

Literary Representation of Conflict and Trauma in Northeast India

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Abstract: Northeast is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions of India. It has emerged from the great traditions of the Indic Asia and Mongoloid Asia and comprises seven states also known as ‘The Seven Sisters’. These states are famous for their unique patterns of culture and traditions for which they stand apart from the rest of the country. Despite such rich cultural heritage, tradition and beauty, people live in the socially, politically and economically troubled atmosphere. Writers from this region predominantly project the simmering discontent and tension through literary representation. The present paper is an attempt to project conflict and trauma in the literature from the northeast.

Keywords: Northeast, Conflict, Trauma

North East embodies the multilingual, pluralistic, multiethnic diversity of India. It consists of seven states namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The State of Sikkim also comes under the umbrella of this region owing to its proximity to the area and somewhat identical developmental and other issues. These seven states are singular in their culture and traditions imparting them a unique identity with racial entity. The Seven States are home to multiple ethnic groups. Although surrounded by many countries on the international border, the Northeast India shares its history and culture most largely with India than any other country. Connected by a narrow corridor called Siliguri Corridor in the Northern West Bengal, the strategically located Northeast region encounters specific problems in the form of conflicts, insurgency, tribal clashes, ethnic strife and the resultant tumult. Despite being dogged by many issues, the area has its own scenic beauty, magnificent landscape, mighty hills, perennial rivers and forests which make it a tourist and adventurer’s paradise. Also, the preservation of art, culture and literature of this region are equally amazing aspects. Tilottoma Misra states in the *Introduction to The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*:

. . . a significantly large number of writers [from Northeast] are writing in English... 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. . . it is a fact that some of the best writings from the North-East have been produced in acquired languages, including English. Indeed, many of the writers writing in English have reaped the benefits of acquiring a worldwide audience through national and international forums. (xv-vi)

Literature from the Northeast is a perfect projection of its diverse concerns. The distinct literary stream that flows from the area has now entered the mainstream Indian Literature. The variegated milieu of the Northeastern society has been woven into novels, short-stories, poetry, films, documentaries and much more. Writers from this region are recognized and appreciated all over the country for their significant contributions. Centers for Northeastern study have been established at many places in the country. The Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research known as C-NES at Jamia Milia Islamia University is the first such research centre on the Northeast established in 2013. It was formally cleared by the by the Academic Council as an independent research centre in 2012. It has offices in New Delhi as well as Guwahati in Assam. It designs, develops and implements innovative ideas, conducts workshops and training programs. The North Eastern Regional Centre of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR-NERC) was established in 1997 in collaboration with North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) at Shillong. In 2006, Jawaharlal Nehru University set up North East India Studies Programme (NEISP). Its main thrust is to undertake critical research and build up a body of scholarly works on the region, including its wider historical and contemporary global connections. A great amount of effort has been invested in recent studies to incorporate the culture of the area in the academic curriculum of different boards in the country especially in NCERT books. This has created awareness among the school children introducing them to the area and its heterogeneous concerns. An observation made in the NCERT textbook is as following:

Diverse ethnic origin of people inhabiting the eight states of the North East makes it truly a wonderful region. Though the legends, myths, folklore and customs of the area are woven with those of the neighboring regions of the country, there has been a rapid change in these states with the modernization of economy and expansion of education. These states present a picture of modernization in a relatively difficult and disadvantaged region and deserve to be recognized for their historical and cultural uniqueness, successes and achievements in a complex and diverse society. (vii)

The Northeast shares an uneasy relationship with the Indian state. In the colonial period, the area, which now constitutes the Northeast, was considered to be a frontier of Bengal that needed to be protected and defended militarily. The separation of Burma from the Indian sub-continent and partition of 1947 created the 'Northeast'. Post-independence troubles got multiplied due to geographical apartness, misunderstood culture and lifestyle, leading to confusion, unease and even skirmishes with the Northeasterners. Conflict is defined as

a situation of two or more persons, tribes, groups or countries reacting to serious disagreements. It is basically a clash of interests in the name of land, religion, region, language and so on. *Collins English Dictionary* defines conflict as, “serious disagreement and argument about something important.” It is a situation of paradox arising out from the differences in ideologies, interests, beliefs etc. Conflicts appear to be embedded in human nature due to divergent interests. The human cost of such conflicts is enormous as it leaves behind survivors scarred both in mind and soul. Trauma is lived in different phases of one’s life, which either takes up the shape of another violent story or culminates into a searing wound. The trauma which stalks the common lives is a part of everyday life that adds to the fragility of the human condition. Troubled by the conflicts and their repercussions, the sensitive hearts of the writers express their pain by articulating what happens around them. In their quest for harmony in a diverse nation, writers mull over answers to many questions, the issues from the Northeast being one. It is in such a scenario that the writer tries to examine the multi-faceted story of conflict and trauma. Writers from the Northeast talk about how literature carries the potential to capture the history of a region which has undergone a time of conflict and trauma. In *Asomiya Handpicked Fictions*, Mitra Phukan says:

It is no wonder, therefore, that many otherwise sensitive and aware people in the rest of the country (and the world) primarily associate the Northeast with terrorism, mayhem, floods and general destruction, in extreme contradiction to the allure and “exoticism” (definers of our land and people that we, the “exotic” people, continue to be amazed at!) that is often attributed to the region, perhaps because of its uniqueness, multi-ethnicity and inaccessibility. (vii-viii)

Emerging out of the colonial-ethnographic representation and seeking consolidation of ethnic and cultural identities in postcolonial times, writers from the Northeast India exhibit a kaleidoscopic variety. In all its manifestations, literature from this region projects an effective picture of conflicts, tribulations, traumas and hopelessness. In the congeries of its complexities and contradictions, the Northeast is not only a territory of diverse people and cultures but also an idea constantly evolving in its making. While underlining the distinctiveness of the writings in English from the Northeast, Indu Goswami in her Preface to the first volume of her edited book titled *Exploring North-East Indian Writings in English*, observes:

North-East India is an under-represented region in many ways. The troubled political climate, the beautiful landscape and the confluence of various ethnic groups perhaps have given rise to a body of writings that is completely different from the rest of India. Some of the most interesting Indian writing in English today is coming from this region. (8)

The writers evoke a sense of longing about the rich cultural heritage of the past, ponder over the present problems and seek a better future through their works. These are the voices of authors from societies caught in the cross-current of conflicts, turmoil, bloodshed - voices involved in developing and contributing to a much larger literary consciousness that needs to be acknowledged. Narratives on the themes of conflict and trauma are bold endeavor, registering voices of untold suffering and marginalization that need to be heard in the context of India's multicultural mosaic. Their writings are undeniably filled with pages of violence experienced in the past or encountered on daily basis. Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika, Mamang Dai, Arnab Jan Deka, Siddhartha Deb, and Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya are some of the most famous literary figures from this region. With the emergence of works such as Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, Jnanpith winner Dr. Indira Goswami's 'The Journey', Rita Chaudhury's *This Time, That Time*, a literary trajectory seems to have been established.

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