

LITERATURE OF THE INVISIBLES: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FICTIONAL WRITINGS FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA

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Abstract

North-East India has been an under-represented area for many years and because of this reason it has been prone to political problems and violence. But for a Pan-Indian perspective the North-East has to be brought into the picture. North-East because of its breath-taking natural beauty, ethnic multiplicity and volatile political conditions has given birth to a body of writings that is completely different from Indian English Literature. Therefore, this paper focuses on the fictional writings from North-East India and it discusses some selective writers of this region. It tries to bring out the fact that writings from North-East India not only deals with violence and bloodshed but it is also replete with stories about ethnicity, culture, identity and history of the North-East. Literature of the North-East has remained invisible because of the marginalization of the region in the conventional discourses on culture and literature. The present paper endeavours to highlight and ascertain the “invisible” literature of the North-East India.

Key words: North-East India, Fictional writings, Literature

North-East India is one of the most beautiful regions of India. Nestled in the bosom of the mighty Himalayas it is blessed with rich natural beauty and bewildering cultural diversity. It is also home to many endangered species of flora and fauna. North-East is a very harsh terrain for survival, but the warm heartedness of its “Rainbow People” (Rajkumar 1) has made it one of the most sought out tourist destinations of India. The untamed, unblemished and unexplored region with lush green valleys, lofty mountains and tumultuous rivers makes it a treasure trove waiting to be discovered.

The focus of this paper is on the fictional writings from North-East India and to discuss some selective writers of this region, but before delving deeper into it, the term ‘North-East India’ has to be understood. Literature is deeply influenced by the society and the spirit of the age; it is a reflection of the society. Therefore, it is very essential to acquaint oneself with the North-East before exploring its literature.

North-East is the melting-pot of India because of its ethnic, racial, religious and linguistic diversity. It is located on the eastern-most region of India and is connected to the mainland

via the Siliguri corridor in West Bengal. It comprises the contiguous seven states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura; and Sikkim. It is a known fact that a full, authoritative and authentic history of the North-eastern states is yet to be written but whatever little we know about the history of this region is from a number of literary and scholarly writings. According to Taher the earliest settlers were Austro-Asiatic speakers, followed by Tibeto-Burmese and then by Indo-Aryans (12). In the early historical period, the present day North-East India, besides Bhutan and Sylhet in Bangladesh made up the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa. But in the medieval times this historical kingdom disappeared and was replaced by smaller political entities.

The entire region came under British rule in the early 19th century because of the first Anglo-Burmese War. During this period North-East India became a part of Bengal province and after the independence of India in 1947, it consisted of Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura. Later on states like Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh (1975) and Mizoram (1987) were carved out of Assam. Manipur and Tripura remained as Union Territories of India between 1956 till 1972 when they attained statehood. The Himalayan state of Sikkim was integrated as the eighth North Eastern Council state in 2002.

In the present day scenario North-East India is seen as a conflict zone and we find very little mention of its history and literature in the mainstream culture. There is a sense of mystique among the people of mainland India, who consider it as an exotic land filled with tribes, or a land troubled with violence and bloodshed. Geographically these areas are far flung from the heartland and the people of this region having a different culture and ethnicity may be the reason for the “invisibility” of the North-East.

Linguistically, North-East is considered as a paradise of India, since the affectionately called ‘Seven Sisters (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) and a Brother (Sikkim)’ states have numerous minority languages with rich word power. In fact in a small state like Sikkim having a small population, a considerable linguistic heterogeneity is noted. According to Bareh there are as many as twenty languages, such as Sikkimese, Lepcha, Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Majhi, Majhwar, Nepal Bhasa, Rai, Sherpa, Sunuwar, Tamang, Thulung, Tibetan, and Yakha (9). Therefore, it is apparent that the linguistic diversity of this region defies easy definition.

North-East has been an under-represented region for many years and because of this reason it has been prone to political problems and violence. But for a Pan-Indian perspective the North-East has to be brought into the picture. Herein lies the importance of the literature that is being produced from this region. However, we cannot define wholly what literature of the North-East means because by doing so we will be homogenising a very diverse and complex structure. Customarily, it refers to the writings in English, but it may also include literature and writings in the languages of the various states of the territory.

North-East because of its breath-taking natural beauty, ethnic multiplicity and volatile political conditions has given birth to a body of writings that is completely different from Indian English Literature. In her book *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*, Misra writes, “its literature is not just a social and historical map of events, but also a medium of telling its story to the world.” All these factors have augmented in the evolution of a literature which has a character of its own and possess a unique essence.

The North-East possesses a rich literary tradition, whether in the written forms of the Assamese Literature and the Bishnupriya Manipuri language or oral traditions of the tribes. However, in the recent years there has been an increase in the number of writers writing in English. The reasons for this phenomenon as observed by Misra are:

Many of them have had the privilege of being educated in English-medium schools and they are more capable of handling that language rather than their mother tongues.

This new band of writers writing in English is bound to grow in number because most of the hill-states of the region have adopted English as the official language. . . .

Moreover, given the small sizes of the linguistic groups to which many of the writers belong, it is understandable that the aspiring writers should choose to write in a language through which they can reach out to a wider reader base. (xiii-xiv)

Undeniably, the use of English as a medium of expression in the literature of North-East has reaped many benefits. It has not only made the literature of the “invisibles” visible to India and to the whole world but it has also helped the inhabitants of this diverse region in discovering the writings from within the states. The mindboggling linguistic heterogeneity of the region implies that there is no particular language that is universal in the North-East. But with the expansion of English this perception seems to be changing.

In the recent years many national and international magazines and journals have given unprecedented attention to the writings from this region. *Tehelka* and *Pratilipi* have brought out special issues on writers from North-East and big publishing houses like Penguin, Zubaan, Oxford UP etc are making beelines to the writers of this region. The key factor behind it rests in the verity that literature and particularly the fictional writings from this part are a magnificent amalgamation of various culture, language, ethnicity and geographical splendour. It is distinct and robustly ingrained in the North-East.

The fictional writings from the North-East blooms with narratives of violence, pain, ethnicity, identity, nature, legends, myths, tribes and so on. Despite the fact that these tales are in the sphere of fiction, they paint and create the pictures of the life experienced by the people of this area and help in comprehending their distinctive individuality. They describe the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, vulnerability and strength, simplicity and innocence, trials and tribulations of the populace. Siddhartha Sarma, author of *East of the Sun* echoes the same belief and says, “North-East contains within it the kernels of some of the richest stories that

can be told. I also like to believe that in many ways, the region contains some distinct attitudes to life and living” (TOI 2011).

The North-East, ever since its creation, has been ravaged by conflicts - including inter ethnic conflicts, conflict over natural resources, the native-migrant conflicts and border conflicts between the states of the region and so forth. These discords have not only made the region vulnerable and backward but it has also severely affected the ordinary people caught in the crossfire. Their lives are totally different from their counterparts from the mainland as they are constantly forced to live under the shadow of fear. This problematic situation is pertinently reflected in the literature of the north east frontier.

The depiction of violence and pain is very commonplace in contemporary North-East writings. For a number of writers, violence was an inescapable reality that suffused their work. TemsulaAo, Mitra Phukan, AruniKashyap are some of the writers who have strongly written about it. Mitra Phukan, author of *The Collector’s Wife*, states:

Writing about terror is a kind of cathartic experience for me. Many incidents in my novel are based on real life. But I do not think just reading about/looking at/art can give much more than a small fraction of an idea about the terror one feels in real lifethe experience is raw. . . . Even the greatest works of art are nothing but shadows. (Pratilipi 2012)

Violence caused by the various groups involved in the insurgency and the resulting excesses of the security forces and the police have been brilliantly brought out by TemsulaAo in her powerful collection of short stories titled *These Hills Called Home Stories From A War Zone*. In the Foreword titled “Lest we forget” the author writes, “in these stories I have endeavoured to revisit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged.” She says her stories do not utter “historical facts”, nor are they “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.”

The stories in this collection are largely about women, as they are the ones who have to endure the most traumas in the long run. One such story that touches deeply is “The Last Song”. It is about a beautiful young woman named Apenyo, the lead singer of a church choir. Later on in the story, when an army unit attacks the village to teach the villagers a lesson for paying taxes to the underground rebels, she and her mother are ruthlessly gang raped by them. All the way through the ordeal Apenyo continues to sing her “last song”. Neither rape nor death could take the song away from her lips. It describes the atrocities of an uncertain and turbulent era and the vulnerability of the Nagas wedged in the conflict zone.

Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife* is also a narrative about a woman called Rukmini, a teacher in the local college who is married to a District Collector of a small town in Assam. The Assam students’ agitation of the 1970s and 1980s, the toil and sufferings of the common

folk and the meaninglessness of violence forms its plot. It is a testament to the fact that violence impairs every individual of the society, be it the gentry or the common man.

The violence and the pain that is being portrayed by the writers of North-East in their works have brought some flak from critics and it has led to the stereotyping of the whole body of Literature from North-East as "Literature of Violence". This is somewhat incorrect; indeed violence has been a motif in some of the fictional writings but it has been used as a means to communicate the agony, torment and the ordeals that the denizens of this beautiful region have been undergoing for the past many decades. It is not in any way exalting or mitigating violence and the bloodshed that has ravaged it.

There are myriad themes in the fictional writings from North-East India but to a great extent only the subject of violence and political problems are taken into cognizance. This perspective is skewed and erroneous. Aruni Kashyap, a young poet and author of *The House with a Thousand Novels* comments, "Literature from here is approached with terms like "literature from the conflict zone" or "a new heart of darkness is getting discovered". . . . It angers me that the whole idea of the North-East is a constructive identity. And it comes because of historical and deep-seated prejudices" (The Hindu 2009). The North-East is not 'only' a land of AK - 47s, Kalashnikovs, conflict and anarchy but it is also a land of singing rivers, emerald valleys, majestic mountains and pristine panorama.

The ever so serene, verdant, invigorating and benevolent Mother Nature of this expanse has had a soothing and calming effect on the strife stricken inhabitants. The strong presence of this is found in the works of contemporary writers like Mamang Dai, Dhurba Hazarika, Jahnabi Baruah, Siddhartha Deb and many more. For Mamang Dai, author of *The Legends of Pensam*, the treatment of nature in her works is something that she feels, "an affinity for and it is my way of viewing this change or the passage of time writing is of course an act of hope, in the sense that you will overcome barriers of misunderstanding, grief, loss, through some new creation like an act of transformation, metamorphosis" (Thanal 2008).

Dhurba Hazarika's *Luck* is a collection of deeply moving stories about nature and the relationship man shares with it. Life in the woods and the country side of Assam is lucidly brought to life by the writer. The stories like "Luck", "Chicken Fever", "Ghostie" and others honour the ties between nature and humans, it reflects the universal truth that man constantly seeks refuge in the lap of nature. Stories such as these are helping in creating a novel image of the region as they are breaking away from the stereotypes created by the relentless branding of the North-East as a conflict zone.

Apart from this there are others, who write about stories that have remained unknown, stories about ethnicity, culture, identity and history of the North-East. Writers like Easterine Kire Iralu, Mamang Dai, Sidharta Sarma and the like have been trying to unravel many such stories from a region which is still invisible to the rest of India. Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *A Naga Village Remembered* and *Bitter Wormwood* have painted the intriguing

and vibrant Naga culture to the rest of the world. Her writings kindle an interest in the age old traditions and oral folklores from the innermost recesses of the mystical Nagaland.

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is also written on the same lines. It is a book of short stories which are interconnected and describes the myths of Adis, a tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. It is set in "Pensam" which means 'in-between' in the language of the Adis. It is a land of mountains, rivers, old legends, spirits, and resilience. The book ascertains the fact that the North-East is still a bastion of indigenous culture. It is also an attempt of preserving an ethnic group's cultural ethos and beliefs, which would appear surreal to modern society.

The stories from North-East are replete with the accounts of indigenous culture and unlike most of the writings from mainland India it does not only describe the monotonous urban life and settings but, it also reveals the remote hamlets, the simple and innocent folks, their magical stories and most important of all their roots and origin. In the fictional works of North-East the humdrum of modern living has not been able to engulf the beliefs and values that are very significant and vital for the survival of mankind.

There are writers like Siddhartha Deb, Anjum Hasan, Daisy Hasan and so forth who are not ethnically "North-Easterners" but were born and have spent a large part of their lives in the North-East. Books like *Lunatic in my Head* by Anjum Hasan, *Surface* by Siddhartha Deb have North-East as an inherent part of their narratives. One such story is *Lunatic in my Head*, it is set in the misty town of Shillong, and it describes the lives of ordinary souls struggling to find a sense of belonging amid conflicting social and personal expectations. The protagonists, Firdaus, Aman and Sophie, are consciously aware of their outsider status and are at times alienated due to it. Nevertheless, they identify with the multicultural nature of Shillong and adore it for what it is. The beauty of the landscape, the dreamy and slow moving lives of the inhabitants and a profound love for the land is subtly portrayed in it.

Literature has a close connection with life. Life endows the essential fabric by means of which literature creates an ingenious form. There is an inseparable connection between life and literature. And life is not simple; it possesses both depth and comprehensiveness. Thus, literature reflects the blessing as well as the pain of life. The fictional writings from the North-East are no different. It does not only manifest violence and conflict but also mirrors the distinctive culture, the breath taking beauty and the simple way of life of individuals. Consequently, there are a multitude of themes in the fictional writings of this frontier. All these themes co-exist and tell the world a story which has never been told before – a story of time-honoured beliefs, Mother Nature, pain, trauma, identity and above all a story of their own.

Literature of the North-East has remained invisible because of the marginalization of the region in the conventional discourses on culture and literature. It is only in the recent years that the vibrant contemporary writing from the North-East has really begun to reach the rest of India and the world. But this also came with a price, which is the classifying of North-East

literature as “literature of violence”. Some may even write it off as provincial literature which does not hold any ground compared to mainstream literature. As a matter of fact the written word from this part can serve as a bridge that can connect the North-East with mainland India. As Mamang Dai writes in *Legends of Pensam*, “The most beautiful thing is that we are all bunched up together on oceans and cities, and deserts and valleys, far apart from each other in so many ways, but we have words, and the right words open our minds and hearts and help us recognize one another.” (191)

Literature of the North-East is special in its own way and with the passage of time will grow manifolds and win many hearts on the way. It has long been abandoned in the mighty mountains and submerged in the roaring rivers but now the times are changing and a day will come when it will get its due recognition and the respect that it deserves.

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