzuala had called himself a patriot since his late teens. His life mission, as he saw it then, was to liberate his native land from *vai rule* and cleanse it from evil. ... as chaplain to the guerrilla fighters, he was an inspiration to them. With great enthusiasm, he showed them his dream of Mizoram as an independent, Christian country. “No other religion will exist then, and no idol worship will be allowed,” he would say.³⁵⁹

He considered every *vai* as an enemy. His outlook changes after meeting a kind Sikh havildar. The giant Sardar is considerate towards the Mizo prisoners, he refuses to beat them and also gives them cigarettes to ease out their suffering. Rinzuala wonders how a ‘mere *vai*’ can be so considerate towards the people of the other race. This experience made him realize that people of other communities too are human.

In her poem ‘Identity’ from *Four Gardens and Other Poems* Jacob makes her idea of tolerance clear. She says Mizos are different from the ‘majoritarian’ Indian. But at the same time they are part of the same universal fraternity and sorority. Therefore this difference should be celebrated and should not be a ground for oppression or divisive politics.

My voice may sound a bit strange
seem to be singing off-key
as I go for minor modes,
not being majoritarian
...
Nevertheless, we are part of
universal brotherhood;
the sky and earth are ours
as well as yours.³⁶⁰

The chapter as well as Zorami’s story comes a full circle with this poem. The chapter begins with an epithet that reflects hatred, anger, and rage for the *vai* or the mainland Indian populace and ends with inner healing, and recognition of the *vai*/other as part of the Mizo self. The violence against Mizoram is a result of aggressive Indian nationalism and its perverse desire to crush the sub-nationalism of the racially other Mizo community. This violence and hatred can

³⁵⁹Ibid., 165.

³⁶⁰ Zualteii Poonte, “Identity and other poems - Malsawmi Jacob,” *Mizo Writings in English*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.mizowritinginenglish.com/2017/08/identity-and-other-poems-malsawmi-jacob.html>.

be countered only by subverting the hierarchical binary between India and Mizoram. Therefore Malsawmi Jacob invents a character Zorami who is an embodiment of non-essentialist subjectivity. One of the main characteristics of Zorami is that she looks like a *vai*. As mentioned earlier, she is dark like a common plain land Indian woman. Malsawmi here accepts and inscribes the despised darkness of the racially other/*vai* women thereby creating an inter-subjective connection between two marginalized sections, the Mizo women and *vai* women.

That being said, it must be emphasized that like Malsawmi Jacob and her Zorami, the larger nation-state and the people from the rest of India also have to recognize the otherness inherent in self. The 'majoritarian' populace who are the upholders of pure identity needs to conduct a journey towards accepting their inherent alterity. And finally it is incumbent on the Government of India and the armed forces to remember and acknowledge the atrocity they committed during the counter insurgency operation to facilitate the process of healing.

Delineating Conflict: Naga Women's Writing in English

You, all of you, who swear by Christ or the Mahatma

Shoot, don't stop now, pull those triggers

Shoot surely you have the courage of conviction

of the rightness of your causes?

Go ahead then, shoot, blast us to eternity

I give you my word, we will not move

neither from our stand nor to distract your aim

Shoot, we will stand firm and not move

from our dreams of brotherhood.

---Monalisa Changkija, 'Shoot'³⁶¹

Mountainous Nagaland— tucked away into the far northeast corner of India— is considered to be one of the most fascinating parts of the country by its readers and commentators.³⁶² In the nineteenth century when the British administrators, anthropologists and ethnographers 'discovered' the Nagas³⁶³ they found them so alluring that they plundered the Naga Hills and collected their 'bizarre' 'exotic' cultural artefacts to showcase them in museums and establish them as exotic head hunters. Captain Jenkins and Pemberton were the first British administrators to invade the Naga Hills. Then the restless desire of the modern West to know and collect the 'exotic' Naga world commenced. Colonel R.G. Woodthorpe was one of the first ones to carry out detailed surveys in the hills in 1871. Then administrators and anthropologists like J. H. Hutton and J. P. Mills joined as administrators and dutifully sent Naga artefacts to the director of Pitt-Rivers Museum.³⁶⁴ In 1937 Mills facilitated the entry of Austrian anthropologist Christoph

³⁶¹ Monalisa Changkija, "Shoot," in *Monsoon Mourning* (Dimapur: Heritage, 2013), 37.

³⁶² I see Nagaland not as an inert land but as a text and the outsiders who come in contact with the terrain as readers who read and construct it as an exotic land.

³⁶³ The Nagas are a heterogeneous conglomeration of sixteen major tribes namely Angami, Ao, Chakhezami, Chang, Chiru, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Lhota, Mokware, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Tikhir, Yimchungru and Zeilang and several sub-tribes. It was the British who first referred to these, at least, 40 different ethnic groups as the Nagas.

³⁶⁴ J. H. Hutton was Nagaland deputy commissioner and Naga specialist. From 1922 Hutton wrote at least three studies on Naga tribes published by McMillan on behalf of the Government of Assam. And Mills joined the Indian Civil Service in 1913.. For the next thirty- forty years he made his career in northeast India. He was a subdivisional officer at Mokochung in the Naga Hills from 1917 to 1924, and then deputy commissioner at Kohima. In 1943 Mills was given responsibility for tribal matters in the northeast. leaving Naga Hills in 1947, Mills sailed to England, where the following year he became Reader in Language and Culture with special reference to South-East Asia at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Between 1951 and 1953 he was president of Royal Anthropological Institute.. He died in 1960. Mills had written

Von Furer-Haimendorf. In 1939 he organized an exhibition in Museum of für Volkukunde in Vienna to exercise his power in casting a culture “... in stereotypical moulds, highlighting only the ‘exotic’ or the ‘savage’ exterior and leaving out the human core.”³⁶⁵

This process of dehumanization and exoticization of the Nagas continue in independent India under the aegis of our post-colonial masters. After brutally crushing the demand for sovereignty made by the ethnic leaders, the Indian nation- state granted statehood to the Nagas in 1963. In 1967 a postal stamp was issued to mark the fourth anniversary of Naga statehood. On the stamp a group of Naga men in their tribal head gear and loin cloth can be seen docilely following the suave and benevolent Nehru, the towering leader of post-colonial India. This image does not reflect the actual bloody history of Naga independence struggle, and the resistance and agency of the Naga people, but foregrounds Nehru’s endeavour to civilize the ‘savage.’ By doing so this postage stamp constitutes Nagaland as modern India’s uncivilized but docile ‘other.’ While the visual text of the postage stamp represent the Nagas as the noble savage, the written text on the official website of the state of Nagaland created under the directives of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology reifies it. The site has this to say about the land and its people: “Each of the 16 odd tribes and sub-tribes that dwell in this exotic hill State can easily be distinguished by the colourful and intricately designed costumes, jewellery and beads that they adorn.”³⁶⁶

The Nagas like any other self-respecting community with their penchant for autonomy and independence found ways to resist this occupation, misrepresentation, and appropriation. In the four month long battle of Khonoma (22November, 1879-27March, 1880) the Angami Nagas put up a strong resistance to the British expansionist design. John Butler records the Naga resistance as “one long sickening story of open insults and defiance...”³⁶⁷ And in the post-colonial time Nagaland has become the site of the world’s longest secessionist struggle. Swedish journalist and author Bertil Lintner, in *Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for*

three studies on individual Naga tribes- *The Lhota Nagas* (1922), *The Ao Nagas* (1926), and *The Regma Nagas* (1937). For a detailed description of the plunder ,see Jonathan Glancey, *Nagaland:A Journey to India’s Forgotten Frontier*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 12.

³⁶⁵Tilottama Misra, Foreword to *On Being a Naga*, by TemsulaAo (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014), xv.

³⁶⁶Glancey, *Nagaland*, 48.

³⁶⁷John Butler, ‘Rough Notes on Angami Nagas,’ *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* 44, no. 4(1875) 307-327, quoted in Sajal Nag, *Contesting Marginality*, 19.

Asia's Most Volatile Frontier, says that the Naga insurgency was the first in independent India to challenge the 'idea of India'.

This strong sense of identity and rootedness that inspire the Nagas to resist the hegemonic forces is the hallmark of written Naga literature as well. Naga Writer Temsula Ao affirmatively writes that even though the material culture was looted, packed and removed by the western forces, the essence of Naga identity survives: "But fortunately for us, though we were stripped of our external Naganess, the essential core of our being Nagas could not be obliterated and this consciousness has remained firmly rooted to the soil of our origin."³⁶⁸ Similarly, asserting Naga difference poet and journalist Monalisa Changkija writes to the hegemonic mainland: "We are different, we cannot conform to the mainstream but we are not villains, so why not accept us as we are and facilitate our differentness to enrich the country's uniqueness?"³⁶⁹ Yet, the writings by these women writers do not present a monolithic crystallized picture of Naga identity pitted against a monolithic enemy other. The 'us' in Changkija's description is not a definable whole. Imposition of a homogenizing limiting definition is a phallogocentric trope to dominate and control the other.³⁷⁰ The colonialists Woodthorpe, Hutton, Mills and later the likes of Elwin³⁷¹ and Nehru tried to position the Nagas as a homogeneous racial 'other' of 'mainland' India, as the naked Nagas, who are to be tamed and captured. The father of Naga Nationalism Angami Zapu Phizo also dreamt of a homogenous and united Nagalim³⁷² inhabited by the Nagas only. A feminine rewriting instead endeavours to deconstruct this homogenous and monolithic definition by inscribing the marginalised stories of the 'other'. The aim of this chapter is to present this gendered representation of Naga people as represented in the contemporary Naga writings in English by Naga women writers.

Nagaland as a state appeared on the political map of India on 1st December 1963 when it became the sixteenth state in the Union of India. But it took a few more decades for it to make its

³⁶⁸ Ao, *On Being a Naga*, 4.

³⁶⁹ Monalisa Changkija, 'Northeast Outside the Newspaper Pages,' in *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity*, edited by Margaret Ch. Zama (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2013), 135..

³⁷⁰ "Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield." Cixous, "Medusa," 881.

³⁷¹ See for example, Verrier Elwin, *Nagaland* (Calcutta: SreeSaraswati Press, 1961).

³⁷² The term Nagalim refers to the entire Naga ancestral domain which was partitioned by the British between India and Myanmar.

mark on the literary map of Indian Writing in English since the Nagas are an oral society. Written Naga literature began to surface in the 1980s when Northeast Hill University Professor Temsula Ao began publishing her collection of poems. Writers Workshop Kolkata published her *Songs that Tell* in 1988, *Songs that Try to Say* in 1992 and *Songs of Many Moods* in 1995. While, the most prolific writer Easterine Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* which was published in 2003 was the first novel in English to be published by a Naga author. Kire's other works include *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) and *When the River Sleeps* (2014). Temsula Ao's collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head* also emerged in the first two decades of the twenty first century. Ao received the Sahitya Akademi award for *Laburnum for My Head* in 2013. Kire's *When the River Sleeps* has earned her the prestigious Hindu Literary Prize in 2015. Her *Terrible Matriarchy* is now a recommended text in the B. A. English syllabus of Nagaland University. Naga writers Nini Lungalang and Monalisa Changkija's poems are also part of various Northeast Indian university syllabi.

Visibility of Naga writing is growing steadily. And the most fascinating aspect of this burgeoning literature is that it is dominated by women writers. In fact, as a *Times of India* article points out, the entire intellectual spectrum of Nagaland is dominated by women.³⁷³ The entire thought shaping domain of fiction writing, publishing, journalism and teaching is guided and led by Naga women. It is inspiring and at the same time ironical and puzzling given the current political climate of Nagaland. The Legislative Assembly of Nagaland state has not seen a single woman member till date. In February 2017 when for the first time the election to urban local bodies was scheduled with thirty three percent reservation for women, the state erupted to oppose this measure. Bandh and boycott was called by the male dominated Naga Hoho, the Apex Organisation of the Naga people. The traditionalists also wrote vociferously against it as they thought participation of women in politics is against Naga culture and tradition. Prominent Naga scholar Charles Chasie believed that this small step towards equality is invasion of disruptive modernism, and a hegemonic homogenization mission of the Indian State.³⁷⁴ In a society where woman's leadership, her participation in decision-making process or her inheritance rights are

³⁷³Yudhajit Shankar Das, 'Why women dominate the entire intellectual spectrum in Nagaland' *Times of India*, Sep 18, 2019,

³⁷⁴Charles Chasie, "Is Naga Society Really Patriarchal?" *The Morung Express*, 9 February, 2017.

seen as threat to cultural essence, she has to surreptitiously make her way to the seat of power. She has to steal the language that fails to accommodate her, steal the tools that are denied to her. As discussed in the introductory chapter, creative writing is that space or tool with which women can negotiate power and put an end to the silencing of women. The male leadership is reluctant to share the power of representing the Naga people with the women. But, it is through the writings by the Naga women that the readers worldwide come to know about Naga culture, history, and their struggle with the coercive forces.

In this chapter I have chosen to focus on the writings by women authors on the Indo-Naga conflict, an exclusively masculinist enterprise. I will also touch upon the British-Naga conflict as rewritten by Easterine Kire. But the 19th century Anglo-Naga conflict has become a relic of the past. The ongoing Naga struggle for the right to self-determination, on the other hand, continues to be a critical part of Naga political history. It has affected the lives of women and men. But women are not only excluded from the decision making process but the women journalists are also denied freedom to report on the political development. Monalisa Changkija who has founded *Nagaland Daily* has received several death threats from the militants. Her book *Cogitating for a Better Deal* was banned by the apex judicial body of the Ao tribe. Defying the patriarchal dictates these women poets, novelists and journalists frequently write about the insurgency. They do not intend to forget the travails of the dead and want to preserve it for the future generation much like Jean Amery. They have taken upon themselves the responsibility to recreate the trauma and terror of the separatist movement. The writers do so by foregrounding the unwritten story of ordinary people who are precariously positioned between two opposite warring sides, insurgents on one side and the Indian armed forces on the other. But before turning to these writers we have to return to the written 'his-story' of the events.

The fight of the Nagas for self determination had its beginning in 1918 when a political entity called the Naga Club came into existence. The founding members of the club were part of the First World War. They were employed as war labourers by the British colonial masters. Their experiences in the War gave them the confidence that they could vanquish the colonial power and establish a united Nagalim. Asoso Yonuo in his book argues that the journey across seas and countries awoke in them the spunk of Naga nationalism, like it had in other parts of India, and they began to develop the concept of a Naga nation, which had not been dreamt of before.

The members of the Naga Club presented a proposal to Simon Commission stating their desire for self rule in 1929. In 1941, the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills and Governor of Assam at the time suggested a scheme to carve out a Trust Territory or Crown Colony, which included the Naga Hills, the Northeast Frontier areas in upper Assam and the hill areas in upper Burma. But the policy did not materialize. In 1946 when British policy makers decided to hand over the Indian Territory to the new government, the pleas of the Nagas to be an independent nation remained unimplemented. They became fearful that they would be forcefully integrated within the Indian Union and an alien culture would be imposed upon them. Around this time Naga National Council was formed and an extremist leader Angami Zapu Phizo who once announced that "I am a Naga first, a Naga second, and a Naga last," took charge. With his arrival the discussions and the treaties turned into a violent warfare. On the eve of 15th August 1947, Phizo declared independence from the emerging nation-state of India. A cable was sent to the United Nations General Secretary that read: "Nagas will be independent. Kindly put on record that Nagas will be independent. Discussions with India are being carried on to that effect. Nagas do not wish to accept Indian constitution. The right of the people must prevail regardless of size."³⁷⁵ On May 16, 1951 he conducted plebiscite by collecting thumbprints of men and women and declared that 99 percent participants voted for independent Nagaland. Angami Zapu Phizo made the following assertion at the Naga national plebiscite.

The Nagas do not ask independence from India; indeed we do not want anything from India. India has nothing to give away to Nagaland, we are independent and sovereign in our own national right. What we ask is not to interfere [in] our dministration but leave us alone and allow Nagaland, the national state of the Nagas, to continue to exist in peace and make progress without hindrance.³⁷⁶

The first general election of 1952 provided another opportunity to challenge the celebratory notion of Indian democracy. The Nagas under the leadership of Phizo decided to boycott the election.

³⁷⁵ Abraham Lotha, "Articulating Naga Nationalism," 36.

³⁷⁶V. K. Nuh, *The Naga Chronicle* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2002),118, quoted in Bora, "The Nation and its Margin,"21.

These challenges posed by a popular and charismatic local ethnic leader were seen as a threat to the Indian consciousness and integrity by the Government of India. Therefore the Government of India under the leadership of Nehru decided to suppress these challenges by wielding military forces. Indian government employed all its might to crush the dissenting voices that dared to challenge their concept of Indianness as a united whole. Parliament of India passed Armed Forces Special Power Act in 1951 to bestow unbridled power to the armed forces in the 'disturbed' areas of the Naga Hills. The Government of India started unleashing uninhibited force to suppress the first armed rebellion of independent India. The Indian Armed forces adopted the policy of forced village grouping as one of their counter insurgency measures to separate the Naga underground military from their support base. That policy rendered ordinary people homeless and more underground soldiers were born as a result of this harsh measure.³⁷⁷ Amidst this violence a new state of Nagaland was born which became the sixteenth state of the Indian union with the special provision under Article 371A. But the dream of an independent and united Nagalim continues to animate the nationalist Nagas to wield guns against the establishment and against each other. Many peace accords have been signed between the insurgent group and the Indian government till now. But the imbroglio continues. Shillong Accord was signed between the NNC and the government in 1979. The signatories agreed to give up arms but the senior members were dissatisfied with it. As a result the famous NSCN was founded by Isak Swu, Muivah and Khaplang on January 31, 1980. Because of disagreement and inter tribal conflict in 1988 NSCN was also divided into two groups, NSCN (IM) led by Isak and Muivah and NSCN (K) by Khaplang. The latest peace accord to end the insurgency was signed in 2015 by the NSCN (IM) and the Government of India.

Now, what is the role of the Naga women in all this? Paula Banerjee has stated that the insurgent groups were known to have women members but they were not given any decision-making power. And because of the clandestine nature of the groups it is difficult to ascertain the names of the women members.³⁷⁸ The women insurgents therefore remain powerless, nameless and faceless. The role of the Naga Mother's Association which was founded in February 1984 in Kohima by Phizo's niece is significant as it tries to undo the invisibilization of women in the

³⁷⁷The policy of village grouping was later implemented during Mizo counter insurgency operation. The trauma of displacement is described in chapter V.

³⁷⁸ Paula Banerjee, "The Naga Women's Interventions For Peace," *Canadian WomanStudies* 19, no.4. (Winter 2002), 138.

public discourse of the Indo-Naga conflict. This apolitical organization was founded to act as a peace enabler and to address social issues like drug addiction, alcoholism, malnutrition among children and so on. The role of Naga Mother's Association in enabling peace talks between the government representatives and insurgent groups is particularly significant. It is even more significant that the members of the Naga Mother's Association are not allowed to have divergent views or take important decisions regarding the treaties and peace accords signed between the rebel groups and the Government of India. They have to toe the line of the local political groups.

This marginalization of women is not surprising. After all Phizo, Swu, Muivah and Khaplang are all male leaders who fought the battle on masculine terms. Phizo's claim for sovereignty was based on the colonial discourse of absolute difference between the Nagas and Indians, his adversaries. He famously said: "... It is an undeniable fact that the Nagas are not Indian. We distinctly and unmistakably belong to the great Mongolian family.... Between the Indians and the Nagas, I am sad to say these [same attitude, same feeling and tolerance] are lacking. Nagas found it impossible to tolerate the Indians . . .”³⁷⁹ Reducing women to the status of second-class citizens, he constructed both Indian and Naga subjectivity as unthinkingly male. In the case of India, the subject is a regressive and intolerant male who is cruel to the women, whereas a Naga subject is a liberal male.

It is a practice in India to kill their daughters because they cannot marry them off; that means, they have no tolerance, no consideration even toward womanhood who are the very fountain of their posterity. Their men are so selfish that they will not marry unless the wife to be brings wealth which they call “dowry” for the price [of] marrying her, and, it is almost always the case the girl does not know the man who is to be her husband. A man old enough to be her grandfather is often represented to her as a handsome young boy. That is the way the Indians do business and they consider such tactics as skillfulness! The selfishness reveals more tragically on the last day the man leaves this world. His wife is burned alive on his funeral pyre. All these go to prove that the core of their heart or the basis of their civilization is intolerant³⁸⁰

³⁷⁹Nuh, *Naga Chronicle*, 119., quoted in Bora, “Nation and its Margin,” 219.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 123.

The same argument of relatively better condition of Naga women is used by Naga men even after fifty years to deny women access to political power. Temsula Ao narrates an incident in which a livid male politician silences a woman questioning the subordinate role of women in Naga patriarchy by reminding her of the lower status of women in heartland India.

...one of the women delegates stated that Naga women have always played a subordinate role in society and advocated a change in male attitude towards the opposite sex so that a more balanced partnership could be devised for greater development in the state. There was hearty applause from the women but a stony silence from the men. Not only that, when it was the turn of the chief guest, a prominent political leader, to deliver his keynote address, he disregarded his prepared speech....and launched into a tirade against women accusing them of misrepresenting their status in society. He began by asking questions: Who can say that Naga women have an inferior position in society? Do we make them cover their heads, make them walk behind us? Can they not eat their meals without having to wait for us to finish first? Do we not spend equal amounts of money for the education of our daughters as we do for our sons? Do we practice dowry system? Do we not look after our womenfolk? Have we not inducted women into the Village Development Boards.³⁸¹

Widow burning, dowry system, and veil which are part of the Indian 'mainland' were indeed never part of Naga tradition. But for centuries Naga society existed on the strength of male superiority and on the principle of exclusion of women from all seats of power. And such state of affairs has continued because of "the unquestioning acquiescence of women."³⁸² Women accepted and contributed to the cult of male heroism to ensure their own security. Ao argues that this ideology had its beginning in the pre-modern Naga Hills when people had to deal with difficult terrain, wild animals, and hostile neighbouring tribes. In such circumstances men used their physical power to assume the role of the protector of the community. Hence as a protector of the community it was easier for them to assume the superior status in the male/female binary. Women unquestioningly accepted the position of men as the protector, provider, hence the superior member of the community. The pre-colonial times was also marked by the tribal wars, incessant struggle for supremacy through warfare, typified by the notorious practice of headhunting which is an ancient Naga practice of chopping off the heads of slain enemies in

³⁸¹ Ao, *On Being a Naga*, 45.

³⁸² Ibid.,

warfare and bringing them home as trophies, for public display. Head-takers were considered to be heroes. The cultural practice of headhunting only reinforced the myth of male supremacy and female inferiority.

This culture of male supremacy remained the same even in the colonial times. When modern education and Christianity made inroads into the Naga Hills it was the male members who became the main beneficiary. When western education became an option it was the male child who got the first opportunity. And when new religion was accepted it was again the men who took charge. The pastor was a male, so were the members of the Deacon Boards. Even today women are not allowed to become the Pastor. Ao rightly puts that “[T]his example of the power structure within the church is one more indicator of the perpetuation of male domination in Naga society in matters of decision-making.”³⁸³

In post-colonial times, Naga insurgency and counter insurgency operation have further exacerbated women’s status in Naga society because, as we know, in times of conflict patriarchy reasserts itself even more violently. The dominant oppositional binary of male fighters and female non-combatants encourages an image of violent aggressive masculinity, whereas it positions women as territorial bodies to be either protected or conquered which subsequently results in gender based moral policing and sexual violence against women. Therefore in this armed and cultural Indo-Naga conflict Naga women have to face multiple patriarchies. They are now precariously positioned between two opposing forces – the homogenizing, integrationist forces of Indian government that in the name of an integrated India oppresses the Naga people and on the other hand Naga male leadership which thwart women’s rise to power in the name of upholding tradition to counter the Indian forces.

Having said this, we must recognize that stereotypical essentialization of women as victims deny them any agency. I will therefore focus on how women writers challenge both the nefarious powers of Indian and Naga patriarchy. Temsula Ao and Nini Lungalang in their rewriting of Naga insurgency try to excavate the alternative stories or counter narratives of subversive resistance thereby calling into question the dominant discourses on insurgency that insist on simple oppositional binaries such as male/female, agent/victim. I will discuss how Temsula Ao brings to the fore the unwritten stories of courage in the form of her female

³⁸³Ibid., 47.

characters like Khatila, Apenyo. They manage to assert their identity even in a deeply misogynistic social and political condition. Nini Lungalang's short story 'Child of Fortune' similarly portrays a woman character that chooses her own death in the face of the mindless violence of counter insurgency operation. These characters are the example of Foucauldian assertion that "As soon as there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance."³⁸⁴ And later in the chapter I will discuss three novels by Easterine Kire who tacitly support the tradition of feminine subservience. And lastly, I will discuss two short stories by a young writer Avinuo Kire: 'Solie' and 'Nigu's Red T Shirt'. While 'Solie' delineates the impact of the masculinist Indo-Naga conflict on woman, 'Nigu's Red T Shirt' describes the psychological impact of the cultural and racial difference between Nagaland and mainland India on Naga migrants in Delhi.

Temsula Ao's Use of Music, Humour and Idiocy as Resistance

Temsula Ao, Padmashree and Sahitya Akademi award winning author from Nagaland, frequently avails the Indo-Naga conflict as her literary inspiration. But the power relation between Indian nation-state and Naga nationalists is seldom addressed clearly by the author. My argument is that Ao's appropriation of the Naga conflict is always political and her apparently dispassionate, apolitical tales are in fact resistance narratives of the subaltern.

In this section I will attempt a close reading of 'Lest We Forget,' Ao's aptly titled introduction to her collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, to comprehend her position on the Naga conflict. Thereafter I will focus on three short stories from this collection, 'The Last Song', 'The Jungle Major', and 'Soaba', to see whether these fictive narratives reflect Ao's (a)political stand.

These Hills Called Home is located in war torn Nagaland of the 1950s and 1960s and in the preface to the book Ao summarizes her intended design to capture this temporal and spatial reality. In 'Lest We Forget' Ao places importance on the role of memory in preserving the history of Naga people. She writes, ". . . in these stories, I have endeavored to re-visit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged"³⁸⁵ But, simultaneously she strips off the historicity and the unique identity from the people's memory which she wishes to preserve.

³⁸⁴ Michael Foucault, 'The End of Monarchy of Sex,' 153.

³⁸⁵ Temsula Ao, Introduction to *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), ix.

These stories however, are not about 'historical facts'; nor are they about condemnation, justice or justification of the events which raged through the land like a wildfire half a century ago. On the contrary, what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life —their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul.³⁸⁶

The critics argue that Ao's framework, that aims to put forth a universal human story of suffering, reduces the traumatic events of Naga conflict to a set of apolitical and a-historical narratives. The stories position the suffering Naga women and men as archetypal silenced victims of war. Sanjoy Barbora, one of the reviewers, for example writes that this a-historical mode is "both liberating and (somewhat unfortunately) subject to self-censorship. The vague references to political positions and positioning of people as victims of circumstances beyond their comprehension are somewhat misleading." Therefore, Barbora adds, "one is left with a nagging doubt that one half of the story is missing."³⁸⁷

I argue that what Barbora refers to as self-censorship is the other half of the story that can be construed or written by the readers. Her a-historical, apolitical ambiguous stance invites her readers to probe deeper into the history, to write the other half of the story, identify with her characters and locate their subversive power. The open ended ambiguity is the strength of Ao's writing that makes it 'writerly.' The pressure on the Northeast writers to be the representative voice of their troubled torn homeland and to unambiguously put forth their political position is a constant one.³⁸⁸ Assamese writer Mitra Phukan faces similar kind of criticism for her *The Collector's Wife*. Ao's nonconformity resists neat and narrow categorization of literary writing on the basis of region. Her writing instead attempts a rewriting of the conflict that resists passive consumption of her texts. Rejecting classification in the 'Writing as Affirmation' Ao writes:

³⁸⁶Ibid. ix-x

³⁸⁷Sanjoy Barbora. 'Book Review: Reading Tamsula Ao,' *The Morung Express*, September 12, 2006, quoted in Ashley Tellis. "Differing Resistances: Mediating the Naga Struggle in Easterine Irulu's a Terrible Matriarchy and Tamsula Ao's These Hills Called Home," *Eastern Quarterly* 5, no. I (April June 2008), 39.

³⁸⁸ In a prestigious conference conducted by IACLALS on Northeast Indian writing a presenter made similar allegation against Ao. The mainland Indian male participant who was presenting a paper on 'The Last Song' criticized the author for her apolitical stance.

...it is about the life we know and want to share with our fellow citizens who have somehow always looked at us through the prism of 'otherness' and suspicion. Accepting the difference can also mean transcending the 'local'... to discover the 'universal.' In that sense these writings deserve more than the cursory perusals as 'categories' that they are subjected to at the moment.³⁸⁹

Ao's writing is in fact deeply critical of the Indian nation-state, its army that uses the phallogocentric brute power to chastise and discipline the 'other'. Her writing also offers a scathing attack on Naga sub-nationalism that rests on the premise of male values and female subservience. It is upon the readers to read into that subversive power of her writing. And more importantly Barbora's observation that the characters in Ao's stories are positioned as ignorant victims is not entirely true either. We will see in the three story stories how her characters subvert the power of the state.

'The Last Song,' one of the short stories in *These Hills Called Home*, stands out as a powerful feminist portrayal of the horrors of Naga conflict. Based on a true incident it transcribes one of the most inhuman atrocities perpetrated by the Indian army during their counter insurgency operation. At the same time it is a subversive tale of resistance to such atrocities. 'The Last Song' tells the story of a young Naga girl Apenyo 'who was born to sing.' At the very onset the writer tries to establish Apenyo's passion for singing. As a child Apenyo is taken to community singing events during festivals and church on Sundays by her mother. And she breaks into singing disturbing the perfect synchrony of the professional singers. She grows up to be the lead soprano at the church choir and becomes famous in her village as 'the singing beauty'.

Ao always foregrounds creative energy and unbridled passion of woman to create something new against the wishes of the traditionalists. Weaving in Naga culture is considered the most important traditional art form. Traditionally women were taught to weave from their childhood. Going against the grain Ao uses the art of singing in this story. In another story 'Pot Maker' the art of pot making is used to highlight the creative energy of Naga women. This creative energy becomes a tool of subversion and defiance in 'The Last Song' when the placid life of Apenyo and her mother Libeni comes under an onslaught as the Naga freedom struggle intensifies.

³⁸⁹TemsulaAo, Writing as Affirmation, *Indian Literature*, 54, No. 6 (260) (November/December 2010), 170.

During the time of independence movement or insurgency the villagers were forced to pay taxes to the underground parallel ‘government’ which in turn was seen as treason by the Indian state and its defenders. The villagers in Apenyo’s village were amongst the tax payers. To teach Apenyo’s villagers a lesson for their ‘anti-national’ act, on a dedication Sunday when Apenyo prepares to perform at the newly constructed church, the revengeful Indian army decides to conduct a dangerous raid. Undeterred by the raid of the Indian Army on the congregation at the new church Apenyo sings on. Her defiance infuriates the egoistic captain who singles out her for punishment. Libeni rushes to rescue her daughter from the violent clutches of the men. But she too meets the same tragic end. Both the mother and daughter are brutally raped. The villagers witness the inhuman act of the army. To destroy the evidence the marauding soldiers then set the new church on fire reducing the dead and dying into an unrecognizable black mass.

This tragic tale of human suffering, told in a dispassionate way, is in fact a scathing attack on the phallogentric premise of India’s counter insurgency operation. Armed conflict is a masculine enterprise and it uses rape as an instrument to humiliate and dehumanize the opponents. Sexual assault against women by warring armies is used as a trope in many war narratives as we have seen in the case of Mizo *rambuai*. In its depiction of sexual assault on women in a church during conflict situations ‘The Last Song’ bears an uncanny resemblance to Alberto Moravia’s Italian post war novel *Two Women* originally titled *La Ciociara*. In this novel a mother-daughter duo is raped by Moroccan allied soldiers of French army in a church under the silent eyes of God. This war rape narrative by Moravia portrays Rosette, the daughter as a victim who suffers trauma and loses her innocence after the incident.³⁹⁰ Ao’s comparatively lesser known short story, by contrast, posits Apenyo’s strength to the fore. The woman’s body as a passive site of torture and victimhood recedes to the background and her active act of singing takes up a central position as a cite of resistance. The most telling act of Apenyo’s resistance is represented in the lines where Ao writes –

Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her. Her mother, standing with the congregation, saw her daughter singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of the guns with her voice raised to God in heaven.³⁹¹

³⁹⁰ See, for example, Sharon Wood, *Object, Language and Gender in the work of Alberto Moravia*, (London: Pluto Press, 1990), for a feminist critique of Moravia.

³⁹¹ Ao, ‘The Last Song,’ 27-28.

The Hindu Nationalist structure of Indian policy empowered the armed forces to dehumanize the ethnically different tribal ‘others’ who practise Christianity. And Temsula Ao is probably one of the subtlest commentators to raise this issue.

One familiar with Naga oral tradition could discern another form of resistance within the text of ‘The Last Song.’ Ao mimics oral folklorist tradition of Nagaland to revisit the story of Apenyo. In the postscript, an old storyteller on a cold December night recounts the story of “that Black Sunday when a young and beautiful singer sang her last song...”³⁹² Her story is transformed into a legend and it is narrated in the way a legend is passed down to new generation by ancient story tellers. In doing so she asserts the oral tradition of her culture and set it against the hegemonic mainstream written culture of Indian mainland. Soumen Sen and Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, editors of *Orality and Beyond: A Northeastern Perspective*, articulate the importance of oral tradition in expressing ethnic identity when they write-

Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social organization, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides example for the sustenance of contemporary social order. It articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concern of reform and redress.³⁹³

The elements of oral tradition play a significant role in subaltern politics. The writers from Native America or Africa, for example, blend orality with the written to counter the Eurocentric literary discourse. Temsula Ao refers to the writings of Ben Okri, Chinua Achebe while writing about orality. ‘Surprisingly, Ao refuses to see the use of oral elements by writers from the Northeast states of India in political terms. Nevertheless, I will here suggest that by turning the story of a Naga girl’s resistance to Indian army’s atrocity into a legend, Ao unwittingly makes an impactful political statement. The Naga oral tradition faced an onslaught due to the cultural maiming. Easterine Kire, argues that “The folktale lost its setting during the war years. The peace that is essential to the continuation of oral narratives was also lost. Folk

³⁹²Ibid., 33.

³⁹³Soumen Sen and Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, *Orality and Beyond: A Northeastern Perspective* (New Delhi: SahityaAkademy, 2005), 5.

narratives were further silenced in the premature deaths of their carriers.”³⁹⁴ But Temsula Ao shows how folk narratives can be kept alive within a narrative of war.

Elements of Naga folktale can also be found in ‘The Jungle Major.’ This story with which the collection begins embodies the characteristics of humorous trickster tales of Ao Naga folklore. Unlike ‘The Last Song’ this story employs humour as a powerful tool to counter the state sponsored oppression. Trickster tales have mischievous character as protagonist. In the folklore of the Angamis, a trickster is called Mache, the Semas call him Iki, the Lothas, Apfuho and the Rengmas know him as Che. In Ao Naga folklore, Akangla can be seen as a trickster figure. Debashree Duttaray argues that “the trickster figure is often subversive as the underdog, and amoral in terms of ethics. S/he, often a wily rogue, is a survivor in the face of adversity.”³⁹⁵ The trickster tales represent not merely deceit and guile, but enlighten oneself about methods of survival utilizing industrious and enterprising resourcefulness.³⁹⁶ Essentially humorous in nature, the trickster tales present veiled protest against any kind of orthodoxy and hierarchical powers. The ‘Jungle Major’ embodies these characteristics of trickster tales. In this story Khatila, a Naga housewife, plays the role of a subversive trickster heroine who fools the mighty Indian army and foils their meticulously planned operation.

The story opens with Khatila and Punaba, a mismatched childless couple. Punaba is a nondescript and ‘ugly’ looking humble driver from a minor clan in the village, whereas his wife Khalita is an astonishingly ‘beautiful’ woman from a relatively well respected clan. They become the subject of gossip in the village because of this incompatibility. However, the couple are totally absorbed in each other and their own household. This idyllic state of affair continues for a year. Then “the entire land was caught in the new wave of patriotic fervour that swept the imagination of the people and plunged them into a struggle which many did not

³⁹⁴EasterineKire, “War and Silencing Naga Narrative.” *Seven Sisters Post* <[http://nelitreview. Blogpost. Com/2011/11/war- and silencing-of naga- narrative.html](http://nelitreview.Com/2011/11/war-and-silencing-of-naga-narrative.html)>.

³⁹⁵DedashreeDuttaray, ‘The Trickster Figure in Northeastern Folklore: Contemporary Transformation in an Ao Naga short Story’, in *Literatures and Oratures as Knowledge System*, edited by SubhaChakrobortyDasgupta, Goutam Biswas and Samantak Das (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2011).

³⁹⁶ *ibid*

understand.”³⁹⁷ The fervour affects Khalita and Punaba’s life as well. Punaba joins the underground army that is fighting for Naga independence from the Indian nation-state.

Villages are burnt down by government officials and innocent villagers are punished for their supposed acts of treason against the nation, but Khatila maintains her trickster like resilience. Punaba on his part arranges for secret meetings with his wife, circumventing official surveillance. In one such meeting Punaba and Khatila find themselves in a difficult situation. One morning, “before they could get up from the bed exhausted from the morning’s bout of ardent lovemaking”³⁹⁸ they hear that the officials would be arriving for inspection and there is no way of escape. “Khalita was in a quandary, what could she do? How could she save her husband, herself and the entire village from the approaching soldiers?”³⁹⁹ Khatila then like the trickster character in folklore transforms herself into a cantankerous shrew and her husband into a servant. “... she fished out some of her husband’s old clothes and ordered him to get into them, then she smeared his face, hands and feet with ash from the hearth, hid his sandals, ruffled his hair and began shouting at him, ‘You no good loafer, what were you doing all day yesterday? There is no water in the house even to wash my face. Run to the well immediately or you will rue the day you were born.’”⁴⁰⁰ The young captain is surprised to see a dishevelled but defiant person who displayed no sign of agitation and seemed to be completely oblivious to any danger. The humble and quiet housewife transforms herself into a querulous shrew in front of the investigating officer. As soon as she dismisses her husband in disguise to safety, she further transforms herself into a timid and coquettish woman. The officer underestimates the courage of the ordinary Naga village woman, her presence of mind and instinct for survival. Eventually, Punaba achieves greater height in the underground by the dint of his skill and leadership quality. He is promoted to the ranks of a Major. The story of this couple is then passed on by word of mouth amongst friends, and retold over and over again as a metaphor for resourcefulness and bravery. Their story, thus, becomes an indelible part of the collective memory of a community.

Naga patriarchy is based on the cult of male heroism. Their folk literatures, folk art, folk song all eulogize masculine prowess. Women in this patriarchal framework reside only on the

³⁹⁷ Ao, ‘The Jungle Major,’ 2,3.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.,5.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.,6.

periphery. But there are few women centered folk narratives that implicitly aim to subvert this male hegemony. The story of Akangla, for example, illustrates an acknowledged aspect of warfare: that mere physical prowess is not enough to win the war, wit is equally important. It is the practical common sense and wit of an ordinary housewife Akangla that made the Lungkhum warriors to vanquish their enemy. Temsula Ao's Khatila represents this unacknowledged aspect of warfare. Naga separatist movement in the 1950s and 1960s was an exclusively male domain. But by narrating the story of a trickster like resourceful housewife who can trick the Indian State Ao demonstrates how even the most marginalized can negotiate power within an oppressive regime.

Not only women characters, Ao in this collection also foregrounds the marginalised character of a mentally disabled boy, to subvert the authority of the powerful. Nivedita Menon in *Seeing like a Feminist* writes "...to be a feminist is to imagine occupying the marginal, relatively powerless position with reference to every dominant framework that swallows up the space at the centre."⁴⁰¹ Therefore Ao deliberately chooses a character of a marginal, powerless, disenfranchised, disabled boy. In 'Soaba' Ao uses mental debility of Soaba as a metaphor for the madness that ravaged the Naga Hills during the insurgency. This short narrative presents the story of Intimoa who is known as Soaba meaning idiot in the Ao language. Soaba is slow in the head and seldom speaks coherently. He grows up as the town orphan living on people's charity. His existential reality is limited only to the awareness of hunger, thirst and shelter from the cold and rain. One day his simple life gets altered because of his childish obsession with speeding army vehicles. And he like Apenyo, Libeni, Punaba and Khatila becomes embroiled in the "whirlwind sweeping through the land and creating havoc in people's lives."⁴⁰² Soaba, in this narrative, is pitted against Imlichuba who likes to be called Boss. He is the leader of a squad of Home Guards employed by the Government of India to act as their 'extra arms.' Indian officials who were completely unfamiliar with the terrain and the people of Naga Hills needed a band of die-hard natives to help them crush the insurgent movements. Therefore, they raised an extra judicial band of power seeking disgruntled Nagas who would fight their fellow Nagas on India's behalf. This band was equipped with vehicles as well as guns, and was given free ration of rum.

⁴⁰¹Nivedita Menon, *Seeing like a Feminist*, viii.

⁴⁰²Ao, 'Soaba', 9.

A notorious former policeman reputed to be the perpetrator of several heinous crimes became the leader of one such squad at Mokochung district. His name was Imlichuba also known as the Boss.

One day Soaba happens to see an army vehicle parked in the compound of the Boss and from that day onwards he begins hovering near it. The guards shoo him off but Soaba refuses to go. One day Boss's wife Imtila offers him a plate of rice. From that day onwards he becomes a fixture in the household. In the meantime, the Boss's fortune changes dramatically, he becomes an influential and dreaded figure. His image as the ally of the government was increasingly enhanced because of his unquestioned authority over people suspected of subversive underground activities. Sometimes, detainees accused of anti-government activities are brought to his house for 'proper interrogation' by him and his squad. Soaba, who now sleeps in a small room in the wood shed, sees these shady activities through a hole in the bamboo wall and hears the agonized screams of the detainees. On a particular night, when a raucous party is going on in the Boss's house Soaba manages to sneak into the kitchen. Finding him crouched in a corner Imtila takes him to her room and hides him under the bed. Around the midnight, one of the bodyguards informs the Boss about the presence of an insurgent in his house. The boss in a drunken stupor shoots Soaba mistaking him for an insurgent. Soaba's death effects a change in the Boss's life as if 'a vital string had snapped in his evil genius when he pulled the trigger that night'... 'he would collapse in a drunken heap muttering to himself, 'Oh you idiot, you idiot.'⁴⁰³

Soaba, the idiot boy of Ao's short story remind us of Stevie in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907). *The Secret Agent* is a political novel that presents the story of a secret agent Adolf Verloc, Stevie's brother-in-law. In the novel Verloc manipulates his mentally challenged brother-in-law Stevie into planting a bomb to provoke public outrage against the Anarchist. But Stevie trips while carrying the bomb and is killed. His accidental death highlights the anarchical nature of society that Conrad depicts. His literal idiocy indicates the metaphoric idiocy of the so called normal people who kill each other for self interest. Temsula Ao's Soaba similarly serves as a metaphor for social ills. His unfortunate and accidental death represents the moral degeneration of Naga society during the time of insurgency. Soaba exists in the story primarily as a victim, a role intended to elicit readers' pity. But I argue that he is not a passive victim of

⁴⁰³Ibid., 20.

exploitation. He is rather a symbolic critic of social and political reality of Nagaland. In this story too a woman's character stands out. Bosse's wife Imtila, who gives shelter and food to Soaba shows how a woman can retain her humanity even amidst the madness of violence. Through the characters of Soaba, Imtila, Apenyo, Khatila and Libeni, Ao highlights the aggressive, destructive, and masculine notion of Indo-Naga conflict.

The Shout of Literature/Silence in Nini Lungalang's 'Child of Fortune'

Nini Lungalang (1948-2019) was a teacher of English and western classical music at Northfield school, Kohima. The little known poet published her first and only book, a collection of poems *The Morning Years* in 1994. Later her poems were published in different anthologies like *Where the Sun Rises When Shadow Falls* edited by Geeti Sen and *Dancing Earth* edited by Robin Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. Her poems are taught in Sikkim and Nagaland university courses. Her poems do not follow traditional metrical pattern. Her life, worldview, ideology, and the subject of her writing also reflect a similar strain of discord.

She was an unusual figure in the literary scene. In the age of intense marketing, publicity, and lobbying for literary prizes she believed as long as one has the freedom to scribble, publishing does not matter. She did not covet literary fame or large readership. She did not even want her writings to be published. "I am a very private person and these are very intimate thoughts," she told Ashley Tellis in an interview, "and, therefore, I feel a certain sense of discomfort. I don't like being encroached upon. It's not embarrassment or shyness, once it's out in print, it's not really yours anymore."⁴⁰⁴ Tellis relates an interesting anecdote about her notorious reclusiveness. He says how little children in Kohima where she lived were warned against visiting her house. They were told that she was a witch and her house was haunted. She was also infamous for her bohemian lifestyle. She smoked and drank. Her bohemianism reflects in her views as well. She was critical of false religiosity, poetry that sermonises and militant nationalism. She was born in the time of intense Indo-Naga conflict and lost her relatives to it. But, she refused to reify the identity politics that is foisted upon writers who come from a troubled region. She shunned the constraining limitation of identity that inhibits one's freedom of expression. Nini Lungalang told Ashley Tellis: "My poems are based mostly on human feelings.

⁴⁰⁴ Ashley Tellis, "Tunes of a Piano Teacher: A Conversation with Nagaland Poet Nini Lungalang," (www.fountainink.in>Dec 29,2012, accessed November 1, 2019.

. . . I do not write on my ‘Naganess’, it is a social characteristic and as such are, in a way, universal. I refuse to mythologise my ‘Naganess’.”⁴⁰⁵

Without ‘mythologizing her Naganess’ she in her powerful, symbolic, and evocative poems like ‘Dust’, ‘Dirge’, or ‘Teardrop’ pens the anguish of the people who lost their dear ones in conflict. Lines like “the dead speak/only through/old shirts/folded away/into cupboards/of memory” subtly brings out the image of loss, violence, pain without resorting to a nationalistic paradigm. In this chapter, however, I will discuss a rare prose piece by Lungalang ‘Child of Fortune’— a hauntingly poetic fable about violence of the Indian Armed forces during counter insurgency operation. The haunting silence of a girl-child and the stoic resilience of her mother in this death affirming tale give voice to the unspeakable torture experienced by the Naga women during the height of counter insurgency operation. This story of silence ironically shouts loudly at the readers to shake them out of their stupor, apathy and oblivion. Lungalang like Ao avoids mentioning the name of the tribe, time or place. This erasure of finer details gives this story a universal appeal and at the same time heightens the effect of the experience of the characters.

The story is set in a small village called New Village situated at the foot of a cliff seemingly in the 1950s when Naga conflict was beginning to intensify. The story is narrated from the point of view of innocent villagers who are unaware of the political development of their region. They seem to be living an idyllic rustic life in their small hamlet of eleven huts away from the heated discourse between the Phizos and Nehrus. The story begins when the Indian soldiers first attack the New Village like a swarm of hornets to tear asunder the idyllic rustic life-world. They burn down the houses and granaries, torture and kill the men, rape the women, and do not even spare the elderly women. Rokono’s mother who was then pregnant with her was spared because she was too big. But she too was disrobed and leered at. The men who survive the violent raid melt into the forest to join the underground army. The rest of the villagers decide to flee their homes and take refuge under the cliff. They even avoid cooking meals as the smoke could alert the soldiers. The mothers train their children to swallow raw grain with water.

In this situation Rokono’s mother finds herself immersed in an additional quandary. The women who were raped by the soldiers turn against Rokono’s mother as she was the only one who was spared. They bitterly attack her and accuse her of sorcery. ..”why did they not rape

⁴⁰⁵Ibid.

you? They hissed; have the beautiful women of the East some talisman to keep them pure?”⁴⁰⁶ She was not originally from New Village. Her husband brought her from a different village situated in the east. She with her taller frame, bigger eyes was also considered to be more beautiful than the New Village women. Her differentness exacerbates their anger and they start to needle her. But Nini Lungalang here refuses to re-create the traditional archetypal binary of beautiful pious suffering woman and jealous cantankerous ugly women that prevail in patriarchal discourse. Rather she brings out the repressed pathos hidden beneath their jealousy. The women who were sexually assaulted by the Indian army, abuse Rokono’s mother because by doing so they try to give vent to their anger, helplessness and hide the shame that patriarchy heap upon raped women. They find solace in targeting Rokono’s mother. The next course of events explains the superficiality of their animosity.

The physical endurance of childbearing and birthing that unite women through pain lifts the veil of superfluous animosity. And the ‘hostile’ women come to her assistance. The following is an example of the tenderness of sorority bonding- “their work-roughed hands were strangely tender as they stroked and soothed her; and they strove with her, united in the sisterhood of pain.”⁴⁰⁷ They give her solace, and comfort by telling her that the new born will be a strong man who will avenge the death of his father. At this point Nini Lungalang makes a strong feminist statement by subverting the traditional belief in strong protecting masculinity. The expectant mother is sure that she will have a baby girl as steady as moon who will bring strength, solace and good fortune to her mother. “No! She gasped as she twisted with pain. It will be a woman, as beautiful and constant as the moon that always return.”⁴⁰⁸ Her prophecy comes true and a girl is born. She names her Rokono meaning child of fortune in Tenyidie dialect. Rokono does bring good fortune with her. The people return to their village to rebuild their life anew. The village begins to prosper, no crop fails, no women miscarries, no epidemic occurs or livestock lost. Along with the village Rokono grows to be a healthy plump cheeked baby. She becomes a source of joy to her mother who loves her immensely but with a prick of guilt. Her husband was tortured and killed by the soldiers. He was struck in his head again and again with the butt of a gun. She could not even bury him properly. This memory refuses to leave her. The past still haunts her. And Rokono symbolizes the disturbing past through her muteness.

⁴⁰⁶Lungalang, “The Child of Fortune,” 93.

⁴⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Rokono turns out to be a mute child. She does not smile, coo or cry. Her cry is not the usual shriek of an infant. Instead she emits only a strange, hoary wail. Her mother tries to make her talk but fails. Lungalang who believed in the emotional character and suggestiveness of language uses Rokono's silence to register her protest. Rokono's withdrawal to the world of silence/non-participation/non-response does not symbolise passivity. It demonstrates her resistance to the oppressive normative world mired with violence. The final form of resistance takes place at the end of the story through death.

The final episode takes place when the Indian soldiers return to avenge the death of their fellow soldiers who were killed by the Naga insurgents. On that day Rokono's mother goes to the cliff with Rokono tied to her bosom to collect mushroom and while she is away the second attack of the army takes place. The men are again tied to the poles and beaten, women are raped, and the children again absorb this brutality. From the height she hears the gunshots, shrill shriek of the women. She sees black smoke rising out of her village like thick cloud. Then 'she decides quickly' to sacrifice her life to bring peace to her community. She reaches the peak and jumps off from the cliff and melts into the howling wind. The cliff like the Egdon Heath has a sinister presence in the story. The unnamed story-teller begins with a terrifying account of the cliff. S/he tells how only fools aim to reach the top, how strongly the wind blows there to tear one's hair off. It becomes a symbol of death and resistance at the end of story.

K. B. Veio Pou reads this self-sacrifice of Rokono's mother as a symbol of helplessness of the Naga women. He states that death for her was perhaps the only way to escape the extreme hardship that women bear during the time of conflict. Rokono's mother is a widowed woman. Her husband was beaten to death by the army men. She was the only one who was not raped. She is plagued by the shame and guilt of not sharing the pain of the fellow women. And she has to run a household on her own without the support of any male member of the family. She is constantly haunted by the image of her dying husband. Death seems a relief in this condition. Another Naga researcher Longkumer associates her suicide with post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴⁰⁹

Her suicide is a cumulative effect of trauma, pain, and helplessness. But there is also an element of agency and authority in her voluntary death. I argue that her leap to voluntary death is a sign of agency on multiple levels. It is at once a statement against Indian nationalism and

⁴⁰⁹See, Pou, *Naga Writing in English*, 186.

patriarchy. Nini Lungalang uses the word ‘decide’ to endow her with that authority and agency. In the narrative of war and conflict men are always revered as martyrs and women are pitied as victims. Therefore the heroine’s martyrdom here is a subversion of this binary. Rokono’s mother’s martyrdom is also associated with old Naga ritual. She recalls how in the olden days sacrifice was offered to pacify the offended spirit. Her reference to this vanishing ‘primitive’ cultural practice of sacrifice is also of great significance.

J. H. Hutton in his study of the Angami Nagas writes that the idea of sacrifice is conducive to the prosperity of a community or crop. He then narrates some incidents of ‘blood thirsty omnivorous slaughtering of men, women and children’ in gory detail: “There can be no doubt that all the tribes in this district consider that by killing a human being in certain cases they are doing the most effectual thing towards averting the displeasure of some particular evil spirit (terhoma). Amongst the Angamis especially the idea is very prevalent, and there have been two cases of murders committed within the last five years near Kohima, the only object of which was to propitiate an evil spirit.”⁴¹⁰ It is highly ironical that the British captured other countries, plundered their resources, oppressed their people to inflate their coffer and establish their dominance in the world, also wrote accounts criticizing the ‘savagery’ of the colonized. They annexed the north-eastern region to safeguard their tea plantation. Then they vilified the indigenous Naga customs to facilitate civilizing process. Nini Lungalang in this story reclaims the ancient Naga custom of sacrifice demonised by the British and elevates it to the status of martyrdom. She makes her heroine sacrifice herself for the prosperity of her people. She could, like Malsawmi Jacob, invoke the image of sacrificing Jesus. Instead she invokes the pre-modern times. She had antipathy towards religiosity. Sounding like a disgruntled old fogey, she tells Ashley “I hate poetry that sermonises. Spiritual and moral attitudes may be one but to seek a clergyman to endorse it is revolting. Many new writers take the easy way, write about God, ‘good things’ and scamper off to a local pastor for approval, some of whom went to study evangelical theology, maybe because they could not pass the regular courses.”⁴¹¹

Self-sacrifice or self-immolation by women in the time of conflict or enemy invasion evokes the image of *jauhar* practiced by Rajputana women in medieval India. *Jauhar* or mass self-immolation in Hindu tradition was practised by Rajput women along with their children to

⁴¹⁰Hutton, *The Angami Naga*, 160.

⁴¹¹Ashley Tellis, “Tunes of a Piano Teacher: A Conversation with Nagaland Poet NiniLungalang,” (www.fountainink.in>Dec 29,2012, accessed November 1, 2019.

avoid being captured, enslaved and raped by invading men and to preserve the honour of their clan. Rajput women were socially conditioned to see themselves as the sole property of their husbands. Therefore to be abducted, invaded by other men was unconscionable to them. *Jauhar* as historians suggest was a precursor to the practice of sati. *Jauhar* is the symbol of ultimate hold of patriarchy on women that alludes to the fear of widowhood and the conviction that for women death is preferable than being raped by other men. It must be noted that in this story Rokono's mother does not commit suicide to escape being raped and tortured. She wanted to share the pain with her fellow village women. She is ashamed that she is spared once again. When she heard the shrieks of the women, she thinks "Why am I spared again?"⁴¹² Like the twelve mothers of Meira Paibi who challenged the army to rape them, to take their flesh, she too is not afraid.

By taking her own life Rokono's mother is submitting neither to the patriarchy nor to the power of militarized nation. Instead she is drawing attention to the institutionalized brutalization of women and men by the Indian Army. Like Rokono's silence, her mother's death makes a strong statement of silent resistance, community solidarity, sorority bonding, and also subtly hints at the sentiment of Naga tribalism that is the essence of Naga independence struggle.

In *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death* the concentration camp survivor and writer Améry claimed both resentment and suicide as rights. Rejecting the philosophy of 'moving on' he and his camp-mate Primo Levi believed that one should be free to remember and relate the unpleasant memory no matter how it discomfited others, and also be free to take one's life when the memory becomes impossible to bear. He took his life in 1978 two years after writing the book. By doing so he kept the memory of violence and injustice alive.⁴¹³ Similarly Rokono's mother's suicidal death in this short story keeps the memory of violence and injustice of the Indian State alive.

⁴¹²Lungalang, "The Child of Fortune," 97.

⁴¹³Ananya Vajpeyi, *Resenting the Indian State: For a New Political Practice in the Northeast*, in *Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India*, ed. Sanjib Baruah (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.

Easterine Kire's Traditionalist Approach to Conflict: *A Naga Village Remembered*, *Bitter Wormwood* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*

The most prolific Naga writer in English, Easterine Kire has several literary works to her credit including *Kelhoukevire* (1982), *The Windhover Collection* (2001), *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Naga Folktales Retold* (2009), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *Life on Hold* (2011), *Forest Songs* (2011), *Dinkypu* (2012), *Different Strokes* (2013), *Jazz Poetry and Other Poems* (2013), *The Log Drummer Boy* (2013), *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and *The Dancing Village* (2015). The role of her fiction in disseminating knowledge about Naga history, culture and politics is unparalleled in the realm of Indian English literature. A major portion of her work recreates her personal experience with the political violence of the 1950s and 1960s that Nagaland witnessed during its encounter with the Indian establishment. Her works also reflect her commitment to the preservation of the old ways of life. Old tribal practices, Naga myth and folklore continue to be a major source of inspiration in her works. She believes that Nagaland in mainstream discourses is defined only by conflict. Therefore, there is a pressing need to counter these discourses. And her retelling of the folktale is a way of telling her readers that there is more to Nagaland than the conflict.

But her representation of Nagaland reproduces the hegemonic colonialist mythology of the hill and the people. She reiterates the colonial discourse on the Nagas that position them as savage warriors practicing rituals and taboos bereft of meaning. Her depiction of Naga freedom struggle also lacks subversive impact of the *écriture féminine* as it does not foreground the disruptive voices of the marginalized. The agency of the women like Apenyo, Khatila, Rokono and her mother are conspicuously missing from her texts. I discuss in this chapter three of her novels to see how her writings reinstate dominant ideology based on the hierarchical binaries between the civilized and the savage, good Naga and bad Naga, good masculinity and bad masculinity, the good woman and bad woman.

Anglo-Naga Cultural Conflict in *A Naga Village Remembered*

Images of Indian independence struggle against British rule readily brings to mind the Indian mutiny of 1857, Gandhi and his civil disobedience movement, Subhas Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army, and the rise of Indian National Congress. But there were other small but significant uprisings in the history of Indian independence struggle. *A Naga Village*

Remembered is a novel about one such story of resistance. It attempts to reconstruct the history of the Angami village of Khonoma and its resistance to British power. It fictionalizes the four month long battle of Khonoma that commenced on 22nd November, 1879 and ended on 27th March, 1880. At the same time the novel tries to give its modern readers a vivid picture of the 19th century cultural life of Angami Nagas of the Khonoma village. But spoken in the language of the colonialists the narrative reduces the story of resistance into that of submission.

To historically situate the battle of Khonoma we have to return to the beginning of nineteenth century when the process of transformation among the Nagas began. The British occupied Assam and Manipur in 1826 after its decisive victory in the Anglo-Burmese war and the treaty of Yandabo. With the arrival of British Empire, a new political environment dawned on the region, one that prepared the road for colonial incursions into Naga-inhabited uplands. The actual process of colonization began in 1832 when seven hundred British troops with eight hundred coolies under Captains Jenkins and Pemberton tried to trace a land route from Imphal to the plains of Assam through Angami-Naga territory.⁴¹⁴ This sudden encounter with the ‘other’ resulted in a rude awakening in the staunchly independent Nagas who had hitherto lived a secluded life within the folds of the intractable Naga Hills. The village of Khonoma was one of those who fought the expansionist design of the British from its beginning till 1880 when a major offensive was launched against the village. Prior to that, the British had launched three attacks on the village of Khonoma.

The first expedition against Khonoma was led by Captain E.L.D. Wood in 1844. The British army burnt down the villages on their departure. The second expedition took place in 1849 when the British Government learnt that Khonoma had helped the men of Mezoma who were against the government. During this expedition the houses of Mehru and Thevo clans were burnt down. The third attack took place on December 10, 1850, led by Captain J. Butler. The well built Semo fort put up a great resistance. The British troops seized the village and burnt the houses of Khonoma again. Between 1850 and 1865, Khonoma village made nineteen raids on British territory. The final expedition took place in November, 1879 when Brigadier General Nation commandeered two thousand men from Manipur, and thirty men of his own escort of the

⁴¹⁴Charles Chasie, "Nagaland in Transition." *India International Centre Quarterly* 32, no. 2/3 (2005): 253-64, accessed December 4, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23006032>.

34th N.I. and a small body of Cachar Police. From Dibrugarh, Major Evans came with a party of the 43rd A.L.I. and two mountain guns under Lieutenant Mansel. Captain Williamson had blockaded the village's connecting road with Mezoma and Kenora. The last batch of troops arrived from Sibsagarh led by Colonel Campbell. Surrounded on all sides, Khonoma was attacked on the 22nd November. Nineteen men of Khonoma and five hundred troops of the British Army lost their lives in the battle. The British army records this massacre as, "the severest fighting ever known in these hills." But greatly outnumbered by the British troops, the men of Khonoma had to retreat to their impenetrable mountain fort. Then the battle turned into a siege of the tough little Angami village for four months. Finally a treaty on the 27th March 1880, between the representatives of the British government and the elders of Khonoma, concluded the conflict.⁴¹⁵

A Naga Village Remembered begins with an Angami warrior Levi as its hero who takes part in the battle against the British expansionist movement. And it relates his struggle with the changes ushered in by the British authority. We first meet him as a young man of seventeen when he is on his way to raid a village in Manipur. He reaches his destination and kills thirteen people and burns down the village. But on his return British soldiers capture him and send him to Tezpur jail. After spending six years in jail he returns to his village, marries Pelhuvino and fathers two sons — Roko and Sato. Then he takes part in the fierce battle between the Angami warriors and the British soldiers.

But the episode of Khonoma mostly narrated from the point of view of the colonialists take place in the background. The struggle of the British administrators Cawley, Damant, Hinde, Col. Johnstone, wife of Cawley and Damant facing the fierce Nagas has been highlighted. Here, for example, is an illustration from the novel that foregrounds the travails of the British: "Both messages were from Hinde. The first one read: Surrounded by Nagas, cutoff from water. Must be relieved at once. Send flying column to bring away garrison at once. Relief must be immediate to be of any use. H.M.H. Assistant Political Agent, Kohima 25.X.79."⁴¹⁶ The second illustration highlight their idea of the savage and untrustworthy Nagas: "But many inside the garrison distrusted the Angamis, and doubted they would honour the terms of surrender. They had seen

⁴¹⁵ For a detailed description see, Easterine Kire, Introduction to *A Naga Village Remembered* (Kohima: Ura Academy, 2003).

⁴¹⁶ Kire, *A Naga Village*, 58.

too many battles of the Angamis where headless torsos were left on the fields, the heads being taken by warriors as trophies of war.”⁴¹⁷

The Nagas, as mentioned before, lose the battle and its strongest impact is felt on the traditional life of the villagers. British administrators facilitate the entry of Christian missionaries. Armed with modern education and a new religion, the missionaries start making inroads into the hills. Dr. Sidney Revenburg establishes a mission school in the village. Levi's younger son Sato is admitted to the school. By the time he is nineteen he decides to follow the path of Christianity. Traditionalist at heart, Levi disowns his son on hearing this. His angry words to his son reflect the angst of a vanquished warrior who helplessly observes cultural imperialism spreading its sway.

I'll not kill you but I'll no more say 'I have another son.' I have only one son now and he is Rokokhoto. Sato, do you know why I allowed you to go to the white man's school? Do you know that I hoped you would learn the secret of his power and come back to teach me his art in battle? The white man is invincible. I have fought so many battles with the villages in the south and to our west. We have vanquished them. But the white man is different- we killed so many of his people, the more we killed, the angrier he became. And like a hornet disturbed, he always stung back.⁴¹⁸

But by this time Sato displaces his father as a hero of the novel. Sato with his faith in *Isu* (Jesus Christ) emerges as the symbol of a good Naga who is modern and believes in Christianity. His traditionalist father who sees the British colonialist as enemy degenerates into a wrathful old man. His wife becomes victim of his angry outbursts and irritable nature. His death brings relief to his wife. With him the old ways of living is also vilified as he represents the traditional way of life. The old customs become taboos that had no meaning and Christianity replaces it as new refined version of belief system endowed with meaning. “The way Sato understood it, to be a follower of *Isu*, was to be bound by taboos similar to the old taboos, but by taboos that had meaning...”⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.,56.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.,70.

Kire in the prologue intimates the readers that “the old cultural life that sustained the village is recorded in the novel in minute detail.”⁴²⁰ In the novel therefore we find a nostalgic recreation of pre-colonial cultural world of the Nagas. Animistic rituals, taboos and old belief systems— like *genna* days (no-work days), *morung* system (dormitory for the boys), Feast of Merit, chicken sacrifice, tiger killing ritual and spirit sighting— are described in minute detail. Consider, for example, the marriage rituals of Levi and Peno which I will quote at length since the novel is out of print therefore difficult to access:

Early on the morning of the marriage, Levi’s eldest aunt was sent to the girl’s house. She carried a spear, a chicken and salt. A little tension hovered over both households as each house strove to refrain from activities that were restricted. It was a long drawn-out day. But after sunset, Peno’s mother lifted her daughter’s basket on to her back and softly said, “Go well, my daughter,” and the bride began to walk to Levi’s house accompanied by a girl-child. Her mother had filled her basket with seed grains of different crops, and a laden mug of brew. She was very nervous as they neared her husband’s house. Twice she stumbled but she steadied herself again, and managed to walk all the way to Levi’s compound. At the threshold, Levi’s aunt stood ready with a jug of brew and she poured it into the child companion’s mug. A big fowl, flapping its wings and cackling in protest was given to the child to carry back home. Her husband’s male relatives also gave an equally big fowl to her age mates as bride-price. They took the chicken, and before leaving, pronounced this blessing on the new householders:

This household will fetch and drink water from the water source as long as others are fetching and drinking of it.

They will be able to make a fire as long as other households are doing so.

Their progeny shall be numerous,

As numerous as the progeny of spiders and crabs.

They shall be blest with long life.

They shall live to be ancestors and grandparents and prosper in their life.⁴²¹

In the next chapter Kire presents another important facet of Naga worldview— their belief in the world of spirits. She describes how Levi’s father captured a forest spirit: “Levi vividly remembered his father’s account of the wiry little spirit, completely hair covered, who he

⁴²⁰Ibid., 5.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 37,

found in one of his porcupine traps. Spitting and hissing, he was furiously trying to break free of the trap. Vicha, Levi's father, coming upon the spirit, quickly realised that it was no animal, but the guardian of wildlife himself caught in his trap."⁴²²

Kire uses excruciatingly descriptive prose to revisit the ancient rituals of the Angami Nagas. But most of the time the descriptions seem forced rather than harmonious part of the story. The description of the Feast of Merit in chapter 2, for instance, stands out as one of the most incongruous part of the narrative. Feast of merit is a ceremony in which a wealthy man hosts a feast for the entire village in order to gain honour and earn a title. In this novel a man called Keviselie hosts the feast but he disappears from the narrative after playing a brief role as a host of the Feast of Merit. Kire describes the ceremony again in her usual detailed prose. The authorial voice assumes the garb of an anthropologist to punctuate the flow of the story. Therefore one is left with a feeling that these descriptions serve no purpose apart from creating an exotic context for its publisher and readers.

To the modern publisher and readers the novel therefore presents a picture of pre-colonial Naga people that mimics the language of the white missionaries like Dr. E. W. Clark, Mrs. Mary Mead Clark, and Rev. C. D. King. They were responsible for establishing churches in the Angami village. This is how Baptist missionaries gave the pre-modern Naga tribes a new religion and a written language. At the same time they instilled in the natives a sense of inferiority. Their oral culture, *morung* system, animistic faith came under vehement cultural attack. Mrs. Clark had this to say about the old way of life:

Every form of demon worship, open or suspected was attacked- Sunday-breaking, rice beer drinking, licentiousness, and all social vices...Instead of congregating promiscuously at different houses to sleep at night, singing objectionable songs, telling doubtful stories, and engaging in lewd conversation, these young reformers separated themselves and built a dormitory for their own accommodation in which purity and holiness should reign. Here at morning and evening time the voice of prayer and song of praise are heard.⁴²³

⁴²²Ibid., 22.

⁴²³ Mary Mead Clark, *A Corner in India* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 138.

The derogatory ideas about animistic way of life and worldview were internalized by Naga people as well. V. K. Nuh writes: “Nagas should be grateful to God for adopting Christianity as their new way of life and religion because whatever small achievements that they have so far made are all because of this faith.”⁴²⁴ Sato, the hero of Kire’s novel echoes the same sentiment.

This Eurocentric knowledge about Nagaland was underpinned by the power relation between the colonizer and the colonized. Here is an excerpt from J. P. Mills’ letter to his wife that demonstrates how British administrators/ethnographers exploited the Nagas and misappropriated Naga culture to serve their own interest; note how he uses coercion to confiscate the skulls as war booty and shows his intention to send them off to Pitt-Rivers museum at Oxford.

Hanging from the Head Tree were five heads of the wretched Saochu people they killed in the spring. As the raid was for slaves and was a gross act of treachery. I was determined to confiscate them, I bided my time till we were safely outside the very strong fortifications. A double fence with a ditch in the middle simply bristling with poisoned bamboo spikes. Then I demanded those heads, and waited outside with my 50 rifles till they were produced. We got them and the Yimpang Head tree is bare: and the Pitt-Rivers Museum will get some fine specimens if I can manage to send them.⁴²⁵

Temsula Ao in *On Being a Naga* eloquently captures this unabashed theft of history in the 19th century by the colonial masters. She writes:

Being a Naga has never been easy for us. The mystique and negative power of the ‘savage’ has always fascinated the western mind and when we were ‘discovered’ by anthropologists and ethnographers in the 19th century, we became exotic and exciting specimens for them to study, but from their perspective only. Our material culture seems to have caught their imagination in such a manner that the best specimen were spirited away to their museums without any qualms because they were the ‘finders’ and therefore

⁴²⁴ V. K. Nuh, *Nagaland Church and Politics* (Kohima: V. Nuh and Bro. 1986), 198, quoted in K. B. VeioPou, *Literary Cultures of India’s Northeast* (Dimapur: Heritage, 2015), 65.

⁴²⁵ Jonathan Glancey, *Nagaland: A Journey to India’s Forgotten Frontier* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 111.

the keepers. In many cases the artefacts were carefully removed, packed and labelled before entire villages were burnt to the ground.⁴²⁶

If we steer our attention to the photographic representation of the Nagas we observe a similar sense of power hierarchy. The ‘objective’ depiction of Angami men and partially naked Angami women only represent colonial fantasies of ‘otherness.’ E. Ann Kaplan has suggested that, “like everything in culture, looking relations are determined by history, tradition, power hierarchies, politics, economics ... the possibilities for looking are carefully controlled ... looking is power.”⁴²⁷ Mills photographic collection (now part of SOAS digital archive) exhibits hundreds of images depicting bare-chested Angami women. The looking relation between Mill and his photographed subjects are controlled by his position as a colonizer. It delineates hierarchical binaries of colonizer and colonized and of active white, male gaze and passive tribal bodies. Thus it reduces the people captured through the lens of power into silenced subjects.

It has to be acknowledged that in *A Naga Village Remembered* these silenced subjects of anthropological enquiry find a voice. And these voices problematize the fixed and homogeneous concept of Naga identity as they position their version to the fore. Here Angami people are not object of anthropological enquiry; Kovi, Levi, Lato, Piano and other Angami people are individualized characters. But at the same time their voices are deeply compromised as they are made to ventriloquise the narrative of the dominant. Temsula Ao on the contrary succinctly captures in her poem the resisting approach of the Nagas. She writes:

We believed that our gods live
In the various forms of nature
Whom we worshipped
With unquestioning faith.
Then came a tribe of strangers
Into our primordial 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.

⁴²⁶ Temsula Ao, *On Being a Naga* (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2014), 4.

⁴²⁷ E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (London: Routledge, 1997), 4.

We listened in confusion
To the new stories and too soon
Allowed our knowledge of other days
To be trivialized into taboo.⁴²⁸

Indo-Naga Conflict in Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*:

The Naga Insurgency, like any other event of political conflict, is a site of multiple interpretations. So far I have discussed the Ao and Lungalang's versions of the conflict. In this section, I will analyze Easterine Kire's interpretation of Naga conflict in her historical novel, *Bitter Wormwood*. History is a narrative mode of knowing, understanding, explaining and reconstructing the past. And the role of literature as a supplement to history is to problematize it. Literary representation of historical event must not unquestioningly accept or privilege the chronology, exactitude of facts and simulate it in totality. It has already been seen how Temsula Ao successfully reconstructs and problematizes the historicity of Naga insurgency by foregrounding the dissenting voices of the marginalised. The subversive voice of Apenyo and the old story teller who narrates her story to the younger generation in 'The Last Song', the display of wit by Khatila in 'The Jungle Major',⁴²⁹ the authority of any single voice that claims to represent their history. Ao's texts, thus, become the site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices. Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*, a historical novel also set in the war torn Nagaland of 1950s and 1960s, on the other hand, gives out a simplified representation of Naga Insurgency. Ao delves deep into the psyche of her characters but Kire's characters are mere mouthpiece for communicating the bare facts about Naga insurgency.

Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) fictionalizes Khonoma village's resistance to the invading British army in nineteenth century, her *Mari* (2009) attempts to portray the battle of Kohima during World War II. Her fixation for Naga political history is reiterated in *Bitter Wormwood* (2011). This novel chronicles the events of Naga freedom struggle against Indian occupation through the life span of an ordinary Naga man, Mose. At the very onset Kire instructs her readers not to read the novel as a historical text which according to Kire is a narrative of leaders and heroes. Her objective instead is to foreground the personal experiences of ordinary people. She writes— "This book is not about the leaders and heroes of the Naga struggle. It is

⁴²⁸TemsulaAo, *Songs from the Other Life: Poems*, (Pune: Grasswork Books, 2007), 66-68.

⁴²⁹ In 'The Jungle Major' a wife of an underground Naga soldier tricks the Indian army by disguising her husband.

about the ordinary people whose lives were completely overturned by the freedom struggle because the conflict is not more important than the people who are its victims.”⁴³⁰ She reasserts her claim in an interview where she says-

Bitter Wormwood is about real people and their lives. I interviewed several people and used their experiences and insights. I wanted to write a non-stereotypical book about Naga political history and the story of the two grandsons of the two soldiers meeting up and striking up a deep friendship is not untrue. It's also a book that questions political ideologies, and their solutions and offers a human solution instead.⁴³¹

I will argue that Kire does not fully succeed in achieving her objectives that she intends to achieve through her narrative. The real people whose life she aims to represent are disempowered by her narrative style. The author voices her opinions on Indo-Naga conflict through her characters, just the way the radio announces the news about Indian Independence and subsequent partition in the novel in the chapter titled ‘The Radio’. Naga insurgency with its political intricacies, ideological conflicts and violent character does not blend seamlessly with the text of Mose’s life. The political and historical facts appear in the form of conversation between Mose and his friend Neituo. The conversations read more like newspaper report than actual daily discourse. Consider the chapter entitled ‘Specters of More Changes’ in which Mose and Neituo discuss the laws passed by Nagaland State Assembly or a chapter called ‘A New Government’ where they announce Indira Gandhi’s visit to Nagaland. Curiously, Mose and Neituo are reduced to mere here made to act as observers or commentators as if they are communicating the historical facts to the students in a history class. But at the same time this technique used by Kire helps her to successfully induct history and its reporting in to the text.

Unlike Ao, Kire unambiguously adopts a nationalistic position on Naga freedom struggle. She supports the secessionist ideology of Naga National Council chief Phizo. The romanticized depiction of Naga nationalism is summarized in the chapter titled ‘The Flag.’ Mose as an underground soldier furtively hoists the Naga flag on the eve of Indian Independence Day. “The blue flag with a rainbow stretched across its breadth and a white star glowing above, brought tears to the eyes of everyone who saw it. Some people began to shout, “Long live Nagaland!”⁴³²

⁴³⁰Easterine Kire, ‘Author’s Introduction’ in *Bitter Wormwood* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011), 6.

⁴³¹Easterine Kire, interview by Swati Daftuar, *The Hindu*, February 11, 2013.

⁴³²Kire, *Bitter Wormwood*, 93.

Her poem ‘What Happened in the Jungles of Burma, My Brother?’ echoes the spirit of Naga nationalism and mourns the loss of this idealism where she writes:

I have engraved in my memory the stories
of the man who lay by the road, shot through the legs
“Go on ahead, I’ll cover you my friends” he said
“It is an honour to die for Nagaland”
how it hurt you that all you could bring back to his loved ones
was a story.

Kire also justifies the violence perpetrated by underground outfits on military personnel. One of the villagers whose brother was killed by the army, says, “Doesn’t our culture teach us that when a relative is murdered we should avenge his death? I do not want to fail in my cultural duty . . . Soon after he left to join the Underground. These men took whatever weapons they could find.”⁴³³

The idealism of freedom struggle, however, degenerates into factional killings. The ideologies of Communism and Maoism adopted by factional groups NSCN (I-M) and NSCN (K) are questioned by Kire. Her disapproval is summarized in the bomb blast episode and ultimately in the accidental death of Mose. And finally, the ‘human solution’ that Kire talks about in her interview seems to be the simplistic idea of fraternity that resists any real engagement with the Indian nation-state and its undemocratic measures to brutally crush the rights of a community. The friendship between two grandsons—retired Naga underground soldier Mose’s grandson, Neibou and Indian soldier Himmat’s grandson, Rakesh—encapsulates Kire’s future vision for a peaceful Nagaland.

The narrative that stands out because of its absence is the narrative of the women’s participation in the Naga struggle. Neilhounuo, Mose’s wife is introduced in the novel as an underground soldier, and as ‘rifle girl.’ But, surprisingly, her background and exploits are not explored by the author. After a disappearing act she returns in the narrative as an ideal daughter-in-law, wife, mother and grandmother. In comparison to Lungalang and Ao’s subversive women characters Kire’s female characters are reduced to mere traditional representations of Naga femininity. The author does not allow her women characters to question the masculinist character of warfare or Naga patriarchal society. Mose’s mother’s ignorance and passivity, Neilhounuo’s conformity and the dismembered body parts of a rape victim, paints a disturbing picture of

⁴³³Ibid., 68.

silenced, conforming and compliant Naga women. Kire's women are traditional at heart and happy to continue in the state of benevolent subordination rather than be involved in a struggle to reform the Naga patriarchy.⁴³⁴

The authorial voice, however, appears once to denounce the war as a masculinist enterprise but even here women are seen as passive grieving suffering mothers, wives and sisters not as active agents who exist for her own sake:

Twenty-one years without any respite. Or any lasting solutions. It was a man's war. If it had been left to the women, maybe they would have talked it over and sorted it out long back. After all, it was they who bore the brunt of the deaths of husbands, lovers, brothers and sons. On both sides. But women did not settle wars. It was unheard of.⁴³⁵

Here, Kire voices the views of Naga Mother's Association whose endeavour is to maintain peace among hostile Naga tribes. It has already been discussed that this association is not a feminist group. It works within the framework of traditional womanhood. And most importantly, they cannot participate in political decision making which is exclusively a male domain.

Another objective of *Bitter Wormwood* is to foreground the racial discrimination faced by the Northeast people in cities like Delhi. In the preface which acts as a paratext to the novel, Kire expresses her angst over the racial attack on the Nagas in the Indian 'mainland'.

The situation in the Indian metropolises is worrying. Students and workers from the Northeast continue to face racist attacks. The Times of India dated October 27, 2009 carried a long article entitled, "Girls from NE soft target in city." It listed various incidents including the rape and murder of a 6-year-old from the Northeast, the murder of a Naga girl by an IIT student and the beating up of Naga and a number of Northeast people by locals.⁴³⁶

But fictionalization of these racial attacks too suffers from oversimplification. The complex discourse of racial identities in mainland cities is communicated through only one incident where Mose's grandson Neibou fights his seniors for the honour of Naga girls. Neibou takes admission in Shri Ram College of Commerce in Delhi where he faces discrimination. He is cornered by a

⁴³⁴ The idea of 'benevolent subordination' of Naga women is borrowed from TemsulaAo. See, TemsulaAo, "Benevolent Subordination: Social Status of Naga Women," in *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*, ed., Preeti Gill (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013).

⁴³⁵ Kire, *Bitter Wormwood*, 113.

⁴³⁶ Kire, introduction to *Bitter Wormwood*, iii.

senior who calls him 'pahariya', a derogatory term for hill dwellers. He, however, springs into action only when the seniors make obscene remarks about Naga girls calling them 'badchalan' or depraved woman. He only mimics the traditional role of a protecting male.

Ashley Tellis in his essay on *A Terrible Matriarchy* criticizes Easterine Kire for 'infantilising'⁴³⁷ the Naga separatist movement. *Bitter Wormwood* too reduces it to a facile narrative. But in spite of its lacunae one cannot deny that *Bitter Wormwood*, the first Indian English novel on Naga insurgency, makes an attempt to unearth some disturbing realities about post independence India. It brings to light the injustices done to the Naga people during the insurgency. It also raises questions about racial discrimination faced by Northeast migrants in major cities.

Men /Women Conflict in *A Terrible Matriarchy*:

Temsula Ao in 'Benevolent Subordination: Social Status of Naga Women'⁴³⁸ argues that patriarchal ideology has governed Naga society for centuries and it would take a revolution of the psyches of both men and women to subvert this deep rooted system. She then continues that opposition to a vision of sexually egalitarian Naga society will come not only from men but also from "a section of women who are themselves still traditionalists at heart and would like to continue in the state of benevolent subordination rather than be involved in a struggle to reform the mind-set of men so strongly entrenched in their age-old belief in male superiority."⁴³⁹ And it is Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) that inadvertently validates Ao's argument through its female characters who are 'traditionalist at heart' and are unable to envision an alternative image of Naga society.

Kire's second novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a coming of age story of a young Angami girl Diliemo. It is generally read as a feminist critique of the gender discrimination in Naga society. Critics see it as a novel in which the female protagonist puts up a resistance against Naga patriarchy. For example: K. B. Veio Pou in his essay 'Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*: Decoding a woman's "mission" in Life' says "it would be right to say that *A Terrible Matriarchy*, in the form of Lieno, presents the new Naga woman who would not blindly give in

⁴³⁷ See, Tellis, 'Differing Resistance,' 38.

⁴³⁸ TemsulaAo, "Benevolent Subordination: Social Status of Naga Women," 132

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

to the dictates of tradition that limits her freedom.”⁴⁴⁰ Similarly, A. J. Sebastian in his essay ‘Gender Inequality in Easterine Iralu’s *A Terrible Matriarchy*’ says “The novel is a clarion call to men and women to play their unique role in ushering in social transformation, doing away with all forms of gender discrimination.”⁴⁴¹ But I argue that Kire’s novel does not envision social transformation that A. J. Sebastian alludes to in his reading of the text. As Ashley Tellis points out the author in fact resists any engagement with Naga patriarchy. Her female characters are perfect examples of women who would not be “involved in a struggle to reform the mind-set of men so strongly entrenched in their age-old belief in male superiority.”⁴⁴²

As mentioned before *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a female bildungsroman that traces the life journey of an Angami girl Dilieno in Naga society. The story opens with a five year old Dilieno and ends when she is twenty three years old. Unlike feminist bildungsroman that “delineates women’s development toward a viable present and future existence, free from predetermined, male dominated societal roles, which in the past have yielded a fragmented rather than a satisfactory integrated personality,”⁴⁴³ *A Terrible Matriarchy* presents a voyage that is regressive. Dilieno or Lieno, the first person narrator and protagonist of the novel, unquestioningly accepts predetermined gender roles of men and women. Lieno, as a young child of five, questions patriarchal assumptions that discriminate against girl children. She wonders why her grandmother prefers her brothers to her, why she refuses to give her the best pieces of meat or, why she never takes her in her lap. The novel begins with a conversation between Lieno and her grandmother that seems to be a telling example of her awakening to gender discrimination in a male dominated society. “I quickly piped up, “I want the leg, Grandmother, give me the leg.” “I wasn’t asking you, silly girl,” she said, as she swiftly put the chicken leg into my brother’s plate, “That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions.”⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴⁰ K. B. VeioPou, *Literary Cultures of India’s Northeast: Naga Writings in English* (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2015), 180.

⁴⁴¹ A. J. Sebastian sdb, ‘Gender Inequality in Easterine Iralu’s *A Terrible Matriarchy*’, in *Exploring North-East Indian Writings in English*, ed, Indu Swami (New Delhi: Sarup Books, 2011), 264.

⁴⁴² Ao, “Benevolent Subordination,” 132.

⁴⁴³ Bonnie Hoover Braendein, “Alher, Atwood, Ballantyne, and Gray: Secular Salvation in the Contemporary Feminist Bildungsroman’, *Frontier: A Journal of Women Studies* 4. no. 1 (Spring, 1979): 19.

⁴⁴⁴ Easterine Kire, *A Terrible Matriarchy* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2007), 1.

But as the narrative progresses Lieno becomes a complacent, harmonious member of a patriarchal society. By the time her journey ends she develops into an ideal woman. In the supplementary text to the novel the author explains why Dielieno represents ideal womanhood—

She is acquainted with household works from a young age and she takes all the activities in her stride. She fetches water and wood, cooks, washes, looks after the chickens, runs errands, shops groceries, cares for sick elderly relatives and on top of all that, studies hard and excels at school. ... [and she] will not fail to be a good wife and mother when her time comes.⁴⁴⁵

In short she possesses all the qualities that are desired in a ‘good’ woman in any patriarchal society. Another quality of Dilieno, that makes her ideal, is that she can navigate her way around the vulgar village gossips and prostitutes. The author shows how skilfully Dilieno avoids gossiping Beuno and her sister at the water source and the fat woman at drinking house who insinuates shameful things in vulgar fashion. Kire here draws a sharp dividing line between what she calls an ideal woman (who cooks, washes, studies hard and becomes a good mother and wife) and the bad women like the vulgar village gossips and prostitutes.

The novel therefore reproduces the traditional patriarchal practice of compartmentalizing women into simplistic binary of good women and bad women. Good women are the ones who marry and reproduce, stand by their husbands even when they are beaten and berated, suffer silently, never gossip and bear oppression with Christian stoicism and compassion, whereas bad women are oppressive, gossipy, vulgar and raucous.⁴⁴⁶ In her first novel *A Naga Village Remembered* Levi’s mother Vipiano represents the values of a ‘good woman’. She is the protector and custodian of patriarchy, a woman who works hard and avoids gossiping, and privileges male members of the family: “She had been a good woman, not one to join the village gossips but keeping herself to her hearth and caring for her husband and children.”⁴⁴⁷ “She never made a decision for the household without consulting him [her son].”⁴⁴⁸

In *A Terrible Matriarchy* Kire’s concept of good femininity is represented by Lieno (it has already been discussed why she is an ideal woman), Nino, Vimenuo and Nisano. Lieno’s mother Nino is an obedient wife and daughter-in-law, and a dutiful mother. She is constantly

⁴⁴⁵Easterine Kire, *A Study Guide to A Terrible Matriarchy* (Nagaland: Barkweaver, 2013), 26 -27.

⁴⁴⁶ Ashley Tellis, ‘Differing Resistances: Mediating the Naga Struggle in Easterine Irul’s *A Terrible Matriarchy* and Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home*,’ *Eastern Quarterly* 5 no. 1 (April- June 2008): 38.

⁴⁴⁷Kire, *A Naga Village*, 11.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

worried about her sons and dutifully reminds her daughter to behave modestly. Vimenuo is Lieno's friend who later becomes Leto's wife and mother of a girl child. Nisano is Vini's wife. She bears domestic violence without protest. She is therefore rewarded when her late husband's brother marries her and accepts her son. And the 'bad' women are Lieon's tyrannical grandmother, Vibano; the village gossips, Benuo and her sister and the prostitutes at the drinking house. Kire at no point allows her protagonist to consider the constructed nature of these binaries. The fact that the concepts of femininity/masculinity or good femininity/ bad femininity are social constructs and therefore subject to revision never occurs to Lieno.

Lieno's journey takes place in a traditional Naga household in which, according to Bano, "girl children are never considered real members of the family. Their mission in life is to marry and have children and be able to cook and weave cloth and look after the household. If they got married, they would always be known as somebody's wife or somebody's mother and never as somebody's daughter. That way they could never carry on their father's name."⁴⁴⁹ And it is Lieno's grandmother who is presented as a chief custodian of this ideology. At the age of five Lieno is sent off to her tyrannical grandmother, the terrible matriarch who believes girl children do not need an education, they do not need love or affection, or even a good piece of meat. Lieno in her oppressive custody is made to go through a gruelling regime—she is made to bathe in cold water; she has to feed the chicken, chase the dog away to protect the chickens, and so on. The terrible matriarch therefore is positioned as the chief antagonist of the novel. And her greatest sin is that she misconstrues the patriarchal belief system to abuse her granddaughter. The author says:

As for upholding the customs of her forefathers, grandmother perverts the patriarchal structure in a way that it has not been subjected to before. She uses the patriarchal system to show favouritism to her grandsons and by the same rule, abuses the females in her household. . . . So while she believes she is upholding culture, she is in fact perverting and abusing it, *because culture does not really allow the ill treatment of women* (emphasis added).⁴⁵⁰

Interestingly, Kire accuses grandmother Vibano for "abusing and perverting" the patriarchal structure but does not question the patriarchal culture itself because Naga culture does not have any empirical evidence of sexual oppression. Naga patriarchy does not enforce foot-binding,

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Easterine Kire, *A Study Guide to A Terrible Matriarchy* (Nagaland: Barkweaver, 2013), 40.

hizab, or mutilation on its women. Patriarchy operates here on an ideological level. And ideological repression of women is beyond the scope of this novel. Therefore, Lieno's parents, Visa and Nino; her brothers, Leto, Bulie; grandmother's brother, Sizo hailed as heroic figures. They represent the benevolent side of patriarchy. Hence little Lieno, who was a only girl after four boys, does not question why her mother is only concerned about her sons and is almost entirely uncaring about her daughter, why is her so-called ideal brother Leto wanted a son, or why the benevolent Sizo, abandoned his illegitimate daughter Bano in his sister's custody and went on to live his life with wife and children.

Easterine Kire said in an interview that feminism is not a consciously held ideology of the text. When asked whether she would call *A Terrible Matriarchy* a feminist novel, her reply was "I don't call it this or that ...It is primarily a young girl's coming of age story and if some readers find feminist elements in it, they are free to find it. For me the writer, the story is the most important thing, not the theory."⁴⁵¹ As a traditionalist writer she privileges writer and her/his story and not the multifarious readings, interpretations and rewriting. Her text reflects this traditionalist approach. It does not present any feminist goal. A feminist literature seeks to subvert the status quo by positioning its female protagonist as a rebel. For example, in Alice Walker's female bildungsroman *The Colour Purple* (1982) a submissive and repressed black woman gains her voice and autonomy outside a hetero-normative paradigm. By contrast, *A Terrible Matriarchy* upholds normative patriarchal ideology that privileges an androcentric familial structure. At no point, the protagonist questions the normative regime, the compulsory domesticity imposed on women, the accepted gender relations; she never reflects upon the marginalized position of the prostitutes and the village gossips. Instead the narrative positions them as bad women. Situated in the patriarchal world of the Angami society the novel does not challenge patriarchy's authority, power and domination.

Having painted a somewhat dismal picture of Kire's writing it must be reiterated emphatically that her literary contribution only enriches the already poly-vocal literary scene of Nagaland that presents divergent viewpoints about colonial incursion, Indo-Naga conflict and Naga patriarchy.

Avinuo Kire's 'Solie' and 'Nigu's Red T Shirt'

⁴⁵¹EasterineKire, in conversation with the author, July 25, 2016.

‘Solie’ is a story of a Naga freedom fighter and ‘Nigu’s Red T Shirt’ is a story of a Naga migrant in Delhi. These two stories are part of Avinuo Kire’s short story collection *The Power to Forgive* (2015). Both of them highlight the tension between India and Nagaland. In ‘Solie’ we see a character of a Naga woman who questions the phallogocentric nature of Indo-Naga conflict. And ‘Nigu’s Red T Shirt’ fills the gap present in Easterine Kire’s *Bitter Wormwood*. In that novel Easterine Kire briefly touches upon the issue of migration and racism in mainland India. But in ‘Solie,’ Avinuo Kire delves deep into the issue of racial difference and its impact on the Naga migrants in the Indian metropolises.

‘Solie,’ begins with the narrator introducing the eponymous protagonist to the readers. She introduces Solie as a lazy, old and inefficient peon-cum-sweeper of her office. He is not punctual and is also inconsistent in performing his duties. While the narrator’s colleagues see Solie as an arrogant and inefficient worker, the narrator feels he belongs to a different breed of men. Later she finds out from her elderly neighbour Atsa Neiu, that Solie was a Naga freedom fighter. Atsa Neiu is Solie’s former wife. She tells the narrator that Solie was the son of a well-to-do farmer. After graduating from reputed college in Shillong he got a job as a teacher. But in the 1950s when the Indian Army occupied the Naga Hills, he joined the Naga movement to liberate his homeland.

The story that, narrates the tale of an enigmatic Naga freedom fighter, is also a gendered representation of the Naga freedom movement. ‘Solie’ is also about Atsa Neiu. She chose Solie to be her partner because of his detachment towards the Naga movement. But when Solie reveals his desire to join the underground army, she decides to leave him. She later marries another man. Atsa Neiu’s father was part of the Naga freedom struggle. Therefore, she was painfully conscious of her mother’s struggles. She had seen her mother being harassed by the Indian Army. She did not want to go through the same struggle of a Naga insurgent’s wife. She tells the narrator: “...politics and war belonged to the men folk and men alone were both heroes and writers of history.”⁴⁵² This story, like Ao and Lungalang’s stories, underscores the struggles of Naga women and at the same time foregrounds their resistance. Here Atsa Neiu questions the masculinist nature of armed struggles and the phallogocentric process of history writing that fails to record the struggles of women.

⁴⁵² Kire, ‘Solie,’ 23.

The next story, 'Nigu's Red T Shirt,' delves deep into the mind of a Naga boy living in Delhi and brings out his loneliness, confusion, identity crisis and anxiety of belongingness to India. Neingulie is a twenty year old Naga boy pursuing an undergraduate degree course in humanities from a Delhi college. He lives in a small rented flat. He is not allowed to cook his favourite traditional Naga food with fermented soybean (*akhuni*) since the locals find the smell offensive. Whenever he cooks with *akhuni*, he sprays strong cheap deodorant to cover the smell. He is called 'Chinki' and 'Ching Chong' by the locals in public places like in the crowded markets in Sarojini Nagar. He endures the humiliation meekly and wonders how "this place had managed to bring out a quality of meekness he never knew he possessed."⁴⁵³ He is also a misfit in his college. On the very first day he understands that he does not belong there. The day begins with a round of introductions. The names of his classmates like 'Deepak, Priyanka, Sahil and so on' are accepted unquestioningly. But when Neingulie mumbles his name his classmates begins to titter and he is made to repeat his 'unpronounceable' name by the teacher.

One day his life changes when he buys a second hand red T shirt with curious oriental etching on it. He feels confident and a sense of comfort wearing the T shirt as he is mistaken for a visiting tourist from China, Japan or Korea. Now he has a justifiable explanation as to why he looks different from the rest of the country. "[I]t was as if he fitted better as a visiting tourist rather than a geographical misfit."⁴⁵⁴ But this illusion breaks when he meets a group of actual tourists from China. When he tells them that he is Indian they greet them with Namaste, the greeting he has never used in his life. They also click picture with him. Later that night, when he takes out his phone to admire the pictures he is taken aback at how different he appeared from the rest of the group. "He did not blend in as perfectly as he had imagined."⁴⁵⁵ He is disgusted and dismayed to realize that he neither looks Indian nor does he look like a foreigner. He is a geographical misfit from Nagaland. His illusion is destroyed and he puts the T shirt in the clothes compartment the least accessible.

This story effectively delineates the alienation, confusion and identity crisis that the Northeast migrants in the Indian metropolises experience. A reviewer of 'Nigu's Red T Shirt' says: "[It] is a story that I feel should be read by all college going students. In my three years at Delhi University, North Campus, I have seen much discrimination and harassment against

⁴⁵³ Kire, Nigu's Red T Shirt,' 58.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 62.

students from the North East. ‘Nigu’s Red T Shirt’ highlights the challenges faced by young North Easterners when they come to metro cities for education or employment.”⁴⁵⁶ As she says this story must be part of every college syllabus so that the race privileged students from mainland India can begin to accept India as a pluralistic nation.

The story narrates the experience of migration from a young man’s point of view. This experience is not always the same for Northeastern men and women. Duncan McDuie-Ra in *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail*, explains the divergent experiences of migration for Northeastern men and women. He argues that in spite of the discrimination faced by both Northeast men and women, it is women who flourish in the cities while the men struggle. The process of migration weakens the men as it impedes them from enforcing the rules and regulation practiced back home but liberates the women. Therefore, Mamang Dai’s Adna, an Arunachali woman in Delhi, prepares to go back to Delhi at the end of the novel.

Conclusion

The hyphenated, complex and marginalized identity of the Naga-Indians that the Naga authors seek to negotiate within the canon of Indian Writing in English is not ‘already-produced stabilities and totalities’⁴⁵⁷ that can be retrieved from the annals of history. They have reconstructed it through their literature. By blending the past with the present, their local culture with the global language and the literary aesthetics with their political consciousness, Naga writers have constituted a new insurgent literature and a new complex identity for the Nagas. This literary identity, however, is not absolute or definite. The process of Naga history and identity formation through literature that began more than a decade ago in Easterine Kire’s *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) is still in the process of making. While Kire’s novel presented an exotic picture of the nineteenth century Naga village, new generation writers like Avinuo Kire, whose collection of short stories *The Power to Forgive* (2015) published by Zubaan in 2015, reveals a new facet of Nagaland. She represents a new society that is unfurling today in Nagaland’s urban centres. The idea of Naga women’s writing that this chapter aims to represent

⁴⁵⁶ Japleen Pasricha, ‘Book Review: The Power To Forgive And Other Stories by Avinuo Kire,’ *FII*, November 23, 2015, <https://feminisminindia.com/2015/11/23/book-review-power-forgive-other-stories-avinuo-kire/>

⁴⁵⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities’, in *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1997), 45.

therefore is provisional. The Naga story is still being written by the courageous accomplished women writers in their distinguished styles.

Conclusion

“We, the writers from this region are still engaged in a 'solitary' activity but we take heart in the faith that true literature endures.”

-----Temsula Ao, 'Writing as Affirmation,' 171.

As someone who is not from the Indian Northeast, my endeavour in this study was to understand this misunderstood and ignored region, through its women's fictional writings in English. But given the complexity and diversity in the literature emerging from the north-eastern states, my understanding of this region has only been problematized. This bewildering heterogeneity is what I have tried to present in this study. This study could not cover the whole realm of Northeast English fiction writing because of this diversity. But some of the subjects that I could cover are—the process of Christianization in Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, the Hinduization of the Meiteis in Manipur, the secessionist movements in Nagaland and Mizoram, anti-outsider agitations in Assam and Meghalaya, tribal/non-tribal conflict and solidarity, racism and sexism in the 'mainland,' sexism in the ethnic communities and rewriting of the oral indigenous culture.

My main concern, however, was to foreground the Northeast women writers' engagement with the questions of national, sub-national and gendered identity, their representation of the conflict between the Indian nation-state and Northeast sub-nationalisms as well as the tension between Northeast sub-nationalisms and feminist concerns. Nationhood, community, and identities are male constructs, rigged in their favour. Therefore women writers from the Northeast challenge both the masculine Indian nationalism and Northeast sub-nationalisms. I have tried to demonstrate that Northeast women's writing resists the hegemony of the Indian nation-state, its repressive measures, army atrocities much like the Manipuri women who protested naked in front of the Army headquarter in Kangla, how they also criticize the local patriarchal community laws and belief systems that deny them agency. Most of these women writers highlight the stories of resistance and women's agency, which goes against the dominant woman-as-victim paradigm in the Northeast historiography. In chapter one, I have shown how Mamang Dai have represented Arunachal Pradesh through her adventurous women characters. Her novel *Stupid Cupid*, for example, highlights the racial discrimination faced by the Northeast

women in Delhi. But she projects the protagonist as a survivor who is ready to start her life anew in the violent and racist city of Delhi. In chapter two, five and six, I have demonstrated how Mitra Phukan, Temsula Ao and Malswami Jacob rewrite the masculinist Assam Agitation, MNF movement and Indo-Naga conflict by foregrounding women's bodies.

Northeast women writers (except Assam which is a Hindu dominated state) always pose challenge to the Hindu hegemony by writing about their indigenous belief-systems, myths and folklore. The chapter on Manipur is a perfect example of this assertion of indigenous identity. They also resist the urbane aesthetics of Indian writing in English, dominated by the city-bred urban elite, by using tribal words, songs, oral story telling style, in their writing. But the myths and folk-tales woven in their texts sometimes have a feminine re-telling which help them to form a sub-nationalist identity that is different from the masculine notion of nationalism and identity assertion— whether of the nation-state or of the Northeast states.

In these chapters, I have tried to show how these writers problematize the Indian and Northeast identities by creating non-essentialist alternate identities. In doing so, they blur the lines between self/Other and insider/outsider. Kulay in *The to-let House*, Zorami in *Zorami*, and Aman, Firdaus and Sophie in *Lunatic in My Head* are examples of such non-essentialist identities. And lastly I have shown that Northeast women writers do not always desire to be categorized as Northeast writers. These writers who otherwise are rooted to their land and proudly inscribe the tribal indigenous culture wish to go beyond this narrow categorization and seek a 'nowhereness', much like their fictional characters who seek a life in the big cities even in the face of hostility.

At the end, I will share my experience as a researcher working on Northeast writing, from outside the Northeast. My experience in the 'mainland' explains why we need more research on the Northeast literature. I remember, in 2015, I was trying to communicate the cultural significance and relevance of Khasi folk narratives in contemporary Khasi society in a 'Literature and Culture' class. Only a few female students were present in the class that day. To animate the reluctant students and to make the discussion more interactive I referred to the research project of one my fellow researchers, a Khasi scholar who was conducting her work on Khasi folktales. The young students were astonished to find that a tribal woman from the remote region of India's northeast could undertake such academic journey. For them the image of tribal northeast Indian woman was that of an exotic dancer in ethnic attire. Their misconception

propelled me to revisit the age old concept of self/Other binary. The ‘self,’ in this case, is marked as urban, middle class Hindu woman from ‘mainland’ India and the ‘other’ as tribal woman from the Northeast.

The second anecdote is from 2017 when I attended a conference. The theme of the conference was ‘Location, Identity, Solidarity – Hegemonic Formations and Contestations (With a Special Focus on the Northeast).’ A participant whose paper was on Ao’s short story ‘The Last Song’ criticized Ao’s apolitical stand. He said that the authors from a troubled region must unambiguously write about their political position. The participant, a Hindu male from ‘mainland’ India believed that the Northeast writers must write from the position of a Northeast subject and it is incumbent upon them to educate the mainstream readers about the place by writing as an unambiguous writing subject. His expectation reflects the reductionist fallacy of the mainland and the binary of India/ the Northeast.

Many such small but nonetheless significant incidents led me to wonder if Northeast India is missing from our mindscape. People from the Northeast have more anecdotal evidences to narrate, that prove how ignorant and arrogant the ‘mainland’ is. Professor Margaret Pachua, for example, says that rest of India do not even know what comprises Northeast India.⁴⁵⁸ She says that the writing from this region is a way of writing back to the rest of India and bringing the periphery to the centre.

As I conclude the thesis we have reached the year 2021. The year began with an inspiring piece of news from Nagaland. The state, which did not allow women to be part of any decision-making process and erupted to protest against the thirty three percent reservation of women in electoral election in 2017, has elected a woman to head a tribal clan body for the first time. The traditional body of Metha tribe has chosen Khrienuo Metha to be its leader. Like the political field, the literary field is growing with new writers. So many new books by Northeast Indian women writers have been and are being published. For example I almost gave up the idea of including Manipuri writing in English as I could not find any book. But I found a new book by Linthoi Chanu which was made available only in 2021. In the coming days women’s writing in English from Tripura and Sikkim will also be widely available, because as Temsula Ao says “true literature endures.”

⁴⁵⁸ “Launch: Prose Writings from North East India eds. Malsawmi Jacob & Jaydeep Sarangi ;SahityaAkademi”, You Tube video, posted by Basudhara Roy, May 30 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkADYICBk8o>.

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