

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

Abstract

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by

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This project studies women's writings from the six North-eastern Indian states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. I have covered more than twenty texts by fourteen Northeast Indian women writers namely Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan, Uddipana Goswami, Jahnavi Barua, Linthoi Chanu, Malsawmi Jacob, Anjum Hasan, Daisy Hasan, Janice Pariat, Bijoya Sawian, Temsula Ao, Nini Lungalang, Easterine Kire and Avinuo Kire. My main focus is to examine 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 nationalisms and feminist concerns. Northeast India is positioned as the 'Other' of the Indian nation-state which has led to sub-nationalism in the Northeast. But within the Northeast sub-nationalism there are many forms of otherings. I here focus on the othering on the basis of gender. Northeast women are doubly marginalized and othered because of their race and gender. They are at once victims of the Indian state power, the racist and misogynistic mindset of the mainland Indian citizens, and of the local patriarchal customary laws, belief systems, and political ideology. The purpose of this thesis is to examine women writers' negotiation with these various forms of repressions and marginalization, and to see whether they subvert the binary of Indian nationalism and northeast sub-nationalism— both oppressive, both patriarchal. These writers effectively pen the stories of rape and torture by the state and gender inequality in the Northeast communities. But more importantly, they highlight the stories of resistance and women's agency, which goes against the dominant woman-as-victim paradigm in the Northeast historiography. I have also found out through the course of the study that these writers always occupy the position of the marginalized, not only of the northeast women but also of the disenfranchised migrant men and women living in the Northeast with their anxiety of belongingness to the region. And lastly I have discovered that Northeast women writers do not always desire to be categorized as Northeast writers. People, in the mainland, have the tendency to see the north-eastern literature only through the prism of this category and expect them to write about the conflict, myth, folk culture, to maintain the 'we/they' (Indian mainland/Northeast 'Other') binary. But the Northeast women writers who otherwise are rooted to their land and proudly inscribe the tribal 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. By doing this, they subvert the reductionist fallacy of the mainland and the binary of India/ the Northeast.