

## The 'NEO Literature' of North East India

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### *Abstract*

The advent of North East Indian writing in English has become proficient since the last couple of decades, leading to an immense interest in the literature published by the authors of this region. This region is rich in diversity with different tribes and their oral traditions. However, the economic backwardness, poverty, insurgency, freedom struggle, identity crisis, and army atrocities have added to the feeling of isolation and cultural segregation among the inhabitants. The 21st century writers of the north-east, through their literature, have expressed the emotions and strife's faced by the previous generations. There is no single definition or term that can be used which can encompass the literature written by the authors belonging to the North East region of India. This paper is an attempt to identify the distinctiveness of the north-east Indian literature, primarily written in English, by encompassing it in the term 'NEOLiterature', to celebrate their uniqueness. The methodology followed in achieving this objective is the application of the cultural race theories, and the Black Aesthetic Movement of the United States, in identifying elements through the select works of North-East Indian writers such as, Dhruva Hazarika, Mamang Dae, Aruni Kashyap, Easterine Kire, Janice Pariat, Janhavi Baruha, Temsung Ao and Moushumi Kandali. The term NEO Literature represents the 'North East Origin' Literature. The term encompasses the dominant trends observed in the 21st century writers who are originally from the states of north east of India and have primarily written in English.

**Key Words:** North East Indian writing, the economic backwardness, poverty, insurgency, freedom struggle, identity crisis.

### **Introduction**

Towards the far east of India lies one of the most beautiful and scenic regions of India, collectively called the north-eastern region, a confluence of seven states. This region is abounding in natural resources, rare flora and fauna, clear rivers, high mountains and dense

forests. Engulfed in the aesthetical nature, this region, is home to around 200 different ingenious tribes, primarily belonging to the Mongolia race. Primarily race is considered as differentiation based on the physical and behavioural characteristics. Race has always been considered as a source of conflict and discrimination. A lot of research and theories have also been postulated regarding racism. The British sociologist, Michael Banton, has spoken of “race as a concept been used to speak of differences between population” (Nayar, 2009). As a consequence, we find that racial discrimination exists in all ethnic minorities. Extensive research has been conducted to study the causes of racial differences between the ‘Black & White’ communities all over the world. Theories ranging from scientific reasons to socio-cultural have been formulated. Though scientists have refuted the theory that race is based on gene or biological differences, but the truth is, ethnic minorities have faced marginalization and in extreme cases even genocide, be it Jews, Yazdis, Blacks, or Mongolians, even in the 21st century, as a result of racial differences.

The Mongolians, mostly originate in the Asian continent. In India, the north-east region is the area where most Mongolians originate. Their distinctness makes them a target of discrimination. They are treated as foreigners in their own country. They are considered ‘different’ or ‘the other’. The ‘other/otherness’ is when certain groups or individuals are considered unfit within the rules or norms of a specific society or group. It is basically a perception that the other group or individual is not like us. It is a conflict between ‘us’ and ‘them’. It creates prejudices against a certain section of people. On a larger level, these prejudices create dehumanizing effect on that section of people by continuously targeting them, thus marginalizing them from the larger society. Otherness can be because of gender, skin colour, ethnicity/race, language, occupation, religion, political affiliation, etc. There are various reasons that could initiate otherness but the most common reason is lack of education. Societal influences and personal biases also lead individuals and groups to creating these prejudices. If they are not curtailed, they can lead to civil unrest in extreme cases. Many a times economic backwardness and media too enforces ‘otherness’, on a section of people with minority voices.

Another important aspect spoken by Michael Banton about racial differences is that it is related to many other factors such as economic development and opportunities, access to proper education, welfare schemes initiated by the government. This racial difference then leads to violent fights and discrimination. We have seen evidences of this kind during the Holocaust, the state of the Aboriginals or the natives in Canada, Australia and even with the natives of America. Though there is no scientific evidence to prove that biologically any race is superior, but the social, political and cultural factors leading to racial difference are still embedded in minds. This prejudice is why racial differences still exist in the 21st century. According to poststructuralist Henry Gates Jr. we can

find racism in language too. He calls it the language of difference, or of mockery or cruelty or just plain discrimination. For example, just as the word 'Negro' is used in a derogatory manner for the Blacks, so is the word 'Chinki' which is used for the north-east people or the 'Mongoloid' race. Thus, racism dehumanizes the 'other' races because they are different.

Many north-east Indians migrate to different parts of the country for economic opportunities, and most of them will have incidences to narrate of discrimination, overtly or covertly. A survey published in Economic Times, on 6th Dec, 2014, conducted by ReachOut Foundation on 1000 respondents in the Delhi/NCR area showed that 54% of respondents felt that there was discrimination, 67% persons responded that they had faced racial/ethnic discrimination and 74% felt that Delhi was most unsafe place in regards to racial/ethnic discrimination. A contemporary north-east writer, Moushumi Kandali, who has just published a book, 'The Black Magic Women Stories from North-east India' (2022), is a collection of ten short stories, which are mainly about north-east Indians who have migrated to different places in the country for jobs and the various discriminations they face in metro cities. One of her stories, talks about a friendship between two north-eastern boys, one from Assam and one from the hills of Nagaland. The latter is telling about how he was almost lynched one day, because of his, "slanting eyes, this spiky hair and this yellow hair" (Kandali, 2022). In an interview given in the 'Frontline', an E-magazine, Maushumi Kandali, talks about 'othering', as one of the reasons by a section of mainstream India, their ignorance and prejudices, being the reason for the discrimination faced by north-east Indians. A novel by Easterine Kire, 'Bitter Wormwood' (2013), also mentions the discrimination faced by the protagonist Mose's grandson, when he goes to Delhi for higher education. One of the most important aspects seen in the 'NEO' literature in India, is this discrimination faced by natives when they travel to other parts of the country, which is poignantly expressed through their works.

Another significant element found in the 'NEO' literature is the political struggle, violence and conflicts faced by this region. Geographically, situated at the farthest north-east part of the country, this region is most isolated from the Indian mainland. This area has faced innumerable challenges, many of which are a result of years of isolation and hostility. The central governments apathy towards this region has given rise to the issue of freedom from the mainland, in order to form an independent political identity. Nagaland and Assam among the seven states, were primarily at the forefront of this struggle, giving birth to the insurgent movement. The political ignorance and government indifference, made the natives, especially the younger generation, rebellious. They wanted their own country, while erasing their links with the mainland. The emergence of insurgent groups demanding political sovereignty from India, created a situation of unrest and conflict. This led to the deployment of the Army to these areas with the

implementation of the Armed Forces Special Act (AFSA, 1968), to counter the insurgency and violence. The constant skirmishes between the army and insurgent groups made the life of the civilians impossible. They were caught in this crossfire, facing atrocities on both fronts.

Many NEO writers of the 21st century have centred their works around the atrocities committed by army, the disillusionment of the youth, especially those who gave up the underground rebellion. In Temsula Ao's, 'Those Hills called Home: Stories from the war zone' (2006), a collection of short stories, narrates the story of a young girl, Apenyo, who was singing in the church choir when the army attacked. When the captain notices Apenyo was unaware about his presence, he pulls her by her hair, taking her to the nearby old church and rapes her. When her mother Libeni, comes there, searching for her daughter, she is caught hold by the other soldiers, knocked out and raped brutally, ultimately killing her. In other stories we come to know that the life of civilians in these conflict areas were sandwiched in the loyalty to the insurgents and saving themselves from the army. As many of the young insurgents were the sons of these very villagers, the parents and indirectly the village had to protect them from the soldiers. They had to share their hard-earned money with the underground rebels, mostly as a 'tax', which was forced on them. The protagonist of one such story by Temsula Ao, Imdongla rightly says, "Fear of you Indian soldiers and fear of the mongrels of the jungle"(Ao, 2006). Another NEO writer Dhruva Hazarika, from Assam, in his novel 'Sons Of Bhrama' (2014) expresses the same conflict in terms of clash between powers – the underground insurgents and the army, later the police. In this story the protagonist Jongom Hanse, goes to meet an underground rebel, who is later killed. The suspicion falls on Hanse. A simple meeting becomes a struggle for survival for Hanse, sandwiched between the followers of the rebel leader and the police, who both think Hanse is responsible for the murder. In Aruni Kashyap's collection of short stories, 'How to Tell a Story of an Insurgency: Fifteen tales from Assam' (2020), a story 'Crimson' by Ratnottama Das Bikram, tells how the villagers were forced to join the meetings of the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), an insurgent movement, demanding the freedom of Assam. The ULFA talked about bringing freedom to Assam by enticing the youth with brilliant and invigorating ideas. Another story from the same collection is 'Surrender', Anuradha Sharma Pujari. Here the protagonist has become a SULFA (surrendered ULFA member), but he finds it difficult to reintegrate with the society. He is forced to pick up guns again as he becomes a valuable asset to the police or army, who need his help to find his other comrades. So, life is not without conflict even if you want to stay away from it.

There are around 200 indigenous tribes that reside in these areas, notable among them are the Bodo, the Khasi and the Angami tribes. There are many other tribes, but they mostly have a population of less than 5000. Every tribe has its own culture and it may differ completely

or slightly depending on the area or region. These tribes have faced the most severe impact of colonialization. The tribal culture, the rituals and folk forms around which their existence revolved, saw a drastic change with the onset of the missionaries, leading to conversions, not just restricted to faith, but also their rituals. These folktales, rituals and myths were not just part of their traditional culture but they were passed on orally from generations to generations.

Larry Neal, in his essay, 'The Black Arts Movement' (1968) talks about the Black aesthetic movement. According to Neal, the Black aesthetic tradition included the African oral tradition, the voodoo, the spirit worship, the shamanic traditions. These traditions were all in a way linked to the community, and not to an individual. And so, every artist – be it a writer or a painter or a musician – should be representing his/her own community or tribe and represent it truthfully. The NEO works also in a way follow the Black Aesthetics as we find many contemporary writers following this philosophy. They have written about their tribes, their rituals, not individually but representing their community as a whole. Easterine Kire, from Nagaland, has spoken about the Angami tribes. In her novel, 'When the River Sleeps' (2014), she has revolved her story around Vilie, who is from the Angami tribe. Vilie, remembers a story told by his ancestors, about the 'sleeping river' at the bottom of which lies the magic stone. The entire novel then depicts Vilie's journey to fulfil this quest. Vilie is also the care taker of the forest and so is valued and respected by his villagers. All decisions are taken together by the senior members of the village. They help each other in times of need and guide when necessary or needed. Vilie is continuously guided in his journey by different people. The author gives a vivid description of the tribal life, how hard they work, the food they eat and how they survive in tough situations with the help of different rituals and myths that have been passed on from generations. In the end of the novel, the villagers come to check Vilie, who had gone to his forest location, as he had not returned to the village even after two days. When they reach his house, they find him murdered. The loss was felt by the entire village. In another novel by Easterine Kire, 'Son of the Thundercloud' (2016), we are told the story of Pele, again belonging to the Angami tribe. In this novel too we are given a detailed description of the tribal life, their customs, and their rituals. When Pele goes in search of his destiny, he has to travel through the dense forest. We are shown how the dense forest protects Pele and provides him with food and shelter. The different villages that he passes all have their own customs and Pele has to follow them in order to safely pass through that village.

Another NEO Mamang Dai, from Arunachal Pradesh, in her novel, 'The Black Hill(2014), revolves her story around the Adi and the Mishmi tribes. The story is from the pre-independence time, when a French priest Father Nicholas Krick has disappeared. Behind this backdrop there is a love story of a girl Gimur from the Adi (Abor) tribe who runs away with a boy from the Mishmee tribe and they settle near the Indo-Tibet border.

Dai has very descriptively told us about the customs of the Adi (Abor) tribe of Mebo, a close-knit race. They were warriors who protected their land and forest with equal valour. They avoided mingling with strangers and so Father Krick's presence is not appreciated as they know with his arrival other foreigners will follow. The Mishmee tribe, which is a very small settlement, is described, "...what was known as the Mishmee Hills was a sparsely populated region of towering mountains and swift flowing rivers where three great clans of the Mishmee tribe lived." (Dai, 2014) Janice Pariat, another NEO writer, in her short story collection 'Boats on Land' (2013), mentions the Khasi tribe in her story, 'Dream of the Golden Mahseer', which brings out the ethnic war of the Khasi tribes with the outsiders.

As the missionaries began entering the north east region, many things began to change. The isolated and close-to nature life that these indigenous tribes lived was disturbed. Their beliefs were challenged, their faith and religion were attacked and conversion began. The struggle for cultural hegemony began. With the entry of the Britishers (White), they initiated their cultural superiority. The North -East region being most isolated from the whole of mainland India, was an advantage to the missionaries. The uneducated tribes were naïve and though they did not welcome the foreigners, gradually things began to change. Also, the economic backwardness, made the tribes succumb to the 'newness' and economic avenues that had blossomed with the onset of the Britishers. Hoyt W. Fuller in his essay 'Towards a Black Aesthetic' (1968), talks about how "the race worlds of the blacks and whites were so unlike each other and so separated, there could be no compatibility" (Nayar, 2009). They would always be conscious about their past history and had pride in this difference. The NEO literature also exhibits this tenet of the Black Aesthetics. The tribes could never forget their past, their customs and their rituals. They had converted their religion but they still followed their tribal customs. Though cultural hegemony existed but it was limited to more urban regions. In the works of Easterine Kire and Tamsula Ao we find many instances where the tribal faiths and beliefs are followed though the religion is Christianity. In Kire's 'When the River Sleeps' (2014), Vilie is buried as per Christianity, but all the rituals followed are tribal. Even in Tamsula Ao's short story 'The Last Song' from 'These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone' (2006), the girl Apenyo is singing in the church choir, though all the preparations were done in the traditional manner. Pride in one's culture is an important feature of the NEO literature.

A distinct feature of the NEO literature is the folktales or the oral tradition that is used by many authors. The books written in this genre are basically stories that are passed from generation to generation, mostly told orally by the elders of the community or clan. They are individual stories about people from a particular society or community. They tell about universal truths, beliefs and even superstitions. Many a times they are moral lessons about how to live life in difficult situations.

It is way of passing culture and traditions to the future generations. Easterine Kire's, 'Son of the Thundercloud' (2016) is an excellent example of folktales, which creates not just an awareness about the myths or rituals but also directs the destiny of the individual. The basic plot revolves around the myth of the spirit tiger. The story is about a widow whose husband and seven sons were killed by the spirit tiger. Later a prophesy has been made which says that the lady will give birth to the son of the thundercloud who will avenge the death of all her loved ones and also free the villagers from the spirit-tiger. Pele, the central character sets on a travel in order to see if this story is true. When he reaches the weavers village, he meet sthe sisters of Mesanuo who are four hundred years old and who have lived a seven-hundred-year-old famine, waiting for the prophesy to come true. This son of the thundercloud will bring fertility to the earth and indirectly regenerate the land. The sisters believe that he will bring rain and earth will once again create life. Though there is no logical explanation to this myth but even Pele eventually accepts and starts believing it. This myth motives the villagers to carry on in dire circumstances and offers them hope and solace. Pele becomes a witness to extraordinary things, such as the appearance of stars "not as fixed pinpoints of light, but as celestial bodies moving in harmony with each other, like an orchestral dance" (Kire, 2016) These are shown as extraordinary things happening which we may not come across in our normal lives. In another novel by Easterine Kire, 'When the River Sleeps' (2014), the protagonist Vilie is shown to be having a dream in which he puts his hand in the still river and picks the magic stone, but just then the current flows and Vilie is taken way, but he wakes up and finds it is a dream. This magic stone from the bottom of the sleeping river is again a folktale told by ancestors. Vilie decides to follow this dream and in the conquest, he meets unusual things such as the river spirit, were-tigers, widow-spirits. All these narratives build a picture of an unreal world in the real world-a kind of magic realism.

Mamang Dai's 'Legends of the Pensam' (2006), set in a village in Arunachal Pradesh is a collection of short stories. The narrator tells us about the legends, myths and beliefs of the Adi tribe, told by the village elders. These beliefs – good or bad – are passed on to the future generations. One such story is about the 'Birbik', who was a water serpent. The story goes that Huxo's father, Lutor, had seen a strange apparition, but he could not be sure whether it was a fish or a snake. But he had a feeling that something evil will happen and, soon, Lutor is killed in a hunting accident. The same story begins with the birth of Hoxo, "the boy who fell from the sky"(Dai, 2006) and was found by Lutor, who took care of him as his son. Later when Hoxo grows up he marries a young girl who is the daughter of the river woman.

Myth and belief in spirits is very powerful in the works of NEO writers. In another story, a widow Pinyar's hut catches fire. As per the beliefs of the Adi tribe, it the spirit of the tiger, which makes something catch fire.

Hence, she was banished from the village for a certain period and no one was allowed to eat food with her, so that the tiger spirit is not provoked further. In one other story we are given the glimpse of the Adi's annual custom where they travel to the snow mountain to harvest a deadly poison which is used to poison arrows. 'Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends' (2007) by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, a novel about the Khasi tribe also tells interesting folktales. One such folktale is a tale of Luri Lura fair, where all animals would come to sell their goods. One dog did not have anything special to sell so he picked up a food item which was a favourite of humans. But he was thrown out of the fair by other animals. Later he went on to plead to the humans and since then dog is considered as a faithful follower of humans. There are many other contemporary NEO writers who have used the myth and legends of folktales in their works.

The last distinct feature of the NEO literature is the use of strong female characters in their stories or novels. Feminism is a strong feature of this literature. Though patriarchy is dominant, but the contemporary writers have strong and wilful female protagonist or support characters. In 'A Terrible Matriarchy' (2007), Easterine Kire, has developed the plot around three generations of female, where the central role is played by the grandmother. Five-year-old Lieno is sent to live with her grandmother, who is not just partial towards her brothers but also wants to make Lieno a perfect traditional Naga wife. The struggle of viewpoints between Lieno and her grandmother is woven around the novel. In another novel by Easterine Kire, 'Bitter Wormwood' (2013), Neilhounuo, who was a 'rifle shooter' in the underground insurgent movement, more capable and severe than the males around her. After she marries the protagonist Mose, who was with her in underground movement, we see a subtle change in her. She handles the family life so well becoming an ideal mother, wife and daughter-in law. We are shown how Neilhounuo, becomes the back bone of the family, managing relations and house very efficiently.

'The Nine-Chambered Heart' (2018) by Janice Pariat, another NEO writer, is a remarkable story of a woman's life narrated by nine different men with whom she had a different relation at various phases in her life. The author had tried to show in a unique way how we try to see only that part of the person we admire or like. It talks about teacher-student relation, friendship, and parental love. Temsula Ao, too in 'These Hills Called Home: Stories from the war Zone' (2006), has built her stories around the strong centric women. Libeni from 'The Last Song' is a widow who single headedly took care of her daughter, Apenyo. When she sees her daughter being raped the Captain, she rushes ahead to save her like a wild animal. Even when she herself is being raped she fights hard until her head is banged by the soldiers. In another story, 'The Last Major', the wife Khatila, saves her underground husband Punaba, from the army when he comes to meet her after a gap of many months, and helps him to escape.



Aruni Kashyap's, 'How to Tell a Story of an Insurgency: Fifteen tales from Assam' (2020), is a collection of fifteen tales by different authors of NEO. The story 'Vigil' by Jahnavi Barua, another well-known NEO writer, tells the tragic tale of a mother's love for her two sons who are at opposing ends – one a rebel another a police officer. Another story by Manikuntala Bhattacharya, 'Stone People', is about a young sister who is forced to not just look out for her parents when her brother joins the militants but also, she has to go to search him too, in a wild-goose chase. Another moving story with a feminist touch is, Jayanta Saikia's 'Maryam'. It is a story of a Muslim midwife, Maryam Bibi, living in a predominantly Muslim border district in Assam. She carries a pregnant lady who was having a breach delivery all the way across the Brahmaputra River, as there were no medical facilities available for a safe birth.

### **Conclusion**

As we come to an end to this discussion, we can fairly conclude that the origin of North East literature, has its tentacles spread in various cultural theories such as the Black Aesthetic movement and cultural studies. But as is any movement one cannot fully encompass the entire genre, so it is impossible to analyse all the work done under NEO literature in a few tenets. Literature includes not just prose but, poetry and drama too. This paper falls short in analysing those aspects. The contemporary writers have used varied themes and issues to express the culture they represent very authentically. Indian English mainstream literature has till date not taken cognizance of the literature that originates from this region. The 21st century Indian literature can no longer ignore the vast work that exists from the north east region. These works need further detailed study This paper is just a small effort towards the understanding the north east originated literature NEO.

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